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Dies Irae: The Broken Soldier in Tacitus' Histories

This paper discusses Tacitus' presentation of the rebellious military in his *Histories*. While the literary *topos* of mutiny consists of notions like insanity, contagious disease and cancerous sores (*furor, morbus, rabies, insania, tabes*) Tacitus rejects this sensational discourse, replacing it with a vocabulary of emotions (*ira, dolor, pavor, frustratio, desperatio, lacrimas, preces*). This is not merely a stylistic choice: rather than condemn and dismiss military rebellion as sheer madness, Tacitus delves into the causes of mutinies, as well as the feelings and motives of soldiers who perpetrate them. Thus, the historian explicates the military disintegration of AD 68-9 not as the cause, but as the effect of a larger socio-political and ethical collapse at the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. His analysis of the military contrasts strongly with other parallel, but less penetrating, accounts of the Long Year (Plutarch, Suetonius, Cassius Dio and Josephus), and constitutes essentially the first comprehensive study of a military body, long before the development of military science and sociology. Because of superficial similarities between Tacitus and these authors, readers have routinely assumed that he subscribes to the traditional representation of mutiny as collective madness. I demonstrate that he boldly breaks with literary conventions regarding military disintegration, in order to provide a better understanding of the civil war in AD 69.

By stressing the soldiers' anger, grief and frustration as potentially violent emotions Tacitus illustrates that mutinies are expressions of what we understand today as Post Combat Traumatic Disorder. By employing *ira* and its semantic cognates, Tacitus allows us to gauge simultaneously the supremacy and the vulnerability of the military in the Long Year. Readers have routinely noted the soldiers' absolute control over civilians and even emperors but have overlooked episodes in which these rebels plead with everyone involved to terminate the war or provide them with some political and moral stability. Tacitus fuses together the vocabularies of supplication and anger in order to make a distinct point: forced to support four different imperial contenders, change sides more than once in less than a year, and fight against their own colleagues, these Roman legionaries are the *real* victims of the war. Mutinies enable soldiers to deal with their misplaced feelings, turning their anger into self-destruction or hostility against innocent civilians and undeserving officers.

Since Tacitus believed in the didactic purpose of history writing, his study of military conduct under battle duress was probably intended as a *ktêma es aei*. From pentagon strategists and generals on active duty, to family and friends who struggle to reassemble the broken men returning from the world's battle-fields, Tacitus' exposition is precious to anyone concerned with the military. That he produced such a comprehensive study long before any sociological analysis of the armed forces is a testament not only to his genius, but also to the timeless demands and pressures on military bodies during both peace and war.