

THE CHARACTERIZATION OF CIVIL WAR: LITERARY, NUMISMATIC, AND
EPIGRAPHICAL PRESENTATIONS OF THE
'YEAR OF THE FOUR EMPERORS'

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes various literary, numismatic, and epigraphical narratives of the Roman civil war of 69CE, and the representations of the four emperors who fought in it. In particular the focus is on how the narratives and representations relate to one another. Such an investigation provides us with useful insight into the people and events of 69 and how contemporaries viewed the actors and the events. These various presentations, most notably the works of five ancient historians and biographers, give 69 the distinction of being one of the best documented years in all antiquity. Historical scholarship has typically sought to determine which of these authors was the most accurate on the points which they disagreed. These points of difference, largely subjective opinion and therefore equally valid, illuminate instead the diverse ways in which an event can be interpreted. This thesis will focus on why there is such diversity and its usefulness to the historian.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What is the character of someone or something? Ask that question to anyone and you will get a variety of descriptive phrases about whatever you indicated. Some character traits are quantifiable: a person's height, a flower's color, the nature of the terrain, when an event took place, etc. But what of such intangibles as personality, motivation, or cause? These subjective modes of characterization vary considerably between different observers, depending on their point of view and their relationship with the person or event described, even for a common person or event.

The year 69CE provides us with a wealth of striking events, dynamic people, and literate observers whose works have, fortunately, survived.¹ This so called 'long year' saw both a brutal civil war in the Roman world and the recognition of four different men as Princeps, or emperor, events which gave rise to the other epithet for 69, 'the year of the four emperors.'² Yet it is for more than the events of the year, which included two large battles between Roman legions, the violent deaths of three emperors, two by the mob and one by his own hands, and the burning of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, that 69 can be identified as 'the long year.' The year 69 also holds the distinction of being the one in all antiquity about which we have the most detailed information.³ This is largely due to the writings of five different extant writers who dealt

¹ All dates are CE unless otherwise noted.

² The appropriate title is 'princeps' and that of the system of government the 'principate', however the terms emperor and empire may safely be used as it conveys an accurate understanding of the position, especially as it had evolved by the year 69.

³ Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The early Principate: Augustus to Trajan*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 15; P.A.L. Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors* (New York: Barnes & Nobles Books, 1975), xi-xii.

with various aspects of the year: Josephus, Plutarch, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio. Between these works and a variety of coins and inscriptions we can decipher, often with no more than a few days uncertainty, the events of this civil war throughout the entire year on a level of detail that is impossible for any year before 69, or for many years after.⁴ This wealth of information includes details about a number of colorful characters.

This is where the issue of characterization comes in. Each of the five authors presented his own version of the events of 69 and the characters involved, and while they agreed on general facts, their opinions differ. Scholars have spent much effort determining which of these authors was, both in general and in given situations, the ‘most accurate’ in his characterization. However, because characterization is at least partly subjective, the fact that one account *seems* less biased or more balanced does not necessarily make it either more or less accurate than another. All we can say for certain is what each author thought of the person or event in question.⁵ In fact, these authors’ presentations of character and the choices they made in depicting character tell us as much about the author in question as about the event itself, thus giving insight into what certain groups of people thought and felt about this event at the time of writing.

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to look at the way four of these five authors characterized the people and events of 69 both individually and in comparison with one another in order to determine both where the accounts differ and why they do. It will also study a sample of the coins and inscriptions dating either from 69 or concerning major participants in events in order to get a glimpse of how the people involved wanted

⁴ Charles L. Murison, *Galba, Otho, and Vitellius: Careers and Controversies* (New York: G. Olms Verlag, 1993), 93-94.

⁵ A.J. Woodman, *Tacitus Reviewed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5-7.

to represent the events in which they participated as well as themselves. This comparative study will help us gain insight into the ways in which these authors are useful in studying the events and the characters of the year 69 and contributes to our understanding of how they represented other years as well. Usefulness here is each author's distinct viewpoint which determined how they characterized both specific people and matters in general. By studying each text on its own, in relation to others, and in light of what is known of the author it is possible to sketch each author's point of view. It is impossible, as Dr. Hayden White noted, to determine which of these view-points is 'true' as 'truth' cannot be recovered. However, each author's depiction can be said to be 'real' in that they wrote their characters the way they perceived them to be.⁶ Such viewpoints highlight the multitude of ways which the people and events of 69 could be, and were, seen. This in turn gives both a more detailed depiction of 69 and a sampling of the complexity of Roman society. This thesis's focus is on fleshing out those various viewpoints.

Of the five authors, Cassius Dio will not be covered here. Although Cassius Dio had his own opinions on the year 69, opinions worth studying, there are two particular reasons why this study omits him.⁷ The first is that Cassius Dio wrote some 150 years after the events of 69, having lived through a Roman civil war much longer and more violent than the one of 69. While his having lived through a civil war no doubt gave him the ability to comment on another such event in Rome's history, and he did use, and occasionally cite, the same sources as the other authors, this temporal distance isolates him from the other authors studied here, all of whom were contemporaries or near-

⁶ Hayden White, "Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality," *Rethinking History* 9(2005): 147-157.

⁷ Fergus Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1964), 5-7, 13.

contemporaries of events and thus reacted immediately to them. The second and more important reason is that the section of Cassius Dio that dealt with 69 exists only in a Byzantine epitomy.⁸ These condensations and summarizations, produced a thousand years after the fact, raise a large array of questions about what Cassius Dio actually wrote and thought which are simply beyond the scope of this thesis.⁹ There are other writers who dealt with the civil war. However their work either exists only in fragments, such as Pliny the Elder who was a possible source for the other writers, or they only make mention of the war rather than give a detailed depiction, as does Pliny the Younger. Since these authors neither provide a comprehensive view-point on 69 nor represent a broad presentation or perception, as the coins and inscriptions, such authors will not be dealt with here.

The first chapter of this thesis deals with a small sampling of coins from 69 and inscriptions concerning the people involved in the events of that year. Both coins and inscriptions provide us with a more ‘on the ground’ look at the events than is provided by the literary sources. However, since both coins and inscriptions were used for generations as a means of propaganda and often followed set patterns, it is not enough to look solely at what the emperor and others were putting on these coins and inscribing in stone or other materials, but rather at how such things changed during, and as a result of, the civil war of 69. This will demonstrate the broader political and social changes that resulted from the civil war and give us some idea what influence the war might have had. This

⁸ Millar, *Cassius Dio*, 2

⁹ Charles L. Murison, *Rebellion and Reconstruction: Galba to Domitian* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 1-2; Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 18-19; Simon Swain, “Biography and Biographic Literature of the Roman Empire” in *Portraits* ed. by M.J. Edwards and Simon Swain. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 25

chapter is being presented first because this material evidence was contemporary to the events and people we are discussing and many of the ideas present on the coins and in the inscriptions make up part of the later characterization by the authors that we are discussing.

The second chapter covers the Roman historian Tacitus (56-117). While Josephus and Plutarch dealt with the subject first, Tacitus' depiction of the civil war is far more detailed. In fact, the first three books of his *Histories*, which cover 69, are the most detailed running narrative in antiquity.¹⁰ This chapter delves into how Tacitus constructed character and ways of interpreting his strong judgments and biases in order to establish Tacitus' viewpoint on the civil war, a perspective as cynical and senatorial as it was complex. It is because of Tacitus' complexity that he is to be dealt with on his own and because of his expansiveness that he will be used as a basis of comparison for the other authors.

The third chapter deals with the Jewish Historian Josephus (37-100). Josephus both lived through and was an active participant in the civil war of 69. His account, part of his *Bellum Iudaicum*, was published roughly a decade after the war, although the Roman civil war is not the focus of the work. This chapter examines how Josephus characterized Vespasian, his patron and the victor of the civil war, and Vitellius, the man Vespasian defeated, in particular. Josephus' characterization will be compared to Tacitus' treatment of these two emperors. The aim here is to determine how Josephus' close proximity to the event affected his account and the degree to which it could be seen as

¹⁰ Rhiannon Ash, *Ordering Anarchy: armies and leaders in Tacitus' Histories*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), vii

representing the Flavian narrative of the war, aimed at giving legitimacy to Vespasian's new dynasty.

The fourth chapter covers Plutarch's biographies of Galba and Otho. Plutarch also lived through the events of 69, although he was young at the time. His status as a biographer means that his focus was, even more so than that of Tacitus and Josephus, on the characters of these emperors. Looking at his work in comparison with Tacitus' *Histories* will bring to light ways in which Plutarch's being a highly educated provincial who chose biography as a genre shaped the way he presented the character of those two emperors (as well as the soldiery, on which Plutarch has some notable opinions). This chapter will reveal the inherent philosophical and moral nature of Plutarch's viewpoint.

The final chapter treats the biographies of all four emperors by Suetonius. Suetonius was born shortly after 69, his father having participated in the war. His biographies, even more so than Plutarch's, focus solely on the characters of the emperors. These biographies will be compared with Tacitus' *Histories*, for the ways in which Suetonius differs from his immediate Roman predecessor, and with Plutarch's biographies, for his differences with his biographical precursor. These comparisons will flesh out Suetonius' less overtly judgmental, more tightly and action focused, and equestrian viewpoint on the four emperors..

The conclusion of this thesis offers a final, comprehensive look at the viewpoints of each of these authors, as well as the numismatic and epigraphical evidence, and the ways in which these viewpoints affected how those authors characterized the civil war of 69. Taken together their viewpoints provide us with a multi-faceted portrait of the civil war of 69 and an invaluable glimpse into the complex world in which these authors lived.

CHAPTER II

COINS AND INSCRIPTIONS

If one is interested in how people and events are characterized in Roman history one is likely to turn to the literary works, contemporary if possible, which deal with that topic such as the ones mentioned in the introduction. Since they wished to present their particular views these authors gave usually clear, often coherent, and frequently eloquent pictures of the people and events they studied. Naturally these depictions are often questioned, as we will do in the proceeding chapters, for what exactly the author's view was, his biases, and his sources. Nevertheless, these depictions give a good and useful, as this thesis will later demonstrate, look at the past based on what one is hoping to gain from reading them. However, this is not the only way of getting at the characterization of these people and events.

Coins and inscriptions also provide us with a wealth of information about various people and events throughout Roman history. These types of sources give a view on things that is often more 'on the ground' and contemporary to the person or event in question than one finds in the surviving literary texts. On the other hand, the vast majority of what survives of coins, as well as official inscriptions, was produced by the Principate itself.¹¹ While much of this numismatic and epigraphical material was likely produced to disseminate what we might call propaganda, or to build legitimacy for the regime, this does not diminish its usefulness. After all, studying the way in which a Princeps characterized, or at least attempted to characterize, himself or an event is just as valid as that of any other author; and the biases are often easier to decipher. This chapter, therefore, will look at the coins and inscriptions which pertain to the civil war of 69CE

¹¹ A great many inscriptions were either locally or privately produced

and the people who participated in it. The goal of this chapter is twofold. First, it will examine how these coins and inscriptions characterized the events and people of the civil war. Second, these materials will be used to sketch out how this civil war might have altered Roman social and political life, with a particular eye to how this may have affected the viewpoints of the authors we shall be dealing with later in this thesis. It is for this reason, and because this is the closest one can get to a contemporary characterization, that these sources are being dealt with first.

While both coins and inscriptions provide messages that people were meant to see by way of specific phrases, ideas, images, and associations, it is not sufficient for the purposes of this chapter to study only these messages. Leaving aside the common issues of who saw these messages, who could read them, and whether or not they understood what was being communicated, the problem is that this method for disseminating information had become an institution by the year 69. The use of coins and inscriptions to convey specific ideas predates Augustus, who served to standardize the practice and many of the images and slogans on coins. The formula for official inscriptions also often stayed the same from one reign to the next. Therefore, it is far more helpful in dealing with characterization to look at whether the messages from coins and official inscriptions changed during the civil war of 69, and afterwards, and if so in what way. Where there is change then one can claim that a new message, or characterization, was being put forward. Where there is continuity then the question becomes continuity with what. If the continuity is with the immediate predecessors then the message was perhaps standard formula or simply being reused for the sake of time and cost. If the continuity harkens back to an earlier reign, or a Republican or Greek precedent, then the characterization

linked the sitting Princeps with that predecessor in order to create, or recreate, a new ideology.

Coins: Continuity and Change

Since before the time of Augustus coins had been used as a means of propaganda. Various deities, allegorical personifications, and various stock phrases were used to promote the image of the one who ordered the coins to be minted.¹² This was generally done on the occasion of important events such as military triumphs and the like. Augustus began the process of regularizing the minting of coins, bringing it under the control of the Principate, and the process, eventually completed under Vespasian, of bringing the mints to Rome, although some remained independent in the East.¹³

Because of the limited space on a coin there was only so much that could be written on them. This is why a variety of stock phrases and depictions evolved for use on coins, many of which had long established meanings.¹⁴ It is for this reason that, despite the large number of coins we have from 69, we will be looking at the ways in which the coins minted by the four emperors were new and in what ways they related back to those minted previously. As already noted incidences in which an image or idea is new indicate some change in thought or an attempt to make a break from the past, whereas when the image or idea harkens back, that means either that the new coin is a simple recopying of an old coin, or that the new emperor was trying to evoke a connection with the emperor who had used that type of image or idea.¹⁵ It is unfortunate that only around 1% of coins

¹² Grant, *Twelve Caesars*, 11-17.

¹³ C.H.V. Sutherland, *Roman Coins* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 129-32, 159-69.

¹⁴ Grant, *Twelve Caesars*, 12-17.

¹⁵ This is operating on the assumption, impossible to prove, that the administration was aware of tradition and was consciously manipulating it.

minted are estimated to have survived, thus adding new problems, beyond the scope of this chapter, to drawing conclusions from these coins.¹⁶

There are a few things that should be mentioned briefly before moving on to discuss the coins themselves. The first is that we do not know whose decision it was to design the coins. Since the mints were under the direct control of the Princeps this paper will address the minter of the coins as emperor/Princeps for the sake of simplicity, since whoever was in charge of the design and minting of coins was clearly doing so on behalf of the regime.¹⁷ There is no real way of being sure of either what ideas the emperor intended people to draw from the coins or what they did draw from the coins. Nevertheless, since every emperor minted coins, especially ones needing legitimacy such as the four emperors of 69, indicates that this was perceived to be an effective means of spreading ideas. This is further proven by the fact that the Romans minted coins for ceremonial occasions such as a triumphs, the ascension of an emperor, or as needed to pay the army, which means that for them coins were more of an ideological tool than a means of keeping the economy functioning.¹⁸ This is best illustrated by the fact that towards the end of Tiberius' reign there was a shortage of coins, because he had minted only in small quantities since the beginning of his reign.¹⁹

Now let us look at the coins produced by the four emperors of 69. In June of 68 Nero died by his own hands leaving the 73 year old Galba, a man of old senatorial

¹⁶ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 137; C.M. Kraay, *The Aes Coinage of Galba* (New York: The American Numismatic Society, 1956), 5-6.

¹⁷ C.H.V. Sutherland, *The Emperor and the Coinage* (London: Spink and Son LTD, 1976), 11-13, 34-35.

¹⁸ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 139-40.

¹⁹ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 169.

standing, as Emperor of Rome and in control of a series of mints in Rome and Gaul that had been refined in their skill and artistry by Nero.²⁰ Before Galba was declared Emperor, he had already struck a number of coins in Spain, where he was governor, declaring his intentions in rebellion.²¹ These coins bore such unique legends as *Concordia Provinciarum*, *Roma Renascens*, *Libertas*, and even *Eid. Mar.*²² These coins, primarily *Denarii* and used to pay the army that Galba was raising, clearly demonstrated to the soldiers that Galba, and his ally Vindex, intended to kill Nero and restore the government to working order.²³ While many of the core ideas, those of ‘Concord’, ‘Rome’, and ‘Liberty’ had been used frequently by previous emperors, the ways in which they were being used were original to Galba.²⁴ This is understandable given that this was the first well organized civil war against the Julio-Claudian house, and thus it makes sense that they would take the old ideas that had long appeared on coins and put them to new uses in order to communicate their intentions. Galba and Vindex certainly were not advocating the return of the Republic, but rather using Republican imagery to convey the idea that when they succeeded, *Bon Event*, then Rome would be restored, *Roma Renascens*, as on one rare coin.²⁵ This is best demonstrated by the fact that *Libertas* and *Eid Mar* were on opposite sides of the same coin. This harkens back to the death of Nero’s ancestor Julius

²⁰ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 174-75.

²¹ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, *ibid.*

²² Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, *ibid.*; BMCRE, 184, 7.

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ F. Gnechi and G. Elmer, *The Coin-types of Imperial Rome*.(Chicago: Ares Publishers Inc., 1978(exact reprint of the 1908 original)), 8-9, 29-30.

²⁵ C.H.V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage* vol. 1 ed. C.H.V. Sutherland and R.A.G. Carson (London: Sprink and Son ltd. 1984(2nd edition)), 198-99.

Caesar, and shows clearly that Galba was rebelling for liberty and to defeat tyranny which was, in his view, what Nero's reign had become.²⁶

Once Galba had gained control over Rome, the coinage he produced, which was in massive quantities in all denominations, continued to be in some ways unprecedented.²⁷ To begin with we will look at those coins which reflected what had come before, both from Nero and from earlier emperors. Depictions of *Ceres*, *Roma*, or *Vesta* as well as the ideas of *Concordia Provinciarum*, *Libertas*, *Salus*, *Securitas*, and *Victoria* had all been used under Nero, though *Securitas* is the only one that was originated by Nero.²⁸ This similarity can be traced to two things. First, Galba inherited Nero's mints and these were ideas for which the mints probably already had dies for. The other reason was the need for Galba to gain legitimacy for his new dynasty. For example, all coins minted in the province and the gold and silver minted in Rome bare virtually all of the *Concordia Provinciarum*, *Salus*, and *Victoria* legends, since these coins would have been used to pay Galba's soldiers and imperial administrators they represent him acknowledging his power base, namely the provinces.²⁹ The bronze coinage in Rome, on the other hand, bares such legends as *Libertas* and *Pax* most consistently, showing Galba's endeavor to gain support among the common people of Rome.³⁰ This demonstrates Galba's desire to be seen as a restorer of peace, liberty, and good government to Rome after Nero's reign, an idea also conveyed in the *Lex de Imperio*

²⁶ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 174-175.

²⁷ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 174-175; Gnechi, Elmer 8-9, 29-30, 42

²⁸ Gnechi and Elmer, *The Coin-types of Imperial Rome*, 8-9, 29-30, 50, 58-60.

²⁹ Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 216-232.

³⁰ *ibid*

Vespasiani. Other coins of Galba's which harkened back to earlier times are ones showing images such as *Fortuna* and *Providentia*, which had not been used since Augustus and Tiberius, and *Pax*, which was employed by Augustus and Claudius.³¹ The ideas of fortune and providence were likely an attempt by Galba to link himself to Augustus and the similar fortune that allowed them to succeed in civil war and become masters of the Roman World. The *Providentia* coins are also all *aes*, meaning Galba was trying to associate himself with this idea for the common people. Given that *Pax* was used on coins by Augustus after the long civil war that ended the Republic and by Claudius after the disruptive reign of Caligula, these coins conveyed a similar message, to Rome specifically as noted above, that peace was restored after a troubled time.

The ideas on Galba's coins that were original to him are far more interesting to study. Galba was the first to make use of the god Aesculapius on his coinage, by which he portrayed himself the healer of a Roman state sick from Nero's corruption.³² Galba also made use of such ideas as *Aequitas*, *Felicitas*, *Fides*, *Honos*, and *Virtus* on his coins. Of which *Aequitas* is rare and found on Roman *aes* and provincial coins as is the more common *Virtus*, *Fides* only on provincial coins, and *Honos* and *Felicitas* is found only in Rome on *aes*.³³ While 'felicity' is something that Galba certainly connected with himself, given his successful service to all of the Julio-Claudian emperors, the rest are clear statements of what Galba stood for. 'Equality' and 'faith' are ideas that connect well with Galba's stated aim of restoring balance and good operation to the Roman state, and

³¹ Gneecchi and Elmer, *The Coin-types of Imperial Rome*, 8-9, 29-30, 53-54, 56-57.

³² Gneecchi and Elmer, *The Coin-types of Imperial Rome*, 8-9, 16, 29-30.

³³ Gneecchi and Elmer, *The Coin-types of Imperial Rome*, 8-9, 29-30, 43-44, 46; BMCRE, 375; Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 116-131.

‘honor’ and ‘virtue’ were the personal characteristics Galba most closely associated with himself.³⁴ After the corrupt reign of Nero the *Aequitas* coins likely represented ‘fair-dealing’ by the government.³⁵ With the evidence of Galba’s coinage we can construct a very clear picture of what was a notable change in the messages presented on coins, driven by the needs of the civil war that Galba had led against Nero and which brought him to the Principate and the concurrent need to establish legitimacy.

If Galba’s coinage marked a notable change in content and message, the coins that were minted by Otho did the exact opposite. In part this might be because Otho did not mint any *aes* coinage, the kind which would be seen by the common people most often, because of the vast surplus of such coins in circulation from both Nero and Galba.³⁶ The fact of the civil war also meant that Otho needed to strike coinage for his soldiers, meaning gold and silver was needed, and thus most of the messages were likely directed at them. All coins minted in Otho’s name are from Rome.³⁷ There is also the fact that Otho was in power for the shortest time of all the emperors of 69, and spent much of that time dealing with the problems associated with the rebellion of Vitellius.³⁸ Of all of the legends from Otho’s coins the only one that was not also used by Nero was that of *Pax*, specifically *Pax Orbis Terrarum*, likely due to the turmoil with which his reign began, and it has been theorized by Mattingly that this might have been Otho’s ‘official

³⁴ Wellesley, *The Long Year*, 6-9.

³⁵ Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 259

³⁶ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 168-69.

³⁷ Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 258-59

³⁸ Morgan, *69AD*, 91-95.

slogan'.³⁹ There are two likely reasons for this lack of change brought on by Otho. First was that he wished to associate himself with Nero and thus used many of the same messages and ideas as he did. Second is that according to our literary sources Otho wished to appear moderate and conform to the standards of the office, rather than appearing radical or innovative.⁴⁰ Both reasons indicate that Otho was endeavoring to build legitimacy by both linking himself to Nero, who was popular with the common people, and presenting himself as a tradition emperor.

