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Primitive or Ideal?  
Gender and Ethnocentrism in Roman Accounts of Germany

*Maggie Thompson*

For a woman who sells her chastity there is no pardon;  
neither beauty nor youth, nor wealth can find her a husband.  
For in Germany no one laughs at vice,  
nor calls mutual corruption “the spirit of the age.”  
(Tacitus, *Germania*, 19)

It may be tempting to use quotes such as the one above to make inferences about what life must have been like for the German women Tacitus wrote about. However, ethnographies such as the *Germania* are more useful in garnering information about Tacitus' Rome than they are accurate accounts of Roman Germany. When constructing the cultural geography of the world they lived in, the Romans often defined themselves, like the Greeks before them, in contrast to a cultural “Other” or “barbarian.” This dichotomy between Roman and non-Roman, West and East, civilized and uncivilized, is a regular theme throughout Classical literature and art. The use of the social construct of the cultural “Other” in Roman ethnographies was both an exercise in Roman self-definition and a means of social control. This rhetoric of “Otherness” often uses constructs of gender in order to delineate cultural distinctions between the dominant group and the “Others.” In this paper I will examine how two Roman authors, Julius Caesar and Gaius Cornelius Tacitus, use the social constructions of gender and the “barbaric Other” in their ethnographies of Germans to construct ethnocentric and inverse-ethnocentric worldviews. I will demonstrate that the two ethnographies are political commentaries about the Roman world, not accurate depictions of “real life” for German women during the Roman period.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **The Barbaric Other in Antiquity, A Political Construction**

When one people defines another as a cultural “Other” that culture is defining itself. The development of the Classical idea of the “barbarian” was truly the development of a Classical Greek identity. Later imperial Roman identity was constructed using a similar concept of the Other that followed the tradition of Greek writers, notably Herodotus. In her book on the construction of the barbarian in Greek tragedy, scholar Edith Hall examines the development of the idea of the barbaric Other in antiquity. She notes “ethnic stereotypes, ancient and modern, though revealing almost nothing about the groups they are intended to define, say a great deal about the community which produces them.”<sup>1</sup>

Classical Greek and later Roman cultures tended to define themselves through opposition with a homogenous “Other.” Hall demonstrates in her book that in Greece the crystallization of the homogenous term “barbaric” as representing anything that was “Other” did not fully develop until the fifth century B.C.E..<sup>2</sup> She cites the Persian Wars as the catalyst that cemented the worldview that placed the Panhellenes in opposition to generic “barbarians.” After the Persian Wars, the concept of the barbaric Other became an integral part of the “discourse of colonization” the Athenians used as a justification for the Delian League and ultimately the Athenian empire.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), iii.

<sup>2</sup>Hall, 8.

<sup>3</sup>Hall, 47.

Hall's analysis of the development of the idea of the barbarian fits with the work of recent scholarship that uses post-colonial theory to show how "Otherness" can be used to justify the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.<sup>4</sup> The correlation between the maturity of the idea of the barbarian and the development of an empire in Athens was not coincidental. The Roman general Caesar uses a colonial discourse of Otherness in his memoirs *De Bello Gallico* to justify imperialism. Tacitus, writing 150 years later, used the social construct of the Other to criticize the Roman empire. Together the ethnographies of Caesar and Tacitus represent ethnocentric and inverse-ethnocentric portrayals of the empire respectively. One places Rome at the center and height of civilization, while the other uses his representation of the Germans to criticize Rome as a corrupt civilization.

In sum, recent scholarship suggests that ancient ethnographies, while revealing some things about the "barbaric" subjects they are portraying, are truly historical documents that reveal much about political (and often imperial) developments occurring within the culture of the observer at a given time.

### **Gender and the Construction of the Barbaric Other: The Tradition of Herodotus**

Gender is an important part of the construction of the barbaric Other, and was often used to contrast political systems in antiquity. Ancient writers often used constructions of gender to demonstrate ideas of Otherness in ethnographies, drama or art. This could be done either by "gendering" another culture or by demonstrating how

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<sup>4</sup>René Rodgers, "Female Representation in Roman Art: Feminising the Provincial 'Other,'" in *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art*, edited by S. Scott and J. Webster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 77.

another culture deviated from “natural” gender roles. Both of these uses of gender are present in Tacitus and Caesar, and can be traced back to the tradition of Herodotus.

