Observations on the Death Scenes in Tacitus' Annals

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Death scenes in any medium lend themselves to splendid dramatic and pictorial effects. Due attention will be paid to these where they occur in Tacitus' Annals, and his striving for contrast and variety will be noted, especially where the death scenes occur in clusters. But this study will look, also, at the way in which Tacitus has shaped his death scenes so as to make them reflect his own moral preoccupations and his views on humanity.

We begin with communal deaths. Tacitus' account of the collapse of the amphitheatre at Fidenae (4.62-3) needs to be appreciated on two levels. On the one hand the historian offers a wealth of circumstantial detail, which has about it the ring of true historical research, on the other we are presented with an emotional description of human agony, which reads more like free composition. It is on the latter that one's attention is likely to be focused, especially as it forms a monumental centre-piece in a rather carefully balanced whole, which may be schematised as follows:

A. Comparison of disaster with wars.
B. Physical causes of disaster, and motives of builder.
C. Description of disaster and suffering of victims.
B. Steps to remove causes of future disasters, and punishment of builder.
A. Comparison of relief operation--with those in wars.¹

Two points deserve brief notice. It is typical of Tacitus that he should deduce human depravity (here Attilius' sordida merces) as the ultimate cause of the catastrophe. His death scenes usually have a villain lurking in the background, and it is, of course, especially in the case of political murders or suicides that Tacitus does not allow the reader to forget who the villain is. Secondly, one should note the significant contrast between the succinct statement of the physical causes of the collapse (neque fundamenta per solidum subdidit neque firmis nexibus ligneam compagem superstruxit), as well as of its manifestations (conferta mole, dein conuulsa, dum ruit intus aut in exteriora effunditur immensamque uim mortalium... praeceps trahit atque operit), and Tacitus' diffuse treatment of the agony resulting from it. The drama and the pathos of this section, extending from et illi quidem quos principio to errorem adnoscentibus fecerat, will not be lost on any reader. Tacitus dwells on the emotions of the afflicted and the bereaved, tending to suppress such graphic

¹ Tacitus rounds the episode off with a characteristic sigh of nostalgia. He refers to times when community effort to help the suffering was less uncommon than in his own day.
details of physical mutilation as one might expect in a Silver Latin epic. An element of restraint appears in *miserandi magis quos abrupta parte corporis nondum uita deseruerat* or *confusion facies*, and the reader is left to deduce from *per diem uisu, per noctem ululatibus* how very protracted was the agony of those not fortunate enough to be killed outright. If the section that describes the widespread anxiety arising from uncertainty strikes an understanding chord, it is overshadowed by the poignancy of that describing quarrels over barely recognisable bodies. Finally, some features considered typical of Tacitus’ mature style appear to good effect: the use of abstract subjects with personal objects (*e.g. quos principium stragis in mortem adflixerat* or *quos illa uis perculisset*) admirably conveys the helplessness of the victims; the elaborate chiasmus *hic fratrem, propinquum ille, alius parentes lamentari* is in keeping with the confusion of the scene, whose vividness is further aided by Tacitean *breuitas: concursus ad examinos complectentium, osculantium.*

