

WHO WERE THE *RUDES NEPOTES* AT  
TACITUS, *Ann.* 4.8.3?<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of Drusus' death in 23, Tacitus records that Tiberius attended a meeting of the senate and addressed the House (8.2). The speech begins in *oratio obliqua* and is then interrupted by a sentence of narrative:<sup>2</sup>

miseratusque Augustae extremam senectam, rudem adhuc nepotum et vergentem aetatem suam, ut Germanici liberi, unica praesentium malorum levamenta, inducerentur [Tiberius] petivit. (8.3)

The meaning of this sentence has been quite clear to scholars: Tiberius lamented the extreme old age of Augusta, the inexperience of his grandsons, and his own declining years; he then requested that Germanicus' children, the sole consolation amidst present ills, be brought into the senate. Yet, the question remains: exactly to whom was Tiberius referring when he bemoaned the *rudis aetas* of his *nepotes*? The notes of Furneaux, Nipperdey-Andresen, Shotter, and Martin-Woodman suggest that the occurrence of *nepotes* at 8.3 is a direct repetition of its use at 3.1 and, thus, of its referent. At 3.1, in the context of a notice of the emperor's *plena domus*, mention is made of Tiberius' *adulti nepotes*, who have been identified as Germanicus' eldest sons, Nero and Drusus Caesar. Commentaries on this earlier passage usually note the existence of the younger grandsons, Gaius and (Drusus' children) Germanicus and Tiberius Gemellus.<sup>3</sup> These younger members are counted among the *ruedes nepotes* by Furneaux and by Shotter, as indicated by their respective notes on 8.3: Furneaux: 'rudem . . . Two of them were "adulti" (c. 3.1) . . .'; Shotter: 'youthful inexperience: see above on 3.1. Two were *adulti* . . .'<sup>4</sup> Nipperdey-Andresen and Koestermann single out Nero and Drusus Caesar; Martin-Woodman are quite emphatic: 'the *nepotes* are Nero and Drusus'.

Two objections to these interpretations present themselves upon a close re-examination of the passage.

1. Most scholars take *rudem* to mean 'inexperienced' (cf. *OLD rudis* 5-7).<sup>5</sup> When applied to individuals, this is the most common sense in Tacitus: Agrippa Postumus was *rudem sane bonarum artium* (1.3.4); Drusus addressed his troops, *quamquam rudis dicendi* (1.29.1); Radamistus was *facinorum non rudis* (12.51.3). On occasions, this sense of inexperience is compounded by youth: *iuventa rudem* (Cotys; 12.15.1); *rudis pueritiae* (women during the fire at Rome; 15.38.4); *ruedes animi (infantes; Dial. 29.1)*. Yet, to translate *rudem* at 8.3 as 'inexperienced' does not quite fit the pattern of thought attributed to Tiberius by Tacitus. The focus in the participial phrase is on *age*

<sup>1</sup> All references are to the *Annals*, and to *Ann.* 4 unless otherwise stated. The following commentaries on *Ann.* 4 are cited by name only: H. Furneaux, *The Annals of Tacitus* (Oxford, 1896<sup>2</sup>); K. Nipperdey and G. Andresen, *P. Cornelius Tacitus, i. Ab Excessu Divi Augusti I-VI* (Berlin, 1915<sup>11</sup>) = Nipperdey-Andresen; E. Koestermann, *Cornelius Tacitus: Annalen* (Heidelberg, 1963-8); D. C. A. Shotter, *Tacitus: Annals IV* (Warminster, 1989); R. H. Martin and A. J. Woodman, *Tacitus Annals Book IV* (Cambridge, 1989) = Martin-Woodman.

<sup>2</sup> For the structure of the speech, see below, p. 630.

<sup>3</sup> Furneaux, Nipperdey-Andresen, Shotter, Martin-Woodman; cf. Koestermann.

<sup>4</sup> Yet, on 3.1, Shotter is clear that by *adulti nepotes*, Germanicus' sons, Nero and Drusus Caesar, are meant.