A common theme in ancient works is a gendered line drawn roughly between East and West. The East and the Persian empire are often gendered feminine. They are typically portrayed as lands awash with luxury, exoticism and tyranny. These places and ideas are then placed in opposition to the “free” and more structured masculine societies of Greece or Rome.

Herodotus as the “father of history” and author of the first extant ethnography establishes in his *Histories* the tradition of using gender constructions to portray the cultural Other. Scholar Vivienne Gray, analyzing the uses of gender in Herodotus, finds that Herodotus’ “ethnographies in particular reveal generic patterns that seem to portray women not as they were, but as a part of the construction of barbaric Otherness.”<sup>5</sup>

The use of the feminine in Herodotus is conflated with royalty and tyranny, and offers a direct contrast not between gender roles in each culture, but a direct comparison of the *political* systems of each culture. Gray’s study of Herodotus indicates that gender in ancient ethnographies cannot be separated from ancient political discourse, and therefore these ethnographies are likely not “realistic” portrayals of women in antiquity.

The primary character type that she uses to demonstrate this use of gender is the construct of the “vengeful queen” in Herodotus. She examines characters such as the Persian Queen who was the shamed wife of Candaules.<sup>6</sup> Grey shows that this character

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<sup>5</sup>Vivienne Gray, “Herodotus and the Rhetoric of Otherness,” *The American Journal of Philology* 116.2 (1995): 186.

<sup>6</sup>In the story of Candaules and Gyges, Herodotus tells of how Candaules conceived so great a lust for his wife, the queen, that he arranges for the head of his bodyguard, Gyges, to see her unclad. However, the Queen discovers his treachery, and being shamed, gives Gyges the ultimatum that he must either kill himself or kill Candaules and take the

type in Herodotus represents ideas of the cultural Other in numerous ways. First, it inverts Greek gender roles by placing a woman in a position of power – a concept that would have seemed irreconcilably foreign to Greeks. Additionally, Hall notes “the characterization of the queen as an extension of the qualities of the barbaric king could represent a masculinization of the barbaric woman through the rhetoric of male/female Otherness or be part of the rhetoric of master/subject Otherness in barbaric society. These stories of common type all describe the Otherness of barbaric royalty.”<sup>7</sup> Gender in Herodotus is more a conduit through which Herodotus makes a political statement about barbaric royalty as opposed to a description of life for women in “barbaric” cultures.

Both Caesar and Tacitus wrote in the tradition of Herodotus. Both authors tie gender constructs to political structures. Their discussions of German women are examples of the use of the construct of gender to create political statements concerning “barbaric” cultures versus Rome.

## **GENDER AND OTHERNESS IN ROMAN ETHNOGRAPHY: *DE BELLO GALLICO* AND *GERMANIA***

### **Ethnocentrism and Caesar on the Germans**

Julius Caesar’s commentaries on the Gallic Wars were written at a date sometime between very late 52 and 50 B.C.E.<sup>8</sup> His account is a memoir of his conquests of Gaul written for his fellow citizens – specifically Roman, aristocratic males. His commentaries are military accounts, but they are supplemented by ethnographies concerning both the Gauls and the Germans. The wealth of information supplied by Caesar not only

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throne. Candaules’ Queen in the story is both calculating and assertive, two characteristics that would not have fit with Greek ideals of womanhood.

<sup>7</sup> Gray, 208.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew M. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: War in Words*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 9.

compares the two people to Rome, but also to each other, making his account an excellent example of the use of ideas of the cultural Other for political purposes. Caesar's narrative utilizes portrayals of gender roles in Gaul and Germany in order to construct an ethnocentric worldview that fits his colonialist ambitions.

