

Urbs ut Scaena : Dramatic Space in the *Historiae* of Tacitus

The city of Rome is an exceedingly charged dramatic space, both in actuality and in the Roman literary landscape. In this paper, I will demonstrate that Tacitus used the *urbs* as dramatic space in order to heighten the drama of his narrative, and to undercut the historical context of each *locus agendi* within Rome.

The first use of Rome as the scene of action is the announcement of Galba's choice of successors (*Hist.* 1.17-18). Tacitus represents the choice of venue as a difficult political issue: whether to make the announcement in the Forum, in the Senate, or in the Praetorian camp. It is noteworthy that each location has not only political and historical overtones, but represents three major "constitutional" segments of the Empire: the people, the Senate, and the army, respectively. Tellingly, Galba chooses to favor the military, followed by the Senate – the *populus Romanus* is forgotten.

With the death of the emperor Galba (*Hist.* 1.40-41), Tacitus continues to stage the horrors of civil war in historically resonant space. Galba, ineffectually moved through the Forum, is finally killed at the *lacus Curtius*, one of the most ancient landmarks in the Forum and associated with victory over foreign invaders and selfless sacrifice for the state.

In *Historiae* 3, the war itself comes to the city of Rome. The Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus is destroyed in the fighting (*Hist.* 3.71-73), an event that Tacitus recounts as the worst calamity that has ever befallen the Roman people. To add to this blasphemy, when the Vitellianist and Flavian forces do battle in the streets (*Hist.* 3.83), the profligate Romans watch and cheer, as though watching a gladiatorial contest. Rome itself has become nothing more than a venue for spectacle.

The final inversion occurs with the death of Vitellius (*Hist.* 3.84-85), alone and wandering afraid in the palace, awaiting the Flavian troops. The solitude and isolation of the palace contrasts not only with the expected state of a seat of empire as one of business and courtiers, but also with the crowd of *bon vivants* that had always clung to Vitellius. The miserable death of Vitellius also recalls the brave ends of both Otho and Galba, suggesting how far the Empire, and Rome, has fallen.

Tacitus, throughout the *Historiae*, focuses on the topography of Rome in order to activate the legends, histories, and associations of each place, as each becomes the scene of civil war.

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