<sup>5</sup> Furneaux, 'inexperienced'; Koestermann, 'also noch ohne jede Staatserfahrung', but also 'jung, unerfahren'; Shotter, 'youthful inexperience'; Martin-Woodman translate 'inexperienced' and cite *OLD* 3a which offers 'of tender years, not yet grown'; A. Gerber and A. Greef, *Lexicon Taciteum*, repr. (Hildesheim, 1962), 1413, 'jung, unerfahren'.

and on what little hope Tiberius had given the circumstances: his mother is too old (*Augustae extremam senectam*), he is getting older (*vergentem aetatem suam*)—and his grandsons are as yet too young (*rudem adhuc*).<sup>6</sup> Experience is thus not the primary issue; to suggest that it is results in compromising the logical trend and the stylistic unity of the phrase. Two parallels, in thought and in style, can be adduced. Firstly, at 13.16.4, Octavia is described as being able to hide her feelings, *quamvis rudibus annis*. At that time (55), she was about fifteen years old, and it is her age, and not her inexperience, which attracts comment. Indeed, that is the very point: she displays an experience that belies her youth. Secondly, at 2.43.1, in giving his justification for appointing Germanicus to an eastern command in 17, Tiberius refers to his own old age and to Drusus' youth: *nam suam aetatem vergere, Drusi nondum satis adolevisse*. In his commentary on the passage, Goodyear makes the intended sense, however disingenuous, quite clear when he repeats Tiberius' assertion that 'Drusus was too young for the task'.<sup>7</sup>

2. Just as the logic of the thought attributed to Tiberius in the participial phrase cannot be sustained if *rudem* is taken to mean 'inexperienced', so the logic of the sentence as a whole is undermined if the *nepotes* in question are identified as Nero and Drusus Caesar, or as all Germanicus' children. Now, when Tiberius asks the consuls to bring in Germanicus' children, they are described as *unica praesentium malorum levamenta*.<sup>8</sup> Scholars agree that the *liberi* were Nero and Drusus Caesar, as is suggested by Tiberius' direct address to them at 8.5 (*hi vobis, Nero et Druse, parentum loco*).<sup>9</sup> But Nero and Drusus Caesar cannot be both the *nepotes* and the *Germanici liberi*. For how can Tiberius lament the youthfulness of Germanicus' two eldest sons, and then, as a result of that sad state of affairs, place hope in the very same young men? It is, quite simply, a nonsense.

A solution to these problems is necessary, and easy. The *rudes nepotes* were not Nero and Drusus Caesar, but Drusus' twins, Germanicus and Tiberius Gemellus.<sup>10</sup> Born in 19 and only about four years old in 23, they well suit the youthfulness that Tiberius laments. This identification also clarifies the fact that, in the participial phrase, the common denominator is one of blood. Tacitus gives the impression that Tiberius is making a distinction between his blood relations and the offspring of Germanicus. The

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Nipperdey–Andresen, who see Tiberius' emphasis on the youth of his grandchildren, who are identified as Nero and Drusus Caesar (see above), as indicating that, given his increasing age (and by implication looming demise), they will soon stand alone.

<sup>7</sup> F. R. D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus* 2 (Cambridge, 1981), ad loc.

<sup>8</sup> The statement, *unica . . . levamenta* (8.3), should be read as a comment made by Tiberius which accompanied his order that the children of Germanicus be brought into the senate.

<sup>9</sup> Furneaux, Nipperdey–Andresen, Koestermann; Shotter is quite adamant: 'clearly only Nero and Drusus are meant'.

<sup>10</sup> This identification makes it obvious that the use of *nepotes* at 8.3 is not a direct repetition of its use at 3.1 (cf. above, p. 628). Tacitus' method in employing the same vocabulary is to offer a distinction between the different identities of *nepotes*, a distinction based on perception as regards the political implications of the adjectives used with *nepotes*. One set of *nepotes* is considered *adulti*, the other is thought to be *rudes adhuc*. At 3.1, Tacitus' comments seem to be 'focalized' through Sejanus: he ponders his career and the impediments to his success; the *adulti nepotes* are seen as a stumbling block to his advancement. At 8.3, the narrative is presented as Tiberius' opinion (*miseratusque*): he comments on his own and his family's situation in relation to the future; the *nepotes* here are still too young to play a role in that future. Both Sejanus and Tiberius are presented as perceiving that the future rests with the young, but each is made to use *nepotes* differently, the former to pinpoint which *nepotes* are important (Nero and Drusus Caesar), the latter to designate those *nepotes* who are 'out of the race', as it were (Drusus' twins).

clustered reference to Tiberius, Augusta, and Drusus' twins in the participial phrase helps underline this nicety, but it is also emphasized symbolically by the different emotions evoked by each respective family: despair (Tiberius'), hope (Germanicus'). This distinction may be read as a part of the programme Tacitus gives to Tiberius in addressing the senate.

