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The Imperial Double:

Imposture, Succession, and the Case of the False Neros in Imperial Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Classics

by

Jasmine A. Akiyama-Kim

2024

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2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Imposture, Succession, and the Case of the False Neros in Imperial Literature

by

Jasmine A. Akiyama-Kim

Doctor of Philosophy in Classics

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Francesca Katherine Martelli, Co-Chair

Professor Lydia M. Spielberg, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines the idea of imitation in Roman imperial succession using the case study of the emperor Nero. Analyzing an array of texts and authors, it argues that Nero is consistently remembered as confounding the categories of original and copy, reality and representation. We are told, for example, that Nero assimilated the Great Fire of Rome to the Fall of Troy (Tac. *Ann.* 15.39.3); that he performed onstage wearing a mask of his own face (Suet. *Ner.* 21.3); that he tried to make his lover Sporus into a copy of his deceased wife Poppaea Sabina (Dio Chrys. *Or.* 21.6-10); and that he authorized the False Neros who imitated him after his death (Tac. *Hist.* 2.8-9, Dio Chrys. *Or.* 21.10, Suet. *Ner.* 57.2). This dissertation posits that these and other instances of Nero's doubling are symptoms of his double reception: legitimized and delegitimized by the same imperial system, he demonstrates how the strategies of repetition

and doubling that sustained the principate also constructed its dysfunction. Each chapter engages with a different theorization of mimesis in which Nero is enmeshed: intertextuality, imperial cult, exemplarity, and imperial Greek mimesis, which engages with both Platonic concepts of mimesis and exemplarity. The first two chapters focus on Tacitus's *Histories* and *Annals*: the first interrogates the uneasy difference between the emperor Nero and his pretenders, and the second investigates a similar unsteady relation between the emperor and his images. The third chapter traces Suetonius's construction of a mimetic genealogy of *Nerones* in *De Vita Caesarum*, and the fourth chapter explores how Nero is conceived by a selection of imperial Greek authors (Dio Chrysostom, Plutarch, Pseudo-Lucian, and Philostratus), who, like Nero, are invested in imitating the Classical Greek past. Guiding my analysis is the distinction articulated by Deleuze between Plato's copy versus his simulacrum, and, correspondingly, the imperial successor versus the impostor. While the copy/successor maintains internal fidelity to the Platonic form, the simulacrum/impostor looks like the form but contains oppositional content. The simulacrum/impostor does not merely negate the original; rather, it destabilizes the difference between original and copy. All of the authors under examination frame Nero as an impostor rather than a successor, yet my analysis shows that the distinction between the two positions is more ambiguous and less hierarchical than the authors theorizing imperial succession sought to construct.

The dissertation of Jasmine A. Akiyama-Kim is approved.

Nelon Bryant Kirkland

Alex C. Purves

Francesca Katherine Martelli, Committee Co-Chair

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University of California, Los Angeles

2024

For my mom

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Vita	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. The Aesthetic of Doubling, the False Neros, and Other Impostors in Tacitus's <i>Histories</i> and <i>Annals</i>	20
Chapter 2. Portraits, Gods, and Other False Neros in Tacitus's <i>Annals</i>	69
Chapter 3. "Caesar" v. "Nero": Imitative Genealogy in Suetonius's <i>De Vita Caesarum</i>	107
Chapter 4. Nero and Exemplary Failure in Imperial Greek Literature	153
Conclusion	192
Bibliography	195

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VITA

Jasmine Akiyama-Kim is Visiting Assistant Professor of Classics at Bard College (2024-2026). She holds a B.A. in Classics from the Robert D. Clark Honors College at University of Oregon (2015) and an M.A. in Classics from the University of California, Los Angeles (2019); she expects to receive a Ph.D. in 2024. She has presented papers at annual meetings of the Society for Classical Studies and the Classical Association of the Middle West and South.

Introduction

The double inheres in ideas about Roman kingship, representing both a necessary bulwark (“heir and spare”) and the ever-present threat of fratricide.¹ So seminal was the two-fold potentiality of the double for both stability and destruction that the Roman people located it in their foundation myth. As Hardie puts it, “the founding myth of the city, of the principate and of civil war is the Romulus and Remus story: Rome arises out of the violent replacement of a twosome by a unique founder.”² As “heir,” Romulus becomes “Mr. Rome”; as “spare,” Remus is reimagined as excess that must be discarded, as in Juvenal’s fickle “mob of Remus” (*turba Remi*, 10.73) unworthy to be called Romans.³ The suppression of illegitimate challenger by legitimate victor then repeats throughout the history of the principate: Octavian and Antony in 32 BCE; Galba, Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian in 69 CE; and Pertinax, Didius Julianus, Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus, and Septimius Severus in 193 CE. In each refoundation of the principate, the dominant ideology contradicts the ideology that was formerly dominant and now lies latent, under the surface.

This project explores a moment following the assassination of Domitian and the accession of Nerva and Trajan when imperial ideology turns back on itself. The authors who bear witness to this transfer of imperial power use Domitian as a mirror to reflect two sets of doubles: first, Trajan becomes the positive double of the deposed Domitian, and second, Domitian

¹ E.g., Tacitus compares Tiberius’s two sons (one biological, one adopted) to military fortifications: “But assuredly, [Augustus] ordered that the son of Drusus be put in charge of the eight legions on the Rhine, and that he be adopted by Tiberius, although the latter already had a young son in his house, that he might stand upon more fortifications” (*at hercule Germanicum, Druso ortum, octo apud Rhenum legionibus inposuit adscirique per adoptionem a Tiberio iussit, quamquam esset in domo Tiberii filius iuvenis, sed quo pluribus munimentis insisteret*, *Ann.* 1.3.5).

² Hardie 1992: 10.

³ For Romulus as “Mr. Rome,” Beard (2015: 95). Juvenal accuses the mob of Remus of “following fortune, as always, and hating the condemned” (*sequitur fortunam, ut semper; et odit/ damnatos*, 10.73-74).

becomes the double of Nero, who is simultaneously reevaluated in light of the structurally similar Domitian (i.e., Domitian was also a “bad” emperor who ended his dynasty). Writers of the Nerva-Antonine moment such as Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Chrysostom, and Plutarch thus establish the traditions of Domitian and Nero in tandem. Having emerged from the Nerva-Antonine moment as a forerunner of Domitian, it is perhaps not surprising that Nero’s psyche is represented as double. This doubleness is proof of his “badness”: he is represented as appetitive, excessive, destabilizing, of two minds, living in multiple realities.⁴ He entered the imperial court as the “spare” to Britannicus’s “heir,” but became the evil twin who replaced both Britannicus and Britannicus’s biological father, the emperor Claudius.⁵ He was tolerable so long as Seneca and Burrus were his advisors, and beyond bearing as soon as they were removed.⁶ As emperor, he took as his exemplum not Augustus, the prototype of all *principes*, but Caligula, the first “bad” emperor.⁷ He was theatrical, performing onstage in a mask of his own face.⁸ He kept a concubine who looked like his mother.⁹ He made the ex-slave Sporus into a double of his deceased second wife, Poppaea Sabina.¹⁰ After his death, he inspired the False Neros,

⁴ The idea of “good” versus “bad” emperors is taken from the discourse of exemplarity, but as Wallace-Hadrill points out, most emperors in Suetonius’s *DVC* existed somewhere in the middle: “Some—Augustus and Titus—rate highly on all counts. Others—Caligula, Galba and Vitellius—are all black. But the majority lie in between with mixed records, either virtuous in some respects and vicious in others, or less virtuous at the start, only to degenerate to vice” (1983: 142).

⁵ Tacitus uses the word *aequari* to indicate the parity between Nero and Britannicus: “Octavia was pledged to him, and in addition to his previous relationship, now bridegroom and son-in-law Domitius became equal to Britannicus though the intrigues of his mother” (*despondeturque Octavia, ac super priorem necessitudinem sponsus iam et gener Domitius aequari Britannico studiis matris*, *Ann.* 12.9.2).

⁶ E.g., *Ann.* 13.2.1. versus *Ann.* 14.52.1

⁷ Suet. *Ner.* 7.1.

⁸ Suet. *Ner.* 21.3.

⁹ Suet. *Ner.* 28.2.

¹⁰ Dio Chrys. *Or.* 21.6-10.

postmortem pretenders who appeared in the East, as well as the imperial challengers Otho and Vitellius, who emulated him in various ways.¹¹ He then replaced Caligula as the prototypical “bad” emperor to which other “bad” emperors were assimilated, most notably Domitian, whom Juvenal calls “a bald Nero” (*calvo Neroni*, Juv. 4.38). I posit that all of these instances of doubling are symptoms of Nero’s double reception: legitimized and delegitimized by the same imperial system, he thus demonstrated how the strategies of repetition and doubling that sustained the principate also constructed its dysfunction.¹² In the terms with which I began this study, Nero went from a Romulus to a Remus—from the legitimate ruler of Rome, to a figure that was retrospectively declared a pretender (an extraneous double) in order for the ideology of the principate to make sense again.

An important theoretical framework for this project comes from Deleuze’s essay *Plato and the Simulacrum*, part of Deleuze’s larger project of “push[ing] back against strict delineations and particularly the binary between subject and object” in such modes of thought as the assemblage, the cinematic image, and becoming.¹³ In this essay, Deleuze compares the task of sorting Platonic representations (e.g., the form from the copy) to that of discerning between true and false claimants to imperial power. While in his simile Deleuze uses the simulacrum as the tenor and the false claimant as the vehicle, in my analysis I reverse the terms of the simile—I use Plato’s simulacrum to explore more fully the idea of the false claimant. The upshot is that the

¹¹ For the False Neros Tac. *Hist.* 1.2, 2.8-9; Suet. *Ner.* 57.2; Cass. Dio 63.9.3 (from Xiphilinus 190, 31–191, 15 R. St., exc. Val. 260 (p. 697), see also Zonaras 11.15 (p. 45 D)); 66.19.3b-c (from Zonaras 11.18, p. 55, 19-27 D); John of Antioch fr. 104 M; for Otho Tac. *Hist.* 1.78, Suet. *Oth.* 7.1, for Vitellius Suet. *Vit.* 11.2, Cass. Dio 64.7.3.

¹² Schulz 2019 recognizes an aspect of the reversibility of imperial ideology in her analysis of the process by which panegyric discourse (i.e., praise) is recoded into historiographical discourse (blame).

¹³ Han 2023: 6.

false claimant destabilizes the criteria on which imperial succession is based, since legitimate succession can also be construed as successful imposture.

Deleuze writes that the project of Platonic division—of sorting out “the ‘thing’ itself and its images, the original and the copy, the model and the simulacrum”—deals “fundamentally with selection from among lines of succession, distinguishing between the claimants, distinguishing the pure from the impure, the authentic from the inauthentic.”¹⁴ According to Plato, as interpreted by Deleuze, the claimant can take two forms: what Deleuze calls the copy, and what he calls the simulacrum. Both copies and simulacra look like the Platonic form on the outside, yet while copies have internal fidelity to the form, simulacra do not. He writes: “Copies are secondhand possessors, well-grounded claimants, authorized by resemblance. Simulacra are like false claimants, built on dissimilitude, implying a perversion, an essential turning away.”¹⁵ So, when Tacitus employs the term *Falsus Nero* (*Hist.* 1.2.1), he would seem to participate in a project that is essentially Platonic: to sift the real from the false, the legitimate emperor from the pretender.¹⁶ If Nero represents the point of departure, “the thing itself,” then the False Nero would represent a false claimant, that possesses, on the outside, “a face similar to Nero’s” (*similitudinem oris*, *Hist.* 2.8.1). But, in actual fact, his claim “is made from below, by means of an aggression, an insinuation, a subversion, ‘against the father’ and without passing through the Idea.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Deleuze 1983: 46.

¹⁵ Deleuze 1983: 47.

¹⁶ For the Platonic aspect of Tacitus’s project see Haynes 2003: 181-183.

¹⁷ Deleuze 1983: 48.

As Deleuze points out, Platonism encodes its own overthrow, since the simulacrum represents not merely the negation of the original, but the destabilization of the difference between original and copy: “The simulacrum is not degraded copy, rather it contains a positive power which negates *both original and copy, both model and reproduction*. Of the at least two divergent series interiorized in the simulacrum, neither can be assigned as original or as copy.”¹⁸ The outcome would be—and here Deleuze quotes Blanchot—“a universe where the image ceases to be second in relation to a model, where imposture pretends to the truth, or, finally, where there is no more original, but an eternal sparkle where, in the glitter of detour and return, the absence of the origin is dispersed.”¹⁹ The permanent destruction of the original—this, I argue, is what the false claimant does to the true claimant, and, in this project, what the False Nero does to Nero. On such a picture, the emperor Nero is no longer the real Nero, and the False Nero is no longer false. This argument has broader implications for the ideology of the principate, since the False Nero also shows imposture to be a simulacrum of succession, thus destabilizing succession as a legitimate way of copying one’s prototype, and imposture as its fake approximation.

Deleuze writes that “folded within the simulacrum there is a process of going mad.”²⁰ The madness of the False Neros (another symptom is their indeterminable number) infiltrates all narratives written about Nero, both ancient and modern.²¹ Before offering possible explanations of why the False Neros pretended to be Nero, Tuplin adds the caveat: “to speak of explaining an

¹⁸ Deleuze 1983: 53.

¹⁹ Blanchot 1965: 103.

²⁰ Deleuze 1983: 49.

²¹ For the number of False Neros see Gallivan 1973; Tuplin 1989: 382-386.

individual's decision to impersonate a dead ruler is perhaps rash: there must be an irreducible element of the sheerly unbalanced in almost all such episodes which passes beyond the realm of rational comment."²² Contra Tuplin, who localizes the madness of the False Neros to a few historical individuals, I argue that this madness is inseparable from the texts in which the False Neros are embedded. The ancient authors who wrote about the False Neros very often did so in a way that preserved the ambiguity implicit in imposture, thus passing onto the reader the interpretive burden of parsing between real and false. This offloading of responsibility has, in turn, caused a schism between readers.

While the majority of scholars agree that the False Neros were not, in fact, Nero, there remains a small contingent that entertains the idea that they were. Weigall, for example, writes: "I do not think that any historian has even suggested that the man was anything but an impostor; but it seems to me not at all impossible that he really was Nero, who had recovered from his wound and had escaped only to meet a miserable end on this little Aegaeon island."²³ There are finer distinctions to make as well, for example, while Tuplin does not think that Terentius Maximus (the Nero-pretender recorded in Zonaras 11.18, p. 55, 19-27 D) was Nero, he suggests that perhaps the short-lived Parthian ruler Artabanus did.²⁴ But the effect of this textual madness is seen most clearly in depictions of the emperor Nero, who is assimilated to his posthumous pretenders. The retrojection of the inexplicability of the False Nero onto the emperor Nero is, I argue, one of the reasons why the latter's personality is represented as inconsistent and contradictory and why he is so engaged with fantasy and delusion. He *must* deal in doubles and

²² Tuplin 1989: 386.

²³ Weigall 1930: 298. See also Roux 1962: 309 f.

²⁴ For Terentius Maximus, Zonar. 11.18, Joan of Antioch fr. 104 M.

be doubled, for he is the prototype of a figure that has retroactively destabilized him. The schism in imperial ideology, which constructs the emperor Nero as both legitimate (the opposite of his pretenders) and illegitimate (the same as his pretenders) has retrospectively presented him as mad.

This madness has also come to bear on the modern scholarly tradition that seeks to determine what Nero was actually like. This tradition is comprised of two contradictory movements, one a reaction to the other. These two trends represent an inversion of Nero's posthumous tradition, which countered a discourse of praise with a discourse of blame. In the last forty years, scholarship on the historical Nero, however, has attempted to recuperate from the characterization of Nero as tyrant the latent characterization of Nero as populist. This movement has been accompanied by a move away from textual sources and toward material ones, especially the Domus Aurea, which lives in the literary imagination as a symbol of Nero's maximalism. Griffin was the first to suggest that contra the literary sources (e.g., the joke in Suetonius that the Domus Aurea would expand to include both Rome and Veii, *Ner.* 39.2), Nero did not intend the Domus Aurea to be a private house, but rather, a public precinct. She emphasizes the disconnect between Nero's intention and the reception of the Domus Aurea: "Nero may have felt he was opening his house to the citizens, while his critics felt that he was excluding the citizens from their city."²⁵ The argument that the Domus Aurea had a public dimension has also been taken up by others.²⁶ Flower, for example, writes:

The evidence does not suggest that Nero took land away from Rome's citizens in order to appropriate it for his private palace. Rather, a more plausible case can be made for the view that Nero took land from the wealthy and powerful in order to create a series of

²⁵ Griffin 1984: 140, for context see 139-41.

²⁶ Following the argument that the Domus Aurea had a public function are Ball 1994, Champlin 1998, Davies 2000, Welch 2002, Flower 2006: 229-32, Rutledge 2012, La Rocca: 2017: 203-12, and Closs 2020: 120-3.

recreational spaces that would have been open to the public. Such a reconstruction certainly fits better with his desire to be a public figure in constant contact with the ordinary people in the city and to share his life with them, at least to some extent and on certain occasions.²⁷

With the reevaluation of the Domus Aurea has come the reevaluation of Nero's behavior during and after the Great Fire. When read for their most imaginative and suggestive details, our literary sources imply that Nero masterminded the Great Fire in order to clear the land for the Domus Aurea (or, that it was a lucky coincidence). But some scholars have read these texts against their most dominant messages, drawing out Nero's subsequent attempts to fire-proof the city (Tac. *Ann.* 15.43, Suet. *Ner.* 16.1).²⁸ Others have attempted to explain the detail that certain people were seen reigniting the fire around the city (Tac. *Ann.* 15.38.7, Suet. *Ner.* 38.1, Cass. Dio 62.17.1). For example, Walsh suggests that "eyewitnesses to their actions misinterpreted the time-honored firefighting strategy of creating firebreaks through controlled burning and demolition."²⁹ This movement in scholarship toward a more balanced view of Nero has (fittingly) gained popular appeal, exemplified by the 2021 exhibit by the British Museum, "Nero: The Man Behind the Myth," which used over 200 art objects to challenge the (literary) idea that Nero was universally disliked.

Another lesson from Neronian material culture has been a softening of the diametrical opposition between Neronian and Flavian building programs. Varner, for example, argues that "in Rome, the 'Flavian aftermath' is not so much an antithesis of Nero's artistic and architectural extravagance, but rather a careful recalibration of the Neronian visual program."³⁰ A good

²⁷ Flower 2006: 231.

²⁸ Cf. Kleiner 1992: 135, Beste and von Hesberg 2013: 314-315.

²⁹ Walsh 2019: 82.

³⁰ Varner 2017: 237.

example is the perceived contrast between the Domus Aurea and the Colosseum which, as Davies explains, was largely a matter of branding:

In regard to the Domus Aurea, a masterful stroke of diplomacy was needed, and the Colosseum proved the perfect solution. In its construction, Vespasian accommodated architecturally precisely those types of activity that the public had enjoyed or expected to enjoy on Nero's land; yet he conspicuously elevated and controlled them, reinforcing their Roman character and making them morally acceptable to the elite. Indeed, the amphitheater's staunchly Roman architectonic form (even down to the choice of Tuscan columns rather than Doric) and the strict seating arrangements for the crowd within the amphitheater according to social hierarchy (women at the top, men of highest rank closest to the arena) must have appeared to reassert the very Roman values and social order that Nero's revels had subverted. I would prefer, then, to characterize the Colosseum not as an anti-Neronian manifesto but as a Flavian "improvement" on the Domus Aurea, which still catered to the masses, but in a fashion more acceptable to all.³¹

Finally, no single study has made a greater effort to take the historical Nero seriously than Champlin's *Nero*, which considers literary and material sources together in an attempt to find consistency in Nero's erratic behaviors. His Nero emerges as a mastermind of his own self-presentation, who consciously uses myth as part of his self-fashioning and purposefully inverts hierarchies in to establish a bond between himself and the common people. While Champlin's approach is appealing in its boldness and has done much for the reconsideration of Nero reputation, I am not convinced that any scholar can undo the effect of the biases and distortions of the future onto the past. This is why I do not consider my own approach fundamentally historical, because my study does not claim to reveal Nero as he was—rather, it analyzes how people thought about Nero after the fact.

This dissertation focuses on Nero's reputation as a figure who destabilizes and confounds discourses of mimesis. It is my contention that this destabilization is the result of simultaneously

³¹ Davies 2000: 42.

existing positive and negative traditions for Nero: both panegyric texts written while he lived (e.g., the *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca's *De Clementia*, Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, Calpurnius Siculus's *Eclogues* 1, 4, and 7, and the *Carmina Einsidlensia*), and critical posthumous texts such as the ones that I will discuss in this dissertation (Tacitus's historical works, Suetonius's *De Vita Caesarum*, and selections from the imperial Greek authors Dio Chrysostom, Plutarch, Pseudo-Lucian, and Philostratus). While these two broad traditions developed at different times—the former under Nero and the latter after his death—they persisted concurrently thereafter. I hence find overly schematic Schulz's argument that the critical historiographical discourse recoded the positive panegyric discourse.³² The so-called panegyric texts invite reading for doublespeak, for example, as I will read more fully in Chapter One, Seneca's mirror of Nero in *De Clementia* reflects a version of Nero that he simultaneously already is and can become. Neither were posthumous critical discourses successful in subsuming and transforming previous discourses of praise with the result that they reflect monolithic criticism. Rather, Tacitus's historical works, Suetonius's *De Vita Caesarum* and the writings of Dio Chrysostom, Plutarch, Pseudo-Lucian, and Philostratus represent Nero as a hybrid creature who is inconsistently worthy of both praise and blame. Nero demonstrates how imperial ideology can contradict itself, but can never fully erase its previous stance (in this case, initial approval of Nero).

Each of the four chapters of this dissertation focuses on a different theorization of mimesis in which Nero is embedded. The four theorizations are: intertextuality, imperial cult, exemplarity, and imperial Greek mimesis, which engages with both Platonic mimesis and exemplarity. In each instance, Nero shows the relation between original and copy to be less hierarchical and more flexible than the theorizations of mimesis themselves might suggest. The

³² Schulz 2019: 38-49.

first chapter takes as its subject the intertextual relation between Tacitus's *Histories* and *Annals*. Tacitus's reverse-chronological order of composition—*Agricola*, *Histories*, *Annals*—places Tacitus's False Nero, as well as three other imposters, before the emperor Nero at the end of the *Annals*. The impostors, who both prefigure and parody elements of legitimate succession, raise the question: is the emperor Nero merely a successful version of the False Nero? The second chapter explores legitimate ways in which emperors were replaced by their own images, namely portraiture and deification, and how these images—like impostors—have the potential to usurp their prototypes. The third chapter takes as its subject Suetonius's *DVC*, and argues that suppressed in the genealogy of the *Caesares* is the genealogy of the *Nerones*, representing an alternate model of succession that prioritizes mimetic resemblance over biological continuity. And finally, the fourth chapter explores Nero's failure (in the eyes of imperial Greek authors) to meaningfully engage with Classical Greek cultural power, over which imperial Greek authors have a monopoly. Across all four chapters, I draw out how Nero, who holds a dual identity as both original and copy, "real" and "false," forces us to rethink our understanding of the categories of original and copy within the structure of the principate. In doing so, we come to a greater understanding of how copying both sustains the principate and contributes to its dysfunction.

Historically, one of the major ways scholars have approached Nero's doubleness is via his identity as a *princeps* who is said to have acted onstage. Such a claim would seem to decenter Nero's essential identity as *princeps* by showing himself to have no essence at all. Edwards argues that "*princeps*" and "actor" were fundamentally incompatible categories: "For Romans [the idea of the *imperator scaenicus*] was a horrible oxymoron, a concept so riven with

contradiction it was almost unthinkable. The qualities that emperors were supposed to exhibit, ideally, to a greater degree than all other Romans, the qualities of *gravitas*, *dignitas*, *fides*, *virtus*, were ones that actors, more than any other Romans, conspicuously lacked.”³³ Nero-as-actor disrupted the assumption that the person who held the position of *princeps* was *princeps*, rather than acting *princeps*. Put another way, Nero’s acting contradicted the idea that being *princeps* went deeper than the surface—that it was something much more fundamental. Actors, on the other hand, lacked substance and lied for a living, and as a result, could never be trusted to be singular versions of themselves.

Edwards argues that the categories of *princeps* and actor were antithetical to each other, but this seeming opposition developed out of a much hazier and mutually dependent relation. Sumi demonstrates that following a number of changes to where power was located in the second and first centuries BCE, republican statesmen increasingly relied on public performances, for example, oratory, games, the triumph and *ovatio*, departures and returns, and the aristocratic funeral, in order to gain the acclaim of the people.³⁴ Augustus then adapted these performances into imperial court ceremony. Suetonius writes that on the last day of Augustus’s life, he seemingly acknowledged that being *princeps* was a matter of acting.

Supremo die identidem exquirens, an iam de se tumultus foris esset, petito speculo capillum sibi comi ac malas labantes corrigi praecepit et admissos amicos percontatus, ecquid iis videretur mimum vitae commode transegisse, adiecit et clausulam:

Ἐπεὶ δὲ πάνυ καλῶς πέπαισται, δότε κρότον
Καὶ πάντες ἡμᾶς μετὰ χαρᾶς προπέμψατε. (Suet. *Aug.* 99.1)

On his last day, asking repeatedly whether there was already a commotion outside on his account, he had a mirror brought to him and instructed that his hair be combed and his

³³ Edwards 1994: 83.

³⁴ Sumi 2005: 4-7. For the categories of public ceremony 16-46.

slackening jaws be corrected and he questioned his friends who had been sent in if it seemed to them that he had performed the mime of life well, and he added the clause:

Since it has been played well, give applause
And all of you send us forth with delight.³⁵

This anecdote raises the possibility of Augustus's doubleness (manifested most obviously in his former identity, Octavian), but ultimately suggests that the present Augustus has subsumed all previously existing versions. Although Augustus suggests to his closest friends that his whole life has been a performance, he never unmask himself to reveal either Octavian or another version of Augustus. Rather, he gives the impression that the Augustus who has played his part well has successfully eradicated all other versions. Put another way, Augustus indicates to his audience that his performance is ending, but dies in character. And while Augustus's request for a mirror might seem to indicate something of the multiplicity of his character, a mirror is a surface as well as a depth, and might merely reflect back Augustus's public façade instead of revealing an underlying version of Augustus.

Nero's acting represents a reification of Augustus's acting. The difference between the two—apart from Nero actually performing onstage—has to do with how many selves Augustus and Nero were respectively willing to acknowledge. While, according to Suetonius, both acted, Augustus acted a singular version of himself, while Nero encouraged plurality, juxtaposing his face with those of Orestes, Oedipus, and Hercules (*Ner.* 21.3). Nero's plurality and hybridity, I argue, result from his contradictory posthumous tradition, which, like the placement of the theatrical mask over the face, attempted to efface a positive tradition by means of a negative one. By taking the stage, Nero seems to comment on the constructedness of his imperial persona, but contra Augustus's singularity, he offers multiple contrasting personae, with no instructions as to

³⁵ Cf. *Edmonds, Fr. Att. Com. III, A, pg. 468, n. 771*; the Greek comedy is not extant.

which to assign priority. Although Nero's non-essentiality is a symptom of his structural position as the last, disgraced, emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, the contradiction in imperial ideology that he exposes also has implications for Augustus, in that the singular Augustus we have in Suetonius is a result of a positive posthumous tradition, but there was always the possibility that it could have gone another way.

Related to Nero's own performances were the performances he demanded from others—a reversal, in Bartsch's words, of the actor-audience paradigm.³⁶ Bartsch locates in Tacitus's account of the emperor Nero a dynamic in which Nero, from his singular position on the stage, was able to survey and monitor the reactions of his audience. This dynamic continued offstage—for example, when Nero killed his step-brother, Britannicus, and his mother, Agrippina the Younger, he forced the witnesses to dissimulate their reactions. Bartsch suggests that Tacitus, as opposed to Suetonius and Cassius Dio, portrays the emperor as purposefully controlling others' reactions to him (the Nero of Suetonius and Cassius Dio is more gullible and easily manipulated). But Bartsch also observes that Tacitus finds it difficult to hold onto this frame, attributing the positive responses of Nero's audiences at different times to both coercion and unprompted delight. She remarks that Tacitus's motivation for emphasizing Nero's theatrical paradigm might have stemmed from the scrutiny to which senators were subject as a result of their reserved seating in the orchestra of the theater.³⁷ The audience who acts inconsistently for Nero is, I argue, a good example of how Nero's positive and negative traditions are both embedded in his historiographic tradition. The tyranny with which Nero controls his own

³⁶ Bartsch 1994: 1-35.

³⁷ Bartsch 1994: 29-31.

reception in the theater (according to Tacitus) finds an analog in the control Nero's posthumous sources attempt to exert over Nero's tradition.

The theorization of the principate as something that is, by its very nature, double, is essential background for this study. Tacitus locates in the founding of the principate an apparent contradiction between Augustus's chosen title and his consolidation of the traditional republican offices in his own person: "bearing himself as a consul and content with tribunician power to safeguard the people . . . he raised himself little by little, drawing toward himself the offices of the senate, the magistrates, and the legislature" (*consulem se ferens et ad tuendam plebem tribunicio iure contentum . . . insurgere paulatim, munia senatus, magistratuum, legum in se trahere, Ann. 1.2.1*). The conflict between two incompatible offices (traditionally, tribunes had the power to negate magistrates) is then expressed as a more general contradiction between the way things *were* and the way things *seemed*. That is, the principate seemed like the Republic, but it was really something else, since one man now held all of the traditional offices.

Seminal is Wallace-Hadrill's social-historical explication of the contradiction inherent in the pose of *princeps*. He begins his article with Tacitus's account of Claudius's unspoken appeal to the senate to break with tradition and marry his niece, Agrippina the Younger, in which he draws out a seeming contradiction between the categories of king and citizen: "On the one hand, the autocratic reality: a decision of high political moment (it was no surprise that Agrippina's son subsequently acceded to the throne) taken in the palace on the counsel of freedmen, potent and resented, involving a violation of the *mos maiorum*. On the other hand the elaborate yet transparent republican façade: the senate decrees, the princeps submits to the will of the citizen

body.”³⁸ Wallace-Hadrill ultimately argues that Tacitus exaggerates the unproductive nature of the citizen-king paradox; it was a paradox, but one that benefitted the *princeps* and his subjects alike. When the *princeps* articulated his power in republican terms, he added value back into the system that authorized him: “civility both reinforced the social hierarchy by demonstrating imperial respect for it, and strengthened the autocracy by linking it with the social structure.”³⁹ While my study does not focus on the realities of life under the principate, and rather locates the doubleness of the principate within certain authorial perspectives and modes of composition, Wallace-Hadrill speaks to the conditions that these authors, who themselves were historically situated, must have experienced firsthand.

Other scholars locate imperial doubling in the literary approaches of certain authors.⁴⁰ An important predecessor of my study is that of Haynes, who theorizes the way Tacitus represents the subjectivities of actors in the *Histories* and *Annals* in light of their attempts to make sense of the ideology of the principate, from which they cannot escape. Her study hangs on the idea that subjects in Tacitus’s works make up and believe in narratives about the principate and in doing so give the system of power real stakes. She writes: “The danger of make-believe is that it erases the distinction between images and nonimages. If well orchestrated, as by Augustus, it consolidates the power of the tyrant as the dream of the people; if allowed to run riot, it destroys the equilibrium of symbolic order, producing panic and violence.”⁴¹ What I have identified as

³⁸ Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 32.

³⁹ Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 47.

⁴⁰ E.g., for Sailor 2008 Tacitus’s doubleness inheres in an apparent contradiction between his political career and his literary persona: “Together, Tacitus’ two careers, and the two monuments that are their written product and summation, lay claim both to the honor to be had from full acceptance of the domination of the *principes*—the “wealth and honors” of *Ann.* 1.2.1—and to the credit to be had from contemptuous rejection of it” (49-50).

⁴¹ Haynes 2003: 3-4.

“the destruction of the original” is the negative manifestation of Haynes’ “make-believe,” but the outcome is the same: imperial ideology has nothing real or authentic on which to posit itself.

Where our frameworks differ is in where we locate the contradictions and disjunctions of the principate—for her, they inhere in the perceptions and understandings of actors in the narrative, which Tacitus leads his readers to understand while simultaneously hinting at the fissures of the ideology in which they are enmeshed. For me, it is impossible to get at Nero’s psychological state whether in Tacitus or any other author, since any idea of how Nero might have thought has been fragmented by what happened afterward, and as a result, he cannot be understood as making sense in his own historical narratives.

Another study that informs my own is that of Gleason, who reads instances of imposture and masquerade in the contemporary books of Cassius Dio as symptoms of the reemergence of usurpation and memory sanctions under the Severans. Both usurpation and *damnatio memoriae* are what Gleason calls “self-canceling identity statements that undo the logic of their own signification.”⁴² She explains:

To assert one’s own imperial identity—to say, in effect, “I usurp, therefore I am emperor”—is also to undermine that very claim, by exposing one’s rise to power as contingent rather than inevitable. That is why successful usurpers like Severus disseminated prophecies and horoscopes that made their rise seem foreordained. Usurpation exposes imperial identity as socially constructed rather than essential. A *damnatio memoriae* is likewise an act that subverts itself: though a defaced statue or partially erased inscription calls attention to the power that ordered its erasure, it also calls attention to the presence-of-which-it-is-an-absence. Effacement implies an image or identity that is logically and chronologically prior. Thus it makes a certain kind of logical sense that Dio’s narratives of usurpation and *damnatio memoriae* should call into question not just the stability of imperial identity, but the stability of signification itself.⁴³

⁴² Gleason 2011: 70.

⁴³ Gleason 2011: 70.

Gleason's interest is in how Cassius Dio projects an anxiety of his milieu onto the contemporary books of his *Roman History*, such that they reflect a thematic concern, rather than "what really happened."⁴⁴ She draws a particular connection between doubles and usurpation and *damnatio memoriae* that I share—Nero's posthumous tradition, which began to take shape as early as Galba but became solidified under the Flavians, became the double of his contemporary tradition and thus, I argue, created literal doubles in his historical narratives. But contra Gleason, my project engages with a longer view of historical time. I am less concerned with how or whether Tacitus, Suetonius, and imperial Greek authors projected contemporary thematic concerns onto contemporary events (as Gleason argues Cassius Dio did); rather, I argue that they project the weight of the subsequent historical tradition back onto the originary event. Put another way, I aim to parse how events in the far past are distorted by the chain of events that both precede from them and retrospectively define them.

In sum: Nero is a figure who collects alternatives, doubles, fantasies, masquerades, and reversals. We should not think of these characteristics as inherent to the person he was, but rather, a result of what a group of authors did to him after his death. These authors all had a stake in theorizing what the principate was, how to be a good emperor, how to be a good man under a bad emperor, and how to create a succession of good emperors, and portrayed Nero in such a way as aligned with their overall goals. It served most of them to cast Nero as a negative exemplum against which other, better emperors (e.g., Trajan or Hadrian) might position themselves. But in doing so, they revealed that the ideology of the principate was subject to the same kinds of

⁴⁴ Cassius Dio's contemporary books are defined by his eyewitness accounts from Commodus onward, 73.4.2.

contradictions and reversals that Nero was, since the same principate that assigned value to him also took it away.

Chapter 1

The Aesthetic of Doubling, the False Neros, and Other Impostors in Tacitus's *Histories* and *Annals*

Marx, building on Hegel, wrote that historical facts and personages occur twice, “once as tragedy, and again as farce.”⁴⁵ This observation, situated at the beginning of the 18th *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, explains the déjà vu that accompanied the December 1851 coup d’état, in which Louis Bonaparte dissolved the National Assembly and created the preconditions for the Second French Empire. The setback of French revolutionary efforts to their point of departure and the reinstatement of another monarch named Napoleon was not just tragic, it was ludicrous.

Tacitus, like Marx, wrote at a time when there was a clear analogue between past and present events.⁴⁶ The end of the Flavian Dynasty, the accession of Nerva, and the succession crisis resulting in the adoption of Trajan all recalled the events of approximately thirty years prior: the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, the unsteady succession of Galba, and his useless adoption of Piso. As Syme put it, “nobody could ignore or evade the parallel.”⁴⁷ But *contra* Marx, who called the chronologically prior event tragedy and the chronologically subsequent event farce, Tacitus wrote the end of the Flavian Dynasty as tragedy and the end of the Julio-

⁴⁵ Marx 1963: 15.

⁴⁶ Tacitus was born in the mid to late 50s CE, within the first five years of Nero’s reign. More exact dates are postulated as follows: 55 or 56 (Borghesi 1872: 321); 56 or 57 (Syme 1958: 63); not before 58 (Birley 2000: 236). Potential birth years are calculated by working backwards from Tacitus’s admission that he was praetor in 88 CE (Tac. *Ann.* 11.11.1). He was perhaps a young adult by the Year of the Four Emperors, and he credits the Flavians with the beginning and rise of his political career (Tac. *Hist.* 1.1.3). He was praetor and *quindecimvir sacris faciundis* in 88 CE (Tac. *Ann.* 11.11.1), consul in 97 or 98 CE (Plin. *Ep.* 2.1.6), and proconsul of Asia around 112-13 CE (*Die Inschriften von Mylasa* no. 365; Birley 2000: 236).

⁴⁷ Syme 1958: 130.

Claudian dynasty as farce. Tacitus's inversion of Marx's principle results from his method of composing history contrary to the forward march of time.⁴⁸ Thus, intertextuality within Tacitus's oeuvre is at odds with historical chronology. The early principate of the *Annals* is inflected by the tyranny of the *Agricola* and the civil war of the *Histories*. What began as tragedy with Agricola's death under Domitian ended with Nero's farcical interpretation of emperorship.

In this chapter, I focus on the aesthetic of doubling in the *Histories* and *Annals*, that, I suggest, indicates an anxiety latent in Tacitus's conception of the principate. Set inside the double historical narrative are four sets of pretenders: in the order of composition, the False Neros (*Hist.* 1.1-3; 2.8-9), the False Scribonianus Camerinus (*Hist.* 2.72), the False Agrippa Postumus (*Ann.* 2.39-40), and the False Drusus (*Ann.* 5.10). These pretenders, all of whom impersonate real people and ape the manner in which claimants gain imperial power, disclose an anxiety suppressed by the ideology of the principate: that sometimes, a false emperor succeeds in the place of a real one, and no one notices until it is too late. Each pretender thus casts doubt on the *princeps* in power at the time he appears. But even further, the pretenders prompt a reevaluation of the idea that anyone can accede to power in a legitimate way.

In order to examine this question further, I close my investigation of impostors in the *Histories* and *Annals* with a section on the emperor Nero, who is the chronological prototype of the False Neros, but, because of the order of composition, is assimilated to them instead. Tacitus attributes to Nero the qualities of an impostor, most notably a vacuousness that is filled only when he is pretending to be someone else. Tacitus's Nero thus raises the question: what is the

⁴⁸ Tacitus composed his historical works in reverse chronological order: first the *Agricola*, written about the life of his father-in-law, Julius Agricola, who died under Domitian; then the *Histories*, which begin in January 69 CE and continue until the death of Domitian (only the first four books are extant; they cover events through the first year of Vespasian's reign); finally the *Annals*, which begin with the death of Augustus and end with the death of Nero (but the last two years of Sejanus's influence and life, the entirety of Caligula's reign, and the last few years of Nero's life are missing).

difference between the emperor Nero and his pretenders? The pairs of False Nero/Nero and imposture/succession approximate the disorientation of a Möbius strip, which despite appearing to have two sides, has only one. By leading his readers on a journey wherein he confounds the difference between oppositional pairs, Tacitus punctures the fantasy of imperial legitimacy, and, along with it, his readers' confidence in their own perceptions.

My discussion of imposture in this chapter draws on Derrida's idea of hauntology, which takes as its central metaphor the proclamation of Old Hamlet's ghost that "the time is out of joint."⁴⁹ Derrida developed hauntology in order to describe the way the non-presence of Marxism haunted the capitalistic system that (seemingly) extinguished it. But this apparatus can also be used with reference to other moments of rupture.⁵⁰ For example, Martelli uses hauntology as a way of describing how Ovid's exilic works, which were written during the transition of power from Augustus to Tiberius and bore witness to the confirmation of the new monarchical system, influence readings of his pre-exilic corpus. For Tacitus, political upheaval came in the form of the tyranny of Domitian and the following succession crises, that, at the time he wrote the *Agricola*, had been resolved but not fully processed (*Agr.* 3.1-3). But in his *Histories* and *Annals*, Tacitus displaces the specter of Domitian onto the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the events of 69 CE, making Nero the ghost that reappears in the wake of the rending open of imperial ideology. Tacitus notes that with the accession of Galba, "the secret of empire was revealed, that a *princeps* was able to be made elsewhere than Rome" (*evulgato imperii arcano posse principem alibi quam Romae fieri, Hist.* 1.4.2). This secret is only a part of a larger one:

⁴⁹ *Hamlet* I. 5.190; Derrida 1994: 1-13.

⁵⁰ As Martelli (2021: 66) explains, hauntology describes "the spectral quality that characterizes moments of historical disjunction, when agencies of the virtual act on events without actually existing, or 'haunt' them in the manner of ghosts."

that there are no preconditions at all for becoming *princeps*. Nero and his pretenders, who make hazy the distinction between impostors and successors in the *Histories* and *Annals*, are reminders of this secret, which has always been true, but must be repressed in order for the principate to continue.

The False Neros and the *Princeps* as Pretender

Tacitus's decision to begin the *Histories* by listing the consuls of 69 CE resurrects two specters: that of the Republic and that of Nero.⁵¹ Syme argues that the beginning of the consular year is the "vital and inevitable" starting point for the work because it follows annalistic precedent (ironically so, since even the façade of the Republic is in shambles) and because it avoids the exposition that would have been necessary had Tacitus begun with the death of Nero.⁵² So, Tacitus left Nero's death out. But he could not avoid Nero's spectral form, which oversees the attempted emperor-making of the *Histories*. Galba instructs Piso, his adopted heir, to "let Nero appear before your eyes" (*sit ante oculos Nero*, *Hist.* 1.16.2) as a negative exemplum against which Piso might position himself. But Nero is very much in front of the eyes of all figures in the *Histories*: a ghostly overlay of the historical past onto the tumultuous present and a future still inchoate.⁵³

⁵¹ It might also be argued that Nero also haunts the *Agricola* (albeit to a slightly lesser degree). Tacitus writes that *Agricola* lay low as tribune of the plebs in 65 CE, the same year Thrasea Paetus died (*Agr.* 6.3). Toward the end of the *Agricola*, Tacitus seems to conceive of Nero as a prototype for Domitian: "Nero at least withdrew his eyes and ordered crimes; he did not look. But it was a particular part of our misery under Domitian to see and to be seen" (*Nero tamen subtraxit oculos suos iussitque scelera, non spectavit: praecipua sub Domitiano miseriarum pars erat videre et aspici*, *Agr.* 45.2).

⁵² Syme 1958: 145.

⁵³ Haynes (2003: 34): "Nero's influence is written all over this story, from the public reaction to his death to impersonations of him both by subsequent emperors and by faraway fortune seekers."

It is not long before Nero enters the text, not as an absent figure, but as a positive fiction. The first False Nero (a preview of a figure we never meet in the narrative) makes a brief appearance in the first preface (*Hist.* 1.1-3): “stirred up—almost—were the arms even of the Parthians by the mockery of a False Nero” (*mota prope etiam Parthorum arma falsi Neronis ludibrio*, *Hist.* 1.2.1). The word *ludibrium*, which means “something that mocks by seeming to be other than it is, a pretense, sham, imposture, etc.,” makes explicit the impostor’s creation of a double reality, which blurred the line between what seemed to be, and what was.⁵⁴ Tacitus insinuates that the Parthians believed that they had encountered the real Nero—only in retrospect did they realize they had been duped, and for this reason decided to stop their preparations for war. The appearance of a False Nero in this highly programmatic passage flags that a theme of the work will be the contestation of the categories of “real” and “false” themselves, defined variously from the year 69 CE forward.

The second False Nero appears near the beginning of Book 2 of the *Histories* (*Hist.* 2.8-9). To orient ourselves in time: we are still early in the year 69 CE. Galba is dead; the fight between Otho and Vitellius continues. Morgan places this episode “early in Otho’s principate, somewhere between mid-February and early April.”⁵⁵

For a person encountering Tacitus’s works as they appeared, the second False Nero represents Tacitus’s first ever extended description of the emperor (save for a few brief mentions in the *Agricola*). The False Nero, as the positive manifestation of an absence, takes priority over the emperor Nero, still yet to be written.

Sub idem tempus Achaia atque Asia falso exterritae velut Nero adventaret, vario super exitu eius rumore eoque pluribus vivere eum fingentibus credentibusque. Ceterorum

⁵⁴ OLD 4.

⁵⁵ 1993: 795; Tuplin (1989: 368) favors a date in January 69.

casus conatusque in contextu operis dicemus: tunc servus e Ponto sive, ut alii tradidere, libertinus ex Italia, citharae et cantus peritus, unde illi super similitudinem oris propior ad fallendum fides, adiunctis desertoribus, quos inopia vagos ingentibus promissis corruerat, mare ingreditur; ac vi tempestatum Cythnum insulam detrusus et militum quosdam ex Oriente commeantium adscivit vel abnuentis interfici iussit, et spoliatis negotiatoribus mancipiorum valentissimum quemque armavit. Centurionemque Sisennam dextras, concordiae insignia, Syriaci exercitus nomine ad praetorianos ferentem variis artibus adgressus est, donec Sisenna clam relicta insula trepidus et vim metuens aufugeret. Inde late terror: multi ad celebritatem nominis erecti rerum novarum cupidine et odio praesentium. Gliscentem in dies famam fors discussit.

Galatiam ac Pamphyliam provincias Calpurnio Asprenati regendas Galba permiserat. Datae e classe Misenensi duae triremes ad prosequendum, cum quibus Cythnum insulam tenuit: nec defuere qui trierarchos nomine Neronis accirent. Is in maestitiam compositus et fidem suorum quondam militum invocans, ut eum in Syria aut Aegypto sisterent orabat. Trierarchi, nutantes seu dolo, adloquendos sibi milites et paratis omnium animis reversuros firmaverunt. Sed Asprenati cuncta ex fide nuntiata, cuius cohortatione expugnata navis et interfectus quisquis ille erat. Corpus, insigne oculis comaque et torvitate vultus, in Asiam atque inde Romam pervectum est. (*Hist.* 2.8-9)

At the same time, Achaia and Asia were terrified by a falsehood, as if Nero were coming, since the rumor about his death was varied, and therefore many were making up and believing that he was alive. The fates and attempts of the others (sc. False Neros) we will tell in the course of the work: that time it was a slave from Pontus, or, as others have recounted, a freedman from Italy, skilled at the cithara and singing, whence, in addition to the similarity of his face to Nero's, he gained greater trust in his deception. Adding deserters, destitute vagabonds whom he had seduced with great promises, he took to the sea; and driven by the force of storms to the island of Cythnus, he recruited certain soldiers visiting from the East or ordered those who refused him to be killed. In addition, after he had robbed some merchants, he armed whoever was the strongest of their slaves. He approached through varied strategies the centurion Sisenna, who was carrying the right hands—the signs of peace—to the praetorians in the name of the Syrian army, until Sisenna, scared and fearing violence, left the island in secret and fled. From that point, fear spread widely: many were roused toward the fame of the name by desire for revolution and hatred of the present circumstances. The rumor was growing day by day when chance shattered it.