To accurately study Caesar's manuscript, one must take into account Caesar's motivations for writing not only of his expeditions but also of the people he was conquering. Caesar was a conqueror, his motivations for illustrating the lives of the Gauls and Germans were imperial. His narrative fits well into a post-colonial analysis of the ethnographic tradition. Scholar Stephen L. Dyson notes that Caesar's memoirs "are the creation of a man who was knowledgeable in the literary anthropology of his day and ever conscious of propaganda, but who was also a field commander whose life and success depended on the accuracy of his information and the acuteness of his perception."<sup>9</sup> As discussed above, the social construction of Otherness, and more specifically the barbarian, was solidified in antiquity as a justification for imperialism. During the Gallic Wars Caesar would have had motive to utilize the construct of the Other in order to portray the Gauls and Germans in a manner that placed Rome in a culturally superior position. At this point in Roman history, the presence of a defined concept of the barbaric Other would have been useful in justifying Rome's rapid expansion. Caesar's memoir can be viewed as the full development of this idea of the barbaric Other in response to the needs of imperialism.

In *de Bello Gallico* Caesar writes two contrasting ethnographies of Gaul then Germany. Caesar draws ethnic lines in a way that archaeology shows us may have been somewhat meaningless, but fit his purpose as a conqueror and creator of propaganda. He

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<sup>9</sup>Stephen L. Dyson, "Caesar and the Natives," *The Classical Journal* 63.8 (1968): 342.

simply defines the peoples living on the south side of the Rhine River as Gauls, and those living on the north side as Germans. However, linguistic and archaeological evidence from the time period reveal that the border of the Rhine was much more of a gray area with peoples who could be either German or Gaul on either side. The Rhine is not the clean break between the two peoples Caesar would give the impression of in his narrative.<sup>10</sup>

Why then, does Caesar make such a firm delineation between the Gauls and the Germans? Scholar Andrew Riggsby demonstrates how, by making this distinction, Caesar is making a political move by “limiting the task before him.”<sup>11</sup> Caesar as a military commander needed to define Gaul as a distinct and therefore conquerable entity so that he could return to Rome triumphant – having “completely” conquered a people. Caesar achieves this distinction by drawing contrasting pictures of the Gauls versus the Germans.

Caesar uses the construct of the Other to do this, but he goes one step further and expands the construction into what Riggsby calls “the Other and the Other Other.”<sup>12</sup> Scholars have noted that barbarian representation in antiquity is “a discourse of duality, polarity, of being either one or the Other...three-way splitting does not, in practice occur. In other words, if two types of barbarianism are represented one will be assimilated to the Roman.”<sup>13</sup> *De Bello Gallico* is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Caesar portrays the Gauls, the “Other,” in such a way that they are a civilization that can be assimilated to the Roman empire, while Germans are “the Other Other” – the primitive people without

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<sup>10</sup>Riggsby, 65.

<sup>11</sup>Riggsby, 68.

<sup>12</sup>Riggsby, 47.

<sup>13</sup>Ellen O’Gorman, “No Place Like Rome: Identity and Difference in the *Germania* of Tacitus,” *Ramus* 22.2 (1993): 147

civilization that therefore cannot be assimilated to Rome. Caesar needed to give Gaul structure, shape, boundaries and the trappings of civilization to make it conquerable. He does this spatially by setting the Rhine as the boundary of Gaul, and anthropologically through the discussion of gender roles in Gaul and Germany.

In the second part of his ethnography, Caesar places Gaul and Germany in opposition to each other (“low” civilization contrasted with primitive “non-civilization”). Riggsby notes that Germany is “symbolically denied civilization altogether” while the “Gauls have an ordinary (if supposedly inferior) civilization.”<sup>14</sup> Caesar does this by spatially giving Gaul structure and Germany a lack of structure. Caesar’s memoir begins, “Gaul is a whole divided into three parts, one of which is inhabited by the Belgae, another by the Aquitani, and a third by a people called in their own tongue Celtae, in the Latin Galli” (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 1.1). He then goes on to describe in detail the topography of Gaul: “The separate part of the country which, as has been said, is occupied by the Gauls, starts from the river Rhone, and is bounded by the river Garonne, the Ocean, and the territory of the Belgae” (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 1.1). Germany is never given any such extensive description; it is only discussed as the land that is on the other side of the boundaries he has set up for Gaul. Caesar writes that in Germany “as a nation they pride themselves on keeping the widest possible belt of no man’s land along their frontiers” (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 4.3). Riggsby notes that “Caesar’s geographic partition of Gaul breaks it up into easily assimilable chunks,”<sup>15</sup> whereas Germany is