While the coinage of Vitellius was not, in itself, particularly innovative, it did make good use both of long used associations of the Roman emperors and suggested the ideas Galba used on his coins during his initial rebellion.⁴¹ In the first case, much as with Otho, a large portion of Vitellius' coins harkened back to ideas that were employed on the coinage of Nero, such as those of *Annona*, *Concordia*, *Roma*, and *Victoria*, although there was some decline in quality.⁴² In that Vitellius was rebelling against the recognized Princes in Rome he also made good use of such ideas as *Libertas Restituta* and *Roma Renascens* before he had succeeded in his civil war against Otho. Minted in Spain or Gaul and directed toward the soldiers in order to keep their support, this legend was also used in small quantities in Rome while Vitellius ruled.⁴³ This deliberate harkening back to the coinage of Galba invokes many of the same ideas, that the princeps in Rome was

³⁹ Gnechi and Elmer, *The Coin-types of Imperial Rome*, 8-9, 29-30; Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 259.

⁴⁰ Morgan, *69AD*, 95-100.

⁴¹ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 175.

⁴² Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 168-69; Gnechi and Elmer, *The Coin-types of Imperial Rome*, 8-9, 29-30; BMCRE, 24.

⁴³ Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 262-67.

corrupt and that Vitellius' mission was to cleanse the Roman state of that corruption signaling that the ideas used by Galba in 68 had already become widely known.⁴⁴

There were, however, two changes made by Vitellius during his time as emperor. The first is one of focus and the second a major innovation. The change in focus was the large amount of coins that Vitellius had minted, both before and after taking control of Rome, of *Consensus* and *Fides Exercitum*.⁴⁵ This was done in recognition of the fact that it was the army that had brought Vitellius to the Principate, a fact previous emperors largely played down; for example Galba used *Consensus* but identified the provinces which supported him.⁴⁶ The first of these legends is perhaps ironic in that Vitellius both came to power and lost it in a major civil war, which shows that he did not have the 'consensus' of the army, but these coins still demonstrate clearly that the Rhine legions were Vitellius' base of power and, since newly minted coins were often distributed to the legions as pay, the message was likely meant for them.⁴⁷ The innovation, however, was the fact that Vitellius was the first to make heavy use of portraits of his father, a famous senator, and his children on the coins that he minted.⁴⁸ This change reflects both Vitellius' claim to fame and that he could provide Rome with a stable succession. This innovation demonstrates the importance of dynasty for gaining legitimacy and ensuring stability, hence why this coin appeared both in Rome and in the provinces.⁴⁹ Thus in

⁴⁴ Morgan, *69AD*, 74-75.

⁴⁵ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 175-76; BMCRE, 110, 65.

⁴⁶ Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 216-31, 262-67.

⁴⁷ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 175-76.

⁴⁸ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 175-76; BMCRE, 27.

⁴⁹ Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, 262-67.

Vitellius one might almost see a mixture of both Otho and Galba. Like Otho he harkened back to previous emperors to gain support for himself, but like Galba he made some changes to his coinage both to reflect how he came to power and also to gain support for the dynasty that he was trying to create.

With Vespasian the civil war of 69 finally came to an end. While the Flavian dynasty lasted only 25 years the changes made to how coinage was produced would last for centuries.⁵⁰ One of the biggest changes was that coins began to be minted every year and the range of messages on the coins was standardized as well.⁵¹ Many of the coins of Vespasian's immediate predecessors were used and several ideas such as *Fortuna*, *Spes*, *Juno*, and *Minerva*, which had once been well used but had fallen out of favor in recent reigns, were brought back into use.⁵² Vespasian, like Vitellius, had portraits of his sons on a great many of the coins that he had minted, starting quite early in his reign in order to gain legitimacy and ensure a stable dynastic succession. This became standardized practice for another century since dynastic succession was seen as the best way of securing peace. The mints were centralized in Rome, and this stricter control served the purposes of Vespasian and the Flavians of restoring the damage of the civil war upon the Roman Empire as well as allowing the Princeps firmer control upon it.⁵³ Thus one can see, the messages placed upon coins were in great flux as a result of the civil war of 68-

⁵⁰ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 180.

⁵¹ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 180-81; Colin Kraay, "The bronze coinage of Vespasian: classification and attribution," in *Scripta Nummaria Romana: essays presented to Humphrey Sutherland*, ed. R.A.G. Carson et al. (London: Spink and Son LTD, 1978), 52

⁵² Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 180-82; Gnechchi and Elmer, *The Coin-types of Imperial Rome*, 8-9, 18, 29-30, 60-61; BMCRE, 558, 603, 269.

⁵³ Sutherland, *Roman Coins*, 176; Kraay, "The Bronze coinage of Vespasian," 56.

69 until finally being stabilized by the victorious Vespasian, who, much as his predecessors, used old models and made innovations, as was the case with much else in the Roman world.

Inscriptions: a shift in government

Inscriptions, etched and inscribed into stone, bronze, or any other material was perhaps the most common method of disseminating information from the beginnings of writing until the printing press came into wide use. We have a great number of inscriptions from all levels of Roman society, and these sources give us an often intimate look at the intricacies of Roman politics and society that is often not possible from other sources.⁵⁴ While there were certainly a large number of official inscriptions from the Principate, unlike with coins the emperor did not have a monopoly on inscriptions. Thus coins give us some good insight into the shifts of government ideas and policy, and inscriptions give us a view of the changes and shifts in Roman politics and society.

Unfortunately, unlike with coins, we do not have any inscriptions from Galba, Otho, or Vitellius. In part this is because, much as with coins, only a very small percentage of inscriptions are thought to still exist so it is hard to draw some conclusions about the existence of certain inscriptions.⁵⁵ There is also the possibility that, as losers of a civil war, all three suffered from *damnatio memoriae*, or the deliberate removal of all of their statues and inscriptions from public places.⁵⁶ This process, well attested in the

⁵⁴ Alan K. Bowman, and Greg Woolf. "Literacy and Power in the Ancient World," in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. Alan K. Bowman et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1-2; Alan K. Bowman, "The Roman Imperial Army: Letters and Literacy on the Northern Frontier," in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. Alan K. Bowman et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 111.

⁵⁵ Bowman and Woolf, "Literacy and Power," 5-6.

⁵⁶ Bowman and Woolf, "Literacy and Power," 8-9.

literary evidence, would explain this absence of inscriptions from the first three emperors of 69, since a great many of the inscriptions were likely destroyed by those that succeeded them.⁵⁷ There is also the fact that none of them ruled long enough to leave much in the first place. This section will first look at two specific inscriptions, the *Lex de Imperio Vespasiani* and a section of the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* from 69, for the ways in which past and precedent were invoked and for several specific reactions to the events of 69. Then we shall move on to looking at the data which both the *AFA* and a series of career inscriptions provide us on the degree to which the civil war marked a shift in Roman politics, which may well have had some bearing on how the event was perceived.

The *Lex de Imperio Vespasiani* is a bronze tablet inscription, currently found in the Capitoline museum, which is the end of a longer inscription that detailed the full powers granted to Vespasian at his ascension to the empire and is probably dateable to early 70.⁵⁸ This document raises a number of issues including whether this is the only time such a law was passed, whether these powers were unique to Vespasian or had been standard from before, and whether it was standard practice for such powers to be conferred by ‘the people’ or this was a unique situation.⁵⁹ If not standard before 69 it is likely that the rapid succession of rulers created the formula given in this *lex*. Of interest also is that despite the fact that it is called a *lex*, this is in the form of a *Senatus Consultum*, and may represent the Senate’s attempt to reestablish its role as the granter of imperial power after the civil war.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ B.W. Jones and R.D. Milns, *The Use of Documentary Evidence in the Study of Roman Imperial History* (Netley: Sydney University Press, 1984), 34-35.

⁵⁹ Jones and Milns, *The Use of Documentary Evidence*, 34-35.

However, this is not our main focus, instead we will take a brief look at the way that this inscription calls upon the past and deals with the civil war. This inscription makes repeated use of phrases like “ita uti licuit divo Aug., Ti. Iulio Caesari Aug. Tiberioque Claudio Caesari Aug. Germanico.”⁶¹ Even though all eight of the emperors who preceded Vespasian likely held the powers here being granted to Vespasian, this document only calls upon the precedent of Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius.⁶² This doubtlessly deliberate omission even removed several emperors that Vespasian and his party would not have had any grievances against. But the specter of civil war, and the widespread unrest that it caused, probably made it beneficial to the Flavian Party to leave those emperors out as well so as not to be seen as calling back to a bad example.⁶³ This also means that Vespasian’s party was calling back to three emperors widely recognized as good and thus can be seen as communicating the hope that Vespasian would reign in a method akin to those men, rather than the unpopular, with the Senate, emperors that had preceded Vespasian.⁶⁴

Another part of this law that has some reflection on the civil war is, “utique quae ante hanc legem rogatam acta gesta decreta imperata ab imperatore Caesare Vespasiano Aug. iussu mandative eius quoque sunt, ea perinde iusta rataq. sint ac si populi plebisve iussu acta essent.”⁶⁵ While such provisions were a common part of the granting of powers

⁶⁰ *ibid*

⁶¹ ILS 244

⁶² Jones and Milns, *The Use of Documentary Evidence*, 34-35.

⁶³ Jones and Milns, *The Use of Documentary Evidence*, 35-36.

⁶⁴ Zvi Yavetz, *Plebs and Princes* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press 1969), 136-140.

⁶⁵ ILS 244.

to a new Princeps, given that there would always been some time between the Princeps assuming the position and when the senate and assembly could meet, most previous emperors had not come to power through the aegis of civil war.⁶⁶ While the main part of this passage served to absolve Vespasian for having declared himself emperor by declaring anything he had done *ante hanc legem rogatam* ‘before the law was passed’, it also provided retroactive absolution for Vespasian’s generals, who actually fought the war *iussu mandatuve eius quoque sunt* ‘at his command’. Thus this law can be seen as giving Vespasian retroactive legitimation for having fought the civil war.⁶⁷

The *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* is a series of inscriptions from the Arval Brethren, an ancient priesthood revived by Augustus whose purpose was to offer prayer for the preservation of the Roman State and of the Emperor, who was also the head of the college. While the record is fragmentary as a whole it does provide a number of very telling points of information for the events of 69, for the early months of which we have a large chunk of the minutes of their meetings. “Isdem cos. pr. idus Mart. vota nu(n)cupato pro s(al)ute et reditu [Vitelli] Germanici imp., preaeunt L. Maecio Postumo, mag. [Vitelli] Germanici imp.”⁶⁸ The first interesting thing to note is that on March 14th Otho was the recognized emperor in Rome and thus the Arval Brethren, over which Otho would have had control, would have been offering prayers for his safe return as he went out to fight Vitellius.⁶⁹ That the inscription actually says *Germanici* indicates that by the time this inscription was actually put up, Otho was dead and Vitellius was master of

⁶⁶ Jones and Milns, *The Use of Documentary Evidence*, 35-36.

⁶⁷ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “Patronage in Roman Society: from Republic to Empire,” in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (New York: Routledge, 1989), 83.

⁶⁸ M&W 2.

⁶⁹ Jones and Milns, *The Use of Documentary Evidence*, 51.

Rome and thus it was wise to fudge the record to make it appear as though Vitellius had been supported all along.⁷⁰ The other interesting thing to note is that the reason Vitellius name is in brackets is because his name is missing from the inscription itself, having been scratched out. This indicates that when Vitellius died someone thought it necessary to chisel out his name, possibly to gain favor with the new Flavian dynasty.⁷¹

Having looked at these two individual inscriptions we will now turn our attention to what information may be gathered from the group of inscriptions we have from the Vespasian period. To do so we will look at the official and provincial inscriptions, career inscriptions and the list of provincial governors, and the *AFA* again. The purpose here is to determine if there was a particular shift in these inscriptions, as there was with the coinage, which could tell us something about the character of the civil war of 69.

Of official inscriptions there is little that can really be said as there are too few of them that exist and those that do are of a traditional nature, either the emperor paying respect to someone or someone paying a dedication to the emperor. The only thing of particular note is the emphasis put in these inscriptions on Vespasian's family. His sons specifically Titus, were often named along with him in honor, a precedent established by Augustus, and one inscription pays tribute to Flavius Sabinus, a very prominent senator and Vespasian's elder brother who was invaluable in helping Vespasian to the Principate.⁷² There is also not much that can be said about the inscriptions set up in the provinces. There is some change apparent here, but it is of a kind that had been slowly

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Jones and Milns, *The Use of Documentary Evidence*, 84; ILS 984; John Nicols, *Vespasian and the Partes Flaviana* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1978), 19-21, 175-77.

happening over the course of the first century as the provinces were gradually Romanized.⁷³

The various career inscriptions, on the other hand, tell a much more interesting story. Looking at the list of provincial governors from the years of Vespasian's reign (69-79) shows a marked shift in who filled official positions around the empire. A number of these governors are from places outside of Italy, making them provincial aristocrats.⁷⁴ Men such as M. Ulpius Traianus, Sex. Iulius Frontinus, and M. Vetius Bolanus all appear several times on this list of governors which shows that they were men who were not just holding a single office but were being used by Vespasian as important parts of governing the Roman Empire.⁷⁵ This change marked a decided demographic shift in Roman politics that is reflected in part by the fact that Vespasian himself, while not a provincial, was a 'new man.' He brought a new group of people with him into the Roman government which would remain a vital part of it thereafter.⁷⁶ From this it is possible to see the civil war of 69 as something of a social revolution which signaled the importance of the provinces, just as the civil war that ended the Republic was also a social revolution that brought Italy to importance. In addition freedmen disappeared from the imperial bureaucracy, replaced by equites. This idea is supported by the fact that many of the

⁷³ Greg Woolf, "Power and the Spread of Writing in the West," in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. Alan K. Bowman et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 95; John Drinkwater, "Patronage in Roman Gaul and the Problem of the Bagaudae," in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (New York: Routledge, 1989), 191; Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 78.

⁷⁴ Nicols, *Vespasian and the Partes Flavianaes*, 34-35; Keith Hopkins, "Elite Mobility in the Roman Empire," in *Studies in Ancient Society*, ed. M.I. Finley (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 112; Bengt E. Thomasson, *Laterculi Praesidium* vol 1. (Goteburg: Radius, 1972),

⁷⁵ Nicols, *Vespasian and the Partes Flavianaes*, 104-111; Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society," 83; Thomassen, *Laterculi Praesidium*.

⁷⁶ Nicols, *Vespasian and the Partes Flavianaes*, 19-21, 172-74.

major figures of the following century, such as Tacitus, Suetonius, Juvenil, Statius, Trajan, Hadrian, Antonius Pius, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, were descendent from this group.⁷⁷

This shift is further confirmed when one looks at the inscriptions of the Arval Brethren. A common part of these inscriptions shows who members of the Brethren were at any given time. While the inscriptions are incomplete we do know that the brothers served for life, so it is not too difficult to get a decent picture of who was appointed to that group.⁷⁸ Since the Brethren were appointed by the emperor, some conclusions can be drawn as to what types of people he chose to honor with appointment to this priesthood, and by extension who he wished to be supporting and praying for him, that being the primary job of the Brethren.⁷⁹ Much as in the case of career inscriptions there is a decided shift towards provincial elites being part of the Brethren, many of whom, whose names we recognize, had highly successful political careers.⁸⁰ In addition to this a number of these appointees bear the name of Julius, which indicates that they were the descendants of families given citizenship by Augustus or Julius Caesar, another demographic shift away from established Roman aristocrats and towards ‘new men’, perhaps inevitable given the emperors’ long reliance on freedmen and their descendants.⁸¹ It should be noted here that the shift here was not a huge one, as provincial ariticrats were still a minority.⁸²

⁷⁷ Nicols, *Vespasian and the Partes Flavianaes*, 104, 112-113.

⁷⁸ Ronald Syme, *Some Arval Brethren* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 2-3.

⁷⁹ Syme, *Some Arval Brethren*, 2-3, 39.

⁸⁰ Syme, *Some Arval Brethren*, 71, 74, 79.

⁸¹ Syme, *Some Arval Brethren*, 39, 50-55; Hopkins, “Elite Mobility,” 107-09; Wallace-Hadrill, “Patronage in Roman Society,” 83.

Therefore, looking at the inscriptions from the Flavian dynasty we can see that there is a decided social and demographic shift towards provincial elites and away from the old Roman and Italian aristocrats. This shift had begun before Vespasian, and the established aristocrats of Rome and Italy still held the majority of positions, but the rise of Vespasian marks a decided shift towards the provinces.⁸³ This says quite clearly that the provinces were becoming increasingly important in the Roman Empire, which is corroborated by the fact that emperors began granting individual provinces more and more rights and by the end of the century there was the first provincial emperor in Trajan.⁸⁴ While the fact that this group supported Vespasian no doubt explains their sudden jump in political positions during his reign, this shift was perhaps inevitable given the increasing levels of Romanization and urbanization in the Provinces.⁸⁵

Having seen shifts in both coins and inscriptions as a result of the civil war of 69 we now look at how these changes might have affected the views people had of the civil war. Coins and the notable shifts in how coins were used by the emperors to spread messages are reflected in the various literary sources, an idea which will be explored in more depth in the following chapters. The ideas, of Galba being a contradiction of both disturbance and recalling old virtues, of Otho trying to be proper in his actions but perhaps calling back to the wrong precedent, of Vitellius as simply imitating what came

⁸² Syme, *Some Arval Brethren*, 40-42, 88-89; Hopkins, "Elite Mobility," 116.

⁸³ Nicols, *Vespasian and the Partes Flavianaes*, 155.

⁸⁴ Hopkins, "Elite Mobility," 104; Simon Keay, "Romanization and the Hispaniae," in *Italy and the West: Comparative Issues in Romanization*, ed. Simon Keay et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), 132; Sergio Fontana, "Leptis Magna. The Romanization of a major African city through burial evidence," in *Italy and the West: Comparative Issues in Romanization*, ed. Simon Keay et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), 162

⁸⁵ Syme, *Some Arval Brethren*, 84-86; Nicols, *Vespasian and the Partes Flavianaes*, 125; Simon James, "'Romanization' and the peoples of Britain," in *Italy and the West: Comparative Issues in Romanization*, ed. Simon Keay et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), 205; Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 81.

before him and being very family oriented, and of Vespasian as a stabilizing and regularizing force are all common themes in the literary works which cover 69.⁸⁶ How much these literary works were actually influenced by the coins is another matter, but the overall impression given by the coins is definitely there. The social shift seen in the inscriptions from Vespasian's reign might well have influenced how later writers saw the war. Of note is that of the four writers who were contemporary to the events of 69 two, Josephus and Plutarch, were provincials, although from the more urbanized east, and two were from the provincial elite which Vespasian brought to power.⁸⁷ While one should be careful of making concrete conclusions on how this shift affected people's perceptions of the civil war. After all, Tacitus was a 'new man' in the Senate and as such was an ardent supporter of the Senate and a critic of the Principate. However, all four writers which we will deal with in the proceeding chapters did treat the events of 69 and the rise of Vespasian as a major shift in Roman politics. They do not say that Vespasian was given new or different powers than previous emperors but all point out his status as a 'new man' and imply that Rome was a different place after his ascension. Thus while it is impossible to say to what degree people noticed the shift in the political and social structure of the Roman government, it is definite that there was in fact change, and that is demonstrated by the coins and inscriptions and corroborated by the literary evidence.

⁸⁶ Syme, *Some Arval Brethren*, 2-3.

⁸⁷ Hopkins, "Elite Mobility," 114-16.

CHAPTER III

TACITUS

Cornelius Tacitus (ca. 56-117) is the most detailed source we possess on the events of 69. He devoted the first three books of his *Histories* to the events of that year and it is for this reason that we are able to construct such a detailed account of the civil war.⁸⁸ Tacitus' account is invaluable because he reported on many matters that were touched upon by no other extant author.⁸⁹ This level of detail makes Tacitus the logical base-line for comparing the various authors that treated this 'long year.'

There are other reasons why scholars have set Tacitus up as the pre-eminent authority on the events of 69, despite his being neither the first to treat the subject, nor a confirmed eye-witness or participant. They generally argue that Tacitus was superior to the other authors as both historian and writer. While the claim that Tacitus was the greatest prose stylist of this collection of authors is widely accepted, and is my conclusion as well, it is irrelevant to this topic of discussion. That Tacitus was the greater historian is also generally accepted and seems likely, but that is not what this thesis is endeavoring to prove. The purpose here is not to determine which of these sources is the 'most accurate' or the 'best' but rather to study how the characterizations presented by these sources differ from each other and what the usefulness of each account is. Indeed, for matters such as character, based as much on subjective judgment as anything else, there is no way of telling which author is 'correct' if any of them were.⁹⁰ Therefore, this

⁸⁸ R. Martin, *Tacitus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

⁸⁹ R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1958). ; R. Mellor, *Tacitus* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 19.

⁹⁰ Andrew Laird, *Powers of Expression, Expressions of Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15-17.

chapter will explore Tacitus' viewpoint on the subject of 69 and will demonstrate how this mode of characterization, distinctly senatorial and cynical, both distinguishes Tacitus as a source and sheds light on the part of Roman society Tacitus was part of.

The reason why Tacitus is being used here as the point of comparison for the other literary sources is, as noted, the level of detail of his work and the fact that his characterizations are the most complex of all the authors to be dealt with since he, as much as possible, tried to give a complete historical evaluation of the events he covered.⁹¹ Again, this is not to say that Tacitus is the 'most accurate' or, if one could prove such an assertion, that the characterizations of the other authors are invalid or do not provide us with useful information. Just because one's judgment is balanced and based on factual information doesn't mean that it is right; it is still a subjective judgment. Indeed, despite giving balanced portrayals of these characters, Tacitus made clear to his readers what he thought and what his biases were. Nor was he above using his considerable writing talent to color his descriptions of people or to give insight into events, one way or another.⁹² Nevertheless, the fact that Tacitus gave by far the most detail about the people and events of 69 and the fact that his characterizations are multi-faceted makes him well-suited to the task of being the base-line of comparison.