Galba had granted the provinces of Galatia and Pamphylia to be ruled by Calpurnius Asprenas. Two triremes were given from the fleet at Misenum to escort him, with which he held the island of Cythnus. There was no lack of men inviting the captains of the ships to join them in the name of Nero. The man, having arranged his face in sadness, calling on the loyalty of the soldiers (once his own) began to beg them to place him in Syria or Egypt. The captains, either wavering or with deceit, declared that they must address their soldiers, and that they would return once the minds of all were prepared. But everything was announced loyally to Asprenas. By his exhortation the ship was assaulted, and the

pretender was killed, whoever he was. His body, remarkable for his eyes, hair, and the savageness of his expression, was conveyed to Asia, and from there to Rome.

Tacitus employs much subtlety as he describes the relation between the False Nero and Nero. Although it becomes clear through his narration that he believes this person is a pretender, he avoids explicitly naming his falsity. He goes to great lengths to avoid the formulation *falsus Nero* that he uses in *Hist.* 1.2.1, although he tricks the reader into expecting a repetition with the (non-agreeing) combination of *falso* and *Nero* in the first sentence. He avoids naming the pretender altogether: he relies on third person verbs with implied subjects, or, when he must specify an actor for the sake of clarity, *illi*, *is* and *quisquis*. He also refers to the relation between the False Nero and Nero in oblique terms. He uses the name “Nero” only twice: *velut Nero* in the introductory sentence and *nomine Neronis* when he describes the attempts of the followers of the False Neros to win over the captains of the triremes. The phrase *velut Nero* introduces a conditional clause of comparison with *adventaret*. But the first two words also stand on their own: the pretender might aptly be called a *Velut Nero* or an “as-If Nero.” By describing the pretender in terms on a continuum between *quisquis* and Nero, Tacitus preserves the ambiguity implicit in imposture.

One of the striking features of this passage is that Tacitus barely describes either the False Nero or Nero; rather, he assumes that his reader will know what Nero is like. The formulations “as-if Nero” (*velut Nero*), “skilled at the cithara and singing” (*citharae et cantus peritus*), and “the similarity of his face to Nero’s” (*similitudinem oris*) provide little information about either the False Nero or Nero. Rather, the descriptions establish a comparison between the two: the False Nero is *like* Nero. But further information about the vehicle (Nero) is missing. The two are similar, but their actual content is vacuous. So, each reader must start with their own preconceived idea of Nero—what he looked like, how he acted—and use that idea as the basis of

their own *Velut Nero*. The emperor Nero is very, very close, and yet only accessible through the partial perspective of the reader.

In his imposture, the *Velut Nero* provides an interpretation of what it means to “act like” a *princeps*. The *Velut Nero* models actions carried out by emperors and imperial actors elsewhere in Tacitus. He corrupts with great promises (*ingentibus promissis corruperat*),⁵⁶ he marches to the sea (*mare ingreditur*), he admits men as allies (*adscivit*),⁵⁷ he orders executions (*interfici iussit*),⁵⁸ he arms (*armavit*),⁵⁹ he tries to entice people with various strategies (*variis artibus adgressus est*),⁶⁰ he begs (*orabat*), and finally, he is killed (*interfectus [est]*).⁶¹ His body, the

⁵⁶ *Ann.* 2.67.1 Pomponius Flaccus (the governor of Moesia) convinces Rhescuporis (the king of Thrace) to enter Roman lines *per ingentia promissa* (in order to put him on trial in the senate); *Ann.* 12.9.1 Agrippina and Seneca convince the consul designate Mammius Pollio with *ingentibus promissis* to put forward a motion suggesting that Claudius engage Octavia to Nero.

⁵⁷ *Adsciscere* generally means “to enroll in an order”: *Agr.* 9.1 *divus Vespasianus inter patricos adscivit*; *Ann.* 1.73.2 *inter cultores Augusti . . . adscivisset*; *Ann.* 11.25.2 *in numerum patriciorum adscivit Caesar*. The word can also mean “to legally establish a family connection”: *Hist.* 1.59.2 *Vitellius generum adscivit*; *Ann.* 3.30.2 *sororis nepotem in nomen adscivit*; *Ann.* 4.57.3 *Augustus . . . sibi Tiberium adscivit*; *Ann.* 5.6.2 *collegam et generum adsciverat*.

⁵⁸ *Agr.* 4.1 Caligula ordered Agricola’s father to be executed because he refused to accuse Marcus Silanus (*quia abnuerat, interfectus*); *Hist.* 1.44.2 Vitellius orders that the authors of petitions demanding rewards for killing Galba and Piso be executed (*interfici iussit*); *Hist.* 2.64.1 Vitellius orders that Dolabella be put to death (*interfici iussit*); *Hist.* 3.54.2 Vitellius orders that his own (captured and released) spies be put to death (*interfici iussit*); *Hist.* 3.54.3 Julius Agrestis might have been put to death on the order of Vitellius (*iussu Vitellii interfectum*); *Ann.* 2.40.3 Tiberius orders the False Agrippa Postumus to be executed (*interfici iussit*).

⁵⁹ *Hist.* 3.79.1 when Antonius Primus marches on Rome, it was reported that the slaves were arming to support Vitellius (*servitia pro Vitellio armari nuntiabatur*); *Ann.* 2.78.2 following Germanicus’s death, Piso attempts to take back Syria by organizing deserters into maniples and arming the camp-followers (*desertores per manipulos componit, armat lixas*); *Ann.* 12.56.2 Claudius arms triremes, quadriremes, and nineteen thousand men for a mock naval battle (*Claudius triremis quadriremisque et undeviginti hominum milia armavit*); *Ann.* 14.7.2 following an attempt to kill Agrippina, Nero imagines she might arm her slaves (*servitia armaret*); *Ann.* 15.3.2 Nero’s general Corbulo arms an improvised band of provincials (*tumultuariam provincialium manum armat*).

⁶⁰ *Hist.* 2.101.2 Caecina attempts to persuade his army to go over to Vespasian by means of *variis artibus*; *Ann.* 4.1.2 Sejanus bound Tiberius in *variis artibus*; *Ann.* 12.68.2 after the death of Claudius, Agrippina delayed Britannicus in *variis artibus* (so that Nero could be hailed as Imperator by the praetorian guard); *Ann.* 13.22.1 Publius Anteius was kept in the city (from a governorship in Syria) by *variis artibus*.

⁶¹ Compare the emperor Nero’s death scene in Suetonius: “and in the midst of speaking he died; his bulging and hardening eyes produced shuddering and fear in those who witnessed it (*atque in ea voce defecit, exstantibus rigentibusque oculis usque ad horrorem formidinemque visentium*, *Ner.* 49.4).

subject of the final sentence, is conveyed to Asia and from there to Rome (*in Asiam atque inde Romam pervectum est*).⁶² Like other emperors and imperial challengers, he participates in bribery, insinuation, executive action, the use of *imperium*, and he travels from the edges of the empire to the center—like Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian.

But the most obvious linguistic parallel between the description of the *Velut Nero* and other emperors comes in the form of an intertextual reference to the Domitian of the *Agricola*. The only time in the passage when the pretender explicitly engages in pretending is when “having arranged his face in sadness” (*in maestitiam compositus*) he calls on the loyalty of the soldiers (once Nero’s) and begs them to place him in Syria or Egypt.⁶³ In this moment, the *Velut Nero* attempts to approximate the disappointment the emperor Nero *would have felt* if he saw his own troops taking orders from a governor appointed by Galba. The formulation mirrors Domitian’s “ready to pretend, masked in haughtiness” (*paratus simulatione, in adrogantiam compositus, Agr. 42.2*) when he hears Agricola’s petition to be excused from taking a governorship. Ash writes that “the verb *compono*, ‘put on a masked expression’ (*OLD* 11) + *ad* or *in*, is peculiarly suited to T.’s narratives, where dissimulation is often a survival technique.”⁶⁴ In this case, however, the relative positions of tyrannical *princeps* and dissimulating senator are reversed. Rather, it is the *princeps* who is dissimulating for the benefit of the senator, whom he

⁶² Morgan 1993: 790-791 discusses the conjecture of *caput* but ultimately supports *corpus* on the grounds that Asprenas took the whole body in order to prove that his action was justified (although outside of his assigned provinces) and that Tacitus only relates the collection of heads in the case of prominent men, not unknown pretenders.

⁶³ Compare an escape plan the emperor Nero considers in Suetonius: “or should he beg [the people] that they grant him the prefecture of Egypt” (*vel Aegypti praefecturam concedi sibi oraret, Ner. 47.2*).

⁶⁴ Ash 2007: 100. The phrase *compositus in/ad something* is a favorite of Tacitus and occurs also (besides the instances mentioned here) in *Hist.* 1.54.1 to describe the envoys of the Lingones (*in squalorem maestitiamque compositi*), *Ann.* 3.44.4 to describe Tiberius amidst rumors that the Gallic tribes were in revolt (*in securitatem compositus*), and *Ann.* 13.20.1 to describe Paris prior to telling Nero that his mother was encouraging Rubellius Plautus to revolt (*compositus ad maestitiam*). In all cases it suggests acting.

perceives as coming too close to his station. When Domitian hears of Agricola's victory at *Mons Graupius*, he is "happy in his face, anxious in his heart" (*fronte laetus, pectore anxius, Agr.* 39.1), because, as Tacitus reveals, "this was his greatest fear: that the name of a private citizen be raised above that of *princeps*" (*id sibi maxime formidolosum, privati hominis nomen supra principis attolli, Agr.* 39.2). Furthermore, when Domitian receives the news of Agricola's death, "he bore before himself the appearance of grief in his spirit and his face" (*speciem tamen doloris animo vultuque prae se tulit, Agr.* 43.3).⁶⁵ Both of these lines detail an incongruity between outward appearance and inner emotion which is characteristic of acting.⁶⁶ In instances where inner emotion might rise to the surface of Domitian's skin (he is not immune to the blushes of *pudor*), his perpetual redness renders any additional coloration imperceptible (*Agr.* 45.2). So, while Tacitus maps the *Velut Nero* onto the model of Domitian, he notes a difference in the types of pretending that the two figures represent: while Domitian dissimulates, the *Velut Nero* simulates. In other words, Domitian hides something that he is (i.e., jealous of Agricola), and the False Nero pretends to be someone that he is not (i.e., Nero). These two different models of pretending are informed by the different class fantasies the two figures represent.

Domitian and the *Velut Nero* have different ideas about how the social order should be structured. Domitian believes that the *princeps* should occupy the top of the social order; his jealousy of Agricola is predicated on his perception that the latter is approaching him in status (e.g., Domitian worries that because Agricola is a good general, he might also make a good

⁶⁵ Tacitus uses a similar construction to describe Cluvius Rufus (*gratulationem vultu ferens, animo anxius, Hist.* 2.65.1). See also *Iliad* 9.312-313 "for to me, that man is as hateful as the gates of Hades who conceals one thing in his heart but says another" (ἐχθρὸς γάρ μοι κείνος ὁμῶς Αἰδαο πύλῃσιν/ ὅς χ' ἕτερον μὲν κεῦθη ἐνὶ φρεσίν, ἄλλο δὲ εἴπη).

⁶⁶ Edwards (1994: 84) notes that actors had a low status because they sold their bodies and their speech.

emperor, *ducis boni imperatoriam virtutem esse*, *Agr.* 39.3). But Domitian is unable to name this concern outright, since a *princeps* is supposed to hide his monarchical aspect.⁶⁷ Wallace-Hadrill coined the phrase *civilis princeps* in order to describe the fine line that a *princeps* walked between holding autocratic power and demonstrating his republican virtue. He argues that the most telling marker of imperial *civilitas* was equality between the *princeps* and individual senators, which was secured by a kind of pretending: “for the Romans imperial play-acting is not a pose but a virtue.”⁶⁸ Following this logic, Domitian attempts to de-emphasize his jealousy of Agricola (an emotion that works against the pretense of equality) in order to maintain a functional relationship with the senate. It is only after Agricola’s death that Domitian gives up the act and allows his actions to contradict his outward appearance (*Agr.* 44.5 f.).

On the other hand, the *Velut Nero*, because he takes Nero as his model, does not pretend to be a *civilis princeps*. The qualities for which Nero is most missed are also his most monarchical. In *Hist.* 1.4.2-3, Tacitus describes the emotions of the stratified Roman people following the death of Nero: the senators were happy (*laeti*), the top-ranking equestrians approached the senators in joy (*proximi gaudio patrum*), those connected to the great houses as well as the clients and freedmen of the condemned and exiled were raised into hope (*in spem erecti*), and those accustomed to the circus and theater, the worst of the slaves, and those who had squandered their own resources and were sustained by Nero’s gifts, were sad and eager for rumors (*maesti et rumorum avidi*). In short, the top three social classes, who had the most to gain

⁶⁷ Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 45-46. It is true that the Flavian dynasty is less reliant on the approval of the senate than the Julio-Claudians—this is exemplified by the counting of Vespasian’s rule from his acclamation by his troops, not the oath of allegiance by the senate (*Hist.* 2.79). But the Domitian of the *Agricola* still makes a pretense of working with the senate until the breakdown of relations toward the end of Domitian’s rule (e.g., *non vidit Agricola obsessam curiam et clausum armis senatum*, *Agr.* 45.1).

⁶⁸ Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 44.

from the emperor's *civilitas*, felt that their circumstances had changed for the better. But the lowest social class, the target audience for a Nero-pretender, missed Nero's munificence, which presupposes an inequality between giver and recipient. Although the *Velut Nero*, a slave or freedman himself, cannot match Nero's cash handouts, he is unstinting in his promises (*ingentibus promissis*). His identity allows him to create a fantasy of Nero's return that appeals specifically to fellow members of the lower classes.

Tacitus's characterization of both Domitian and the *Velut Nero* as pretenders places them in a lineage of illegitimate emperors, which Nero will join in the *Annals*. Ironically, the legitimacy of the *Velut Nero* (who is, of course, never formally recognized by the Senate) increases after his death, since when his body arrives in Rome, it achieves in death what the man could not in life. The *Velut Nero* will gain further significance in the *Annals*, when it becomes clear that he is a literary model for the emperor Nero himself. But while the intertextual relation between the *Velut Nero* and the emperor Nero increases the legitimacy of the former, it decreases that of the latter, since he seems derivative of his own pretender.

It is not until Tacitus's reader arrives at the *Annals* and considers the *Histories* in retrospect that the symbiotic relation between the emperor Nero and the *Velut Nero* comes into full view. I will save a broader discussion of the ways in which Tacitus assimilates the emperor Nero to the pretenders that precede him in the narrative for the latter half of this chapter—here I focus on the repetition of the phrase *compositus in* to describe the emperor Nero, who, at the time, has disguised himself with the garb of a slave. Tacitus shows Nero as mimicking the *Velut Nero*, but on an opposite trajectory. The *Velut Nero* pretended to be the *princeps*; Nero pretends to be not-the-*princeps*:

Q. Volusio P. Scipione consulibus otium foris, foeda domi lascivia, qua Nero itinera urbis et lupanaria et deverticula veste servili in dissimulationem sui compositus pererrabat,

comitantibus qui raperent venditioni exposita et obviis vulnera inferrent, adversus ignaros adeo, ut ipse quoque exciperet ictus et ore praeferret. (*Ann.* 13.25.1)

When Quintus Volusius and Publius Scipio were consuls there was quiet abroad and foul recklessness at home, whereby Nero took to wandering through the streets, brothels, and alleys of the city, having put on the dress of a slave in order to hide his true self. He was accompanied by people who aimed to snatch things displayed for sale and deal injuries to those who got in the way. His victims were so unaware (of who he was) that he himself received blows and displayed them on his face.

In this scene, Nero reverses two operations of the *Velut Nero*. The pretender was a slave or freedmen (*servus e Ponto sive, ut alii tradidere, libertinus ex Italia*) of unknown identity (*quisquis ille erat*) who became Nero-like (*velut Nero adventaret*) and notorious (*multi ad celebritatem nominis erecti; gliscentem in dies famam*). Nero, on the other hand, is known to be Nero, but escapes his public-facing role by becoming slave-like (*servili*) and anonymous (*adversus ignaros*). The opposition and equation of the emperor Nero and the *Velut Nero* speaks to Champlin's formulation of Nero as *princeps Saturnalicus*, who deliberately upset binaries (e.g., Rome/Baiae, *horti/domus*, public/private) in order to build a bond between himself and the common people.⁶⁹ Tacitus's Nero seems to react to the *Velut Nero* by throwing off the characteristics particular to him and becoming what his pretender was prior to becoming Nero. Tacitus thus confounds the difference between Nero and the *Velut Nero*, since they undergo complimentary changes in status: in both figures, the highest and lowest social statuses cohere.

The fantasy of Nero-as-slave, although acted, becomes real on the level of his body. *Pererrabat*, the verb Tacitus uses to describe Nero's nighttime wanderings, recalls *erro*, the term for a slave who was, in contrast to a *fugitivus*, or runaway, "merely dilatory, slow to return to the household, a vagabond."⁷⁰ Nero moves through the city in a different way, and his feet take him

⁶⁹ Champlin 1998.

⁷⁰ Bradley 1990: 144.

to places where a *princeps* cannot go (at least inconspicuously). Furthermore, Nero's bruised face is a clear indication that he has thrown off the body and mask of the *princeps*. Because a *princeps* possesses *tribunicia potestas*, his body should be inviolable. The body of a slave, however, is human property in someone else's ownership; it may be marked without the slave's consent.⁷¹ And unlike the *vestis servilis*, Nero is not able to remove welts and bruises when he resumes the *princeps* role.

Nero's mimesis engenders further mimesis. In Tacitus, Nero's theatricality manifests in the real world (Tacitus never depicts him acting in dramas onstage).⁷² As Bartsch notes, Nero typically forces others (e.g., family members, senators, courtiers) to act in scenes with him.⁷³ Bartsch articulates this dynamic as a reversal of the actor-audience paradigm, where Nero-as-actor becomes a spectator of others' performances. But in this scene, while Nero begins with the upper hand, he creates a dynamic that quickly spins out of his control.

Nero's attempted transformation into anonymity facilitates his own multiplication. Following the passage above, Tacitus writes that as Nero's secret was promulgated and mayhem increased, imitators appeared.

Deinde ubi Caesarem esse qui grassaretur pernotuit augebanturque iniuriae adversus viros feminasque insignis, et quidam permissa semel licentia sub nomine Neronis inulti propriis cum globis eadem exercebant, in modum captivitatis nox agebatur. (*Ann.* 13.25.2)

Then—when it became common knowledge that it was the Caesar who had been on the prowl, and injuries against noble men and women were increasing, and certain people (once unbounded license had been granted) were, under the name of Nero, practicing the

⁷¹ Similarly, the body of the actor subject to corporal punishment based on their collective status as *infames*, cf. Edwards 1994: 84.

⁷² That Nero did perform onstage is suggested by epithets such as *scaenicus* (*Ann.* 15.59.2) and *histrion* (*Ann.* 15.67.2).

⁷³ Bartsch 1994.

same deeds with their own hands and going unpunished—night was passed in a state of imprisonment.

Nero's pretending fails and the knowledge of his charade is disseminated. But Nero is not forced to return to a fixed identity. Rather, his failure creates license (*licentia*) for emulation: Nero's name is detached from his body and becomes a vehicle for the transformation of others. His theoretical omnipresence (because Nero is nowhere, he could be anywhere) becomes reified when other criminals use his name in order to disguise their identities. As a result, the name "Nero" becomes attached to multiple bodies at the same time, and the nights are filled with multiple Neros committing the same (*eadem*) crimes. The criminals' claims to be "Nero" gain credibility because Nero has deliberately made it difficult for people to recognize him. Although Nero plays tragic heroes, he eschews a recognition token; he does not insist on his own uniqueness. Tacitus thus depicts Nero, who succeeds the False Neros in the order of writing, as creating the preconditions for them.

The phrase *sub nomine Neronis* recalls the role of Nero's name in recruiting followers for the *Velut Nero*. In both passages, the name first becomes dissociated from the body of the emperor Nero, then precedes the pretender(s) in rumor, and finally conceals the mismatch of Nero's name and someone else's body. In the *Histories* passage, Tacitus writes that after the centurion Sisenna sounded the alarm on the mainland, many were roused toward the fame of the name by the desire for revolution and hatred of the present circumstances (*multi ad celebritatem nominis erecti rerum novarum cupidine et odio praesentium*, *Hist.* 2.8.2). The name "Nero," even in unsubstantiated rumor, already means something to would-be revolutionaries and malcontents. The *Annals* passage gives context to how the name "Nero" would obscure a body that is *not* Nero's. Nero himself starts the interchange whereby he becomes anonymous, and others become "Nero."

The language of pretending in Tacitus' extended narration of the False Nero (*Hist.* 2.8-9) recalls the Domitian of the *Agricola*, who pretends not to hate Agricola, and anticipates the Nero of the *Annals* (from the perspective of the *Histories*, still to be written), who pretends that he is not *princeps*. The accounts of Domitian, the *Velut Nero*, and the emperor Nero (one would-be *princeps* and two posthumously dishonored *principes*) test the limits of pretending in the structure of the principate. On the one hand, Domitian's pretending is motivated by a desire to keep his singular position at the top of the social hierarchy. On the other, the *Velut Nero* and the emperor Nero pretend toward the idea of reversal, wherein a slave or freedman could gain the status of the *princeps* (and vice versa). Both kinds of pretending interrogate the model of the *civilis princeps* and its exemplar, Augustus. Tacitus writes that at Augustus's funeral, some accused the then-Octavian of using filial piety and the precarious position of the Republic as a pretext (*obtentui*, *Ann.* 1.10.1) when his true motivation was a lust for power (*cupidine dominandi*), a statement that brings him into implicit comparison with Domitian. Furthermore, Augustus's rise to power was characterized by a name change and a reversal of fortune reminiscent of the *Velut Nero*. On the basis of pretending, categories of "legitimate" and "illegitimate" are not so easily distinguished, since even so-called legitimate emperors are inscribed with elements of illegitimacy.

The False Scribonianus Camerinus and the Bidirectional Construction of the Pretender

Although Tacitus promises to write additional False Neros, only the two discussed in the previous section are extant today (*Hist.* 1.2.1; 2.8-9). But the aesthetic of doubling manifests in other false figures: the False Scribonianus Camerinus (*Hist.* 2.72), the False Agrippa Postumus

(*Ann.* 2.39-40), and the False Drusus (*Ann.* 5.10). These figures are doubly false because they are the counterparts of men who never became *principes*.

The False Scribonianus Camerinus represents a Republican fantasy directly opposed to that of the *Velut Nero*. Scribonianus Camerinus was a member of the *Licinii* and probably died under Nero alongside the rest of his family. He was the nephew of Piso, the heir of Galba, whose Republican credentials positioned him in opposition to Nero.⁷⁴ The False Scribonianus Camerinus thus functions as a specter of the dead Piso, come to haunt Vitellius, who currently holds imperial power. In their encounter, Vitellius represents the pro-Neronian perspective, as Tacitus will later write that he made ritual funeral offerings to the dead emperor (*inferias Neroni fecisset, Hist.* 2.95).⁷⁵ The meeting between the two figures represents a site of contestation of Nero's legacy.

Non ultra paucos dies quamquam acribus initiis coeptum mendacium valuit. Extiterat quidam Scribonianum se Camerinum ferens, Neronianorum temporum metu in Histria occultatum, quod illic clientelae et agri veterum Crassorum ac nominis favor manebat. Igitur deterrimo quoque in argumentum fabulae adsumpto vulgus credulum et quidam militum, errore veri seu turbarum studio, certatim adgregabantur, cum pertractus ad Vitellium interrogatusque quisnam mortalium esset. Postquam nulla dictis fides et a domino noscebatur condicione fugitivus, nomine Geta, sumptum de eo supplicium in servilem modum. (*Hist.* 2.72)

For not more than a few days did a falsehood—although originated with fervent beginnings—prevail. There had appeared a certain man passing himself off as Scribonianus Camerinus, who had been hidden in Istria out of fear of Neronian times. [He had chosen Istria] because in that place there remained clients and farms of the ancient Crassi, as well as goodwill toward the name. Therefore, with the worst people drawn in to the plot of the drama, the common people, easy of belief, and certain soldiers (either from a delusion about the truth or the infectious energy of the crowds) were flocking eagerly, when he was dragged in front of Vitellius and asked who among

⁷⁴ Morgan 1993: 778. O’Gorman 2006 traces an alternate history in which Piso becomes *princeps*; only in this contrafactual series of events would Scribonianus Camerinus have approached imperial power.

⁷⁵ Morgan and Nicolleau agree that Tacitus takes aim at Vitellius’s incompetence: “But whether or not Geta was quite as ridiculous as Tacitus finally makes him appear, the way in which the historian develops this aspect of the situation lays the groundwork for another subtle attack of Vitellius” (Morgan 1993: 781); “Therefore, by occupying the imperial rank despite his lack of merit, Vitellius could be seen as the true impostor” (Nicolleau 2019: 94).

mortals he was. After no trust was assigned to his words and he was recognized by his master as a runaway in status, Geta by name, he was executed like a slave [sc. crucifixion].

As in the case of the *Velut Nero*, Tacitus refuses to name the pretender as such (e.g., *Falsus Scribonianus Camerinus*). Instead, he describes the pretender using grammatical constructions that emphasize the gap between referent (the real Scribonianus Camerinus) and representation (the False Scribonianus Camerinus). Two such constructions stand out: the factitive sentence pattern (*quidam Scribonianum se Camerinum ferens*) and the indirect question (*quisnam mortalium esset*). The former theorizes how a pretender might pass himself off as another; the latter how an outsider might interrogate a pretender's identity. The two phrases demonstrate that a pretender is constructed from both the inside and the outside. While the False Scribonianus Camerinus consciously styles himself as Scribonianus Camerinus, he must also be authenticated by others who will determine if he is who he claims to be.

In the factitive construction *quidam Scribonianum se Camerinum ferens*, the triangulation of nominative indefinite pronoun (*quidam*), accusative reflexive (*se*), and predicate accusative (*Scribonianum Camerinum*) explicate how imposture works from the pretender's perspective. The first two terms represent the pretender prior to taking up the portrayal of Scribonianus Camerinus; the last term is the identity the pretender displays to the world. The final product is the pretender cloaked as someone else.⁷⁶ Tacitus will use the construction *se ferens* (always a sign of disingenuousness or delusion) two more times. First, Julius Civilis, the leader of the Batavian revolt, will “brand himself a Sertorius or a Hannibal because he had a similar facial

⁷⁶ Tacitus also invokes the idea of the divided self when he writes in the *Agricola* “we are survivors of even ourselves” (*etiam nostri superstites sumus*, *Agr.* 2.3). As Woodman remarks, “that ‘we’ is divided into two elements, *superstites sumus* and *nostri*; and, since those whom ‘we’ have survived are also ‘we’ (*nostri*), the dead ‘we’ and the living ‘we’ are identical with each other” (2014: 90).

disfigurement” (*Sertorium se aut Annibalem ferens simili oris dehonestamento*, *Hist.* 4.13.2).

Like the False Nero, who is believed to be Nero due to his similar-looking face (*similitudinem oris*), Julius Civilis will move from a shared facial feature to a shared identity. And second, following the battle of Actium, Augustus will “put down his triumviral title and bear himself as a consul (*posito triumviri nomine, consulem se ferens*, *Ann.* 1.2.1). Tacitus will contrast Augustus’s outward behavior with his inner ambitions—although he acts like a consul, he already holds the power of a monarch.

The indirect question *quisnam mortalium esset*, on the other hand, interrogates the identity of the pretender from an outside perspective. That the question incorporates a form of *sum* suggests that Vitellius is inquiring about the pretender’s essential identity: who he is, rather than who he pretends to be. This construction sets up an equivalence between two terms, but with one term omitted. The interrogative *quis* demands a name—and Tacitus will provide one, Geta, later. But if Geta’s story was assigned *nulla fides*, perhaps his answer to the question *quisnam mortalium es* was not “Geta,” but “Scribonianus Camerinus.” It is up to Vitellius to decide if the two terms match.

Vitellius’s question (*quisnam mortalium es*) recalls Tacitus’s description of the *Velut Nero*’s real identity (*quisquis ille erat*). In both cases, when the individual’s false identity is stripped off, the pretender becomes anonymous before he can be assigned another positive identity. But any reidentification is suspect for its belatedness. Because Tacitus has already cast doubt on the accuracy of recognition (e.g., the pretender’s supporters mistakenly recognize him as Scribonianus Camerinus), the “correct” recognition of Geta by his master raises the question of what makes the latter recognition more valid than the former.

Haynes emphasizes the role of the recipient in constructing an identity to be mapped onto a pretender.⁷⁷ She identifies the formula *fingentibus credentibusque* (from the beginning of the description of the False Nero, *Hist.* 2.8.1, also used in the description of the False Drusus, *Ann.* 5.10), as encapsulating the process by which someone (*quisquis*) becomes the emperor. She argues that “there is no legitimate principle by which the principate changes hands,” rather what matters is that enough people make up (*fingere*) and believe in (*credere*) an emperor’s legitimacy.⁷⁸ The False Nero and the False Drusus appear laughable because they never obtained a critical mass of believers, but present in their rebellions are elements that brought Augustus to power. Like the False Nero and the False Drusus, Augustus is also “made-up.” But he retrospectively made his power grab look legitimate, and the people authenticated his position as *princeps*. Perhaps if Mark Antony had defeated Octavian, he would have denounced the latter as “the False Caesar.” (Although Augustus was not a Caesar-impersonator *per se*, he staked his claim to power on his contiguity with the deified Caesar.) But this did not happen. Rather, Augustus denounced Mark Antony as a False Roman.

Hayne’s model prioritizes the agency of the audience in creating the pretender. But it is also worth pursuing a complimentary model, in which the pretender entrances his audience into believing in him. When Tacitus writes that “the worst people were drawn in to the plot of the drama” (*deterrimo quoque in argumentum fabulae adsumpto*), he uses the metaphor of the theater to demonstrate the passivity of the audience. Tacitus characterizes the episode of the False Scribonianus Camerinus as an *argumentum fabulae*, a phrase that refers to the plot of a

⁷⁷ Hedrick 2016 also emphasizes the agency of the recipients of the False Nero. He suggests that because the Roman state never codified Nero’s memory, the Roman people’s experience of him devolved instead into fantasy.

⁷⁸ Haynes 2003: 9.

play.⁷⁹ Morgan argues that the section incorporates comedic elements, pointing out that Geta is a slave character in Terence's *Phormio* and *Adelphi*, and the phrase *in servilem modum* scans as an iambic senarius, "the metre commonly used in comedies of imposture and recognition."⁸⁰ The belief of the worst people (*deterrimus quisque*) causes a chain reaction, wherein the gullible common people (*vulgus credulum*), along with certain soldiers, also get swept up in the drama. The adjective *credulum* represents a shift in agency from Haynes' active formulation *credere*. In this scenario, the subject does not thrust his belief onto another, rather, his belief makes him vulnerable to deception. The followers of the False Scribonianus Camerinus map theater onto reality, and are unaware of their own transformation into supporting comic actors.⁸¹

When a pretender is successful, it is due to a convergence of multiple agentic forces, both internal and external. Initially, the pretender exhibits agency toward himself, in order that he projects not his own character but that of his prototype. But various recipients must also authenticate the pretender as the prototype. This last step can happen in two different ways: either the recipient can take an active role in constructing the identity of the pretender or they can be passively entranced by him. In the case of the False Scribonianus Camerinus, he is authenticated only up to the point that he comes into conflict with the ruling emperor.

Both the stories of the False Nero and the False Scribonianus Camerinus describe contests of *fides* between the pretender and the ruling emperor. The False Nero calls on the *fides* of the soldiers to the emperor Nero (*fidem suorum quondam militum invocans*), but the captains

⁷⁹ cf. Quint. 5.10.9; Gell. 6.5.5.

⁸⁰ Morgan 1993: 780.

⁸¹ Many figures in Tacitus mistake reality for representation (cf. *Hist.* 1.32.1), but few mistake representation for reality.

of the triremes disclose everything to Calpurnius Asprenas *ex fide*. The False Scribonianus Camerinus comes face-to-face with Vitellius, and their confrontation determines to whose words *fides* is assigned (i.e., who is telling the truth). Both of the pretenders eventually lose their contests of *fides*. But they also draw attention to a suppressed alternative history, where *fides* falls on the side of the pretender and he is authenticated as the real thing.⁸² In such a conception of events, Nero did not die in 68 CE and/or Scribonianus Camerinus really was hiding in Istria, and now presents a Republican alternative to Vitellius.

Morgan argues that Tacitus dedicates space in his *Histories* to pretenders in order to emphasize the very real threat they posed to Roman authorities.⁸³ I want to reiterate and expand on this point. After the Julio-Claudian dynasty ended, all claims to the position of *princeps* were fragile. Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian all run the risk of being named pretenders, insofar as none is related to the previous dynasty but all reuse traditional nomenclature in order to define their positions of power. Galba uses the title *Caesar* (*Hist.* 1.30.2), Otho is sometimes called *Nero Otho* (*Hist.* 1.78.2), Vitellius initially accepts *Germanicus* but refuses *Caesar* (*Hist.* 1.62.2) before changing his mind (*Hist.* 3.58), and Vespasian is acclaimed *Imperator, Caesar, Augustus*, and “all the titles of chief command” (*omnia principatus vocabula*, *Hist.* 2.80.1). When pretenders like the False Nero and the False Scribonianus Camerinus are exposed and executed, it creates an awareness that the same fate could await the emperors of 69 CE. Ultimately, the outcome hinges on how they are received: they might be alternatively constructed as rulers appointed by fate or usurpers out for their own gain.

⁸² Emanuele 1989 takes on a related problem of how ancient Romans authenticated *aes Corinthium*; the criteria include provenance, patina, smell, and stylistic consistency (stylistic anachronisms could give away a fake).

⁸³ Morgan 1993: 796.

The Wagers of Tiberius and the False Agrippa Postumus

I now shift my focus to the two pretenders in the *Annals* and make a considerable jump into the past. We are leaving the year 69 CE before the question of who will be *princeps* is resolved and arriving in 16 CE, soon after the first transfer of power between *principes*. Until very recently, there has been no precedent for succession and a question existed as to whether Augustus's rule would be a one-off. The potential dissolution of the principate under Tiberius mimics the widespread uncertainty following Nero's death and the end of the first "legitimate" dynasty, with which Tacitus begins the *Histories*. Both the False Agrippa Postumus (the focus of this section) and the False Nero provide alternatives to official narratives of succession and retrospectively destabilize the criteria on which succession is based.

The story of the False Agrippa Postumus runs parallel to the very beginning of the *Annals*. Tacitus places the episode in Book 2, in the year 16 CE, because this is when the False Agrippa Postumus came to the attention of Roman authorities. But the story actually begins in 14 CE. The events are precipitated by anxiety surrounding Tiberius's succession of Augustus, because another potential successor existed. This was the impostor's prototype, Agrippa Postumus, the youngest grandson of Augustus and brother to Gaius and Lucius Caesar. But while Augustus marked out Gaius and Lucius as his successors (before their untimely deaths), he exiled Agrippa Postumus at Livia's urging.⁸⁴ Then, Tacitus writes, "everything fell to Tiberius: he was designated son, colleague of *imperium*, and partner in *tribunica potestas*" (*illuc cuncta vergere: filius, collega imperii, consors tribuniciae potestatis adsumitur, Ann. 1.3.3*). But

⁸⁴ For the deaths of Gaius and Lucius, *Ann. 1.3.3*; for the exile of Agrippa Postumus, *Ann. 1.3.4*.

Agrippa Postumus still had one thing that Tiberius did not: a blood tie with Augustus.⁸⁵ Tacitus reports that as Augustus's health deteriorated, and people debated Agrippa Postumus and Tiberius as potential successors, those disparaging Tiberius said that he had the old, inborn arrogance of the Claudian family (*vetere atque insita Claudiae familiae superbia*, *Ann.* 1.4.3); in short, that he had not *really* become a Julian. Additionally, a rumor circulated that Augustus had visited Agrippa Postumus on Planasia and ignited hope that the young man would be restored to his grandfather's family (*spemque ex eo fore ut iuvenis penatibus avi redderetur*, *Ann.* 1.5.1). Tacitus writes that popular favor was divided between the two men. So, when Tiberius became *princeps*, the first thing he did was kill Agrippa Postumus.

Clemens' imposture of Agrippa Postumus acts as a foil to Tiberius's succession of Augustus. Scholars have noted similarities between Clemens (the False Agrippa Postumus) and Tiberius.⁸⁶ I follow Haynes' reading that the two are opposites whose subjectivities are dependent on one another.⁸⁷ Both rely on an element of fictionality: just as Clemens is not really Agrippa Postumus, Tiberius is not really a Caesar.⁸⁸ I suggest that we take Clemens' retort to Tiberius (included in the following passage) seriously: "I became Agrippa in the same way you became Caesar." Of course, Clemens is paraphrasing for the sake of the *sententia*; unlike

⁸⁵ The strength of a blood tie is encapsulated by Agrippina the Elder's retort to Tiberius: "[Augustus's] spirit had not been transferred into silent likenesses: *she* was his true image, she who had been born from divine blood" (*non in effigies mutas divinum spiritum transfusum: se imaginem veram, caelesti sanguine ortam*, *Ann.* 4.52.2).

⁸⁶ Nicolleau (2019: 80-4) argues that the theme of secrecy that characterizes Clemens' imposture is, at the end of the episode, transferred to Tiberius, who executes the pretender in secret. (Previous to this episode, Tiberius also murders the real Agrippa Postumus without consulting the senate.) Secrecy, Nicolleau argues, is characteristic of a monarch but not a Republican magistrate. Thus, even though Clemens is exposed for pretending to be Agrippa Postumus, he reciprocally exposes Tiberius for pretending to be a *civilis princeps*.

⁸⁷ Haynes 2003: 9-11.

⁸⁸ Tiberius, however, has the trappings of legitimacy since he has been declared *princeps* by the senate (*Ann.* 1.12.), the same body that granted Augustus his exceptional status.

Tiberius, his new status has not been authorized by the senate. But his larger point stands: both figures have undergone a transformation and become someone else.

In the following section, I analyze the grounds on which Clemens and Tiberius stake their successions (i.e., how they make themselves up). I argue that the attempts of Clemens (in impersonating Agrippa Postumus) and Tiberius (in succeeding Augustus) might be articulated as the same wager: can either “pass” as the person they are replacing?

Eodem anno mancipii unius audacia, ni mature subventum foret, discordiis armisque civilibus rem publicam perculisset. Postumi Agrippae servus, nomine Clemens, comperto fine Augusti, pergere in insulam Planasiam et fraude aut vi raptum Agrippam ferre ad exercitus Germanicos non servili animo concepit. Ausa eius inpedivit tarditas onerariae navis: atque interim patrata caede ad maiora et magis praecipitia conversus furatur cineres vectusque Cosam, Etruriae promunturium, ignotis locis sese abdit, donec crinem barbamque promitteret: nam aetate et forma haud dissimili in dominum erat. Tum per idoneos et secreti eius socios crebrescit vivere Agrippam, occultis primum sermonibus, ut vetita solent, mox vago rumore apud inperitissimi cuiusque promptas auris aut rursum apud turbidos eoque nova cupientis. Atque ipse adire municipia obscuro diei, neque propalam aspici neque diutius isdem locis, sed quia veritas visu et mora, falsa festinatione et incertis valescunt, relinquebat famam aut praeveniebat.

Vulgabatur interim per Italiam servatum munere deum Agrippam, credebatur Romae; iamque Ostiam invectum multitudo ingens, iam in urbe clandestini coetus celebrabant, cum Tiberium anceps cura distrahere, vine militum servum suum coaceret an inanem credulitatem tempore ipso vanescere sineret: modo nihil spernendum, modo non omnia metuenda ambiguus pudoris ac metus reputabat. Postremo dat negotium Sallustio Crispo. Ille e clientibus duos (quidam milites fuisse tradunt) deligit atque hortatur, simulata conscientia adeant, offerant pecuniam, fidem atque pericula polliceantur. Exequuntur ut iussum erat. Dein speculati noctem incustoditam, accepta idonea manu, vinctum clauso ore in Palatium traxere. Percontanti Tiberio quo modo Agrippa factus esset respondisse fertur “quo modo tu Caesar.” Vt ederet socios subigi non potuit. Nec Tiberius poenam eius palam ausus, in secreta Palatii parte interfici iussit corpusque clam auferri. Et quamquam multi e domo principis equitesque ac senatores sustentasse opibus, iuvisse consiliis dicerentur, haud quaesitum. (*Ann.* 2.39-40)

In the same year, the boldness of one slave, had the situation not been quickly remedied, would have overturned the state with civil discords and arms. The slave of Agrippa Postumus, Clemens by name, once he had learned of the death of Augustus, conceived the idea—he did not have a typical slavish mind—of making his way to the island Planasia, and, by deception or force, snatching Agrippa and bringing him to the German armies. The slowness of a transport ship impeded his ventures, and in the meantime the murder had been carried out, so he turned to plans greater and more dangerous. He stole

Agrippa's ashes and sailed to Cosa, a promontory of Etruria, and hid himself in secluded places until he grew out his hair and beard: for in age and appearance he was not unlike his master. Then through suitable contacts and sharers in his secret the rumor began to grow that Agrippa was alive, at first through secret conversations, as is customary with forbidden topics, then in rumor wandering among the ready ears of whoever was the most inexperienced, and again among those who were seditious and therefore desired revolution. And he himself visited towns in the darkening of the day, and was seen neither openly nor in the same places for long, but because truth gains strength by visibility and delay, and falsity by hastening and uncertainty, he kept leaving rumor behind or anticipating it.

In the meantime, a rumor that Agrippa had been saved by the gift of the gods was circulated throughout Italy and believed in Rome; already a huge crowd was awaiting his arrival in Ostia; already secret meetings were happening in the city, when the double care began to wrench Tiberius apart. Should he restrain a personal slave using military force? Or should he allow the foolish credulity to fade by itself in time? Wavering between shame and fear he was reflecting now that nothing ought to be despised; now that not all things ought to be feared. Finally, he gave the business to Sallustius Crispus. He chose two men from his clients (certain sources say they were soldiers) and encouraged them to approach [Agrippa] with the pretense that they were in on the plan, offer money, and promise fidelity and joint risk-taking. They carried out what had been ordered. Then they waited for an unguarded night and, having recruited a suitable gang, they dragged him, bound and gagged, to the Palatine. In response to Tiberius's inquiry of how he had become Agrippa, he is said to have responded "in the same way that you became Caesar." He was not able to be compelled to give up his associates. Nor did Tiberius dare execute him publicly; he ordered for him to be killed in a remote part of the Palatine and the body to be taken away in secret. And although many from the house of the *princeps* as well as members of the equestrian class and senators are said to have supported him with money and helped him with plans, no inquiry followed.

Clemens is uniquely positioned to impersonate Agrippa Postumus because Tacitus portrays both figures as exceptional of their relative statuses. Clemens does not fit slave stereotypes that Tacitus develops elsewhere in his historical works. In his study of slavery and empire in Tacitus, Lavan argues that in the *Agricola*, "slavery is associated with a set of slavish traits which include compliance (*patientia*), passivity (*inertia* or *segnitia*) and silence."⁸⁹ Clemens exhibits none of these qualities; rather, Tacitus highlights his daring (*audacia*), action (*fraude aut vi*), and quotes his speech (proving that he is not silent). Furthermore, Tacitus describes Clemens' original plan

⁸⁹ Lavan 2013: 138; Lavan compares the real slavery of the conquered British and the political slavery of the senate.

for usurpation, as “conceived by an unslavish mind” (*non servili animo concepit*).⁹⁰ In Clemens, there is a preexisting mismatch between mind and status that aids his imposture of Agrippa Postumus.⁹¹

Agrippa Postumus, while he lived, was the opposite: his mind and body did not match his princely status. Rather, some of his features read as slave-like. Tacitus characterizes him as overdeveloped physically and underdeveloped in his education and habits. He was “untrained in the liberal arts and fierce in the brutish strength of his body” (*rudem sane bonarum artium et robore corporis stolidè ferocem*, *Ann.* 1.3.4). Even Augustus complained about his *mores* (*Augustus de moribus adolescentis questus*, *Ann.* 1.6.2). Of his death, Tacitus writes “although unaware and unarmed, only with difficulty was he killed by a strong-willed centurion” (*quem ignarum inermumque quamvis firmatus animo centurio aegre confecit*, *Ann.* 1.6.1). All of these descriptions point to a remove from the citizen status that was Agrippa Postumus’s by birth. That he was untrained in the liberal arts suggests that he did not fully embody his free status.⁹² And his animalistic strength recalls Aristotle’s suggestion that the bodies of slaves differ from the bodies of free men.⁹³ Even before the action of the story, Tacitus sets up a correspondence and potential symbiosis between the two figures.

⁹⁰ The plan is a good one. The German armies have already shown their willingness to support a candidate other than Tiberius (e.g., Germanicus in *Ann.* 1.35.3). If Clemens had brought Agrippa Postumus to them, perhaps they would have rallied behind him.

⁹¹ Fitzgerald (2000: 17) notes that “it is a reoccurring paradox of domestic slavery that in order to serve the master properly the slave must have knowledge and abilities that contradict his official status.” In this context, Clemens is the model slave for Agrippa Postumus.

⁹² The liberal arts prepared a young person for citizenship. As Seneca writes, “but the one truly liberal study is that which makes a free man” (*ceterum unum studium vere liberale est, quod liberum facit*, *Sen. Ep.* 88.2). Lewis and Short note that “to Roman notions, the arts were either *liberales* or *ingenuae artes*, arts of freemen, the liberal arts; or *artes illiberales* or *sordidae*, the arts, employments, of slaves or the lower classes” (Lewis and Short I.B.1).

