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*Qualis artifex pereo:*

The Use and Reception of the Neronian Narrative

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

by

Katharine Eileen Piller

2016



ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

*Qualis artifex pereo:*

The Use and Reception of the Neronian Narrative

by

Katharine Eileen Piller

Doctor of Philosophy in Classics

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Robert A. Gurval, Chair

By examining material and literary sources related to the most notable points of Nero's reception, we can understand how formerly benign aspects of the Neronian narrative contributed to his characterization as a "bad emperor." Scholars have long questioned the myth of Nero as a villain. A balanced reading of the primary sources that describe his reign, such as Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio, instead reveals a mediocre emperor unequipped to manage the complicated political situation he inherited. More recently, analyses of the material and literary evidence produced by Nero and his regime have highlighted the logic behind actions once considered symptoms of his madness. The Flavians and later ancient writers manipulated aspects of Neronian narrative to exaggerate the scope of his perceived crimes against the Roman people.

I assess the immediate reception of literature, coinage, and architecture of Nero's reign to demonstrate how later sources influenced impressions of Nero's actions and policies. I have chosen five of the most notable people or events from his life: Seneca, Agrippina, the *Domus Aurea*, the Greek Tour, and Nero's death. I analyze Seneca and Agrippina through the lens of the *Octavia*, a play so far little considered in studies of Nero's reception. As one of the first reactions to Nero's Principate, it offers us a valuable impression of how the narrative of his early reign, embodied by Seneca's monograph *De Clementia* and coinage featuring Agrippina, was refitted to suit the myth of Nero as a villain.

Next, I focus on Nero's innovations in public representation. The *Domus Aurea* represents a revolutionary new approach to Imperial architecture and the use of space within the city of Rome. The Greek Tour was an effort on Nero's part to consolidate Rome's interests in the Near East. Certain aspects of both the palace and the tour, however, are magnified to personify Nero as a megalomaniacal and delusional figure. These negative interpretations converge in the narrative of Nero's death, in which he is characterized as foolish and cowardly. In retrospect, Nero's official imagery becomes damning in the context of a narrative created by his successors.

The dissertation of Katharine Eileen Piller is approved.

Ronald Mellor

Kathryn McDonnell

Robert A. Gurval, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

To my parents, Lynn and Sally Piller

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## VITA

Katharine Piller earned her B.A. in Classical Languages at the University of Kansas in 2006. She was accepted into the Classics graduate program at the University of California, Los Angeles, and completed the requirements for her Master's degree in 2008. While at UCLA, Katharine taught a variety of subjects as a graduate teaching assistant in the Classics department, including Greek and Roman civilization and Latin language. She was also chosen to teach a lower-division college seminar in the College of University Teaching Fellows. Inspired by her interest in Roman emperors as villains in ancient history and modern cinema, her course was called "Defining the Bad Emperor: Ancient and Modern Depictions of Caligula, Nero, and Commodus." Katharine attended the summer seminar at the American Numismatic Society in 2013, where she pursued research on the coinage of Nero and gained an invaluable introduction to the history of world coinage. In that same year, she won the Lenart Travel Fellowship, which enabled her to travel to London and Rome to research Neronian coinage and architecture. Katharine is now following her passion for teaching as a Latin instructor at Laguna Blanca School, an independent school in Santa Barbara.

## Introduction

τίνος ἔχει τὸν χαρακτῆρα τοῦτο τὸ τετράσσαρον; “Τραιανοῦ,” “φέρε.” “Νέρωνος.” ῥῖψον ἔξω, ἀδόκιμόν ἐστιν, σαπρόν.

“Whose mark does this sestertius have?” “Trajan’s.” “Keep it.” “Nero’s.” “Throw it out. It’s false and gross” (Arr. *Epict. diss.* 4.5.17).<sup>1</sup>

In this passage, Epictetus uses coins as a metaphor for the characteristics that define individuals just as a mark defines a coin. If a person is stamped with a positive set of traits, like those of Trajan, he accepts him as a friend. If, however, the philosopher observes a stamp that reminds him of Nero’s negative qualities, he keeps his distance. In his example, Epictetus presents two rulers who embody the extremes of “good emperor” and “bad emperor.” The adverse reaction to Nero’s image (or name, as *χαρακτῆρ* could signify either), several decades after his reign, demonstrates the force of his legacy; his very image can ruin perfectly good currency. This passage of Epictetus emphasizes the negative associations the mere portrait of Nero could evoke. He was, and often still is, considered the quintessential “bad emperor.” The ancient historians provide many reasons for the view of Nero as a villain. He killed his stepbrother, mother, wife, and tutor. In the wake of the Great Fire, he spent an enormous amount of money and stole land from citizens to build a house for his own pleasure. He held audiences captive and forced them to applaud his terrible singing. For an individual so corrupt, any story, no matter how far-fetched, seems believable.

No historian seriously aims to rehabilitate Nero’s image completely; there is no question that Nero had his faults, and should not be counted among the “good” emperors. It is generally agreed, however, that the ancient sources have greatly exaggerated the scope of his crimes. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, authors of biographies and other studies of Nero

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

have attempted to provide a fairer view of his Principate. B.W. Henderson began this trend in 1903 with his biography, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero*.<sup>2</sup> As the title suggests, Henderson aims to separate Nero's personal life from his management of the Roman Empire. In his introduction, he details the unfair reception of Nero, quoting the scathing summations of previous biographers. "Modern historians have ransacked the armory of censure and abuse to obtain missiles with which to overwhelm the memory of the Emperor,"<sup>3</sup> he exclaims. He explains that in spite of Nero's scandalous behavior, he and his advisers managed the empire fairly well.<sup>4</sup> Henderson examines Nero's policies in minute detail and provides an exhaustive analysis of the wars of his reign. Although he does not leave us with a positive view of Nero, he diminishes the impression of the emperor as a monster.