Before we look at Tacitus' viewpoint on people and events, we should consider the historian himself and the sources he used. Unfortunately, virtually all we know about Tacitus comes from his writing. We do not even know whether his praenomen was Gaius or Publius. Born around 56 or 57 in what is now Northern Italy or Southern France, he was part of the rising group of provincial aristocrats discussed in the previous chapter. He

⁹¹ Karl Christ, "Tacitus und der Principat," in *Historia* 27 (1978): 449-87.

⁹² Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 148-149.

pursued a typical senatorial career, held the suffect consulship in 97, possibly participating in the decision by Nerva to adopt Trajan as his successor. It culminated in his governorship of the province of Asia in or around 112-113. There are several periods for which we have no firm information of his actions, and the evidence is inconclusive as to whether he ever served with a Legion. Counted among the great orators of his generation, he began writing history with a short work in praise of his father-in-law Julius Agricola. That Tacitus was able to marry the daughter of a significant figure such as Agricola hints of a noteworthy status for Tacitus, possibly because of his oratory. His upbringing, career, and his having lived through the final bloody years of Domitian's reign, all contributed to Tacitus' cynicism and nostalgia for the Republic. This is not to say that Tacitus was a Republican, he recognized the drawbacks of the Republican form of government and acknowledged the benefits of the Principate. What Tacitus wrestled with is what he saw as the corrupting affect of the Principate on Roman politics and the problems that arose if an unfit man was emperor.⁹³ It is likely for this reason that Tacitus devoted three whole books of his *Histories* to 69, the year that saw three unfit men as emperor and a devastating civil war. This also explains the focus of Tacitus' characterizations of these emperors on the question of whether or not they were *capax imperii*, or 'worthy of empire.'

Tacitus provided as little information about his sources as he did about himself.⁹⁴ He admitted getting details of the Flavian campaign in Book III from Vipstanus Messalla, a legionary legate who participated in the campaign, but the sources for the rest of the

⁹³ Christ, "Tacitus und der Principat," 449-87.

⁹⁴ Martin, *Tacitus*, 189.

Histories are unknown.⁹⁵ Given that Tacitus was alive when the civil war of 69 took place, it is likely he acquired some information first or second hand at the time.⁹⁶ However, it is unknown whether Tacitus was in Rome.⁹⁷ No doubt he asked the players of that drama who survived, such as Verginius Rufus, whom Tacitus eulogized, for information.⁹⁸ This supposition is corroborated by a remark in one of Pliny the Younger's letters to Tacitus: "Petis ut tibi avunculi mei exitum scribam, quo verius tradere posteris possis. Gratias ago; nam video morti eius si celebretur a te immortalem gloriam esse propositam."⁹⁹ Pliny indicated that Tacitus was soliciting information from people, *petis ut. . .scribam* 'you desire that I write,' who were eye-witnesses to important events for his *Histories*.¹⁰⁰ he also indicated that Tacitus ambition for his work was well known, and that there was value placed upon writing an enduring history saying that *morti eius si celebretur a te immortalem gloriam esse propositam* 'immortal glory would be displayed if his (Pliny the Elder's) death was celebrated by you'.¹⁰¹ As a senator, Tacitus also had access to the *Acta Senatus*, the official senate records of that body; It is unknown whether the *Acta* contained full debates or merely resolutions, although Tacitus does provide great detail of Senate meetings. However, just because Tacitus consulted eye-witnesses and did archival research, he did not necessarily present the information 'accurately', if it had

⁹⁵ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 172.

⁹⁶ R. Mellor, *Tacitus* (New York: Routledge, 1994). G.E.F. Chilver, *A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' Histories I and II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 25.

⁹⁷ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 176.

⁹⁸ Gaius Plinius Secundus, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), II.I.6. Translations of Pliny's letters relay primarily on this translation.

⁹⁹ Pliny, *Epistles*, 6.16.

¹⁰⁰ David Potter, *Literary Texts and the Roman Historian* (New York: Routledge 1999), 116.

¹⁰¹ Syme, *Tacitus* vol I., 118-119.

even been relayed ‘accurately’ in the first place.¹⁰² Also worth noting is the fact that Tacitus was also a renowned orator, possibly THE renowned orator, of his generation, a fact which can be seen most clearly in the speeches, based in part at least upon actual orations, which he puts into the mouths of his characters.¹⁰³

Now that the background of Tacitus has been discussed we can proceed to how Tacitus constructed character in the *Histories*. Like many ancient historians, Tacitus began his *Histories* by explaining both why he was writing and how he planned to distinguish himself from his predecessors:¹⁰⁴ “simul veritas pluribus modis infracta, primum inscitia rei publicae ut alienae, mox libidine adsentandi aut rursus odio adversus dominantis: ita neutris cura posteritatis inter infensos vel obnoxios.”¹⁰⁵ Several things can be established here. The first is that Tacitus felt that many of his predecessors had done an insufficient job in recording events, either because they were ‘ignorant of state or foreign affairs,’ *inscitia rei publicae ut alienate*, or were either excessively hostile, *infensos*, or too pandering, *obnoxios*.¹⁰⁶ The second is that his lifetime of political experience suited him for the job.¹⁰⁷ Tacitus, then, revealed: “mihi Galba Otho Vitellius nec beneficio nec iniuria cogniti. Dignitatem nostram a Vespasiano inchoatam, a Tito

¹⁰² Woodman, *Tacitus Reviewed*, 80-81.

¹⁰³ R. Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 112-17

¹⁰⁴ R. Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 146-147

¹⁰⁵ Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Historiae*, ed. Charles Dennis Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1911); Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals & The Histories*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: The Modern Library, 2003(1942)) I.1. All references to Tacitus use the former for the Latin and the later forms the basis of the English renderings.

¹⁰⁶ Mellor, *Tacitus*, 1-2, 36. F.R.D. Goodyear, *Tacitus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970), 29.

¹⁰⁷ Dylan Sailor, *Writing and Empire in Tacitus* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2008) 7-9.

auctam, a Domitiano longius provectam non abnuerim”.¹⁰⁸ Thus Tacitus had no reason to either criticize or flatter the first three emperors with which he dealt since he ‘knew neither benefit nor injury,’ *nec beneficio nec iniuria cogniti*, from them. By revealing that he owed his career to the Flavians at the beginning, *dignitatem nostram a Vespasiano inchoatam*, Tacitus could not be accused of hiding his association with them. As for the forms of bias which do not involve personal interaction; such objectivity was not expected of a Roman historian and in fact it was the purpose of history to highlight specific moral lessons.¹⁰⁹ This introduction, specifically Tacitus’ use of the topos of the impartial historian who spoke with ‘genuine honesty speaking without love or hate,’ *incorruptam fidem professis neque amore quisquam et sine odio dicendus est*, also declared Tacitus’ superiority over the authors who wrote before him, and highlight concerns which Tacitus wrestled with while writing.¹¹⁰

Tacitus demonstrated his characterization most clearly in the obituaries he provided for important people at their death which gave a final, definite judgment on their character.¹¹¹ Studying these obituaries is, therefore, the best way to look at how he constructed character.¹¹² The first ‘character’ heavily dealt with in the *Histories* is that of Galba, the first emperor of 69. Tacitus summed up the character of this aged emperor with one of his most famous pieces of writing:

hunc exitum habuit Servius Galba, tribus et septuaginta annis quinque principes prospera fortuna emensus et alieno imperio felicior quam suo. vetus in familia

¹⁰⁸Tacitus, *Histories*, I.1.

¹⁰⁹ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I., 204-205; Martin, *Tacitus*, 69.

¹¹⁰ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I., 90.

¹¹¹ Karl Christ, “Tacitus und der Principat,” 449-87.

¹¹² Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I., 194-96; Martin, *Tacitus*, 11.

nobilitas, magnae opes: ipsi medium ingenium, magis extra vitia quam cum virtutibus. famae nec incuriosus nec venditor; pecuniae alienae non adpetens, suae parcus, publicae avarus; amicorum libertorumque, ubi in bonos incidisset, sine reprehensione patiens, si mali forent, usque ad culpam ignarus. sed claritas natalium et metus temporum obtentui, ut, quod segnitia erat, sapientia vocaretur. dum vigeat aetas militari laude apud Germanias floruit. pro consule Africam moderate, iam senior citeriorem Hispaniam pari iustitia continuit, maior privato visus dum privatus fuit, et omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset.¹¹³

Here is the sum of Tacitus' characterization of Galba, he was a respectable man whose abilities were 'disguised by the distinction of his origins and the fear of the times so that his sloth was called wisdom,' *sed claritas natalium et metus temporum obtentui, ut, quod segnitia erat, sapientia vocaretur.*¹¹⁴ It was Galba's misfortune that he came to the throne because he was not 'fit for ruling,' *capax imperii.*¹¹⁵ Tacitus commented here on the irony that the traits which had recommended Galba as a replacement for the debauched Nero were what also destroyed him, *omnium consensu capax imperii nisi imperasset.* Nero had accustomed Rome to a generous emperor, and Galba's strict character was as unwelcome in reality as it was ideal on paper. Namely, he was a good senator but was not a good emperor and in part this obituary is a lament that it took him ruling to discover that.¹¹⁶ Tacitus did not hide Galba's indulgence of his greedy advisors, his foolish decisions, or his occasional brutality, but the portrayal is, in the end, that of a man whose fate at the hands of the mob was undeserved.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.49

¹¹⁴ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 77.

¹¹⁵ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 182.

¹¹⁶ Arthur J. Pomeroy, *The Appropriate Comment: Death Notices in the Ancient Historians* (New York: Peter Lang 1991), 211-12.

¹¹⁷ H.W. Benario, *An Introduction to Tacitus* (Athens: University of Georgia Press 1975), 47.; Kenneth Wellesley, *The Long Year: the year of the four emperors* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 30-33.

This sympathetic portrayal of Galba is further supported by the fact that Tacitus depicted Galba's end as a noble one.¹¹⁸ Although Tacitus acknowledged that there were some who said that Galba had died 'begging for a few day to pay the donative,' *paucos dies exolvendo donativo deprecatum*, he emphasized, by saying that *plures*, 'more' supported it and mentioning it second, the account that Galba 'offered his neck to the attackers for the good of the commonwealth,' *ultra percussoribus iugulum: agerent ac ferirent, si ita <e> re publica videretur*.¹¹⁹ This shows that Tacitus thought well of Galba, even if he did not think him suited to the Principate. It was a common topos that dying well signaled a good character, although that would not make him a good emperor.¹²⁰

Worth discussing here is the often cited idea that Tacitus portrayed Galba well because of the parallel between Galba's adoption of Piso and Nerva's adoption of Trajan.¹²¹ This parallel is drawn from the speech Galba made to Piso at his adoption:

'Si immensum imperii corpus stare ac librari sine rectore posset, dignus eram a quo res publica inciperet: nunc eo necessitatis iam pridem ventum est ut nec mea senectus conferre plus populo Romano possit quam bonum successorem, nec tua plus iuventa quam bonum principem . . . et audita adoptione desinam videri senex, quod nunc mihi unum obicitur'.¹²²

At first read this speech casts a poor light upon Galba, who has failed to understand the objection to his rule, which Galba thought was age, *videri senex, quod nunc mihi unum obicitur*, although age was not in itself a bad trait, nor choosing a man for adoption with

¹¹⁸ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.41

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Pomeroy, *The Appropriate Comment*, 210-211.

¹²¹ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 120, 150-153.

¹²² Tacitus, *Histories*, I.16.

the same character traits as himself.¹²³ At second look the speech also casts a positive light upon the idea of adoption of the best senator as a method for choosing a successor by saying that ‘my age can confer nothing better to the Roman people than a good successor,’ *mea senectus conferre plus populo Romano posit quam bonum successorem*.¹²⁴ The idea that Galba did care for the good of the Republic may have come from coins which Galba minted bearing such legends as *Libertas* and *Salus*. Therefore, although Galba’s choice of Piso was poor, the principle was sound, and by implication Nerva was wise both in choosing to adopt a successor and in his choice of Trajan.¹²⁵ It is possible, then, that Tacitus portrayed Galba as a noble, if flawed and tragic, character out of deference to Nerva. If Tacitus did so here, where else did he alter his characterization to suit some personal or political end?¹²⁶

While Tacitus was sympathetic to Galba, either because of his respect for Nerva or because Galba’s own ideals match his own to some degree, the very career of Otho, who usurped Galba, was a puzzle. Throughout the *Histories*, Tacitus used Otho to illuminate the divide between action and people’s view of those actions.¹²⁷ Thus, when Tacitus credited Otho for doing something beneficial, he would then detract from it by saying that it was ‘advantageous,’ *utilem*, in order not to alienate supporters, *ne vulgi largitione centurionum animos averteret*.¹²⁸ And when Tacitus conveyed that ‘against the

¹²³ D.C.A. Shotton, *Nero* (New York: Routledge 1997), 74-75.

¹²⁴ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 192.

¹²⁵ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 10-13.

¹²⁶ Thomas Cole “Initium mihi operis Servius Galba iterum T. Vinius consules. . .” in *Beginnings in classical literature*, ed. Francis W. Dunn et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press 1992), 240-241.

¹²⁷ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 88.

hope of all,' *contra spem omnium*, that Otho was not living down to the reputation earned by his association with Nero and was actually 'arranging everything to the honor of ruling,' *cuncta ad decorem imperii composita*, he implied that it was all just a façade of 'false virtue and vices sure to return,' *falsae virtutes et vitia reditura*.¹²⁹ Tacitus drew a line between Otho's actions and his intentions.¹³⁰ Tacitus clearly thought that many of the actions Otho took as emperor were good, but in his characterization he wrestled with Otho's past actions, namely having for a time lived a more drunken and debauched lifestyle than even Nero.¹³¹ As a result of both Otho's actions in his early life and the bloody coup which made him Princeps Tacitus was extremely grudging in his compliments to Otho.¹³² The reason being that Otho's abhorrent way, to Tacitus, of coming to power served undermined his legitimacy, despite his performance as Princeps.

Tacitus' attitude towards Otho lightened when it came to Otho's death, by suicide, and Tacitus was forced to deal with what is and was the great question of Otho's life: why did he commit suicide after losing only one battle and with ample forces still at his disposal? Tacitus dedicated his considerable oratorical skill to answering the question, having Otho address his attendants thus after his army's defeat at Bedriacum:

'experti in vicem sumus ego ac fortuna. nec tempus computaveritis: difficilius est temperare felicitati qua te non putes diu usurum. civile bellum a Vitellio coepit, et ut de principatu certaremus armis initium illic fuit: ne plus quam semel certemus penes me exemplum erit . . . plura de extremis loqui pars ignaviae est. praecipuum

¹²⁸ Tacitus, *Histories*, I. 46; Wellesley, *The Long Year*, 27.

¹²⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.71.

¹³⁰ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 210-211.

¹³¹ Gwyn Morgan, *69AD: The year of the four emperors* (New York: Oxford University Press 2003), 94.

¹³² Martin, *Tacitus*, 10. Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 132-133.

destinationis meae documentum habete quod de nemine queror; nam incusare deos vel homines eius est qui vivere velit.’¹³³

Thus Tacitus showed Otho meeting his end not from despair or fear but with the sober realization that fortune was ‘not with him,’ *non. . . diu usurum*” and with the desire not to put Rome through the distress of a prolonged civil war that ‘the example of not contending more than once would be his,’ *ne plus quam semel certemus penes me exemplum erit*. The speech is certainly Tacitus’, but the presence of eye-witnesses makes it possible that the content of the speech was indeed accurate. In the end, Tacitus summarized Otho’s life and career with the line: “duobus facinoribus, altero flagitiosissimo, altero egregio, tantundem apud posteros meruit bonae famae quantum malae.”¹³⁴ That Tacitus despised the ‘most disgraceful act,’ *facinoribus . . . altero flagitiosissimo*, that brought him to power is clear, and was the reason for his criticism, but paradoxically he also admired him for the ‘exceptional,’ *altero egregio*, way he ended his life.¹³⁵ It is this paradox which Tacitus used to characterize Otho and perhaps why he does not give a clear judgment on whether or not Otho was *capax imperii*.¹³⁶

While Tacitus’ characterization of Otho was rife with paradox, his characterization of Vitellius, the third emperor of 69, was rife with criticism. The charges Tacitus most frequently laid against Vitellius were that ‘Vitellius honored Nero with admiration,’ *Neronem ipsum Vitellius admiratione celebrabat*, and that he was a ‘surrendered himself to luxury and gluttony,’ *luxu et saginae mancipatus emptusque*.¹³⁷

¹³³ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.47.

¹³⁴ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.50.

¹³⁵ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 205.

¹³⁶ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 41-42; Martin, *Tacitus*, 83-84.

From the very first mention, Tacitus rarely bothered to hide his disdain for Vitellius.¹³⁸

For Tacitus, Vitellius was the opposite of what an emperor should be.¹³⁹ Tacitus covered up Vitellius' positive traits even more than he did Otho's, as demonstrated by the following account of Vitellius first days in Rome:

Postera die tamquam apud alterius civitatis senatum populumque magnificam orationem de semet ipso prompsit, industriam temperantiamque suam laudibus attollens, consciis flagitiorum ipsis qui aderant omnique Italia, per quam somno et luxu pudendus incesserat. vulgus tamen vacuum curis et sine falsi verique discrimine solitas adulationes edoctum clamore et vocibus adstrepebat; abnuentique nomen Augusti expressere ut adsumeret, tam frustra quam recusaverat.¹⁴⁰

For Tacitus, the worse thing an emperor could do was allow himself to be 'forced,' *expressere*, to do something, as here 'to take up the name of Augustus,' *nomen Augusti* . . . *ut adsumeret*, since the whole purpose of the Principate was to protect and stabilize the Roman world.¹⁴¹ While Tacitus at least grudgingly admitted Otho's positive actions, this depiction of Vitellius ignored three things.¹⁴² The first is that Vitellius was actually addressing the senate, which he often did, something his predecessors did only rarely.¹⁴³ The second is that he killed only those he absolutely had to, so he could certainly be said to have at least some 'self-control,' *temperantiam*, something also mirrored on Vitellius' *Clementia* coins.¹⁴⁴ Finally, there was his initial 'refusal,' *recusaverat*, of the title of

¹³⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.71.

¹³⁸ Martin, *Tacitus*, 217. Shotter, *Nero*, 76.

¹³⁹ Mellor, *Tacitus*, 53. Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 96-98.

¹⁴⁰ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.90.

¹⁴¹ Benario, *An Introduction to Tacitus*, 111.

¹⁴² Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 146-149.

¹⁴³ Wellesley, *The Long Year*, 104.

‘Augustus’ which was a common political tool since the days of Augustus, if not before.¹⁴⁵ It is here that one can see Tacitus playing with this common topos in that he describes both the *recusatio* and the acceptance as ‘purposeless,’ *frustra*.

As in Otho’s case, Tacitus gave Vitellius a small measure of sympathy at his end, dying at the hand of Flavian soldiers:

principatum ei detulere qui ipsum non noverant: studia exercitus raro cuiquam bonis artibus quaesita perinde adfuere quam huic per ignaviam. inerat tamen simplicitas ac liberalitas, quae, ni adsit modus, in exitium vertuntur. amicitias dum magnitudine munerum, non constantia morum contineri putat, meruit magis quam habuit. rei publicae haud dubie intererat Vitellium vinci.¹⁴⁶

Tacitus’ obituary of Vitellius gave him credit for having ‘candor and generosity,’ *simplicitas ac liberalitas*. But, in order to highlight his own opinion, he used those virtues to underline the weakness of his character, namely that since ‘they were not moderated, they caused his end,’ *quae, ni adsit modus, in exitium vertuntur*.¹⁴⁷ Vitellius was not wholly a bad man, but his weak character was bad for Rome, and therefore it was ‘for the good of the Republic that he be overthrown,’ *rei publicae haud dubie intererat Vitellium vinci*.¹⁴⁸ Vitellius’ gluttony not only was detrimental to himself but corrupted Roman politics as a whole since the ‘only way to power was to satisfy Vitellius’ insatiable desires,’ *unum ad potentiam iter. . .satiare inexplebilis Vitellii libidines*.¹⁴⁹ In addition, Tacitus criticized Vitellius for being so weak that he could not even spare Rome from

¹⁴⁴ Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors*, 121. Tacitus does admit this, grudgingly

¹⁴⁵ John Crook, “The Roman Principate,” review of *Recherches sur l’aspect ideologique du principat*, by Jean Beranger. *The Classical Review* 5 (1955): 79-81.

¹⁴⁶ Tacitus, *Histories*, III.86.

¹⁴⁷ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 190.

¹⁴⁸ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 110-113.

¹⁴⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.95.

bloodshed, lamenting that ‘if only Vitellius could have persuade the minds of other as easily has his own yielded, Vespasian’s army would have entered the city bloodlessly’ *quod si tam facile suorum mentis flexisset Vitellius, quam ipse cesserat, incruentam urbem Vespasiani exercitus intrasset.*¹⁵⁰ In the end, Tacitus’ biggest problem with Vitellius was that he could not control his own supporters, because they indulged his appetites and he was too malleable to their opinions.¹⁵¹ To Tacitus, Vitellius was not *capax imperii* as his presence in Rome was both corrupting and deprived the Roman people of security and strong leadership.¹⁵²

The final emperor of 69 to be dealt with is Vespasian, the victor of the civil war. Unfortunately, we are missing the portion of the *Histories* in which Tacitus dealt with the reign and death of Vespasian. We are thus missing Tacitus’ obituary and final opinion on Vespasian leaving his characterization incomplete. What we are left with is the tantalizing comment that Vespasian ‘alone among his predecessors became better while Emperor,’ *solusque omnium ante se principum in melius mutatus est.*¹⁵³ Given Tacitus’ famous pessimism, it is impossible to determine just how positive Tacitus was towards Vespasian. What he wrote in the surviving portion of the *Histories* does not offer a clear opinion.¹⁵⁴ Instead, what Tacitus focused on in these books is the question of why and how Vespasian pursued the Principate.

¹⁵⁰ Tacitus, *Histories*, III.66; Pomeroy, *The Appropriate Comment*, 215.