⁹³ Arist. *Pol.* 1254b; see Bradley 2000 for the connection between slaves and animals (maybe flesh out reason for this reference; it postdates your material tho is relevant) (You also don’t have this in your bib???? Alarm emoji)

A further bond between Agrippa Postumus and Clemens comes from their preexisting relationship as master and slave. Aristotle theorized the slave as having a synecdochic relationship with his master. He wrote that “the slave is in some way part of his master, as it were a portion of the body, animate in some fashion yet separate from it [the master’s body]” (ὁ δὲ δοῦλος μέρος τι τοῦ δεσπότου, οἷον ἔμψυχόν τι τοῦ σώματος κεχωρισμένον δὲ μέρος, Arist. *Pol.* 1255b).⁹⁴ According to Aristotle’s formulation, when Clemens became Agrippa Postumus’s slave, he also became a stand-in for him. The interchangeability of master and slave is attested by Appian, who records instances when, during the proscriptions of the second triumvirate, loyal slaves traded places with their masters in order to save their lives. In one such instance, a slave put on his master’s clothing and voluntarily died as him, while his master, who was pretending to be his slave, looked on.⁹⁵ Because Agrippa Postumus predeceased Clemens, Clemens did not have an opportunity to die as his master. But, because he was already part of his master in some capacity, he became his master wholesale following the latter’s death.

The similarity that Agrippa Postumus and Clemens share by virtue of their master-slave relationship finds its analogue in the synecdochic relationship between Augustus and Tiberius. Since the relationship between Augustus and Tiberius did not initially fit a preexisting paradigm (e.g., master and slave or father and son), Augustus created another way to make Tiberius stand in for him. He expressed the continuity between himself and Tiberius in the language of *tribunicia potestas*, which, during the Republic, referred to the inviolability of the bodies of the tribunes of the *plebs*, but was transformed by Augustus into something more capacious and ill-defined.

⁹⁴ See also Fitzgerald 2000: 13-31.

⁹⁵ App. *B Civ.* 4.44; a similar story is in Val. Max. 6.8.6 and Macrobian *Sat.* 1.11.60.

Id summi fastigii vocabulum Augustus repperit, ne regis aut dictatoris nomen adsumeret ac tamen appellatione aliqua cetera imperia praemineret. Marcum deinde Agrippam socium eius potestatis, quo defuncto Tiberium Neronem delegit ne successor in incerto foret. (*Ann.* 3.56.2)

Augustus devised this term for the highest rank in order to avoid taking up the name “king” or “dictator,” but still had some title by which he excelled all other authorities. He then chose Marcus Agrippa as his associate in that power, and when Agrippa died, Tiberius Nero, so that his successor not be uncertain.

Tribunicia potestas stands in for the power of a king or a dictator while simultaneously denying these equivalences. Tacitus describes this power using the superlative degree (*summum fastigium; cetera imperia praemineret*) without describing what it means or how it functions, except that when it is held in common, one of the holders can stand in for the other. *Tribunicia potestas* thus marks out the relationship between a predecessor and his successor without relying on the language of blood or family.

Having established the criteria by which Clemens and Tiberius prove their similarity to their predecessors, I will now focus on the temporal processes by which they become their predecessors. Of all of Tacitus’s pretender narratives, the False Agrippa Postumus provides the best insight into how imposture works from beginning to end. Delay and hastening both play major roles, as exemplified by Tacitus’s *sententia*: “truth grows strong by visibility and delay, and falsity by hastening and uncertainty” (*veritas visu et mora, falsa festinatione et incertis valescunt*). But this statement is ironic, since throughout the story, Tacitus also suggests the opposite. Tacitus opens the story with the claim that Clemens would have plunged the state into civil war had the situation not been remedied quickly (*mature*), thus showing hastening as sometimes necessary to avert disaster. Tacitus unpacks this statement later when he shows a vacillating Tiberius wondering if he should act now or let Clemens’ ruse be revealed by the passage of time (*tempore ipso*); ultimately, Tiberius decides not to wait. Conversely, delay does

not always reveal truth. The slowness (*tarditas*) of Clemens' transport ship causes him to miss Agrippa Postumus and initiates his imposture. Clemens also requires an interval in order to become Agrippa Postumus—he hides in remote places until (*donec*) he has grown out his hair and beard. So, it is also the case that delay can facilitate imposture.

Clemens' bid to replace Agrippa Postumus is aided by the mysterious circumstances surrounding Agrippa Postumus's death. The uncertainty is due to Tiberius's attempts to distance himself from the affair: he denied that he gave the execution order and (seemingly) directed the body to be burned.⁹⁶ As a result, there was no official narrative of Agrippa Postumus's death and no way to verify that he had actually died. While the False Nero's body was sent back to Rome in order to be identified as not-Nero, Agrippa Postumus's body simply vanishes. Tiberius probably hoped that speculation over Agrippa Postumus's death would also disappear. But instead, Clemens reconstitutes the missing body and puts forth the alternate narrative that Agrippa Postumus had been saved.

Clemens' exploitation of the uncertainty surrounding Agrippa Postumus's death recalls Tiberius's accession at the beginning of Book 1. Livia also suppressed information surrounding Augustus's death in order to make sure that Tiberius succeeded him. Even though Tiberius held *tribunicia potestas* and had been designated Augustus's successor, Livia did not trust that his succession would be automatic. She thus delayed announcing Augustus's death until Tiberius was present in order to ensure geographical and temporal continuity between the two figures.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ For Tiberius's denial, *Ann.* 1.6.

⁹⁷ Pettinger (2012: 169-173) examines the question "where was Tiberius when Augustus died?" using different textual sources. There are two main traditions: 1) that Tiberius was absent and Livia murdered Augustus because he considered pardoning Agrippa Postumus and 2) that Tiberius was present for Augustus's final moments.

When she finally announced Augustus's death and Tiberius's accession, she represented the transfer of power as already having happened:

Vt cumque se ea res habuit, vix dum ingressus Illyricum Tiberius properis matris litteris accitur; neque satis conpertum est, spirantem adhuc Augustum apud urbem Nola an exanimem repperit. Acribus namque custodiis domum et vias saepserat Livia, laetique interdum nuntii vulgabantur, donec provisus quae tempus monebat simul excessisse Augustum et rerum potiri Neronem fama eadem tulit. (*Ann.* 1.5.3-4)

However that matter stood, scarcely had Tiberius arrived in Illyricum when he was summoned by an urgent letter from his mother; and it has not been fully determined whether he found Augustus still breathing in the city of Nola, or if he was dead. For Livia had surrounded the house and the streets with fierce guards, and positive reports were disseminated now and then, until, once the things which the moment demanded were provided for, the same report simultaneously bore the news that Augustus had died and that Nero was in charge of affairs.

Livia's actions look forward to Clemens'. She ensures that the transition between *principes* happens in the private space of the house, with both predecessor and successor present. This action approximates Clemens' strategy of stealing Agrippa Postumus's ashes and hiding in Northern Italy until he can "become" Agrippa Postumus. Tacitus invites speculation that Augustus died before Tiberius arrived in Nola. If this version of the story is true, there was a geographical and temporal discontinuity between the two figures, making a final conversation between them impossible. Livia then concealed a short interregnum by creating a False Augustus who lived not in body, but in the happy reports she disseminated. The purpose of this False Augustus was to dilate time until Tiberius could be announced as Augustus' replacement. The temporal markers *interdum*, *donec*, and *simul* in the last sentence demonstrate the different temporal registers on which Livia is operating. *Interdum* and *donec* distinguish the foreground and background of Livia's actions. The story outside of the house is that Augustus is still alive, and this story must form a recurring loop (e.g., "Augustus is still doing fine!") until, inside of the house, Livia's preparations are finished. Once these preparations are complete, Augustus's death

and Tiberius's accession are announced at the same time (*simul*). Livia's goal is to transfer Augustus's powers to Tiberius without returning them to the senate, from which they originated. Like the False Agrippa Postumus, she aims to conceal the moment of transformation. If the process were transparently exposed, she might be subject to many more opinions regarding who Augustus's successor should be and which of his powers that successor should inherit.

When Livia finally announces Augustus's death and Tiberius's accession, Tacitus refers to Tiberius as "Nero," i.e., "Nero was in charge of affairs" (*rerum potiri Neronem*). While it is not unheard of for Tacitus to use this name—he calls Tiberius either "Tiberius," "Tiberius Nero," or, in sections where he already has used one of the previous two titles, just "Nero"⁹⁸—it nonetheless recalls the False Neros of the *Histories* and looks forward to the emperor Nero, with whom Tacitus will close the *Annals*. Put another way, some of the blame for the emperor Nero rests with Tiberius. As Tacitus will write, Nero's accession will replicate elements of Tiberius's. Agrippina, like Livia before her, will delay the announcement of her husband's death until her son can take his place as *princeps*.

It is with Nero, at the end of the *Annals*, that Tacitus arrives at his most complete theorization of imposture and succession vis-à-vis temporal manipulation. Like the accession of Tiberius and the imposture of Clemens, the accession of Nero relies on the dilation of time in order to conceal machinations behind the scenes.⁹⁹ But Nero's accession provides a more complete rendering of elements left implicit in Tiberius's accession. Tacitus does not comment on whether or not Livia hastened Augustus's death, but assures the reader that Agrippina

⁹⁸ e.g., "Tiberius Nero" at *Ann.* 1.3.1; "Nero" at *Ann.* 1.3.3.

⁹⁹ Nero's accession finds a further literary precedent in Livy's account of Servius Tullius's accession (aided by Tanaquil) (Livy 1.41).

poisoned Claudius. He also draws a stronger contrast between the events outside of the house versus inside, and a more detailed account of how Agrippina delays other members of the imperial family (including Britannicus, Claudius's son) in order to ensure that Nero is hailed as *imperator*. In this account, hastening and delay, the two modes of time Tacitus highlights in the story of the False Agrippa Postumus, reappear as acting simultaneously.

Vocabatur interim senatus votaque pro incolunitate principis consules et sacerdotes nuncupabant, cum iam exanimis vestibus et fomentis obtegeretur, dum quae res ferret firmando Neronis imperio componuntur. Iam primum Agrippina, velut dolore evicta et solacia conquirens, tenere amplexu Britannicum, veram paterni oris effigiem appellare ac variis artibus demorari, ne cubiculo egrederetur. Antoniam quoque et Octaviam sorores eius attinuit, et cunctos aditus custodiis clauserat, crebroque vulgabat ire in melius valetudinem principis, quo miles bona in spe ageret tempusque prosperum ex monitis Chaldaeorum adventaret. (*Ann.* 12.68)

In the meantime, the senate was convened, and the consuls and priests were offering prayers for the health of the *princeps*, when Claudius, already lifeless, was being covered in clothes and poultices, while the things were arranged which pertained to strengthening imperial power for Nero. Already, before all else, Agrippina, as if overcome by grief and seeking consolation, held Britannicus in her embrace, called him the true portrait of his father's face, and delayed him by various strategies, so that he not come out of his room. She also detained his sisters, Antonia and Octavia, and had blocked all exits with guards, and kept on announcing with frequent reports that the health of the *princeps* was improving, in order that the soldiery keep good hope and in order that she might delay until the auspicious time marked out by the astrologers arrived.

The temporal markers *interim*, *cum*, and *dum* in the first sentence distinguish the three temporal registers on which the action of the story is taking place. Tacitus uses the transitional *interim* to leave Agrippina's poisoning of Claudius and move to what is happening outside of the house, where the story is that Claudius's health is perpetually improving. But at the same time (*cum*), back inside the house, Claudius is already dead, though his body is being administered to while (*dum*) preparations for Nero's accession are ongoing. Tacitus adds a final reason for Agrippina's delay: she is waiting until a time preordained by astrologers for Nero's accession. Like Tiberius's accession, time outside of the house is running in a loop of delay. But time inside the

house is split into two registers. First, time for Claudius has stopped completely. And second, time for Agrippina is a time of hastening. Not only is she the subject of the majority of the verbs in the passage, her verbs employ the greatest variety of tenses: the historical infinitives *tenere*, *appellare*, and *demorari*, the perfect *attinuit*, the pluperfect *clauserat*, and the imperfect *vulgabat*. Agrippina crowds her temporal stratum with actions that overlap according to their different temporal aspects. Ironically, one of the actions she undertakes in her hastening is the delay of Britannicus, Nero's rival for the position of *princeps*.

Britannicus plays the same structural role for Nero as Agrippa Postumus does for Tiberius: he acts as a foil to Nero and throws his "illegitimate" qualities into relief. Both Agrippa Postumus and Britannicus are reminders of where imperial power could have passed, but did not. That power passed from Augustus to Tiberius (bypassing Agrippa Postumus) and from Claudius to Nero (bypassing Britannicus) demonstrates that a biological tie with the ruling *princeps* does not guarantee succession. But at the same time, the lack of a biological tie between a predecessor and his successor could be used as proof of the latter's illegitimacy. Tacitus strongly suggests that Nero usurped Britannicus's position as Claudius's successor.¹⁰⁰ Proof of Nero's falsity comes in the form of his name, which changed from Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus to Nero after his adoption by Claudius in order to emphasize continuity with his adopted father. But what Tacitus does not draw attention to is that Nero was related to Augustus (his parents were Agrippa the Younger and Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, the son of Antonia the Elder). Tacitus's implication that Nero was an illegitimate *princeps* stemmed from a point of view that privileged continuity with his immediate predecessor (Claudius) rather than his archetype (Augustus). Thus, even a *princeps* who was well-liked during his reign risked being recast as a pretender if those

¹⁰⁰ *Ann.* 12.25.2.

retrospectively determining the criteria for legitimacy define the most important factor as the one where the *princeps* fell short.¹⁰¹

As a way of concluding this section, I return to the story of the False Agrippa Postumus, an instance of imposture that acts as a foil to the accessions of Tiberius and Nero. A particular effect that this story shares with Tacitus's description of Nero-as-slave (from the perspective of the False Agrippa Postumus, still to be written) is that imposture, itself a mimetic action, engenders further mimesis. Tiberius attempts to double-cross the False Agrippa Postumus via Sallustius Crispus, who in turn gives the business to his clients.¹⁰² Sallustius Crispus's clients, in an attempt to gain the False Agrippa Postumus's trust and subvert his goals, act in response to his perceived needs: in this case, for conspirators, money, fidelity, and risk-taking (*simulata conscientia adeant, offerant pecuniam, fidem atque pericula polliceantur*). Clemens, an impostor himself, is placed in a position where he must determine whether Crispus's clients are conspirators or merely impostoring them. While Tacitus is inconclusive about whether Clemens is taken in by Crispus's clients (since they end up using force to drag him to the Palatine), what is clear is that Clemens and Tiberius, through proxies, enter into a reciprocal dynamic of pretending. At the end of the episode, Tacitus reveals that real conspirators existed in the *princeps*' own household, as well as among senators and Roman knights, who allegedly gave Clemens money and advice (*sustentasse opibus, iuvisse consiliis*). The imposture of Crispus's clients is thus thrown into doubt: whether or not they were acting, they nonetheless participated

¹⁰¹ "The point of such stories [as the False Agrippa Postumus] is that Roman emperors, like other public figures, ancient or for that matter modern, are to be regarded by the nature of the positions as impostors" (Hedrick 2016: 163).

¹⁰² Sallustius Crispus also acted as a middleman between Tiberius and the tribune who dispatched to order to kill the real Agrippa Postumus, *Ann.* 1.1.3.

in a real movement. My larger point is that a single instance of pretending, an action that cuts across the categories of “real” and “false”, can give rise to a dynamic of pretending. On the one hand, Clemens pretends to be Agrippa Postumus, and on the other, Tiberius attempts to expose the pretender, but as a consequence ends up turning Sallustius Crispus’s clients into false conspirators of the False Agrippa Postumus. Or was it Tiberius who created the conditions of possibility for the False Agrippa Postumus by pretending that the orders to kill the real Agrippa Postumus had come from his father (*patris iussa simulabat*, *Ann.* 1.6.1)? If one attempts to trace the dynamic of pretending that sustains impostors and successors alike to an originary act, they might find it at least as far back as the establishment of the principate.

The False Drusus (and the False Nero, Again)

The False Drusus is Tacitus’s last pretender in the order of writing and an obvious case of *déjà vu*.¹⁰³ This episode represents both a repetition of the False Nero story and a failure of the pretender and the historiographer to the point of absurdity. If we return to Marx’s observation “once as tragedy, and again as farce,” the False Drusus fits the bill.

In his description of the False Drusus, Tacitus makes clear intertextual references to the False Nero. Both stories open with Achaia and Asia terrified, use the combination of *fingere/credere* to explain the creation of and belief in an unofficial narrative, and emphasize the name as a draw for followers (*fama nominis* for the False Drusus versus *celebritas nominis* for the False Nero).¹⁰⁴ The False Drusus episode takes place in the Cyclades (again) and the

¹⁰³ Also in Cass. Dio 58.25.1 (in abbreviated form).

¹⁰⁴ Tuplin recognizes these three similarities between the False Nero and False Drusus episodes but argues “there are no grounds, therefore, for supposing that the *Annals* narrative is improperly affected by the literary model provided by *Hist.* 2.8-9” (1987: 781-2, footnote 2). I, of course, disagree lol.

surrounding area, around the time of the fall of Sejanus in 31 BCE. By coinciding with the ousting of Sejanus from any pretense of imperial power, the False Drusus sheds light on Sejanus's brand of usurpation, which is dependent not on a family connection, but on his positions as prefect of the praetorian guard and proxy for Tiberius after the latter has permanently withdrawn to Capri. And yet, in drawing so heavily on his False Nero for his False Drusus, Tacitus seems to deemphasize the specific historical circumstances of the pretender in favor of demonstrating that types of events repeat throughout the history of the principate.

Per idem tempus Asia atque Achaia exterritae sunt acri magis quam diuturno rumore, Drusum Germanici filium apud Cycladas insulas, mox in continenti visum. Et erat iuvenis haud dispari aetate, quibusdam Caesaris libertis velut adgnitus; per dolumque comitantibus adliciebantur ignari fama nominis et promptis Graecorum animis ad nova et mira. Quippe elapsam custodiae pergere ad paternos exercitus, Aegyptum aut Suriam invasurum, fingeant simul credebantque. Iam iuventutis concursu, iam publicis studiis frequentabatur, laetus praesentibus et inanium spe, cum auditum id Poppaeo Sabino: is Macedoniae tum intentus Achaia quoque curabat. Igitur quo vera seu falsa antiret, Toroneum Thermaeumque sinum praefestinas, mox Euboeam Aegaei maris insulam et Piraeum Atticae orae, dein Corinthiense litus angustiasque Isthmi evadit; marique Ionio Nicopolim Romanam coloniam ingressus, ibi demum cognoscit sollertius interrogatum, quisnam foret, dixisse M. Silano genitum, et multis sectatorum dilapsis ascendisse navem tamquam Italiam peteret. Scripsitque haec Tiberio, neque nos originem finemve eius rei ultra comperimus. (*Ann.* 5.10)

At the same time, Asia and Achaia were terrified by a rumor, more fierce than enduring, that Drusus, the son of Germanicus, had been seen in the Cycladic Islands and then on the continent. And there was a young man of not dissimilar age, recognized, as it were, by certain freedmen of Caesar, who began to accompany him in the deception; the ignorant were won over by the fame of the name and because the minds of the Greeks are inclined toward new and marvelous things. Naturally, they were fictionalizing and believing that he had escaped from imprisonment and was going to his father's armies in order to invade Egypt and Syria. Now he was surrounded by a crowd of young persons, now by public zeals; he was happy due to present successes and empty hopes when the matter reached the attention of Poppaeus Sabinus: at that time he was directing his attention toward Macedonia and also governing Achaia. Therefore, in order to anticipate the rumors, whether true or false, he hastened past the bays of Torone and Thermae, then left behind the island of Euboea on the Aegean Sea, and the Piraeus of the Attic coast, then the Corinthian shore and the narrows of the Isthmus, then he arrived at the Roman colony of Nicopolis on the Ionian sea; finally there he learned that the man, when interrogated more skillfully as to who he was, said that he was the son of Marcus Silanus, and since many of his followers had dispersed, he had boarded a boat as if to seek Italy. He wrote

these things to Tiberius, but I have not found anything more about the beginning or the end of this affair.

In telling the story of the False Drusus, Tacitus persistently undercuts the plausibility of the event and the reliability of his narrative. First, he reveals that the False Drusus does not even bear a strong mimetic similarity to his prototype. The only point of similarity between the pretender and the real Drusus are that they are around the same age (*haud dispari aetate*)—hardly grounds for imposture. (In contrast, the False Nero looked like Nero, sang, and played the cithara). Tacitus also uses the adverbs *velut* (reminiscent of the *Velut Nero*) and *tamquam* in order to introduce doubt into his narration. He openly admits failures of historiographical inquiry on the part of both Poppaeus Sabinus (the grandfather of Poppaea Sabina, Nero's second wife), who obtains only second-hand knowledge of the pretender, and himself, who writes from a point of even further removal. Tacitus's closing statement, "I have not found anything more about the beginning or the end of this affair" (*neque nos originem finemve eius rei ultra comperimus*), leaves the reader doubtful of what value to assign the story. If history-writing is a process of ordering events via cause (*origo*) and effect (*finis*), this episode is isolated from both.¹⁰⁵

The attempt of the False Drusus also has oddly low political stakes. While the aims of Tacitus's pretenders are often unclear, their presumed goal is revolution that will result in the replacement of the ruling *princeps* by the pretender. In the accounts of the False Nero, the False Scribonianus Camerinus, and the False Agrippa Postumus, a few standard elements emerge: a slave or freedman pretends to be a contender for imperial power, the story spreads via rumor, supporters gather, and there is a moment of social ordering in which the pretender is confronted by a representative of the state and killed. Occasionally, too, the pretender inspires a mimetic

¹⁰⁵ Compare Tacitus's commitment at *Hist.* 1.4.1. to discovering *non modo casus eventusque rerum . . . sed ratio etiam causaeque*.

response (this is most obvious in the case of the clients of Sallustius Crispus, who pretend to be conspirators). But in the story of the False Drusus, there is no element of danger—any revolutionary energy is undercut by Tacitus’s implication that at least to the Greeks, the False Drusus is more of a novelty than a threat (*promptis Graecorum animis ad nova et mira*).¹⁰⁶ And furthermore, there is no moment of social ordering. Not only is there no direct confrontation between Poppaeus Sabinus and the False Drusus, the False Drusus morphs into the (False?) son of Marcus Silanus (Caligula’s father-in-law) and acts “as if” (*tamquam*) he is going to Italy.¹⁰⁷ In this case, the mimetic response turns inward and the pretender becomes indeterminate in who he is pretending to be. The False Drusus is never caught, unmasked, or killed like the others; he simply disappears.

In the story of the False Drusus, Tacitus draws on his own literary precedent and theorizes the repetition and degradation implicit in the principate. The story of the False Drusus both replicates and makes absurd the story of the False Nero with the result that the episode no longer has real stakes or hangs together as a narrative. Any impostor is necessarily once removed from their prototype, but the False Drusus is once removed from even the idea of an impostor. In his final pretender narrative, Tacitus seems to feel the effects of the monotony of the history of the principate, of which he complains, “I was always facing a similarity and satiety of events” (*obvia rerum similitudine et satietate*, *Ann.* 4.33.3). That Tacitus tells the history of the principate as a series of repetitions becomes more obvious the closer the reader gets to Nero, the telos of the *Annals*.

¹⁰⁶ Tacitus does suggest that the real Drusus might have generated a revolutionary impulse at *Ann.* 6.23.2. Tuplin suggests that revolution was never the goal, rather, “all that was needed was a brief crisis to unnerve the *princeps* and provoke a change of arrangements in Syria to something more satisfactory to Sejanus” (1987: 797).

¹⁰⁷ Cass. Dio 58.25.1, in contrast, records a meeting between the False Drusus and Tiberius.

Each of Tacitus's pretenders reveals an element shared by illegitimate impostors and legitimate successors alike. The False Nero shows that no matter what model one follows, pretending is an implicit part of being *princeps*—even Augustus pretended in order to be perceived as *civilis*. The False Scribonianus Camerinus demonstrates that pretenders and *principes* are constructed from both the inside and the outside. Both construct themselves in the image of their prototype, but are also constructed by their audience. The stakes become higher when military *fides* is on the line, since in these stories, *fides* is either to the prototype (the instigator of revolution) or the *status quo*. The False Agrippa Postumus explicates the similar gamble that impostors and successors make: can either pass as their predecessor? In order to conceal the interregnum, both Tiberius (aided by Livia) and the False Agrippa Postumus dilate and compress time. And finally, the False Drusus proves that both *principes* and impostors are implicated in a pattern of copying wherein later iterations become further and further removed from their original prototype. Just as Tacitus writes Nero as a farce of Domitian, so too does he write the False Drusus as a farce of the False Nero.

Nero as Pretender

Thus far I have argued that in the Nero void of the *Histories* and *Annals*, Tacitus's pretenders constitute our earliest portraits of Nero and participate in a lineage of false or bad *principes* that throws into confusion the difference between an impostor and a successor. Nero hangs in the background of the *Histories* because the actions of the four emperors of 69 CE are responses to his death; he is imminent in the *Annals* because his appearance will herald the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the work. His absence is manifested as positive fiction in the sequence of pretenders that mirror back his behavior as *princeps* and retrospectively contest his legitimacy.

Because Tacitus composed his historical works in reverse chronological order, the pretenders in the *Histories* and *Annals* are influenced by chronologically future events that simultaneously represent Tacitus's literary past (e.g., the False Drusus is haunted by the chronologically future False Nero). The same is true for Nero in the *Annals*. I compare Tacitus's Nero—haunted by both his literary past and his chronological future—to a statue of Nero that has been struck by lightning.

Isdem consulibus gymnasium ictu fulminis conflagravit, effigiesque in eo Neronis ad informe aes liquefacta. (*Ann.* 15.22.2)

In the same year the gymnasium was struck by lightning and went up in flames and inside of it a portrait of Nero was melted into formless bronze.

Tacitus does not describe the way the statue looked before it was struck by lightning. But the lightning strike distorts its features to the point where they no longer read as individual features, far less Nero's own. The formless lump, I suggest, can be read as a metaphor for Nero in the *Annals*, who has been transformed from the historical Nero—no longer recoverable to us—and instead represents a site of various projections.¹⁰⁸ In this final section, I turn to focus on Nero himself and, from the perspective of Books 13-16 of the *Annals*, look back at the pretenders of the *Histories* and early *Annals*. I aim to demonstrate how the Nero of the *Annals* is influenced by copycats who are both his literary predecessors and part of a post-Nero world.

Tacitus depicts Nero as possessing what I term a “distributed identity,” a phrase that plays off Gell's “distributed person.”¹⁰⁹ Tacitus represents Nero not as possessing an essential

¹⁰⁸ The formless lump also recalls readings of Nero that bring out his overburdening by tradition. Vout, working with Nero's material portraiture, writes “the “fatness” of Nero's mature portrait, if that is what it was for those confronted with it in the 60s CE, is less a statement about his lifestyle than about his art's style, his features swollen as the Farnese Hercules' muscles are swollen, similarly pushing their visual prototypes to inflated levels where the only additional move left is bursting” (2017: 184).

¹⁰⁹ Gell 1998: 96-154.

identity, but rather, as partaking in mimetic actions that bring him into comparison with other figures. He is best understood as a collection of imitations. I have already described his attempt to become a slave in the vein of the *Velut Nero* above—in this section, I will discuss the distribution of Nero at the hands of Seneca, his connections to the East and to the past that draw him away from Rome, his strategy of distributed authorship, and his performance as a citharode. By demonstrating that Nero only assumes positive outward characteristics when he is pretending to be someone else, or in some other time or place, Tacitus shows him to have similar inclinations as the pretenders who precede him in the narrative. But as a prototype for imitation, Nero does not have much more to offer than his own mimetic attempts.

Tacitus represents Nero and Seneca as participating in a reciprocal relation of pretending. Nero negotiates his identity as *princeps* in relation to Seneca's protreptic representation of him as an ideal *princeps*. The dynamic between the two figures is first revealed when Nero gives the funeral eulogy for Claudius, which was clearly written by Seneca.

Postquam ad providentiam sapientiamque flexit, nemo risui temperare, quamquam oratio a Seneca composita multum cultus praeferret, ut fuit illi viro ingenium amoenum et temporis eius auribus adcommodatum. Adnotabant seniores, quibus otiosum est vetera et praesentia contendere, primum ex iis, qui rerum potiti essent, Neronem alienae facundiae eguisse. (*Ann.* 13.3.1-2)

After he turned to Claudius's foresight and wisdom, no one could refrain from laughing, although the speech, composed by Seneca, displayed much polish in accordance with that man's talent, which was attractive and agreeable to the listeners of the time. The older men, who in their idleness were comparing old things and new, noted that Nero was the first of those who had held imperial power to have need of another's eloquence.

Tacitus describes a dynamic in which Seneca and Nero imitate each other. Seneca attempts to write a speech that sounds like Nero, but it actually sounds like himself. Nero is then placed in a position of speaking as Seneca pretending to be Nero. Just as the speech displays (*praeferret*) a

polished style, Nero bears Seneca's speech before himself like a mask.¹¹⁰ But the mask is not of Seneca, it is of a version of Nero created by Seneca. The relation between Nero, Seneca, and Seneca's Nero finds an analogue in the opening metaphor of (the real) Seneca's *De Clementia*:

Scribere de clementia, Nero Caesar, institui, ut quodam modo speculi vice fungerer et te tibi ostenderem perventurum ad voluptatem maximam omnium. (*Clem.* 1.1)

I have decided, Nero Caesar, to write about *clementia*, so that I might in some way fulfill the function of a mirror, and show you to yourself as one who will arrive at the greatest pleasure of all.

In this metaphor, there are two Neros: the Nero looking in the mirror, and the Nero looking back. The Nero looking in the mirror represents Nero prior to Seneca's intervention; the Nero looking back is the Nero who has been shaped by Seneca. Seneca, the mirror, does not merely reflect the original Nero, but displays a Nero that—paradoxically—the original Nero both already is *and* can become. As Braund puts it, “the mirror image is clever especially because it can be interpreted descriptively—representing Nero's present state—or prescriptively—representing an idealized state.”¹¹¹ Both Tacitus and Seneca represent Nero as participating in a dynamic in which Seneca shows Nero an aspirational version of himself, and Nero impostors that version.

Nero, however, is driven by other mimetic impulses that distract him from imitating the Nero crafted by Seneca. Tacitus characterizes Nero as affected by a nostalgic impulse to return to a moment in the Greek past. He shares this inclination with the pretenders of the *Histories* and *Annals* who privilege the past as representing a preferable state of affairs and the East as a place from which alternate narratives of legitimacy might arise. Nero replicates these priorities by paying homage to the Greeks as the ancestors of the Roman people (for this reason, Tacitus

¹¹⁰ O’Gorman (2000: 147-154) notes that because Seneca’s speeches sounds like Seneca, no one knows what Nero’s own voice sounds like.

¹¹¹ Braund 2009: 154. See also Moles 1990: 336.

writes, Nero relieved the people of Ilium from taxes), and the originators of the panhellenic games and a culture of performance.¹¹² Tacitus associates Achaia and Asia (the provinces terrified by the False Nero and the False Drusus) with the *ludi*, of which Nero is an enthusiastic host and participant. When Tacitus writes about Nero's quinquennial games in 60 CE, he makes a causal connection between the annexation of the provinces of Achaia and Asia and the more thoughtful production of the games in Rome.¹¹³ And in 64 CE, Nero performs in Naples with the goal of crossing over into Achaia.¹¹⁴ Tacitus's *Annals* breaks off before Nero's tour of Greece (66/67 CE), but we know from Suetonius that he performed in Achaia and liberated the province.¹¹⁵ Tacitus represents Nero's zeal for Greece as impinging on his role as *princeps*, who is expected to stay in Rome, and in the present.

During a critical test of Nero's *princeps* role, he retreats into a nostalgic desire to return to a past moment in time. Tacitus writes that while the city was burning, Nero entered his performance space and began to act as if he were witnessing the fall of Troy.

Quae quamquam popularia in inritum cadebant, quia pervaserat rumor ipso tempore flagrantis urbis inisse eum domesticam scaenam et cecinisse Troianum excidium, praesentia mala vetustis cladibus adsimulantem. (*Ann.* 15.39.3)

Which [measures], although popular, kept falling into uselessness, because a rumor had spread that at the very moment the city was burning, he had gone up on his private stage and sung the destruction of Troy, assimilating present evils to ancient disasters.

¹¹² *Ann.* 12.58.1.

¹¹³ *possessa Achaia Asiaque ludos curatius editos*, *Ann.* 14.21.1; Achaia was annexed in 146 BCE and Asia in 133 BCE.

¹¹⁴ *Non tamen Romae incipere ausus Neapolim quasi Graecam urbem delegit: inde initium fore, ut transgressus in Achaiam insignisque et antiquitus sacras coronas adeptus maiore fama studia civium eliceret*, *Ann.* 15.33.2.

¹¹⁵ *Suet. Ner.* 24.2.

Tacitus uses the word *adsimulare*, which means to make one thing like another, to describe Nero's process of making the Great Fire like the fall of Troy. The word recalls the various *sim*-words Tacitus uses in his accounts of pretenders: *simulare* (verbs); *dissimulatio*, *similitudo*, *simulacrum*, *simulatio* (nouns), *dissimilis* (adjectives), *simul* (adverbs). These words originate from the proto-Indo-European root *sem- (1) "one; as one, together with". The root gets to the heart of what Tacitus's pretenders try to do: close the gap between two disparate people or events. When Nero (reportedly) sings the fall of Troy during the Great Fire, he replicates the desire of a pretender to conflate two events that stand apart in time.¹¹⁶

When Nero assimilates Rome to Troy, he assimilates himself to Homer and Vergil, both who composed accounts of the sack of Troy. But, at least in the context of the *Annals*, his preference is for Homer.¹¹⁷ It is in keeping with Tacitus's characterization of Nero as a figure who has distributed his identity over different, sometimes incompatible aspects of his personality, to have him imitate Homer, who was not a person, but a name that stood in for multiple anonymous people in a long oral tradition. By the time Nero sings the sack of Troy, Tacitus has already described Nero's process of poetic composition, which reads like a parody of Homeric distributed authorship. Tacitus writes that once Nero has established a group of skilled poets, he brings in precomposed verses for the other poets to finish:

¹¹⁶ It is a Roman commonplace to assimilate the large-scale destruction of a city to the fall of Troy, hence Nero's responses to the Great Fire hold additional resonance. Tacitus also recalls two Roman historical moments: the Gallic Sack of 390 BCE, and the sack of Carthage in 146 BCE. Feeney (2007: 105-107) emphasizes the connection Tacitus draws between the Great Fire and the Gallic Sack and argues that unlike Camillus, Nero is unable to refound the city and bring Rome into a new, non-regressive phase of history. O'Gorman (2000: 171-175) argues that Nero references Scipio Aemilianus, the destroyer of Carthage. She makes the additional point that Nero is assimilated to both a destroyer and refounder of the city, but when he attempts to rebuild the city with broader streets and more open areas, the city becomes too hot—Tacitus drives this point home by using language that recalls his narration of the Great Fire. Hence, even when Nero attempts historiographical difference, his efforts collapse into sameness and repetition.

¹¹⁷ Suetonius has Nero quote a line of Homer before his suicide (*Ner.* 49.3). Mitchell (2015: 352) notes that the quotation is "remarkable mainly for its pointlessness."

Ne tamen ludicrae tantum imperatoris artes notescerent, carminum quoque studium adfectavit, contractis quibus aliqua pangendi facultas necdum insignis erat. Hi cenati considerare simul, et adlatos vel ibidem repertos versus connectere atque ipsius verba quoquo modo prolata supplere, quod species ipsa carminum docet, non impetu et instinctu nec ore uno fluens. (*Ann.* 14.16.1)

Yet, so that not only the theatrical skills of the emperor gain attention, he also feigned a zeal for poems, drawing together people who had some skill for composing—but not such as was yet well known. These people, after dining, sat down at the same time, and connected verses brought in or composed on the spot and supplemented Nero’s own words as they were brought forward in whatever way. The very form of the poems discloses this method of composition, since they do not flow uniformly with vigor and inspiration, nor with a single voice.

In this passage, Tacitus describes Nero as a kind of anti-Homer. That is to say that while Nero imitates Homeric distributed authorship, he does so by way of his lack of enthusiasm and talent. The word *adfectavit* suggests that Nero is not genuinely interested in composing poetry. While Tacitus previously praised Nero’s poetry, commenting that “sometimes, in the composition of verses, he showed that he had in him the rudiments of education” (*aliquando carminibus pangendis inesse sibi elementa doctrinae ostendebat*, *Ann.* 13.3.3), the phrase “rudiments of education” (*elementa doctrinae*) now seems to refer to Nero’s method of composition—Nero supplies only the smallest elements of poems that are eventually completed by others. Nero is not prolific or fluent enough to compose a poem on his own. Hence others must intervene in order to fill the space between words. The result is that Tacitus is able to identify the joints where one author gives way to another. In his process of sorting words written by Nero versus by other authors, Tacitus approximates a Homeric analyst, who looks for the oldest, most authentic parts of the text. But Tacitus turns the criteria for authenticity on its head. He depicts the oldest parts of the poems (i.e., the parts written by Nero) as even less authentic than the poetry written by unknown authors.

Finally, when Nero performs as a citharode onstage, he both copies and heralds the coming of the *Velut Nero* who precedes him in the order of writing. Nero's citharodic performance likely incorporated passages from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as songs with Trojan War plot lines—akin to what Nero performed during the Great Fire.¹¹⁸ As Tacitus assimilates Nero to his own pretender, he also destabilizes Nero's prototypical function by demonstrating the distribution of Nero's identity into a multiplicity of mimetic moments.

Interea senatus, propinquo iam lustrali certamine, ut dedecus averteret, offert imperatori victoriam cantus adicitque facundiae coronam, qua ludicra deformitas velaretur. Sed Nero nihil ambitu nec potestate senatus opus esse dictitans, se aequum adversum aemulos et religione iudicum meritam laudem adsecuturum, primo carmen in scaena recitat; mox flagitante vulgo ut omnia studia sua publicaret (haec enim verba dixere) ingreditur theatrum, cunctis citharae legibus obtemperans, ne fessus resideret, ne sudorem nisi ea, quam indutui gerebat, veste detergeret, ut nulla oris aut narium excrementa viserentur. Postremo flexus genu et coetum illum manu veneratus sententias iudicum opperiebatur ficto pavore. Et plebs quidem urbis, histrionum quoque gestus iuvare solita, personabat certis modis plausuque composito. Crederes laetari, ac fortasse laetabantur per incuriam publici flagitii. (*Ann.* 16.4.1-4)

In the meantime, the senate, with the quinquennial contest already at hand, in order to avert disgrace, offered the victory for singing to the *princeps* and added the crown of eloquence, in order that the shame of a *princeps* onstage be concealed. But Nero kept saying that there was no need for bribery nor the power of the senate; he was an equal against his rivals and would obtain deserved praise by the integrity of the judges. First, he recited a poem onstage; then, with the crowd asking that he make public all of his pursuits (those were their exact words), he entered the theater, obeying all the rules of the cithara: not to sit down if tired, not to wipe away sweat except with the garment he was wearing, not to allow discharge from his mouth or nose to be visible. Finally, on bended knee and having supplicated that crowd with a hand, he began to wait for the verdict of the judges with pretended fear. And indeed, the urban plebs, accustomed to delight in the gestures of actors, were resounding with fixed rhythms and regular applause. You would have thought they were happy, and perhaps they were happy, through their lack of regard for public shame.

This passage directly responds to *Hist.* 1.4.2-3, in which Tacitus describes the reactions of the social classes to the death of Nero. In the *Histories* passage, the senators celebrated Nero's

¹¹⁸ Power 2010: 243-249.

demise while the members of the lowest social class were sad and eager to believe that Nero had somehow survived. In this passage, the senators and the common people display the inverse of their emotions in the *Histories* passage. The senate wants to forestall Nero's participation in the games and offer him the victory in advance. But, as Tacitus writes, the common people seem happy to witness Nero's public show. Tacitus thus reveals what the common people in the *Histories* were missing, and why they would have been excited at the prospect of another theatrical Nero.

Nero's insistence on competing on equal footing with the other citharodes moves Augustus's pose of equality with the senate into a more ludicrous venue. The premise is ridiculous—as *princeps*, Nero has more structural power than anyone else in Rome. That he takes pains to observe the rules of the cithara as if the outcome of the contest is at stake only adds to the farce. His fictionalized fear (*ficto pavore*) reveals that the stakes are not real for him. But they are real for the other citharodes, the judges, and the audience, who are forced to celebrate Nero's win under the banner of meritocracy.

In this final section, I have aimed to show that Nero is assimilated to figures who postdate him, but whom Tacitus has written first. Nero and his pretenders find a shared prototype in mimesis itself. Tacitus depicts Nero as having few reliable characteristics upon which imposture might be based, since his *modus operandi* involves impostoring, comparing, appropriating, and pretending. The result is that Tacitus's Nero reads as a hall of mirrors, in which there is no true original account of who Nero really is.

Both imposture and succession rely on fidelity to the past in the form of nostalgic conservatism. Tacitus's pretenders attempt to intervene in the *status quo* by returning to the past and enacting an alternate version of reality. Rather than creating something new, they explore

questions such as “what if Nero had not died in 68 CE?” A similar question comes to bear on imperial successors who couch their rule in terms of continuity with their predecessors. Tiberius, for example, measures his success as *princeps* in terms of how well he adheres to Augustus’s precedent.¹¹⁹ This is a nostalgia that Tacitus does not share. Tacitus tells the history of the principate as a series of repetitions to emphasize the potential of the present moment to be a positive break from the past—the successful adoption of Trajan, set against the backdrop of the failed adoption of Piso, seems like a promising sign. In this potentially hopeful moment, Tacitus emphasizes the value of difference.

¹¹⁹ Cowan 2009.

Chapter 2

Portraits, Gods, and Other False Neros in Tacitus's *Annals*

In Chapter One, I analyzed the destabilizing effect of Tacitus's backward order of composition—*Agricola*, *Histories*, *Annals*—on his depiction of the emperor Nero. By writing about Nero's afterlife before Nero's life, Tacitus obliterates the idea of a real or authentic Nero in his work. The False Nero of the *Histories* is putatively imitative of the emperor Nero in the *Annals*, but because of the order of writing, the emperor Nero is instead burdened by the precedent set by his own impostor. In this second chapter, I continue to explore the bidirectional relation between Nero and his impostors in Tacitus's oeuvre, but in a slightly different vein. Here, I focus not on the slipperiness and mutability of the *princeps*' identity vis-à-vis the categories of "real" and "false," but the structures in place that allow someone or something to stand in for the mortal *princeps*. I will explicate three such structures in this chapter: first, the imperial portrait, second, the web of government officials that oversees the minutia of the empire on a day-to-day basis, and third, the family members that will replace the emperor once he has died. On the one hand these structures, which endorse the replacement of the *princeps* by look-alikes and other substitutes, are necessary to sustain an empire that is geographically large (an estimated 2.5 million square miles during the Julio-Claudian period) and temporally enduring (lasting almost 100 years under the Julio-Claudians and much longer afterward).¹²⁰ But on the other, they create the conditions of possibility for the emperor to be replaced without his consent; in short, for him to be replaced by pretenders. While, historically speaking, these structures of replacement are not unique to Nero's reign, I argue that Tacitus puts them under particular pressure in the Neronian

¹²⁰ For the size of the empire Noreña 2017: 49.

books of the *Annals* as a way of foreshadowing the succession crisis that will be triggered by Nero's death. Because Nero both already has been and will be replaced in the *Histories*, in the *Annals* Tacitus draws out the ways in which Nero is losing control of his replacements.

As in Chapter One, my method of reading hangs on the relation between Tacitus's *Histories* and *Annals*. In the previous chapter, I emphasized how the False Nero of the *Histories*, by virtue of being composed first, destabilizes the emperor Nero of the *Annals*. In short, I read the *Annals* from the perspective of the *Histories*. In this chapter, I attempt to add the internal chronological order back in, thus reading the *Annals* as self-consciously anticipating the events of the *Histories*. I will argue that Tacitus writes the emperor Nero of the *Annals* as a way of explaining the False Nero of the *Histories*, who hangs in the future of the emperor Nero. Put another way, in the *Annals*, Tacitus tells us why the False Nero of the *Histories* makes sense. The *Histories* lie in both the past and the future of the *Annals*, as the reader is presumed to have already read the *Histories*, but at the same time to anticipate its events while reading the *Annals*. I follow Tacitus's order of writing in order to better understand how Tacitus creates a continuous narrative between the *Annals* and the *Histories*. Tacitus writes the Nero of the *Annals* toward the afterlife that he already wrote for Nero in the *Histories*. Nero's afterlife is to be replaced, not only by the False Nero, but by all four emperors of the year 69 CE. In the Neronian books of the *Annals*, then, Tacitus explains how Nero's replacement comes to be.

Nero's replacement by stand-ins is a major issue in Books 15 and 16 of the *Annals*, which, I argue, foreshadow his permanent replacement in the *Histories*. The narrative of Book 15 alternates between domestic and foreign events, both of which test the limits of the ability of the *princeps* to extend his presence in space and time. The foreign narrative focuses on Tiridates' bid to become king of Armenia and his eventual surrender of his diadem to a portrait of Nero (62-63

CE, *Ann.* 15.1-17, 24-31). The domestic narrative, while wide-ranging, periodically returns to the deification of the imperial family through the birth and death of Nero and Poppaea's baby daughter (63 CE, *Ann.* 15.23) and Anicius Cerialis's proposal of a living deification for Nero (65 CE, *Ann.* 15.74). These two narrative threads—foreign and domestic—focalize legitimate methods of replacing the *princeps* in order to extend his authority. The surrender of Tiridates to Nero's portrait demonstrates how the replication of the image of the *princeps* allows him to “travel” to the edges of the empire without leaving Rome. Similarly, the deification of baby Augusta and the proposed deification for Nero demonstrate how apotheosis—which amounts to the replacement of a mortal body with an immortal one—is a means of extending one's lifetime beyond its mortal limits. Both of these narratives are extended in Book 16, which features Poppaea's death and deification and Tiridates' coronation in Rome. The latter event refers to the former, since Tiridates' coronation is used as an occasion to condemn Thrasea Paetus, who reportedly does not believe that Poppaea is a real goddess (*Ann.* 16.22.3). Thus, in Books 15 and 16 it is evident that Nero's replacement by substitutes is double-edged: on the one hand, he is following the precedent of emperors before him, who used substitutes in order to extend their authority in space and time. But on the other hand, it becomes evident how many places and times Nero is *not* (e.g., he is not in Armenia; he is not deified yet). From the perspective of the Neronian books of the *Annals*, it is easy to see how Nero's extended personhood will lead to his usurpation by substitutes. Nero will be replaced in the *Histories*, but according to Tacitus, the process of replacement begins in the *Annals*.