For all its innuendo and pathos, Tacitus’ account of the great Fire at Rome (15.38) supplies much solid factual information. The starting point and course of the fire, the factors aggravating it and making counter-measures of no avail are briefly stated (*initium in ea parte . . . qualis uetus Roma fuit*). Then follows a passage of comparable length in which the sufferings of the victims are portrayed in an imaginative and emotional way, the predominating idea being one of helplessness and frustration whatever course of action was pursued (*ad hoc lamenta pauentium . . . patente effugio interiere*). Acting as a kind of frame round these two plainly contrasting parts of the description of the fire is the suggestion that the sinister motives of Nero were its ultimate cause: *forte an dolo principis incertum* and *esse sibi auctorem uociferabantur . . . seu iussu.* The vague use of *auctorem* and *iussu*, specific reference to the emperor being this time suppressed, is especially pointed, but even allowing for Nero’s actual innocence of the event, it is clear from Tacitus’ account that human depravity was not slow to profit from death and misfortune: threatening gangs intimidated those seeking to quench the flames, and others hurling torches were bent on looting, if they were not Nero’s agents. Returning to Tacitus’ portrayal of the suffering caused by the fire, we note that only a small part of it is, strictly speaking, a death scene, since the majority of those whose frantic efforts to escape are so vividly described as being thwarted by the seemingly ubiquitous fire did, it seems, find salvation in the open country. Tacitus, however, ends this part of his description on a poignant note: some of those affected might have escaped, but they chose to die because they had lost everything they owned, or because they were overcome with grief at their failure to rescue their loved ones. Tacitus has throughout this passage succeeded in involving the reader in the varying emotions of the victims, while avoiding what would have been both most obvious and most grotesque, namely an account of people being burnt to death.
At 15.44 Tacitus chooses not to spare us the grim details of the torture and humiliation of the Christians: how they were dressed as wild beasts to be torn to pieces by dogs, crucified, or used as human torches after nightfall. Tacitus had no sympathy for Christian belief, which he appears to concede demanded severe punishment (sontis et nouissima exempla meritos), but he has turned his scene into a condemnation of Nero. Nero’s sadism towards the Christians and his lack of personal decorum (he witnessed the spectacle dressed as a charioteer) antagonised the Romans, rousing in them pity for his victims. Tacitus appears to be saying that the public service done by getting the Christians out of the way was overshadowed by the emperor’s brutality. But contrast the different relationship between saeuitia and miseratio at 6.19 where, in depicting the alleged mass slaughter by Tiberius of Sejanus’ associates, Tacitus reflects how the emperor’s bloodthirstiness had become contagious: his henchmen spied even on grief, the normal rites of burial were denied, and pity itself was driven away (interciderat sortis humanae commercium ui metus, quantumque saeuitia glisceret, miseratio arcebatur). Tacitus’ description of slaughter and outrage, in which unsavoury details are multiplied, culminates in this bitter observation. And even when he deals with natural disasters imperial saeuitia is never far from his thoughts. The keynote of the brief description of the plague (16.13) is the indiscriminate deaths, with just a few pathetic touches, e.g. how wives and children were often cremated on the pyres by which they sat lamenting. Yet the final impression with which Tacitus chooses to leave his reader is his wry comment that the deaths by plague of the politically involved, that is equites and senators, were less a subject of mourning as they forestalled Nero’s bloodthirstiness.

Periodically the gloom and cynicism of the Annals is relieved to some extent by the nobility of individual deaths, even if they are brought about by the sinister motives of others. Valerius Asiaticus appears as the helpless victim of Messalina’s malice (11.1). When Claudius was inclined to acquit him of false charges, Lucius Vitellius, who was under instructions from Messalina, manipulated the emperor into allowing Asiaticus to choose his own manner of death as if that were a favour. Against a background of such dark intrigue Asiaticus maintained perfect calm in the face of death: he exercised as usual and was cheerful at dinner (11.3). Before opening his veins he made a barbed reference to Messalina and Vitellius, showing that, for all their dissimulation, he knew whose victim he was, and his placid concern for every kind of propriety extended even to his having his funeral pyre moved so as not to scorch overhanging trees. Burrus, too, is represented as making a restrained and dignified exit (14.51). Although Tacitus leaves it open whether Nero did actually cause his death by poisoning or not, Burrus apparently recognised the emperor as his murderer. When visited by him and asked how he was, Burrus merely
looked away and said *ego me bene habeo*, suggesting that Nero would have to live with his guilt.

The bravery of Epicharis under torture is all the more remarkable for being unexpected (15.57). Nero had thought no woman could stand such agony, and her tormentors were especially savage for fear of being thwarted by a woman. But after enduring one day of diverse tortures without divulging the information sought, Epicharis forestalled a prolongation of her ordeal by fashioning a noose from her breast-band, attaching it to the canopy of a chair, and then with all the weight of her body choking what little life was left in her. She stands out as a rare and shining example in the *Annals*, and Tacitus points an emphatic contrast by remarking that a woman and an ex-slave acted so bravely to shield strangers while free-born men of the senatorial and equestrian orders betrayed those closest to them even without being subjected to torture.