The conclusion that Nero supervised the Roman Empire competently still prevails. While there is no doubt that Nero killed his mother, built a pleasure villa in Rome, and sang to the cithara in public, it is difficult to accuse him of blatant maladministration. Although there were uprisings in Britain and Armenia, his generals either quelled the insurrections or found a diplomatic solution. He certainly kept the *plebs* happy with frequent spectacles and donations of grain. It is possible to accuse him of excessive spending because of the building of the *Domus Aurea* in the wake of the Great Fire. His extensive reform of Roman coinage, however, shows his concern for the economic welfare of the Empire. Rebuilding was necessary after such a great disaster; higher spending, in that case, is understandable. Perhaps the strongest charge against Nero is the murder of so many members of the upper class, whether they conspired against him

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<sup>2</sup> Henderson (1903).

<sup>3</sup> Henderson (1903: 12).

<sup>4</sup> Henderson (1903: 14).

or were rivals to his claim as a descendant of Augustus. A series of deaths was nothing new for the Julio-Claudians; Seneca accused Claudius of killing a large number of senators and knights in the *Apocolocyntosis* and Tiberius did not escape similar censure. Nero was no Augustus, but a fair reading of his reign reveals that he managed Rome as well as his situation allowed.

Nero has been a frequent subject of biographies. His life and personality lend themselves well to an engaging narrative.<sup>5</sup> More recently, however, biographers have employed a political focus and have followed the example of Henderson in a more critical reading of the primary sources. B.H. Warmington published a biography called *Nero: Reality and Legend* in 1969, which provided a political analysis of the Neronian Principate.<sup>6</sup> In particular, this biography analyzes the emperor's foreign policy and approach to the military. Warmington concludes that if Nero had displayed a greater attention to the military than the *plebs*, he might have survived. He cites his frivolous nature as a significant factor in his downfall. Michael Grant's 1970 biography of Nero paid greater attention to the material culture of Nero's reign as well as his policies and reception in the provinces.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Warmington, he cites the emperor's cruel nature as his defining flaw. Both biographers see Nero as a man without the mental capacity to rule Rome effectively, a childish figure.

These scholars opened the way for Miriam Griffin, who contributed a political study rather than a biography. In *Nero: The End of a Dynasty*, Griffin maintains, "For the historian, the most important event of Nero's reign was its collapse."<sup>8</sup> Griffin untangles the complicated

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<sup>5</sup> Examples include Abbott (1904), Pascal (1923), Weigall (1930), and Bishop (1964), which provide narratives of Nero's life without much analysis or criticism of the primary sources.

<sup>6</sup> Warmington (1969).

<sup>7</sup> Grant (1970).

<sup>8</sup> Griffin (1984: 17).

relationship between the Emperor and the Roman Senate. While the *princeps* was the ruler of Rome, he still had to provide the impression that members of the Senate held the same powers they had enjoyed during the Republic. The existence of other members of the Julio-Claudian family was an added danger to the emperor's position; others could boast the connection to Augustus that gave Nero his legitimacy. Griffin asserts that while Nero did his best to navigate these relationships, he was neither intelligent enough nor strong enough to succeed without the help of competent advisers. At the beginning of his reign, Seneca and Burrus were instrumental in maintaining the Senate's support for Nero. After the death of Burrus in 62 and Seneca's withdrawal from politics, Griffin believes that Nero lacked the political savvy to sustain senatorial endorsement of his policies.

In 2008, Shotter would come to a similar conclusion in his biography *Nero Caesar Augustus: Emperor of Rome*.<sup>9</sup> His interpretation of Nero's character as childlike, however, is more extreme. "Like a spoiled child, when he succeeded in [gaining popular approval], his response would be characteristically warm-hearted...but when he did not succeed, then his reaction would consist of tantrums and lashing out, often with great cruelty, against those who, in his view, had let him down."<sup>10</sup> Shotter sees Nero's impetuosity as a prominent reason for his failure as an emperor. He also cites the perennial problem of the soldiers' too-fierce loyalty to their generals as a contributing factor, especially since Nero showed little interest in military matters.<sup>11</sup> The studies of Griffin and Shotter, along with those of Warmington and Grant, demonstrate that the problem of Nero's fall from power has long been the focus of scholarship.

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<sup>9</sup> Shotter (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Shotter (2008: 174).

<sup>11</sup> Shotter (2008: 166).

This has been a fruitful line of inquiry, as the end of Nero's reign would mark a distinctive change in the nature of the office of the Roman emperor.

A more recent approach to the analysis of Nero's reign is the problematization of the "myth" of Nero. Henderson, Warmington, Grant, and especially Griffin began this process with their critical readings of the primary sources that designated Nero as a "bad emperor."

*Reflections of Nero*, edited by Jas Elsner and Jamie Masters, expands upon this trend.<sup>12</sup> The essays in this volume examine the primary sources in the context of the art, architecture, and literature of the Neronian era, rather than its political atmosphere. There is a greater effort to extract the origins and implications of Nero's eventual characterization as a monster. Many essays center on possible explanations for Nero's seemingly odd or scandalous behavior. For instance, Jas Elsner questions the interpretation of the *Domus Aurea* as an example of Nero's profligacy, suggesting that the negative perception of Nero's reign overall caused an adverse reception of this building.<sup>13</sup> Susan Alcock presents a more optimistic side to the Greek Tour; the Greeks viewed Nero as a hero for his liberation of Greece.<sup>14</sup> Catherine Edwards unpacks the reasons why Nero's singing caused scandal in the conservative Roman mind.<sup>15</sup> Overall, the scholars in this volume move away from the accounts of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio as they attempt to view the Neronian Principate through alternative lenses. They privilege the material produced during Nero's reign, adding greater nuance to the perception of his character.

In an essay in *Reflections of Nero* and in her book *Projecting the Past*, Maria Wyke cites the appeal of Nero's decadence as a primary reason for his continued presence in the modern

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<sup>12</sup> Elsner & Masters (1994).

<sup>13</sup> Elsner (1994).

<sup>14</sup> Alcock (1994).

<sup>15</sup> Edwards (1994).

cultural *zeitgeist*.<sup>16</sup> As the persecutor of the Christians, he was a useful villain for authors and filmmakers. Movies with a moral message, such as *Sign of the Cross* (1932) or *Quo Vadis* (1951), became much more marketable with Nero creating a spectacle to attract moviegoers. Identifying the special attraction of Nero as a villain has thus represented an important area of focus.