The Replacement of the Emperor in Space and Time

As Vergil tells it, Jupiter promised Venus that Rome would become “an empire without limits” (*imperium sine fine*, *Aen.* 1.279), undemarcated in space and time (*ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono*, *Aen.* 1.278). But, on a practical level, how was this totalizing impulse to be realized? The answer: by creating a system in which different agents stood in for the emperor in space and time. The reduplication of the emperor in space via his image and other human agents allowed him to maintain a contemporaneous presence across the empire. His replication in time via his successors and apotheosis allowed him to extend his presence on earth beyond a mortal lifetime. These three types of substitutes—images, humans, and gods—constituted a system that allowed the emperor to fully permeate the empire with his image. In this section, I will give a brief historical background on how the emperor extended his reach in the context of the correctly functioning empire. I will then turn to the Neronian books of the *Annals*, in which Tacitus represents the system of substitution at its breaking point.

As Noreña has argued, the empire was, by necessity, ruled by many people: not just the emperor, but his advisors (*consilium*), a secretarial staff, the Senate, individual senators as provincial governors and commanders of legions, equestrian civil servants, and the emperor’s slaves and freedmen (*familia Caesaris*).¹²¹ Each of these individual people augmented what the emperor could accomplish on his own. Their synecdochic function—that they represented parts of the whole of imperial administration—was made clear by their accompaniment by the image of the emperor, under whose auspices they acted. Noreña, who argues that the image of the emperor was the single unifying symbol of the western empire from 69 to 235 CE, emphasizes the pervasiveness of the emperor’s name and image in multiple contexts and media.

Visual representations in a wide range of media helped to maintain the emperor’s existence in the collective consciousness of his subjects. Scattered literary references

¹²¹ For an overview of imperial government in the early empire, see Noreña 2017: 49-52.

suggest that the emperor's image was nearly ubiquitous, especially in public contexts, a picture amply confirmed by the material record, which indicates that imperial statues were erected in large numbers in the public spaces of cities big and small. Public monuments, too, helped to diffuse the idea of the emperor, especially the temples and other complexes associated with what we call "the imperial cult." Less dramatic than statues and public buildings, but far more numerous, were the imperial coins produced at Rome and disseminated throughout the empire, bringing imperial images and ideals to every corner of the Roman world, and in constant circulation between the public and private spheres. Other small-scale objects, such as medallions, gems, seals, lamps, and mirrors, also conveyed images of the emperor, especially in domestic contexts. In the western empire in particular, the early imperial period also witnessed a dramatic proliferation in the number of epigraphic texts, many of which presented the emperor's names and titles in monumental letters, usually associating the emperor with some positive quality or action. Literary texts also worked to diffuse the idea of the emperor far and wide. Finally, imperial travels in the provinces not only invested local places with the temporary aura of centrality, but also gave the emperor's subjects a rare opportunity to see their ruler in person.¹²²

These images were not merely symbolic, but material embodiments of the emperor's authority.

Although static, they wielded real power. In order to explain the relation between the *princeps*, his men, and the imperial portrait, I draw on Gell's idea of the distributed person. Gell argues that it is possible for primary agents (humans) to transcend the limits of their bodily capabilities by directing their agency through secondary agents (artifacts and other "things"). For example, the dictator Pol Pot's soldiers (primary agents) used anti-personnel mines (secondary agents) in order to kill and mutilate on a larger scale than they would have been able to do otherwise. We should not think of the mines as tools, but elements of the soldiers' agentic potential. As Gell puts it, "Pol Pot's men were capable of being the kind of (very malign) agents that they were only because of the artefacts they had at their disposal, which, so to speak, turned them from mere men into devils with extraordinary powers."¹²³ Although Gell presents his example as only having two terms (the men and the mines) in order to demonstrate the concept of primary versus

¹²² Noreña 2011: 14-15. See also Fronto *ad M. Caes.* 4.12.4.

¹²³ Gell 1998: 21.

secondary agency, there is actually a third term in the example: Pol Pot himself, also a human actor and thus a primary agent, who directed his men to plant the mines. Thus, an alternate way of reading Gell's example is that Pol Pot's agency was distributed through his men and into the mines.

The distribution of Pol Pot's agency into his men and the objects they carried is mirrored in our study by the nexus of agency comprised of the emperor (primary agent), his men (primary agents) and the imperial portraits (secondary agents), which both groups wielded for their own ends. When taken alone, the emperor was only a man, fragile and easily usurped and killed. But when augmented by a network of men wielding, in turn, a network of portraits, he became a corporation with incredible reach and authority. As Stewart argues, "his [i.e., the emperor's] agency was distributed not only in the sense that portraits were regarded as extending his legal presence and authority, for example, but also in the sense that they prosthetically extended the effect of his appearance."¹²⁴ The emperor's many faces allowed him to both see and be seen across the empire, reminding his subjects that if they could see him, he could also "see" them.

But the emperor could not produce and disseminate his image alone—he needed other humans (primary agents) to do that work for him. There were several reasons that other humans might choose to become involved with the production and circulation of the emperor's image. For example, provincial aristocrats (primary agents) used the image of the emperor (secondary agents) in order to gain or maintain standing in their communities. As Noreña argues, local aristocrats were motivated to erect statues of the emperor in their own city centers in order to articulate their position in the system of imperial power (namely, under the emperor, but over the local population): "by idealizing the emperor, symbolically associating themselves with him, and

¹²⁴ Stewart 2006: 247.

universalizing an imperial order in which they were clear beneficiaries, these aristocrats were effectively reinforcing their own, local authority.”¹²⁵ It also happened that the emperor (primary agent) could appropriate already existing systems of images in order to disseminate his own name and image; for example, in 7 BCE, Augustus reformed the *lares compitales* (the guardians of the crossroads) and renamed them the *lares augusti*. On the one hand, Augustus’s reform largely preserved the original function of the *lares*; as Flower writes, “their traditional function as protectors and patrons of the local neighborhoods had not disappeared and the types of ritual with which they were invoked and appeased seem to have remained largely the same, but were enhanced and multiplied.”¹²⁶ But Augustus also remade the *lares compitales* in his own image: as Flower puts it, “the princeps’ epithet *augustus* (itself an overtly religious term) was now displayed at every crossroads shrine in Rome” and “[Augustus’s] very special connection to the divine linked him to the local protective gods of each compital shrine and even to each of their individual worshippers, many of whom were freedmen and slaves.”¹²⁷ In short, Augustus (primary agent) used his own name and image (secondary agents) in order to make himself known to everyone who worshipped at the crossroads shrines. The upshot is that production and dissemination of the imperial image was a group effort, and not all of the members of the group shared the same goals and objectives.

Related to the agentic nexus in which the imperial image was implicated was the ontological status of the image of the emperor itself. Put another way, with what powers was the image of the emperor endowed? The obvious answer would seem to be: the powers with which

¹²⁵ Noreña 2011: 19.

¹²⁶ Flower 2017: 345.

¹²⁷ Flower 2017: 345. Cf. Ov. *Fast.* 5.145-46

the emperor himself was endowed. But depictions of the emperor's portrait statues in action would seem to cut across the simple one-to-one correspondence between emperor and statue. Rather, although it might seem an obvious point, statues existed in the world differently from the emperors whom they represented. For example, several authors attest that statues of *principes* (past or present) could grant protection to suppliants, a function they shared with statues of gods and goddesses. Now, the living *princeps* could also grant protection to suppliants. But the difference between the statue of a *princeps* and the living *princeps* is that the living *princeps* could also refuse suppliants, something that the statue of a *princeps* could not do. Tacitus writes that in the reign of Tiberius, it became common practice for "whoever was worst" (*detrinimus*, *Ann.* 3.36.1) to avoid punishment by grasping onto a statue of the emperor (*arrepta imagine Caesaris*). Tacitus records a speech of the senator Gaius Cestius in which he denounced the upside-down state of affairs in which convicted criminals could intimidate their prosecutors by seeking the protection of the emperor's image (*effigiem imperatoris oppositam*, *Ann.* 3.36.4), but conceded that *principes* are equivalent to gods (*principes quidem instar deorum esse*, *Ann.* 3.36.2); thus, by analogy, the image of a *princeps* was equivalent to the image of a god, even if the *princeps* in question was not yet deified. When Tiberius plotted openly against Agrippina the Elder and her son Nero, the pair was advised to go to the forum at its most crowded hour, clasp the statue of the deified Augustus (*effigiem divi Augusti amplecti*, *Ann.* 4.67.4), and call on the senate and people for aid. These two stories demonstrate the receptivity of the statue of the *princeps* to the personal motivations of his subjects. As Trimble notes, "a portrait's creation, viewing, reception, and meaning were not under the control of the subject or patron alone. They were shaped much more broadly by multiple agents, and by the collective experience and expectation of viewers . . . a person portrayed in such a portrait could lose control over the

representation, for example if a city in whose public space the statue stood deinstalled it or reused it to honor someone else.”¹²⁸ In the examples above, the emperor lost control over his representations because he could not regulate which suppliants it accepted—by virtue of the power granted to it, his image extended sanctuary to all suppliants, regardless of their motivations. The image’s position toward suppliants demonstrates that the representation of the emperor did not merely stand in for the emperor; rather, it had a wholly different way of being in the world.

The power of the image of the emperor to accept suppliants was further bound up in the perceived divinity of the emperor. While this power seemed to be available to all emperors from Augustus onward, Cassius Dio locates its inception in the divine honors granted to Julius Caesar following his death:

ἀπηγόρευσαν δὲ μηδένα ἐς τὸ ἡρώον αὐτοῦ καταφυγόντα ἐπ’ ἀδείᾳ μήτε ἀνδρηλατεῖσθαι μήτε συλαῖσθαι, ὅπερ οὐδενὶ οὐδὲ τῶν θεῶν, πλὴν τῶν ἐπὶ τοῦ Ῥωμύλου γενομένων, ἔδεδώκεσαν. (47.19.3)

They [the senate] forbid that anyone who fled and sought refuge in his shrine for the purposes of amnesty be banished or to be seized, an honor which they had not granted to a single one of the gods, save for those that existed in the time of Romulus.

Dio comments that at the time of the decree (42 BCE), this power was unique to Julius Caesar and had not been granted to the other gods (among which Caesar was now one). It would then follow that the power to protect suppliants was a function of Caesar’s divinity, rather than any other position he held, for example, dictator or head of state. This divinity was then distributed into Caesar’s descendants, some of whom were deified, and others who were proximal to those who had been deified. But because all of the Julio-Claudians (except Claudius) could claim relation to

¹²⁸ Trimble 2011: 320-321.

the deified Julius Caesar, and because so long as they lived, they could one day be deified, their images cast a corresponding religious aura.

The religious function that statues of *principes* served in the cities was replicated by the legionary standards at the disputed frontiers of the empire. The standards were considered sacrosanct and were incorporated into a shrine in every legionary camp (*altaria deum*, *Ann.* 1.39.4). They were also akin to gods; Tacitus writes that Germanicus, while leading his troops against the Cherusci, “called out that they should go forward, and follow the Roman birds, the legions’ own deities” (*exclamat irent, sequerentur Romanas avis, propria legionum numina*, *Ann.* 2.17.2). When the standards were in camp, they offered protection to suppliants in times of need. During a mutiny of the German legions under Germanicus’s control, the ex-consul Munatius Plancus, “having embraced the standards and eagle, was keeping himself safe by means of religious prohibition” (*signa et aquilam amplexus religione sese tutabatur*, *Ann.* 1.39.4).

But the more prominent function of the standards was to signify the loyalty of the army who carried them. The portrait of the emperor on the military standards also stood in for the emperor in formal surrenders. Tacitus records two instances when rebellious leaders on the fringes of the empire surrendered to an image of the emperor: Zorsines, king of the Siraces, surrendered to a portrait of Claudius (*apud effigiem Caesaris procubuit*, *Ann.* 12.17.2), and in an episode I will discuss further below, Tiridates, the newly re-instated king of Armenia, gave up his diadem to a portrait of Nero (*ponere apud effigiem Caesaris insigne regium*, *Ann.* 15.29.1). The *effigies* in question seems to be the same as the *imago* attached to the vertical pole of the standard—as Furneaux writes (somewhat obliquely), “the effigy of Caesar was carried with the standards.”¹²⁹ In cases of civil discord, images of claimants could reenter Rome, not as the stable

¹²⁹ Furneaux 1907: 81.

visual language of a peaceful empire, but as signs of revolution. For example, during the reign of Sejanus, under Tiberius, the people showed their support for Agrippina the Elder and her son Nero by carrying their images (*effigies*, *Ann.* 5.4.2) around the curia. In response, Sejanus wrote an inflammatory letter to the emperor Tiberius, posing the question “what was left but that they take up their swords, and choose those whose standard-portraits they followed as their generals and emperors” (*quid reliquum nisi ut caperent ferrum et, quorum imagines pro vexillis secuti forent, duces imperatoresque deligerent?*, *Ann.* 5.4.4). Although it is not clear what the *effigies* of Agrippina and Nero were (e.g., portrait statues or perhaps something more portable?), Sejanus interprets them as akin to standards and signs of a possible coup. In this example, it does not seem to be the case that Agrippina the Elder and Nero want to usurp Tiberius. Rather, the people are using their images to indicate their dissatisfaction with Sejanus’s rule.

What emerges from this brief historical survey is that the emperor was very often not in control of how his image was used. This lack of control was simply a function of the way that statues existed in the world versus the way that humans existed in the world. For one, there was only one emperor, but there could be unlimited portraits of him. Through their multiplicity, portraits of the emperor traveled to places in the empire where the emperor was not, and hence were receptive to the agencies of those who would coopt the image of the emperor for their own ends— as we have discussed, those ends included seeking their own self-aggrandizement, to attain amnesty from their crimes, or as a means of political demonstration.

I will now turn my attention to how Tacitus represents the relation between Nero and his portraits in the Neronian books of the *Annals*, where I will closely read the scene in which Tiridates surrenders to a portrait of Nero. I suggest that in his description of this encounter, Tacitus demonstrates how Nero’s portrait and the actors who wield it have come unmoored from the

emperor Nero back in Rome. I will then conclude this section with a reading of the story of the False Nero in the *Histories* which, I suggest, represents distributed agency gone haywire.

Tacitus describes how the distributed Nero works most clearly in his account of Tiridates' ceremonial surrender of his diadem to a portrait of Nero (on the condition that he will receive it again from the emperor himself). This act ends the dispute between Rome and Parthia over Armenia, which began in 52 CE when Vologeses, king of Parthia, installed his brother Tiridates as king of Armenia.¹³⁰ In 63 CE, after years of fruitless fighting and the entrances and exits of many short-lived rulers, Nero accepts Tiridates as king. In a ceremony facilitated by Corbulo, Nero's general on the eastern front, Tiridates places his diadem before a portrait of Nero.

Exim Romanus laudat iuvenem ommissis praecipitibus tuta et salutaria capessentem. Ille de nobilitate generis multum praefatus, cetera temperanter adiungit: iturum quippe Romam laturumque novum Caesari decus, non adversis Parthorum rebus supplicem Arsaciden. Tum placuit Tiridaten ponere apud effigiem Caesaris insigne regium nec nisi manu Neronis resumere; et conloquium osculo finitum.

Dein paucis diebus interiectis, magna utrimque specie, inde eques compositus per turmas et insignibus patriis, hinc agmina legionum stetero fulgentibus aquilis signisque et simulacris deum in modum templi: medio tribunal sedem curulem et sedes effigiem Neronis sustinebat. Ad quam progressus Tiridates, caesis ex more victimis, sublatum capiti diadema imagini subiecit, magnis apud cunctos animorum motibus, quos augebat insita adhuc oculis exercituum Romanorum caedes aut obsidio. At nunc versos casus: iturum Tiridaten ostentui gentibus, quanto minus quam captivum? (*Ann.* 15.29)

Then the Roman (Corbulo) praised the young man, who had laid aside great dangers and was seizing upon what was safe and salutary. The other (Tiridates), once he had made a long preface on the nobility of his own family, added the rest with measured calmness: he would go to Rome and bring a new honor to the Caesar—although the affairs of Parthia were not adverse—himself, an Arsacidian suppliant. Then it was agreed that Tiridates would place his royal insignia before a likeness of Caesar, and not take it up again except from the hand of Nero. The parley was finished with a kiss.

¹³⁰ Vologeses installed Tiridates as king of Armenia in 52 CE; Tiridates was then in and out of power for a number of years (*Annals* 12.50-1 [initial installment and overthrow by Radamistus]; 13.6 [expulsion of Radamistus]; 14.26 [expulsion of Tiridates and installation of Tigranes by Nero]; 15.1 [recap of 14.26]; 15.2 [re-installment of Tiridates by Vologeses]). Cf. Drinkwater 2019: 131-144.

Then, after a few days had passed, a great spectacle on both sides. On the Parthian side, cavalry was arrayed into squadrons with their ancestral insignias; on the Roman side, columns of legionaries stood with blazing eagles and standards and images of the gods in the manner of a temple. In the middle, a tribunal held a curule chair, which in turn held a portrait of Nero. Toward this Tiridates advanced and—after victims had been sacrificed in the usual way—lifted the diadem from his head, and submitted it to the statue. The spirits of everyone present were deeply moved, which effect was augmented by the slaughter and siege of the Roman armies, still fixed in their eyes. But now fortune had turned: Tiridates would go to be a spectacle for the people, how little short of a captive!

In this passage, Tacitus focalizes two perspectives: first, that of Corbulo and the Roman soldiers, and second, that of Tiridates and the Armenian and Parthian soldiers. Each group views the portrait of Nero, to which Tiridates surrenders his diadem, according to their own conception of how the image functions in relation to the emperor Nero.

From Corbulo's perspective, the two Neros—the *effigies* on the curule chair and the emperor back in Rome—work together to receive and confer the diadem and create the effect that Nero's power is coextensive with his portraits. Corbulo himself acts as a substitute for Nero and thus has first-hand knowledge of how power can emanate out from the center of the empire to the periphery. Because Corbulo is a loyal general, he aligns his agency with Nero's, thus creating the impression that Tiridates is surrendering to Nero even though, in practical terms, Tiridates is surrendering to Corbulo.

Corbulo has actually met Nero and knows the degree to which Nero's portrait resembles him. Tiridates, on the other hand, does not know what Nero actually looks like—he only knows what Nero's portrait looks like. But, as the scene demonstrates, the actual semblance of the portrait to Nero matters very little to the functioning of the portrait as a substitute for Nero. So, even though Tiridates has no way to verify if Nero's portrait is a good likeness of Nero or not, he accepts that Nero's portrait structurally stands in for Nero. What Tiridates reveals is that the visual link between Nero and his portrait could potentially be quite weak. And if someone or

something does not need to look like Nero in order to stand in for him, a broad range of people or images could stand in for Nero.

The portrait's ability to stand in for Nero finds an analog in Nero's ability to stand in for Caesar—whoever he might be. In this passage, Tacitus refers to Nero twice—once as Caesar and once as Nero—and Nero's portrait twice—again, once as Caesar and once as Nero. The chiasmic line *ponere apud effigiem Caesaris . . . manu Neronis resumere* highlights the role of synecdoche in the rule of the Caesars. When describing the course of action Tiridates will take—placing his diadem before a likeness of Caesar, and taking it up again from the hand of Nero—Tacitus puts the generic “Caesar” before the specific “Nero”. The phrase may represent a set formula, since Tacitus describes Zorsines' surrender to Claudius using an identical construction (*apud effigiem Caesaris procubuit*, *Ann.* 12.17.2). But even so, it would suggest that Nero is only a specific expression of the institution of the Caesars, and that the power that Nero's portrait possesses is backed not only by Nero, but by the Caesars. When Tiridates tells Corbulo that he will bring a new honor to the Caesar (*laturumque novum Caesari decus*), he means not only Nero, but also the whole of which Nero is a part. What seems important is that right now Nero fulfills the structural role of Caesar, but that role does not belong to him permanently.

In fact, even the official surrender is somewhat generic. Tacitus describes the Roman legionaries as accompanied by “blazing eagles and standards and images of the gods in the manner of a temple” (*fulgentibus aquilis signisque et simulacris deum in modum templi*). Each of these terms—*aquilae*, *signa*, and *simulacra deum*—emphasizes a different part of the legionary standard. The standard was comprised of four parts—*signum* (the tall cross of wood), *aquila* (the eagle atop the cross), *vexillum* (the banner hanging from the crossbar), and *imagines* (small

reliefs attached to the vertical pole of the standard).¹³¹ Each of these words could also be taken to refer to the whole standard instead of a specific part. So, in this scene, Tacitus is specifically drawing attention to the eagles, the crosses, and the portraits of the emperor that accompanied the standards. But he does not specify that these portraits were of Nero; he merely writes *simulacra deum*, by which he means either Nero, functionally deified in this context, or other deified Julio-Claudians. The entire ceremony seems like a type scene which might be reused for another surrender featuring another emperor.

Despite the very real possibility that Nero's portrait looked nothing like Nero, it still wielded enormous power. More, from the perspective of the Parthians, than Nero himself. Tacitus writes that the sight of Tiridates submitting his diadem to Nero's portrait produces a great affective response in those present (*magnis apud cunctos animorum motibus*). The visual stimulus directs the attention of the Armenian and Parthian soldiers to two contrasting scenes: one past and one future. First, they remember a happy memory: "the slaughter and siege of the Roman armies, still fixed in their eyes" (*insita adhuc oculis exercituum Romanorum caedes aut obsidio*). And second, they anticipate a grim future, in which Tiridates will become an object of display and an example to other rebellious leaders (*Tiridaten ostentui gentibus*). Tacitus implicitly compares Tiridates to the spoils of a triumphal procession, meant to be looked at—although he will be a diplomatic guest, he is imagined as a captured chieftain (*quanto minus quam captivum*). From the perspective of the Armenians and Parthians, it is Corbulo, his army, and Nero's portrait, rather than Nero himself, who will force Tiridates to become an object of the conquering gaze.

¹³¹ Ando 2000: 260.

Tacitus makes it clear that Tiridates' surrender to a portrait of Nero is only part one of a two-part ceremony (*ponere apud effigiem Caesaris . . . manu Neronis resumere*). In part two, Tiridates would have had the opportunity to compare the emperor Nero to the visual representations that preceded him. The circle would have been closed, and Tiridates would have been able to recognize Nero as the prototype from which his images derived their agency. But Tacitus never narrates part two, thus giving Nero's portrait prominence in the narrative over Nero himself. What Tacitus writes instead is the condemnation of the dissident senator Thrasea Paetus, in which Tiridates plays a very minor role. In this account, Nero makes Tiridates a witness to civil slaughter, which has replaced Nero's zeal for foreign conquest—the original reason he requested Tiridates' presence in Rome.

Tempus damnationi delectum, quo Tiridates accipiendo Armeniae regno adventabat, ut versis ad externa rumoribus intestinum scelus obscuraretur, an ut magnitudinem imperatoriam caede insignium virorum quasi regio facinore ostentaret. (*Ann.* 16.23.2)

The time for the condemnation was chosen as the time when Tiridates was coming to accept the kingdom of Armenia so that, with gossip turned toward external affairs, internal crime be concealed, or so that the emperor could show off the greatness of imperial power with the slaughter of illustrious men, as if it were a kingly deed.

The condemnation of Thrasea Paetus occupies the main clause, while Tiridates' visit is relegated to a subordinate clause. Tacitus presents two alternatives as to why Nero has chosen to combine these events: he intends for Tiridates to draw attention away from his crimes, or (and here Tacitus places greater emphasis) for the death of Thrasea Paetus to serve as a demonstration of his power. In Rome, Nero will directly contradict the imperialist aims represented by Corbulo, his army, and Nero's portrait to expand the borders of the Roman empire by force and to bring evidence of foreign conquest back to Rome. But in the passage above, Nero inverts this imperialist spirit, instead performing for a foreign king (*magnitudinem imperatoriam . . . ostentaret*) by killing his own fellow-citizens (*caede insignium virorum*). Tacitus sums up with the

judgement that Nero has misinterpreted kingship, since he turns the drive for domination back on his own people “as if it were a kingly deed” (*quasi regio facinore*). In short, Nero mistakes what is *imperatorium*, that is, a function of a conquering general, and by extension, the emperor, for what is *regium*, an ambiguous term that could refer to either members of the imperial court or eastern-style despots. In Tacitus’s narrative, not only does Tiridates not meet the emperor Nero, of which he has only seen the image, Nero has turned into exactly the kind of autocrat that one might have expected Tiridates to be.

I will now consider again the False Nero of the *Histories*, with which I began this section. When Tiridates places his diadem in front of the portrait of Nero, he validates the idea that a portrait of the *princeps* can stand in for the *princeps*—that the difference between “looking like” (regardless of actual resemblance) and “being” is not great. This system of replacement and its attendant fluidity of belief both allows the Roman empire to unite far-flung areas under the image of one man and creates the conditions of possibility for pretenders. “False Neros” (that is, representations of Nero), such as the one to which Tiridates surrenders, are legitimate tools for ruling so long as their agency is derived from Nero and they are backed by the Roman army. Because Corbulo makes Nero’s portrait work in line with Nero’s imperialist goals, this system of “False Neros” does not seem so false. But even though Corbulo disguises his agency as Nero’s agency, in the context of Corbulo’s campaign in the East, it is Corbulo’s agency enacts Tiridates’ surrender, not Nero’s.

But in the *Histories*, following Nero’s death, the synecdochic system becomes destabilized. At the time of the False Nero, Nero’s death had not yet been widely recognized—as Tacitus writes, the rumor about his death was varied (*vario super exitu eius rumore*, *Hist.* 2.8.1). Hedrick attributes the False Nero to a failure on the part of the Roman people to commit Nero to

past memory, writing that “it was difficult to make a memory of the Roman emperor because so much care and energy had been lavished on creating the position as a contemporary presence, especially with the armies, and because many groups had invested so deeply and emotionally in the persona of the emperor.”¹³² When Nero died, he stopped exerting agency through his substitutes, both people and portraits. But his portraits, especially, were slow to lose the agency with which they had been endowed. In the period of confusion after Nero’s death, they still seemed to answer to a living emperor. In the case of the False Nero, the slave or freedmen intervenes in this state of transition by holding the image of Nero before himself like a mask and attempting to capture the agentic system over which Nero used to exert control. The difference between the False Nero and Corbulo is that Corbulo acted as a substitute for Nero, while the False Nero conflates being a substitute for Nero and being Nero. The False Nero is a Corbulo gone rogue.

When Tacitus writes that the False Nero’s face was similar to Nero’s (*illi super similitudinem oris*, *Hist.* 2.8.1), he raises the question: *according to whom?* Presumably, the False Nero’s followers had never seen the emperor Nero before—they had only seen his portraits. To them, the relation modeled by Nero’s portraits would not have been hierarchical but flat and horizontal; each portrait could not be compared to its prototype, but only to other portraits. A modern comparison might be found in the work of Belgian artist Francis Alÿs, who designed an exhibition bringing together more than four hundred and fifty reproductions of an 1885 painting of the Roman saint Fabiola by French artist Jean-Jacques Henner. The mystique of the exhibition lay in the fact that the original painting was not present, since it had been long lost. In its place

¹³² Hedrick 2016: 163.

was a preponderance of copies. Vout, drawing on the exhibition catalog, comments on the destabilizing effect of multiple competing images on the viewer. She writes:

The question's emphasis is again on "the many," and stems from accepting that the polyphony of portraits "destabilizes the prospect of a settled referent." As the authors go on to explain, "the images resemble one another, not the sitter."¹³³

As is the case with Fabiola, there is no original Nero, at least not to the False Nero's followers in the East. So, when the would-be followers were confronted with the False Nero, who was styling himself the prototype of Nero's portraits, the response could only have been uncertainty. It is entirely possible that Tacitus's comment that the False Nero's face was similar to Nero's (*illi super similitudinem oris*, *Hist.* 2.8.1) means that the False Nero looked kind of like one of Nero's portraits, which in turn looked kind of like Nero. The actual resemblance between Nero, his portraits, and the False Nero was tenuous and fragile, but what was widely accepted was the idea that someone else could act for the emperor.

In this section, I have argued that the False Nero in the *Histories* intervened in a dynamic that already existed in the *Annals*. In the *Histories*, the pretender approximates the structural position held by Corbulo in the *Annals*, in that he leads an army in the name of Nero and acts on his behalf. The difference is that in the *Histories*, with Nero dead, the False Nero styles himself not as Nero's substitute, but as Nero himself. But Tacitus suggests that the preconditions for the False Nero have existed for a long time. He foreshadows the dysfunction to come when he makes it clear how much Nero relies on his portraits to do the work of ruling the empire and how important they are in the provinces—much more than Nero himself. And he implicitly raises the question: what else is an image of the *princeps* but a potential False Nero?

¹³³ Vout 2013: 80, quotations from Morgan 2008: 11, 18.

Succession, Deification, and Imposture

In this section, I will discuss the corollary to replication in space: replication in time. If the emperor was to create the illusion of an eternal present, exemplified by Augustus's Golden Age, he had to find a way of projecting his image into the future. This could happen in two ways: succession and deification. Succession approximated the replacement of a father by his son, who was like him because of their contiguity. Deification amounted to the replacement of a mortal by an immortal version of himself. In both instances, the departed emperor would live on in his substitutes. When all worked well, these two processes of replacement—mortal and immortal—yielded benefits for deified emperors and their successors alike. Just as mortal successors were incentivized to deify their predecessors in order that they might appropriate the authority of gods for themselves, the authority of deified emperors depended on their continued cultivation on the mortal plane.¹³⁴ But, because these two processes drew on similar discourses of replacement, there existed the potential for succession and deification to come into conflict with each other. Successors were forced to articulate the extent to which they approached their predecessors' god-like status. Did they, like their deified predecessors, also deserve god-like honors? And how would either acceptance or rejection of these honors place them in direct competition with their deified predecessors?

While the process of replacement inherent in succession was fairly straightforward, the claim that deification also equaled replacement needs unpacking. On a conceptual level, the life force of the emperor was transformed into the divinity of a god, and on a material level, the emperor's body was replaced with statues and temples (which he might have already had, either

¹³⁴ E.g., Germanicus calls on the deified Augustus to expiate the mutinous German legions from civil war (*Ann.* 1.43.3).

by virtue of being the emperor, or by virtue of living deification). According to descriptions of divine funerals, when a *princeps* was deified postmortem, his body was cremated and his ascension into heaven was marked with a comet (this was the case for Julius Caesar), an eagle, or an eyewitness account.¹³⁵ When a *princeps* gained divine status prior to this death, no ceremony marked his apotheosis. Rather, it was assumed to have taken place in private.¹³⁶ In practice, postmortem deification and living deification were not mutually exclusive, nor did one imply the other. For example, Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius all experienced living deification in the provinces, but Augustus and Claudius also subsequently underwent postmortem deification in Rome (Tiberius did not).¹³⁷ That Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius existed simultaneously as living *principes* in Rome but deified *principes* in the provinces created the illusion that time moved differently in the center versus the edges of empire; it was as if their deifications took place gradually, starting in the provinces and making their ways toward Rome.

If, in the *Annals*, Augustus and his successors establish the prototypical relation between succession and deification, in the *Histories*, Nero and his pretenders subvert it. The reader of the *Annals* knows the telos toward which Nero proceeds: no chosen successor, but a succession crisis; no deification, but pretenders. And yet, these differences are not as great as they may seem. At the heart of all three phenomena—succession, deification, and imposture—lies the question: who or what stands in for the *princeps* once he is gone? And what is their relation to the divine? Because Tacitus explores the logic of imposture in the *Histories* prior to the logic of deification in the

¹³⁵ Cf. the funerals of Augustus (Cass. Dio 56.34.1-4; Suet. *Aug.* 100.3 and 101.4) and Drusilla (Cass. Dio 59.11.1-4). For examples of later divine funerals see those of Pertinax (Cass. Dio 75.4.2-5.5) and Septimius Severus (Hdn. 4.2.1-11). Cf. Price 1987: 60, Hekster 2009: 100-101, and McIntyre 2019: 30-36.

¹³⁶ On the application of *epiphanes* and *epiphanestatos* to the Roman emperors, see Price 1984: 86-8.

¹³⁷ Gradel 2002: 142-144.

Annals, he creates the effect that deification is a kind of imposture (rather than imposture seeming a poor substitute for deification, as might have happened in a chronological narrative). The False Nero, then, functions as a truth-teller with implications for both the *Histories* and *Annals*, as he demonstrates the similarity between posthumous imposture (unofficial) and the dyad of state-sanctioned succession and deification (official). Both processes represent attempts to stand in for the departed *princeps* and appropriate the authority of the dead in the service of the living.

Tacitus undercuts the legitimacy of deification from the beginning of the *Annals* by drawing out the double reality implicit in the process.¹³⁸ In the mouths of Augustus's posthumous critics, he articulates the mutually beneficial relation between succession and deification while also skewering it: first, deification is always a means to an end, rather than an end in and of itself, and second, the deified emperors are mere simulacra of the old gods. According to Augustus's critics, "filial piety and the crises of the Republic had been taken up as a pretense" (*pietatem erga parentem et tempora rei publicae obtentui sumpta*, *Ann.* 1.10.1). That is, in styling himself *divi filius*, Augustus only *seemed* to be motivated by his sense of duty toward his adopted father and the Republic; what really motivated him was a "lust for domination" (*cupidine dominandi*). This phrase implies Augustus's political ambitions, but can be extended to refer to the conquest of memory—in short, Augustus used his connection to Julius Caesar to lay the groundwork for his own deification. The creation of *divi* is another symptom of the double reality enacted by Augustus. Augustus's critics distinguish between the gods and the deified emperors, the latter who actively diminish the honor paid to the former: "no honor was left to the gods, when he wanted to be cultivated in temples and in cult images by flamens and priests" (*nihil deorum honoribus*

¹³⁸ Haynes calls deification "a fiction that was also a reality" (2003: 6).

*relictum, cum se templis et effigie numinum per flamines et sacerdotes coli vellet, Ann. 1.10.6).*¹³⁹

In short, deified emperors *seemed* like gods, but they were actually sacrilegious interpolations into the established pantheon. Tacitus thus destabilizes the religious aura attached to the deified Julius and the deified Augustus, simulacra of gods who sought deification for their own self-promotion.

In this section, I will frame my discussion of Nero's living deification, which is proposed and rejected at the end of Book 15 of the *Annals*, and the associated deifications of Augusta (his daughter) and Poppaea (the mother of Augusta) in relation to competing models of how successors interacted with their deified predecessors, as formulated by Tiberius and Agrippina the Elder in Book 4. Both Tiberius and Agrippina claimed statuses somewhere between human and divine by virtue of their relation to the deified Augustus. By way of explicating *how* they had access to Augustus's divinity, they also theorized Augustus's ontological status as a deified *princeps*.

Tiberius's theorization of his own divinity vis-à-vis Augustus's, characterized by both proximity and distance, is informed by their inherent difference in status. Because Augustus was deified and Tiberius was not, an inequality that was unresolvable during Tiberius's lifetime, Tiberius conceives of himself as *both* similar to the mortal Augustus and dissimilar to the deified Augustus. According to Tacitus, Tiberius articulated his formulation in response to a delegation sent by Further Spain in 25 CE asking to erect a shrine to Tiberius and his mother. They framed their request as following the precedent set by the cities of Asia, where Tiberius had allowed a cult to himself, Livia, and the senate.¹⁴⁰ But Tiberius rejected the Spanish cult for two reasons:

¹³⁹ For a similar argument—that new deifications are crowding out the old gods—see Hypereides *Epit.* 21.43.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Valerius Maximus's address to Tiberius: "other divinity is proven by opinion, but yours is proven by present belief, and is equal to the star of your grandfather and father" (*cetera divinitas opinione colligitur, tua praesenti fide paterno avitque sideri par videtur, 1 praef*).

first, in accepting the cult in Asia, he was following the precedent set by Augustus, who had allowed a temple to himself and Roma in Pergamum (there was no such precedent for a Spanish cult), and second, while one temple was acceptable, to be consecrated in the image of a god through all of the provinces would be self-aggrandizing (*omnes per provincias effigie numinum sacrari ambitiosum*, *Ann.* 4.37.3) and detract from the honor given to the deified Augustus (*vanescet Augusti honor, si promiscis adulationibus vulgatur*). Although Tiberius frames both his acceptance of the cult to himself, Livia, and the senate in Asia and his rejection of the cult to himself and Livia in Further Spain as following Augustus's precedent—in light of his claim that he follows all of Augustus's deeds and words as law (*omnia facta dictaque eius vice legis observem*)—he reveals a tension inherent in his interpretation of what it means to be Augustus's successor. Cowan articulates some of the questions about succession that this encounter raises:

Tacitus' description of Tiberius' reasons for refusing this request point to some of the key issues facing any (but in particular Augustus') successor: what should or could be done with Augustan precedent and especially with the expectations generated by Augustan practice? How could a successor create space within which to be innovative (for innovation was undeniably necessary)? How should a successor deal with two separate, though obviously related, entities—Augustus the man (the generator of actions and words) and Augustus the god?¹⁴¹

At the heart of Tiberius's problem are the ontological statuses of Augustus and himself. Tiberius cannot follow the precedent of both Augustus the man and Augustus the god without claiming divinity for himself, and possibly, for the *princeps* in general (whoever he may be in the future). Because Tiberius frames deification as a zero-sum game, in which further deifications would detract from the honor paid to the deified Augustus (and presumably, the deified Julius Caesar) he cannot follow Augustan precedent without actively diminishing his predecessors. This argument follows the logic of Augustus's critics at the beginning of the *Annals*, who argue that

¹⁴¹ Cowan 2009: 200

the deified emperors reduce the standing of the established gods (*Ann.* 1.10.6). Although Tiberius frames his decision *not* to follow the precedent of Augustus the god and accept living deification for himself as a means of preserving the sanctity of the deified Augustus, his reasoning might also function as an implicit criticism of the imperial cult, since (according to Tiberius) it is not self-sustaining and further deifications will undermine its authority.

Following his rejection of the Spanish cult, Tiberius expounds on the difference between himself and Augustus. Namely, Tiberius is mortal and hopes that his legacy will be preserved among mortals. But his focus on immaterial memory over material monuments further destabilizes the legitimacy of the imperial cult.

Ego me, patres conscripti, mortalem esse et hominum officia fungi satisque habere, si locum principem impleam, et vos testor et meminisse posteros volo; qui satis superque memoriae meae tribuent, ut maioribus meis dignum, rerum vestrarum providum, constantem in periculis, offensionum pro utilitate publica non pavidum credant. Haec mihi in animis vestris templa, hae pulcherrimae effigies et mansurae. Nam quae saxo struuntur, si iudicium posterorum in odium vertit, pro sepulchris spernuntur. Proinde socios civis et deos ipsos precor, hos ut mihi ad finem usque vitae quietam et intellegentem humani divinique iuris mentem duint, illos ut, quandoque concessero, cum laude et bonis recordationibus facta atque famam nominis mei prosequantur. (*Ann.* 4.38.1-3)

As for me, conscript fathers, that I am mortal, that I discharge the duties of men, and that I consider it sufficient if I fill the foremost place among them—I call you to witness and I want posterity to remember. They will grant enough and more to my memory should they believe that I was worthy of my ancestors, that I was provident of your affairs, that I was steadfast in dangers, that I was not scared of complaints for the sake of the public welfare. These qualities are my temples in your minds, these are my most handsome and enduring likenesses. For those likenesses that are fabricated from stone, if the judgement of posterity turns to hatred, are avoided as if they were tombs. So, I pray to the allies and my fellow citizens and the gods themselves, to the gods, that they give me all the way to the end of my life a mind that is peaceful and understands human and divine law, and to the allies and citizens that, when I will have departed, they describe my deeds and the fame of my name with praise and good memories.

Tiberius reiterates that he is mortal, and that *princeps* is a job for a mortal. This statement is consistent with Augustan precedent, who was also mortal when he was *princeps*. But as Tiberius begins to discuss his hopes for his afterlife, he diverges from his predecessor. He draws a contrast

between two different types of memory: internally motivated memory and externally motivated memory, the latter of which is triggered by material objects. This contrast functions as an implicit comparison of Tiberius and Augustus: while Augustus possesses temples and cult images in the external world, Tiberius aims to have temples and cult images in peoples' minds (*in animis vestris*)—represented by *pietas*, *providentia*, *constantia*, and *fortitudo*.¹⁴² While both Augustus and Tiberius hope to be remembered, Tiberius inadvertently criticizes Augustus by suggesting that a positive reception of material monuments is dependent on a good reputation, rejecting the assumption that material monuments, with their continual presence, would enact a positive legacy. Tiberius drives home the superior status of immaterial memory when he suggests that if the judgement of posterity turns against someone, their temples and portraits are avoided as if they were tombs (*si iudicium posterorum in odium vertit, pro sepulchris spernuntur*). He implies that temples and cult images, and hence the god-like status conferred by deification itself, is dependent on future public opinion. Thus, something that is designed to be lasting and permanent is actually fragile and contingent. But even further, he suggests that it is possible for a deified emperor to die a second death, and if he does, monuments to his god-like status will metamorphize into tombs and funeral portraits. Thus, it is better not to be deified and not to celebrate one's deified status in temples and cult images, because in time, these monuments might come to memorialize the death of their afterlife. A legacy that has no material component, however, will leave behind no material trace, no matter the judgement of posterity. In his monologue, Tiberius articulates a skepticism toward the longevity of imperial cult that is at odds with his piety toward the deified Augustus. Although he has deified Augustus (*Ann.* 1.10.8) and taken actions to sustain his worship, he projects a future in which all reverence for the imperial cult has disappeared.

¹⁴² Martin and Woodman 1989: 189.

The distance between Tiberius and Augustus is picked up by the former's critics, who suggest that it would be impossible for Tiberius to follow the precedent of Augustus the man without also following the precedent of Augustus the god. The critics cast Tiberius as too different from Augustus, not out of piety, but because he is inherently inferior: "some were interpreting [his rejection of divine honors] as modesty, many, a lack of confidence in himself, and certain people, a mark of an inferior soul" (*alii modestiam, multi, quia diffideret, quidam ut degeneris animi interpretabantur*, *Ann.* 4.38.4). Furthermore, hope for deification is supposed to act as a goad for excellence as a mortal.

Optimos quippe mortalium altissima cupere: sic Herculem et Liberum apud Graecos, Quirinum apud nos deum numero additos: melius Augustum, qui speraverit. Cetera principibus statim adesse: unum insatiabiliter parandum, prosperam sui memoriam; nam contemptu famae contemni virtutes. (*Ann.* 4.38.5)

Of course, the best of men desired the greatest heights: so, Hercules and Liber among the Greeks were added to the number of the gods, and Quirinus for us: better Augustus, who had hoped. Everything else was immediately at hand for *principes*: one thing must be prepared for insatiably, a favorable memory for oneself; for disregard of one's reputation meant carelessness for virtues.

As a mortal, Augustus had hoped to be deified, and his hope had made him excellent. If Tiberius did not want to be deified, what was spurring him on to attain excellence as a mortal? As Elsner puts it, "the fulfilment of the imperial office was beset by a permanent anxiety of influence."¹⁴³ Cleave too closely to Augustus and it resembles self-flattery, but too far away and it reveals an unworthy successor.

If Tiberius's theorization of his status vis-à-vis Augustan precedent reveals an ambiguous distance, Agrippina the Elder's theorization of her status is characterized by being the "true image" (*imaginem veram*) of her grandfather. While Tiberius fears that the imperial cult will vanish with

¹⁴³ Elsner 1994: 113.

the passage of time, Agrippina would prefer it to become a cult of Augustus's successors—herself included. Agrippina's viewpoint is best expressed in an altercation between herself and Tiberius in which they contest the relation between a deified predecessor and his living successors—at stake (again) is what it means to be Augustus's successor and how much divinity should be accorded to that person. Agrippina is particularly invested in this debate, since Tiberius is actively attempting to destroy her and her line, which he regards as a threat to his sovereignty.

Agrippina semper atrox, tum et periculo propinquae accensa, pergit ad Tiberium ac forte sacrificantem patri repperit. Quo initio invidiae non eiusdem ait mactare divo Augusto victimas et posteros eius insectari. Non in effigies mutas divinum spiritum transfusum: se imaginem veram, caelesti sanguine ortam, intellegere discrimen, suscipere sordes. (*Ann.* 4.52.2)

Agrippina, always fierce, at that time inflamed by the danger of her cousin, went to Tiberius and by chance found him sacrificing to his father. With this as a provocation of her ill-will, she said that it was not of the same man to sacrifice victims to the deified Augustus and to persecute his descendants. His divine spirit had not been transferred into silent statues: *she* was his true image, born from divine blood, and she perceived the danger and was taking up her dark clothes.

Agrippina the Elder's outburst is prompted by Tiberius's indictment against her cousin, Claudia Pulchra, contrived "so to begin the sequence leading to Agrippina's future destruction" (*ut series futuri in Agrippinam exitii inciperet*, *Ann.* 4.52.1). Since Tacitus characterizes Tiberius as sacrificing to his father, *sacrificantem patri*, it is clear that Tiberius is still positioning himself as *divi filius* and not *divus Tiberius*.

Agrippina, now Germanicus's widow, has been given no comparable titles and is unprotected by Tiberius and the state apparatus. As a way of demonstrating her worthiness to Tiberius, she theorizes an alternate model of succession, in which the title of *divi filius* would lose its potency when unaccompanied by blood relation. She makes the argument that the "true image" (*imaginem veram*) of Augustus is represented not in his cult images, which she characterizes as

“silent” (*mutas*), but in herself, who is “born from divine blood” (*caelesti sanguine ortam*).¹⁴⁴

Blood, she suggests, is the vehicle by which Augustus’s divinity is transferred. If Augustus’s divine spirit (*divinum spiritum*) did not go into his portrait statues, it probably also did not go into Tiberius, who like the portrait statues, is imitative of Augustus rather than biologically related to him. She therefore suggests that she is a better successor than Tiberius, an implication that Tiberius addresses in his response: “he reminded her that she was not wounded because she did not rule” (*admonuit non ideo laedi, quia non regnaret, Ann. 4.52.3*). From Agrippina’s perspective, it is ironic that Tiberius cannot recognize her for what she is—a true image of Augustus, whom Tiberius should be cultivating as he is Augustus’s statues.

At issue is who has a greater claim to Augustus’s divinity: someone or something that is imitative of him (like Tiberius or Augustus’s cult images), or someone who is related to him (like Agrippina the Elder, his granddaughter)? This debate is exemplified by the differences in how Tiberius and Agrippina theorize Augustus’s *imago*. While Tiberius upholds the traditional exemplary function of the *imago*, Agrippina subverts it. If Agrippina were to follow the model of exemplarity, she would consider Augustus’s *imago* an exemplum for herself and attempt to impress his likeness into her soul. Tacitus describes this process in the *Agricola*, when he exhorts Agricola’s daughter (his wife) and widow to hold and express (*tenere et exprimere, Agr. 46.3*) the eternal form of Agricola’s soul (*forma mentis aeterna*) through their own behaviors (*tuis . . . moribus*). But instead, Agrippina argues that she *is* Augustus’s *imago*. She does not need to be imitative of him—because she has a share of his blood, she is *de facto* like him. In making this argument,

¹⁴⁴ Agrippina the Elder also references her biological connection to Augustus (*se divo Augusto ortam*) when Germanicus sends her away from the mutinous German armies in *Ann. 1.40.3*), and during Germanicus’s funeral she is called “the only blood of Augustus” (*solum Augusti sanguinem, Ann. 3.4.2*). Martin and Woodman note that in her use of *transfusum*, Agrippina draws on “the language of popular Pythagoreanism, which believed in the transmigration of souls” (1989: 217). Cf. *Aen. 6.713ff.*

Agrippina collapses the difference between being *like* Augustus and simply *being* Augustus. Contra Tiberius, who claims to be Augustus's successor by way of maintaining mimetic distance between himself and his predecessor, Agrippina represents herself as both Augustus's successor and the true representation of his deified form. By championing biological relation over mimetic resemblance, Agrippina undermines not only Tiberius, but all of Augustus's images, including his cult images and ancestor masks. If she is the "true image" of Augustus, would that make Tiberius a False Augustus? And what of his other images—would they be false too?