¹⁵¹ Morgan, *69AD*, 80

¹⁵² Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors*, 123. Sailor, *Writing and Empire*, 165.

¹⁵³ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.50.

¹⁵⁴ Donald Dudley, *The World of Tacitus* (Boston: Little, Brown 1969), 87.

Interestingly, in these three books Tacitus gave greater characterization to Vespasian's subordinates, Mucianus and especially Antonius Primus. It is they who were assigned the active role in winning the civil war for Vespasian. The following is part of speech Tacitus has Mucianus make to Vespasian to persuade him to become emperor:

ego te, Vespasiane, ad imperium voco, quam salutare rei publicae, quam tibi magnificum, iuxta deos in tua manu positum est. nec speciem adulantis expaveris: a contumelia quam a laude propius fuerit post Vitellium eligi. non adversus divi Augusti acerrimam mentem nec adversus cautissimam Tiberii senectutem, ne contra Gai quidem aut Claudii vel Neronis fundatam longo imperio domum exurgimus; cessisti etiam Galbae imaginibus: torpere ultra et polluentem perdendamque rem publicam relinquere sopor et ignavia videretur, etiam si tibi quam inhonesta, tam tuta servitus esset.¹⁵⁵

Vespasian is depicted as a passive figure here, needing to be persuaded to seize his chance to become emperor, Mucianus literally says 'I call you to rule, Vespasian,' *ego te, Vespasiane, ad imperium voco*.¹⁵⁶ While verbally it follows some of the forms of a *recusatio*, this is a private meeting which defeats the purpose of the gesture, although Tacitus may well be playing with the idea here that *this* was Vespasian's real *recusatio* rather than his later acclamation by his soldiers.¹⁵⁷ The absence of Vespasian's virtues here implied that Vespasian's claim on the throne was not proper as much as it was superior to Vitellius,' who, according to Mucianus, 'it would be more an insult than praise to chosen after,' *a contumelia quam a laude propius fuerit post Vitellium eligi*.¹⁵⁸ That a 'new man' like Vespasian was now worthy of the Principate was no more complimentary to Vespasian than it was to the Principate itself.¹⁵⁹ As noted, Vespasian

¹⁵⁵ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.76.

¹⁵⁶ Morgan, *69AD*, 183

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 182-84

¹⁵⁸ Wellesley, *The Long Year*, 114-115.

was not even the deciding factor in his faction's victory, Antonius Primus won the campaign against Vitellius, despite acting in ways that 'Vespasian was ignorant of or had forbidden,' *quae ignara Vespasiano aut vetita*.¹⁶⁰ Tacitus was perhaps playing with the idea that Vespasian remained clear of the fighting so that he could appear to have clean hands as a way of gaining legitimacy, which was likely how the Flavians presented it and Tacitus followed it at the expense of making Vespasian seem weak.¹⁶¹ On the surface this is not a complimentary portrayal, and it is, again, unfortunate that we do not have Tacitus' complete depiction of Vespasian.

Throughout the *Histories*, Tacitus gave just as much characterization, and often more of the blame for the events, to the various subordinates of the emperors.¹⁶² It is worth considering such passages as this, since Tacitus gave them far more attention than the other authors do: "multi in utroque exercitu sicut modesti quietique ita mali et strenui. sed profusa cupidine et insigni temeritate legati legionum Alienus Caecina et Fabius Valens."¹⁶³ The two men named were the ones who 'induced Vitellius,' *instigare Vitellium* to proclaim himself emperor. As with all the other subordinates with whom he dealt, Tacitus focused his characterization on Caecina and Valens' 'great,' *profuse* and ultimately detrimental 'greed,' *cupidine* since a Roman general was meant to protect the republic, not seek personal gain.¹⁶⁴ Even here, however, Tacitus gave some indication of

¹⁵⁹ Shotter, *Nero*, 75, 82.

¹⁶⁰ Tacitus, *Histories*, III.8.

¹⁶¹ Barbara Levick, *Vespasian* (New York: Routledge 1999), 45-47, 53.

¹⁶² Morgan, *69AD*, 7; Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 24-26.

¹⁶³ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.52.

¹⁶⁴ Shotter, *Nero*, 80.

the virtues which these men possessed such as ‘notable bravery,’ *insigni temeritate*. As with Otho, Tacitus spent much time wrestling with the paradoxical conflict between their greedy and violent motives and actions and their more positive attributes.¹⁶⁵ Caecina and Valens here, and Antonius Primus in the Flavian faction, are the men whom Tacitus often blamed for the disasters of 69. It is on Antonius Primus, for example, that Tacitus laid the crime of the sack of Cremona by saying “Antonius did not sink to this terrible crime from his reputation and lifestyle,’ *quod neque Antonius . . . a fama vitaeque sua quamvis pessimo flagitio degeneravere*, meaning that it was in keeping with his previous lifestyle.¹⁶⁶ Not only did Primus fail to rein in his soldiers’ passions as a good general should, he is even depicted as encouraging them to indulge those passions and sack the city.¹⁶⁷ Tacitus did not wholly absolve the soldiers from their bloodlust during the actual sack, but he places responsibility for the incident squarely on the shoulders of their commanders.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, despite laying the crime of the sacking of Cremona at Primus’ feet, Tacitus still acknowledged his usefulness in the chaotic times of civil war, saying famously that he was ‘the worst in peace, but not to be scorned in war,’ *pace pessimus, bello non spernendus*.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Dudley, *The World of Tacitus*, 67-68.

¹⁶⁶ Tacitus, *Histories*, III.28.

¹⁶⁷ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 147-60.

¹⁶⁸ Mellor, *Tacitus*, 57, 82. Rhiannon Ash, “Fission and fusion: shifting Roman identities in the *Histories*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*, ed. A.J. Woodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 92; Morgan, *69AD*, 213.

¹⁶⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.86.

Tacitus made the following statement, a rare case of him directly citing and challenging a previous historical characterization, to condemn Alienus Caecina, who supported and then betrayed Vitellius.¹⁷⁰

Scriptores temporum, qui potiente rerum Flavia domo monimenta belli huiusce composuerunt, curam pacis et amorem rei publicae, corruptas in adulationem causas, tradidere: nobis super insitam levitatem et prodito Galba vilem mox fidem aemulatione etiam invidiaque, ne ab aliis apud Vitellium anteirentur, pervertisse ipsum Vitellium videntur. Caecina legiones adsecutus centurionum militumque animos obstinatos pro Vitellio variis artibus subruebat.¹⁷¹

Tacitus certainly did not think well of such men if the only motive he gave them for their ‘betrayal of Vitellius,’ *pervertisse ipsum Vitellium* was that they ‘did not want anyone else to gain more favor with him,’ *ne ab aliis apud Vitellium anteirentur*. It is quite clear Tacitus thought that such men as this were one of the core problems Rome suffered during the civil war: “magna et misera civitas, eodem anno Othonem Vitellium passa, inter Vinios Fabios Icelos Asiaticos varia et pudenda sorte agebat, donec successere Mucianus et Marcellus et magis alii homines quam alii mores.”¹⁷² It is these men, a ‘changeable and scandalous sort,’ *varia et pudenda sorte agebat*, that Tacitus viewed as the real problem for the Roman government and people in 69. Even Mucianus and Marcellus, supporters of Vespasian, are painted with the same brush, with the line that they were ‘more different men than different morality,’ *magis alii homines quam alii mores*. All of them, Tacitus implies caused civil strife in order to satisfy their own appetites for power.

¹⁷⁰ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 180.

¹⁷¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.101.

¹⁷² Tacitus, *Histories*, II.95.

Tacitus characterized groups of people as well as individuals, the mob of Rome, for example, as well as the Senate and the soldiery. The army will be dealt with in the chapters on Josephus and Plutarch, each of whom characterized the Roman army differently. The mob of Rome, however, provides an interesting counterpoint to the four emperors discussed so far. The reason being that Tacitus, in passages such as the following portrayed the ‘mob’ of Rome in a wholly negative light:¹⁷³

Vniversa iam plebs Palatium implebat, mixtis servitiis et dissono clamore caedem Othonis et coniuratorum exitium poscentium ut si in circo aut theatro ludicrum aliquod postularent: neque illis iudicium aut veritas, quippe eodem die diversa pari certamine postulaturis, sed tradito more quemcumque principem adulandi licentia adclamationum et studiis inanibus.¹⁷⁴

Tacitus’ disdain for the mob of Rome is obvious: he viewed it as little more than sheep wishing to be fed and entertained ‘as if in the circus or theater,’ *ut si in circo aut theatro*.¹⁷⁵ This is the point of view of the Senator who felt that political matters should be treated with decorum and propriety rather than ‘reckless applause and meaningless zeal,’ *licentia adclamationum et studiis inanibus*.¹⁷⁶ Here Tacitus was not trying to be nuanced or sympathetic. If he were, he might have observed that by this time the urban populace was wholly disenfranchised and dependent on the Emperor for its own well-being.¹⁷⁷ It cheered the emperor for it could do little else. To do otherwise would have invited reprisal against which it could not defend itself.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Zvi Yavetz, “Vitellius and the ‘fickleness of the mob’” *Historia* 18(1969), 557-58.

¹⁷⁴ Tacitus, *Histories*, I. 32.

¹⁷⁵ Dudley, *The World of Tacitus*, 171-172.

¹⁷⁶ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 194.

¹⁷⁷ Sailor, *Writing and Empire*, 188-191. Garnsey and Saller, *The Early Principate*, 15.

Tacitus characterized the Senate, much like the fickle mob, as being a passive in the face of the emperor, but unlike the mob he acknowledged in passages such as this that they were in a difficult position:

coacto vero in curiam senatu arduus rerum omnium modus, ne contumax silentium, ne suspecta libertas; et privato Othoni nuper atque eadem dicenti nota adulatio. igitur versare sententias et huc atque illuc torquere, hostem et parricidam Vitellium vocantes, providentissimus quisque vulgaribus conviciis, quidam vera probra iacere, in clamore tamen et ubi plurimae voces, aut tumultu verborum sibi ipsi obstrepentes.¹⁷⁹

Tacitus' depiction of the senate here is certainly not positive. He depicted them as only willing to 'throw out reproaches founded in truth,' *vera probra iacere*, which sounds positive, but when added to the fact that they were only willing to do so when 'many others were speaking,' *in clamore tamen et ubi plurimae voces* so as to disguise their voices is quite damning. For a man such as Tacitus, who firmly believed that the Senate should be a part of the Roman government, even under the Principate, such submissiveness was quite galling.¹⁸⁰ However, Tacitus did acknowledge that the senate was caught in a difficult position during a civil war since condemning one side or the other could be found suspicious, *ne contumax silentium, ne suspecta libertas*, which paints them better than the plebs, although both were in the same situation. Tacitus' depiction of the Senate also shows examples of the Senate attempting, whenever they could, to establish their proper role in the Roman government. Saying "adcurrunt patres: decernitur Othoni tribunicia potestas et nomen Augusti et omnes principum honores" shows the senate hastening, *adcurrunt patres*, to 'grant Otho the honors of the

¹⁷⁸ Gian Biagio Conte, *Latin Literature: a history* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1994), 537.

¹⁷⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.85

¹⁸⁰ S.P. Oakley, "Res olim dissociabiles: emperors, senators and liberty," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus*, ed. A.J. Woodman (New York: Cambridge University Press 2009) 184-87.

Principate,' *decernitur*. . . *omnes principum honores*, which he had already *de facto* seized.¹⁸¹ This indicates that the Senate was anxious to secure its role in the political process, namely as the body that granted imperial power to a new emperor, much as the Senate would do at the end of that year with the *lex de imperio Vespasiani*.¹⁸²

Having studied Tacitus' characterization of people, I will turn to how he treated the civil war as a whole. He examined, in great detail, the various people and forces which contributed to the conflict and, moreover, assigned many a share of the blame for individual incidents. Only at the end of Book III, however, did Tacitus turn to a depiction of the war as a whole.

Id facinus post conditam urbem luctuosissimum foedissimumque rei publicae populi Romani accidit, nullo externo hoste, propitiis, si per mores nostros liceret, deis, sedem Iovis Optimi Maximi auspicato a maioribus pignus imperii conditam, quam non Porsenna dedita urbe neque Galli capta temerare potuissent, furore principum excindi. arserat et ante Capitolium civili bello, sed fraude privata: nunc palam obsessum, palam incensum.¹⁸³

This was for Tacitus the great tragedy of civil war.¹⁸⁴ The symbol of Roman sovereignty and power was burned to the ground by Roman hands, not those of a foreign invader, 'not even the capturing Gauls were able to violate it,' *neque Galli capta temerare potuissent*.¹⁸⁵ Desire for imperial power was so great that the very symbol of that power was 'destroyed by the fury of the emperors,' *furore principum excindi*. This was a

¹⁸¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.47.

¹⁸² Jones and Milns, *The Use of Documentary Evidence*, 35-36.

¹⁸³ Tacitus, *Histories*, III.72.

¹⁸⁴ Dudley, *The World of Tacitus*, 167; Kenneth Wellesley, "Tacitus as a Military Historian," in *Tacitus* ed. T.A. Dorey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 78.

¹⁸⁵ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 194.

symbolic destruction of Roman authority, already lost, temporarily, in the fight over the Principate and Tacitus gave all 4 emperors a share in the blame for it.¹⁸⁶

It was not the emperors themselves who were, for Tacitus, the real problem, it was the Principate itself. As has already been noted, Tacitus was not a Republican or against the Principate in general.¹⁸⁷ Tacitus acknowledged that having one person in charge was necessary for peace and stability. However, as Tacitus repeated in his works, there were drawbacks inherent to the system, the chief of which was its corrupting influence on people in power and the resultant difficulty in finding someone who was *capax imperii*, which as has been noted, was one of Tacitus' primary preoccupations in constructing the characters of the emperors of 69.¹⁸⁸ As Tacitus noted in his introduction, it was the Principate itself which prevented unbiased histories from being written which Tacitus was perhaps trying to remedy with this account in which he explored these problems and illustrated various lessons about the Principate.¹⁸⁹ This was the cause for Tacitus of the civil war because, without this seat of power to strive for, the civil war either would not have happened or, if it did, it would not have been as detrimental to Rome.¹⁹⁰

The actions of the Emperors' subordinates was also traced back to the corrupting influence of the Principate by Tacitus, since without the benefits of the Principate which they could coax from the Emperor those subordinate would not have been so adamant in

¹⁸⁶ Ash, "Fission and Fusion," 91.

¹⁸⁷ Mellor, *Tacitus*, 89-91.

¹⁸⁸ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. II, 530, 547-48.

¹⁸⁹ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 145-146; Sailor, *Writing and Empire*, 123-25.

¹⁹⁰ Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, ix; Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 71.

the pursuit of the war. Tacitus noted that “aut legatos ac duces magna ex parte luxus egestatis scelerum sibi conscios nisi pollutum obstrictumque meritis suis principem passuros.”¹⁹¹ These commanders and administrators supported their candidates for Empire not because they thought that they were the right choice, but because they hoped that the favor of the new emperor would be ‘gained for themselves,’ *meritis suis*.¹⁹² Thus the root and cause of all the horrors of Civil War was the existence of the Principate.

As can be seen by the above analyses, while Tacitus was certainly opinionated, he also at least to endeavored to present balanced characterizations of the people involved and of the causes of specific events of the war. There were certainly limits to what Tacitus understood, or perhaps wished to understand and the degree to which he met his own ideals, let alone ours, of an unbiased history is a matter of debate. However, it is evident that he did make an effort to be balanced. Tacitus’ high level of detail in relating events and the nuance with which he made his characterizations make him the ‘control’ for this look at various accounts of 69. As demonstrated in this chapter, Tacitus’ own viewpoint was cynical, critical, and provides the reader with a complex depiction of civil war, albeit with a senatorial bias. In particular, Tacitus’ focus on whether these emperors were *capax imperii* gives the modern reader a view on this civil war which questions whether any of these men were worthy of being emperor. It also provides a coherent questioning of the role and effects of the Principate as an institution. Even at the time when Tacitus was writing, 130 years after its creation, there were likely still many asking this question. Therefore this account also reflects back on the people who, like Tacitus, viewed the Principate in a critical light, most likely other Roman senators.

¹⁹¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.37.

¹⁹² Syme, *Tacitus* vol. I, 50.

CHAPTER IV

JOSEPHUS

The Jewish Historian Yosef ben Mattithyahu (37-100), usually called Flavius Josephus, is the earliest author, whose work survives, to treat the Roman civil war of 69.¹⁹³ He lived through and participated in the events of that year and recorded them less than a decade later as part of his *Bellum Iudaicum*.¹⁹⁴ Because of this, one might think him the most accurate source, even though the Roman civil war was not the focus of his work. However, Josephus wrote all of his works under the patronage of the Flavian emperors, and may have written this under their direction as well; although that does not mean that it was not his choice.¹⁹⁵

The possibility that Josephus' characterization of the people and events of the civil war contains what is often, unfairly and inaccurately, called 'Flavian propaganda' makes dealing with the *Bellum Iudaicum* a challenge. In fact, Tacitus may have had Josephus in mind while making the following criticism of previous historians that they were "mox libidine adsentandi aut rursus odio adversus dominantis: ita neutris cura posteritatis inter infensos vel obnoxios."¹⁹⁶ While it is an exaggeration to say that Josephus had 'no regard for posterity,' *ita neutris cura posteritatis*, since he initially wrote the *Bellum Iudaicum* to explain the Jewish War to the Jewish people living to the

¹⁹³ Steve Mason, "Flavius Josephus in Flavian Rome: Reading on and Between the Lines," in *Flavian Rome: culture, image, text*, ed. A.J. Boyle et al. (Boston: Brill, 2003), 561.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.* This is the work's Latin title, it was written in Hebrew and translated into Greek.

¹⁹⁵ Morgan, *69AD*, 270-271. Seth Schwartz, *Josephus and Judaeon Politics* (New York: Brill, 1990), 15.

¹⁹⁶ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.1; Martin, *Tacitus*, 195.

east of the empire, he certainly did paint a rosy picture of Vespasian.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, Josephus will be studied for his insights into the people and events of the civil war of 69. This narrative will be compared to that of Tacitus in order for us to get at least some idea of what the Flavian ‘approved’ version of the civil war may, perhaps, have looked like.

It should be kept in mind while studying the *Bellum Iudaicum* that the Roman civil war was not its focus. Josephus’ concern was the war of the Jewish people against the Romans. With this focus, Josephus treats the Roman civil war as a background event which affected the Jewish War only indirectly. When he does discuss the civil war, his primary concern is the elevation of Vespasian from general of the Romans army in Judaea to emperor.¹⁹⁸ This is underlined by a passage from Josephus’ prologue: “Now at the time when this great concussion of affairs happened, the affairs of the Romans were themselves in great disorder.”¹⁹⁹ Aside from a later mention of the succession of emperors ending with Vespasian, this is the only detail Josephus gave in his opening concerning the Roman civil war. This indicates that Josephus considered it less momentous than the Jewish War, at least within the context of Josephus purpose of explaining the Jewish War.²⁰⁰

Before discussing in detail Josephus’ characterization we must first take a look at the sources he used. Much of the *Bellum Iudaicum* is based on Josephus’ own

¹⁹⁷ Martin,, *Tacitus*, 92; Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 197-99.

¹⁹⁸ Steve Mason, “Reading Josephus’ *Bellum Iudaicum*,” in *Josephus and Jewish History in Flavian Rome and Beyond*, ed. Joseph Sievers et al. (Boston: Brill, 2005), 98.

¹⁹⁹ Flavius Josephus, *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston, com. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), I.4. All references to Josephus follow this translation.

²⁰⁰ James S. McLaren, *Turbulent Times? Josephus and Scholarship on Judaea in the First Century CE* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 81.

recollection of events.²⁰¹ He not only lived through but also participated in many of the events he described.²⁰² Among other things, Josephus was a general, a prisoner of Vespasian, and a witness to Titus' conquest of Jerusalem.²⁰³ For the Roman civil war, Josephus' information likely came at least partially from his association with Vespasian and members of his party.²⁰⁴ Indeed he claimed that he had read and made use of Vespasian's own *Comentarii*, now lost, on the war.²⁰⁵ Josephus also lived in Rome starting in 71 and, therefore, had easy access to the many eyewitnesses. Since Josephus provided only occasional information on Rome, it is unclear how much use he made of such a wealth of information. It is also possible that Josephus only recorded the Flavian 'party line' on events which were, at best, a secondary focus for him.²⁰⁶

The first time that Josephus met Vespasian in the *Bellum Iudaicum* sets the stage for Vespasian's rise and the tone for Josephus' treatment of him. Josephus had just been defeated by Vespasian and, deciding not to commit suicide as his compatriots had, he allowed himself to be captured and made the follow prophecy to Vespasian:

You, O Vespasian, think no more than that you have taken Josephus himself captive; but I come to you as a messenger of greater tidings; for had not I been sent by God to you, I knew what was the law of the Jews in this case and how it becomes generals to die. Do you send me to Nero? For Why? Are Nero's successors until they come to you still alive? You, O Vespasian, are Caesar and emperor, you, and this your son.²⁰⁷

²⁰¹ James S. McLaren, "Delving into the Dark Side: Josephus' Foresight as Hindsight," in *Making History: Josephus and Historical Method* ed. Zuleika Rodgers (Boston: Brill, 2007), 49.

²⁰² Rajak, *Josephus*, 5.

²⁰³ Morgan, *69AD*, 269.

²⁰⁴ Schwartz, *Josephus and Judaeen Politics*, 12.

²⁰⁵ Schwartz, *Josephus and Judaeen Politics*, 143.

²⁰⁶ Ash, *Ordering Anarch*, 127.

²⁰⁷ Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, III.400-401.