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<sup>14</sup>Riggsby, 82.

<sup>15</sup>Riggsby, 69.

shapeless, bound only by the Great Ocean, a boundary that in antiquity was almost mythical.<sup>16</sup>

In his discussion of Gaul, Caesar notes numerous ways in which the Gauls have the structures indicating civilization, including structured gender roles (though they may be somewhat backwards from a Roman point of view). Caesar notes that in Gaul they do have structured marriage traditions such as the giving of dowries, “The men, after making due reckoning, take from their own goods a sum of money equal to the dowry they have received from their wives and place it with the dowry” (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.19)<sup>17</sup>. However, despite having these trappings of civilization, Caesar notes that they are still barbaric because of the treatment of their women. Caesar writes “husbands have the same power of life and death over their wives as over their children. When the head of a noble family dies his relatives meet, and if there is suspicion of foul play the widow is examined under torture, just as we examine slaves” (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.19). The Gauls of Caesar’s ethnography, although they have some of the trappings of civilization such as a marriage structures and a judicial system, are lower in the hierarchy of civilization than Rome because of the “barbaric” manner in which they treat their women – no better than slaves in the Roman empire.

Caesar’s construction of gender roles in Germany is one way he illustrates the “primitive” nature of German society. In his discussion of women, they are simply a side-note in Germany’s warlike, masculine society. He states of German men that “those

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<sup>16</sup>In antiquity, the Great Ocean would have been considered the edge of the earth – the point at which the world dropped into the land of myth. Caesar’s use of the Ocean as a boundary here contributes to Germany’s limitless, and therefore unconquerable nature. An extensive discussion of this worldview in antiquity can be found in James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9-44.

<sup>17</sup>Loeb Classical Library translation.

who retain their chastity longest are held in highest honour by their fellow men; for continence, so they believe, makes a man taller, hardier, more muscular (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.21). This is an inversion of gender roles that for a Roman reader would have seemed bizarre; in Rome it was women who protected their chastity. In Caesar's Germany hyper-masculinity defines the both the character and purpose of Germany as a war-like society.

Women are only given mention only in a brief passage, when Caesar states that "in the matter of sex there is no prudery, men and women bathing together in the rivers, and wearing skins or short cloaks of reindeer hide which leave most of the body naked" (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.21). There are no structured gender roles in Caesar's Germany, and therefore no "civilization" as Caesar would define it. Both men and women are portrayed almost as animals, wearing skins and with little sensitivity to matters of modesty or sexual chastity. This lack of distinction between the genders is one way in which Caesar portrays Germany without civilization. Germany is the primitive fringe of the world, and therefore not worth conquering.

Caesar also uses gender to construct an ethnocentric worldview through the personification of "civilization" as brought to the barbarians by Rome as feminine (although he is careful to underline Rome's masculinity by highlighting Rome's military prowess and ability to enjoy civil luxuries without becoming weak). In his book on cultural geography in antiquity, James S. Romm defines ethnocentrism as something that "denotes a cultural construct of space which sees the center of the world as the best or most advanced location, and therefore denotes distant peoples to the status of unworthy savages." The Germans, being the furthest from the temptations and luxuries that come

with civilized society, are portrayed as a hyper-masculine military society, whereas the Gauls closer to Rome are portrayed as more “effeminate” and less militaristic. Even within Gallic society Caesar constructs this hierarchy. Riggsby asserts that Caesar “establishes a hierarchy of strength in war ranging from the Germans (the toughest), to the Gauls near Germany (e.g., the Belgae), to the remaining Gauls.”<sup>18</sup> The language that Caesar uses to discuss this hierarchy is very gendered:

Of all these [tribal groups,] the strongest are the Belgae, because they are very far away from the culture and humanity of our province, and merchants rarely reach them and bring those things which contribute to the weakening of men’s spirits (*effeminandos animos*), and they are next door to the Germans, who live across the Rhine, with whom they wage continual war (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 1.1).<sup>19</sup>

Here Caesar is echoing the tradition of Herodotus by portraying the “corrupting” influence of the luxuries of civilization as feminine. As discussed above, in Herodotus’ *Histories* Persian civilization was often represented as more effeminate than the restrained Greek society. Caesar is walking a fine line at this point in the narrative, because he risks portraying Rome as a corrupting influence. However, he avoids this trap by discussing the military prowess and experience that has given the Roman soldier the specifically masculine quality of “*virtus*” – the courage and endurance of a Roman man.<sup>20</sup> Caesar writes that the Germans “from earliest youth dedicate themselves to labor and toughness” (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.21), thereby winning their *virtus* through their harsh primitive lifestyles. In contrast, the Romans are superior because they achieve *virtus* as a collective – building a military empire while still able to both enjoy the

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<sup>18</sup>Riggsby, 83.

<sup>19</sup>Translated in Riggsby, 82.

<sup>20</sup>Riggsby, 83.

“effeminate” benefits of civilization and conquer both the Germans and Gauls in battle.<sup>21</sup>

This triumph over the effeminate “temptations” that come with civilization places Rome at the pinnacle of civilization in Caesar’s ethnocentric narrative.

Caesar’s narrative is a colonialist memoir – propaganda that glorifies the conqueror Rome (and Caesar’s person) as superior to the barbarians on the fringe of the known world. He uses illustrations of gender constructs in order to delineate cultures in a way that fits his military ambition. He also is able to construct a gendered hierarchy that glorifies Rome as the peak of civilization. This ethnocentric Roman worldview stands in sharp contrast to the one Tacitus constructs in his *Germania*.

### **Inverse-Ethnocentrism and Tacitus on the Germans**

Gaius Cornelius Tacitus wrote his ethnography of the Germans, the *Germania*, roughly 150 years after Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico*. The *Germania* is an ethnography, but unlike Caesar in his memoirs, Tacitus uses gender roles in Germany to create an inverse-ethnocentric account using the idea of the “noble savage” to construct a polemic against the imperial Rome of his day.

Tacitus’ motivations for writing his work on the Germans were radically different and even in opposition to Caesar’s colonialist motivations. Tacitus was living during a time period in which the empire had fully-developed and Roman society revolved around the imperial house and family.<sup>22</sup> Tacitus’ *Germania* is written with an anti-imperialist bent, casting German society in a radically different light than Caesar at the beginnings of the empire did. Tacitus believed that Rome had been corrupted by “demoralizing eastern

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<sup>21</sup>Riggsby, 87.

<sup>22</sup>Herbert Benario, *An Introduction to Tacitus* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), 11.

luxury,”<sup>23</sup> and developed a Germany in his narrative to represent both an earlier heroic society and also republican Rome. He uses gender roles to put forward Germany as the home of the anthropological “noble savage.” By constructing Germany in such a way Tacitus delivers scolding criticism to the Roman order contemporary to his day.

The Germany that Tacitus creates throughout his narrative is “a creation of the Roman writer, through which vestiges of Rome are traced.”<sup>24</sup> It can be inferred that Tacitus never actually traveled to Germany himself, and his information for the construction of his ethnography was all second-hand – from traders or friends who had traveled to the country.<sup>25</sup>

In order to create a Germany that represents an idealized past, Tacitus uses a number of literary devices. First he draws connections between Germany and a glorious heroic ancient time. He writes that the Germans “tell stories of Hercules living amongst them” and that “Ulysses in his long legendary wandering was carried into these seas and visited Germany” (Tacitus, *Germania*, 3). Tacitus at the end of this section of his narrative does state of these assertions that “my readers must believe or disbelieve them each as he feels inclined” (Tacitus, *Germania*, 3). However, his inclusion of these references to the divine having visited or lived for a time among the Germans ties the Germans to Other exotic peoples at the edges of the Earth who had Gods come live amongst them for a time. Some examples of these peoples were the Hyperboreans that Apollo preferred to spend part of the year with, and the “blameless Ethiopians” with whom the Olympiads would take leaves.<sup>26</sup> Dionysus also was said to have traveled in the

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<sup>23</sup>O’Gorman, 147.