Tiberius and Agrippina the Elder's conflicting theorizations of how to be Augustus's successor and the False Nero's imposture/succession of Nero mutually inform one another. By Tacitus's account, Tiberius and Agrippina the Elder both struggled to conceptualize, first, the ontological status of their predecessor Augustus, and second, their own ontological statuses vis-à-vis Augustus. The False Nero complicates this conceptual problem by following someone who is neither alive nor dead (*vario super exitu eius rumore*, *Hist.* 2.8.1). If Nero is alive, and the False Nero is Nero, he would not need to be succeeded or deified. But if Nero is dead, the False Nero would represent both his successor and the living embodiment of his deified form. Nero's ambiguous ontological status—is he alive?—results in the False Nero both *being* Nero and *standing in* for Nero. Like Tiberius, the False Nero is mimetic of his predecessor, and like Agrippina, he is a successor who also *is* his predecessor.

That Nero is replaced postmortem by the False Nero instead of a successor and *divus Nero* might be explained by two factors: one located in the *Histories* and one in the *Annals*. First, and most obviously, the reader of the *Histories* knows that the Julio-Claudian dynasty ended with Nero, and the claimants of 69 CE positioned themselves in opposition to Nero or held power too briefly to enact his deification. As such, Nero's afterlife took shape outside of official channels

and stood in for an aborted future in which the Julio-Claudian dynasty would have continued via mimesis (since relation by blood was no longer an option). But second, in the *Annals*, Tacitus describes Nero as creating the preconditions for innovation on the afterlife of a *princeps*, because he so vehemently suppresses both succession and deification. While Nero seems open to the multiplication of his image in space (discussed in the first part of this chapter), he does everything in his power to prevent his replication in time. His attempts to arrest the passage of time represent a variation on Augustus's Golden Age—except rather than extend his lifetime via mortal and immortal substitutes, he attempts to freeze time and saturate the present moment with his presence. His strategy is two-pronged. On the one hand, he actively eliminates potential usurpers and successors, most recently Piso, the telling of whose conspiracy takes up the latter half of Book 15.¹⁴⁵ And on the other, he refuses deification while he lives. The combination of strategies demonstrates Nero's drive toward temporal singularity, in which his death is constantly deferred.

Nowhere is Nero's anxiety around deification more apparent than in response to Anicius Cerialis's proposal that he receive deified status while he lives at the end of Book 15 of the *Annals*. Just as the replication of the image of the emperor in space creates the conditions of possibility for his usurpation via images, his deification would imply his displacement in time.

Reperio in commentariis senatus Cerialem Anicium consulem designatum pro sententia dixisse, ut templum divo Neroni quam maturime publica pecunia poneretur. Quod quidem ille decernebat tamquam mortale fastigium egresso et venerationem hominum merito, <sed ipse prohibuit, ne interpretatione> quorundam ad omen ac votum sui exitus verteretur: nam deum honor principi non ante habetur, quam agere inter homines desierit. (*Ann.* 15.74.3)

¹⁴⁵ The interchangeability of Nero and Piso is even noted by certain of the Pisonian conspirators, who circulated the saying that "in terms of disgrace, it would make no difference if a citharode were deposed and a tragic actor succeeded him, because just as Nero made a habit of singing to the cithara, Piso did the same in his tragic costume" (*non referre dedecori, si citharoedus demoveretur et tragoedus succederet, quia ut Nero cithara, ita Piso tragico ornatu canebat, Ann.* 15.65).

I find in the records of the senate that Anicius Cerialis, the consul designate, had said as his opinion that a temple to the deified Nero ought to be built as quickly as possible with public funds. Which thing, in fact, Cerialis was proposing as if for one who had reached the mortal summit and deserved the worship of men, <but Nero himself prohibited it, lest by the interpretation> of certain men the act be turned into an omen and prayer for his death. For the honor of the gods is not held by a *princeps* before he has ceased to live among men.

Tacitus articulates two possible interpretations of Nero's proposed deification: on the one hand, a celebration of his exemplary mortal status (*mortale fastigium*) and on the other, an omen and prayer for his death (*omen ac votum sui exitus*). At stake is whether or not deification implies death. Tiberius and Agrippina the Elder have already suggested that death and deification are closely related, insofar as deification is a defense against a mortal death, but because deification is akin to a second life, it creates the conditions of possibility for a second death. Tiberius worried that deification created the preconditions for the death of memory, and hence, the death of the deified emperor. Tiberius's critics, on the other hand, were concerned that because Tiberius was not aiming for deification, he would remain an average mortal, subject to a final death, rather than transcending his mortality via exemplary deeds like Hercules, Liber, Quirinus, and Augustus. Agrippina the Elder equated Augustus's cult images with his corpse, insofar as they were "silent" (*mutas*), and argued instead that his deified spirit lived in her body. Tiberius and Agrippina both raised questions about how to keep the deified *princeps* "alive" and what kinds of death are possible for him.

The proposed deification raises the question of how Nero's deified form would map onto his mortal body—would the process enact his death? As a result, the intended flattery resembles a threat of present replacement—another version of the Pisonian conspiracy, whose actors planned to "rush at him and kill him" (*adcurrerent trucidarentque*, *Ann.* 15.53.2).

It is reasonable for Nero to be paranoid—according to Tacitus, he himself had used deification as a *post hoc* justification for murder. Most notably, he deified Claudius, whom Agrippina the Younger murdered, in order to appropriate the title of *divi filius*. And when Nero was discussing murdering his mother with the freedman Anicetus, the latter suggested that “the *princeps* could add for the deceased a temple, altars, and the other things that serve to display piety” (*additurum principem defunctae templum et aras et cetera ostentandae pietati*, *Ann.* 14.3.3). In both cases, instead of placing the emphasis on extending the life of the deceased, Nero aimed to artificially accelerate their departure from the mortal plane. So, when Anicius Cerialis proposes Nero’s deification, he activates Nero’s fear that deification implies not just death, but murder.

At the time Nero refuses deification, he has already inverted the relation between himself and his successor, who, following the Augustan model, would have succeeded him and deified him following his death. Nero’s putative successor was his daughter Augusta, who once represented hope for the continuation of Nero’s line.

Memmio Regulo et Verginio Rufo consulibus natam sibi ex Poppaea filiam Nero ultra mortale gaudium accepit appellavitque Augustam dato et Poppaeae eodem cognomento. Locus puerperio colonia Antium fuit, ubi ipse generatus erat. Iam senatus uterum Poppaeae commendaverat dis votaue publice susceperat, quae multiplicata exsolutaue. Et additae supplicationes templumque Fecunditati et certamen ad exemplar Actiacae religionis decretum, utque Fortunarum effigies aureae in solio Capitolini Iovis locarentur, ludicrum circense, ut Iuliae genti apud Bovillas, ita Claudia Domitiaeque apud Antium ederetur. Quae fluxa fuere, quartum intra mensem defuncta infante. Rursusque exortae adulationes censentium honorem divae et pulvinar aedemque et sacerdotem. Atque ipse ut laetitiae, ita maeroris inmodicus egit. (*Ann.* 15.23.1-3)

When Memmius Regulus and Verginius Rufus were consuls, Nero received a daughter, born from himself and Poppaea, with beyond mortal joy and named her Augusta, the same cognomen that had been given to Poppaea. The place of her delivery was the colony of Antium, where he himself had been brought forth. The senate had already entrusted Poppaea’s uterus to the gods and had taken up public votive offerings, which were now multiplied and paid. And public prayers were added and a temple was decreed to Fertility as well as a contest following the example of the Actian ceremony, and that gold

likenesses of the Fortunes be placed in the lap of Capitoline Jove, and that a circus game, like the one the *Julii* celebrated at Bovillae, should be celebrated by the *Claudii* and the *Domitii* at Antium. Which things were in the works when, within four months, the child was dead. Again, flatteries sprung up from those recommending the honor of a goddess, a pulvinar, a temple, and a priest. And Nero, just as he acted immoderately in happiness, so too in grief.

The deifications that Tacitus has related up to this time have all followed a certain logic that baby Augusta inverts. Prior to the deification of Augusta, three deifications are extant in Tacitus's narrative: Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Claudius.¹⁴⁶ According to Suetonius, Caligula's sister Drusilla and Augustus's wife Livia were also posthumously deified. But Drusilla's deification falls into a lacuna in the *Annals*, and Tiberius opposed Livia's deification "adding that divine worship should not be decreed: as she herself had wished" (*addito, ne caelestis religio decerneretur: sic ipsam maluisse, Ann. 5.2.1*).¹⁴⁷ Caligula, who was seemingly acknowledged as a god while he lived, also falls into a lacuna. Regardless, the general pattern has been that a successor deifies their predecessor with the assent of the senate (e.g., Augustus deified Caesar, Tiberius Augustus, and Nero Claudius), and the successor appropriates a part of the divinity of which the deified emperor represents the whole. The deification of Augusta breaks with this pattern because a would-be successor is deified by her predecessor. According to Tacitus's telling, Nero conceives of his daughter as a synecdochic part of himself and, more broadly, the family of the Caesars. The name Augusta, bestowed upon both the baby and Poppaea, previously held by Livia (*Ann. 1.14.1*) and Agrippina the Younger (*Ann. 12.26.1*), assimilates baby Augusta to her female predecessors who have been wives of the ruling emperor. That Augusta, like Nero, was

¹⁴⁶ In the *Agricola*, Tacitus refers to the three as *divus Julius* (*Agr. 13.2*), *divus Augustus* (*Agr. 13.2*), and *divus Claudius* (*Agr. 13.3*). Tacitus does not narrate the deification of Julius Caesar, but does those of Augustus (*Ann. 1.10.8*) and Claudius (*Ann. 12.69.3*).

¹⁴⁷ For Drusilla, Suet. *Calig.* 24.2, for Livia, *Claud.* 11.2.

born at Antium, and that Nero plans to celebrate the games of the *Claudii* and the *Domitii* there suggest that Nero also sees Augusta as part of his paternal family lines (as opposed to only the Julian line). So, when Nero deifies her, he rearranges the terms of deification. Instead of granting divinity to a former *princeps*, who proved his worth through world conquest and euergetism, and assimilating himself to his predecessor, Nero becomes the successor of his own deified daughter, a person whom he has already assimilated to himself.¹⁴⁸ Augusta represents a dream of succession that through her death and deification is continually deferred.

If Nero gained *divi filius* from deifying Claudius, he might gain *divae pater* from deifying Augusta. Such a title would be logically upside-down, since claiming to be the mortal parent of a deified child would demonstrate, in a patently obvious way, that divinity does not flow from a deified predecessor to his successor. In order for Augusta to precede Nero in divinity, Nero's divinity (which he does not yet possess) must be projected into the future. Would being the parent of a deified child somehow imply, more than being the son of a deified emperor, Nero's own deification? Tacitus explores the argument that the deification of a child implies the deification of their parent when he narrates Poppaea's funeral, at which Nero suggests that because she is the mother of a deified infant, she too is worthy of deification.

Corpus non igni abolitum, ut Romanus mos, sed regum externorum consuetudine differtum odoribus conditur tumuloque Iuliorum infertur. Ductae tamen publicae exsequiae, laudavitque ipse apud rostra formam eius et quod divinae infantis parens fuisset aliaque fortunae munera pro virtutibus. (*Ann.* 16.6.2)

Her body was not cremated, according to the Roman custom, but in the convention of foreign kings, was preserved stuffed with spices, and interred in the mausoleum of the Julians. Nevertheless, a funeral procession was carried out, and Nero himself, at the rostra, praised her beauty and the fact that she had been the mother of a deified infant daughter, and other gifts of fortune as if they were virtues.

¹⁴⁸ Bosworth 1999.

Poppaea's funeral is an inversion of the traditional Roman funeral, and as such, strangely material. While traditionally, the person eulogizing the dead focused on the deceased's virtues—for example, above Tiberius claimed for himself *pietas*, *providentia*, *constantia*, and *fortitudo*—Nero praises Poppaea's beauty (*formam eius*) and her status as a mother of a deified baby (*divinae infantis parens*) instead of her virtues (*pro virtutibus*). Both of these qualities are functions of her body, which, in contrast to *Romanus mos*, is still hyperpresent.¹⁴⁹ By foregrounding Poppaea's material body instead of her immaterial virtues, Nero complicates her transition from mortal woman to immortal goddess. According to Tiberius's critics, deification is closely linked with a favorable memory for oneself (*prosperam sui memoriam*) and must be earned (*unum insatiabiliter parandum*). But Nero does not suggest that Poppaea has earned her deification, rather he emphasizes her structural connection to the deified Augusta, whose deification in turn hangs on Nero's status as pre-deified. The deifications of Augusta and Poppaea, then, depend more on their associations with Nero than any virtues particular to them. Although they depend on Nero, they also precede him in deification, while their prototype, Livia, succeeded her husband Augustus in deification.¹⁵⁰

That a distinction might be made between Poppaea's deification and Augustus's deification is recognized by at least one internal actor in the *Annals*.¹⁵¹ One of the very last events of the

¹⁴⁹ Typically, disappearance or destruction of the body is a prerequisite for deification. Cf. Romulus's death and deification in Livy: "suddenly a storm, which arose with great noise and thunderings, covered the king with a cloud so dense that it removed him from the sight of his people; then Romulus was no longer on this earth" (*subito coorta tempestas cum magno fragore tonitribusque tam denso regem operuit nimbo ut conspectum eius contioni abstulerit; nec deinde in terris Romulus fuit*, 1.16.1). For the replacement of the body in the divine funeral see already McIntyre 2019: 30-36. For the Egyptianizing aspect of Poppaea's embalmment see Malaise 1972: 403-405, Chioffi 1998: 31, 35-36, Gillespie 2014: 136, Shannon-Henderson 2019: 355.

¹⁵⁰ Shannon-Henderson argues that "in the commemoration of Octavia's death and Poppaea's divinity, [we see] the logical conclusion of honors directed at Livia" (2019: 348).

¹⁵¹ Descriptions of German semi-divine women in the *Germania* and *Histories* hang in the background of Tacitus's narrations of Augusta and Poppaea in the *Annals*. In the *Germania* he writes that the Germans used to worship women "not out of flattery, or as if they were making goddesses" (*non adulatione nec tamquam facerent deas*,

Annals is the death of Thrasea Paetus, a holdout against the growing adulation of the other senators.¹⁵² (As mentioned above, Thrasea Paetus's death takes place during Tiridates' visit to Rome.) In his accusation against Thrasea Paetus, Cossutianus Capito argues that "it is of the same mind not to believe that Poppaea is a goddess, and not to swear to uphold the actions of the deified Augustus and the deified Julius" (*eiusdem animi est Poppaeam divam non credere, cuius in acta divi Augusti et divi Iuli non iurare*, *Ann.* 16.22.3). This argument represents a variation on Agrippina the Elder's accusation of Tiberius: "it was not of the same man to sacrifice victims to the deified Augustus and to persecute his descendants" (*non eiusdem ait mactare divo Augusto victimas et posteros eius insectari*, *Ann.* 4.52.2). In both cases, the speaker suggests that a deified person does not exist in a vacuum, rather, they are implicated in networks of mortals and immortals. The energy that one applies toward a deified person has implications for how they might treat others in their networks. What is notable about Cossutianus Capito's argument is that instead of formulating Poppaea's divinity as stemming from that of Caesar and Augustus (as Agrippina's argument would imply), he argues that belief in her divinity retroactively impacts belief in Caesar and Augustus. In short, a person has to believe in *diva Poppaea* in order to believe in *divus Augustus* and *divus Julius*. The lack of belief that Thrasea Paetus holds toward Poppaea might cause him to refuse the annual oath to uphold the actions of the *princeps* and his

Germ. 8.3), a pointed contrast to deification in the *Annals*, but in the *Histories*, he amends his statement by suggesting that "with growing superstition, they think them to be goddesses" (*augescente superstitione arbitrantur deas*, *Hist.* 4.61.2). On this progression see Haynes 2003: 13-14.

¹⁵² E.g., Thrasea Paetus walks out of the Senate amongst the acts of flattery following Agrippina's death (*Ann.* 14.12.1). For a complete breakdown of how, during the reign on Nero, growing *adulatio* in the senate produces religiously inappropriate outcomes, see Shannon-Henderson 2019: 285-349.

predecessors, dating back to Julius Caesar.¹⁵³ Hence, with every new deification comes new opportunities to destabilize the founders of the principate and the principate itself.

Cassius Dio writes that Seneca told Nero: “no matter how many throats you cut, you cannot kill your successor” (ὅσους ἂν ἀποσφάξῃς, οὐ δύνασαι τὸν διάδοχόν σου ἀποκτεῖναι, Cass. Dio 62.18.3 from Xiphilinus). Although (according to Tacitus) Nero did his best to restrict the passage of time, an attempt summed up by the deification of his successor, which concretized the cessation of his mortal line, he himself was mortal and hence subject to the passage of time. What Nero did do in the *Annals*, however, was obliterate the traditional methods of replacing the *princeps* when he died, which up until this time were represented by succession and deification. While the relation between these two terms was always contested, especially by Agrippina the Elder, who sought to conflate the two, Nero denied both terms: he would not name a successor who would then deify him. In this aspect, Tacitus’s Nero differs from the Nero of the *Octavia*, who explicitly theorizes having children as a way of ensuring his immortality: “the stars will await us too, if I will have anticipated/ with a harsh sword whatever is hostile to me,/ and if I will have established our house with worthy offspring” (*nos quoque manebunt astra, si saevo prior/ ense occuparo quidquid infestum est mihi,/ dignaque nostram subole fundaro domum*, 530-32). Rather, in the *Annals*, Nero creates the necessity for a re-theorization of the relation between succession and deification, which has already come, in the *Histories*, in the form of pretenders and other copycats who formulate their claims not via contiguity, but by mimetic similarity. The False Nero reconceptualizes the traditional dyad of succession and deification, demonstrating, in a way reminiscent of Agrippina the Elder, that these two terms can exist in a single person.

¹⁵³ In 15 CE Tiberius refused to allow the senate to take this oath (*neque in acta sua iurari, quamquam censente senatu, permisit*, *Ann.* 1.72.1), similarly, when Nero was consul in 55 CE, he prohibited his co-consul Lucius Antistius from swearing to obey his acts (*in sua acta collegam Antistium iurare prohibuit*, *Ann.* 13.11.1)

Chapter 3

“Caesar” v. “Nero”: Imitative Genealogy in Suetonius’s *De Vita Caesarum*

In this chapter, I follow Nero and the questions of imitation that accompany him into Suetonius’s *De Vita Caesarum*. The project of biographing a family group allows Suetonius to reorganize the chronology of the principate in a way that brings out replications and resemblances throughout a large swath of time. Suetonius plots the evolution of the multivalent “Caesar” from its origin as a *cognomen* demarcating a branch of the Julii (*Iulii, cuius gentis familia est nostra, Iul. 6.1*), to its eventual use as a *nomen* that signified membership in the family of the Caesars—that is, the “family” of *principes* who held imperial power. Within this structure, Suetonius traces a secondary evolution—that of “Nero”, a Claudian family name which in Sabine meant “strong and active” (*inter cognomina autem et Neronis assumpsit, quo significatur lingua Sabina fortis ac strenuous, Tib. 1.2*), but became wholly saturated with the character of the emperor Nero. While “Nero” is not an explicit through-line in the *DVC*, the name acts as a pendant to “Caesar” that haunts the principate backwards and forwards. Both “Caesar” and “Nero” transition from names passed down in a family line to names that members outside of their respective families took on imitatively. But while “Caesar” is proof that the position of *princeps* is replicable, “Nero” represents the shadow side of replicability: if the functional *princeps* is replicable, so is the tyrannical one. And worse, the two are members of the same family. Thus, the name “Nero” haunts the name “Caesar”, to which it is continually conjoined, even when it is not there at all.

From the outset, Suetonius contrasts his project with that of annalistic history. In terms of temporal scope, Suetonius matches and exceeds Tacitus, since in writing *Divus Iulius* he crosses

the dividing line between republican and imperial history.¹⁵⁴ But Suetonius makes it clear that his sense of temporality is different from that of an annalist. First, he abandons the yearly rotation of the consuls as a marker of temporal difference. In organizing the sweep of the principate, he places the emphasis not on the year, but the life. He thus asserts what is already evident: time is no longer marked by the consuls, but the *princeps*. And second, Suetonius writes each *Vita* in a nonlinear fashion, creating the impression that time within each *princeps*' reign becomes jumbled and loses a sense of forward motion.

While the *Vitae* are organized chronologically, temporality flows loosely within each *Vita*. Each *Vita* follows the model of a “rubric sandwich”: the ends of the sandwich are the chronological events of birth and death, and the filling is the non-chronological material organized by rubrics.¹⁵⁵ Suetonius describes his goal for rubrication in *Divus Augustus*: “I will proceed upon the parts one by one, organized not by periods of time but by topics, so that the parts are able to be represented and understood more clearly” (*partes singillatim neque per tempora sed per species exsequar, quo distinctius demonstrari cognoscique possint*, Aug. 9.1). Suetonius rejects chronological organization in favor of organization by category—the latter allows him to synthesize temporally disparate actions into overviews that can be viewed at a glance.¹⁵⁶ Suetonius's system of rubrication serves two larger goals of the *DVC*: first, to

¹⁵⁴ The *DVC* slightly postdates Tacitus's works. While it is possible that Tacitus was still writing under Hadrian, Suetonius definitively was. The *DVC* was published during the ten years of Hadrian's reign, following Suetonius's appointment as *ab epistulis* for the emperor (commemorated by the Hippo inscription first published by E. Marec and H.G. Pflaum).

¹⁵⁵ Hurley 2014: 21.

¹⁵⁶ As Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 1.2.

determine the exemplarity of each individual *princeps*, and second, to map behavioral trends across *principes*.¹⁵⁷

Suetonius structures the *DVC* in terms of parts *versus* whole. Although the *Vitae* of the *DVC* broadly follow chronological progression, each *Vita* recontextualizes and reframes others across the collection. Unlike annals, *Vitae* overlap temporally, prompting Suetonius and his readers to think backwards and forwards to corresponding moments throughout the collection. For example, in order to tell the story of Nero's birth, Suetonius must retrace his steps to Caligula's principate (*Ner.* 6.1-2). Nero, in turn, reappears as late as *Divus Vespasianus*, for Suetonius must explain that Vespasian accompanied Nero to Greece (*Vesp.* 4.4). The idea of Nero appears again in *Divus Titus*; Titus was expected to be a second Nero (*denique propalam alium Neronem et opinabantur et praedicabant*, *Tit.* 7.1). *Principes* are not circumscribed to their own *Vitae*; in order to get the full picture of their lives, one must read for them across the collection. Where *principes* themselves do not repeat, their characteristics and behaviors do. By studying the family of the Caesars through its generations, Suetonius is able to plot a constellation of repeating elements that span the entire work.

One such constellation is evident in the reported dream of Vespasian, in which he and his sons are balanced against Claudius and Nero. This dream, I suggest, provides a model of how to read the *DVC*, by prompting the reader to compare individual *principes* and dynastic groups.

Dicitur etiam vidisse quondam per quietem stateram media parte vestibuli Palatinae domus positam examine aequo, cum in altera lance Claudius et Nero starent, in altera ipse ac filii. Nec res fefellit, quando totidem annis parique temporis spatio utrique imperaverunt. (*Vesp.* 25)

It is also said that he once dreamed of a pair of scales, positioned in the middle part of the vestibule of the Palatine house, with the beam balanced: Claudius and Nero were

¹⁵⁷ Gunderson (2014: 130-131) 5/29/2024 4:29:00 PM: "Suetonius turned the immanent politics of exemplification in the Augustan age into a politics of exemplification as it applies to the project of reading and writing Caesars."

standing in one pan, while he and his sons were standing in another. And the portent did not fail, when they both ruled for the same number of years and an equal space of time.

The dream articulates a measure of sameness between Claudius and Nero versus Vespasian, Titus and Domitian. Suetonius interprets this equivalence in terms of time: both ruled for twenty-seven years. But the balanced scale invites other comparisons.¹⁵⁸ First, both groups are comprised of a father and his son(s): Nero was Claudius's son by adoption, while Titus and Domitian were Vespasian's biological sons. And both groups represent dynasties. One might observe that Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian represent the complete Flavian dynasty, while Claudius and Nero comprise only two-fifths of the Julio-Claudians. But the term "Julio-Claudian" is monolithic only in retrospect; after Caligula's assassination, the chain of filiation was broken. Caligula had been named Tiberius's heir (along with Tiberius Gemellus, *Tib.* 76), but Claudius had not been named heir or adopted by Caligula; at this point, it would have been against precedent for Caligula (a younger emperor) to adopt Claudius (an older successor).¹⁵⁹ It is less the case that Claudius succeeds Caligula than that he restarts the Julio-Claudian dynasty from scratch—which ends a second time with Nero's suicide. Both the Flavian dynasty and the mini-dynasty of Nero and Claudius might then be read as repetitions of Augustus through Caligula: all three dynasties

¹⁵⁸ Another way that Suetonius "weighs" his emperors is by the length of their written *Vitae*. *DVC* spans twelve Caesars, but only eight rolls of papyrus. Suetonius follows the pattern of one Caesar per volume through Nero, then switches to three Caesars per volume for the last two volumes. Suetonius implicitly suggests that the post-Julio-Claudians emperors are less substantial than their Julio-Claudian predecessors (including Julius Caesar). In terms of written content, Claudius and Nero weigh twice as much as the Flavians. They do, however, weigh as the same as Galba, Otho, and Vitellius and the Flavians, making the ratio 2:6. The greater emphasis on the Julio-Claudians may be a result of Suetonius working out emperor archetypes early on (from Julius Caesar through Nero) and drawing on this material as he tackled the post-Julio-Claudian era.

¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, Caligula's death opened up two days in which the senate seriously considered restoring the republic (*de mutando rei p. statu*, *Claud.* 11.1), thus prompting Claudius, once he had gained imperial power, to destroy the memory of what had transpired during that time period.

begin with a *princeps* who remakes his position and ends with one who inherits it and loses it. In reading the *DVC*, Suetonius encourages his readers to keep such structural comparisons in mind.

The primary structure that the *DVC* works out is “C” (Caesars). Thus, the question: what is a Caesar? *Prima facie*, Caesar is a *cognomen* that marks a branch of the *Iulii*, hence *Gaius Iulius Caesar*.¹⁶⁰ But Suetonius never refers to Caesar by his tripartite name, preferring *Gaius Caesar* (e.g. *Iul.* 30.4). Suetonius’s choice to drop *Iulius* foreshadows the eclipse of the *Iulii* by the *Caesares*; the latter eventually become so distinguished that they no longer find it necessary to advertise the larger family to which they belong.¹⁶¹

But Caesar also mutates from a *cognomen* to something approximating a title of competence.¹⁶² First, Augustus inherits the name Gaius Caesar via his great-uncle’s will (*Gai Caesaris et deinde Augusti cognomen assumpsit, alterum testamento maioris avunculi, alterum Munati Planci sententia, Aug.* 7.2). Here, Suetonius explicitly refers to Caesar as a *cognomen*. The name is then used by successive *principes* regardless of filiation. Tiberius is Tiberius Caesar (*Tib.* 23) and Caligula is another Gaius Caesar (*Calig.* 1.1); presumably both inherited the name via their predecessors’ wills. But Claudius is Claudius Caesar (*Claud.* 1.1) despite never having been named Caligula’s successor. One would expect Nero to follow Claudius’s precedent and become Nero Caesar, but Suetonius never refers to Nero as Caesar at all (he has the same policy for Otho and Titus).

¹⁶⁰ Henderson approaches the issue of compositional unity when he asks “was Suetonius’s Julius a Caesar?”. The answer, he suggests, is both yes and no. Henderson calls Julius “an absent presence” who both makes up one half of the Julius-Augustus dyad between which future emperors might be placed, and a one-off (2014: 109).

¹⁶¹ Syme sums up: “The Julii, the dominant faction of the *nobilitas*, are now known as the ‘Caesares’” (1958: 187).

¹⁶² The opposite of *Imperator*, which begins as a title of competence but becomes part of Augustus’s name (Syme 1958: 177).

Post Julio-Claudian dynasty, when the family of the *Caesares* has ended, “Caesar” becomes something else. Although it is still a name, it is also an office, for Suetonius writes that Galba laid down the position of governor and took up that of Caesar (*deposita legati suscepit Caesaris appellationem*, *Galb.* 11). Suetonius suggests that the offices of *legatus* and *Caesar* have some commonalities, since Galba is able to exchange one for the other. “Caesar” now comes with a job description; it is not just something that one is called, but something that one does. Vitellius is the outlier here; he is the only one of Suetonius’s twelve Caesars to refuse to be called Caesar (*Caesaris in perpetuum recusavit*, *Vit.* 8.2). He instead defines his office of imperial power by the *cognomen* Germanicus, which aligns him with Drusus the Elder who first bore the name (*Claud.* 1.3), and Claudius’s brother Germanicus. By the Flavian period, Caesar is used interchangeably with *princeps*: Vespasian and Domitian are referred to as Caesar by third parties (*Vesp.* 13; *Dom.* 3.1, 12.2). Domitian is also acclaimed Caesar after the conclusion of the war with Vitellius (*Caesar consalutatus*, *Dom.* 1.3), thus suggesting that although *Caesares* can still be born, they can also be made by popular consensus.

So, there were two ways to become a Caesar. First, people who were part of the family of the *Caesares* could inherit the name. Here, Caesar acts like a name and not another word for *princeps*, for some *Caesares* never held imperial power (e.g., Gaius and Lucius Caesar, *Tib.* 52.2). Second, one could gain the status of a Caesar through imitative patterns of behavior. Two options were self-styling or acclamation; in both cases, the to-be Caesar was perceived as mimetically similar to previous *Caesares*. The two axes of family connection and mimesis (otherwise construed as *imagines* and *exempla*) underlie the structure of Caesars in the *DVC*. The two-headedness of “Caesar” affords Suetonius a certain flexibility in defining the relation of Caesars to one another. Sometimes Caesars from different families are mimetically similar (e.g., Vespasian undertakes

building projects honoring Augustus and Claudius, *Vesp.* 9.1); sometimes Caesars from the same family are different (e.g., Tiberius fails to live up to Augustus's example). This structure allows Suetonius to praise or disparage a single Caesar without implicating the entire institution. It is not the case that the structure of the Caesars—sustained as it is by two methods of inheritance—is faulty. Rather, the structure is what makes moderate *principes* exceptional and tyrannical ones bearable.

In the *DVC*, Nero makes an intervention at the intersection of family relation and mimetic similarity. Like “Caesar,” “Nero” was originally a *cognomen*—in this case, used by the patrician branch of the Claudian family (*Tib.* 1.2). “Caesar” and “Nero” were not always incompatible, since Tiberius held both names (*Tib.* 42.1). But after Nero extinguished the family lines of the *Nerones* and the *Caesares* in one fell swoop, “Nero,” like “Caesar,” had to be transmitted through mimetic similarity. Individuals either self-styled as “Nero,” notably Otho, Vitellius, and the False Neros, or were assimilated to Nero vis-à-vis his status as a negative *exemplum*. Hence “Nero” comes to represent a dynasty of illegitimate emperors (either pretenders or *principes* who were posthumously delegitimized) that both imitates the structure of the *Caesares* and is at odds with it. “Nero” represents an aspect of “Caesar” that the ideology of the principate attempts to repress and diminish, but remains a latent potentiality—in short, that a Caesar will reveal himself to be an impostor (a “Nero”). In what follows, I trace the development of the name “Nero” from a family name to a prototype for imitation. This development happens from both the inside and the outside. First, Suetonius attempts to dissociate Nero from the name “Caesar” by emphasizing his connection to other lineages, e.g., the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* and the group of “bad emperors” (most notably, Caligula). In the *DVC*, Nero will come to replace Caligula as the primary negative *exemplum* for a Caesar. But second, Suetonius's Nero wants the same thing as Suetonius. Nero

purposefully detaches himself from his family context (e.g., the *Domitii Ahenobarbi*, the *Claudii Neronēs*, and the *Caesares*) and attempts to establish the name Nero as its own authoritative reference point. Of course, Suetonius is ultimately the one pulling the strings—his Nero tells us very little about how the historical Nero might have self-styled. The Nero in the *DVC*, however, seems to actively desire that he will be the last Nero and the last Caesar of his family line, and styles himself the first of a successive dynasty that will survive based solely on the imitations of others.

Nero's Paternal Ancestors: The *Domitii Ahenobarbi*

Throughout Nero's *Vita*, Suetonius dissociates Nero from the Julio-Claudians by emphasizing his connection to the paternal side of his family.¹⁶³ Nero's connection to the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* appears most clearly at the beginning and end of his *Vita*. Suetonius dedicates the first five sections of Nero's *Vita* to the *Domitii Ahenobarbi*, who prefigure Nero's vices. He returns to them when, after Nero's death, he is interred in the family tomb of the *Domitii* (*gentili Domitiorum monumento*, *Ner.* 50.1) instead of the Mausoleum of Augustus. Suetonius thus creates the impression that Nero—an anomalous Caesar—emerges from the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* and, after his death, is assimilated back into that family. Following Hurley's "rubric sandwich," the chronological ends of the sandwich correspond to the name "Ahenobarbus," while the rubricated filling corresponds to "Nero." But Nero's connection to the paternal side of his family also reemerges throughout his *Vita* in the form of his given name, *Lucius Domitius*

¹⁶³ The *Domitii Ahenobarbi* became entwined with the *Julii* through Gnaeus Domitius's marriage to Antonia the Elder (a daughter of Octavia and Mark Antony). Their son, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, was Nero's father. Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus was first cousins with Germanicus: the two shared Mark Antony as a grandfather. Nero was hence related to Mark Antony (the anti-Julio-Claudian Caesar) on both sides of his family.

Ahenobarbus.¹⁶⁴ Nero is called “Ahenobarbus” twice in his *Vita*, first by Britannicus, and then by Julius Vindex; in both cases, the use of the name implies illegitimacy.

In beginning with the *Domitii Ahenobarbi*, Suetonius employs a common rhetorical strategy: attack an opponent’s ancestors in order to diminish his credibility.¹⁶⁵ This rhetorical strategy is based on the assumption that a person’s character can be judged by the character of his ancestors. But Nero has access to two family identities: his birth family and his adopted one. Historically, family identity cut across biological connection versus adoption, since it was transmitted via conscious emulation or passive assimilation.¹⁶⁶ Since Nero was adopted into the family of the *Claudii Neronēs*, Suetonius could have begun Nero’s *Vita* with that set of ancestors. That he begins with the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* suggests that he does not count Nero a real member of the *Claudii Neronēs*; despite his adoption, he retains the character of the family into which he was born.

Suetonius has other reasons for protecting the *Claudii Neronēs*: the reputations of Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius are all at stake. Suetonius told the origin of the *Claudii Neronēs* at the beginning of Tiberius’s *Vita*. Although the *Vitae* of both Caligula and Claudius could have begun in the same place, Suetonius chooses to start Caligula’s *Vita* with Germanicus and Claudius’s with Drusus the Elder. In contrast, because Nero is the only *princeps* from the *Domitii Ahenobarbi*, Suetonius is free to mold their family identity to be a reflection of Nero alone.

¹⁶⁴ Suetonius writes that the *Claudii Neronēs* discarded the praenomen “Lucius” after two family members with that name were convicted of crimes (*Tib.* 1.2). Hence, Nero’s praenomen is incompatible with his later identity.

¹⁶⁵ Barton 1994: 51; *Ner.* 19.3.

¹⁶⁶ E.g., Cic. *Phil.* 10.20.

Barton notes the uncanny similarity of the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* to Nero himself. This similarity suggests that Suetonius is not merely recording a preexisting narrative, but shaping a new one. Following this line of thought, Suetonius's characterization of the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* would result from his projection of Nero's vices into the past.¹⁶⁷

In the case of Nero, many of the themes of his life are foreshadowed by his ancestors: not only examples of cruelty, arrogance, extravagance and rudeness, but even specific incidents, like the attempt at suicide which failed through cowardice (2.3), or the putting of equestrians and matrons of rank on the stage (4.1).¹⁶⁸

In short, the *imagines* of the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* all look like Nero. Suetonius thus reverses the hierarchy between Nero and his ancestors. Instead of Nero modelling himself on the *exempla* of his ancestors, Suetonius fashions *exempla* that serve to explain Nero's behavior.

The reading that Suetonius inflects the character of Nero's ancestors based on Nero himself (of course) runs contrary to Suetonius's own claims. Suetonius explains that he introduces the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* in order to demonstrate how Nero inverted traditional ancestor worship by consciously emulating his ancestors' vices.

Pluris e familia cognosci referre arbitror, quo facilius appareat ita degenerasse a suorum virtutibus Nero, ut tamen vitia cuiusque quasi tradita et ingenita rettulerit. (*Ner.* 1.2)

I think it is important to examine several members of his family, so that it appear more obvious that Nero fell short of his ancestor's virtues, just as he repeated their vices as if they were handed down and inborn.

Nero repeats the vices of his ancestors as if (*quasi*) they were handed down (*tradita*) and inborn (*ingenita*). These two methods of transmission correspond to what we would call "nurture" and "nature." *Tradere* suggests either study of one's ancestors or passive assimilation of their values.

¹⁶⁷ Garrett (2021: 777-786) argues that Suetonius retools an existing family identity for the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* (namely that they were sharp, rude, and ferocious) in order to better prefigure Nero's vices.

¹⁶⁸ Barton 1994: 51.

Inignere, on the other hand, means “to instill by birth.” Together, *tradere* and *ingignere* span the possible reasons for similarity within a family group. Suetonius suggests that Caesars who became vicious did so via both nature and nurture. For example, later in Nero’s *Vita*, Suetonius attributes Nero’s wantonness (*petulantia*), lust (*libido*), excess (*luxuria*), greed (*avaritia*), and inhumanity (*crudelitas*), to nature, and not to youth (*naturae illa vitia, non aetatis esse, Ner.* 26.1). But when it comes to Domitian, he writes that he “turned even his virtues into vices” (*virtutes quoque in vitia deflexit, Dom.* 3.2), suggesting that he shaped his own trajectory vis-à-vis virtues and vices. In the passage above, Suetonius remains equivocal on whether Nero’s vices were naturally occurring or learned. But insofar as Nero had agency, Suetonius suggests that he cultivated the values of his ancestors in order to become more like them. Only, these values happened to be his ancestors’ vices instead of their virtues.

Nero, Caligula, and Claudius: Portended Repetition

After beginning with the *Domitii Ahenobarbi*, Suetonius turns to the story of Nero’s birth. Here, Suetonius foregrounds a connection between Nero and his two most recent imperial predecessors: Caligula and Claudius. He couches this relation not in the language of family identity, but in that of portents—one of the primary ways Suetonius links unrelated *principes* to one another.¹⁶⁹ Although Nero is related to both Caligula and Claudius (Caligula is his maternal uncle and Claudius his maternal great-uncle), Suetonius suggests that this is not (necessarily) the cause of Nero’s similarity to them. Rather, the similarity might be attributed to a pattern,

¹⁶⁹ Osgood (2013: 37) argues that Suetonius conceives of imperial succession as governed by fate, and that one of the ways that fate communicates its intentions is via portents. For more on portents, see Wallace-Hadrill 1983: 192-193.

announced by portents, in which the same set of characteristics appears across successive Caesars.

Suetonius writes that when Nero was born, there was negative speculation about his birth chart. Suetonius seems to think that this speculation was justified and contributes two anecdotes that he takes as portentous of Nero's eventual bad qualities. Both anecdotes center on Nero's relation to his fathers: first Domitius, Nero's biological father, and then Claudius, Nero's adoptive father.

De genitura eius statim multa et formidulosa multis coniectantibus praesagio fuit etiam Domiti patris vox, inter gratulationes amicorum negantis quicquam ex se et Agrippina nisi detestabile et malo publico nasci potuisse. Eiusdem futurae infelicitatis signum evidens die lustrico exstitit; nam C. Caesar, rogante sorore ut infanti quod vellet nomen daret, intuens Claudium patruum suum, a quo mox principe Nero adoptatus est, eius se dixit dare, neque ipse serio sed per iocum et aspernante Agrippina, quod tum Claudius inter ludibria aulae erat. (*Ner.* 6.1-2)

Immediately, many people were providing numerous alarming interpretations of his birth chart and even his father, Domitius, contributed a statement that was taken as an omen. In response to his friends' congratulations, Domitius said that nothing was able to be born from himself and Agrippina that was not abominable and a source of public evil. A clear sign of this same future misfortune emerged on his name day; for Gaius Caesar, when his sister asked him to give whatever name he wanted to the baby, looked at his uncle Claudius, by whom Nero was later adopted, and said that he would give Claudius's name not seriously, but as a joke—and Agrippina ignored the suggestion because Claudius was one of the laughingstocks of the court.

Suetonius writes that both stories clearly indicate (*signum evidens*) the same future misfortune (*eiusdem futurae infelicitatis*)—namely, that Nero would become a monstrous Caesar. But each of the portents follows its own logic. First, Domitius's claim that any offspring of himself and Agrippina was bound to be abominable and a public evil (*detestabile et malo publico*) casts blame on two sets of ancestors: his own, and Agrippina's. The description of the to-be Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus (later known as Nero) as *detestabilis* echoes Suetonius's previous description of Domitius as “abominable in every part of his life” (*omni parte vitae*

detestabilem, *Ner.* 5.1). Domitius thus predicts that his son will be a negative repetition of himself. But he also suggests that Agrippina will contribute to Nero's monstrousness—perhaps, in part, because she is Caligula's sister (and, Suetonius claims, they had an incestuous relationship, *Calig.* 24.1, 36.1). In implicating Agrippina, who is a direct descendant of Augustus through Augustus's daughter Julia, Domitius suggests that Augustus's line is not as unimpeachable as it may seem, since Nero will be a hybrid of his parents' monstrous union.

Domitius's (or Suetonius's) choice of *quicquam* to refer to his offspring suggests that he does not even expect him (it?) to be human. This word predicts both the augmented status Nero will inhabit as *princeps* and his eventual descent into animality. The *princeps* (whoever he is) is made freakish by his singularity and thus simpatico with other creatures that exist in the liminal spaces between humans and gods or humans and animals. Ní Mheallaigh draws a connection between the emperor, who is “an aberration, unique and isolated in his social status” and the human-animal hybrids he collects in his storehouse.¹⁷⁰ For example, Suetonius writes that Augustus decorated his villa at Capreae with the so-called bones of giants (*quae dicuntur gigantum ossa*, *Aug.* 72.3). Nero does not collect hybrid humans, but embodies one: he uses his status as *princeps* as a gateway to acting like a non-human animal. As Curry argues, when Nero willingly pretends to be an animal (*Ner.* 29), he inadvertently creates a role for himself that he must reprise at the end of his life when he is forced to crawl on all fours (*quadrupes*, *Ner.* 48.4) in order to hide in his freedman Phaon's villa.¹⁷¹ Domitius thus shows prescience of Nero's extreme bifurcation in status: as *princeps* he becomes more than human, as an animal he becomes less.

¹⁷⁰ ní Mheallaigh 2014: 264.

¹⁷¹ Curry 2014.

The second portent in the story of Nero's birth enforces a model of similarity via naming. Caligula, who is emperor at the time, speaks the portent: the still unnamed child should be named after Claudius (Literally, "he said that he would give him Claudius's name," *eius se dixit dare*, but Caligula doesn't specify *which* of Claudius's names.) Caligula's joke splits the difference between calling two people the same name in order to point out underlying similarities (Claudius and Agrippina's baby are both jokes) and imposing those similarities (because Agrippina's baby is named Claudius, he will become a joke).¹⁷² Either way, Caligula means to insult all three of his relatives. But portents are never straightforward, and Caligula's joke will come true in an unintended way. Caligula unwittingly foreshadows the baby's adoption by Claudius and his assumption of the name Nero (*adsciturus in nomen Neronem*, *Claud.* 39.2). While Claudius never held the name Nero himself, he had access to it through his father Drusus the Elder. Thus, Agrippina's baby *is* given Claudius's name. When Claudius adopts Nero, Nero becomes both his son and his successor to the position of *princeps*. After Claudius's death, Nero will solidify this relationship by deifying him (*Ner.* 9).

In addition to the portentous utterances that frame Nero as a repetition of his two fathers, Suetonius relates a dream of Seneca that suggests Nero will replicate the behaviors of Caligula. Although Nero and Caligula are related (Caligula is Nero's maternal uncle), Suetonius de-emphasizes family relation in favor of mimetic similarity. These two types of relation underlie the structure of the Caesars. In the case of Nero and Caligula, mimesis opens up an alternate genealogy of "bad" emperors (Suetonius's assessments of Julius Caesar and Tiberius were more nuanced).

¹⁷² To give another example: Suetonius ends Caligula's life with the observation that all Caesars who had the praenomen Gaius perished by the sword (*observatum autem notatumque est in primis Caesares omnes, quibus Gai praenomen fuerit, ferro perisse*, *Calig.* 60).

Undecimo aetatis anno a Claudio adoptatus est Annaeoque Senecae iam tunc senatori in disciplinam traditus. Ferunt Senecam proxima nocte visum sibi per quietem C. Caesari praecipere, et fidem somnio Nero brevi fecit prodita immanitate naturae quibus primum potuit experimentis. Namque Britannicum fratrem, quod se post adoptionem Ahenobarbum ex consuetudine salutasset, ut subditivum apud patrem arguere conatus est. (*Ner.* 7.1)

In the eleventh year of his life, he was adopted by Claudius and handed over to Annaeus Seneca, then already a senator, for instruction. They say that the following night, Seneca dreamed he was instructing Gaius Caesar, and Nero shortly gave credibility to the dream by revealing the monstrosity of his nature at the first possible opportunity. For when his brother Britannicus greeted Nero after his adoption as Ahenobarbus out of habit Nero tried to convince his father that he was an impostor.