At first glance Josephus was both justifying why he did not commit suicide rather than being captured, saying that he was sent by God to deliver a message, and making an argument for why Vespasian should not have him killed, since as an oracle predicting great things for Vespasian he should be kept alive.²⁰⁸ What is interesting, however, is Josephus' claim that he made this prediction to Vespasian two years before the civil war had actually begun, perhaps as a way of establishing his own importance to his readers.²⁰⁹ Still more interesting is the divine sanction put behind it.²¹⁰ There is no way of knowing whether Josephus fabricated this at the time of writing, although Vespasian clearly did spare his life.²¹¹ It is possible that Josephus made such a claim to save his life and mere chance proved it true. That would explain why Vespasian both freed and honored Josephus. Whatever the truth, this gives the impression that Vespasian was destined to rule by the Jewish God; a strong, if dangerous, endorsement even for a Roman.²¹²

In comparison, Tacitus also made reference to the omens which presaged Vespasian's rise. However, Tacitus indicated his own opinion on oracle in the following passage: "occulta fati et ostentis ac responsis destinatum Vespasiano liberisque eius imperium post fortunam credidimus."²¹³ That Tacitus viewed oracles as something only 'believed after the fact,' *post fortunam credidimus*, shows that he thought them neither

²⁰⁸ McLaren, "Delving into the Dark Side," 58-61.

²⁰⁹ Morgan, *69AD*, 178; Schwartz, *Josephus and Judaeae Politics*, 5.

²¹⁰ Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Flavius Josephus: Eyewitness to Rome's First-Century Conquest of Judaea*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Maxwell Publishing Company, 1993), 111-112.

²¹¹ Levick, *Vespasian*, 43.

²¹² Shotter, *Nero*, 82.

²¹³ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.10.

reliable nor something on which to base decisions.²¹⁴ In Roman society, oracles were consulted both regularly and before important tasks were undertaken, therefore, as Tacitus recognized, it was important to have the right attitude toward Oracles and having good omens on one's side was a great boost to legitimacy.²¹⁵ However, Tacitus expressed doubt concerning oracles himself, as already noted, and seemed to have a low opinion of those who trusted in such things. Tacitus detailed many of the oracles Vespasian consulted which were said to presage his rise later in the *Histories*. In light of Tacitus' opinion, however, Vespasian's character becomes, by implication, both indecisive and superstitious for his frequent consultation of oracles.²¹⁶ Thus, what for Josephus was a means of establishing both Vespasian legitimacy and his own authority was used by Tacitus to highlight a character flaw which he perceived in Vespasian.

When the Roman Civil war does enter the narrative of the *Bellum Iudaicum* Josephus, of course, took the opportunity to give Vespasian further characterization.

In the meantime, an account came that there was commotions in Gaul, and that Vindex, together with the men of power in that country, had revolted from Nero; which affair is more accurately described elsewhere. This report, thus related to Vespasian, excited him to go on briskly with the war; for he foresaw already the civil wars which were coming upon them, nay, that the very government was in danger, and he thought if he could first reduce the eastern parts of the empire to peace, he should make the fears for Italy the lighter.²¹⁷

Josephus characterized Vespasian as having foreseen the civil war and taken care to ease the empire's burden by ending the Jewish War. To Josephus' credit, he did admit earlier in the work that the Roman civil war was not his focus and that there were others better

²¹⁴ Chilver, *Commentary on Tacitus Histories*, 23-24.

²¹⁵ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 134-136.

²¹⁶ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 130-131; Ash "Fission and Fusion," 97-98; Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 250.

²¹⁷ Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, IV.440-441.

suites to explain it.²¹⁸ However, this idea runs into two problems. First, since the revolt of Vindex was quickly crushed, it is questionable whether anyone could have predicted the destructive civil war of 69, even in light of widespread discontent against Nero. Nero's needless panic and suicide started the chain of events that placed Vespasian upon the throne. The second issue betrays Josephus' bias for the seriousness of the Jewish War. It was a major rebellion, and its suppression was in Rome's interest, but it was not a threat to the empire or a cause of fear in Italy.²¹⁹

Tacitus also commented upon Vespasian's actions in the east. He recorded, "Profligaverat bellum Iudaicum Vespasianus, obpugnatione Hierosolymorum reliqua, duro magis et arduo opere ob ingenium montis et pervicaciam superstitionis quam quo satis virium obsessis ad tolerandas necessitates superesset."²²⁰ Leaving aside Tacitus' bias against the Jewish people and their 'stubborn superstition,' *pervicaciam superstitionis*, this is still a lower opinion of the importance of the Jewish War. The war seems a nuisance to the Roman army, but nothing more.²²¹ Tacitus' implies that taking Jerusalem would be a simple operation, 'difficult only because of the nature of the mountain,' *arduo opere ob ingenium montis*. However, his readers certainly knew that the city did not fall until the following year. This indicates that, in Tacitus' view, Vespasian did not attempt to end the war quickly. Tacitus credits Vespasian with being a good soldier, if perhaps too cautious, but not with having an urge to ease the burden of Rome. However, there is not necessarily a contradiction between these accounts.

²¹⁸ C.P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971), 77.

²¹⁹ Hadas-Lebel, *Flavius Josephus*, 188.

²²⁰ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.4.

²²¹ Hadas-Lebel, *Flavius Josephus*, 188.

Josephus was discussing the campaign season of 68 and Tacitus that of 69, and Tacitus does acknowledge that by the beginning of 69 ‘Vespasian had ended the Jewish war,’ *Profligaverat bellum Iudaicum Vespasianus*. Josephus’ characterization of Vespasian is still the more positive one, however.

While Josephus mentioned Galba and Otho only in passing, he gave a full characterization of Vitellius. Since Vespasian wrested the empire from Vitellius, such a characterization was necessary to justify Vespasian’s rebellion.²²²

Now about this very time it was that heavy calamities came about Rome on all sides; for Vitellius was come from Germany with his soldiers, and drew along with him a great multitude of other men besides. And when the spaces allotted for the soldiers could not contain them, he made all Rome itself his camp, and filled all the houses with his armed men; which men, when they saw the riches of Rome with those eyes which had never seen such riches before, and found themselves shone around on all sides with silver and gold, they had much ado to contain their covetous desires, and were ready to betake themselves to plunder and to slaughter of such as should stand in their way. And this was the state of affairs in Italy at that time.²²³

While Josephus did not characterize Vitellius directly here, Vitellius was assigned the blame for causing calamity in Rome by bringing such avaricious soldiers.²²⁴ Josephus indicated that Vitellius’ very presence in Rome had brought chaos and destruction to the city.²²⁵ Josephus also characterized Vitellius’ soldiers as being more of an uncouth rabble than an army.²²⁶ The soldiers were blamed for looting and murdering, but Vitellius was assigned the greater blame for having brought them in the first place.²²⁷

²²² Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors*, 114.

²²³ Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, IV.585-587.

²²⁴ Mason, “Reading Josephus’ *Bellum Iudaicum*,” 98.

²²⁵ Wellesley *The Long Year*, 201; Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome*, 90-91.

²²⁶ Hadas-Lebel, *Flavius Josephus*, 138.

On this matter Tacitus and Josephus were in agreement. As we have seen, Tacitus portrayed Vitellius as being an inherently corrupted and corrupting figure. He painted a similar picture of Vitellius' soldiers, that of an almost ravening horde 'wandering through the colonnades, the shrines, and the whole city,' *in porticibus aut delubris et urbe tota vagus*.²²⁸ He also characterized Vitellius as 'permitting anything to his generals and soldiers,' *Ceterum non ita ducibus indulset Vitellius ut non plus militi liceret*.²²⁹ Like Josephus, Tacitus blamed Vitellius for the problems his soldiers brought to Rome. He did not say that Vitellius caused the problems, but his presence, and that of his army, disrupted the city.²³⁰ While Tacitus portrayed the soldiers more positively than does Josephus and his depiction of Vitellius was more complex, he continually returned to the chaos and degradation that Vitellius brought on Rome.²³¹ It is possible that both writers were influenced by the Flavian 'party line,' it being common for the victorious party of a civil war to criticize the morality of the defeated party to establish legitimacy for their new regime.²³² However, even if these accounts are exaggerated, this does not invalidate their point of view.

Josephus used his characterization of Vitellius as the reason why Vespasian's troops pushed for civil war.

For that neither will the Roman senate, nor people, bear such a lascivious emperor as Vitellius, if he be compared with their chaste Vespasian; nor will they endure a

²²⁷ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 96-98.

²²⁸ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.93.

²²⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.94.

²³⁰ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 116-118.

²³¹ Mason, "Flavius Josephus in Flavian Rome," 576.

²³² Wellesley, *The Long Year*, 201.

most barbarous tyrant, instead of a good governor, nor choose one that has no child to preside over them, instead of him that is a father; because the advancement of men's own children to dignities is certainly the greatest security kings can have for themselves.²³³

This gives an important point of characterization to Vespasian's soldiers. Namely that they were concerned for the Roman state and wished to save it from Vitellius' corruption.²³⁴ Also of note here is the fact that Vespasian's sons were cited as one the main points in Vespasian's favor. This stems, perhaps, from Josephus' high regard for the elder son, Titus, although, as already noted with the coinage, Vespasian's ability to offer a stable succession was an important part of his gaining legitimacy.²³⁵ While it is questionable whether all, or even some, of Vespasian's soldiers felt this way, of greater concern are the factual errors. When Vespasian was declared emperor, Vitellius had not yet reached Rome and Vitellius also had a son, albeit one who was much younger and unproven.²³⁶ This characterization of the event absolves Vespasian of the crime of rebellion, since he was shown doing so only to save Rome at the behest of his soldiers.²³⁷ Since such a *recusatio* gave greater legitimacy than mere conquest, the Flavians would almost certainly have endorsed this depiction of their rise.²³⁸

Once more, Tacitus provided a different perspective on how and why Vespasian was declared emperor. The following passage indicates that he did not think it

²³³ Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, IV.596.

²³⁴ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 55.

²³⁵ Rajak, *Josephus*, 185-86.

²³⁶ Martin, *Tacitus*, 195.

²³⁷ Hadas-Lebel, *Flavius Josephus*, 138.

²³⁸ Mary Beard, "The Triumph of Flavius Josephus," in *Flavian Rome: culture, image, text*, ed. A.J. Boyle et al. (Boston: Brill, 2003), 545-546; Rajak, *Josephus*, 214.

spontaneous: “At Vespasianus bellum armaque et procul vel iuxta sitas viris circumspectabat. miles ipsi adeo paratus ut praeentem sacramentum et fausta Vitellio omnia precantem per silentium audierint.”²³⁹ Tacitus agrees with Josephus that Vespasian’s ‘soldiers were devoted to him,’ *miles ipsi adeo paratus*, but posits that ‘Vespasian was contemplating war and arms,’ *At Vespasianus bellum armaque. . .circumspectabat*, against Vitellius before he was proclaimed by his soldiers. Tacitus’ account is supported by the fact that Mucianus departed on his campaign to Italy almost immediately after the proclamation, a fact that indicates prior planning. In fairness, however, Josephus did not say that the acclamation was spontaneous, merely enthusiastic and for benevolent reasons. Thus, these two accounts are different but not mutually exclusive. Tacitus also characterized Titus as having ‘reputation, talent, and great fortune,’ *famam. . .ingenium. . .quantaecumque fortunae*, but was more reserved about it than Josephus.²⁴⁰ Namely he implied that Titus’ success to date was largely a result of ‘beautiful face and a certain grandeur,’ *decor oris cum quadam maiestate*.

Josephus followed his account of Vespasian’s acclamation as emperor with the newly crowned emperor asking Titus Alexander, governor of Egypt, for aid.

Justly, therefore, did Vespasian desire to obtain that government, in order to corroborate his attempts upon the whole empire; so he immediately sent to Tiberius Alexander, who was then governor of Egypt and of Alexandria, and informed him what the army had put upon him, and how he, being forced to accept of the burden of the government was desirous to have him for ally and supporter.²⁴¹

²³⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.74.

²⁴⁰ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.1.

²⁴¹ Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, IV.616.

Josephus continued his characterization of Vespasian by describing the Principate as a burden to be undertaken, a common trope of rulers.²⁴² More importantly, Vespasian was characterized as having the intelligence to immediately gain the support of Egypt, a province both wealthy and vital to Rome's grain supply.²⁴³ Every other source, however, depicted Egypt as declaring for Vespasian first, with the Judaeen legions following a few days later.²⁴⁴ It is widely supposed that Josephus manipulated the sequence of events so that it was Vespasian's troops that declared for him first, thus raising the prestige of both. This is unfair to Josephus as he was an actual eye-witness and by that logic it is just as possible that the other writers changed the sequence of events to suit their own ends.²⁴⁵

While Tacitus openly stated that it was in the best interest of Rome to remove Vitellius, he did not credit Vespasian with rebelling for this reason. He also, as noted, gave the initiative for the rebellion to Tiberius Alexander, *initium ferendi ad Vespasianum imperii Alexandriae coetum*, and the legions stationed in Alexandria, after Vespasian, Mucianus, and Tiberius Alexander had already agreed to rebel.²⁴⁶ As already discussed, that Tacitus took the initiative for the rebellion away from Vespasian fits with his portrayal of Vespasian as a passive character needing to be prompted to action.²⁴⁷ Tacitus was playing here with the idea of Vespasian being 'prompted to the Principate' in

²⁴² Crook, "The Roman Principate," 79-81.

²⁴³ Levick, *Vespasian*, 46.

²⁴⁴ Levick, *Vespasian*, 43.

²⁴⁵ Hadas-Lebel, *Flavius Josephus*, 140-141. Schwartz, *Josephus and Judaeen Politics*, 6n.12.

²⁴⁶ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.79.

²⁴⁷ Levick, *Vespasian*, 43.

counter to the *recusatio* topos which various authors, such as Josephus, invoked in order to legitimize Vespasian's rule.

Josephus concluded his discussion of the Roman civil war by detailing its end and characterizing the event as a whole: "So Vespasian's good fortune succeeded to his wishes everywhere, and the public affairs were, for the greatest part, already in his hands; upon which he considered that he had not arrived at the government without divine providence, but that a righteous kind of fate had brought the empire under his power."²⁴⁸ Josephus made it sound as if the civil war was resolved easily because of Vespasian's luck, which it obviously was not. It is also implied that Vespasian succeeded because he was a good man. The Flavians undoubtedly supported these ideas: that fate and fortune made Vespasian emperor because he was a good man and suited to the position, and while the war itself was unfortunate the result was a happy one. This could certainly have been Josephus' honest opinion of the war, but it does make his account problematic.

Despite calling Vespasian the only emperor to become better by exercising power, Tacitus' characterization of the war was much different. This goes beyond Tacitus' characterization of Vespasian as passive and his low opinion of Fate and Fortune. As already discussed, Tacitus felt that the only change brought by the civil war was who was in power, rather than how he ruled.²⁴⁹ Specifically, Vespasian's supporters were depicted as no better than those who came before. Such men were, for Tacitus, if anything a bigger problem for Rome than the emperors themselves.²⁵⁰ More importantly, while Vespasian, and other historians, might have claimed that Vespasian's hands were clean of bloodshed,

²⁴⁸ Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum*, 4.622.

²⁴⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.95.

²⁵⁰ Grant, *The Twelve Caesars*, 217.

Tacitus did not absolve him of having led a civil war.²⁵¹ After all Tacitus did not single out Vitellius or any one emperor when discussing the destruction of the Capitol. He says *principum*, a use of the plural which implies that he blamed all four of the emperors of 69 for that crime, the greatest of the civil war.²⁵² Regardless of what the Flavians claimed, Tacitus assigned them a part of the blame.

There is little difference between the sequence of events as given by Josephus and that of Tacitus, although Josephus' is the simpler narrative.²⁵³ Where there are discrepancies, there is no clear way of telling who was right. Both historians had clear reasons for depicting things the way they did, although scholarship favors Tacitus as the more accurate of the two, despite Josephus' status as an eye-witness. The real difference, however, lies in how these two authors characterized the people and events of 69.

All told Josephus' relationship with and patronage by Vespasian makes it likely that his account was at least in accord with the Flavian 'party line.' His glowing praise of Vespasian and the apparent factual errors of his account support this conclusion. That the civil war was only a concern secondary to Josephus' focus, the Jewish War, makes this seem all the more likely. However, Josephus is still a useful source for the Roman civil war, since his history gives us a look at what the Flavian's 'official' depiction of the war might have been. It provides an outside view of Roman politics and an account of events with which the other authors discussed were probably familiar.²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ Levick, *Vespasian*, 51-53.

²⁵² Tacitus, *Histories*, III.72

²⁵³ Louis H. Feldmann "Introduction," in *Josephus, the Bible and History*, ed. Louis H. Feldmann et al. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

²⁵⁴ There is not evidence that the other authors used Josephus as a source, but Tacitus indicates several times that there were other pro-Flavian accounts of the war around.

CHAPTER V

PLUTARCH

The Greek biographer Plutarch (c. 46-120) dealt with the civil war of 69 in his biographies of the emperors Galba and Otho. These were part of a series of biographies on the emperors from Augustus to Vitellius of which only these two survive in their entirety. This series of Imperial *Lives* differs from Plutarch's more famous *Parallel Lives* in that there is a stronger thread of narrative and comparatively more concern for events beyond the actions of and on the emperor.²⁵⁵ It was noted, even in antiquity, that these two *Lives* were a linked pair and they were often reproduced for the moral lessons they taught about civil war and proper behavior.²⁵⁶ It is uncertain whether this was a unique feature or part of the whole series.

Plutarch was a wealthy provincial aristocrat from Chaeronea, in Greece. Aside from a prodigious writing career he participated actively in local government and was a priest of Apollo at Delphi.²⁵⁷ He was a noted partisan of the Greek people and travelled to Rome on several occasions to represent his city. These trips, as well as the popularity of his writing, earned him many friends in Rome.²⁵⁸ Plutarch's literary accomplishments eventually earned him Roman citizenship and honors granted by both Trajan and

²⁵⁵ A.J. Gossage, "Plutarch," in *Latin Biography*, ed. T.A. Dorey (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 48.

²⁵⁶ Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, "Beginnings in Plutarch's Lives," in *Beginnings in Classical Literature*, ed. Francis W. Dunn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 208-11; Robert Lamberton, *Plutarch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 23.

²⁵⁷ Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 9.

²⁵⁸ Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 11.

Hadrian.²⁵⁹ Most importantly for the study of these *Lives*, however, is the fact that Plutarch was a Platonist and thus interested in the ideals of moderate and proper action.²⁶⁰

As with the previous authors, some mention must be made of Plutarch's sources before we delve into his characterizations. As with Tacitus and Josephus, we know very little about Plutarch's sources. Like Josephus, however, Plutarch was an adult in 69 and likely heard about many of these events as they occurred, although he was not a participant in the war.²⁶¹ Plutarch, by his own admission, came to Latin only later in his life and was not particularly good at it. However, since many Romans knew Greek this is unlikely to have hindered any inquiries he made on the war, although it has been questioned how well he understood what sources he had.²⁶² That Plutarch did make inquiries is supported by the fact that he says he was shown around the battlefield at Bedriacum and saw Otho's tomb.²⁶³ There is evidence, to be discussed in depth later, that Plutarch primarily based these biographies on several Roman accounts of the war, also used by Tacitus.²⁶⁴ It is widely accepted in the scholarly community that Plutarch cut this string of biographies off before Vespasian, because they were written during the reign of Domitian, Vespasian's son, or under his immediate successor Nerva and thus would have been politically, and perhaps even personally, dangerous.²⁶⁵

²⁵⁹ Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 29, 34.

²⁶⁰ Gossage, "Plutarch," 51.

²⁶¹ Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 17-18.

²⁶² Gossage, "Plutarch," 46; D.A. Russel, *Plutarch* (New York: Scribner, 1973), 54-55.

²⁶³ Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 49.

²⁶⁴ Chilver, *Commentary on Tacitus*, 26; Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 17-18.

²⁶⁵ C.P. Jones, "Towards a Chronology of Plutarch's Works," in *Essay on Plutarch's Lives*, ed. Barbara Scardigli (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 123.

Unfortunately, no opening or programmatic statement gives us Plutarch's stated aims. Presumably this would have been at the beginning of the *Life of Augustus*.

Therefore, we shall begin with Plutarch's characterization of Galba. As was common in biography, Plutarch gave an overall judgment of Galba at the emperor's death:

Having lived in great honor and reputation in the reigns of five emperors, insomuch that he overthrew Nero rather by his fame and repute in the world than by actual force and power. . . . But being now overcome with age, he was indeed among the troops and legions an upright ruler upon the antique model; but for the rest giving himself to Vinus, Laco, and his freedmen, who make their gain of all things, no otherwise than Nero had done to his insatiate favorites, he left none behind him to wish him still in power, though many to compassionate his death.²⁶⁶

Plutarch implied here that Galba was such an upright and moral man that he toppled Nero simply by existing. While other sources do agree that Galba gave the rebellion political legitimacy, they also agree that Nero fell to his own panic rather than to Galba's virtue.²⁶⁷

The only flaw that Plutarch gave Galba in this obituary is that his age made him too reliant on corrupt men.²⁶⁸ Plutarch therefore implied that it was the shortcomings in others, rather than in Galba, that brought down his reign.²⁶⁹ The corrupt soldiery saw him as antiquated, his unworthy favorites ruined his reputation, and Rome itself was so corrupt that none wished him in power. Thus Plutarch seemed to make Galba an exemplar of the dangers of corrupt times to a good man.²⁷⁰ The virtues themselves, especially 'honor,' *honos*, were also used by Galba on his coins.

²⁶⁶ Plutarch *Plutarch's Lives, vol. II* trans. John Dryden, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2001). All references to Plutarch use this translation.

²⁶⁷ Lamberton, *Plutarch*, 2.

²⁶⁸ Grant, *Twelve Caesars*, 180.

²⁶⁹ Chilver, *Commentary on Tacitus*, 14-16; Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 50.

²⁷⁰ Lamberton, *Plutarch*, 72.