In his 2003 study, *Nero*, Edward Champlin examined the reception of Nero by asking the question of why he has such a vibrant afterlife.<sup>17</sup> Nero was the only emperor to “return”; Suetonius himself remembered that a man who claimed to be Nero garnered a dangerous amount of support from the Parthians (Suet. *Ner.* 57.2). Champlin analyzes aspects of Nero’s history to show that the emperor himself is the architect of his lasting appeal. Rather than seeing Nero as a pawn with a weak personality, Champlin casts him as an innovative manipulator of public opinion. The emperor presented himself in a distinctive and spectacular fashion that came to define his afterlife. Champlin’s analysis of Nero aims to identify the original intention of his most memorable exploits. Instead of resisting the myth of Nero, he seeks its origins.

In his recent book on citharodes in Greek and Roman culture, *The Culture of Kitharoidia*, Timothy Power shows that the modern perception of Nero is changing not only because of the efforts of traditional historians.<sup>18</sup> While the focus of the book is the history and development of the citharode in ancient Greece and Rome, he uses Nero to demonstrate the connotations of *kitharoidia* as a means to promote the cultural harmony of a nation. Power provides a new glimpse into Nero’s motivations for the Greek Tour, an event often cited as a sign of the

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<sup>16</sup> Wyke (1994 and 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Champlin (2003a).

<sup>18</sup> Power (2010).

emperor's disconnect from reality. Nero promoted himself as a citharode, the most glamorous and popular musician in Greece, both to increase the popularity of Hellenistic culture in Rome and to create closer ties with the Greeks. Power also explains why historians such as Tacitus and Suetonius misinterpreted these actions; while the Greeks generally appreciated Nero's efforts, Romans of the upper class were embarrassed by the appearance of their emperor on stage. By analyzing Nero in the context of *kitharoidia* specifically, Power allows an alternative glimpse at the emperor's motivations. He puts Nero's actions into a Greek cultural context impossible to comprehend without knowledge of the conventions of cithara playing. His study also affirms certain aspects of Nero's persona, such as his penchant for glamor and spectacle.

Once scholars looked past the sensational material featured in the ancient tradition, a new interpretation of Nero's reign emerged. He was by no means a "good emperor" but he was also not the villain presented by the historians. A deeper understanding of the challenges of the Julio-Claudian court has allowed us to identify, at least in part, why he was a failure as an emperor. Reception studies are valuable in their reminder that centuries of storytelling have shaped our perception of Nero. We now attribute a variety of motives to Nero's actions.

Two questions emerge. Ancient writers exaggerated or even falsified certain aspects of Nero's reign to intensify the impression of him as a bad emperor. Their interpretations, however, did not emerge in a vacuum, and likely include elements derived from a narrative provided by Nero himself. How did ancient authors, historians in particular, reshape Nero's original policies and actions to vilify him? The primary sources most commonly used in evaluating Nero's reign, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio, wrote their accounts decades or, in Cassius Dio's case, centuries after Nero's reign. As such, these authors can only communicate the events of that

period after they have been reinterpreted and reevaluated several times over. When did the characterization of Nero as a villain begin?

Careful analysis of the Neronian narrative and its interpretation by later sources provides a more nuanced view of Nero. By Neronian narrative, I am referring to the literature and material culture specifically created by Nero and his regime. A series of case studies forms the core of this examination, a close look at the people and events that defined Nero's reign: his tutor, Seneca, his mother, Agrippina, the *Domus Aurea*, and the Greek Tour. I have chosen these case studies based on the availability of official literature or imagery concerning them. Nero's reign sets itself apart from others in the prevalence of primary sources and material evidence directly issued by the command of the *princeps* and his regime. Scholars have recently begun to unlock the possibilities of this material in studies of Nero, and the results have been fruitful. One drawback has been the use of literary evidence at the expense of material evidence, or studies that focus exclusively on material evidence. This has been a particular weakness in analyses of the *Domus Aurea*. While there have been several successful examinations of the position of the *Domus Aurea* in literature, they rarely take the remarkable architectural aspects of the palace into account. Conversely, archaeological studies of the *Domus Aurea* may include the iconic description by Suetonius (*Ner.* 31), but they focus on the architecture at the expense of the literature.<sup>19</sup> This study incorporates both on their own terms with a particular focus on numismatic and architectural evidence.

After my analysis of the possible intentions of each manifestation of the Neronian narrative, I place them in the context of their reception by ancient historians and other writers.

As the excerpt from Epictetus in the epigraph of this introduction demonstrates, a portrait or

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<sup>19</sup> Representative examples include Champlin (2003a: 178-209) on the literary side and Ball (2003) on the archaeological side.

name of Nero on coinage can evoke an intense reaction in light of his later characterization. My aim is to identify how these exaggerations or distortions of his history developed. Since Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio present the most comprehensive and influential accounts of Nero, the presentation of the emperor and his policies in their narratives is a particular focus of this study.

The *Octavia*, a *fabula praetexta* written by an unknown author, provides a major point of reference. The play presents three days in the reign of Nero and dramatizes his divorce of Octavia and his marriage to his second wife, Poppaea. The work was originally attributed to Seneca and was undoubtedly written by someone very familiar with his works.<sup>20</sup> Since the play includes references to events occurring after Seneca's death, he cannot have written it; indeed, the comparatively poor quality of the verses would also represent a departure from his usual style. The *Octavia* is the only extant representation of the *fabula praetexta* genre of Roman drama. Most studies have thus centered on its genre and date.<sup>21</sup> Because the *Octavia* likely represents our first point of reception of Nero's reign, however, it is a valuable source that historians of the Neronian era have noted, but rarely analyzed. It is possible that the play's false attribution to Seneca has prevented some from using it as a source. In many cases, it goes unnoticed. This play represents a microcosm of Nero's reign in its effort to include all of the events and people that would define the emperor's legacy. I have thus attempted to include it as much as possible in my analysis.

The first two chapters center on the creators of Nero's public image when he ascended to the Principate: his tutor, Seneca and his mother, Agrippina. The machinations of both were

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<sup>20</sup> See Ferri (2003: 31-54) for a thorough explanation on the *Octavia* in the Senecan corpus and its authorship.