Suetonius's use of the word *tradere* recalls the inculcated vices (*vitia tradita*, *Ner.* 1.2) that Nero received from the *Domitii Ahenobarbi*. In this passage, Claudius, Nero's adoptive father, hands Nero over to Seneca (*traditus*) in order that Nero might gain access to an alternate, nonfamilial tradition. This is potentially a move on Claudius's part to counteract the negative influence of Nero's paternal ancestors. Seneca, however, quickly realizes that his pupil is already implicated in a tradition—that of Caligula, who was hostile toward Seneca. According to Suetonius, Caligula, himself a powerful orator, criticized Seneca for writing only ostentatious speeches ("*commissiones meras*" *componere*) and being sand without lime (*harenam esse sine calce*, *Calig.* 53.2). Seneca thus inherits a student who has himself inherited Caligula's arrogance and resistance to Seneca's teachings.

The proof that Nero is another Caligula, Suetonius claims, comes in the form of an exchange between Nero and his step-brother and rival Britannicus that foreshadows the former's eventual usurpation of the latter. Claudius granted Nero and Britannicus a share of equality when he adopted Nero. Suetonius suggests, however, that Claudius could have avoided the problem of two heirs, since his adoption of Nero was both unprecedented and unnecessary. Suetonius writes that prior to Nero's adoption, Claudius "kept on saying that no one had ever been admitted to the

Claudian family via adoption” (*identidem divulgavit neminem umquam per adoptionem familiae Claudiae insertum*, *Claud.* 39.2). While the Claudian line had been depleted by the adoptions of Tiberius (*Aug.* 65.1) and Germanicus (*Tib.* 15.2; *Calig.* 1.1; 4.1) into the family of the *Caesares*, Claudius already had an heir and did not need another one. As it happened, Nero and Britannicus were doomed to repeat the dynamic between Tiberius’s co-heirs, Caligula and Tiberius’s grandson Tiberius Gemellus (*Tib.* 76), in which Caligula resolved the question of succession by setting Tiberius’s will aside (*Calig.* 14.1). Although Claudius created the conditions of possibility for repetition, Nero is the one who will prove his structural similarity to Caligula by seizing imperial power and eventually killing Britannicus.

But Nero’s usurpation of Britannicus is still to come. What Suetonius focalizes in this passage is a contest of names between Nero and Britannicus: “Ahenobarbus” versus *subditivus*. First, Britannicus greets Nero as “Ahenobarbus.” Suetonius vouches for Britannicus: it was an accident from force of habit (*ex consuetudine*). But accident or not, Britannicus’s “forgetfulness” cuts across Nero’s self-styling and suggests that he does not recognize Nero’s new name, and, consequently, his new position as Claudius’s adopted son and potential heir. Here, Britannicus participates in a discourse about renaming germane to the early principate, following the rebranding of Octavian as Augustus (*Aug.* 7.2). Britannicus suggests that a new name cannot make someone new; it can only repackage the same character they have always had.

That names do little to change a person’s essential identity is demonstrated by Britannicus’s own name change, which had no effect on his status as a legitimate heir. Suetonius writes that Britannicus was once called Germanicus, the name earned by Claudius’s father Drusus for himself and his descendants (*Germanici cognomen ipsi posterisque eius*, *Claud.* 1.3). But then his name was changed to Britannicus, the name recognizing Claudius’s victory over

Britain (*Claud.* 27.1). The name “Britannicus” participates in an aborted lineage. While the name “Germanicus” looks back to Claudius’s father, brother, and Claudius himself, “Britannicus” only refers back to Claudius. Still, Britannicus’s name change is minimal when compared to Nero’s more substantial change. Britannicus trades one *agnomen* signifying a family accomplishment for another. But Nero switches *gens*: from the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* to the *Claudii Neronēs*. Britannicus’s “mistake” (calling Nero “Ahenobarbus”) makes it clear that Nero was born further away from imperial power. Should Nero have called Britannicus “Germanicus,” the error would not have produced the same effect.

Nero, however, turns the accusation of illegitimacy back on Britannicus by trying to convince Claudius that Britannicus is not his biological son. *Subditivus* is the word Seneca uses in his *Oedipus* to describe Oedipus’s status as Merope’s son (i.e., Merope is not his *vera parens*, 802).¹⁷³ Nero implies that Britannicus is the product of an adulterous union between Messalina and an anonymous partner. In the *Octavia*, Nero uses the same accusation in order to discredit Octavia’s lineage (*incesta genetrix detrahit generi fidem*, 536). In countering “Ahenobarbus” with *subditivus*, Nero attempts to equalize the respective statuses of himself and Britannicus. But in doing so, he reveals his insecurity about how qualified he is to be Claudius’s heir, and suggests that he might be the real impostor in the family.

Caligula and the Drive to Edit One’s Ancestors

¹⁷³ *Subditivus* is strikingly similar to *insitivus*; the word Octavia uses to describe Nero in the *Octavia* (249). *Insitivus* spans a range of meanings from “adopted” to “spurious”.

In his attempt to edit Britannicus's ancestry as a way of bolstering his own, Nero once again follows the precedent of his dream-double Caligula.¹⁷⁴ Suetonius writes that Caligula was so preoccupied with having a "legitimate" lineage that he preferred to claim descent from incest rather than admit he was related to Agrippa.¹⁷⁵

Agrippae se nepotem neque credi neque dici ob ignobilitatem eius volebat
suscensebatque, si qui vel oratione vel carmine imaginibus eum Caesarum insererent.
Praedicabat autem matrem suam ex incesto, quod Augustus cum Iulia filia admisisset,
procreatam. (*Calig.* 23.1)

Caligula did not want people to believe or say that he was the grandson of Agrippa because the latter had been low-born, and he grew enraged if anyone placed him among the ancestral images of the Caesars in speech or song. He proclaimed instead that his mother had been conceived from incest because Augustus had had intercourse with his daughter Julia.

Caligula attempted to reconfigure his family tree in order to exclude his maternal grandfather, Agrippa. Caligula's prohibition against "inserting" (*insererent*) Agrippa into the *images* of the Caesars looked forward to Claudius's boast that no one except Nero had ever been inserted (*insertum*) into the Claudian family via adoption.¹⁷⁶ From Caligula's (deeply erroneous) perspective, he was protecting the line of the Caesars against fictitious incursions. Once he had excised Agrippa, he revealed the "truth": that Augustus was the father of both Julia and Agrippina the Elder. Instead of retaining Augustus as the progenitor of the Caesars, Caligula reinserted him into the subsequent generation. Agrippa was displaced, and Caligula could claim

¹⁷⁴ Nero and Caligula replicate a strategy used by Suetonius himself, who, I argued above, edits the *images* of the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* to make them look more like Nero.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Sen. *Controv.* 2.4.13: "Marcus Agrippa was among those who were not born noble, but made" (*erat M. Agrippa inter eos qui non nati sunt nobiles sed facti*).

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Sen. *Controv.* 2.4.13: "now through adoption he is raised from the lowest point and is inserted into the nobility (*iam iste ex imo per adoptionem nobilitati inseritur*).

closer relation to Augustus. Tiberius had already adopted Caligula, making Augustus Caligula's grandfather via adoption; now he was doubly his grandfather via incest.¹⁷⁷

Caligula's elimination of Agrippa's ancestral mask points to the importance of the *imagines* as a nexus between past and future action. *Imagines*—whether material or immaterial—encouraged living descendants to double the positive traits of their deceased ancestors. From the Republican period, *imagines* were displayed in the *atria* of elite families' homes and brought into use during the Roman funeral, when, Polybius writes, each living family member would put on the mask and clothing of the ancestor they most resembled.¹⁷⁸ Outside of the context of the funeral, *imagines* watched over family members and reminded them to conserve and reiterate the values of the past. Thus, when an *imago* was removed from a family group, the action was a prohibition against repetition. The list of punishments for Gnaeus Piso, Germanicus's alleged murderer, included the destruction of his public and private portraits, the removal of his *imago* from the *atria* and funerals of the Calpurnii, and the change in name of his eldest son (also named Gnaeus) if he wished to inherit his father's property.¹⁷⁹ These conditions betrayed the anxiety that, under the influence of Gnaeus Piso's *imago* and name, his family would unwittingly replicate his character.¹⁸⁰

Preserving an *imago* after it had been condemned could be considered treason. To give a Suetonian example, Nero puts Cassius Longinus to death “because he had retained in his ancestral family tree *imagines* of Gaius Cassius, Caesar's assassin” (*quod in vetere gentili*

¹⁷⁷ Without either adoption or incest, Caligula would be Augustus's great-grandson.

¹⁷⁸ Polybius 6.53-4; see also Flower 1996: 91-126.

¹⁷⁹ Eck, Caballos, Fernández 1996.

¹⁸⁰ Other examples of the abolishment of *praenomina* include Marcus Manlius (Livy 6.20.14) and Mark Antony (Plut. *Cic.* 49.6).

stemma C. Cassi percussoris Caesaris imagines retinuisset, Ner. 37.1). That Nero considers Cassius Longinus's behavior a capital offense suggests that he perceives a strong connection between the two Cassii. From Nero's perspective, retaining an *imago* of one's ancestor is akin to sympathizing with him. Even though Cassius Longinus is blind (*luminibus orbato*), and thus less capable of committing murder than the other Cassius, he could find an equally dangerous way of following in his ancestor's footsteps.

By deleting Agrippa's *imago*, Caligula intervened in the dynamic between past, present, and future action. His reason for the intervention had more to do with his own self-styling than any infraction committed on Agrippa's part—Agrippa's only fault was his low birth (*ignobilitatem*). Caligula wanted to make it clear that neither was he biologically similar to Agrippa, nor would he consciously assimilate himself to him. Rather, the past must be assimilated to him: he should have ancestors worthy of his character, not the other way around.

Ultimately, Caligula's attempt was not successful. He did not permanently delete Agrippa from his family tree; he only temporarily suppressed him. The example of Agrippa indicates that individual ancestors or family lines can exist both at the level of the official narrative and be obscured behind it. The imperial family tree is particularly susceptible to reshaping because the legitimacy of the *princeps* is, in part, staked on the perception of his ancestors. The narratives around genealogy are mutable. But they are also unwieldy; a person can attempt to make their ancestors unimpeachable, but, in time, suppressed elements might rise to the surface.

Ahenobarbus Again

Such resurgence is what happens with Nero's birth name, Ahenobarbus, toward the end of his life. At this point, Suetonius has moved past the section of Nero's *Vita* that is organized by

atemporal rubrics and begun the narrative of his downfall. After Julius Vindex (also possessing a resonant name), pro-praetor of Gaul, revolts, he characterizes Nero in two particularly stinging ways: first “a bad citharode” and second, “Ahenobarbus.”¹⁸¹

Nihil autem aeque doluit, quam ut malum se citharoedum increpitum ac pro Nerone Ahenobarbum appellatum; et nomen quidem gentile, quod sibi per contumeliam exprobraretur, resumpturum se professus est deposito adoptivo. (*Ner.* 41.1)

Nothing, however, pained him equally as the accusation that he was a bad citharode and the fact that he was called Ahenobarbus instead of Nero. And the family name, because it had been brought up as a reproach, he declared that he would take up again, with his adopted name laid aside.

Both names call Nero’s legitimacy into question. First, Suetonius has already chronicled Nero’s intense devotion to playing the cithara and his desire to be perceived as a good citharode. His actions include observing the famous citharode Terpnus, doing vocal exercises, avoiding apples (*Ner.* 20.1), participating in Greek contests, bribing the other competitors (23.2), strictly observing the rules of performance, and even destroying the statues and busts of all previous victors (24.1). But Vindex’s insult goes beyond injuring Nero’s vanity; it also threatens his ability to survive, should he live longer than he is *princeps*. Suetonius writes that when Nero was warned that he would one day be deserted, he responded that he would make a living with his art.

Praedictum a mathematicis Neroni olim erat fore ut quandoque destitueretur; unde illa vox eius celeberrima: τὸ τέχνιον ἡμᾶς διατρέφει, quo maiore scilicet venia meditaretur citharoedicam artem, principi sibi gratam, privato necessariam. (*Ner.* 40.2)

Astrologers predicted to Nero that he would one day be forsaken; whence he said that most famous utterance “my art sustains me,” so he might practice the citharodic art with that much more indulgence, for while it might be a pleasure for a *princeps*, it would be a necessity for a private citizen.

¹⁸¹ See Aug. 7.1 for a similar example of using a former name as an insult: “in letters Mark Antony often called him “Thurinus” as an insult” (*a M. Antonio in epistulis per contumeliam saepe Thurinus appellatur*).

Nero's response suggests that he perceives his identity as citharode as separate from his identity as *princeps*. If he is forced out of imperial power and into private life (a rosy picture of what might happen to a deposed *princeps*), he will at least retain his musical skill. But Vindex's insult challenges the idea that Nero is a good citharode outside of his role as *princeps*. Rather, he introduces the possibility that the relation between the two terms is correlative: Nero's position as *princeps* is what affords his reputation as a good citharode. Thus Nero's "Plan B" is erroneous: if Nero loses his position as *princeps*, he will also lose his acclaim as a citharode and thus his self-professed means of keeping himself alive.¹⁸²

The second name that Vindex calls Nero, Ahenobarbus, reinforces the first. The two insults, "bad citharode" and "Ahenobarbus" are the opposites of "good citharode" and "Nero," terms that are implicated in and sustain Nero's legitimacy as *princeps*. Just as Nero's position as *princeps* has a complicated interrelation with his identity as a citharode (being *princeps* makes his reputation as a good citharode possible, but being any kind of citharode makes Nero a bad *princeps*), a similar correspondence exists between the terms "bad citharode" and

¹⁸² Nero, however, never gets the opportunity to express his identity as a citharode outside of his role as *princeps*. Rather, he amalgamates the two identities by versifying his *princeps*-actions. Suetonius writes that when Nero received encouraging news regarding the simultaneous revolts of Julius Vindex and Galba, "he even acted out insulting verses aimed at the leaders of the revolt—which then became famous to the public—set to wanton music" (*iocularia in defectionis duces carmina lasciveque modulata, quae vulgo notuerunt, etiam gesticulatus est. Ner.* 42.2). Nero translates the aggression and physicality of fighting on the battlefield into the aggression and physicality of composing insulting verses (*iocularia carmina*) and acting them out (*gesticulatus est*). He uses a similar process of translation into music when he imagines victory over the Gauls. Instead of strategizing how he will put down the uprising, he turns his attention to composing songs celebrating its suppression. He reveals that once he has convinced the Gauls to remember their loyalty (which he will achieve by appearing before them unarmed and weeping), "he—happy among the happy—would sing victory songs, which he really ought to be composing right now" (*laetum inter laetos cantaturum epinicia, quae iam nunc sibi componi oporteret, Ner.* 43.2). Although Nero does have something of a strategy to reincorporate the Gauls into the empire, it is clear that he finds composing victory songs to be a task both more pleasurable and more worthy of his talents. Nero's tendency to respond to government matters in a musical fashion demonstrates that a citharode identity and a *princeps* identity should not be executed simultaneously. The fact that Nero cannot let go of his identity as a citharode in order to take his role as *princeps* seriously makes Nero neither a good or bad citharode but a definitively bad *princeps*.

“Ahenobarbus.” Namely, if Nero is a bad citharode, he must be an Ahenobarbus or some other name because he cannot be a Nero (“Nero,” in turn, comes to bear on “Caesar.”) Nero himself has already theorized this relation in response to his freedman’s request that he leave the Greek games in order to return to Rome.

Ac ne quid circa haec occupatum avocaret detineretve, cum praesentia eius urbicas res egere a liberto Helio admoneretur, rescripsit his verbis: “Quamvis nunc tuum consilium sit et votum celeriter reverti me, tamen suadere et optare potius debes, ut Nerone dignus revertar.” (*Ner.* 23.1)

And so that nothing call him away or detain him while he was occupied with these activities, when he was reminded by his freedman Helius that affairs in the city required his presence, he wrote back with these words: “Although it may now be your advice and desire that I return quickly, you ought rather to recommend and hope that I return worthy of Nero.”

The phrase “worthy of Nero” (*Nerone dignus*) conveys multiple meanings. Does Nero mean “Nero” as in his adopted name: a shorthand for membership in the Claudian family? If this is the case, to be “worthy of a Nero” would mean to embody the virtues and rival the accomplishments of exemplary Neronēs past.¹⁸³ It seems, however, that Nero is using “Nero” to refer to himself and the many identities he encompasses (including that of *princeps*). So, then, how might Nero become worthy of “Nero”? Helius’s answer to this question is different from Nero’s. Helius’s assessment of Nero seems to be linked to his role as Rome’s chief administrator—he would be happiest if Nero would return home and oversee the affairs of the city (*urbicas res*). But Nero chastises Helius for asking him to return quickly (*celeriter reverti*). He puts a higher value on returning “worthy of Nero,” a goal he will accomplish by winning recognition at the games. Nero plans to become “worthy of Nero” (either the name “Nero” or himself), not via his *princeps* function, but via his function as an artist. Nero’s prioritization of art over administration looks

¹⁸³ Cf. Hor. *Carm.* 4.4.

forward to the most famous of his dying statements, “so great an artist dies” (*qualis artifex pereo*, *Ner.* 49.1). Nero does not say *qualis princeps*; *princeps* was only ever a means to an end. The role created the conditions of possibility for *artifex* (on which Nero bases “Nero”).

The idea that Nero is his own *exemplum* reemerges in his lamentation preceding his death. Suetonius writes that Nero berates himself for being unable to kill himself. He complains: “I live—hideously, repulsively—it is not fitting for Nero, it is not fitting—one must show self-control in circumstances such as these—come on, get it together” (*vivo deformiter, turpiter*—οὐ πρόκειται Νέρωνι, οὐ πρόκειται—νήφειν δεῖ ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις—ἄγε ἐγείρε σεαυτόν, *Ner.* 49.3). Again, Nero makes “Nero” the standard against which he measures himself. The word *πρόκειται* plus the dative most commonly means “to be fitting” but can also mean “to resemble,” so οὐ πρόκειται Νέρωνι can be translated “this is not like Nero,” or “I am not acting like Nero.” Nero implies that acting like Nero would mean being able to kill himself courageously. But this statement can also be taken ironically: Nero could be saying “I am not acting like a Nero” (e.g., one of his ancestors from the Claudian line), which is also the case. By using “Nero” to refer only to himself, Nero severs the connection between the name “Nero” and the long line of *Nerones* that came before him.¹⁸⁴

That Nero switches to speaking Greek in the middle of his phrase suggests that he is engaging with his habit of quoting Greek poetry, which he does throughout his *Vita*. Suetonius records four instances of Nero quoting: his first three quotations are from tragedies, and his final quotation is of Homer.¹⁸⁵ Nero’s last tragic quotation, which Suetonius suggests is portentous of his imminent death, is from a performance of *Oedipus in Exile*, which ends with the line:

¹⁸⁴ van der Blom (2010: 287-291) makes a similar argument describing Cicero’s self-promotion as an *exemplum*.

¹⁸⁵ Mitchell (2015: 337) lists Nero’s quotations.

“spouse, mother, and father drove me to die” (θανεῖν μ’ ἄνωγε σύγγαμος, μήτηρ, πατήρ, *Ner.* 46.3). This line embeds Nero (as Oedipus) in three family relationships that exert power over him. The titles of “spouse,” “mother,” and “father” have a multiplying effect, since Nero has three spouses, one mother, and two fathers, all of whom he seemingly blames for his death. But, later, when Nero laments οὐ πρέπει Νέρωνι, he engages in an act of original quotation that reframes his role in *Oedipus in Exile*. He breaks the connection between himself and his family and assigns himself the agency to choose his own death. By situating himself as a tragic actor playing a version of himself, he motivates himself to perform “Nero,” who ends his life by suicide.¹⁸⁶

The implications of Vindex’s double insult are far reaching, since Nero has forged a link between the name “Nero” and his identity as an artist. Thus, Nero’s reaction to Vindex’s label “Ahenobarbus” is surprising. The last time Nero was called Ahenobarbus, it was by Britannicus and he countered by accusing Britannicus of being illegitimate (*subditivus*) himself. He could make the same accusation of Vindex. Vindex (despite his praenomen “Julius”) has no claim to imperial legitimacy (insofar as membership in the family of the *Caesars* is a necessary precondition for legitimacy). But this time, Nero gives in to the act of renaming. He declares that he will drop his adopted name and become Ahenobarbus again. Nero’s acquiescence to his old name could be considered an admission of his own illegitimacy. As previously mentioned, Nero is eventually interred in the family tomb of the *Domitii* (*Ner.* 50.1), and thus reintegrated into a non-Julio-Claudian context. But paradoxically, this illegitimacy does not disqualify Nero from being *princeps*. Nero’s response to Vindex reveals that he has already abandoned the premise that

¹⁸⁶ Nero is recognized (*agnitus est*, *Ner.* 48.2) as he flees the city, a nod to tragic recognition. Cf. Cass. Dio. 63.28.4-5.

one must hold the family name “Caesar” in order to be *princeps*, thus whether he is called “Ahenobarbus” or “Nero” makes no difference. Nero admits a certain equivalence between himself and Vindex: neither has an inherent claim to power. But the difference is that Nero, despite his illegitimacy, actually holds power, while Vindex does not. Nero thus reverses the argument that one must deserve power in order to hold it, rather, he suggests that the possessor of power deserves it, whoever he may be.

Persona v. Imago

That Nero takes up and renounces both “Ahenobarbus” and “Nero” points to the possibility that he defines himself not as a member of the *Domitii Ahenobarbi* or the *Claudii Neronēs*, but *sui generis*. Nero demonstrates his self-reflexivity on a visual level in his theatrical performances, in which he wears a mask of his own face. Nero’s theatrical masks act as a pendant to Caligula’s *imagines*. Nero turns the drive to imitate one’s ancestors into the drive to imitate mythological heroes and heroines. Like Caligula, Nero imprints his *exempla* with his own image, rather than the other way around.

Tragoedias quoque cantavit personatus heroum deorumque, item heroidum ac dearum, personis effectis ad similitudinem oris sui et feminae, prout quamque diligeret. Inter cetera cantavit Canacen parturientem, Oresten matricidam, Oedipodem excaecatam, Herculem insanum. In qua fabula fama est tirunculum militem positum ad custodiam aditus, cum eum ornari ac vinciri catenis, sicut argumentum postulabat, videret, accurrisse ferendae opis gratia. (*Ner.* 21.3)

He even put on a mask and sang tragedies of heroes and gods, and likewise heroines and goddesses, with his theatrical masks fashioned to be similar to his own face, and that of whatever woman he was favoring. Amongst others he sang Canace in Labor, Orestes the Matricide, Oedipus Blind, Hercules Mad. The story goes that during the latter play, a novice soldier, who had been positioned to guard the entrances, when he saw Nero in costume and bound with chains as the plot required, ran to help him.

Scholars generally agree that Nero's face—omnipresent and inescapable, even in the mythological realm—creates a parallel between acted events and lived ones.¹⁸⁷ Suetonius bolsters this impression by ordering the rubrics of Nero's *Vita* in such a way that Nero's acting onstage precedes accusations of matricide, incest, and uxoricide, thus creating the impression that the events of Nero's life are determined or inspired by his actions onstage.¹⁸⁸ But even the categories of on and offstage break down under scrutiny. As Bartsch puts it, "Nero's mask of himself serves as a catalyst of confusion, making it seemingly impossible for the spectator to apply either "representation" or "reality" as a consistent frame for viewing."¹⁸⁹ Nero's mask cuts across the categories of representation/onstage and reality/offstage and forces a reevaluation of the categories themselves.

I focus on an area of slippage between the two (newly indistinct) categories of representation and reality: the relationship between the ancestral mask (*imago*) and the theatrical mask (*persona*).¹⁹⁰ I argue that in the context of *DVC*, Nero's *persona* takes on some of the functions of the *imago* and thus places him within an alternate genealogy that competes with the *imagines* of the Caesars. Here I draw on Coleman's argument that the bringing together of truth and fiction is a regular mode of thought in the early empire: "there is a remarkable coalescence

¹⁸⁷ They disagree, however, on whether Nero consciously emulated mythological figures or if Suetonius writes about him as if he did. Champlin 2003: 92-96 for the former; Bartsch 1994: 46-49 for the latter.

¹⁸⁸ Bartsch 1994: 42.

¹⁸⁹ Bartsch 1994: 49.

¹⁹⁰ This slippage can also be articulated in other ways, for example, when Plutarch writes that the Parthians used Crassus's severed head as the head of Pentheus in a production of the *Bacchae* (Crassus 33).

between reality and the imaginative transformation of that reality in the record that the Romans have left behind.”¹⁹¹

The relationship between the *imago* and the *persona* is contested, but there are some undeniable similarities.¹⁹² Flower notes that both types of masks are linked to use in a performance context and participate in the development of standardized characters. While these “types” of *imagines* are not exact parallels of comic stock characters—they are meant to provoke emulation, not laughter—they are a result of the same process of stereotyping. Examples of “types” of *imagines* might include “the wise old censor, the young warrior, the famous orator, or the learned judge.”¹⁹³ Suetonius in particular blurs the line between the *imago* and the *persona* by suggesting that it was customary for a *persona*-clad performer to embody the emperor at his own funeral. He writes in *Vespasian* that “at his funeral, Favor, a leading actor, wore Vespasian’s mask, and, according to custom, imitated the words and deeds of the living emperor” (*sed et in funere Favor archimimus personam eius ferens imitansque, ut est mos, facta ac dicta vivi, Vesp.* 19.2). In the context of a funeral, one would expect the mask to be an *imago*, not a *persona*. If Favor is not actually wearing a theatrical mask, Suetonius is using the same word for theatrical mask and ancestral mask, and thus suggesting a measure of equivalence between the two masks. It is especially significant that the collapse of the *imago* and *persona* happens at the funeral of Vespasian, the first successful dynasty-starter since Nero. Suetonius introduces the possibility that Vespasian borrows Nero’s technique of self-styling with a theatrical mask, but reframes it as

¹⁹¹ Coleman 2005: 40.

¹⁹² Wiles (1991: 130), on the other hand, suggests that “the masks of Roman comedy became something like a negative imprint of the *imago*.”

¹⁹³ Flower 1996: 115.

conservative and traditional.¹⁹⁴ Suetonius refers to Favor's performance as a *mos*. If Vespasian was able to characterize imitation of himself at his own funeral (unattested during the Julio-Claudian dynasty) as traditional, it would seem a lot less "Neronian" and subversive.

So too it might also happen the other way around: the onstage *persona* might take on the characteristics of the funereal *imago*. Flower hints at this possibility when she discusses the performance of the *Octavia* (dated to after Nero's death), in which Nero was a prominent character. She speculates that the appearance of Nero's *persona* onstage was especially dramatic because Nero had not received an aristocratic funeral.¹⁹⁵ Suetonius takes advantage of the same general device. In a moment of dramatic irony, Nero's lifelike *persona* stands in for his absent *imago*, which Suetonius and his readers know Nero will never receive. But Suetonius also suggests that Nero intentionally chooses the *persona* over the *imago*. He is not devoted to any mortal ancestor. Rather, he styles himself as belonging to the families of Aeolus, Atreus, Cadmus, and Jupiter. When Nero performs onstage, he gives his likeness, akin to his *imago*, another name, and places it within the context of another family group. This act of recontextualization requires a change from linear time to mythological and eternal time. While the family tree of the Caesars relies on contiguity from one generation to the next, inserting oneself into a mythological family could happen anytime the play is performed.

The False Neros

¹⁹⁴ Varner (2017: 237) make a similar argument about the Flavian building program: "in Rome, the "Flavian aftermath" is not so much an antithesis of Nero's artistic and architectural extravagance, but rather a careful recalibration of the Neronian visual program."

¹⁹⁵ Flower 2006: 204.

According to Suetonius, Nero's ultimate goal was immortality. Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Claudius achieved immortality via deification, which relied on decisions made by their successors. Nero, on the other hand, pursued a brand of immortality that was self-enacted. His mythological stage performances are one example of his attempted self-immortalization. He also attempted to make his name omnipresent for all people living in the Roman empire by attaching it to both the month of April and the city of Rome itself. But because Nero was not deified after the fact, these gestures come across not as state-sanctioned memorials but failed attempts at producing successors akin to the False Neros.

Erat illi aeternitatis perpetuaeque famae cupido, sed inconsulta. Ideoque multis rebus ac locis vetere appellatione detracta novam indixit ex suo nomine, mensem quoque Aprilem Neroneum appellavit; destinaverat et Romam Neropolim nuncupare. (*Ner.* 55)

He had a desire for everlasting and continuous fame, but ill-advised. For that reason, he got rid of the old name for many things and places and decreed a new one from his own name, he called even the month of April "Neroneus"; he decided to call even Rome "Neropolis."

The proposed month "Neroneus" and the new city name "Neropolis" would fix the name "Nero" to several Roman temporalities. First, "Neroneus" would give Nero a place in the repeating year. The new month would ensure that people living in the Roman empire would need to say Nero's name in order to make sense of past, present, and future events. Nero's action of naming a month after himself has two precedents in the months of "July" and "August," which Suetonius frames in significantly different ways. Suetonius uses Julius Caesar's act of renaming as an example that he overreached and "allowed inhumanly great honors to be decreed to him" (*ampliora etiam humano fastigio decerni sibi passus est, Iul.* 76.1). But when it comes to Augustus, Suetonius matter-of-factly includes his renaming of Sextilis in the list of things he did after assuming the office of *pontifex maximus* (*Aug.* 31.2). Ultimately, however, "July" and

“August” are retrospectively legitimized following the deifications of their namesakes. In contrast, “Neroneus” looks like more of an overreach than “July.”

Second, “Neropolis” would mark a new foundation of the city, and thus a new division of historical time. While the division between republic and principate was the most recent large temporal rupture, the division between “the time of Rome” and “the time of Neropolis,” could have become equally significant. Like “Neroneus,” “Neropolis” also had an Augustan precedent: Augustus considered the possibility of renaming himself after the city. Suetonius writes that before Augustus took the name “Augustus,” “there were some who thought he ought to be called “Romulus” as though he were himself the founder of the city” (*quibusdam censentibus Romulum appellari oportere quasi et ipsum conditorem urbis*, Aug. 7.2). On one level, these people are suggesting that Augustus assimilate himself to Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome. But on another level, they are suggesting that Augustus name himself after the city, since just as Rome means “of Romulus,” Romulus means “Mr. Rome.”¹⁹⁶ Nero reverses Augustus’s consideration: instead of imprinting himself with the name of the city, he will imprint the city with his name. But Nero can only be Rome’s founder in jest. The closest he comes to an act of foundation is building the Domus Aurea, which people jokingly assimilate to the city (*Roma domus fiet*, Ner. 39.2).¹⁹⁷ “Neroneus” and “Neropolis” are attempts on Nero’s part to jump from linear time to mythological and eternal time via mimetic similarity (i.e., Nero forces April and Rome to become imitative of him). But ironically, they end up highlighting the abortive nature of Neronian time. The name changes could only be verified by the actions of successors recognized in Rome, which Nero did not have (at least, not in any lasting way).

¹⁹⁶ As Beard (2015: 95) suggests.

¹⁹⁷ He also re-builds the city after the fire (*Ner.* 16.1).

Nero's most famous unauthorized successor appears in the last sentence of his *Vita*: a False Nero (the only one in Suetonius, but one of three attested). The False Nero should be read as an attempt to continue a dynasty of *Nerones* through mimesis.

Denique cum post viginti annos adulescente me exstisset condicionis incertae qui se Neronem esse iactaret, tam favorabile nomen eius apud Parthos fuit, ut vehementer adiutus et vix redditus sit. (*Ner.* 57.2)

Finally, twenty years later, when I was a young man, there emerged someone of uncertain status who boasted that he was Nero. The name was so favorable among the Parthians that the man was much cherished and handed over only reluctantly.

This False Nero is not the same as Tacitus's False Nero. Not only are the two False Neros different historical figures, they play different roles in their respective narratives.¹⁹⁸ In the last chapter, I argued that by beginning the *Histories* with the False Nero, Tacitus prematurely infects the emperor Nero with the accusation of falseness. Suetonius's False Nero, however, is an epilogue, rather than a prologue. Suetonius preserves the chronological order, and thus allows his False Nero to be positioned as an internal reader of the emperor Nero. The False Nero's boast picks up on instances in which Nero uses "Nero" as his own metric, such as the previously discussed phrases "worthy of Nero" (*Nerone dignus*, *Ner.* 23.1) and "it is not fitting for Nero" (οὐ πρόπει Νέρωνι, *Ner.* 49.3) (alternately conceived as *indignum Neroni*). Thus by "boasting that he was Nero" (*se Neronem esse iactaret*), the False Nero does not reveal his falseness, but faithfully replicates the actions of the emperor Nero. Furthermore, the False Nero is able to realize an outcome that the emperor Nero only considered: fleeing to the Parthians and presenting himself as a suppliant (*varie agitavit, Parthosne an Galbam supplex peteret*, *Ner.* 47.2). Suetonius writes that the Parthians were so enamored with the name "Nero" that they

¹⁹⁸ By Suetonius's estimation, this False Nero appears around 88/89 CE, during the reign of Domitian, cf. Tuplin 1989: 377.

protected a Nero. Whether or not they knew that the Nero they had was not the prototype seems to be irrelevant; even a conceptual Nero was appealing. Both the False Nero's boast that he was Nero and the attachment of the Parthians to the name "Nero" indicate that the name "Nero" had become detached from membership in a family group and had become attached instead to similarity lacking family relation. A new dynasty of *Nerones* could have taken shape around this concept—and almost did.

Finally, Suetonius's decision to place the False Nero at the end of Nero's *Vita* raises the question: when does one stop writing about Nero and start writing about something after Nero? And, does the False Nero belong to Nero or to the post-Neros? Syme argued that Suetonius originally planned to end his collection with Nero, and added the final two books (Galba through Domitian) as sequels.¹⁹⁹ According to his model, the False Nero episode would serve as an epilogue not only to the *Nero* but to the entire Julio-Claudian dynasty. He also suggested that the first section of Galba, in which Suetonius recounts the portents that the Julio-Claudian line would end with Nero, originally belonged to the *Nero*.²⁰⁰ Scholars have since disputed both of these ideas.²⁰¹ But Syme's arguments speak to an unmistakable blurriness in the *DVC* generated by the figures of the False Nero and the emperor Nero. Just as the False Nero haunts his Julio-Claudian predecessors, the emperor Nero is a revenant that continually reappears during the Year of the Four Emperors. Together the two figures transcend both Nero's lifetime and the *Nero* and come to bear on both their predecessors and successors.

¹⁹⁹ Syme 1958: vol 2, 501, cf. Townend 1982: vol. 2, 1053.

²⁰⁰ Syme 1980: 117-18; Syme 1981: 117.

²⁰¹ Notably, Power 2009.

To Be a Caesar but not a Nero?: Galba and Otho's Neronian Connections

In this final section, I examine Nero's reception in the year 69 CE. The year ends with Vespasian as *princeps*, who downplays Nero as his direct predecessor and focuses instead on cultivating the memory of Claudius (e.g., he rebuilds Claudius's temple on the Caelian, *Vesp.* 9.1). But prior to Vespasian's solidification of Nero's negative tradition, Nero—an absent presence—looms over the self-fashioning of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. Nero provokes positive emulation from Otho and Vitellius, who were both members of his court and become members of his would-be mimetic dynasty.²⁰² Even Galba, who emphasizes his difference from his Julio-Claudian predecessors, unwittingly falls back into old Neronian patterns. In this section, I draw particular attention to the dyad of Galba versus Otho as modeling two contrasting ways of appropriating imperial legitimacy. Galba pursues imperial legitimacy by emphasizing his Republican background, but unintentionally invites illegitimate incursions into his family line. In contrast, Otho uses his unofficial or illegitimate connections to the Julio-Claudian family in order to bolster his imperial claim.

Suetonius begins *Galba* with Nero: “the family of the Caesars ended with Nero” (*progenies Caesarum in Nerone defecit*, *Galb.* 1.1). So, he begins at a point of tension: the family of the Caesars has died out, but Galba is a Caesar. For when messengers from the city delivered the news that Nero was dead (*occisum Neronem*) and the rest had sworn to obey Galba's words (*cunctosque in verba sua iurasse*), Galba laid down the title of governor and took up that of Caesar (*deposita legati suscepit Caesaris appellationem*, *Galb.* 11). Here, “Caesar” is not a name, but a title (*appellatio*), like *dominus* (*domini appellationem*, *Aug.* 53) or *pater patriae*

²⁰² See Bradley (2011: 32-34) for a brief but salient discussion of the corpulent iconography of Nero and his successors.

(*patris patriae appellationem*, Tib. 67.2).²⁰³ With Galba, the coalescence of “Caesar” the name and “Caesar” the title has come undone. Galba will be the first Caesar not to have membership in the family of the Caesars.

Suetonius reiterates Galba’s non-relation to the Caesars at the beginning of section two: “Galba succeeded Nero, related to the house of the Caesars in no degree” (*Neroni Galba successit nullo gradu contingens Caesarum domum*, Galb. 2.1). The word *contingens*, which literally means “touching,” exemplifies one of the two kinds of relation Suetonius focalizes in his work: contiguity via membership in a family group (versus similarity lacking family relation). Suetonius’s word order, in which Galba is “touching” Nero, is at odds with the content of the sentence. Therein lies Galba’s essential problem: while he is not part of the Julio-Claudian family, his act of succession puts him in relation to the last Julio-Claudian *princeps*. Galba’s aim is to reverse these relations by gaining membership in the Caesar-group while positioning himself as an anti-Nero. For example, Galba is hailed *imperator* in front of statues of Nero’s victims (Galb. 10.1). He thus simultaneously denounces Nero and implicates himself in the system that produced Nero.

Nonetheless, Galba unintentionally complicates his anti-Neronian stance. Crucial to Galba’s self-styling is his family tree, which boasts illustrious ancestors unrelated to the Julio-Claudians. Galba’s more recent ancestors are Republican notables, while his further ancestors are

²⁰³ “Caesar” is only explicitly referred to as a *nomen* only once in the *DVC*—when, among the portents of Augustus’s death, lightning strikes one of his inscriptions and melts off the “C” in Caesar, leaving “AESAR,” the remaining part of the name Caesar (*reliqua pars e Caesaris nomine*, Aug. 97.2). Also, when Julius Caesar “adopted even Gaius Octavius into the family name” (*Gaium Octavium etiam in familiam nomenque adoptavit*, Iul. 83.2), it is likely that “the family name” means “Caesar.”

mythological figures who compete with the Julio-Claudian ancestors Aeneas and Romulus.²⁰⁴

Lurking in Galba's genealogy, however, are implications of Nero-like monstrousness and imposture.

Neroni Galba successit nullo gradu contingens Caesarum domum, sed haud dubie nobilissimus magnaue et vetere prosapia, ut qui statuarum titulis pronepotem se Quinti Catuli Capitolini semper ascripserit, imperator vero etiam stemma in atrio proposuerit, quo paternam originem ad Iovem, maternam ad Pasiphaam Minonis uxorem referret. (*Galb.* 2.1)

Galba succeeded Nero, related to the house of the Caesars in no degree, but undoubtedly an exceptionally noble man and from a great and old family, such that he always added to the placards of his statues that he was the great-grandson of Quintus Catulus Capitolinus, and when he became emperor he even displayed a family tree in his atrium by which he attributed his paternal origin to Jove and his maternal origin to Pasiphae, the wife of Minos.

Suetonius's use of the word *semper* with the perfect tense suggests that Galba started adding Quintus Catulus Capitolinus's name to his statue-placards prior to becoming *princeps*. Quintus Catulus Capitolinus is first introduced in *Divus Iulius* as an opponent of Caesar—Caesar attempted to revoke his commission for restoring the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, but Catulus's position was saved by the intervention of the *optimates* (*Iul.* 15). Catulus seems to have enjoyed a special relationship with the god—in *Divus Augustus* he has two prophetic dreams in which Jupiter Optimus Maximus singles out a youth resembling Augustus, thus indicating Augustus's rise to power (*Aug.* 94.8). Galba's emphasis on this ancestor—who opposed Caesar, prophetically dreamed of Augustus, and whose name references the most enduring symbol of the republic—would suggest that before he became *princeps*, he assimilated himself to the old Republican elite, who predated and authorized the principate.

²⁰⁴ Nero was (mockingly) acknowledged to be a descendant of Aeneas with the verse "who denies that Nero is from the great stock of Aeneas? The latter killed his mother; the former carried his father (*quis negat Aeneae magna de stirpe Neronem? sustulit hic matrem, sustulit ille patrem*, *Ner.* 39.2).

Thus far, nothing seems amiss in Galba's ancestry. But once Galba becomes *princeps*, he traces his Republican ancestors back to Jove and Pasiphae.²⁰⁵ Through the fusing of mythological and historical time, Galba is able to claim both Greekness and Romanness. But by making Pasiphae one half of his claim to Greekness, he introduces an element of risk that threatens to compromise himself and his matrilineal ancestors. Suetonius calls Pasiphae "the wife of Minos" (*Minonis uxorem*), both eliding her other identity (namely, the mother of the illegitimately conceived Minotaur) and making it prominent in its omission. Galba introduces the possibility that Pasiphae's lustful and chaotic qualities—or worse, the monstrous illegitimacy of the Minotaur—will emerge somewhere in his maternal line.²⁰⁶ This line includes Lucius Mummius, sacker of Corinth, and the aforementioned Quintus Catulus Capitolinus—respected Republican figures retroactively made questionable by their relation to Pasiphae.

Furthermore, in the *DVC*, Pasiphae is a marker of Neronian construction. Suetonius writes that Nero put on a performance so hyperreal that it was unclear whether Pasiphae and the bull were actually having sex onstage or just seemed to.

Inter pyrricharum argumenta taurus Pasiphaam ligneo iuvencae simulacro abditam iniit,
ut multi spectantium crediderunt. (*Ner.* 12.2)

Among the subjects of Pyrrhic dances, the bull penetrated Pasiphae, concealed by the wooden image of a heifer, as many of those watching believed.

Suetonius first describes the sex act between Pasiphae and the bull using the indicative mood (*iniit*), thus creating the impression that intercourse actually occurred onstage. He then expresses

²⁰⁵ Cf. Wiseman, who suggests that, based on numismatic evidence, the Sulpicii might have also claimed descent from Troy and the Alban kings (1974: 153) and provides a possible reconstruction of how Galba's family came to claim descent from Pasiphae (1974: 156) and Flory, who argues that Galba created, "a divine family line to rival that of his predecessors" (1989: 347).

²⁰⁶ For Galba's excessive sexual desire, see Charles and Anagnostou-Laoutides 2012; Wardle 2015. Cf. also the raging bull as a portent of Galba's death (*Galb.* 18.1)

doubt with the parenthetical expression “as many of those watching believed” (*ut multi spectantium crediderunt*), highlighting the role of the audience in accepting or rejecting the spectacle as real or simulated. When Suetonius’s reader arrives at Galba’s family tree, they might recall Pasiphae’s previous role in creating and sustaining a fiction—an action that Galba replicates when he fictionalizes Pasiphae as the matriarch of his family tree.

Pasiphae and the bull also provide an approximate model for Agrippina and Nero: a lustful mother and son pairing who threaten to insert themselves into Galba’s family. We recall that Nero’s father, Domitius, commented that “nothing was able to be born from himself and Agrippina that was not abominable and a source of public evil” (*negantis quicquam ex se et Agrippina nisi detestabile et malo publico nasci potuisse*, *Ner.* 6.1), seemingly blaming Agrippina for Nero’s less-than-human status. Suetonius describes Nero as having a monstrous nature (*immanitate naturae*, *Ner.* 7.1) and an insatiable sexual appetite. Among his other conquests (detailed in *Ner.* 28-29), he turned his lust toward a *simulacrum*. Suetonius writes that Nero kept a prostitute whom rumor said was most similar to Agrippina (*meretricem, quam fama erat Agrippinae simillimam, inter concubinas recepit*, *Ner.* 28.2). Nero’s Agrippina-prostitute parallels Pasiphae’s wooden heifer (*ligneo iuvencae simulacro*) as a contraption that makes illicit sex possible.

Agrippina directed her erotic energy more intentionally. Suetonius writes that Agrippina made sexual overtures to Galba following the death of her first husband (and Nero’s father) Domitius. At the time, Galba’s wife was still alive, but Agrippina nonetheless “made use of every enticement” (*omnibus sollicitaverat modis*, *Galb.* 5.1), with the result that she was publicly reproached and slapped by Galba’s mother-in-law. Her advances open up an alternate history in which Nero became a Galba rather than Galba a Caesar. Galba’s close call with Agrippina

demonstrates that at one point, he risked entering into a family relationship with his predecessor. Although Galba did not become Nero's stepfather, Agrippina contemplated a future in which he did. Galba's interactions with Agrippina and Nero suggest that his inclusion of Pasiphae in his family tree is not a one-off, but patterned: Galba continually runs the risk of inviting Pasiphae and Minotaur figures into his family.

Finally, in a move that seems to work at cross-purposes with his self-styling, Suetonius reveals that, for much of his life, Galba did not go by the name Servius Galba, but Lucius Livius Ocella. Suetonius writes that after Galba's mother, Mummia Achaica, died, he was adopted by his stepmother Livia Ocellina and took both of her names as well as the praenomen Lucius; he then changed his name back to Servius when he became emperor (*Galb.* 4.1). Thus, "Servius Galba" did not exist in any meaningful way before he became *princeps*. "Lucius Livius Ocella" strays from the family tree in Galba's *atrium* and toward two Livias: first, his step-mother and namesake, and second, Livia Augusta, who left him a bequest that was reduced by Tiberius and never fully paid out (*Galb.* 5.2). Galba's name change echoes Nero's name change from Ahenobarbus to Nero: both move them closer to Julio-Claudian legitimacy.²⁰⁷ The problem is that when Galba makes a bid for *princeps*, he positions himself against Julio-Claudian legitimacy and thus must take up his non-affiliated name again. At this later stage in his life, Galba designates his given name, rather than his adopted one, as more legitimate.²⁰⁸ But the fact that Galba changes his name in the first place might suggest that he does not have fidelity to his given name. He could be accused of being excessively mimetic and too little discerning about his

²⁰⁷ Hekster (2015: 207) draws attention to a coin with Galba on the obverse and Livia Augusta on the reverse; he argues that the pairing was "a dubious way to claim connection with the *domus augusta*."

²⁰⁸ Like Nero, Galba returned to his birth name at the end of his life.

models; in short, a pendant to Nero, who both imitated others and forced them to become mimetic of him.