Interestingly, Tacitus used some of the same language and ideas as Plutarch in his own obituary of Galba. While Plutarch did write earlier than Tacitus, and was well known, it is the consensus among scholars that Tacitus did not base his account on Plutarch's, although it is unknown whether or not Tacitus knew Plutarch.²⁷¹ Instead, it is argued that both used the same source, or set of sources, for their narratives.²⁷² It is also consensus that Plutarch followed these sources closely while Tacitus rearranged things and added other evidence.²⁷³ Many favor Tacitus as the 'more accurate' of the two, but this does not address the question of how following, or not following, would affect their characterizations.²⁷⁴ While Tacitus spoke of Galba's successes under previous emperors, he implied that this was more to do with luck than Galba being a 'good man'. The greater difference is that Tacitus put much greater weight on Galba's poor decisions, although he too called Galba old-fashioned.²⁷⁵ In his final judgment, while Tacitus had sympathy for Galba, he ultimately felt that he was not suited to be emperor, regardless of how good he may have looked on paper because he had a better sense than Plutarch of what made someone *capax imperii*.²⁷⁶

Plutarch's main criticism of Galba, aside from trusting his advisors too much, was the poor job Galba did in attempting to recoup the money wasted by Nero. While Plutarch did credit Galba for the attempt he was forced to admit that the method Galba

²⁷¹ Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 61; Russel, *Plutarch*, 10; C.B.R. Pelling, "Plutarch's Method of Work in the Roman *Lives*," in *Essay on Plutarch's Lives*, ed. Barbara Scardigli (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 301-303.

²⁷² Chilver, *Commentary on Tacitus*, 26; Lamberton, *Plutarch*, 13.

²⁷³ Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, 74.

²⁷⁴ Russel, *Plutarch*, 61.

²⁷⁵ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 32-33.

²⁷⁶ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.49; Pomeroy, *The Appropriate Comment*, 213.

chose was not only a failure but also detrimental to the state, and his reign.²⁷⁷ Plutarch did not depict Galba's failings as bringing about his end, however, but rather the unwillingness of the Roman people and soldiery to accept his moral way of ruling.²⁷⁸ This way of ruling, perhaps an attempt by Galba to establish legitimacy based on moral superiority, was popular with some but, unfortunately and terminally for Galba, was not popular the army and the plebs.²⁷⁹

“when they heard of this, they conceived an implacable hatred against him. . . This heartburning, however, was as yet at Rome a thing undeclared, and a certain respect for Galba's personal presence somewhat retarded their motions, and took off their edge, and their having no obvious occasion for beginning a revolution curbed and kept under, more or less, their resentments.”²⁸⁰

Plutarch placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the soldiers. They hated Galba because he would not fulfill their greed, and they are so unruly that they would not even take their grievances to him.²⁸¹ Plutarch also praised Galba's authority as being sufficient to check these feelings but also set the stage for Otho by saying that the soldiers needed an occasion to begin a revolution against Galba, an occasion that Otho would provide.

Additionally, Plutarch characterized Galba as sacrificing his personal desires for the state: “but Galba, in all his actions, showed clearly that he preferred the public good before his own private interest, not aiming so much to pleasure himself as to advantage the Romans by his selection.”²⁸² Plutarch characterized Galba's adoption of Piso as being

²⁷⁷ Plutarch, *Galba*; Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 56-57.

²⁷⁸ Wellesley *The Long Year*, 30-33; Alan Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 3.

²⁷⁹ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 76-77.

²⁸⁰ Plutarch, *Galba*.

²⁸¹ Rosenmeyer, “Beginnings in Plutarch's *Lives*,” 223.

for the good of the state, rather than what he would have wished for himself. Plutarch did not address the problem mentioned by our other sources, however, namely that while Piso may have been good for the state, he was not what the army or people wanted.²⁸³

Plutarch carried this idea of self-sacrifice to its conclusion at Galba's death:

He, however, offered his throat, bidding them 'strike, if it be for the Romans' good. . . But those that were with him would not allow him to keep it covered up, but bade him let every one see the brave deed he had done; so that after a while he struck upon the lance the head of the aged man that had been their grave and temperate ruler, their supreme priest and consul, and tossing it up in the air, ran like a bacchanal, twirling and flourishing with it, while the blood ran down the spear.²⁸⁴

Plutarch's view was that Galba faced his end with the hope that the soldiers would take the good of Rome into account.²⁸⁵ As the rest of the passage shows, however, that is not what the soldiers had in mind. Plutarch used this display to underline, one last time, the difference between Galba's morality and the immorality of the times.²⁸⁶

Tacitus characterized Galba's death in much the same manner: "alii suppliciter interrogasse quid mali meruisset, paucos dies exolvendo donativo deprecatum: plures obtulisse ultro percussoribus iugulum: agerent ac ferirent, si ita <e> re publica videretur. non interfuit occidentium quid diceret. de percussore non satis constat."²⁸⁷ While acknowledging a competing story, *alii suppliciter interrogasse*, Tacitus also favored the account that Galba faced his end nobly and 'for the good of the commonwealth.' *si ita*

²⁸² Plutarch, *Galba*.

²⁸³ Grant, *Twelve Caesars*, 184-186.

²⁸⁴ Plutarch, *Galba*.

²⁸⁵ Mursion, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 43-44.

²⁸⁶ Lamberton, *Plutarch*, 35.

²⁸⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.41.

<e> *re publica*. Tacitus also mentioned that ‘many barbaric wounds and savage mutilations were given to the body,’ *pleraque vulnera feritate et saevitia trunco iam corpori adiecta*, but the perpetrators are not singled out and it is merely part of the chaotic scene, whereas Plutarch focused his account on blaming those responsible.²⁸⁸ It is possible that Plutarch used this focus to underline both the tragedy of Galba’s death and the ferocity of the soldiers. It is equally possible that Tacitus manipulated the account to underscore how out of place and out of touch Galba was. Tacitus certainly did not attach the same kind of selflessness to Galba. In fact, Tacitus criticized Galba for not realizing that more than morality was needed to rule Rome. It is a question left unexplored in any extant author as to whether Galba’s moral stance was real or the typical moral superiority that was employed to gain legitimacy. Certainly, these accounts of Galba’s actions can be seen in several different lights.²⁸⁹ Regardless of whether Galba’s morality was real or feigned, Plutarch still characterized him and his reign based on his perceived morality and Tacitus, while acknowledging said morality, chose to underline Galba’s poor choices in his attempt to either be or appear moral.

Plutarch’s characterization of Otho was clear from the moment he introduced him into the narrative of the *Life of Galba*.²⁹⁰

Here, it is related, no more than twenty-three received and saluted him emperor; so that, although he was not in mind as in body enervated with soft living and effeminacy, being in his nature bold and fearless enough in danger, nevertheless, he was afraid to go on. But the soldiers that were present would not suffer him to recede, but came with their swords drawn around his chair.²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 77; Tacitus, *Histories*, I.41.

²⁸⁹ Murison, *Galba, Otho, and Vitellius*, 32-33.

²⁹⁰ Russel, *Plutarch*, 102-03.

²⁹¹ Plutarch, *Galba*.

Plutarch characterized Otho based on Otho inability to free his mind completely from the degradation of his body and lifestyle. His courage, which Plutarch damned with faint praise, is unable to carry through with a plan which he hashed. This left the soldiers in control. Plutarch clearly thought little of Otho, characterizing him as stirring up and focusing the anger of the Praetorian Guard but unable muster the courage to see the plot through.²⁹² Plutarch's Otho was, therefore, a weak and immoral character, unfit to rule Rome.²⁹³

While Tacitus certainly focused on Otho's immoral lifestyle and the weaknesses in his character, he also gave Otho credit for some positive attributes as well: "Quis ad vos processerim commilitones, dicere non possum, quia nec privatum me vocare sustineo princeps a vobis nominatus, nec principem alio imperante. vestrum quoque nomen in incerto erit donec dubitabitur imperatorem populi Romani in castris an hostem habeatis."²⁹⁴ Tacitus made Otho seem both calm and in control as he is encouraging the Praetorian Guard to support his coup. This speech, likely a Tacitean construction, also gave Otho credit for the clever tactic of linking the Guard's fate with his own, saying 'your title is likewise in uncertainty,' *vestrum quoque nomen in incerto erit.*²⁹⁵ While Tacitus did acknowledge the chaos unleashed by Otho's coup and was critical of his rise to power, he nevertheless gave Otho credit for both inner strength and outward authority.²⁹⁶

²⁹² Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives*, 51-52.

²⁹³ Lamberton, *Plutarch*, 72.

²⁹⁴ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.37.

²⁹⁵ Sailor, *Writing and Empire in Tacitus*, 194.

²⁹⁶ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 82-83

Plutarch's judgment of Otho carried over into his descriptions of how Otho ruled in Rome. Plutarch depicted Otho as striving to please the people of Rome, to his own detriment at times, even going so far as to take the name Nero on the people's wishes.²⁹⁷ A link reinforced by Otho's employment of many of Nero's coin types. To Plutarch, such pandering was unfit for a Princeps and immoral as well.²⁹⁸ What Plutarch admitted but glossed over was that when Otho realized that using the name Nero angered the senate, he stopped.²⁹⁹ Plutarch likely intended this to be further proof of Otho's indecisive character.³⁰⁰ Another reading, however, is that Otho was, unlike Galba, capable of perceiving and learning from his mistakes.

Plutarch used Otho's indecisiveness to explain why Otho offered battle at Bedriacum, even though waiting would have been more beneficial to him:

Otho also himself seems not to have shown the proper fortitude in bearing up against the uncertainty, and, out of effeminacy and want of use, had not patience for the calculations of danger, and was so uneasy at the apprehension of it that he shut his eyes, and like one going to leap from a precipice, left everything to fortune.³⁰¹

Once more, Plutarch's Otho is unable to maintain mental fortitude and overcome the 'effeminacy' of his character.³⁰² For Plutarch, this is both why Otho lost the battle of Bedriacum and why his rule ultimately failed. He was unable to face uncertainty and thus gambled rather than planned. Plutarch credited Otho with only one moment of strength in

²⁹⁷ Plutarch, *Otho*.

²⁹⁸ C.B.R. Pelling, "Plutarch's Adaption of his Source-Material," in *Essay on Plutarch's Lives*, ed. Barbara Scardigli (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 143.

²⁹⁹ Grant, *Twelve Caesars*, 190-191.

³⁰⁰ D.A. Russel, "On Reading Plutarch's *Lives*," in *Essay on Plutarch's Lives*, ed. Barbara Scardigli (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 85.

³⁰¹ Plutarch, *Otho*.

³⁰² R.H. Barrow, *Plutarch and his times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 92-93.

his entire depiction, and only after Otho had decided on suicide: “out of regard to their safety, he showed himself once more in public, but not with a gentle aspect and in a persuading manner as before; on the contrary, with a countenance that discovered indignation and authority, he commanded such as were disorderly to leave the place, and was not disobeyed.”³⁰³ Thus we have another of Plutarch’s lessons on morality, Otho found strength only after he had decided upon committing suicide *for the good of Rome*.

Plutarch’s description of Otho’s decision to kill himself also highlighted a further moral lesson: “Believe it many times over, I can die with more honor than I can reign. For I cannot see at all how I should do any such great good to my country by gaining the victory, as I shall by dying to establish peace and unanimity and to save Italy from such another unhappy day.”³⁰⁴ Plutarch posited two reasons why Otho decided to kill himself rather than keep fighting. First, Otho despaired of winning.³⁰⁵ He had already lost one battle and could neither foresee victory nor bear the strain of trying. Second, Otho realized that he was a detriment to Rome.³⁰⁶ Plutarch implied with this speech that Otho’s realization that he was a detriment to Rome meant that he had to commit suicide. Under Plutarch’s morality Otho could not be redeemed and rule better, once the realization came to him he had no choice but to die in order to cleanse Rome of himself.

As already noted, Tacitus did discuss the divide between Otho’s lifestyle and his action, but for him the relationship was more complex than it appeared in Plutarch. Tacitus certainly did not hide what he perceived as Otho’s immorality, but at the same

³⁰³ Plutarch, *Otho*.

³⁰⁴ Plutarch, *Otho*.

³⁰⁵ Grant, *Twelve Caesars*, 195.

³⁰⁶ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 136.

time he often complimented Otho for his good action, albeit grudgingly. Specifically, Tacitus characterized Otho's decision to commit suicide in a more positive light. Rather than despairing or criticizing himself, Otho calmly asks 'whether I can allow so many Roman youths, and such a distinguished army to be scattered again and be snatched away from the stat,' *an ego tantum Romanae pubis, tot egregios exercitus sterni rursus et rei publicae eripi patiar?*, which Tacitus implies he could have done, *ne plus quam semel*.³⁰⁷ Once more, while both authors' sequences of events were notably similar, their characterization of Otho was notably different.

As a final note of comparison, we shall look at the way in which both Plutarch and Tacitus summarized the character of Otho: "He died in his thirty eighth year, after a short reign of about three months, his death being as much applauded as his life was censured, for if he lived no better than Nero, he died more nobly."³⁰⁸ "Duobus facinoribus, altero flagitiosissimo, altero egregio, tantundem apud posteros meruit bonae famae quantum malae."³⁰⁹ Once more, Plutarch and Tacitus presented similar descriptions but with different focuses. Plutarch focused on Otho's immoral life and gave praise to his death. Tacitus, however, juxtaposed Otho's 'noble,' *egregio*, death with the 'most despicable,' *flagitiosissimo* coup which brought him to power. It is his coup, rather than his lifestyle, which earned Otho the most censure from Tacitus, who praised him for the manner of his death rather than merely praising the death itself. Thus the differences in characterization: Plutarch, interested in morality, focused on Otho's lifestyle while

³⁰⁷ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 89-91; Tacitus, *Histories*, II.47.

³⁰⁸ Plutarch, *Otho*

³⁰⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.50.

Tacitus, interested in whether Otho was *capax imperii*, focused on the paradox between that lifestyle and his actions.

Despite the differences between how they characterized the emperors of 69, both Plutarch and Tacitus viewed the civil war itself in similar ways:

letters passed between the two, conveying bitter and shameful terms of reproach, which were not false indeed, for that matter, only it was senseless and ridiculous for each to assail the other with accusations to which both alike must plead guilty. For it were hard to determine which of the two had been most profuse, most effeminate, which was most novice in military affairs, and most involved in debt through previous want of means.³¹⁰

Plutarch used this passage to highlight both the hypocrisy of the rival claims of Otho and Vitellius to the Principate and the fact that both claimants were corrupt. Tacitus recorded the same exchange of letters and made the same point with them as well. Tacitus underlined this by citing a contemporary aphorism: “quorum bello solum id scires, deteriorem fore qui vicisset” or ‘you can only learn from this war that whomever was worse shall have conquered.’³¹¹ Thus Plutarch and Tacitus agreed that neither Otho nor Vitellius was entirely suited to empire, although Tacitus is elsewhere more complimentary towards Otho.

This brings us to Plutarch’s brief description of Vitellius. Since we are missing the *Life of Vitellius*, we are left with only a few comments on how Vitellius began his rise to power, such as:

He had hitherto seemed to decline it, professing a dread he had to undertake the weight of the government; but on this day, being fortified, they say, by wine and a plentiful noon-day repast, he began to yield, and submitted to take on him the title of Germanicus they gave him, but desired to be excused as to that of Caesar. And immediately the army under Flaccus, putting away their fine and popular oaths in

³¹⁰ Plutarch, *Otho*.

³¹¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.50.

the name of the senate, swore obedience to Vitellus as emperor, to observe whatever he commanded.³¹²

Unlike Otho who was at least daring in his ambitions, if not always in their execution, Vitellius was characterized by Plutarch as fearing to become emperor and then agreeing anyway, persuaded by drink.³¹³ It is likely that the central thread of Plutarch's characterization of Vitellius was that Vitellius was weak willed and did whatever was asked of him.³¹⁴ While the, at least feigned, fear of becoming emperor or taking office was common enough in Roman politics the fact that Plutarch adds the idea that Vitellius did not start yielding until he was drunk implies true fear of the position and/or a weak will.³¹⁵ Plutarch also characterized the soldiers here as being fickle, changing their oaths at the drop of a hat. As with Tacitus and Josephus, it is unclear whether this characterization of Vitellius was based on the Flavian 'party-line.' This does read as Plutarch's typical focus on morality, however, namely the prominence of alcohol in persuading Vitellius to be declared emperor and the depiction of the oaths to the senate as 'fine and popular' even though it is unlikely either was the case among most soldiers. This could also be Plutarch making use of Vitellius' repeated claims on his coinage that he was the 'choice of the army,' *Consensus Exercitum*.

Tacitus has a good deal more characterization of Vitellius, since his entire account of the war survives, but when we focus solely on Vitellius' acclamation, several key differences emerge. Tacitus characterized Vitellius as both consenting to and desiring to be declared emperor. In addition, he also claimed that the German legions' oath to the

³¹² Plutarch, *Galba*.

³¹³ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 99.

³¹⁴ Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives*, 115-116.

³¹⁵ Crook, "The Roman Principate," 79-81; Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 108-09.

Senate was ‘empty oath,’ *sacramentum inane*, while they decided who they ‘pleased to offer the Principate,’ *offerri principem placuit*.³¹⁶ While relating the embarkation of the German legions to civil war, Tacitus did ascribe the same vices to Vitellius as did Plutarch, however:

medio diei temulentus et sagina gravis, cum tamen ardor et vis militum ultro ducis munia implebat, ut si adesset imperator et strenuis vel ignavis spem metumve adderet. instructi intentique signum profectionis exposcunt. nomen Germanici Vitellio statim additum: Caesarem se appellari etiam victor prohibuit.³¹⁷

Tacitus showed the soldiers as not fickle but ‘ardent,’ *ardor*, in their loyalty to Vitellius and both competent and organized as well since they are said to be so loyal to him that they were ‘fulfilling their duties unaided by the generals,’ *ultro ducis munia implebat*. Tacitus characterized Vitellius as willing enough to declare himself emperor, but he also says that ‘Vitellius assumed the Principate for the sake of stagnant luxury and lavish feasts,’ *Vitellius et fortunam principatus inertis luxu ac prodigiis epulis praesumebat*.³¹⁸ Despite differing on the particulars, Plutarch and Tacitus both depict Vitellius as being weak, indolent, and wholly unfit to rule.³¹⁹

Having looked at Plutarch’s characterization of three of the emperors of 69 all that remains is to look at what he thought of the civil war as a whole. Plutarch gave the following characterization to the topic:

But the calamities of the Roman government might be likened to the motions of the giants that assailed heaven, convulsed as it was, and distracted, and from every side recoiling, as it were, upon itself, not so much by the ambition of those

³¹⁶ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.56.

³¹⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.62.

³¹⁸ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 106-07; Elizabeth Keitel, “Feast Your Eyes on This: Vitellius as a Stock Tyrant(Tac. *Hist.* 3.36-39),” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, ed. John Marincola (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 441-444.

³¹⁹ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 107.

who were proclaimed emperors, as by the covetousness and license of the soldiery, who drove commander after commander out, like nails on upon another.³²⁰

At first glance this is a standard depiction of the horrors of civil war, and doesn't really delve into cause.³²¹ What is unique, however, is that Plutarch blamed the desires of the soldiers, rather than the ambitions of the emperors, for causing the civil war; a common platonic idea.³²² This can be traced back to Plutarch's moral judgments. While Plutarch was certainly not wrong, the soldiers did commit terrible crimes and without their discontent the war would not have been possible, for him this is all that matters. Soldiers were supposed to serve the emperor loyally, and since they were not doing so, Plutarch judged it immoral and therefore the problem.³²³ The issue is not that this viewpoint is illegitimate but that Plutarch's broad-stroke characterization ignores both the larger grievances of the soldiers against their commanders and the emperors and the role of the commanders who prompted them to many of the crimes they committed.³²⁴

As already noted, Tacitus placed greater blame on the commanders: "multi in utroque exercitu sicut modesti quietique ita mali et strenui. sed profusa cupidine et insigni temeritate legati legionum Alienus Caecina et Fabius Valens."³²⁵ Tacitus' view on the soldiery is multi-faceted in that he recognized that 'some were disciplined and quiet and others were wicked and vigorous,' *sicut modesti quietique ita mali et strenui*. Tacitus did

³²⁰ Plutarch, *Galba*.

³²¹ Barrow, *Plutarch and his Times*, 147.

³²² Gossage, "Plutarch," 70-71.

³²³ Grant, *Twelve Caesars*, 193.

³²⁴ Rosenmeyer, "Beginnings in Plutarch's Lives," 223; Barrow, *Plutarch and his Times*, 58-59.

³²⁵ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.52.

not ignore the fact that many were unprincipled or the terrible crimes some of them committed; but placed the most of the blame on the ‘commanders of the legions,’ *legati legionum* who Tacitus called ‘excessive in desire and singular in daring,’ *profuse cupidine et insigni temeritate*.³²⁶ This is not to say that Tacitus denied agency to the soldiers. For example his narrative of Otho’s coup mentions: “suscepere duo manipulares imperium populi Romani transferendum et transtulerunt.”³²⁷ Again, however, even though Tacitus gave ‘two soldiers,’ *duo manipulares* the key role in ‘transferring the rule of the Roman people,’ *imperium populi Romani transferendum*, they were still acting at the behest of Otho.

The difference between Plutarch and Tacitus in their characterizations of the army is perhaps best seen in the way they each dealt with the rumor that both armies, Otho’s and Vitellius’, would abandon their commanders and join together. Plutarch wrote:

But others would tell you that there were many movements in both armies for acting in concert; and if it were possible for them to agree, then they should proceed to choose one of their most experience officers that were present; if not, they should convene the senate, and invest it with the power of election. And it is not improbable that, neither of the emperors then bearing the title having really any reputation, such purposes were really entertained among the genuine, serviceable, and sober-minded part of the soldiers.³²⁸

Plutarch, once more, characterized the soldiers as being fickle, willing to betray their chosen emperors for someone more acceptable to them. This showed the soldiers as only interested in what would be beneficial to themselves. Even the good soldiers are shown as entertaining the idea of betraying those they had sworn loyalty too. It is possible that this is meant to mean that the good soldiers had realized their commanders weren’t worth

³²⁶ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 62-63.

³²⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.25.

³²⁸ Plutarch, *Otho*.

following. Either way, however, the passage reinforces Plutarch's characterization of the soldiers as being the main driving force behind the civil war.