Tacitus has expended great pains on the death of Seneca (15.62-4), which appears as the inevitable outcome of a long period of declining influence. As Seneca had often had to compromise on matters of principle in order to check his extravagant ward Nero, the noble manner of his death as described by Tacitus may be seen as a partial rehabilitation of him. Indeed, from a historian normally so intent on compression such an extended and circumstantial account of Seneca’s last hours is in itself a tribute. When ordered to die Seneca was undismayed, and his first thought was to provide for his friends, but since the officer present forbade him to make any addition to his will, he asserted with great dignity that he was leaving his friends the finest thing of all, namely the pattern of his life. When their grief got the better of them, by subtle changes of tone he recalled them to their philosophy. His final denunciation of Nero’s savagery is what he had perhaps refrained from doing earlier, in the hope of retaining some curbing influence on his excesses. Turning to his wife, Seneca softened his dispassionate philosophical approach with words that have the true ring of affection. When despite his entreaties she insisted on dying with him, he did not seek to deprive her of the glory, generously conceding that hers would outstrip his own. Then follow the physical details of Seneca’s protracted death, with his final fond gesture towards his wife whom he bade go into another room lest too much distress be caused for each by the sight of the other’s suffering. After recording that, even after cutting his veins, Seneca had the moral strength to dictate a philosophical dissertation, Tacitus interrupts his account of Seneca’s lingering death in order to explain how his wife’s death was averted at Nero’s behest. A current cynical interpretation of her motives is here dismissed by the historian. Returning to Seneca, we read how he asked his doctor to administer poison, as his blood was flowing too slowly through his severed veins, and how the poison proved ineffective because his limbs were cold and numbed. Seneca’s first bath of warm water did not have the desired effect of stimulating
the flow of blood or diffusing the poison throughout his system, but it enabled
him to perform his goodhumoured gesture of sprinkling his slaves as if in a
libation at the end of a feast. His frame of mind appears in the choice of
liberatori denoting the function of Jupiter being honoured. Finally, a vapour
bath put an end to Seneca’s life, and he was allowed the unpretentious
cremation he had requested in his will.

Yet another of Nero’s victims was Lucius Silanus, who, unlike Seneca, refused
to open his veins but insisted that the centurion sent to kill him should do his
duty (16.9). His sarcastic words non remittere percussori gloriam ministerii
reflect even more bitterly on Nero than on his henchman. There is a marked
contrast between the centurion’s cowardice and Silanus’ bravery: the former,
noting the unarmed Silanus’ strength and lack of fear (irae quam timori
propriorem), ordered his men to overpower him. Against several armed men
Silanus put up what resistance he could with his bare hands until he fell with his
wounds in front, like a soldier in battle.

In the ensuing section (16.10-11) Tacitus illustrates nobility in the face of
death somewhat more diffusely through the example of Antistia Pollitta, whose
stature is ennobled by a retrospective glance at her bearing after the murder of
her husband: she had kept his bloodstained clothes and had, on traditional
Roman standards, maintained an ideal widowhood (inpexa luctu continuo nec
ullis alimentis nisi quae mortem arcerent). Tacitus plainly approves also of the
persistence she showed when imploring Nero to spare her father Lucius Vetus:
egressus obsidens . . . modo muliebri etulatu, aliquando sexum egressa uoce
infensa clamitabat. But when the emperor proved obdurate, as was to be
expected, Vetus’ family committed suicide together. Here Tacitus multiplies
pathetic details: how Vetus bade the slaves remove for themselves all but the
three beds for his family to die on, how they were all together in a small room
with only one garment each for the sake of modesty, how they exchanged their
final glances and each prayed to die first so as to be spared the sight of the
others’ deaths. After this scene of genuine emotion, indeed after the burial,
Vetus’ family was sentenced to be punished more maiorum, but the hypocritical
Nero, appearing like some evil genius, intervened to allow them to die sine
arbitro, a macabre twist which draws from Tacitus the comment ea caedibus
peractis ludibria adiciebantur.