If Galba unintentionally replicates Neronian tendencies in his genealogy, Otho intentionally emphasizes his illegitimate connections to the Julio-Claudians. Suetonius frames Otho's relation to the Julio-Claudians in the two ways that underlie the structure of the *DVC*: contiguity via membership in a family group and similarity lacking family relation. He begins Otho's *Vita* in his usual way, with an account of his ancestors.²⁰⁹ We then immediately learn that Otho's father, Lucius Otho, was allegedly the illegitimate son of the emperor Tiberius. Suetonius writes that Lucius Otho "was so dear and so similar in appearance to the *princeps* Tiberius that many believed that he had been fathered by him" (*tam carus tamque non absimilis facie Tiberio principi fuit, ut plerique procreatum ex eo crederent, Oth. 1.2*). This belief (note again the emphasis on *credere*), would cause both Lucius and Marcus Otho (the emperor) to be part of an unofficial Julio-Claudian line.²¹⁰ While Lucius Otho was never legitimized by Tiberius, Marcus Otho would have had the option of using the belief in order to—paradoxically—increase his own legitimacy during the succession crisis following Nero's death. He would then be able to claim that the line of the Julio-Claudians had not ended with Nero and that he—and his future children—were the continuation of that lineage.²¹¹

But according to Suetonius, Marcus Otho did not stake his claim to *imperium* on his father's hazy connection with Tiberius. Rather, he positioned himself as similar (but unrelated) to

²⁰⁹ Suetonius starts with the ancestors of every Caesar except for Julius Caesar (this portion is missing), Titus, and Domitian.

²¹⁰ Furthermore, the emperor Otho's grandfather had become a senator through the influence of Livia Augusta (*Oth. 1.1*).

²¹¹ According to Suetonius, Claudius said of Otho's father: "I wish to have sons no better than this man" (*vir, quo meliores liberos habere ne opto quidem, Oth. 1.3*).

the emperor Nero. Suetonius introduces Otho by writing that when he was young, he used to wander around at night accosting feeble and tipsy passerby and tossing them into blankets (*Oth.* 2.1). We recall that Nero had a similar nocturnal habit of stabbing people who were coming home from dinner and throwing them into the sewers (*Ner.* 26.1). Both habits are comprised of the same two actions: assaulting unsuspecting pedestrians and physically displacing them. Suetonius goes on to reason that their similar character formed the basis of their friendship. He writes that Otho “held first place among his [Nero’s] friends because of the similarity of their behaviors, but, as certain people say, also because of the habit of mutual fornication” (*summum inter amicos locum tenuit congruentia morum, ut vero quidam tradunt, et consuetudine mutui stupri, Oth.* 2.2). In addition to enjoying the same nighttime activities, Otho and Nero have the same *mores* and, perhaps, a reciprocal sexual relationship. Suetonius initially characterizes their relationship as de-hierarchized. Even though Nero holds the highest social and political position, Suetonius does not write that Otho is at Nero’s service; rather the two are portrayed as equals who mirror back each other’s character and actions.

Once Otho becomes *princeps*, however, he follows Nero’s example. Otho, more than any other figure in the *DVC*, is proof that Nero’s mimesis-based dynasty continued beyond himself. While Suetonius’s False Nero makes a good attempt, he never makes it to Rome. But Otho is acknowledged as *princeps* by the senate (*Oth.* 7.1) and functions within the state apparatus (e.g., he appoints magistrates, meets with the senate, and wages war). It seems possible that the False Nero (who appears almost twenty years after Otho, during the reign of Domitian), takes both Nero and Otho as prototypes for his venture. Otho would then be the original False Nero.

Suetonius writes that Otho—like the False Nero—actually called himself Nero. The name “Nero Otho” demonstrates Nero’s success at decoupling the name “Nero” from the *Claudii*

Nerones and making it stand for himself alone. (It seems highly unlikely that Otho would call himself “Nero” in order to align himself with the *Claudii Nerones*.)

Ac super ceteras gratulantium adulantiumque blanditias ab infima plebe appellatus Nero nullum indicium recusantis dedit, immo, ut quidam tradiderunt, etiam diplomatibus primisque epistulis suis ad quosdam provinciarum praesides Neronis cognomen adiecit. Certe et imagines statuasque eius reponi passus est et procuratores atque libertos ad eadem officia revocavit, nec quicquam prius pro potestate subscripsit quam quingenties sesterium ad peragendam Auream Domum. (*Oth.* 7.1)

And in addition to the rest of the compliments from those congratulating and flattering him, he was addressed as “Nero” by the lowest mob, and gave no indication of rejecting the title; on the contrary, as certain authors have reported, he even added the cognomen “Nero” to letters of recommendation and his first letters to certain provincial governors. Certainly, he allowed Nero’s portraits and statues to be set up again and recalled procurators and freedmen to their old offices; and he did not approve of anything else as *princeps* before he had earmarked fifty million sesterces to finish the Domus Aurea.

The addition of the name “Nero” to Otho’s own demonstrates the beginning of the transformation of “Nero” into a title like “Caesar” (which also originated as a family name). As it happened, neither Vitellius or Vespasian used the name “Nero”, and it fell out of use before it became codified. But “Nero Otho” nods to an alternate history in which all Caesars and Augustuses were also Neros.

In addition to taking the name “Nero,” Otho emulates other aspects of Nero’s rule. Otho is ultimately traditional—not as a Caesar, but as a Nero. His restoration of Nero’s portraits and statues directly contrasts with Galba’s action of announcing his claim in front of statues of Nero’s victims (*Galb.* 10.1) and functions as a display of *imagines* in genealogical descent. And by surrounding himself with the same actors who served Nero and earmarking funds to finish the Domus Aurea, Otho attempts to live and rule as Nero did; he surrounds himself with the same objects, people, and spaces in order to act like Nero as much as possible.

There is, however, one place early in Otho’s *Vita* where Otho subverts the idea that he is Nero’s double; rather, Nero becomes *Otho*’s double. This subversion happens during Otho’s

marriage to the woman who would become Nero's second wife: Poppaea Sabina. Suetonius writes that Nero and Otho had an arrangement that Otho would marry Poppaea (at the time Nero's mistress) until Nero could marry her himself. In short, Otho would act as a proxy for Nero. Otho, however, became unhappy with this arrangement and forced Nero to act as his proxy instead.

item Poppaeam Sabinam tunc adhuc amicam eius, abductam marito demandatamque interim sibi, nuptiarum specie recepit nec corrupisse contentus adeo dilexit, ut ne rivalem quidem Neronem aequo tulerit animo. Creditur certe non modo missos ad arcessendam non recepisse, sed ipsum etiam exclusisse quondam pro foribus astantem miscentemque frustra minas et preces ac depositum reposcentem. Quare diducto matrimonio sepositus est per causam legationis in Lusitaniam. Et satis visum, ne poena acrior mimum omnem divulgaret, qui tamen sic quoque hoc disticho enotuit:

Cur Otho mentito sit, quaeritis, exsul honore?
Uxoris moechus coeperat esse suae. (*Oth.* 3.1-2)

Also, Poppaea Sabina, then still Nero's mistress, taken from her husband and in the meantime entrusted to him, was received by Otho under the outward appearance of marriage. But not content to have seduced her, he loved her so much that he could not bear even Nero as a rival with equal temper. It is believed, at any rate, that he not only refused men sent to fetch her, but once even shut out Nero who was standing in front of the doors, alternating in vain between threats and entreaties and demanding back what he had deposited for safekeeping. Hence, when Otho's marriage had been dissolved he was stationed in Lusitania under the pretext of governorship. And it seemed a sufficient punishment, lest a harsher one announce the farce, which nevertheless became known with this distich:

Why, do you ask, is Otho an exile under the guise of a governor?
He had begun to become an adulterer of his own wife.

Many phrases highlight the doubleness of Nero and Otho's realities, including "the outward appearance of marriage" (*nuptiarum specie*), "under the pretext of governorship" (*per causam legationis*) and "mime" (*mimum*). Nero and Otho purposefully bifurcate reality when they agree that Otho will marry Poppaea, but that Otho will have no marital responsibilities except procuring Poppaea for Nero. To Nero, the marriage between Otho and Poppaea represents "appearance" and his claim to Poppaea over Otho represents "reality." But Otho reverses this

hierarchy. Because Nero wants his and Otho's arrangement to remain secret, Otho acts as if they have no arrangement: things *are* as they seem, and his marriage to Poppaea is real. Once Otho takes the role of Poppaea's husband, the only role available to Nero is that of the adulterer on the wrong side of the door. Otho establishes the narrative, and Nero must follow along (to his humiliation).

Nero attempts to reestablish his supremacy over Otho when he appoints him governor of Lusitania. Nero pretends as if Otho's appointment is an honor (*honore*), when he really means it as a punishment (*poena*). The Roman people, however, acknowledge Nero's hypocrisy with their pro-Otho verse. The phrase "adulterer of his own wife" (*uxoris moechus . . . suae*) cuts across the two realities and reveals both Otho and Nero to be simultaneous husbands and adulterers. But the joke is on Nero because he has deluded himself into thinking that Otho, and not himself, is the adulterer of someone else's wife.

Otho and Nero share one more woman in common: Nero's widow, Statilia Messalina, whom Otho intended to marry. Suetonius writes that before Otho killed himself, he wrote a letter "to Nero's wife Messalina, whom he had marked out for marriage, entrusting to her his ashes and his memory" (*ad Messalinam Neronis, quam matrimonio destinarat, commendans reliquias suas et memoriam, Oth. 10.2*). If Otho had married Messalina, he would have gained another point of contiguity with Nero. They had already shared Poppaea; if they also shared Messalina, the four linked individuals would have approximated a family group. What was missing was offspring. Nero, of course, died childless. It seems that Otho did not rule long enough to seriously consider an heir, but should Otho and Messalina have married and produced a child, that child would have been a pseudo-Julio Claudian (through both Otho's possible Julio-Claudian ancestry and Messalina's status as a Julio-Claudian spouse). But because Otho did not live to marry

Messalina, he instead designated her as his unofficial widow, dedicating his remains and the cultivation of his memory to her. It is likely that Messalina held the same responsibilities for Nero. Thus, in death, Otho tied his legacy to Nero's.

Neither Otho nor Nero act consistently as prototype or double. Suetonius introduces their friendship as based on similarity and reciprocity. When it came to Poppaea, both forced the other to stand in for themselves: Nero turned Otho into a husband, and Otho turned Nero into an adulterer. Their rivalry over Poppaea ended with Otho's appointment in Lusitania, and their status as friends and doubles ended. Otho, however, attempted to repair their relationship after Nero died and he became *princeps*. He dedicated himself to extending Nero's mimesis-based dynasty, calling himself by Nero's name, finishing Nero's house, and planning to marry Nero's wife.

Ultimately, Suetonius's stories of Galba and Otho suggest that, in the post-Julio-Claudian era, imperial claimants had to articulate their connections to both "Caesar" and "Nero." Galba styles himself a Caesar and not a Nero. But Suetonius writes that he was already related to Nero, or almost related to Nero, through unintentional mimesis and missed family connections. Galba's fidelity to Pasiphae and Livia Ocellina causes him to deviate from traditional republican self-styling and demonstrates the extent to which his family line and identity are plastic and susceptible to re-shaping. In contrast, Otho styles himself a Caesar and a Nero. He represents the potential of "Nero" to become an additional title held by *principes*. The name-title "Nero" does not function identically to "Caesar," however, as it is based exclusively on mimesis: to be a Nero is to act like Nero. But although Otho always "acts like Nero," sometimes this is the result of Nero acting like Otho.

In the *DVC*, Nero's mimesis-based dynasty and the name-title "Nero" cannot be traced beyond Otho, Vitellius, and the False Nero. But because the dynasty relies on mimesis, and not membership in a family group, it is less spatially and temporally bounded than the Julio-Claudian or Flavian dynasties. This spatial and temporal openness results in two conclusions. First, members of Nero's dynasty may arise from anywhere. And second, the dynasty may lie dormant over large periods of time before it is reactivated. So long as Nero has imitators, his dynasty survives.

Chapter 4

Nero and Exemplary Failure in Imperial Greek Literature

Thus far, I have explored the contradictions that inhere in Nero and imperial ideology from the perspective of the Roman authors Tacitus and Suetonius. I have attempted to elucidate the ways in which these authors embed Nero in hierarchies that are subject to change and reversal, for example, the way Tacitus shows Nero to have commonalities with his impostors, his images, and his (never-to-be) deified form, and the way Suetonius demonstrates the continuation of the *Caesares* and the *Nerones* to be dependent on both genealogical connection and mimesis. In this chapter, I follow Nero as a figure who problematizes and destabilizes discourses of mimesis into imperial Greek literature, a genre that interrogates the same hierarchies that Nero upends. To follow Nero into this world requires a shift in perspective. Tacitus and Suetonius were both intimately familiar with the workings of Roman rule—the former was a senator and provincial governor, and the latter an equestrian administrator. In short, both authors wrote about the principate from an inside perspective. But the imperial Greek authors discussed in this chapter (who, of course, do not form a monolithic perspective) assumed the pose of the outsider, since they were Roman citizens in lieu of being citizens of their own countries. (In actual fact, many of them were close to, or at least not far from, both Roman-ness and imperial power.) But what they lacked in Roman identity, they counterbalanced by styling themselves insiders when it came to Greek cultural knowledge. This outsider-insider pose is entwined with and comes to bear on the categories of original and copy, with which imperial Greek authors were greatly preoccupied. As Whitmarsh explains,

From Plato on, substantial dispute surrounded the question of the ontological status of the mimetic artifact. Does it have a natural, self-evident, genetic relationship with the object

it imitates? Or is it a spurious fake? These issues raise concomitant queries about the status of Hellenism in Roman Greece: are Roman Greeks the natural inheritors of Classical Greece? Or are they interloping impostors masquerading as the real thing?²¹²

Imperial Greek authors were forced to articulate how they fit into a Platonic hierarchy that seemed to place them second to the Classical Greek authors who had come before them. Indeed, the term Second Sophistic, coined by Philostratus in his *Lives of the Sophists*, emphasizes the movement's status as a copy or repetition of a past time period—Philostratus introduces the movement as an iteration of the “Ancient Sophistic” (ἀρχαία σοφιστική, *VS* 81). But rather than replicate Plato's value judgments and accept their subordinate position vis-à-vis their genealogical ancestors, imperial Greek authors reframed and reconceptualized the terms of original and copy in such a way as to demonstrate their reversibility.²¹³ The relation between original and copy did not need to be unidirectional and hierarchical. Rather, copies—whether these were the Greek imperial authors themselves or the works they produced—could reframe and reorient the way in which people read the originals.

Such were the general concerns of the authors in whose works Nero appears, having escaped from the genres of historiography and biography in order to appear in a more condensed and potent form. Just as the pose of imperial Greek authors represents an “outsider” perspective contra the “insider” perspective of Tacitus and Suetonius, so too is the Nero of imperial Greek literature different from his counterparts in historiography and biography. For one, Nero is no longer embedded in his own life, and by extension, the lives of the Caesars, but becomes instead a meme-like figure who has been taken out of context in order to problematize a series of

²¹² Whitmarsh 2001: 28.

²¹³ Whitmarsh writes of the Second Sophistic: “the fundamental structures of this aesthetic, namely the privileging of the originary as the site of the ‘real’, are Platonic; but the terms have been twisted, so that for some writers unnatural, posterior elaboration becomes celebrated over the ontologically prior (2001: 89).”

concerns about how the ancient Greek past relates to the present. Kemezis writes that “evocation [of the Greek past], whether through mimesis, interpretation, narrative or claims of identity and descent, is at the heart of the modern conception of the Second Sophistic.”²¹⁴ These concerns are replicated in the new Second Sophistic version of Nero. For example, now Nero’s philhellenism is a good thing, and many imperial Greek authors applaud his decision to liberate the province of Greece following his Greek tour.²¹⁵ Such efforts on Nero’s part align with the goals of imperial Greek authors, as they too seek to affirm Greek culture within an imperial Roman framework. But imperial Greek authors also cannot accept Nero uncritically, since Nero’s mimetic endeavors are so often (in their eyes), erratic, disorganized, and undertheorized. Like imperial Greek authors, Nero pushes back against the Platonic hierarchy that privileges the original over the copy, but he also upends exemplarity, which imperial Greek authors generally seem to accept. Imperial Greek authors thus have a complicated relation to Nero, insofar as they share the projects of reframing the Classical Greek past and of complicating the Platonic distinction between original and copy, but they also position themselves against his ill-informed mimetic practices. And yet, in writing about Nero, they also make a statement about his ability to transcend his own context and become replicable elsewhere, even as a negative exemplum.

In this chapter, I focus on four representations of Nero written by imperial Greek authors: Dio Chrysostom’s *Orations*, Plutarch’s *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance*, Psuedo-Lucian’s *Nero* and Philostratus’s *Life of Apollonius*. These texts represent a departure from Tacitus’s *Agricola*, *Histories*, and *Annals* and Suetonius’s *De Vita Caesarum* in that the big events of imperial history now happen in the background of the texts instead of the foreground. But

²¹⁴ Kemezis 2014: 151.

²¹⁵ Malik 2021: 172-175.

authors of these texts still ask many of the same questions as Tacitus and Suetonius, including how emperors should use the exempla of the past, and how points of similarity and difference add up across imperial dynasties. Dio Chrysostom and Plutarch both wrote under Trajan, making them rough contemporaries of Tacitus and Suetonius. Pseudo-Lucian and Philostratus (probably the same author) wrote under the Severans around a century later.²¹⁶

Informing the analyses of these four (possibly three) imperial Greek authors is a tension between Platonic mimesis and Roman exemplary mimesis—an indication of their hybrid status as both Greek and Roman. Each kind of mimesis comes with an attendant theorization of the ontological status of the copy vis-à-vis the original. Put another way, these kinds of mimesis propose different ideas about the planes of existence to which original and copy belong. Also at issue is the value of the aesthetic, since for Plato, what is beautiful is also noble, but Roman exemplary mimesis privileges a person's deeds over their looks.

The upshot of Platonic mimesis is that it actively corrupts the soul because it moves the viewer away from the Platonic form and toward a world of simulacra. In Book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato explains why he will not allow anything mimetic (μιμητική, 595a) in his ideal city. He begins by introducing a hierarchy of representations: at the top, the immortal form, in the middle, an expression of the form on the mortal plane, and at the bottom, an imitation of an iteration of the form. The imitation is thus twice removed from the form. The primary reasons that imitations (e.g., poetry or art) are problematic is because the soul is unable to properly categorize them. Imitations appeal to the irrational part of the soul, which mistakes what *seems*

²¹⁶ For the Philostratan authorship of the *Nero*, see Whitmarsh 1999: 143-144.

to be for what is.²¹⁷ According to Plato, this is the wrong direction to move, since a person should always move away from imitations and toward the form. In the *Symposium*, Diotima, via Socrates, argues that one should appreciate beautiful people only as a means of accessing the very form of beauty (*Symp.* 210b-212a). One should never dwell on either the earthly expression of the form or the copy, but on the form itself. But, on the other hand, Plato describes something akin to exemplary mimesis when he writes that a person's thumos, or the honor-loving part of their soul, should be trained to respond pleasurably to fine accomplishments and elicit desire in the person to accomplish similar things themselves.²¹⁸

For Plato, original and copy can only relate to each other via a hierarchy and can never gain a share of equivalence—the copy will always be deceitfully pretending to be the original. Nor do copy and original belong to the same plane of existence. But this is not so when it comes to exemplary mimesis. As Langlands writes, “the Roman version of ethical *mimesis* (*imitatio* and *aemulatio*) is not about art and the imitation of nature, but about a cycle of repeated patterns, where *imitatio* is an act of becoming which generates products of the same order of being as the model.”²¹⁹ So, instead of three discrete planes of existence, representing form, original, and copy, there is one sliding plane in which the copy will eventually become the original. While exemplary mimesis enables a small amount of degradation à la Plato, a copy's employment of critical judgment acts as a check against devaluing too much or too quickly, and can even allow the copy to exceed the model. As Whitmarsh writes, “imitation is safe if sophisticated

²¹⁷ In *Republic* 10, Plato favors a two-part soul, which seems to contradict his earlier discussion of the tripartite soul. For a discussion on the two views as alternate characterizations, see Singpurwalla 2011.

²¹⁸ Fossheim 2020: 38-40.

²¹⁹ Langlands 2020: 85.

hermeneutic techniques can recoup its moral function.”²²⁰ These hermeneutic techniques are a method of quality control which prevent subsequent generations from becoming degraded copies of their ancestors.

Dio Chrysostom

I start with the orations of Dio Chrysostom, a philosophically inclined sophist born around 40 CE whose career spanned the reigns of Vespasian through Trajan, but was exiled under Domitian and recalled under Nerva.²²¹ There is no question for Dio that Nero did mimesis wrong: his greatest mimetic failure was his attempt to make his male lover Sporus into a double of his deceased wife Poppaea Sabina by castrating him and calling him “Sabina” (21.6-10). But at the same time, Nero’s mimetic pursuits present a challenge to Dio, whose own self-styling is based on imitation of literary and philosophical predecessors, part of the larger Second Sophistic project of theorizing the mimetic relation between the Classical Greek past and the Roman Greek present. I argue that Dio characterizes Nero as unable to choose appropriate objects of mimesis and, further, to distinguish between original and copy—maladies to which Dio’s philosophical program provides the antidote.

In this section, I consider Dio’s characterizations of Nero in *Orations* 21 (*On Beauty*), 31 (*To the People of Rhodes*), and 71 (*On the Philosopher*) within the context of his *Kingship Orations*, which Dio intends to function as a philosophical education for Trajan.²²² In the

²²⁰ Whitmarsh 2001: 54.

²²¹ For Dio Chrysostom’s career, especially as Dio himself imagined it, see Moles 1978.

²²² Moles 1990 maintains that the orations were performed before Trajan; Whitmarsh 2001: 325-327 argues for performance in a civic context.

Kingship Orations, Nero appears as a negative exemplum for Trajan based on, primarily, his misplaced love of music.²²³ I argue that in *Orations* 21, 31, and 71, Dio arrives at a fuller theorization of why Nero is dangerous: he fell into a mimetic sickness that made fantasies and delusions seem real to him, and worse, he was in a position of power that allowed him to impose these delusions on others. What Dio wants for Trajan, or any good emperor, is to be philosophically learned enough to parse reality from delusion for the sake of his subjects. Dio evaluates Nero's attempts at mimesis through a Platonic lens, but his exhortations to Trajan in the *Kingship Orations* draw on Roman exemplary mimesis.

The Value of the Past

In the short and wide-ranging *Oration* 21 (*On Beauty*) Dio and his interlocuter speak meanderingly about how to assign beauty along the binaries of ancient/modern, masculine/feminine, and Greek/Persian. In sum, the initial terms of the pairs—ancient, masculine, and Greek—align with Dio's estimation of beauty, while the subsequent terms—modern, feminine, and Persian—represent its desecration. Dio suggests that the stakes for recognizing beauty are high, since he attributes the downfall of the emperor Nero to a misunderstanding both of beauty itself and of how to copy something beautiful, resulting in such crises of representation as Sporus-as-Poppaea-Sabina and (posthumously) the False Neros. But even so, those that deposed and killed Nero represent only a small minority of people. Dio writes that “with regard to the others (e.g., outside of the group that deposed and killed Nero), nothing prevented him from being king for all time, since even now everyone wishes he were still alive” (τῶν γε ἄλλων ἕνεκεν οὐδὲν ἐκόλυνεν αὐτὸν βασιλεύειν τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον, ὃν γε καὶ νῦν ἔτι

²²³ Moles: 1990: 308, 315, 343, 360.

πάντες ἐπιθυμοῦσι ζῆν, 21.10), and that “the majority even believe that he is” (οἱ δὲ πλεῖστοι καὶ οἶονται). That at the time of composition Nero still had supporters who wished and believed he were still alive suggests that the misidentification of beauty was a demos-wide problem that Dio sought to correct.

Dio opens *Oration 21* by pointing out a youth who reminds him of “the very old statues set up at Olympia” (τῶν Ὀλυμπίασιν ἀνακειμένων τῶν πάνυ παλαιῶν, 21.1). This youth, who exists ambiguously between the categories of human and statue (e.g., he has no father, οὗτος τοιοῦτος ὢν οὐδενός ἐστιν, 21.15), raises the question of whether it is possible to copy something ancient and beautiful while preserving its value.

Δ. Ὡς ὑψηλὸς ὁ νεανίσκος καὶ ὠραῖος· ἔτι δὲ ἀρχαῖον αὐτοῦ τὸ εἶδος, οἷον ἐγὼ οὐχ ἐώρακα τῶν νῦν, ἀλλ’ ἢ τῶν Ὀλυμπίασιν ἀνακειμένων τῶν πάνυ παλαιῶν· αἱ δὲ τῶν ὕστερον εἰκόνες ἀεὶ χειρόους καὶ ἀγεννεστέρων φαίνονται, τὸ μὲν τι ὑπὸ τῶν δημιουργῶν, τὸ δὲ πλεόν καὶ αὐτοὶ τοιοῦτοὶ εἰσιν. (*Or.* 21.1)

Dio: How sublime that youth and in the prime of his life! And yet his form is ancient, such as I have not seen of the men who exist now, but rather of the very old statues set up at Olympia. The images of those who came afterward appear continually worse and are of lower-born men, which effect occurs in part because of the craftsmen, but primarily because the men represented are such.

The handsome youth functions as a model for the kind of beauty that Dio prioritizes: ancient, masculine, and Greek. But he also raises questions about how such a beauty can be replicated without crossing over into the categories of modern, feminine, and Persian. Dio resists the idea that the value of the past naturally filters down to the present, since he denies the youth productive participation in both biological and mimetic genealogies. On the one hand, the youth does not have a father, and on the other, insofar as he has been assimilated to the statues at Olympia, he is a father of imitations that have become successively worse (ἀεὶ χειρόους) than

himself. The youth gives the impression of being hermetically sealed in his own (ancient) time, in which he must stay or risk being destroyed.²²⁴

Elsewhere, Dio suggests that one should access the past not via tradition but via intervention. When, in his third *Kingship Oration*, Dio praises Trajan for being a good reader of the past, he emphasizes the unmediated nature of their connection: Trajan is blessed (μακάριος) because “he has conversed with the ancients and understood their prudent and precise discourses” (έντυγχάνοντα τοῖς παλαιοῖς ἀνδράσι καὶ συνιέντα φρονίμων καὶ ἀκριβῶν λόγων, 3.3). As Moles puts it, “through reading, Trajan can achieve the close association with, and knowledge of, παλαιοὶ ἄνδρες who will transmit their virtue to him.”²²⁵ The word έντυγχάνω, which means “to fall in with” or “to meet with,” and by extension “to read,” suggests that Trajan has a direct relationship with his interlocuters. Dio also specifies that these interlocuters are ancient *men* (τοῖς παλαιοῖς ἀνδράσι), thus positioning Trajan opposite Nero, who, as we shall see in *Oration 21*, did not appropriately value men, preferring to turn them into women. In the third *Kingship Oration*, the role of anti-Trajan is filled by the Persian king, who also functions as a stand-in for Domitian (and by extension, Nero).²²⁶ Dio criticizes the king because unlike Trajan, who is busy reading the ancients and cultivating his inner state (διανοίας, 3.1), the Persian king is accumulating possessions (χρυσωμάτων) that stand in for the true happiness he does not possess. Implicit in Dio’s criticism is the suggestion that the Persian king’s drive to accumulate is paired with an ignorance of the value of what he is accumulating—a pose that aligns him with Nero.

²²⁴ According to Strazdins, the youth represents the state of Greek culture under Roman rule “which has been deformed from its classical perfection by the inferior artistry of imitation, the influence of foreign power, and most damningly by the demands of a superficial audience” (2023: 39).

²²⁵ Moles 1990: 351-352.

²²⁶ Moles 1990: 355.

In *Oration 31 (To the People of Rhodes)*, Dio characterizes Nero as (literally) taking the ancient Greek aesthetic out of context, taking aim at his acquisition of Greek statues in order to decorate the city of Rome (κόσμου, 31.151). In short, Dio accuses Nero of being attracted to the aesthetic of these statues without truly valuing their content.²²⁷ But what would have been a fault in any other circumstance becomes the subject of ambiguous praise in this one, since the Rhodians have been acting worse than Nero. Instead of dedicating new statues, they have been recycling existing ones and changing the plaques to match the names of new honorees. As a result, statues and their plaques have become absurdly mismatched. Dio reminds the Rhodians that even Nero, “the most impetuous of kings, assigning the most to himself and having esteemed all things to be less than his absolute authority, took away the statue of no one who had been honored by the Rhodians—and this he granted the Rhodians alone” (Νέρων μὲν ὁ τῶν βασιλέων σφοδρότατος καὶ πλεῖστον αὐτῷ διδοὺς καὶ πρὸς ἅπασαν ἐξουσίαν πάντ’ ἐλάττω νενομικῶς οὐδενὸς ἀφείλετο τὴν εἰκόνα τῶν παρὰ μόνοις Ῥοδίοις τιμηθέντων, 31.150). Even in instances when Nero despoiled statues from Athens and Pergamum, he transported them to Rome wholesale, leaving the original honoree’s name intact (31.151). In contrast, the Rhodians remove the original honoree’s name, “as if he had done something bad” (ὥσπερ κακόν τι πεπονθότες, 31.150). Dio suggest that even though, in line with his erratic philhellenism, Nero privileged form over content, he at least preserved the monumental function of the statues. The Rhodians, on the other hand, have been inadvertently imposing memory sanctions upon their most distinguished citizens. Thus, even though Nero fails to follow the Platonic hierarchy wherein aesthetic appreciation leads to

²²⁷ Cf. the booksellers in *Or.* 21.12 who disguise modern books as ancient ones in order to appeal to an audience that is enamored of the past but does not properly understand it. Strazdins interprets this story as “a veiled swipe at the profession of sophistry which prided itself on imitating the past in speech and personal image and which, despite his own sophistic activities, Dio was prone to denigrate” (2023: 40).

philosophical contemplation, and becomes lodged in aesthetic appreciation instead, he nonetheless becomes an unexpected custodian of the kind of beauty that Dio endorses.

Nero's Simulacra

Returning to *Oration* 21, we recall that opposite ancient, masculine, and Greek beauty is modern, feminine, and Persian beauty. Dio emphasizes the defectiveness of this latter type of beauty by introducing a second simile meant to be read against the first (the youth who looks like the statues at Olympia). While in the first simile there is consistency between vehicle and tenor—the youth is compared to a statue and may also be a statue—in the second simile, the holder of Persian feminine beauty is the result of deceptive mimesis. Dio compares the Persian feminization of men to Daedalus's construction of the decoy heifer in which Pasiphae encloses herself in order to have sex with the bull. Dio suggests that when the Persians obscure the masculine form with feminine decorations, they turn men into false copies of women.

οἱ δὲ Πέρσαι πῶς ἐνόμιζον;

Δ. Οὐ γὰρ φανερόν, ὅτε εὐνούχους ἐποίουν τοὺς καλούς, ὅπως αὐτοῖς ὡς κάλλιστοι ᾤσιν; τοσοῦτον διαφέρειν ᾤοντο πρὸς κάλλος τὸ θῆλυ. σχεδὸν δὲ καὶ πάντες οἱ βάρβαροι, ἥπερ τὰ ἄλλα ζῷα, διὰ τὸ μόνον τὰ ἀφροδίσια ἐννοεῖν. ὡς οὖν λέγεται Δαίδαλος ποιῆσαι τὸν ταῦρον ἐξαπατῶν, περιτεῖναι τῷ ξύλῳ δέρμα βοός, κάκεῖνοι γυναικὸς εἶδος περιτιθέασιν τοῖς ἄρρεσιν, ἄλλως δὲ οὐκ ἐπίστανται ἐρᾶν. (*Or.* 21.4)

Interlocutor: How did the Persians conceive of beauty?

Dio: Is it not clear, since they were in the habit of making their handsome young men into eunuchs, so they might seem as beautiful as possible? To such a degree they thought the female to excel in beauty. And almost all of the barbarians treated the other animals in the same way, because they only thought of sexual pleasures. As, indeed, Daedalus is said to have done when he deceived the bull, stretching the skin of a bull all around a wooden frame, so they put the appearance of a woman around their men; they do not know how to love them otherwise.

Although Dio never states it outright, his criterion for parsing ancient, masculine, and Greek from modern, feminine, and Persian is based on the fidelity of representations to their Platonic forms. It is not the case that what is modern, feminine, and Persian is inherently bad, but rather, the application of these categories onto their structural opposites results in a disparity between representations and their forms. When a man is castrated and dressed up as a woman, he turns away from the Platonic form of the masculine and becomes instead a simulacrum of the form of the feminine. Because Persian feminized men cannot be clearly identified as either men or women, they become agents of confusion and deception. Dio drives this point home when he compares the Persians to Daedalus and their feminized women to Daedalus's faux heifer, suggesting that he considers the transformation of men into pseudo-women to be deceitful and insidious.

While the youth who resembles the statues at Olympia leads Dio to contemplate a general type of beauty exemplified by the statues of which the youth may be one, following Diotima's directive to move from the specific instance of beauty to the category (Pl. *Symp.* 210a-211c), Dio places the beautiful feminine man in a restrictive and regressive comparison in which he is always a version of Daedalus's heifer. Unlike the statues at Olympia, which embody the form of the ideal male youth, Daedalus's heifer makes a mockery of the form of the heifer, since the contraption looks like a heifer, but is really a vehicle for illicit sex between Pasiphae and the bull. And while both the statues at Olympia and the heifer are the result of craftsmanship, the former were fashioned via subtraction, by chiseling away stone, while the latter was constructed additively, by layering skin over a wooden frame. As a result, the statues are made of solid, undifferentiated stone that cannot conceal, while the hoax heifer is hollow *so that* it can hide Pasiphae. Like Pasiphae in the heifer, the beautiful feminine man is comprised of two layers: the form of a woman (γυναικὸς

εἶδος) on the outside, and a lustful Pasiphae or an empty space inside. As we will see later in the dialogue, Nero’s mistake will be in ignoring this empty space, where Sporus is located underneath the appearance of Sabina. Nero will privilege external appearances and believe that Sporus-as-Sabina is Sabina all the way through—a miscalculation.

The simile comparing the beautiful feminine man to Pasiphae’s faux heifer gains significance when placed in conversation with a parallel simile in the second *Kingship Oration* that compares kings to bulls. In this oration, Dio builds on the Iliadic simile comparing Agamemnon to a bull (*Hom. Il.* 2.480-483) by theorizing more fully what makes a good bull (king) as opposed to a bad one. One of the characteristics of a bad bull is that he “rules outrageously contrary to nature” (ἄρχῃ ἀσελγῶς παρὰ φύσιν, 2.73)—in such a situation, his masters and herdsmen (the people) would be justified in killing and removing him (οἱ δεσπότες καὶ βουκόλοι μετέστησαν καὶ ἠφάνισαν).²²⁸ Through the figure of Nero, the idea that the bad bull positions himself against nature (παρὰ φύσιν) dovetails with the simile in *Oration 21* that compares the Persian feminization of men to Daedalus’s creation of the faux heifer. Like the bad bull, Nero positions himself against nature by creating artificial imitations of it. And like the Persians, Nero creates a faux heifer—an intervention in the natural order—in the form of Sporus, and, as Dio will argue, this is precisely what leads to him being deposed and killed.

In *Oration 21*, Dio and his interlocutor eventually come around to the topic of Nero, who exemplifies the neglect of what is ancient, masculine, and Greek in favor of what is modern, feminine, and Persian. Just like the Persians, Nero turned a man into a simulacrum of a woman—he attempted to make his male lover Sporus into a copy of his deceased second wife, Poppaea Sabina. Dio writes that “not only did Nero castrate his beloved, but he changed his name to an

²²⁸ Moles 1990: 345.

effeminate one, which had belonged to the woman with whom he had been in love” (οὐ μόνον ἐξέτεμε τὸν ἐρώμενον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ μετωνόμασε γυναικεῖον, τῆς αὐτοῦ ἐρωμένης καὶ γυναικός, 21.6). By using two genders of the same participle to refer to Sporus and Sabina, Dio suggests that Nero intended the former (ἐρώμενος) to be a direct replacement for the latter (ἐρωμένη). And indeed, Nero’s transformation of Sporus into Sabina is focused on gender at the exclusion of potential internal similarities. In addition to castrating and renaming Sporus, Nero ensures that his lover parts his hair, wears women’s clothes, and is attended by maidens (21.7), all examples of performing femininity that focus on Sporus’s body and behavior. And in a final bid to close the gap between Sporus and Sabina, Nero attempts to buy a sex-change surgery for Sporus. Dio writes that “great honors and boundless money were offered to whomever might make him (Sporus) a woman” (προυτέθησαν μεγάλοι καὶ τιμαὶ καὶ χρήματα ἅπειρα τὸ πλῆθος, ὅστις αὐτὸν γυναῖκα ποιήσειεν, 21.7). The juxtaposition of αὐτὸν and γυναῖκα, contiguous at the end of the sentence above, the former masculine and the latter feminine, highlight Nero’s misunderstanding of how to make Sporus like Sabina. Nero seems to believe that if Sporus can become a generic γυνή, he will better represent the specific Sabina. He misses the point that external resemblances do not create internal ones.

Ultimately, Dio attributes Nero’s fall from power solely to his mistreatment of Sporus. (In contrast, Suetonius writes that Sporus was in Nero’s retinue as he fled the city and was present when he died by suicide, Suet. *Ner.* 48.1). According to Dio, Sporus grew resentful of Nero’s hubristic behavior and revealed Nero’s plans to Nero’s companions who then deserted him and forced him to kill himself. The contrast between Sporus’s outer appearance (he resembled Sabina) and inner feeling (he was angry) demonstrates that in forcing Sporus to adhere to

modern, feminine, and Persian beauty standards, Nero made Sporus's appearance at odds with his essence—with great consequences.

διὰ μόνην μέντοι ταύτην τὴν ὕβριν καὶ ἀπέθανε τὴν εἰς τὸν εὐνοῦχον. ὀργισθεὶς γὰρ ἐξήνεγκεν αὐτοῦ τὰ βουλευματα τοῖς περὶ αὐτόν· καὶ οὕτως ἀπέστησαν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἠνάγκασαν ὅτῳ ποτὲ τρόπῳ ἀπολέσθαι αὐτόν· οὐδέπω γὰρ καὶ νῦν τοῦτό γε δῆλόν ἐστιν· ἐπεὶ τῶν γε ἄλλων ἕνεκεν οὐδὲν ἐκώλυεν αὐτὸν βασιλεύειν τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον, ὃν γε καὶ νῦν ἔτι πάντες ἐπιθυμοῦσι ζῆν. οἱ δὲ πλεῖστοι καὶ οἴονται, καίπερ τρόπον τινὰ οὐχ ἅπαξ αὐτοῦ τεθνηκότος, ἀλλὰ πολλάκις μετὰ τῶν σφόδρα οἰηθέντων αὐτὸν ζῆν. (*Or.* 21.10)

Indeed, solely because of his overreaching behavior toward the eunuch, [Nero] lost his life. For the eunuch, provoked to anger, betrayed Nero's plans to his inner circle. And in this way, they deserted him and forced him to kill himself in whatever way he could at the time. For even now this is not yet a clear fact. Since as far as concerned the others, nothing prevented him from being king for all time, since at least even now everyone wishes he were still alive. And the majority even think that he is, although in some way he has died not once but many times along with those who strongly believed that he lived.

In imposing modern, feminine, and Persian beauty standards on Sporus, Nero makes the latter inconsistent with himself. Sporus's anger is a testament to his original identity, which he sublimates in order to serve the appearance of "Sabina." In his final state, Sporus represents a bifurcation of appearance and reality. Nero, unable to read beyond "Sabina," is unaware of the existence of Sporus, a separate, masculine identity who might seek vengeance on his master. Nero's companions, however, can see that Nero's suppression of Sporus in favor of Sabina is hubristic and they force him to kill himself. To return to the simile from Dio's second *Kingship Oration*, the herdsmen kill the bad bull for creating and exploiting the faux heifer. But Dio suggests that not everyone recognized Nero as a bad bull, since in the eyes of the rest of the world nothing prevented him from being king for all time.

Dio suggests that one of the qualities that made Sporus an unfit companion for Nero was Sporus's sterility. As a eunuch, Sporus could not father children, and although he resembled a woman, he could not carry children either. Dio assigns sexual potency a philosophical value—in

his fourth *Kingship Oration*, he associates philosophy with male virility and sophistry with impotence (e.g., a sophist is a “lecherous eunuch,” εὐνούχου ἀκολάστου, 4.35). As Whitmarsh puts it, “whereas sophistry is presented as sterile and unproductive, philosophy is generative and procreative.”²²⁹ The good king must match the intellectual virility of the philosopher by becoming literally virile—producing heirs in order to endure the continuation of his dynasty. By choosing Sporus as his sexual partner, Nero neglects both philosophy and literal reproduction. His privileging of the appearance of Poppaea Sabina over the reality of Sporus is akin to sophistry, and, because Sporus is not a woman and cannot bear children, he makes himself infertile by association. Even if Nero had not been deposed and killed, he ensured the end of his dynasty by privileging sophistic delusions over the production of legitimate heirs.

But it is not true that Nero does not reproduce—he just does not do so biologically. By demonstrating the ability of mimesis to be generative, Nero challenges Dio’s statement that only the philosopher and his subject, the good king, have procreative power. Nero does not produce biological heirs, but rather successors who impersonate him. Nero’s successors are better at copying than he is, insofar as they render Nero’s death and the deaths of the False Neros indistinguishable—something Nero fails to do with Sabina and Sporus. As Dio puts it, “he has died not once but many times along with those who strongly believed that he lived” (οὐχ ἅπαξ αὐτοῦ τεθνηκότος, ἀλλὰ πολλάκις μετὰ τῶν σφόδρα οἰηθέντων αὐτὸν ζῆν, 21.10). The attempts of the False Neros bend the rules of mimesis, which dictate a separation between referent and representation. Under normal circumstances, a person would be able to distinguish between the death of the referent (Nero) and the deaths of subsequent representations (the False Neros). But in the eyes of Nero’s followers, the referent appears to have died multiple times. Even though

²²⁹ Whitmarsh 2001: 194.

Nero himself is a flawed copyist, he inspires other more effective copyists to take him as the prototype for future uncanny representations. Granted, the False Neros are symptoms of a false reality against which Dio positions himself. But they also do something to destabilize Dio's privileging of essences over appearances, since the False Neros blur the distinction between these two categories—Dio does not write that it is as if Nero has died many times, rather, he asserts that he has.

The Sickness of the Craftsman

Dio strengthens the implicit identification between Nero and Daedalus, as the reckless creators of “Sabina” and the faux heifer, in *Oration 71 (On the Philosopher)*. In this oration, Dio theorizes the difference between the philosopher and the craftsman. He argues that while the craftsman has superior skill in his own craft, the philosopher is able to comment on the advisability of the craftsman's endeavors. In Dio's words, the philosopher is superior in “knowing to act or not to act profitably, and when it is necessary and how and at what time, more than the craftsman, and what is possible” (τῷ συμφερόντως ποιεῖν ἢ μὴ ποιεῖν καὶ ὅτε δεῖ καὶ ὅπου καὶ τὸν καιρὸν γινῶναι τοῦ δημιουργοῦ μᾶλλον καὶ τὸ δυνατόν, 71.6). Dio's primary example of a craftsman who has not acted profitably is Daedalus, who wielded his great creative skill without guidance from philosophical principles. Dio provides three examples of Daedalus's projects that he considers inadvisable: Pasiphae's heifer, the labyrinth for the Minotaur, and Icarus's wings (71.6). All three examples highlight Daedalus's transgressiveness and willingness to experiment with human-animal hybridity. The example of Pasiphae, which is chronologically prior to, and creates the conditions of possibility for the two other examples, reintroduces the question of the ethics of copying in light of its possible consequences.

συμπράττων δ' αὖ τῇ νόσῳ τῆς Πασιφάης οὐκ ὀρθῶς εἰργάσατο· οὐ γὰρ συνέφερεν οὐδὲ ἦν δίκαιον οὐδὲ καλὸν τοιαῦτα συμπράττειν οὐδὲ μηχανὰς εὐρίσκειν ἐπὶ τὰ αἰσχρὰ καὶ ἀνόσια. (*Or.* 71.6)

And in turn, in assisting the sickness of Pasiphae, he did not act rightly. For it was not beneficial nor just nor beautiful to help such thoughts nor to devise contrivances to achieve shameful and profane ends.

Dio will not mention Nero by name until the end of *Oration* 71, but I suggest that Dio alludes to him earlier, insofar as his description of Daedalus recalls his description of Nero in *Oration* 21. Dio suggests that like an exceptionally skilled craftsman, the emperor bends the laws of nature without taking responsibility for the results he produces. Rather, he is absorbed in the means. Dio states in *Oration* 21 that “among men power is something lawless” (ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις καὶ ἡ ἐξουσία παράνομόν τί ἐστι, 21.6). The prepositions ἐκ and παρά guide the sense of the sentence: Nero’s exceptional status results in his standing outside of human and natural laws. This is a stance shared by Daedalus—in *Oration* 71, Dio writes that in attaching wings to a human, Daedalus wrought impossible things (οὐ γὰρ δυνατὰ ἐμχανᾶτο πτέρυγας ἀνθρώπῳ προστιθείς, 71.6). Nero—in addition to making a faux heifer out of Sporus—also made an Icarus by means of his power, which approximates the power of the craftsman. Dio writes in *Oration* 21 that if Nero demanded a person fly, it would be promised to him, and that person would be retained in the imperial household as someone who could fly (21.9). Like Daedalus, Nero accomplished impossible things, but thought more of whether he could than whether he should.²³⁰

After considering examples of men who were equally craftsmen and philosophers (Hippias of Elis and Odysseus) and craftsmen who were in need of philosophers (Daedalus, the builder of the ships Paris took to Greece, and Scamandrius, who was good at hunting but fled before Menelaus), Dio ends *Oration* 71 with a summary of Nero’s artistic achievements and

²³⁰ Cf. Suet. *Ner.* 12.2, in which an actor performing Icarus fails to fly and dies near Nero, who is watching.

poses the question: “was he not then a wise man?” (οὐκουν ὑπῆρχε σοφός; 71.9). Implicitly, he asks with which profession Nero is better aligned: the craftsman who makes all things possible without considering the consequences, or the philosopher, who is able to judge what pursuits are appropriate for whom.

καίτοι τῶν νῦν βασιλέων τις ἐπεθύμει σοφὸς εἶναι τὴν τοιαύτην σοφίαν, ὥς πλεῖστα ἐπιστάμενος· οὐ μέντοι τὰ τοιαῦτα ἃ μὴ θαυμάζεται παρὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἀλλὰ ἐφ’ οἷς στεφανωθῆναι ἔστι, κηρύττειν καὶ ᾄδειν πρὸς κιθάραν καὶ τραγωδεῖν καὶ παλαίειν καὶ παγκρατιάζειν. φασὶ δὲ καὶ γράφειν καὶ πλάττειν ἱκανὸν αὐτὸν εἶναι καὶ αὐλεῖν τῷ τε στόματι καὶ ταῖς μασχάλαις ἄσκον ὑποβάλλοντα, ὅπως διαπεφευγὼς ἦ τὸ αἰσχρὸν τὸ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς. οὐκουν ὑπῆρχε σοφός; (*Or.* 71.9)

And indeed, a certain one of the kings of our time desired to be wise with regard to such wisdom, insofar as he was versed in the greatest number of things. To be sure, only such things as are marveled at among men, for which it is possible to win a crown: to be a herald and to sing to the cithara and to represent events in tragedies and to wrestle and to participate in the pankration. And they say that he was competent in writing and sculpture and playing the flute, both with his mouth and by placing prosthetic lungs under his armpits, so that he might escape the shame of Athena. Was he not, then, a wise man?