<sup>21</sup> On date, see page 15, note 7 of this dissertation. On genre, see Kragelund (2002) and comments following his article by Ballaira, Chaumartin, Ferri, Flower, Hine, Marshall, and Wiseman in the same issue of *Symbolae Osloenses* (pp. 52-88).

essential in Nero's rise to power. Each represented key components to Nero's public image at the outset of his reign. Both were instrumental in presenting the new *princeps* as a well-guided youth who would embody the hope of the Roman Empire. An emphasis on Nero's descent from Augustus added weight to their promises. In the treatise *De Clementia*, Seneca exhorts his young pupil to follow the example of the first *princeps*. Nero's early coinage featuring Agrippina highlighted his family connection to Augustus. Agrippina and Seneca communicated the hope, and thus the expectation, that Nero would prove equal to his illustrious ancestry.

Later, Nero condemned both his tutor and his mother to death. These decisions would irrevocably change the impressions associated with the beginning of Nero's reign. Because Seneca and Agrippina were so active in Nero's early Principate, they were influential in defining the reception of both his later policies and his character. The *Octavia* in particular demonstrates the importance of each figure in Nero's history. Although the story of the play centers on Nero, Octavia, and Poppaea, Seneca and Agrippina have prominent parts. The *Octavia* dramatizes how Nero disappoints and subverts the hopes encompassed by Seneca and Agrippina, thus demonstrating its value as a source in the reception of Nero's reign. Agrippina and Seneca were notable in their own right before Nero's rise to power, but Nero would become one of the defining aspects of the reception of their lives, particularly in the case of Agrippina. My analysis of the origin and outcome of these associations highlights the extent to which the expectations for Nero's reign influenced his reception.

Chapters three and four focus on aspects of Nero's reign masterminded by the emperor himself. Nero's urban villa, the *Domus Aurea*, and the Greek Tour represent the events that seem most to confirm the impression of the emperor as a selfish megalomaniac. The material evidence associated with these events supplies a different interpretation. In these chapters, I

explore the emperor's motivations for the construction of the *Domus Aurea* and the performance of the Greek Tour. The remains of the *Domus Aurea* complex as a whole reveal a distinctive political purpose. The provincial coinage celebrating the Greek Tour demonstrates that Nero hoped to build better ties with the eastern provinces. The palace and the tour show Nero as an innovator as he tried to redefine the relationship between himself and the people in both Rome and the Eastern provinces. It is possible that had he survived the revolt of Vindex and Galba, and had died of a natural death after a long life, ancient authors would have viewed the *Domus Aurea* and the Greek Tour as the innovations they were. Because his reign ended in such a disastrous manner, both for himself and for Rome, historians and other ancient writers portrayed these events as symptoms of his obsession with luxury and philhellenism. My analyses add further evidence and depth to recent interpretations of Nero's later reign. Again, by exploring the origins of Nero's legacy, we can understand how later writers distorted or outright misinterpreted elements of his narrative.

The epilogue of this dissertation shows how Suetonius' account of Nero's death embodies the later interpretations of his narrative. The story of Nero's *exitus* exaggerates the negative aspects of his reign and has greatly influenced the interpretation of his character. Many scholars have explored the possible reasons for Nero's downfall in the context of Suetonius' narrative. I instead consider how aspects of the emperor's narrative emerge as reasons for his downfall in this story. This final analysis explores the case studies discussed in Chapters 1-4 from a different angle and demonstrates the persistence of each topic in the reception of Nero's reign.

While this dissertation in no way attempts to rehabilitate Nero, it does add nuance to our interpretation of his reign. Like other recent scholars, I have aimed to provide a fair reading of

the sources, this time by evaluating them alongside the evidence supplied by Nero. With this approach, I take the first steps to explain and identify the origins of the characterization of Nero as the “bad emperor.”

## Chapter 1 - Nero as a Student: A Dialogue Between *De Clementia* and *Octavia*

In the study of Nero's afterlife, it is proper to begin with Seneca, who is credited with educating and advising Nero. Seneca set a promising and optimistic tone for the reign of the young ruler. He started this process by writing Nero's accession speeches for the Senate and the people, in which he had the young emperor promise to rule by the *exemplum* of Augustus. His philosophical monograph *De Clementia*, published two years later, established a set of expectations both for the personality of Nero and the policies of his reign. In particular, the *De Clementia* presented a ruler under Seneca's strict guidance. Through his characterization of the young Nero, Seneca created the hope that this emperor would be attentive to the desires of the Roman senatorial class. In short, Nero would be a new Augustus. While Nero initially lived up to this hopeful portrayal, he would eventually grow frustrated with the restrictions and judgments of the senatorial class. He would break the promises that Seneca expressed for him in *De Clementia*. The conceit of Nero as a student who rejected the teachings of his tutor had a marked influence on the interpretation of his later reign.

The *Octavia* dramatizes Nero's rejection of the tenets of *De Clementia* by framing it as a debate between Seneca and Nero on the power of the *princeps*. Nero explains and defends his decision to stray from the path that Seneca promised in *De Clementia*. In particular, he questions the validity of Seneca's characterization of Augustus as a gentle and merciful leader. Nero argues convincingly that he cannot follow this example, however appealing, against the political realities of the Roman Principate. The tragedy of Nero in the *Octavia* is also the tragedy of the Julio-Claudian Principate; no one can be another Augustus, and thus no one can hold power and provide a successful legacy. The *Octavia* thus shows Nero in dialogue with *De Clementia* and demonstrates how Seneca's overly optimistic promises came to taint the reception of his reign.