Against the noble deaths one should pit those treated more or less flippantly.
Tacitus is always scrupulous to make the manner of the death harmonise with

2. Thrasea made his libation to Jupiter the Liberator by sprinkling the ground with
blood from his arms (16.35). It is likely that he was accorded a monumental death scene in
the Annals, but the manuscript breaks off in the middle of it. Thrasea was apparently
discussing the nature of the soul when informed of his death sentence, and he appears
invested with a quasi-Socratic stature at this point.
traits of character already depicted. At 2.27 he introduces Libo Drusus as *iuuenem inproidum et facilem inanibus*, and we learn of his involvement in magic and astrology. His extravagant way of life lent plausibility to charges trumped up against him, and when he realised the hopelessness of his plight he gave a farewell banquet *in nouissimam voluptatem* (2.31). But even this pleasure was turned sour by the bustle of soldiers about his door. When he thrust a sword into a slave’s hand asking to be killed, the recoiling slaves accidentally knocked over a table-lamp. The inclusion of such a trivial detail is unusual in Tacitus, but as he is telling his story not too seriously, one can safely explain it by the ensuing verbal conceit *feralis . . . tenebris*. After Libo’s suicide the scene is brought to a brisk conclusion: *adcurrere liberti, et caede uisa miles abstitit*.

Lucan appears in a vainglorious light at 15.49. His motive for joining the conspiracy against Nero is stated to be pique at the latter’s attempt to rival him as a poet and to thwart his career. There is, therefore, something appropriately ridiculous about Lucan’s end as depicted at 15.70. Although his body was already numb with the onset of death, his brain was clear enough for him to remember and to recite lines of his own poetry describing the death of a soldier in similar circumstances. One feels from Tacitus’ account that the vain, 26-year-old poet could not have made an exit more gratifying to himself.

Also characteristic is the death of Gaius Petronius. Tacitus’ sketch of him at 16.18 is justly famous: *illi dies per somnum, nox officiis et oblectamentis uiae transigebatur; utque alios industria, ita hunc ignavia ad famam protulerat, habebaturque non ganeo et profligatore, ut plerique sua haurientium, sed erudito luxu. ac dicta factaque eius quanto solutiora et quandam sui neglegentiam praesentia, tanto gratius in speciem simplicitatis accipiebantur*. Then follows an account of Petronius’ influence over Nero in matters of taste, resulting in rivalry with Tigellinus who denounced him. According to Tacitus, Petronius cut his veins because he could not endure suspense (16.19). And the manner of his death is unique in the *Annals*. Periodically he had his veins bound up so that he could carry on flippant conversations with his friends. The contrast with some noble deaths emerges pointedly in *non . . . quibus gloriarm constantiae peteret*, the use of relief being perhaps nowhere more marked. Petronius is shown listening to frivolous poems in his last minutes, meting out presents or lashes to his slaves, and contriving to make his death at dinner look as if he merely dozed off. His will, too, was unconventional in that it gave explicit details of Nero’s sexual deviations instead of the normal flattery.

The death of Germanicus (2.69-73) is unique in the *Annals* because of its very mystery, which is in keeping with the somewhat ethereal aura with which Tacitus has invested him. The cause of death apparently remained open in the historian’s mind (2.73; 3.14), but Germanicus certainly felt that he was being
poisoned by Piso. Indeed, his actual physical state was worsened by this belief: saeua uim morbi augebat persuasio ueneni a Pisone accepti (2.69). A touch of the macabre is added to an event already shrouded in mystery when Tacitus states as a fact that instruments of magic were found in Germanicus’ room: erutae humanorum corporum reliquiae, carmina et deuotiones et nomen Germanici plumbeis tabulis insculptum, semusti cines ac tabo obliti aliaque malefica (69). Tacitus traces the vicissitudes of Germanicus’ illness most carefully, from its first onset to the second relapse, which was followed by his death. But inserted between Germanicus’ second relapse and his death is a speech rich in pathos and poetic colouring — a lament over shattered hopes, and a passionate plea for vengeance (71). Then Tacitus makes Germanicus’ wife’s safety his final concern in life (72). After his death his greatness and goodness are underlined by the widespread grief portrayed as well as by the lengthy comparison with Alexander the Great (73). As it is supposed to have been made by people delivering eulogies over Germanicus, it may be a little unfair to ascribe to Tacitus the extravagance of equating his military greatness with Alexander’s. (The claim that his personal qualities were superior need not be disputed.) However, the ample scale of the historian’s representation of Germanicus’ death, so replete with mystery, drama and pathos, and of the subsequent obituary is best explained by a desire to magnify his hero Germanicus to the detriment of his arch-villain Tiberius. However profound the historical distortion, the unique quality of Tacitus’ writing about Germanicus has seldom failed to impress.