Dio asserts (facetiously) that the basis of Nero’s wisdom was that he was “versed in the greatest number of things” (ὥς πλεῖστα ἐπιστάμενος). The word ἐπίσταμαι is used throughout *Oration* 71 to describe practical skills, for example, fighting (μάχεσθαι ἐπιστάμενον, 71.3), knowledge of building houses (οἰκοδομῆσαι ἠπίστατο, 71.4), and hunting (τὰ μὲν θηρία ἠπίστατο βάλλειν, 71.7). But Dio suggests throughout the oration that knowing such skills alone does not constitute wisdom. Rather, “there is need of judgment and excellence both toward what men know, and toward what they do not know” (δεῖ φρονήσεως καὶ ἀρετῆς καὶ πρὸς ἃ ἐπίστανται οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ πρὸς ἃ οὐκ ἐπίστανται, 71.8). The craftsman needs the philosopher to tell him when to act and when to practice restraint. So, when Dio writes that Nero was “versed in the greatest number of things” (ὥς πλεῖστα ἐπιστάμενος), his use of the word ἐπίσταμαι suggests that Nero’s skills belong to the craftsman rather than the philosopher.

That Nero’s subset of knowledge is limited to such things “for which it is possible to win a crown” (ἐφ’ οἷς στεφανωθῆναι ἔστι) speaks to his φιλοτιμία, which distances him from the pose of the philosopher.²³¹ In *Oration 67 (On Popular Opinion)*, Dio suggests that the philosopher’s chief concern must be knowing both his own nature and the nature of the external world. Taken in this context, φιλοτιμία (the desire to win prestige or esteem) would distort the philosopher’s ability to see clearly, since his sense of self in relation to the rest of the world would be reliant on the ever-changing opinions of others.²³² In *Oration 66 (On Reputation)*, Dio conceives of the φιλότιμοι as suffering from an illness (νόσον, 66.2), which leads them to desire “crowns and front seats and proclamations” (στεφάνους καὶ προεδρίας καὶ κηρύγματα), words that explicitly recall Nero’s pursuits in *Oration 71* (στεφανωθῆναι; κηρύττειν). The language of sickness, in turn, reappears in a reference to Nero in the third *Kingship Oration*, in which Dio argues that kings who participate in the wrong sort of recreation will harm their souls and the reputation of kingship itself.

ὅθεν δὴ πολλὰ πολλοῖς προσέπεσε νοσήματα ἀγεννῆ καὶ λυμαινόμενα τὰς ψυχάς, ἔτι δὲ καθαιροῦντα τὸ ἀξίωμα τῆς βασιλείας· ὁ μὲν γὰρ ὑπὸ ᾧδῆς ἀλούς μινυρίζων διετέλει καὶ θρηνῶν ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις, ἀμελήσας δὲ τῆς αὐτοῦ βασιλείας, τοὺς παλαιοὺς ὑποκρινόμενος ἡγάπα βασιλέας· (*Or.* 3.133-134)

From this source (improper recreation) many sordid and soul-ruining sicknesses fell upon many, and even more, sicknesses that reduced the reputation of kingship. For one king, taken in by song, developed a habit of warbling and wailing in theaters, without care for his station, since he was fond of playing the parts of the kings of old.

The sickness of the king (clearly Nero) stems from his refusal to limit his recreational activities to pursuits appropriate to his station (Dio argues that hunting is the only proper recreational activity for kings, 3.133-138)—thus, instead of restoring his soul, he destroys it. The sickness from which

²³¹ Dio contrasts the language of winning a crown with the language of wondering (θαυμάζεται), which Langlands describes as the point of departure for philosophical inquiry (2020: 80).

²³² Trapp 2012: 127-128.

Nero suffers parallels the sickness of the φιλότιμοι (if it is not the same sickness), since both sicknesses drive their hosts to seek status in the eyes of their audience, whose opinions have no intrinsic value.

The sickness that φιλοτιμία produces in its adherents causes a schism between appearances and realities. The φιλότιμοι do not think that they are sick; they think that they are upstanding citizens. Trapp writes that the φιλότιμοι “are deluded into thinking of themselves as men of nobility or virtue, but in reality, just like Ixion mating with clouds under the delusion that he was consorting with Hera, all they produce are monstrosities that demonstrate their misguided ambition without achieving any solid or beneficial result.”²³³ Producing a monstrosity is precisely what Nero does (in Dio’s eyes) when he creates “Sabina,” suffering from a malady that causes him to turn away from reality. Nero engages with the same world of images when he plays the kings of old onstage. As mentioned above, Dio conceives of fidelity to the past as an important aspect of being a good king—ideally Nero would engage philosophically with kingly *exempla* in order to improve his own behavior vis-à-vis the kings of old. But instead, Nero merely re-represents these *exempla* onstage while emptying them of their philosophical content. In short, he makes himself a *simulacrum* of them, and them *simulacra* of themselves. Dio’s question in *Oration 71* “was he not then a wise man?” (οὐκουν ὑπῆρχε σοφός;, 71.9), then, must be taken ironically, since if Nero *were* a wise man, he would follow the philosopher in turning away from φιλοτιμία and the simulacra it produces.²³⁴

²³³ Trapp 2012: 129.

²³⁴ As Trapp (2012: 141) notes, in the *Republic*, the timocratic or timarchic individual/polis is the first of the degenerate forms of government and thus occupies a precarious position of both appearing similar to the ideal form of government and beginning the process of decline (Pl. *Resp.* 545b, 546c-550c).

The doubleness of Nero's world can be summed up by the word *πλάττειν*, which Dio uses at the end of *Oration 71* to describe one of Nero's recreational activities. In the passage above, I have translated the word as "to sculpt," but it has a wide range of meanings, all of which describe things that Nero has done. In its most basic sense, the word means "to form or to mold" (e.g., out of clay). This meaning can also have a metaphoric dimension, as in "to form or to mold via education," "to form an image of a thing in the mind (i.e., to imagine)," "to pretend," and, in its participial form, "fictitious" or "forged."²³⁵ So, Nero's creation of "Sabina" and his acting are both formations, or representations, of natural phenomena and interventions in the natural world.

Despite Nero's desire to pay homage to ancient, masculine, and Greek models, Dio depicts him as inadvertently perverting these categories in his representations. Thus, Sporus only superficially resembles Sabina, and Nero's penchant for acting in tragedies is incompatible with his exceptional status as ruler of the Roman world. In short, Nero mostly does mimesis wrong, and when he does it right (as in the case of the Rhodian statues), it is for the wrong reasons. Nero's aesthetic values have political implications: for one, his limited skill as a copyist means that he cannot fully participate in the Roman tradition of exemplarity, in which he would base aspects of his rulership on his virtuous predecessors. But more than simply being bad at copying, Nero sometimes seems to lack the critical judgment to tell original from copy, and thus loses himself in a world of copies. Dio implies that this problem would have been alleviated by the intervention of a philosopher, who would have been able to teach him to distinguish the real world from the world of representation (what Dio is doing for Trajan). The stakes are particularly

²³⁵ Much later, Cassius Dio will use the same word to describe the attempt of the False Nero of 69, who "pretended to be Nero" (Νέρων εἶναι πλασάμενος, Cass. Dio 63.9).

high because the good king is meant to provide an *exemplum* for his subjects, who will then follow his lead (3.9-11).

Plutarch

Plutarch, Dio's contemporary, also wrestles with the dual influences of Platonism and exemplary mimesis, but in a much different way.²³⁶ In this section, I focus on Plutarch's *On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance* (*De sera numinis vindicta*, henceforth *De sera*), a Platonic-style dialogue in which Plutarch and his three interlocutors discuss the problem of late punishment by the gods. The dialogue ends with a myth based on the Myth of Er, in which the soul of Aridaeus (renamed Thespesius during the course of the myth) views the punishment of souls in the afterlife, including the reincarnation of Nero into a marsh creature. Yet this Platonic-style dialogue also bears traces of exemplary mimesis. Exemplarity in *De sera* is not straightforward, as it is in *How a Man May Become Aware of His Progress in Virtue* (*Quomodo quis suos in virtute sentiat profectus*)—in this latter essay, a man knows that he has made progress in virtue because he now asks “what would my exempla have done in this scenario?” (*Quomodo quis suos* 85A-B). In contrast, *De sera* explores the other side of exemplarity: inescapable sameness between family members. In *De sera*, Plutarch embeds Nero in large structures that extend across time (e.g., the family, the city, and the race) from which he is inseparable, and thus absolves Nero of many crimes, conceiving of them as crimes of the structures rather than crimes of the individual.

In *De sera*, Plutarch's theorization of what makes two people similar is based on a shared common quality that is transferred from one to the other, regardless of whether or not they exist in the same time. This general framework informs the structures of the family, the city, and the

²³⁶ E.g., Langlands 2020: 84-90; Kirkland 2022: 117-121.

race, and, I suggest, the family-like structure to which all emperors belong.²³⁷ Following this last point, I argue that *De sera* has a contemporary political function as a warning to the emperor Trajan. On the one hand, Trajan was not biologically related to the preceding two dynasties, and thus might seem to avoid any delayed vengeance for the actions of the Julio-Claudians and Flavians. But on the other hand, Trajan was implicated in the larger structure of emperors, which, as Plutarch seems to suggest, is analogous to a family or a city, and in that case, the burden would be on him to avert any pending instances of delayed vengeance.

Plutarch argues that punishment for an ancestor's sins may be delayed and enacted on their descendants. In order to support this position, he theorizes the family not as separate people, but rather, as a single person at different stages of his life. The sins of a father are replicated in his offspring, not because his offspring copy him, but because they *are* him—that is, they derive their existence from him. Thus, *imitatio* is a byproduct of being part of a continuous structure. Plutarch's theorization of the family draws on his theorization of the city. In short, a city is one cohesive entity that cannot be separated by means of chronological distinction.

ἐν γάρ τι πρᾶγμα καὶ συνεχὲς ἡ πόλις ὥσπερ ζῶον, οὐκ ἐξιστάμενον αὐτοῦ ταῖς καθ' ἡλικίαν μεταβολαῖς οὐδ' ἕτερον ἐξ ἑτέρου τῷ χρόνῳ γινόμενον, ἀλλὰ συμπαθὲς ἀεὶ καὶ οἰκεῖον αὐτῷ καὶ πᾶσαν ὧν πράττει κατὰ τὸ κοινὸν ἢ ἔπραξεν αἰτίαν καὶ χάριν ἀναδεχόμενον μέχρι ἂν ἡ ποιοῦσα καὶ συνδέουσα ταῖς ἐπιπλοκαῖς κοινωνία τὴν ἐνότητα διαφυλάττῃ. (*De sera* 559A)

For a city is one continuous thing, like a living creature, nor does it separate from itself amidst the changes related to aging, nor does it become continually other in the passage of time, but it is always sympathetic and belonging to itself, and accepting all blame or favor for what it does or has done in the public sphere so long as the common quality making it and binding it with connections carefully guards it as a unity.

²³⁷ I take as a general starting point the claim made by Folch that “the emperor’s posthumous incarnation as a swan, a frog, a swan-frog might therefore be understood as provocation to reread Plutarch’s Platonic philosophy as an exploration of why Nero and his γένος—understood narrowly as tyrants or expansively as a family (the Julio-Claudians?) or a city (Rome?), all of which Plutarch cites as targets of divine retribution—have not been more swiftly punished” (2018: 239). I narrow Folch’s claim by placing *De sera* in its Trajanic context.

Plutarch uses abstractions to explain the consistency of the city over time. He is not explicit about how the transmission of the common quality takes place (e.g., is it a material process or something more like a spirit?) but rather relies on repeated words and prepositions to convey the general sense of what he means. For example, Plutarch uses variations on the word κοινός (e.g., τὸ κοινὸν; κοινωνία) to emphasize the common or shared quality of the city in which all citizens partake. He also repeats the preposition σύν (with, e.g., συνεχές, συμπαθές, συνδέουσα) in order to stress the togetherness of the city with itself—it holds together (συνεχές), it feels together (συμπαθές), it binds together (συνδέουσα). On the other hand, he negates the preposition ἐκ (from, e.g., οὐκ ἐξιστάμενον αὐτοῦ; οὐδ' ἕτερον ἐξ ἑτέρου), suggesting that the city never departs from itself.

Plutarch has already suggested that a city is “like a living creature” (ὥσπερ ζῷον). He will elaborate on this comparison, writing that “to make many—or rather, countless—cities distinguished by time is like making many men out of one because now he is old, earlier he was young, and before that he was a teenager” (τὸ δὲ πολλὰς πόλεις διαιροῦντα τῷ χρόνῳ ποιεῖν, μᾶλλον δὲ ἀπείρους, ὁμοίον ἐστὶν τῷ πολλοὺς τὸν ἓνα ποιεῖν ἄνθρωπον ὅτι νῦν πρεσβύτερός ἐστι, πρότερον δὲ νεώτερος, ἀνωτέρῳ δὲ μειράκιον ἦν, 559A). Such a characterization of a city as a living person dovetails with Seneca the Elder’s representation of Rome as a person who has experienced various life stages: infancy under King Romulus (*infantiam sub rege Romulo*), childhood under the other kings (*pueritiam sub ceteris regibus*), almost an adult under Tarquin (*Tarquinio regnante . . . quasi adulta esse coepisset*), the end of adolescence at the end of the Punic War (*adulescentia eius fine Punici belli terminata*), a first old age during the civil wars (*prima eius senectus, cum bellis lacerata civilibus*) a second infancy under Augustus (*rursus ad regimen singularis imperii recidit quasi ad alteram infantiam revoluta*), and old age during the principate

(*ita consenuit tamquam sustentare se ipsa non valeret nisi adminiculo regentium uteretur*).²³⁸

According to such a line of thought, a city would possess a life force that would make it continuous with itself.

In terms of its continuity, the city is analogous to the family, since the family also does not lend itself to chronological distinction. But Plutarch emphasizes that in the case of the family, unlike the city, the process by which one member becomes an extension of another is material and biological. Family members act the same because they are the same—they derive their existence from one another.

Εἰ δ' ἔστι τι πόλις ἐν πρᾶγμα καὶ συνεχές, ἔστι δῆπου καὶ γένος, ἐξηρημένον ἀρχῆς μιᾶς καὶ δυνάμιν τινα καὶ κοινωνίαν διαπεφυκυῖαν ἀναφερούσης, καὶ τὸ γεννηθὲν οὐχ ὥς τι δημιούργημα πεποιημένον ἀπὸ γένου τοῦ γεννήσαντος· ἐξ αὐτοῦ γάρ, οὐχ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ, γέγονεν, ὥστ' ἔχει τι καὶ φέρεται τῶν ἐκείνου μέρος ἐν ἑαυτῷ, καὶ κολαζόμενον προσηκόντως καὶ τιμώμενον. (*De sera* 559D)

If a city is a single and continuous thing, it is doubtless also true of a family, attached to a single origin that repeats some force and inseparable connection, and offspring does not depart from parent, as a created piece of workmanship might depart from his craftsman. For his offspring came into being out of him, not by his hands, so that it holds and endures some portion of his lot in itself, and is punished or honored accordingly.

The force that ensures continuity between all members of the family is its single origin (ἀρχῆς μιᾶς). Plutarch does not identify the nature of the single origin and again leaves us to speculate whether it is the body of the family founder or an immaterial spirit that all family members possess. This single origin plays a vital role in the process of replication by bringing back (ἀναφερούσης) some power (δυνάμιν τινα) and inseparable connection (κοινωνίαν διαπεφυκυῖαν) in each of its iterations (i.e., each family member). Each member of the family has a synecdochic relation with the family progenitor, since they each hold some portion (τι μέρος) of him and prosthetically extend his life. Plutarch sets this process against craftsmanship. It is not enough to be

²³⁸ Historical Fragments 1 = Lactant. *Div. inst.* 7.15.14.

formed by one's parent (e.g., as in the case of adoption). Rather, in order to inherit the family's vital force, one needs to have been created out of their parent's body (ἐξ αὐτοῦ).

The single origin of the family is reminiscent of the magnet in Plato's *Ion*, which imparts (ἐντίθησι) its own power (δύναμιν, a word Plutarch seems to take from Plato in the passage above) to the iron rings that it touches, with the result that a great chain (ὄρμαθὸς μακρὸς) of objects can be formed, all deriving their power from the original magnet (Pl. *Ion*. 533E). In the *Ion*, the metaphor of the magnet is used to describe the way in which the inspiration from the Muse facilitates a mimetic connection between a rhapsode and his audience. The single origin of the family in *De sera* also holds its descendants in a chain which links ancestors and descendants as if they were segments of a single life.

When he appears at the end of the essay, Nero broadens the idea of γένος to mean not only a city or a family, but also a species (of animal) or a race (of people). Given Plutarch's discussion thus far, Nero's punishment might seem to be a punishment for the collective crimes of the Julio-Claudians. Granted, the Julio-Claudians were a dynasty, not a family—they were biologically related only in retrospect, since Augustus and Tiberius were not biologically related, but shared descendants. So, a dynasty would seem to fall somewhere between the structure of the family, which relies on biological relation, and the city, which depends on a more mysterious common quality. But even so, Nero's punishment will not be solely determined by membership in his dynasty. Rather, he is implicated in a broader network of structures that must be considered when determining his due in the present.

So, to Nero: after Plutarch has refuted all of his interlocutors' objections—first to late punishment in general, and second to the punishment of a descendent for the crime of an ancestor—Plutarch tells a myth about the soul of a certain Aridaeus, who, like the Platonic Er,

survives a trip into the underworld and relates what he has seen there. Nero enters into a scene where craftsmen are refashioning souls for reincarnation into lower life forms. The craftsmen are planning to modify Nero soul to fit Nicander's viper, but receive last-minute instructions to change the animal as a reward for his liberation of the Greek people.

Ἔσχατα δὲ ὀρώντος αὐτοῦ τὰς ἐπὶ δευτέραν γένεσιν τρεπομένας ψυχὰς εἷς τε ζῷα παντοδαπὰ καμπτομένας βία καὶ μετασχηματιζομένας ὑπὸ τῶν ταῦτα δημιουργούντων, ὀργάνοις τισὶ καὶ πληγαῖς τὰ μὲν κολλώντων μέρη καὶ συνελαυνόντων, τὰ δὲ ἀποστρεφόντων, ἓνια δ' ἐκλεινόντων καὶ ἀφανιζόντων παντάπασιν ὅπως ἐφαρμόσειεν ἑτέροις ἢ θεσι καὶ βίοις, ἐν ταύταις φανῆναι τὴν Νέρωνος, τὰ τε ἄλλα κακῶς ἔχουσιν ἤδη καὶ διαπεπαρμένην ἥλοις διαπύροις. προκεχειρισμένων δὲ καὶ ταύτῃ τῶν δημιουργῶν Νικανδρικῆς ἐχίδνης εἶδος, ἐν ᾗ κυθεῖσαν καὶ διαφαγοῦσαν τὴν μητέρα βιώσεσθαι, φῶς ἔφασκεν ἐξαίφνης διαλάμψαι μέγα καὶ φωνὴν ἐκ τοῦ φωτὸς γενέσθαι προστάττουσαν εἰς ἄλλο γένος ἡμερώτερον μεταβαλεῖν, ᾧδικόν τι μηχανησαμένους περὶ ἔλη καὶ λίμνας ζῷον· ὧν μὲν γὰρ ἡδίκησεν δεδωκέναι δίκας, ὀφείλεσθαι δέ τι καὶ χρηστὸν αὐτῷ παρὰ θεῶν ὅτι τῶν ὑπηκόων τὸ βέλτιστον καὶ θεοφιλέστατον γένος ἡλευθέρωσε. (*De sera* 567-568)

He himself was viewing the extremes, the souls being turned for a second birth, being bent by force into all sorts of living creatures and being changed in form by those crafting them, who, with some tools and blows were welding and hammering together some limbs, twisting back others, and polishing and altogether destroying still others, in order that they be adapted to new characters and lives, when among these appeared Nero, who was on the whole already in a bad state and pierced through with fiery nails. The craftsmen had made also for his soul the form of Nicander's viper, in which he would live by eating through his pregnant mother, when suddenly (he said) a great light shined through and a voice came from the light commanding the craftsmen to change the form to another gentler species, having constructed something musical, an animal living around marshes and pools. For Nero had paid the penalty for the things he had done wrong, and something good was owed to him from the gods, since he had set free the best and most god-favored people among his subjects.

In this passage, the idea of the γένος takes several different forms: family, species (of animal), and race (of people). Nero's original punishment would seem to be based on his actions within the structure of his family. The original plan is that the craftsmen will alter Nero's soul to fit Nicander's viper. As Capettini notes, the viper is female, a distinction indicated by the feminine ἔχιδνα instead of the masculine ἔχιδς—evidence that Nero's punishment is guided by the principle

of *lex talionis*.²³⁹ This punishment would force Nero to reenact the murder of his mother, Agrippina the Younger, before structurally replacing her—Nero too would become a mother and be killed by his (her) own offspring. When applied to the Julio-Claudian dynasty as a whole, the punishment of the viper seems to be an attempt to counteract the murders of predecessors by successors, exemplified by both Caligula and Nero.²⁴⁰ The viper emphasizes the idea that the true punishment of the Julio-Claudians would be its continued cyclical existence. Right before his description of Nero, Plutarch writes that each ancestor whose sins have been replicated by their descendants are attacked by their descendants in the afterlife (567E). Although the punishment of the viper would have been enacted on Nero, it would have affected the entire dynasty.

But, as it turns out, Nero is not going to be turned into a viper after all. This commutation brings together two additional meanings of the word γένος. As Plutarch relates, Nero is set to become “a gentler species” (γένος ἡμερώτερον), that is, a marsh animal (either a swan or frog).²⁴¹ The god’s change of heart is based on Nero’s treatment of another γένος—the race of the Greeks, who are “the best and most god-favored people” (τὸ βέλτιστον καὶ θεοφιλέστατον γένος). God is a Hellenophile, just like Nero. This passage relates to Plutarch’s earlier argument that if a person approves of rewarding descendants for their ancestors’ good deeds, he must also approve of punishing descendants for their ancestors’ crimes (558C). Nero has fulfilled the protasis of this condition: he has rewarded the Greek people for their past legacy, rather than their current status.²⁴²

²³⁹ Capettini 2020: 655-656.

²⁴⁰ Suet. *Calig.* 12.2-3; *Ner.* 33.1.

²⁴¹ Folch 2018: 230-232.

²⁴² Plutarch does not outline Nero’s reasoning for liberating the Greeks, but Tacitus writes that Nero relieved the people of Ilium from taxes (*ut Ilienses omni publico munere solverentur*, *Ann.* 12.58.1) on the basis that the Romans

The spirit of reciprocity then comes back to Nero, who is going to change γένη based on the way he treated a γένος. Plutarch outlines groups of people in broad strokes, with many of their current trajectories having been predetermined in the far past.

Plutarch's theorization of the γένος looks both backwards and forwards. On the one hand, the course that the γένος will take is dependent on a common origin that displaces blame from succeeding family members. On the other hand, it is up to each member of the family to avert the vengeance that is being accumulated. Put another way, ancestors and descendants are always in the double position of attempting to absolve the crimes of previous generations and of deferring punishment onto subsequent ones. Plutarch implies that Nero's crimes were seeded by Augustus, but that in conferring a benefit to the Greek people, Nero lessened both his own punishment and the punishment of those who came before him.

Where in this structure would Trajan fit? As previously discussed, the structure of the dynasty falls somewhere between a family and a city. How, then, would Plutarch conceive of three succeeding dynasties, separated by a period of civil war? It is my view that since cities retain their continuity throughout periods of civil war, and a dynasty is somewhat analogous to a city, Plutarch's message to Trajan is that he should not count on biological disjuncture to shield him from Nero's bloodline and the outstanding vengeance directed toward the Julio-Claudians. It is notable that the Flavians also left an ambiguous legacy. In *De sera*, Plutarch writes that the Sibyl in the underworld predicts that a good emperor will leave his rule because of sickness (ἐσθλὸς ἐὼν νοῦσφ τυραννίδα λείψει, 566E), seemingly a reference to the emperor Titus, but it is also the case that Vespasian revoked Nero's good deed toward the Greeks, and Domitian was posthumously

were descended from the Trojans (*Romanum Troia demissum*). Suetonius writes that following his Greek Tour, Nero freed the province (*provinciam universam libertate donavit*, *Ner.* 24.2).

assimilated to Nero. Trajan then, should not assume that he is starting his rule with a blank slate, since vengeance directed at preceding dynasties might very well be looming.

Pseudo-Lucian/Philostratus

In this final section, I consider two texts probably written by Philostratus: the pseudo-Lucianic *Nero* and the securely Philostratean *Life of Apollonius* (*Vita Apollonii*).²⁴³ These texts, composed under Septimius Severus (193-211 CE), reconsider the emperor Nero roughly 150 years after his death, contra the 30 or so years between Nero and the Trajanic authors Dio Chrysostom and Plutarch. Nevertheless, the *Nero* and the *Life of Apollonius*—the former a dialogue and the latter a fictionalized reimagination of the historical Apollonius of Tyana's life—pick up questions of exemplarity explored in earlier imperial Greek texts. The *Nero* interrogates Nero's contradictory pose as a Hellenophile who mixes Greek and Persian exempla. On Elsner's view, Nero's tendency to collapse hierarchies and blur the exemplary landscape make him a bad exemplum: "*Nero*, whose subject is a bad emperor obsessed with Greece, might figure as a negative exemplum of how the Philhellene should not behave."²⁴⁴ But I suggest that Philostratus approaches Nero-as-negative-exemplum with a sense of irony, since in the *Nero*, Nero fails to follow both positive and negative exempla alike and in the *Life of Apollonius*, the title character makes fun of Vespasian for positioning himself against Nero to the point where he counteracts even the good things that Nero has done. More than casting Nero as a negative exemplum, Philostratus draws out the ways in which Nero challenges the binary nature of exemplary thinking.

²⁴³ For the Philostratean authorship of *Nero*, see already Whitmarsh 1999: 143-144; Elsner 2009: 4; Bowie 2009: 31. Points of continuity between the *Nero* and the *Life of Apollonius* include references to Nero's attempt to cut the Isthmus in *VA* 4.24; 5.7 and to Musonius's digging in *VA* 5.19.

²⁴⁴ Elsner 2009: 16-17.

Nero

The *Nero* opens with two speakers, the philosopher Musonius Rufus and his interlocutor Menecrates, discussing Nero's unfinished attempt to cut across the Isthmus of Corinth. Musonius frames Nero's project as following the exempla of his predecessors who cut and joined segments of land: Agamemnon and Darius, whom he purposefully imitated, and Xerxes, whom Musonius thinks he might have had in mind. Nero's selection and combination of exempla reflects the ambiguity of his own project, which was loftily conceived but not finished. First, Nero mixes Greek and Persian exempla, flattening the traditionally hierarchal relation between the two, and second, he chooses exempla that encode elements of failure—either on the parts of the military leaders or on the part of Nero himself, who seems to misunderstand the lessons of the past.

ὁ δὲ Ἴσθμος οὐ τῶν ἀποθεν αὐτῷ βεβουλευμένων, ἀλλ' ἐντυχὼν τῇ φύσει τοῦ τόπου μεγαλουργίας ἠράσθη, τὸν τε βασιλέα τῶν ἐπὶ τὴν Τροίαν ποτὲ Ἀχαιῶν ἐνθυμηθείς, ὡς τὴν Εὐβοίαν τῆς Βοιωτίας ἀπέτεμεν Εὐρίπῳ τῷ περὶ τὴν Χαλκίδα, ἔτι γε μὴν καὶ τὸν Δαρεῖον, ὡς ὁ Βόσπορος ἐγεφυρώθη αὐτῷ ἐπὶ τοὺς Σκύθας· τὰ δὲ Ξέρξου καὶ πρὸ τούτων ἴσως ἐνενόησε, μέγιστα τῶν μεγαλουργιῶν ὄντα, καὶ πρὸς τοῦτοις <ὡς> τῷ δι' ὀλίγου ἀλλήλοις ἐπιμῖζαι πάντας ἔσοιτο τὴν Ἑλλάδα λαμπρῶς ἐστιᾶσθαι τοῖς ἔξωθεν· (*Nero* 2)

The Isthmus was not part of the plans Nero had made from a distance, but coming into contact with the nature of the place he eagerly desired to achieve something great, having pondered the king of the Achaeans in the old times who waged war against Troy, as he cut Euboea from Boeotia by means of the Euripus at Chalcis, and of course Darius, as the Bosphorus was bridged by him when he waged war against the Scythians. And perhaps before these he considered the achievements of Xerxes, as they were the greatest of great achievements, and in addition to these exempla, he considered how by mixing everyone with one another by means of a small distance, he might splendidly open Greece to entertain those from without.

Musonius explains that Nero's original plans in Greece did not include the Isthmus—he had actually come to sing and compete in the games. But he was struck by the nature of the place (τῇ φύσει τοῦ τόπου) and desired, or even lusted (ἠράσθη) to accomplish something great (μεγαλουργίας). In short, the nature of the place rouses a corresponding desire for craft, and Nero is moved to make an artificial intervention (à la Sporus) in the natural landscape. In conceiving of

his great deed, Nero looks to the tradition of kings who manipulated landscapes. First, (Musonius says) Nero took as an exemplum the king of the Achaeans, seemingly a reference to Agamemnon, who cut Euboea from Boeotia. The problem is that no such story is attested. Macleod argues that the reference is a mistake on the part of the author—Whitmarsh responds by suggesting that it could be “a snide swipe (on the part of both Musonius and the author) at the Trimalchioesque ignorance of Nero.”²⁴⁵ On Whitmarsh’s view, Nero’s attempt to cut the Isthmus would have been based on a misunderstanding of the inspiring exemplum.

Second, (Musonius says) Nero thought of Darius. Darius, a Persian king who built a bridge in order to invade Scythia would seem to represent an inversion of Agamemnon, a Greek king who dug a channel in order to lead his troops out of Greece. That Nero was equally inspired by a Greek cutting a channel and a Persian building a bridge suggests that the emperor (purposefully or not) collapsed oppositions and thus released exempla from previously existing hierarchies. On Nero’s view, a Greek king would not seem to be a better exemplum than a Persian one, nor would channel-cutting be superior to bridge-building. Musonius conjectures that Nero might have thought of Xerxes even before the other two exempla (πρὸ τούτων), and calls his bridging of the Hellespont “the greatest of great achievements” (μέγιστα τῶν μεγαλουργιῶν ὄντα), a repetition of the word μεγαλουργία, which he uses earlier in the passage to describe what Nero hoped to achieve. That Musonius aligns Nero’s attempt to cut the Isthmus with the campaigns of Darius and Xerxes would seem to be an attempt to cast Nero as an eastern-style despot. And yet, Nero fails to live up to the exempla of Darius and Xerxes—he dies with the digging of the Isthmus still incomplete. While Darius and Xerxes may have failed to achieve the larger outcomes of their

²⁴⁵ Whitmarsh 1999: 149 (footnote 50).

campaigns, they succeeded at building bridges, no matter how hubristic their triumphs over nature might have been perceived. Nero's failure to follow Persian exempla has an ambiguous value, since in his ineptitude, he rejects becoming a tyrant after Darius and Xerxes.

Some insight into Nero's method of choosing exempla might be found in the comment that Nero's channel across the Isthmus would allow him to mix everyone with one another (ἀλλήλοις ἐπιμῖξαι πάντα) in order to open (ἔσοιτο) Greece to foreigners. In line with Nero's mixing of Greek and Persian exempla, the emperor desires to open Greece to a mixed population. It does not seem to be Nero's goal to protect Greece's exemplary status, *pace* Pericles' assertion that it is better to be a model than an imitator ("we [Athenians] are ourselves a model to some, rather than imitators of others, παράδειγμα δὲ μᾶλλον αὐτοὶ ὄντες τισὶν ἢ μιμούμενοι ἐτέρους, Thuc. 2.37.1). Rather, Greece might also learn from the exempla of others.

Nero's cutting of the Isthmus is reminiscent of his castration of Sporus, another intervention in the natural order that follows the example of Persian kings.²⁴⁶ Philostratus describes Agamemnon's act of cutting Euboea from Boeotia with the verb ἀποτέμνω, which parallels Nero's surgical cutting of Sporus (ἐξέτεμε τὸν ἐρώμενον, Dio Chrys. 21.6). Like the cutting of the Isthmus, Nero's cutting of Sporus would seem to indicate the former's desire to open the latter's body to new hierarchies of gender.

Finally, Nero's program of bastardization is reiterated by his singing. Musonius notes that under normal circumstances, Nero's voice is "neither amazing nor ridiculous" (οὔτε θαυμασίως . . . οὔτ' αὖ γελώως, 6). But, if he attempts to imitate his superiors in the act (εἰ δὲ μιμοῖτο τοὺς κρείττους, 7) a great amount of laughter emanates from the audience (γέλωτος, ὥς πολὺς τῶν

²⁴⁶ On another view, Whitmarsh (1999: 153-155) interprets Nero's cutting of the Isthmus as paralleling instances of throat-cutting in the *Nero*, including the smashing of the throat of the tragic actor from Epirus (9) and the stifling of the Delphic oracle (10).

θεωμένων ἐκπίπτει). In short, Nero is not a bad performer, so long as he keeps within the natural limits of his voice. But the act of imitation forces him to transgress his limits, and what becomes evident is how different Nero is from his models. Musonius describes Nero as shaking his head excessively (νεύει μὲν γὰρ τοῦ μετρίου πλέον), holding his breath (ξυνάγων τὸ πνεῦμα), standing on tiptoe with his feet apart (ἐπ' ἄκρων δὲ δίσταται τῶν ποδῶν), bending back as if attached to a wheel (ἀνακλώμενος ὥσπερ οἱ ἐπὶ τοῦ τροχοῦ), and making his face very hot and red (ἐμπιπραμένου αὐτῷ τοῦ προσώπου).

In the *Nero*, Nero fails both at choosing exempla and at imitating the exempla he chooses. His only criterion for choosing exempla is the principle of “mixing all things with each other” (ἀλλήλοις ἐπιμιῖξαι πάντα), and when it comes to imitating these mixed exempla, he falls short. Put another way, Nero continually resists forming hierarchies, declining to elevate Greek over Persian and masculine over feminine. Whether his anti-hierarchical stance is due to conscious decision-making or maladroitness is unclear—Musonius favors the latter option, but the text makes room for both readings. Either way, Nero confounds the process of hierarchization on which exemplarity relies.

Life of Apollonius

If in *Nero*, Philostratus demonstrates Nero’s failures to follow the exempla of others, in *Life of Apollonius*, he tackles the difficulty of judging Nero as a wholly negative exemplum. This difficulty is focalized through the figure of Vespasian, who positions himself against Nero—even to his detriment. While the *Life of Apollonius* follows the adventures of the titular Apollonius,

these adventures occasionally intersect with the history of the Caesars, which for the most part takes place in the background of the narrative.²⁴⁷

In book 5 of the *Life of Apollonius*, Apollonius encounters Vespasian, who is contemplating overthrowing Vitellius. Apollonius, Dio Chrysostom, and Euphrates participate in a constitutional debate in front of Vespasian (5.27-40).²⁴⁸ With regard to Nero, this series of conversations has two outcomes: first, Vespasian emerges as the opposite of Nero, and second, Vitellius, Vespasian's direct opponent, is conflated with Nero. The oppositional relation between Vespasian and Nero is established in the initial meeting of Vespasian and Apollonius.

προσεῖπε τὸν Ἀπολλώνιον καὶ ὥσπερ εὐχόμενος αὐτῷ “ποίησόν με” ἔφη “βασιλέα.” ὁ δὲ “ἐποίησα,” εἶπεν, “ἤδη γὰρ εὐξάμενος βασιλέα δίκαιόν τε καὶ γενναῖον καὶ σώφρονα, καὶ πολὺ κεκοσμημένον καὶ πατέρα παίδων γνησίων (5.28.1)

[Vespasian] addressed Apollonius and, as if he were praying to him, said “make me king.” And Apollonius said “I already have, for I prayed for a king who was just and noble and wise, and decorated with grey hair, and the father of legitimate children.”

Apollonius reassures Vespasian that he already meets the former's criteria for a good king while simultaneously taking aim at Nero. The qualities of Vespasian that Apollonius finds praiseworthy are related to his potential to found a new dynasty—while Nero ended his. Apollonius singles out Vespasian's nobility (γενναῖον), grey hair (πολὺ κεκοσμημένον), and status as the father of legitimate children (πατέρα παίδων γνησίων), suggesting that Vespasian's own high birth has already found another iteration in his offspring. This last point will become important later, when Apollonius will note the nobility of Vespasian's sons (γενναῖοι, 5.36.4)

²⁴⁷ E.g., Kemezis (2014: 157) “The heroes' stories are in effect imposed on the dynastic past of all four of Rome's first ruling houses, and in one sense the dynastic principle is clearly subordinate . . . The political narrative is shaped to fit them, not vice versa.”

²⁴⁸ On Dio Chrysostom's appearance in the *VA* versus the historical Dio's *Kingship Orations*, see Whitmarsh 2001: 227-238.

within a theorization of how generations affect one another. Just as Vespasian has granted his sons a share of his own nobility, so too will the actions of his sons come to bear on his reputation.

Apollonius will advise Vespasian to “rule over them most of all, for their sins, of course, carry across to you” (ἄρχε τούτων μάλιστα, τὰ γὰρ ἐκείνοις ἀμαρτηθέντα σὲ δήπου διαβαλεῖ, 5.36.4).

Apollonius, who elsewhere in the VA is able to see how future events will play out, seems to be warning Vespasian about one of his sons in particular, suggesting that if Vespasian does not rule over Domitian, his reputation will be posthumously affected by his son. But in the present moment, Vespasian’s nobility, wisdom, visible age, and the fact that he produced biological children within the structure of marriage stands in opposition to Nero’s deficiencies in these same areas.

What is more, the threat of Nero is not dead, but has become present again in Vitellius, whom Vespasian casts as a second Nero, stating that “if we were to give power to Vitellius, the most outrageous person in the world, Nero would overpower us” (εἰ δὲ καὶ Βιτελίῳ τῷ πάντων ἀσελγεστάτῳ τὴν ἀρχὴν παραδοίμεν, ἀναβιώῃ Νέρων 5.32.2). Euphrates will later pick up on this train of thought when he accuses Vespasian of “making Vitellius a mirror of Nero” (τὸν Βιτέλιον εἶδωλον πεποιημένος τοῦ Νέρωνος, 5.33.5), in order to give himself a second chance at overthrowing Nero. That he did not overthrow Nero in the first place is a sensitive issue for Vespasian, who now has much to gain from representing Vitellius as a clone of Nero. Apollonius, in turn, will encourage Vespasian to see himself as an inversion of Nero (and hence also of Vitellius). He will tell the story of a flute-player who taught his students to play by sending them to inferior teachers—in the same way, Vespasian might learn how to rule by studying those who ruled badly (5.32.3).

But eventually, Apollonius’s advice to Vespasian to position himself in opposition to Nero is subject to reevaluation and reversal. Although Apollonius generally thinks highly of Vespasian,

there is one aspect in which Apollonius considers him worse than Nero. During his reign, Nero “came to understand something approximating wisdom” (σωφρονέστερόν τι ἑαυτοῦ γνούς, 5.41.1) and freed Greece, which in turn introduced a prosperity “that Hellas did not have even in ancient times” (ὁ μὴδὲ πάλαι ἡ Ἑλλάς εἶχεν). But after Vespasian came to power, he deprived Greece of Nero’s gift, a decision that Apollonius censures in letters to the emperor.

“Ἀπολλώνιος Οὐέσπασιανῶ βασιλεῖ χαίρειν. Ἐδουλώσω τὴν Ἑλλάδα, ὥς φασί, καὶ πλέον μὲν οἶει τι ἔχειν Ξέρξου, λέληθας δὲ ἔλαττον ἔχων Νέρωνος· Νέρων γὰρ ἔχων αὐτὸ παρητήσατο. ἔρρωσο.” (5.41.2).

Apollonius greets the emperor Vespasian. So, they say that you have enslaved Greece and think that you have more than Xerxes. It has escaped you that you have less than Nero. For Nero had the same thing and declined it.

Apollonius draws attention to the apparent equality between Nero and Vespasian, as their rules incorporated periods of enslavement and periods of freedom for the Greeks. The two emperors, however, engaged in oppositional actions. Apollonius thus points out that Vespasian has “less than Nero” (ἔλαττον ἔχων Νέρωνος), seeing as while they both ruled over a captive Greece, Nero’s trajectory (freeing the Greeks) is more noble than Vespasian’s (enslaving the Greeks). Prior to Vespasian’s accession to power, Apollonius suggested to Vespasian that he use Nero as a negative exemplum of how to rule. Vespasian, it seems, has followed this advice to the letter, even inverting the single good thing that Nero accomplished during his rule. In the letter above, Apollonius censures Vespasian for the very thing that he previously encouraged—being the opposite of Nero. Apollonius thus demonstrates the fallibility of using Nero as a purely negative exemplum.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have drawn together different aspects of the emperor Nero vis-à-vis his role in discourses of imitation (namely, Platonic mimesis and exemplarity) with which Second Sophistic authors were broadly concerned. Nero has appeared as an emperor lost in a world of images (Dio

Chrysostom), the inevitable outcome of the Julio-Claudian family structure (Plutarch), and an exemplum that is neither wholly positive nor negative (Philostratus). As both a Hellenophile and a Roman emperor, seeking to possess Greek cultural power and holding Roman political power, Nero would seem to represent the very best of both worlds. Yet, he continually fails at both understanding the past and wielding power in the present. Only occasionally does his clumsy philhellenism, including his preservation of the Rhodian statues (Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.148-150) and his freeing of the province of Greece (Plut. *De sera* 568; Philostr. *VA* 5.41.2) draw the praise of imperial Greek authors. Nero's failures crystallize the opposition of Greek cultural authority and Roman imperial power—a Roman emperor could only come to understand the Greek past through the intervention of a Greek philosopher, like Dio, Musonius, or the fictional Apollonius. For if a Roman emperor could understand the Greek past unaided, what cultural authority would remain for the Roman Greeks?

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have sought to explore the manifold ways in which the Nerva-Antonine authors Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Chrysostom, and Plutarch, as well as the Severan author Philostratus, represent the emperor Nero as confounding discourses of mimesis. Each author revisits and reimagines how Nero came to end the Julio-Claudian dynasty and uses their version of Nero as a negative template for succession in the Nerva-Antonine and Severan dynasties (not yet completed and called by those names). These authors are acutely aware of the tendency of imperial history to repeat itself, and thus frame Nero as the precursor of his structural equivalents in the Flavian and Nerva-Antonine dynasties: Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Chrysostom, and Plutarch map Nero onto Domitian; for Philostratus, the most recent dynasty-ender was Commodus. The hope of these authors was that the emperors under whom they wrote—Trajan (Tacitus, Dio Chrysostom, and Plutarch), Hadrian (Suetonius) and Septimius Severus (Philostratus)—would do mimesis better than the Neros they created retrospectively. This meant that, *contra* Nero, the emperors in power were to participate productively in the project of succession: they were not only to rule well (as each author defined “ruling well”), but they were also to pass on their power to successors similar to them. Good emperor should succeed good emperor, avoiding the civil strife that results when succession fails (e.g., the Year of the Four Emperors in 69 CE; the Year of the Five Emperors in 193 CE).

Nero’s failure to engage productively with imperial succession (his deposition and death triggered the first full-blown succession crisis of the principate) was, in the eyes of the authors explored in this dissertation, a mimetic failure. Thus, instances when Nero does mimesis wrong,

including his clumsy imitations of Greek culture, his performances of tragedies onstage, his multiple Neronian masks, his assimilation of the Great Fire to the fall of Troy, his gullibility, and his creation of multiple realities, should all be read in light of his failure as a successor. Because Nero failed at succession, he became the simulacrum of a successor: an impostor. Like Plato's simulacrum, an impostor looks like a successor but is actually the opposite: instead of being worthy of ruling, he merely pretends to be worthy. While court writers during Nero's lifetime attempted to demonstrate that Nero was a copy (to use Deleuze's term) of an emperor, after his death, their project was to expose him for the simulacrum that he was. Hence, his failure to succeed and to leave a successor was displaced onto other mimetic failures.

One of the upshots of this displacement is that Nero becomes disconnected from the other Caesars and is instead lodged in a hall of mirrors where he becomes his own reference point. Each of the authors in this dissertation approaches Nero's hall of mirrors in a different way: Tacitus writes his *Histories* before his *Annals*, such that the False Neros precedes the emperor Nero in the order of writing and makes the emperor Nero seem derivative of his own pretenders. In the Neronian books of the *Annals*, Nero is outpaced again, first by his own images and those who wield them, and then by the presumption of his eventual deification, which implies his death. In the *DVC*, Suetonius's Nero detaches his lineage from his ancestors and makes it self-referential and mimetic: Nero does not strive to be worthy of the *Claudii Neronēs*, but instead "worthy of Nero" (*Nerone dignus*, *Ner.* 23.1), i.e., himself. Dio Chrysostom represents Nero as a craftsman after the model of Daedalus, who creates illusory worlds without considering the consequences. But not every author explored in this dissertation leads us into Nero's dysfunction; some instead take aim at the structures within which Nero is implicated. Plutarch conceives of the Caesars as a single person, thus taking the blame off any individual emperor. And

Philostratus ironizes the binary thinking that accompanies exemplarity, when the choice is either to imitate or not to imitate; he suggests that it is ridiculous to think of Nero as either a wholly positive or wholly negative exemplum. In each case, Nero is either removed from or placed in the context of the Caesar group. Throughout this project, I have tried to emphasize the multiplicity of Neros that different authors have created, who stand in for a (nonexistent) authentic and singular Nero.

There are more Neros to explore outside of the temporal scope of this dissertation. For example, I have neglected the Nero of early Christian and rabbinical texts. In these texts, the False Nero, who threatens the standing of the good or legitimate emperor, finds a new iteration in Nero-as-Antichrist, who threatens Christ, thus demonstrating Nero's longevity as a figure who reveals paradoxes of ideology even outside of his relevance to the principate.²⁴⁹ I have also only given brief attention to the inconsistencies and instances of doublespeak in Nero's contemporary texts. Instead, I have focused on Nero as he was retrospectively conceived in the aftermath of subsequent tyrannical emperors. But my study never leaves the temporal scope of the principate in order to examine it after its cessation. Rather, the Neros in these pages were reconceived and reinvented alongside a changing theorization of what it meant to live under the Caesars.

²⁴⁹ For Nero as Antichrist, see Malik 2020.

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