<sup>24</sup>O’Gorman, 147.

<sup>25</sup>O’Gorman, 135.

<sup>26</sup>Romm, 50.

Far East. This reference to the divine, although qualified by Tacitus' disclaimer, ties the Germans contemporary to his day to a tradition of the heroic "noble savage" found in ancient literature. This theme would have been familiar to a reader in antiquity, and legitimizes Tacitus' portrayal of the Germans as a virtuous people at the fringe of the world.

The second way in which Tacitus idealizes Germany is by conflating the Germany of his narrative with earlier republican Rome through his discussion and gendering of German political organization. He notes that although in Germany they have a king, the king is appointed by merit – in every assembly of tribesmen the king "obtains [power] more by power of persuasion than by any right of command" (Tacitus, *Germania*, 11). The masculine, war-like nature of Germany's society is emphasized through Tacitus' discussion of decision-making in German tribal assemblies. He writes that in German assemblies "If the advice tendered [by the King] be displeasing, they reject it with groans; if it please them, they clash their spears (Tacitus, *Germania*, 11)." Through this militaristic emphasis Tacitus is able to portray German society as a masculine meritocracy.

This passage would have familiar echoes to a Roman reader. First is the portrayal of the German kings as earning their position through merit. This qualified version of monarchy is very similar to Livy's portrayal of early Roman kings in his histories. When Tacitus writes of the German kings having their position affirmed by the clash of spears, this too would have implications for a Roman reader. It echoes the way in which Roman soldiers hailed their military leader as an *imperator*. The militaristic tone of this text makes the German political system seem both incredibly masculine somewhat Roman.

Tacitus' portrayal of the German system creates an implicit contrast with imperial Rome. By tying the German system to republican Rome, Tacitus then contrasts imperial Rome with republican Rome. Tacitus is not discussing Germany in this passage. He is using Germany to criticize Roman political organization by recalling early republican Rome.

Tacitus' description of German political organization follows Herodotus' tradition of gendering societies based upon political structure to further this critique of the empire. The portrayal of the more masculine warrior-society of Germany creates a direct contrast with the (therefore) more feminine imperial ruling body of Rome. This juxtaposition echoes the contrast between Greek democracy and Eastern tyranny found in Herodotus. Tacitus seems to be suggesting that because rulership in Germany is based on merit and military prowess rather than succession as in imperial Rome, Germany represents more closely the ideals of the Greco-Roman world (specifically Republican Rome), than Rome of his day. Through contrast he is implicitly tying the Roman imperial system to ideas of more effeminate structures of Eastern tyranny – the feminine “royal barbarian” discussed above.

Tacitus also directly discusses women in Germany and their roles in order to hold up German society as having ideals associated with “noble savagery” and with early republican Rome. His extensive discussion of the chastity, loyalty, and obedience of German women is a direct critique of the less strict gender roles facing women of the imperial ruling class in his own Rome. Tacitus cites the fidelity and strict gender roles of German women as the reason for the success of their society, and implicitly suggests that it is the disintegration of gender roles for Roman women causing the disintegration of

Roman society and military success. He does this by praising their marriage tradition, stating that “the marriage tie with them is strict: you will find nothing in their character to praise more highly” (Tacitus, *Germania*, 18)<sup>27</sup>. He also extensively discusses the harsh punishment for adultery in Germany, deploring the fact that this is not the case in imperial Rome. He writes that “For a woman who sells her chastity there is no pardon; neither beauty, nor youth, nor wealth can find her a husband. For in Germany no one laughs at vice, nor calls mutual corruption the ‘spirit of the age’” (Tacitus, *Germania*, 19). This strong statement concerning the women of Germany is blatantly more a statement about corruption in Rome than it is a statement about German women.