The deaths of some Tacitean villains may now be examined. Tiberius’ last days on earth were marked by his usual dissembling: iam Tiberium corpus, iam uires, nondum dissimulatio deserebat ... quaesita interdum comitate quamuis manifestam defectionem tegebat. (6.50). Then follows an elaborate account of the cat and mouse game between the doctor Charicles and the moribund emperor, the former seeking to learn how much time Tiberius had left, the latter to hide his real condition. When Tiberius ceased to breathe, Gaius was congratulated on his succession, but so avidly did the old emperor cling to life that he regained consciousness and asked for food. The emotions of all are vividly described: pauor hinc in omnis, et ceteri passim dispergi, se quisque maestum aut nescium fingere; Caesar in silentium fixus a summa spe nouissima expectabant. Only the murderous Macro kept his sang-froid. Anticipating nature, he ordered Tiberius to be smothered with his bed-clothes. In the ensuing obituary (51) Tacitus may initially create a spurious impression of balance, but in his final assessment he does nothing to screen his antipathy: postremo in

3. At 3.15 Tacitus varies his usual manner of narration to indicate how Piso’s suicide took place: operiri foris iussit (Piso); et coepta luce perfosso iugulo, iacente humi gladio, repertus est.
sce\l er\a sim\l ac dedecora prorupit postquam remOTO pudore et metu suo tantum ingenio utebatur.

A series of lively images surrounds the death of Messalina, in recounting which Tacitus is unusually open in revealing his distaste for her: *sed animo per libidines corrupto nihil honestum inerat* (11.37). Presumably for dramatic contrast with the actual death scene Tacitus has lavished on Messalina’s mock Bacchanalia what must be the most pictorial writing of his entire output: *at Messalina non alias solutior luxu, adulto autumno simulacrum uindemiae per domum celebrabat. urgeri prela, fluere lacus; et feminae pellibus accinctae adsultabant ut sacrificantes uel insanientes Bacchae; ipsa crine fluxo thyrsium quattis, iuxtaque Silius hedera uinctus, gerere cothurnos, iacere caput, strepente circum procaci choro* (11.31). The same empress was shortly after (37.8) to be an utterly abject figure in the Gardens of Lucullus, composing pleas for her life, lying prostrate by a not too sympathetic mother who urged her to die with honour. Even her attempts at suicide failed through her lack of will, so that it remained for a tribune to kill her. These contrasting scenes are enacted against a background of Claudius’ fluctuating feelings towards his wife. After a long period of unawareness he appeared at one stage bent on revenge (32); a little later, on the way to Rome, he vacillated (34); then he seemed unfathomable in his silence (35); and it was when his attitude was manifestly softening (37) that Narcissus gave the order for Messalina’s prompt execution. One’s last impression of this episode is of Claudius’ impassivity, which constrasts so pointedly with the frantic events surrounding the empress’ person: *nuntiatumque Claudio epulanti perisse Messalinam, non distincto sua an aliena manu, nec ille quaesuit, poposcitque poculum et solita conuiuio celebrauit. ne secutis quidem diebus odii gaudii, irae tristitiae, ullius denique humani affectus signa dedit* (38).

The murder of Agrippina comes as a climax after Anicetus’ unsuccessful plan to kill her by drowning and all the drama associated with it: Nero’s hypocritical affection towards her (14.4); the ‘accident’ and her miraculous escape (5); Nero’s despair (7); the excitement of the crowd (8). Agrippina at the end (8) was an isolated figure in a dimly lit room, her fears mounting through sheer lack of news from Nero. Her one remaining maid deserted her when the assassins appeared, and ironically Agrippina still seemed to think it possible that the intruders had merely come to visit her. She at least pretended to clear her son of guilt should their business be sinister, yet after she had been struck on the head she offered to the sword the womb that bore Nero. The last twist to this grim story Tacitus reports with some reservations, saying that in some accounts Nero inspected his mother’s body and praised its beauty (9).