## *De Clementia and Octavia*

The *De Clementia* and the *Octavia* provide literary bookends to the Principate of Nero. The first, published in 56 C.E., outlines Seneca's hopes and expectations for his pupil Nero.<sup>1</sup> In it, Seneca, who had been Nero's tutor before his accession, establishes himself firmly as a guide to his young pupil's reign.<sup>2</sup> He dedicates the *De Clementia* to Nero and presents the work as a mirror with which the young *princeps* can judge himself and his actions (*Seneca Clem.* 1.1.1).<sup>3</sup> The monograph as a whole presents Nero as a willing and innocent student who is thoughtful about the extent of his power.<sup>4</sup> Seneca examines the nature and use of *clementia*, presenting positive and negative *exempla* that culminate in a favorable comparison between Nero and Augustus. Like other works that appear at the beginning of Nero's reign, the *De Clementia* characterizes Nero as a promising youth who will bring about a second Golden Age. Some modern scholars theorize that *De Clementia* was a work meant to assuage the fears of the senatorial class, who had felt threatened and marginalized during the reign of Claudius.<sup>5</sup> Seneca,

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<sup>1</sup> The main point of contention on the date of the *De Clementia* seems to be the question of whether Seneca wrote this work before or after the death of Britannicus. Seneca asserts in the text that Nero is *innocentia* (1.1.5) and has so far spilled no blood (1.11.3). A reference to Nero's age at 1.9.1, however, makes the date more certain, since Seneca asserts that Nero is just past his eighteenth year. See Braund (2009: 16-17) for a summary of the debate; see Malaspina (2000: 292) for a detailed bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between Seneca and Nero, see Griffin (1976 and 1984) for an excellent analysis of Seneca's political influence, Veyne (1993) for an account of their history based on Seneca's texts, Too (1994) for a discussion of Seneca's teaching persona, and Habinek (2000) for a survey of Seneca's career and influence in Rome overall. See also Stacey (2007: 23-72) for Seneca's education of Nero as specifically related to *De Clementia*.

<sup>3</sup> The *De Clementia* is the earliest surviving example of the "mirror of princes" genre in Latin. This type of treatise became very influential in the early modern period. See Stacey (2007: 4-5).

<sup>4</sup> Hine (2006: 57).

<sup>5</sup> Griffin (1976: 141) considers this the primary purpose of *De Clementia*. Leach (1989: 216) analyzes how this work, in conjunction with the *Apocolocyntosis*, is meant to reassure the senatorial classes of Nero's separation specifically from the policies of Claudius. See also Braund (2009: 23).

in effect, promises that this emperor will break from the destructive practices of past rulers.<sup>6</sup> The *De Clementia* thus sets a hopeful tone for Nero's reign. As I will show, Seneca goes to great lengths to establish Nero as a gentle *princeps* and himself as a wise and competent tutor.

The *Octavia* was published soon after the end of Nero's reign and portrays Nero as a villain on the cusp of destroying Rome with the Great Fire. While most scholars agree that Seneca was not the author of the *Octavia*, the exact date of the play is hotly debated. Although there is general agreement that the play could not have been written during Nero's reign, there is no consensus on how soon it appeared after Nero's death.<sup>7</sup> Sander Goldberg is likely correct in his assertion that the *Octavia* was written and disseminated very soon after Nero's reign, since "some of the play's attitudes are otherwise unattested."<sup>8</sup> For instance, the play presents a public attitude towards Poppaea that can be found in no other source. While Tacitus states only that the public sided with Octavia after Nero decided to divorce her, the *Octavia* includes an opposing faction that is loyal to Poppaea (Tac. *Ann.* 14.61; *Oct.* 762-779). The play also lacks details that became part of Nero's legacy, such as the connection between the Great Fire and the *Domus Aurea*. With such an early date for the *Octavia*, it becomes the first textual point of reception for

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<sup>6</sup> On the reception of the *De Clementia* and its role as a theory of monarchy in the Renaissance, see Stacey (2009). He highlights the influence of the *De Clementia* on monarchical theory since Seneca had before been neglected in favor of Cicero. His study culminates in an analysis of Machiavelli's reinterpretation of the *De Clementia* (207-311). "Machiavelli's *Il Principe* intervenes upon the historical rise to pre-eminence of this Senecan version of monarchy...his dethronement of universal reason is a profound act of liberation" (313).

<sup>7</sup> Ferri (2003: 5-30) suggests perhaps the latest date in his belief that the Ignotus knew the work of Statius and wrote in the reign of Domitian. The varied reaction by reviewers of Ferri's commentary shows the continuing diversity of opinions. For example, Roland Mayer (2005: 543) discounts the Stavian influence and follows Fitch (2004: 512-13) in the belief that the play was composed in the reign of Galba. Smith (2006: 458) does not believe that the Ignotus could have witnessed the events of 62 but agrees with Ferri in his idea that the playwright relied on written sources. Boyle (2008: lxvi-lxvii) discounts a Galban date but commits the play to the early Flavian period without much discussion. For more on the author's knowledge of Senecan drama and philosophy, see especially Ferri's commentary (2003).

<sup>8</sup> See Goldberg (2003: 20-21), who adds that the portrayal of Poppaea as a victim parallel to Octavia is unseen elsewhere.

Nero's reign that we possess. This formerly neglected play thus has much to offer about the early aspects of Nero's reception.

The *Octavia* itself offers a beautifully condensed version of Nero's time in power. Although the action of the play only spans three days and focuses on Nero's divorce of Octavia, it touches upon nearly every aspect of Nero's Principate. Agrippina has been dead for three years by the time the action of the play occurs, but the author includes a monologue by her ghost.<sup>9</sup> Seneca also makes an appearance to lament the abuses of Nero's reign and attempt to argue him back to the long-abandoned policy of *clementia*. While commentaries on the *Octavia* have pointed out possible references to the *De Clementia* in this dialogue, the implications of these references have been little discussed.<sup>10</sup> This gap in scholarly attention is due in part to the peculiar place that the *Octavia* has occupied in scholarship; most scholars have focused on issues of authorship and the dating of the play. Recently, the *Octavia* has garnered a great deal more attention, particularly in its interpretation of Nero's reign.<sup>11</sup>

The scene featuring the debate between Nero and Seneca in the *Octavia* presents a critique of the promises outlined in *De Clementia*. The characterization of Nero in this scene is vital to this process, as the unknown author of the *Octavia* presents him differently than Cassius Dio, Suetonius, or Tacitus. Rather than a spoiled child or a paranoid tyrant, Nero is a cunning and politically astute leader in this portion of the *Octavia*. He understands the danger of his position keenly and arguably has a better grasp of the history of his family than Seneca. In fact,

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<sup>9</sup> Billot (2003: 128).

<sup>10</sup> For instance, the commentaries of Ferri (2003) and Boyle (2008).