Tacitus recounted the same rumor and even acknowledged some of the same opinions but he, however, gave a more concrete reason why such a thing could not occur:

Invenio apud quosdam auctores pavore belli seu fastidio utriusque principis, quorum flagitia ac dedecus apertiore in dies fama noscebantur, dubitasse exercitus num posito certamine vel ipsi in medium consultarent, vel senatui permetterent legere imperatorem;. . . ego ut concesserim apud paucos tacito voto quietem pro discordia, bonum et innocentem principem pro pessimis ac flagitiosissimis expetitur. . . sperasse corruptissimo saeculo tantam vulgi moderationem reor ut qui pacem belli amore turbaverant, bellum pacis caritate deponerent, neque aut exercitus linguis moribusque dissonos in hunc consensum potuisse coalescere, aut legatos ac duces magna ex parte luxus egestatis scelorum sibi conscios nisi pollutum obstrictumque meritis suis principem passuros."³²⁹

Tacitus credited 'among a few was the secret desire for peace rather than discord,' *apud paucos tacito voto quietem pro discordia*, but he once more focused on the commanders.

Tacitus showed these 'commanders,' *legatos ac duces*, as being so profligate that they furthered the civil war just so that someone ' beholden to themselves,' *meritis suis*, could become emperor. Thus Tacitus argued they would have prevented any such merging of the armies. Tacitus also spoke well of the loyalty of the army, especially in relation to the officers.³³⁰ For example, when Caecina betrayed Vitellius and tried to turn the army over to Vespasian the soldiers 'restored Vitellius' images and threw Caecina in chains,' *repositis Vitellii imaginibus vincla Caecinae iniciunt*.³³¹ Tacitus often portrayed the army very well. Even Vitellius' soldiers are shown as loyal, albeit to a bad cause. For Tacitus, it is the emperors and commanders who drove on the civil war.

³²⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, II.37.

³³⁰ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 51-52.

³³¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, III.14.

As a biographer, Plutarch discussed the actions of people and groups other than his subject but little.³³² Concerning the plebs of Rome, Plutarch said almost nothing of substance. Generally Plutarch confined himself to general comments about what the people's reactions were to various events, with such phrases as "and thus the mass of the people began to look with dislike upon the government" after having listed some of Galba's unpopular acts or "the people applauded, giving loud acclamations" after one soldier claimed that he had killed Otho.³³³ Taken together this has the effect of making the mob seem fickle, without directly characterizing them as such. Plutarch gave only one comment of any substance on the *plebs*, right before Galba was killed: "Upon this, the crowd of people set off running, not to fly and disperse, but to possess themselves of the colonnades and elevated places of the forum, as it might be to get places to see a spectacle."³³⁴ This depiction of the Roman mob, as fickle and desiring to be entertained fits in well with Tacitus' equally negative portrayal of them, as well as Plutarch's general characterization of Rome as having been inherently corrupt at the time.

Plutarch's depiction of the Roman senate, as sparse as his direct characterization of the plebs, shared many of the same characteristics as Tacitus', but was less understanding of their position. Plutarch described the Senate's actions thus after Galba had been assassinated: "Forthwith a senate was convened, and as if they were not the same men, or had other gods to swear by, they took the oath in Otho's name which he himself had taken in Galba's and had broken; and withal conferred on him the titles of Caesar and Augustus; whilst the dead carcasses of the slain lay yet in their consular robes

³³² Lamberton, *Plutarch*, 72-73

³³³ Plutarch, *Galba*.

³³⁴ Plutarch, *Galba*.

in the market-place.”³³⁵ Plutarch here criticized the Senate for swearing the oath to Otho, despite the fact that they had no other alternative, and painted the scene as if they had betrayed Galba, who was dead.³³⁶ Notably absent here is either the sympathy Tacitus showed for the difficult position the Senate was in with regard to the emperor, as he himself would have known well, or the characterization of the senate as trying to assert their role in Roman politics any way they possibly could, as Tacitus, in the same scene, and the later *lex de imperio Vespasiani* demonstrated. Plutarch furthered his characterization of the Senate and nobility in a later passage which states: “So that the nobility and chief of the people, who were at first apprehensive that no human creature, but some supernatural, or penal vindictive power had seized the empire, began now to flatter themselves with hopes of a government that smiled upon them thus early.”³³⁷ This scene comes after Otho had made several propitiatory gestures to the senate and thus Plutarch has the senate, at first wisely wary of Otho, being flattered into thinking that he will turn out well as emperor. Thus, much as with the above scene, Plutarch used his depiction of the Senate to further his general characterization of the emperor, in this case that Otho was corrupt but skilled in fooling people. Plutarch’s characterization of the Senate is thus more negative than Tacitus, although Tacitus’ characterization was also critical, and did not attempt to understand the senate’s difficult position.

It becomes clear in this comparison that Plutarch and Tacitus were using the same set of sources and told basically the same story. Tacitus was more detailed but the nature

³³⁵ Plutarch, *Galba*.

³³⁶ Oakley, “*Res olim dissociabiles*,” 184-86

³³⁷ Plutarch, *Otho*.

of history in relation to biography allowed him to be.³³⁸ The real difference here is between what these two authors chose to focus on.³³⁹ Plutarch's focus was largely on the morality of individuals and the moral lessons which could be read from events. While Tacitus himself focused on morality, it was more the necessities of good government rather than the more philosophical morality of Plutarch. Tacitus gave his characters greater depth and focused on the paradox between action and appearance.³⁴⁰ Plutarch's main theme was the importance of morality in government. Tacitus' was the suitability of these men for government and the corrupting effect of the Principate.

Plutarch is useful as a source on 69 for several reasons. Firstly, these *Lives* give invaluable insight into how Greek intellectuals may have seen the Roman Empire.³⁴¹ More generally, he provided us with information on how provincials might have perceived events in Rome and hint at their investment in the Empire.³⁴² Secondly, these two biographies were popular in Rome, which indicates that viewing the war as a moral lesson was popular among the Roman elite. Thirdly, the comparison of these biographies and Tacitus' *Histories* demonstrates how two men could look at the same information and reach different opinions about it. While at times Tacitus' more complex characterizations might seem superior, Plutarch's moral viewpoint still provides invaluable insight into the characters and events of 69. Specifically, Plutarch's viewpoint on these events focused on the motives and morals of the people involved. While this

³³⁸ Barrow, *Plutarch and his Times*, 60-61.

³³⁹ Barrow, *Plutarch and his Times*, 39.

³⁴⁰ Russell, *Plutarch*, 41.

³⁴¹ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, "Plutarch as Biographer," in *Essay on Plutarch's Lives*, ed. Barbara Scardigli (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 74.

³⁴² Lamberton, *Plutarch*, 90.

view can be problematic at times, such as Plutarch's difficulty in looking past the lifestyles of the emperors to what they were actually doing and his assuming motive based on the actions of larger groups, this still provides the modern reader with an insight into how these emperors presented themselves, and how that presentation was viewed by others.

CHAPTER VI

SUETONIUS

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (c.70-130) was a Roman biographer who dealt with the ‘year of the four emperors’ in four of his *De Vita Caesarum*, a work covering the emperors from Julius Caesar to Domitian. Its exact dates of publication are unknown but likely during the reign of Hadrian, whom Suetonius served as *ab epistulis* for a time.

Suetonius was born at Hippo Regius, in Africa. He was of the Equestrian order and his father had served Otho as a military tribune. Suetonius’ cognomen ‘Tranquillus’ points to a date of birth close to the conclusion of the civil war. Nothing is known of Suetonius’ family aside from his father. From what we can gather from Pliny the Younger’s letters, Pliny being Suetonius’ patron, the young biographer had no interest in a public career and resisted Pliny’s attempt to get him one. It was only after Pliny’s death in 113 that Suetonius gained the prestigious posts of ‘chief librarian’ and then later *ab epistulis* to the new Emperor Hadrian. Suetonius’ constant contact with the emperor would have given him enormous influence. Suetonius lost this position due to a scandal involving the empress and seems to have retired from public life until his death a decade later, although some have argued that he got the position back several years later.³⁴³

Suetonius was an avid scholar, writing biographies of men in every field of human endeavor; all save *The Twelve Caesars*, his most famous, are now lost.³⁴⁴ One of

³⁴³ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius: The Scholar and his Caesars* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 2-8. All information in the preceding paragraph is from this source.

³⁴⁴ G.B. Townend, “Suetonius and his Influence,” in *Latin Biography*, ed. T.A. Dorey (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 79.

Pliny's letters, however, described Suetonius as a man who was hesitant to publish his work, perhaps for fear of public attention or retaliation.³⁴⁵

Perfectum opus absolutumque est, nec iam splendescit lima sed atteritur. Patere me videre titulum tuum, patere audire describi legi venire volumina Tranquilli mei. Aequum est nos in amore tam mutuo eandem percipere ex te voluptatem, qua tu perfrueris ex nobis. Vale.³⁴⁶

Pliny prided himself on his judgment of literary merit so clearly thought his praise, that it was 'perfect and finished,' *perfectum opus absolutumque est*, should be enough to convince Suetonius to publish. Suetonius comes off here as perhaps something of a perfectionist, wishing to 'revise,' *lima*, his work yet again before publishing it. Since he turned down a public career on several occasions, it is also possible that he was merely reluctant to submit his work to public scrutiny. It should be noted that Pliny was pushing for Suetonius to publish in part because him doing so would reflect well on Pliny too.

The *Twelve Caesars* represents a biographical tradition that is distinctly different from the Greek tradition in which Plutarch was writing.³⁴⁷ While Suetonius began and ended each biography chronologically, dealing with the subject's origin and death, he wrote the bulk of his work thematically rather than narratively. Suetonius treated every theme by detailing good and bad actions taken by the emperor. He also recounted anecdotes and rumors alongside provable facts.³⁴⁸ This style results in these biographies being less overtly judgmental than the other works we have dealt with although Suetonius certainly manipulated things in order to make certain points.³⁴⁹ On the one hand, there is

³⁴⁵ Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 8.

³⁴⁶ Pliny, *Epistles*, 5.10.

³⁴⁷ Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 23-24.

³⁴⁸ Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 24.

less rhetoric or judgment with which the reader must contend. On the other hand, these contradictory and often unexplained stories make understanding more difficult.³⁵⁰

Suetonius' choice of anecdotes, however, does reveal an interest in the way power corrupts, the actions of the Princes, and how those actions were perceived. The biggest problem in treating Suetonius' biographies, however, is that he rarely mentioned anyone save the emperor. This focused almost all praise and blame for events onto the emperor, whether deserving or not.³⁵¹

As we have done with all the previous authors, we must detail Suetonius' sources before moving on to how he characterized the civil war of 69. As *ab epistulis*, Suetonius would have had access to a wealth of information in the imperial archives. For 69 specifically, he had his father's recollections of serving in the war as well as a variety of other published accounts. As with Tacitus and Plutarch, what these sources were and how much he used them is unknown. While he certainly had access to Plutarch's *Lives* and Tacitus' *Histories*, there is no evidence that Suetonius used either.³⁵² However, it has been argued that the reason Suetonius' biographies grew shorter and more superficial after the *Augustus* was because Tacitus' recent publication made such detail unnecessary.³⁵³ It is also possible that he did not wish to compete with Tacitus, or felt that he could not; in fact when he does go into detail it seems that he was correcting

³⁴⁹ K.R. Bradley, *Suetonius Life of Nero: An historical commentary* (Bruxelles: Latomus, 1978), 242-243.

³⁵⁰ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 73.

³⁵¹ Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero*, 240-241; Townend, "Suetonius and his influence," 84.

³⁵² Gossage, "Plutarch," 45; Townend, "Suetonius and his influence," 82, 89.

³⁵³ Chilver, *Commentary on Tacitus' Histories*, 26; Townend, "Suetonius and his influence," 81-82.

Tacitus.³⁵⁴ The other reason often given for this decline in quality is that he was removed from his position as *ab epistulis* after completing the *Augustus* and thus no longer had access to such detailed records.³⁵⁵ Both explanations are certainly possible and not mutually exclusive.

Moving on to how Suetonius characterized the emperors, we shall begin with his discussion of how Galba was perceived by the Roman people before entering the city:

Praecesserat de eo fama saevitiae simul atque auaritiae, quod ciuitates Hispaniarum Galliarumque, quae cunctantius sibi accesserant. . . ea fama et confirmata et aucta est, ut primum urbem introiit. nam cum classarios, quos Nero ex remigibus iustos milites fecerat, redire ad pristinum statum cogeret, recusantis atque insuper aquilam et signa pertinacius flagitantis non modo inmisso equite disiecit, sed decimauit etiam. . . illa quoque uerene an falso per ludibrium iactabantur.³⁵⁶

Suetonius depicted Galba as having earned a ‘reputation for greed and cruelty,’ *fama saevitiae simul atque auaritiae*, before he had even set foot in Rome, *praecesserat*.³⁵⁷

Suetonius created this impression by mixing rumor with fact. The punishment of the townships was clearly a rumor that had reached Rome based on the use of the subjunctives *punisset*, *adfecisset*, *conflasset*, and *iussisset*. Galba’s entrance into the city, however, has a tone of fact to it saying his reputation was ‘confirmed and increased,’ *confirmata et aucta* and using the indicative verbs *fecerat*, *disiecit*, and *decimauit*.

Suetonius acknowledged that there were many stories about Galba going around Rome both ‘true and false,’ *uerene an falso*. His purpose, however, was not to separate fact

³⁵⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 2.

³⁵⁵ Townend, “Suetonius and his influence,” 87-88; Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*. 2.

³⁵⁶ Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *De Vita Caesarum*, ed. Maximilian Ihm (in aedibus B. G. Teubneri, 1907); Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves. int. J.B. Rives (New York: Penguin Books, 2007(1957)), 12.1-2. All references to Suetonius are based on the former for the latin and on the later, along with my own interpretations, for the English translations.

³⁵⁷ Chilver, *Commentary on Tacitus’ Histories*, 13.

from fiction but to show his readers how Galba was perceived both when he reached Rome and by later writers.³⁵⁸

Tacitus often did acknowledge varying stories and rumors concerning an event but always gave at least some indication of which account he thought correct rather than leaving it to the impression of his readers. This is demonstrated by the fact that Tacitus only depicted Galba's 'entrance into the city with thousands of unarmed soldiers slaughtered,' *introitus in urbem trucidatis tot milibus inermium militum*.³⁵⁹ He did acknowledge, however, that Galba did have the faults of 'avarice,' *avaritiam*, and 'renowned strictness,' *celebrata severitas*.³⁶⁰ The general character of Galba comes off better in Tacitus than it does in Suetonius. Tacitus portrayed him as a noble but notably flawed man. Suetonius made him seem greedy and uncaring.

What is notable about Suetonius' method of characterization is the lack of both explanation and judgment:

liberalitates Neronis non plus decimis concessis per quinquaginta equites R. ea condicione reuocandas curauit exigendasque, ut et si quid scaenici ac xystici donatum olim uendidissent, auferretur emptoribus, quando illi pretio absumpto soluere nequirent. at contra nihil non per comites atque libertos pretio addici aut donari gratia passus est.³⁶¹

Suetonius was so focused on Galba's actions here that he did not take the trouble to explain to his reader Galba's reasons for 'recalling the gifts of Nero,' *liberalitates Neronis*. . . *reuocandas curauit*, namely a desperate need of raising funds for the state, impoverished in part by Nero's many gifts. There is no direct judgment, good or bad, of

³⁵⁸ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 57; Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 149.

³⁵⁹ Tacitus, *Historiae*, I.6.

³⁶⁰ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.5.

³⁶¹ Suetonius, *Galba*, 15.1-2.

Galba here either, however. Tacitus referenced Galba's unsound financial policies and Plutarch acknowledged that this strategy was foolish, but Suetonius let the action speak for itself.³⁶² The only note of judgment is that 'there was nothing (Galba implied) would not allow for his companions,' *at contra nihil non per comites. . . passus est*, with the *ab contra* subtly highlighting Galba's hypocrisy.³⁶³ Another feature of Suetonius' tight character focus is that he neither mentioned by name nor characterized Galba's favorites and he certainly did not censure them for their corruption as both Plutarch and Tacitus do.³⁶⁴ However, the fact that Suetonius included this scene indicates that he intended for his audience to reach the conclusion that Galba's plan was foolish.³⁶⁵ Suetonius' direct accusation of hypocrisy served to underline this implied judgment.³⁶⁶ Thus Suetonius led his readers towards specific characterizations, but did not overtly state them.

Another example of Suetonius' style of characterization can be seen in his account of Galba's decision to adopt Piso: "quod ut nuntiatum est, despectui esse non tam senectam suam quam orbitatem ratus, Pisonem Frugi Licinianum nobilem egregiumque iuuenem ac sibi olim probatissimum testamentoque semper in bona et nomen adscitum repente e media salutantium turba adprehendit."³⁶⁷ Suetonius definitely pushed his readers towards a specific conclusion, namely that Galba's choice of Piso was poor, by making

³⁶² Townend, "Suetonius and his influence," 83

³⁶³ Murison, *Rebellion and Reconstruction*, 50.

³⁶⁴ Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives*, 148.

³⁶⁵ Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 19.

³⁶⁶ Shotter, *Nero*, 71.

³⁶⁷ Suetonius, *Galba*, 17.

the whole process sound ‘sudden,’ *repente*, and therefore arbitrary.³⁶⁸ This is supported by the fact that the characteristics Suetonius chose to ascribe to Piso make him sound unsuitable for rule. It is not that noble descent, *nobilem*, and distinguished character, *egregiumque*, were bad traits for the Romans, far from it, but Suetonius gave Piso no other characteristics for ruling, indicating that he was not suitable to the job.³⁶⁹ Suetonius underscored the point by directly calling Galba ‘senile,’ *senectam*. This characterization serves as the anchor for both parts of the above quote as it explains why Galba neither realized why he was being criticized nor that his choice of heir was a poor one.

All of our sources characterize Galba as failing to understand why he was being criticized and made a poor choice in adopting Piso. As already discussed, Tacitus elaborated this scene with a speech that depicts Galba as at least having his heart in the right place, in order to establish the precedent of adopting a successor. Therefore, Suetonius was merely trying to relay the facts and convey how Galba was perceived at the time while Tacitus was making a larger point about the Principate as an institution; these accounts are not mutually exclusive.³⁷⁰

Of all the authors we have discussed, Suetonius portrayed Otho in the most positive light. The common thought is that Suetonius characterized Otho positively to honor his father who served Otho during the war.³⁷¹ However, this does not mean Suetonius was not critical of some aspects of Otho’s character:

simili temeritate, quamuis dubium nemini esset quin trahi bellum oporteret, quando et fame et angustiis locorum urgeretur hostis, quam primum tamen

³⁶⁸ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 70.

³⁶⁹ Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 105-06; Pomeroy, *The Appropriate Comment*, 195-96,

³⁷⁰ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 74.

³⁷¹ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 84.

decertare statuit, siue impatiens longioris sollicitudinis speransque ante Vitelli aduentum profligari plurimum posse, siue impar militum ardori pugnam deposcentium. nec ulli pugnae affuit substititque Brixelli.³⁷²

The central idea of this scene is Suetonius' judgment that Otho ordering battle against Vitellius' forces was 'rash,' *temeritate*.³⁷³ As usual, Suetonius gave several possibilities of why Otho decided to make this gamble 'whether he was intolerant of longer anxiety,' *siue impatiens longioris sollicitudinis*, 'or unequal of military hardship,' *siue impar militum ardori*, without direct comment although the central theme of the possibilities is Otho's impatience. One can also interpret the final line of this passage as meaning that Otho 'could not bear fighting,' *nec ulli pugnae affuit*, and thus wanted to end the war quickly.³⁷⁴ This dislike for violence on Otho's part is perhaps supported by Otho's *Pax Orbis Terrarum* coins. Suetonius also previously characterized Otho as a gambler who launched his coup because 'he would rather fall to an enemy in battle than his creditors in the forum,' *nihilque referre ab hoste in acie an in foro sub creditoribus caderet*.³⁷⁵

Interestingly, Tacitus gave a speech to those who wished to wait for reinforcements at Bedriacum but did not give the side that wanted immediate battle the same courtesy. Many have argued that Tacitus did this to underline the foolishness of the decision to fight. It is possible that the reason all of our sources are vague on the point is that the defeated Othoniasts were unwilling to shed light on the decision which cost their party the civil war.³⁷⁶ Conversely there could well have been too much finger pointing to

³⁷² Suetonius, *Otho*, 9.1.

³⁷³ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 115.

³⁷⁴ Shotter, *Nero*, 75.

³⁷⁵ Suetonius, *Otho*, 5.1.

³⁷⁶ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 84-86.

sort out what actually happened. Suetonius' explanation seems clearer than that of Tacitus and Plutarch, largely because in the absence of Otho's subordinates the decision appears to be entirely his. Suetonius also differed from Tacitus and Plutarch on the strategic position of Vitellius' army. Both stated that it was Otho's army that was in a bad position, not Vitellius'. It is impossible to determine, however, how much Suetonius' account is based on, or at least influenced by, the recollection of his father.

Suetonius' style of reporting an incident without explanation or comment does make interpreting passages such as this rather difficult:

ea cum in castris sub noctem promerentur, insidias quidam suspicati tumultum excitauerunt; ac repente omnes nullo certo duce in Palatium cucurrerunt caedem senatus flagitantes, repulsisque tribunorum qui inhibere temptabant, nonnullis et occisis, sic ut erant cruenti, ubinam imperator esset requirentes perruperunt in triclinium usque nec nisi uiso destiterunt.³⁷⁷

This passage asks more questions than it answers: Why did the Guards 'suspect treachery,' *insidias quidam suspicati*? Why 'drive away or kill the officers,' *repulsisque tribunorum*. . . *nonnullis et occisis*? Why did the guardsmen 'calm down as soon as they saw Otho,' *nec nisi uiso destiterunt*? This is a rare example of Suetonius depicting his subject, Otho, as being a passive participant, *uiso*, in events. This is also a prime example of an event which Suetonius, possibly, gave minimal description to because it had already been dealt with by Tacitus.³⁷⁸ Ironically, given Suetonius' close focus on the emperor's actions; it was Tacitus who depicted Otho as active during this mutiny, 'calming the soldiers with prayers and tears,' *insistens precibus et lacrimis aegre cohibuit*.³⁷⁹ In Suetonius, this incident was used to demonstrate the loyalty of Otho's soldiers. In

³⁷⁷ Suetonius, *Otho*, 8.2.

³⁷⁸ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 85.

³⁷⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.82.