4. The possibility of an incestuous relationship between Nero and Agrippina is mentioned at 14.2.
Finally, it is worth looking at some murders of innocent victims. Tacitus’ account of the poisoning of Claudius (12.66-7) purports to interpret Agrippina’s thoughts with considerable precision: ... ne repentino et praecipiti facinus proderetur; si lentum et tabidum delegisset, ne admotus supemis Claudius et dolo intellecto ad amorem filii rediret, exquisitum aliquid placet, quod turbaret mentem et mortem differret. There is a notable contrast between Agrippina’s initial calculation and her panic-stricken abandonment of appearances once Claudius seemed to have recovered from the effects of the poison. In introducing the sinister Locusta, Tacitus ominously foreshadows her later role (diu inter instrumenta regni habita), and there is grim irony in the epithet delectabilis for the mushroom offered Claudius, whose last appearance is, characteristically, marked by socordia or uinolentia. The murder committed by the disreputable doctor Xenophon is briefly described (tamquam nisus euomentis adiuuaret, pinnam rapido ueneno inlitam faucibus eius demisisse creditur), and Tacitus rounds the episode off by ascribing to him the cynical thought summa scelera incipi cum periculo, peragi cum praemio.

Locusta reappears as the instrument of Britannicus’ murder (13.15-16). The first attempt failed because the poison was discharged before taking effect. Tacitus then explains how a stronger poison was administered at a banquet through an ingenious scheme circumventing the usual taster of food and drink. Death was instantaneous. The diverse reactions of those present are most carefully portrayed. Some were merely horror-stricken and fled, but the more prudent discerned the involvement of Nero whose callous insouciance is conveyed in reclinis et nescio similis and in his blithe reference to epilepsy. There is a marked contrast in the effect of the crime on Agrippina and Octavia: cf. at Agrippinae is pauor, ea constematio mentis, quamuis uultu premeretur, emicuit ... and Octauia dolorem caritatem, omnis adfectus abscondere didicerat. This section ends on a note of cynicism: post breue silentium repetita conuiuii laetitia. Tacitus’ own feeling of revulsion and sorrow is expressed only after he has mentioned reports that Nero had abused the young Britannicus sexually: ut iam non praematura neque saeua mors uideri queat, quamuis inter sacra mensae, ne tempore quidem ad complexum sororum dato, ante oculos inimici properata sit in illum supremum Claudiorum sanguinem, stupro prius quam ueneno pollutum (17).

A comparable striving for pathos colours Tacitus’ account of the murder of the young Octavia (14.63-4), and indeed it is equally warranted by the circumstances. The startling hyperbole hinc primum nuptiarum dies loco funeris fuit, with which Tacitus ends the comparison of Octavia’s fate as an exile with that of other banished women, is amply justified by the account of her life with Nero following it, and her pitiful plight shortly before her death is memorably expressed in praesagio malorum iam uitae exempla, nondum tamen morte.
adquiescebat. Her desperate plea for her life contains the striking paradox uiduam se et tantum sororem, alluding to her rejection as a wife and to Claudius' adoption of Nero. The horrible details of Octavia's death (when terror slowed the flow of blood through her severed veins she was killed by the steam of an excessively hot bath) are overshadowed by atrocior saeuitia: her head was cut off for Poppaea to gloat over it.5

Unnatural death looms large in the Annals. It may be a subject for pity, horror, admiration or amusement. Be it murder or suicide, the means are manifold. The victims — individual men, women or children, whole families or crowds — react to their fate in a seemingly endless variety of ways. If one looks for a common denominator, it appears only in Tacitean gloom and Tacitean art: for the deaths flow from human, notably imperial, depravity, and the reader's emotions follow surely where the jurist-historian has directed them.

5. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to draw a parallel with Tacitus' manifest revulsion at another posthumous mutilation, namely that of Drusus Caesar's reputation by Tiberius (6.24). This was made possible by his having been assiduously spied on, manhandled and terrorised by some particularly unsavoury characters. Tacitus gives only sketchy details of his death. We learn that he kept alive for eight days by eating the stuffing of his mattress (23), and there is, also, his tormentor's rather dubious account of his dying curse against Tiberius.