<sup>11</sup> *The Tragedy of Nero's Wife* (Wilson 2003a), a volume of essays on various aspects of the *Octavia*, is representative of new scholarly approaches. While the contributions by Harrison (2003) and Ferri (2003) still focus on genre, the essays by Goldberg (2003) and Manuwald (2003) analyze the *Octavia* as a political critique on Nero's reign. Wilson (2003b) explores the role of allegory and the presence of *fortuna* in the play, while Billot (2003) discusses the possibility that Tacitus was familiar with the work.

his arguments on the value (or lack thereof) of *clementia* quickly become more compelling than those of his former tutor. This Nero is not delusional and, therefore, cannot become the gentle leader that Seneca imagined and promised in *De Clementia*. In the wake of the realities of Nero's reign as well as its revision and distortion by ancient and modern historians, the *De Clementia* rings hollow. Seneca's propaganda and praise become ironic in light of the later characterization of Nero as one of Rome's worst emperors. The stark difference between the emperor promised in the *De Clementia* and the emperor that Nero became highlights the impression of Seneca as a failed teacher.

### **Creating Great Expectations**

An atmosphere of hope characterized the outset of Nero's reign. Part of this was due to Nero's mother Agrippina; her blood connection to Augustus and the ever-popular Germanicus made Nero a favorite of the Roman people. Seneca together with his collaborator Burrus, the prefect of the Praetorian Guard, provided a sense of stability for the upper classes as Nero's advisers. These men were essential in consideration of Nero's youth (he was sixteen years old when he ascended to the office of *princeps*) and the unpopular policies of Claudius. Tacitus describes the nature of the partnership between Seneca and Burrus (Tac. *Ann.* 13.2):

*hi rectores imperatoriae iuventae et, rarum in societate potentiae, concordēs, diversa arte ex aequo pollebant, Burrus militaribus curis et severitate morum, Seneca praeceptis eloquentiae et comitate honesta, iuvantes in vicem, quo facilius lubricam principis aetatem, si virtutem aspernaretur, voluptatibus concessis retinerent.*

These men were monitors of the emperor's youth and, a rare thing in the circles of powerful men, they worked together. They exerted influence equally with different talents: Burrus with military experience and an austerity of character, and Seneca with a command of eloquence and with a respectable affability. They would take turns helping, so that they could more easily control the hazardous youth of the emperor with certain pleasures allowed to him, if he would not take the virtuous path.

In essence, Seneca and Burrus are the ideal advisory team, an appropriate blend of military skill, political experience, and general virtue, *rectores* able to mold and instruct an impressionable youth. The distinction of them as *concordes* and *iuvantes in vicem* reflects that the pair seems not to be interested in the exercise of their own power but are committed to guiding their student into the correct use of his power. There is no need for competition since they have a shared goal.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, they show an awareness of Nero's *lubricam aetatem*, and like good parents, pick their battles accordingly, with an awareness of the possibility of youthful folly (*voluptatibus concessis*). Seneca would go on to cultivate this role as the guide of the young emperor's youthful proclivities in *De Clementia*.

Nero's first speech to the Senate and his funerary oration for Claudius were both written by Seneca. Tacitus notes that Nero was the first emperor to use "borrowed eloquence." He does not portray Nero's ghostwritten oration as a negative aspect, however: *oratio a Seneca composita multum cultus praeferret, ut fuit illi viro ingenium amoenum et temporis eius auribus accommodatum*, "The speech, written by Seneca, displayed a great deal of urbanity, as that man had an outstanding mind particularly appealing to the ears of his time" (Tac. *Ann.* 13.3). Tacitus is somewhat critical of Nero for not composing his own speech, which he shows by describing the oratorical proficiency of previous emperors (Tac. *Ann.* 13.3). He does specify, however, that those who criticized Nero for using a speechwriter were *seniores quibus otiosum est vetera et praesentia contendere*, "old men who have the leisure to compare the past and present" (Tac. *Ann.* 13.3). It is possible that Nero borrowing Seneca's words caused some controversy, but was

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<sup>12</sup> See Griffin (1985: 67-82) for further analysis of the partnership between Seneca and Burrus. In her study of Seneca (1976: 96), she theorizes that Seneca and Burrus worked so well together because of their similar social background; Seneca did not seem to fit comfortably among the senators.

largely forgiven in light of his youth.<sup>13</sup> Seneca's authorship of the speeches provides an impression of guidance, particularly since Nero made the right promises in his speech to the Senate. It was a shrewd tactic for the new emperor to capitalize on the popularity of his tutor's oratory.

In his accession speech, Nero promises to allow the Senate to uphold its ancient functions and particularly emphasizes fairness in judicial cases. The introduction is the most significant: *consilia sibi et exempla capessendi egregie imperii memoravit, neque iuventam armis civilibus aut domesticis discordiis imbutam; nulla odia, nullas iniurias nec cupidinem ultionis adferre*, "He mentioned his council and his examples for managing authority uncommonly well, and that his early years were not characterized by civil wars and family discord; he had no quarrels, no grudges, and no desire of a vendetta" (Tac. *Ann.* 13.4). In this speech, Nero establishes himself as a thoughtful young emperor under guidance, mindful of Rome's past leaders. His youth and inexperience become a positive aspect, as he does not have the paranoia and prejudices against others in power that came to characterize the reigns of his predecessors. Seneca's main agenda here is to reassure the Senate as well as establish the tone for Nero's rule. As Miriam Griffin notes, Nero's accession speech was not significantly different from the initial promises of his predecessors. The distinction was that Nero actually kept the promises he made for several years, probably because of the influence of Seneca and Burrus.<sup>14</sup>

Suetonius is less explicit than Tacitus about Seneca's influence at Nero's accession, but he does have Nero state that he will rule *ex Augusti praescripto*, "from the example of

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<sup>13</sup> Cassius Dio too specifies that Seneca wrote Nero's speeches at the outset of his reign, again creating the impression of a young emperor under guidance from his tutor. He seems only to include this as a fact in his narrative of Nero's accession (Cass. Dio 61.3).

<sup>14</sup> Griffin (1983: 51-62).

