

Characterizing tiberius and sejanus in the opening chapter of the annals



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Throughout chapter 1, Tacitus combines a range of literary techniques with a variety of contextual factors (such as the death of Germanicus and certain rumours surrounding the underhand methods with which Sejanus rose to power) to characterise both men in a highly negative manner, reflecting the general subordination of integrity and moral fibre to the acquisition of power. Indeed, the connotations of wealth and prosperity in the words 'compositae' (well ordered) and 'florentis' (flourishing) contrast heavily to the subsequently mentioned death of Germanicus, highlighting the fact that Tiberius has benefitted directly from the suffering of others and, by extension, characterising him as a cold, almost heartless figure. The direct juxtaposition of the phrases 'Germanici mortem' (the death of Germanicus) and 'inter prospera' (amongst his blessings) serves to further underscore his acceptance of death and suffering as a tool for the further attainment of power, emphasising the lack of compassion in both his character and his emperorship.

This lack of human empathy is particularly concerning considering Tiberius's extremely high level of influence, characterising him as a dangerous emperor who, as long as he will benefit, will not allow kind-heartedness to get in the way of his goals. The fact that Germanicus was such a popular figure again has implications regarding Tiberius's character, painting him as an outsider whose interests are separate from those of his subjects. The use of the present participle 'florentis' (flourishing) highlights the continual progress made under his rule, as well as, more subtly, the constant application of his fairly immoral set of values, characterising him as being relentlessly self-interested and indifferent to human suffering.

Indeed, Tacitus's use of polyptoton in ' saevire' and ' saevientibus' (cruel) highlights the abundance of malice throughout his inner circle, demonstrating the fact that the immorality that characterises his own rule has spread beyond his own personality. This once more paints him as an irresponsible, borderline tyrannical ruler. Furthermore, the high level of clarity in the phrase ' initium et causa' (beginning and cause) lends a strong sense of certainty and conviction to his subsequent attack on the character of Sejanus, as well as highlighting Sejanus's direct, manipulative role in events. This effect is enhanced by Tacitus's use of tricolon in ' originem, mores, et quo facinore' (his beginnings, his character and by what crime), constructing, in direct contrast to Sejanus's own underhand manipulations, a clear and up-front argument, again adding a highly persuasive tone of conviction and certainty. This adds an increased level of credence to his upcoming characterisation of Sejanus as a highly devious, manipulative figure, whilst the fact that the connotations of corruption in ' facinore' (crime) are placed in such close proximity with basic, rudimentary elements of his personality such as his ' originem' (beginnings) and ' mores' (character) implies that crime is a fundamental element of his character.

Moreover, the use of praeteritio in ' non sine rumore' (not without rumour) subtly plays on rumours that Sejanus prostituted himself sexually in order to gain power. The subtlety of the phrase reflects the scandalous nature of the allegations, further adding to the characterisation of Sejanus as underhand and deceitful. This combines with the connotations of cunning and manipulation in ' devinxit' (tie up) to once more characterise Sejanus as a dishonest exploiter, emphasising, particularly in tandem with the further

connotations of secrecy in the vague phrase 'variis artibus' (various arts), his distinct lack of moral fibre – he is hardly an admirable leader. Furthermore, the deliberately balanced sentence structure in 'obscurum adversum alios... uni incautum intectumque' (reserved and hostile to others... unguarded and frank with him alone) brings out a strong sense of contrast, laying emphasis on the change in Tiberius's behaviour when around Sejanus and once more highlighting his skill as a manipulator. This contrast is further extended by the juxtaposition of 'alios' (others) with 'sibi' (with him), adding to the characterisation of Sejanus as a both highly capable and underhand manipulator. By extension, Tacitus clearly portrays Tiberius as being at the mercy of Sejanus's manipulations, subverting his senior position and characterising him as an ultimately weak, gullible figure. The double use of variatio here ('obscurum adversum', 'incautum intectumque') also heightens the sense of contrast, laying emphasis on the strength of each of the conflicting behaviours, whilst the manipulative connotations of 'sollertia' (ingenuity) again portray Sejanus as a sly, deceptive character. Indeed, Tacitus's relentless focus on the negative in 'non tam' (not just) continues to emphasise Sejanus's negative characteristics, combining with the reference to divine anger in 'deum' (gods) to portray him as ultimately doomed and fated to fall.

Furthermore, Tacitus's use of synchosis in 'sui obtegens... alios criminatur' (concealing for himself... an accuser against others) provides a strong sense of balance, bringing out the contrast in his behaviour to effectively highlight his hypocrisy – concealing his own crimes, he readily accuses others of similar ones. The continued use of synchosis in 'palam... pudor... intus...

libido' (openly... modesty... inwardly... lust) again brings out a powerful contrast between Sejanus's outward behaviour and his inward intention, once again characterising him as a highly deceptive, manipulative figure. This also demonstrates his ability to alter his personality to suit the situation, characterising him as a highly effective and skilled manipulator - he is rarely, if ever, genuine, underlining the fact that his apparently good qualities in fact conceal his pervasive self-interest. The toxic connotations of 'noxiae' (harmful) emphasise this underlying malevolence, characterising Sejanus as a quietly destructive, corrupting influence.