Tacitus demonstrates through his writing of German customs that marriage is the key to a successful military society, and is therefore a political bond. He does this by discussing the purpose of marriage in Germany, illustrating his point by outlining the practical nature of a German dowry (Tacitus, *Germania*, 18):

[There are] gifts not devised for ministering to female fads, nor for the adornment of the person of the bride, but oxen, a horse and bridle, as shield and spear or sword; it is to share these things that the wife is taken by the husband, and she herself, in turn, brings some piece of armour to her husband. Here is the gist of the bond between them, here in their eyes its mysterious sacrament, the divinity which hedges it. That the wife may not imagine herself released from the practice of heroism, released from the chances of war, she is thus warned by the very rites with which her marriage begins that she comes to share hard work and peril; that her fate will be the same as his in peace and in panic, her risks the same.<sup>28</sup>

Tacitus here demonstrates that in Germany marriage is not about love or social mobility, it is about having a successful society. He seems to be condemning frivolity he sees in women and marriage vows in imperial Rome. This would have been a scathing

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<sup>27</sup>Loeb Classical Library translation.

<sup>28</sup>Loeb translation.

critique, as women and family structure in the Roman empire were common tools of propaganda starting in the Augustan period. Roman propaganda tended to conflate the health of the patriarchal family with the health of the empire. Thus, Tacitus' critique of the disintegration of family structure in the Roman empire is then really a critique of the empire itself.

Tacitus' discussion of the role of German women in childbearing extends this argument. In the Augustan period laws were passed in Rome that allowed a man to divorce a woman if she was barren and unable to produce sons for the emperor's army.<sup>29</sup> This and other laws related childbearing directly to the strength of the Roman state. Tacitus seems to be referencing this belief that giving birth to and raising children leads to the success of a society by glorifying the robust childbearing German women. He writes that in Germany "to limit the number of their children, to make away with any of the later children is held abominable, and good habits have more force with them than good laws elsewhere" (Tacitus, *Germania*, 19). He goes on to directly equate the abilities and roles of German mothers with the strength of German soldiers, writing "there then they are, the children, in every house, filling out amid nakedness and squalor into that girth of limb and frame which is to our people a marvel. Its own mother suckles each at her breast; they are not passed on to nursemaids and wet-nurses" (Tacitus, *Germania*, 20).

Tacitus thus uses gender constructions in two ways: the gendering German society as masculine to make a statement about Rome's more "effeminate" tyrannical political system, and also the equating of stiff female gender roles with the success of

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<sup>29</sup>I. M. Ferris, *Enemies of Rome: Barbarians Through Roman Eyes* (Sutton: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 47.

society. Tacitus' ethnography develops a Roman worldview that is directly in opposition to the worldview that Caesar develops in his memoirs. Tacitus is an excellent example of inverse ethnocentrism. He views the Roman empire as the (somewhat rotten) core of the world, and through his construction of gender and the idea of the "noble savage" he glorifies those peoples on the fringe of the world as primitive, but still virtuous.

## CONCLUSION

While it may be tempting to try to garner information from authors like Tacitus and Caesar about the life of the elusive "real women" in antiquity due to their extensive discussions of women, one must read these texts as politically, not anthropologically, motivated. Gender in these texts is used to construct the barbaric Other and associated political connotations in ways that suited the purposes of the individual authors. In one work the Germans are a barbaric archetype, in the other they are noble savages. The Germany created by both Caesar and Tacitus are Roman constructions with little basis in reality. The contrasts between the two approaches of the authors reveal their political interests, not information about life in Germany during the Roman period. While it may be tempting to look for information concerning the life of German women in these works, gender is simply a tool used by both authors to construct opposing ethnocentric and inverse-ethnocentric Roman worldviews.

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