Augustus,” a comparison prominent throughout the *De Clementia* (Suet. *Ner.* 10.1). He also tells us that the young emperor *neque liberalitatis neque clementiae, ne comitatis quidem exhibendae ullam occasionem omisit*, “lost no opportunity for exhibiting generosity, *clementia*, nor even friendliness” (Suet. *Ner.* 10.1). The theme of *clementia* begins to emerge strongly in both Suetonius and Tacitus, thus showing a distinctive message established by Seneca at the outset of Nero’s reign.

Poetry by Calpurnius Siculus reflects the themes found in historians writing about Nero’s early reign.<sup>15</sup> He heralds the new emperor as the harbinger of a Golden Age in a poem imitating Virgil’s *Eclogue* 4. The poet includes the following lines when describing the new era (Calp. *Ecl.* 1.58-62):

*omne procul vitium simulatae cedere pacis  
iussit et insanos Clementia contudit enses.  
nulla catenati feralis pompa senatus  
carnificum lassabit opus, nec carcere pleno  
infelix raros numerabit Curia patres*

*Clementia* has ordered every sin of pretended peace  
To go far away, and has blunted the frantic swords.  
No deadly procession of a chained Senate  
Will exhaust the duty of executioners; the unlucky Curia  
Will not include so few Senators while the prison is full.

Here, the messages associated with Nero’s early reign come together. While *clementia* is a virtue commonly claimed by Roman emperors,<sup>16</sup> Nero and his advisers went to great lengths to associate it with his accession to the Principate. Calpurnius Siculus also connects this virtue with relief for the Senators; Seneca had accused Claudius of executing thirty-five of their number

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<sup>15</sup> There has been much controversy over the date of Calpurnius Siculus. For a survey of the problems, see Champlin (1987, 1986, and 2003b) and Horsfall (1997). Because of the material quoted later in this paragraph, I accept that Calpurnius Siculus was writing at the outset of Nero’s reign.

<sup>16</sup> See Braund (2009: 33-38) for a history of *clementia*, especially as related to Roman emperors.

during his reign (Sen. *Apocol.* 14.1).<sup>17</sup> With this consideration, Nero's assertion that he held no grudges during his accession speech must have been particularly poignant. Finally, the conscious parallels between Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* and Calpurnius' first *Eclogue* recall the associations between Augustus and Nero. Just as Virgil praises a young Octavian in the *Eclogues*, Calpurnius Siculus lauds Nero in his poetry. Like his great-great-grandfather, Nero will usher in a Golden Age.

The themes that Seneca highlights in Nero's first speech to the Senate provide insight into his fashioning of Nero as a character in *De Clementia*. In the *De Clementia*, Seneca emphasizes Nero's youth, reasserting an official persona of innocence and malleability. Both the accession speech and the *De Clementia* deliver a message of reassurance coupled with the promise of prosperity for Rome and her citizens. Given the murder of Britannicus, possibly by Nero, soon after his accession to power, some scholars have credited Seneca with the attempt in *De Clementia* to provide Nero with a clean slate and reassure his readers that the emperor was still in control of his advisers (Tac. *Ann.* 13.16; Suet. *Nero* 33; Cass. Dio 61.7).<sup>18</sup>

### **Fashioning Nero as a Student**

Throughout the *De Clementia*, Seneca uses several *exempla*, positive and negative, to define *clementia* and emphasize it as Nero's defining virtue. Two themes stand out in the work as a whole: Nero's role as Seneca's student and the innate positive qualities of Nero's personality. Seneca also discusses the nature of Nero's power in detail, establishing him as the unquestioned ruler of Rome, while also reassuring the upper classes. His Nero is a thoughtful and gentle youth who, while aware of the immense extent of his power, is determined to use it

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<sup>17</sup> Griffin (1983: 64). Seneca also accuses Claudius of executing 221 *equites*.

<sup>18</sup> See Griffin (1983: 77), Braund (2009: 16), and Romm (2014: 88). For an opposing view, see Zwielerlein (1996).

responsibly. Seneca characterizes himself as a competent teacher who will help the emperor control his emotions. With Burrus' help, Nero will become a philosopher king.<sup>19</sup>

Seneca identifies himself as Nero's teacher from the beginning. This is evident in his dedication of the work to his young student, *scribere de clementia, Nero Caesar, institui, ut quodam modo speculi vice fungerer et te tibi ostenderem perventurum ad voluptatem maximam omnium*, "I decided to write about *clementia*, Nero Caesar, so that I could act in the same way as a mirror, and so that I could show you that you could reach the greatest joy of all" (Sen. *Clem.* 1.1.1).<sup>20</sup> Seneca is careful to place Nero firmly in the position of power while he establishes himself as a guide with no pretensions toward the imperial throne. Seneca is not giving orders, but providing advice that he expects his addressee to follow. He explicitly associates *clementia*, the topic of his treatise, with Nero, highlighting the name *Nero* with its placement next to the word *clementia*, and the repetition of the pronoun *te tibi*. He also links *clementia* to the attainment of *voluptatem maximam*, an implication that good behavior is its own reward. Seneca thus adopts a narrative of a teacher attempting to guide his student via positive reinforcement. Throughout the *De Clementia*, Seneca encourages Nero to follow his advice and to employ *clementia* because it is effective.

Seneca stresses Nero's malleability by portraying him as a thoughtful student. After the initial dedication of *De Clementia*, he puts a speech into the young emperor's mouth that establishes him as a ruler committed to ruling his people fairly, and in a restrained manner.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Leach (1989: 227).

<sup>20</sup> Braund (2009: 153) remarks that this is quite a direct opening. Seneca adopts a deferential tone to match the authority of his addressee. In works dedicated to friends or family, he is more casual. This directness is reflective of the public nature of this particular work.

<sup>21</sup> Stacey (2007: 41) comments on the effectiveness of this rhetorical tactic, "Watching over himself, the prince is self-reflexive and introspective; the image is figured talking to himself and looking inward." Nero has good intentions from the outset, but as Braund points out, Seneca uses this as a platform for gentle

Nero describes his newfound powers with a sense of awe and respect, *egone ex omnibus mortalibus placui electusque sum, qui in terris deorum vice fungerer?* “Was I, out of all mortals, found acceptable, and chosen to act on land in the gods’ stead?” (Sen. *Clem.* 1.1.2).<sup>22</sup> Nero’s rule by divine mandate is prominent throughout the *De Clementia*, partially as flattery, but also to convey his comprehension of the extent of his power. Seneca has Nero reflect on this thought in his statement, *ego vitae necisque gentibus arbiter*, “I am the controller of life and death for the people” (Sen. *Clem.* 1.1.2). Nero emphasizes his authority with a list of his powers in short sentences. He can take on the role of Fortuna, and give happiness or strife; he can declare war or peace throughout the empire; he can decide who is a slave and who is free.