Tacitus, this incident gave an example of the corruption Otho's coup brought to Rome.³⁸⁰ For Plutarch, who gave another account of this event, this provided yet another example of Otho's weak character, since he could not control the army.³⁸¹ Once more, all three accounts are compatible.

Unsurprisingly, Suetonius gave Otho the most detailed characterization of extant authors in his account of Otho's decision to commit suicide. The scene is also a rare example of Suetonius indicating which account of events was accurate, namely that Otho wished to free Rome from civil war rather than because he despaired of winning.³⁸² By discounting the idea that Otho despaired of victory, Suetonius was directly challenging Plutarch's account of events, or at least whatever source both based their accounts on. Suetonius' positive characterization of Otho is explained and seen clearly in this passage:

Interfuit huic bello pater meus Suetonius Laetus, tertiae decimae legionis tribunus angusticlaius. is mox referre crebro solebat Othonem etiam priuatum usque adeo detestatum ciuilia arma. . . nec concursurum cum Galba fuisse, nisi confideret sine bello rem transigi posse; tunc ad despiciendam uitam. . . hoc uiso proclamasse eum aiebat, non amplius se in periculum talis tamque bene meritos coniecturum.³⁸³

That Suetonius deliberately cited his father, *pater meus Suetonius Laetus*, as evidence, *referre crebro solebat*, for his account of Otho's suicide put tremendous weight behind his account, which reinforces the fact that Suetonius should not be automatically discounted because he was sometimes wrong or careless.³⁸⁴ Suetonius with this passage sought both to explain why Otho stayed out of the fighting at Bedriacum, that he

³⁸⁰ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 123; Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 32-33.

³⁸¹ Grant, *Twelve Caesars*, 196.

³⁸² Suetonius, *Otho*, 9.3.

³⁸³ Suetonius, *Otho*, 10.1.

³⁸⁴ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 139-142.

‘detested civil war,’ *detestatum ciuilia arma*, and to absolve him from some of the bloodshed of his coup, that he would not have done it ‘unless he were confident he could accomplish the thing without battle,’ *nisi confideret sine bello rem transigi posse*. This passage has also been seen as Suetonius’ direct challenge to Plutarch’s negative portrayal of Otho.³⁸⁵ Tacitus’ depiction was similar to Suetonius’, although his was more detailed and gave Otho a speech, but was in general less glowingly praising of Otho.³⁸⁶

Suetonius ended his *Life of Otho* with a brief obituary that, in language at least, mirrors the eulogies of Tacitus and Plutarch closely:

Tanto Othonis animo nequaquam corpus aut habitus competit. . . per quae factum putem, ut mors eius minime congruens uitae maiore miraculo fuerit. . . denique magna pars hominum incolumem grauissime detestata mortuum laudibus tulit, ut uulgo iactatum sit etiam, Galbam ab eo non tam dominandi quam rei p. ac libertatis restituendae causa interemptum.³⁸⁷

Suetonius approached his obituary of Otho from the opposite direction. Whereas Plutarch viewed Otho as an immoral man whose death, *mortuum*, was in such sharp contrast to his life that it surprised everyone and earned Otho ‘praise,’ *laudibus tulit*, Suetonius acknowledged that praise and traced it to the same cause as Tacitus and Plutarch, ‘that his death was little like his life,’ *ut mors eius minime congruens uitae*. However, Suetonius implied that Otho was in fact a courageous man, *tanto animo*, but that this did not ‘agree with his body and habits,’ *nequaquam corpus aut habitus competit*.³⁸⁸ Thus his courageous death was surprising to those who judged him by his lifestyle which demonstrates once more the value put upon a noble death. This idea is even further

³⁸⁵ Wardman, *Plutarch’s Lives*, 152.

³⁸⁶ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 136.

³⁸⁷ Suetonius, *Otho*, 12.1-2.

³⁸⁸ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 131.

reinforced by Suetonius' statement 'that it was common opinion,' *ut uulgo iactatum sit etiam* at the time that 'Otho had overthrown Galba to restore liberty to the Republic,' *quam rei p. ac libertatis resituendae causa interemptum*, indicating the amount of legitimacy gained from a good death.³⁸⁹ This also indicates that Otho may have, for a time at least, been more popular, or at least more fondly remembered, than either Tacitus or Plutarch gave him credit for.

While Suetonius' characterization of Otho was more positive than Tacitus' and Plutarch's, his treatment of Vitellius was more typical. Like Plutarch, Suetonius gave Vitellius a passive role in his own ascension to the Principate:

quare uixdum mense transacto, neque diei neque temporis ratione habita, ac iam uespere, subito a militibus e cubiculo raptus, ita ut erat in ueste domestica, imperator est consalutatus. . . consentiente deinde etiam superioris prouinciae exercitu, qui prior a Galba ad senatum defecerat, cognomen Germanici delatum ab uniuersis cupide recepit, Augusti distulit, Caesaris in perpetuum recusauit.³⁹⁰

Suetonius' characterization of this event was notably more 'violent,' *raptus*, than either Tacitus' or Plutarch's. Tacitus' Vitellius was persuaded by his subordinates, and Plutarch's was induced by drink, but Suetonius' is 'declared emperor,' *imperator est consalutatus*, by 'soldiers suddenly seizing him in the bedroom room,' *subito a militibus e cubiculo raptus*. As with both Plutarch and Tacitus this could be seen as a *recusatio*, but there is no staged or attempted refusal depicted here, save for the title of Caesar, *Caesaris in perpetuum recusauit*, and rather than being persuaded there is a tone of violence here. The implication is that Vitellius' soldiers forced him to be their emperor because his leniency towards them meant that he would be malleable to their wishes.³⁹¹ Suetonius

³⁸⁹ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 33-36; Pomeroy, *The Appropriate Comment*, 216-17.

³⁹⁰ Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 8.1-2.

only made Vitellius an active character after the decision to become emperor had already been made for him. Suetonius returned to this negative character trait in a scene which shows Vitellius ‘administering not without the council and judgment of the lowest people in the theater and race-track, *partem non nisi consilio et arbitrio uilissimi cuiusque histrionum et aurigarum administravit*.³⁹² As with Tacitus’ characterization of Vitellius one can question whether or not following the people’s wishes was actually a bad thing, but Suetonius language, specifically his use of *uilissimi* or ‘most worthless,’ clearly shows that Suetonius thought it a bad thing.

Suetonius did convey the idea that Vitellius was initially perceived to have the potential to be a good emperor, until he fell into corruption:

egregie prorsus atque magnifice et ut summi principis spem ostenderet, nisi cetera magis ex natura et priore uita sua quam ex imperii maiestate gessisset. . . inter profusissimos obsoniorum apparatus, nulla familiae aut militis disciplina, rapinas ac petulantiam omnium in iocum uertens.³⁹³

Once again, Suetonius did not say what he thought Vitellius’ actual character was, merely that, at the time, ‘it was hoped that he would display good leadership,’ *ut summi principis spem ostenderet*. It is only when the perception is seen to be shattered that Suetonius gave his judgment that ‘in keeping with his nature and previous life,’ *nisi cetera magis ex nature et uita sua*, he ‘turned the rapine and wantonness of all men into a joke,’ *rapinas ac petulantiam omnium in iocum uertens*, in other words he was not only corrupt but willfully so.³⁹⁴ This judgment is reinforced by an anecdote which Suetonius alone related: that at the battlefield of Bedriacum Vitellius quipped that ‘a dead enemy smelled good

³⁹¹ Grant, *Twelve Caesars*, 200; Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 109-111.

³⁹² Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 12.1.

³⁹³ Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 10.1-2.

³⁹⁴ Shotter, *Nero*, 76; Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 116-117.

and a dead citizen even better,' *optime olere occisum hostem et melius ciuem*.³⁹⁵

Suetonius used both incidents to underline how unsuitable Vitellius was as an emperor. It is worth noting that the various reasons which the Flavians put out to legitimize their civil war against Vitellius might well have furnished Suetonius with a wide variety of the anecdotes which he loved to record. However, just as with Tacitus, there is no way of knowing how much he was influenced by this, although Suetonius was likely also biased against Vitellius because of his father, and the fact that all four authors characterized Vitellius thus lends credence to it.³⁹⁶

It is Suetonius' depiction of Vitellius' final days which best highlights his judgment on both Vitellius and the need for a strong character as emperor:

ac nocte interposita primo diluculo sordidatus descendit ad rostra multisque cum lacrimis eadem illa, uerum e libello testatus est. rursus interpellante milite ac populo et ne deficeret hortante omnemque operam suam certatim pollicente, animum resumpsit Sabinumque et reliquos Flavianos nihil iam metuentis ui subita in Capitolium compulit succensoque templo Iouis Optimi Maximi oppressit, cum et proelium et incendium e Tiberiana prospiceret domo inter epulas. non multo post paenitens facti et in alios culpam conferens uocata contione iuravit coegitque iurare et ceteros nihil sibi antiquius quiete publica fore.³⁹⁷

Suetonius clearly characterized Vitellius as too weak to end the civil war, either by abdication or suicide, because 'his spirit was revived by the objections of the soldiers and people,' *rursus interpellante milite ac populo. . .animum resumpsit*.³⁹⁸ Interestingly, despite already characterizing him as passive, Suetonius said that Vitellius 'overthrew and set fire to the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus,' *succensoque templo Iouis Optimi Maximi oppressit*. He even went one step further and showed Vitellius 'watching the

³⁹⁵ Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 10.3.

³⁹⁶ Murison, *Galba Otho and Vitellius*, 146; Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors*, 100-101.

³⁹⁷ Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 15.2-3.

³⁹⁸ Levick, *Vespasian*, 51.

battle and fire while feasting,' *proelium et incedium*. . .*prospiceret domo inter epulas*. Suetonius also implied that the other accounts of the temple's destruction arose from Vitellius' 'directing the blame onto others,' *in alios culpam conferens*.³⁹⁹ Tacitus, as already noted, blamed all of the emperors of 69 together and the destructiveness that came with civil war for causing the fire.⁴⁰⁰ Once more, Suetonius' focus was on fleshing out the character of his subject while Tacitus was interested in making a larger point.

Finally, Suetonius' depiction of Vespasian was very positive, specifically praising him for 'supporting and strengthening the empire,' *imperium suscepit firmavitque*.⁴⁰¹ With regard to the civil war, Suetonius characterized Vespasian as acting and planning decisively, saying that 'with the civil war undertaken and generals and soldiers sent to Italy, at the same time he traveled to Alexandria,' *suscepto igitur civili bello ac ducibus copiisque in Italiam praemissis interim Alexandriam transit*, which shows Vespasian ordering or undertaking several things at the same time.⁴⁰² He also presaged Vespasian's victory by citing a number of oracles:

Apud Iudaeam Carmeli dei oraculum consulentem ita confirmauere sortes, ut quidquid cogitaret uolueretque animo quamlibet magnum, id esse prouenturum pollicerentur; et unus ex nobiles captiuus Iosephus, cum coiceretur in uincula, constantissime asseuerauit fore ut ab eodem breui solueretur, uerum iam imperatore.⁴⁰³

Given Suetonius' interest in perception, these stories were likely ones that were promulgated by Vespasian's supporters during, and immediately after, the civil war as a

³⁹⁹ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 120-124.

⁴⁰⁰ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 69-70.

⁴⁰¹ Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 1.1.

⁴⁰² Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 7.1.

⁴⁰³ Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 5.6.

means of gaining legitimacy.⁴⁰⁴ Despite mentioning him by name, ‘the prominent prisoner Josephus,’ *nobilibus captiuis Iosephus*, there is no way of knowing whether Suetonius was familiar with Josephus or his works. It is entirely possible that the story was circulated independent of the *Bellum Iudaicum*. Tacitus’ account corroborates these omens, but Tacitus is more skeptical than Suetonius, although to be fair Suetonius merely reported the omens, he gave no indication as to how much trust he put in them himself.⁴⁰⁵

After dealing with these oracles Suetonius then made reference to several practical advantages that aided Vespasian in the civil war:

Plurimum coeptis contulerunt iactatum exemplar epistulae uerae siue falsae defuncti Othonis ad Vespasianum extrema obtestatione ultionem mandantis et ut rei p. subueniret optantis, simul rumor dissipatus destinasse uictorem Vitellium permutare hiberna legionum et Germanicas transferre in Orientem ad securiorem mollioremque militiam, praeterea ex praesidibus prouinciarum Licinius Mucianus et e regibus Vologaesus Parthus; ille deposita simultate, quam in id tempus ex aemulatione non obscure gerebat, Syriacum promisit exercitum, hic quadraginta milia sagittariorum.⁴⁰⁶

Interestingly, only the third item is portrayed as a concrete fact, shown by the indicative verb *promisi*’ with the first depicted as ‘true or false,’ *uerae siue falsae*, and the second as a ‘rumor,’ *rumor*. Of the latter two, the letter, *epistulae* sounds like something the Flavian’s used to gain legitimacy, saying they were ‘asked to save the Republic,’ *ut rei p. subueniret optantis*, and the rumor was probably piece of rhetoric to stir up the soldiers, since the legions would not want ‘Vitellius to change their quarters,’ *Vitellium permutare hiberna legionum*.⁴⁰⁷ Suetonius artfully mixed fact, perception, and his own opinion in

⁴⁰⁴ Shotter, *Nero*, 82.

⁴⁰⁵ Ash, *Ordering Anarchy*, 129-131.

⁴⁰⁶ Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 6.4.

⁴⁰⁷ Wellesley, *The Long Year*, 35; Chilver, *Commentary on Tacitus*, 20.

this scene, all the while clearly conveying the factors that helped Vespasian win the war. Suetonius' account contradicts neither Tacitus' nor Josephus', while at the same time giving Vespasian more agency than Tacitus allowed and making his methods more dubious than Josephus would admit.

Much like Plutarch, Suetonius' characterization of various groups at Rome was limited, his focus on his subject being tighter than Plutarch's. Often when Suetonius commented upon the plebs he did so only to highlight their reaction to some policy or another such as his comment that Galba's 'arrival was not pleasing to them,' *quare aduentus eius non perinde gratus fuit*, or that his policies angered virtually all the classes of Rome, *per haec prope uniuersis ordinibus offensis*.⁴⁰⁸ Where Suetonius characterized the mob as being active participants in events, he characterized them as being being fickle and ardently following 'which way the wind was blowing' as the following pair of quotations demonstrates: "rursus interpellante milite ac populo et ne deficeret hortante omnemque operam suam certatim pollicente."⁴⁰⁹ "Quibusdam stercore et caeno incessentibus, aliis incendiarium et patinarium uociferantibus, parte uulgi etiam corporis uitia exprobrante."⁴¹⁰ The first instance here was Vitellius attempt to abdicate the throne, but since Vitellius still controlled, nominally at least, Rome 'the people encouraged him lest he depart,' *populo et ne deficeret hortante*. The second instance, but a few days later, showed Vitellius being led through the streets and being pelted, *incessentibus*, by the same people who 'even reproached him for his bodily faults,' *parte uulgi etiam corporis uitia exprobrante*. Thus Suetonius showed the mob being fickle and ardently following

⁴⁰⁸ Suetonius, *Galba*, 13.1, 16.1.

⁴⁰⁹ Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 15.3.

⁴¹⁰ Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 17.2.

whoever was the popular choice at the time, just as Tacitus and Plutarch did in their narratives. Uniquely, however, Suetonius did portray the mob as genuinely liking emperors such as Otho and Vitellius for their populist actions.⁴¹¹

Although he mentioned the Senate frequently, Suetonius only gave direct characterization to the Senate once during his entire discussion on the civil war of 69. The other mentions were all general reactions, such as has been seen with the plebs, or as the object of address for a variety of speeches, or the setting in which certain debates occurred. Ironically, despite minimal mention, Suetonius' lone depiction of the Senate taking action made that body seem more positive than either Tacitus or Plutarch. Suetonius says: "ut primum licitum est, statuam ei decreuerat rostratae columnae superstantem in parte fori, qua trucidatus est."⁴¹² That the senate attempted to grant Galba a statue as soon as they were able to, *ut primum licitum est*, showed that the Senate liked Galba, even though the measure was ultimately forbidden by Vespasian, *sed decretum Vespasianus aboleuit*. This attempt, failed though it was, at honoring Galba depicts the Senate in Suetonius as actually having and using an independent role in government, in opposition to the frightened Senate trying desperately to maintain its role of Tacitus, or the weak and easily fooled Senate of Plutarch. This characterization could be seen as ironic, given that Suetonius often showed the Emperor performing the Senate's duty.⁴¹³

On the whole it is Suetonius' reliance on rumor and perception that makes his biographies useful.⁴¹⁴ Without explicit judgment from Suetonius it is difficult at times to

⁴¹¹ Yavetz, *Plebs and Princesps*, 136-140.

⁴¹² Suetonius, *Galba*, 23.1.

⁴¹³ Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 118.

⁴¹⁴ Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives*, 144-145.

distinguish reality from anecdote, but Suetonius still provided modern readers with a good look at how these emperors were perceived at the time, which is useful to have given the highly constructed narratives of Tacitus, Josephus, and Plutarch.⁴¹⁵ Where Suetonius gave judgment, he provided us with an insight into a more Equestrian view of Roman politics which focused on how power corrupted the morality of those who wielded it and on the actions of the Principes.⁴¹⁶ As such, the power of the Principate turned Galba's old age and strictness into corruption and harshness. Otho was a good man but too prone to gamble for power rather than working for it. Vitellius was already corrupt and lacked the strength either to improve himself or to resist further corruption. Only Vespasian had the moral strength to bring the system back under control and rule well. There was certainly much which Suetonius ignored or simplified, especially the roles of other people besides the emperor, but he still provided a useful and fascinating character sketch of the four emperors of 69.

⁴¹⁵ Townend, "Suetonius and his influence," 92-96.

⁴¹⁶ Conte, *Latin Literature*, 548-49; Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 142.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In discussing and comparing the various characterization of the Roman civil war of 69 we have revealed a variety of different viewpoints on the topic. The various coins and inscriptions regarding the civil war of 69, and the emperors of that year, provide us with a sense of the social and political shifts that took place as a result of the civil war. Tacitus provided detailed and complex characterization, but with a distinctly senatorial and cynical view, and often used his depiction to make broader points about the Principate and what made one *capax imperii*. Josephus gave the civil war the view of an outsider and also provides insight into what the Flavian ‘party-line’ for the war might well have been. Plutarch has the view of a Greek intellectual and spun the characterizations in his biographies of Galba and Otho into distinct moral lessons by focusing on the motives and lifestyles of his characters. Finally, Suetonius presented fact and anecdote to provide his readers with a glimpse of how his subjects were perceived at the time, as well as giving a more Equestrian view on events with a focus on action and administration.

Rather than being in opposition to each other, as has often been argued, these accounts actually serve to reinforce each other. In their narratives of events they are all distinctly similar and when they did disagree the two versions are often not mutually exclusive. The real difference between these accounts is how each author chose to characterize the people and events of the war. Rather than trying to determine which of these is ‘true’ or the ‘most accurate’, which is impossible given that such characterizations are a matter of viewpoint and opinion rather than fact, we have regarded

each as being 'real' to its author. Thus each author's characterization can be regarded as their honest and legitimate opinion on the people and events in question, since each of their characterizations can be traced, at least in part, to the social group and the career of the author. This is not to say that there was not manipulation or outside influence. However, the manipulation, where evident, can be traced to a specific reason or point the author was trying to make and yet still fits in with the author's general method of characterization. Where there was influence, which cannot be concretely proven in any case, each author still showed his distinctive viewpoint. For example, there is clearly some influence of the Flavian 'party-line' in all of the accounts of Vitellius, and the ideas conveyed by the coins and inscriptions of the various emperors are also present throughout, but despite being based on the same sources, the characterizations by Tacitus, Plutarch, and Suetonius shows distinct differences.

With these different viewpoints thus established as being distinct and useful, we are provided with a more elaborate and complete depiction of the Roman civil war and Roman society in general. Just as political leaders and important events in our world today are viewed in many different ways, so too would the Principes and the civil war of 69 have had multiple interpretations. The accounts of Tacitus, Josephus, Plutarch, and Suetonius give us four such interpretations. While there is no way of knowing whether their viewpoints were unique to themselves or representative of a larger group within society, the senators for Tacitus' and the equestrians for Suetonius' for example, they give us a far more detailed and elaborate portrait of the 'year of the four emperors' than we would possess if we only had one such account. On top of this, the coins and inscriptions that we have further elaborate this portrait with tantalizing hints both at how

the participants wished themselves and the war to be seen and at the broader changes that resulted from the war. While none of the authors directly identify 69 as being a year of social and political change, with Tacitus explicitly opposed to such a view, all of them present the year as marking a distinct break in Roman history, specifically that the stock of the Principate had fallen to a new dynasty, and as the inscriptions demonstrate, a different group of men. This shift could perhaps be part of what Tacitus meant when he said: “evulgato imperii arcano posse principem alibi quam Romae fieri” ‘the secret of empire was revealed, an emperor could be made elsewhere than in Rome.’⁴¹⁷ Tacitus was specifically referring to the fact that emperors could be made by the army, but there is also the fact that one of the main supports for the Flavians was provincial aristocrats. What is more, the families of both Tacitus and Suetonius were brought into prominence by the social changes wrought by the Flavian victory, which may have influenced their perceptions of the war in ways that are impossible to calculate.

In addition, these viewpoints on the people and events of 69 also reflect back on their writers. The choices each author made in his account tell as much about him, and his own opinions, as it does about his subject. Although, as has already been noted, there is no way of knowing whether or not these authors were representative of the social group they were from, it still remains that each author was from a distinctive societal background. What is more, all four authors’ viewpoints seem to have particular hallmarks of the class they were from. Therefore, these accounts combined with the coins and inscriptions, which show a particular social shift, and the messages the various regimes felt it necessary to communicate with different groups, allow us to paint a more elaborate picture of Roman society in the late 1st and early 2nd century CE as well.

⁴¹⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, I.4.

In conclusion, rather than being contradictory and in competition for who was the 'most accurate', the variety of sources which we possess on the year 69 provide the modern historian with a variety of subjective interpretations on the people and events of the Roman civil war. This variety of interpretations allows us to paint a detailed portrait of the characters of the civil war and of the complexities of Roman society thus making all of these accounts useful.

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