Tiberius' speech is carefully presented by Tacitus; it alternates between *oratio obliqua* (8.3), narrative, which includes a report of the speech (8.3–4), *oratio recta* (8.4–5), and, finally, narrative, which again reports what Tiberius supposedly said (9.1).<sup>11</sup> The variation allows the historian both subtle control of what the emperor says (*oratio obliqua* and *recta*) and obvious control as narrator (the two sections of narrative). Now, Tiberius makes it clear that he wished to retire from bearing the burden of being *princeps*; the distance Tiberius places between himself and Germanicus' offspring is inseparable from this goal. The emperor tries, firstly, to disqualify himself and his blood relations from playing a significant role in the state, while promoting Nero and Drusus Caesar as the only hope (8.3). He, secondly, makes it clear that, with Drusus dead, he has no intention of becoming a father figure to Germanicus' children, and instead he entrusts the task to the *patres* (8.5). Here the distinction between blood and adopted relations is further apparent—importantly for Tiberius as it assists in his attempt to transfer the burden of responsibility he had as grandfather to Nero and Drusus Caesar. Tiberius twice mentions Drusus' twins and their blood connection (*propria suboles* . . . *suum sanguinem*, 8.4), and he recognizes the priority of place given to them on those grounds, hence his having urged equity on Drusus' part.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, there is no attempt by Tiberius to associate Nero and Drusus Caesar with himself directly, but rather with Augustus (*Augusti pronepotes*, 8.5); this is part of the same process of detaching the youths from the emperor. With the burden of responsibility for Germanicus' children lifted, Tiberius is said finally to have expressed a desire to withdraw himself from the actual *regimen* of the empire (9.1).

In this atmosphere, Nero and Drusus Caesar's promotion must have seemed like a backhanded compliment. Both had been paid the highest honour by such recommendation and promotion, but it was accompanied by the emperor's express desire to detach himself from being responsible for their future and from continuing to bear the burden of empire. Like Augustus before him, Tiberius was promoting adopted relatives because he considered that the options among his own blood were either exhausted (Drusus) or ineligible (Drusus' twins). Unlike his predecessor, Tiberius expressly had no intention of standing by those whom he had advanced, and preferred altogether to give up his position as *princeps*. The emperor was more successful in entrusting Nero and Drusus Caesar to the care of the *patres*<sup>13</sup> than he was in trying to

<sup>11</sup> For the structure of the speech, see Martin-Woodman on 8.2 (*oratione continua*). They omit to mention the notice of Tiberius' words at 9.1 (*ac si modum orationi posuisset* . . . *revolutus*), which should be read as a part of the same *oratio*.

<sup>12</sup> *propria* (OLD 2 c) emphasizes that Drusus' own children were closer to him than Germanicus', and thus closer to Tiberius; *sanguis* (OLD 10) highlights the relation through blood (cf. *Hist.* 4.52.1; *Ann.* 3.4.2; 4.66.2, 75; 13.17.2). Cf. the language and sentiment of 2.43.5.

<sup>13</sup> Tiberius' intervention in the process of Nero and Drusus Caesars' promotion at 17.1–3 (cf. Suet. *Tib.* 54.1) suggests that the youths' interests were, at least, being pursued by some of the *patres* (cf. *partium Agrippinae*, 17.3). The emperor's action in reprimanding the priests and admonishing the senate suggests that his detachment from Nero and Drusus Caesar would not be absolute, especially in light of his unsuccessful attempt to renounce his position as *princeps*, of which his distancing of the youths was an aspect. The slow advancement of Nero and Drusus Caesar immediately following their recommendation in 23 may be due partially to Tiberius'

retire, but his actions have a more immediate significance on a narrative level than just being a part of a broader characterization of the emperor. Tacitus now begins to emphasize Sejanus' plotting against the *domus Germanici* (12.2) and his influence in encouraging Tiberius' hostility towards it. The distance that the emperor places between himself and the children of Germanicus, and by implication Agrippina and the family's supporters, runs smoothly into this next narrative theme. Nero and Drusus Caesar may have been designated as successors—but they had now become targets too (cf. Suet. *Tib.* 54.1).<sup>14</sup>

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withdrawal from having direct responsibility for their future promotion, and, because of this, to the hesitancy of the senate to act (cf. Barbara Levick, *Tiberius the Politician* [London, 1976], 162–3).

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