In the next section of the speech, Seneca connects the godlike powers of the emperor to all-too-human failings as Nero states (Sen. *Clem.* 1.1.3):

*in hac tanta facultate rerum non ira me ad iniqua supplicia compulit, non iuvenilis impetus, non temeritas hominum et contumacia quae saepe tranquillissimis quoque pectoribus patientiam extorsit, non ipsa ostentandae per terrores potentiae dira, sed frequens magnis imperiis, gloria.*

In this position of massive power, anger does not drive me to unjust penalties, nor childish inclination, nor the weakness of men or the arrogance which so often robs even the most tranquil hearts of patience, nor that glory, dreadful for showing power with fear, but common in great powers.

This piece seems calculated to assuage the fears of those wary of the emperor’s youth; Nero vows to place himself above the pitfalls of petty emotions. He states his intention to rule without resorting to fear, a leitmotif of *De Clementia*, and displays the appropriate amount of reluctance

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improvement, “This method seems to be analogous to a technique he deploys elsewhere--of establishing the addressee’s world-view and then gently expanding that world-view so that it becomes more enlightened. But with the *princeps* as his addressee, Seneca has to take extra care that the didacticism is indirect” (Braund 2009: 56).

<sup>22</sup> From this language, it seems that the gods are the source of Nero’s power. See Braund (2009: 160). On similarities between Nero’s speech and the proclamations of Near Eastern rulers, which outline their connection and obligation to the gods, see Fears (1975).

to use his godlike power over life and death: *conditum, immo constrictum apud me ferrum est, summa parsimonia etiam vilissimi sanguinis*, “My sword is hidden, even sheathed, with the greatest respect for the blood of even the lowliest” (*Clem.* 1.1.3). This same theme recalls the lines of Calpurnius Siculus mentioned above, where the poet celebrates that *insanos Clementia contudit enses*, “Clementia has blunted the frantic swords” (*Calp. Ecl.* 1.59).<sup>23</sup> Seneca establishes Nero as a ruler who does not want violence associated with his rule. He approaches his power of life and death seriously and thoughtfully, an element that Seneca has him revisit several times in this monograph.

Seneca highlights the gentle (*mitis*) nature of his pupil throughout *De Clementia*; Nero’s exercise of *clementia* is effortless and natural, whereas many leaders (Augustus, for instance, as Seneca is careful to point out) only show mercy after their cruelty is exhausted (*lassam crudelitatem*; *Sen. Clem.* 1.11.2). *praestitisti, Caesar, civitatem incruentam, et hoc, quod magno animo gloriatus es nullam te toto orbe stillam cruoris humani misisse, eo maius est mirabiliusque quod nulli umquam citius gladius commissus est*. “You are responsible for a bloodless state, and this because you, with your great soul, have boasted that you have not spilled a drop of human blood in the whole world, an even greater and more fantastic feat because the sword was never entrusted to anyone more quickly” (*Sen. Clem.* 1.11.3). Seneca acknowledges the possible danger of a youthful leader while persuading his readers that Nero’s personality makes such anxieties irrelevant. Far from being a bloodthirsty ruler, Nero even boasts of the lack of bloodshed in his reign. When Seneca later describes the savage practices of kings, such as Alexander throwing men to be ripped apart by beasts, he reminds us that cruelty is *indignum tam miti animo*, “unworthy of such a gentle soul” (*Sen. Clem.* 1.25.1). When he inserts this

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<sup>23</sup> Braund (2009: 166) compares this section with Calpurnius Siculus 1.59.

subtle reminder, he is explicitly not including Nero, whose innate personality shies away from such practices, in his examples of bad kings.

Seneca portrays Nero's youthful good nature most effectively at the beginning of book 2, where he describes the inspiration his pupil provided him to write this work. He presents a narrative, however brief, of a moment of insight for both Nero and the readers of *De Clementia* (Sen. *Clem.* 2.1.2-3):

*animadversurus in latrones duos Burrus praefectus tuus, vir egregius et tibi principi natus, exigebat a te, scriberes, in quos et ex qua causa animadverti velles; hoc saepe dilatum ut aliquando fieret, instabat. Invitus invito cum chartam protulisset traderetque, exclamasti: "vellem litteras nescirem!" o dignam vocem, quam audirent omnes gentes, quae Romanum imperium incolunt quaeque iuxta iacent dubiae libertatis quaeque se contra viribus aut animis attollunt!*

When he was about to punish two thieves, Burrus, your Prefect, an outstanding man born to serve your authority, kept demanding that you write whom you wanted to be punished, and for what reason: this matter having been delayed as often as it came up, he was pressing you. He was reluctant when he had brought over the document, and handed it to you, also reluctant. You exclaimed, "I wish I didn't know letters!" O worthy statement, which all of the people who inhabit the Roman Empire should hear, and those people, of dubious liberty, who live close by, and those who raise themselves against us with strength and spirit!

Both Burrus and Nero are *inviti* to sign the death warrant, but Burrus, more experienced, is a strong *exemplum*, and encourages the young *princeps* to abide by the law. As one who sees the value of *clementia*, Burrus illustrates the appropriate reluctance to spill the blood of other human beings. He is, perhaps, intended to be a vision of what Nero could be. The young *princeps*, however, is *invitus* due to his innate *innocentia* (*Clem.* 1.1.5). The statement *vellem litteras nescire* "If only I didn't know letters!" is simple and quotable, with the effect of a memorable *sententia*. Suetonius' inclusion of the same anecdote further illustrates its efficacy. His account culminates in the slightly revised statement, *quam vellem nescire litteras*, "How I wish I didn't

know letters!” (Suet. *Ner.* 10.2).<sup>24</sup> The effusive exclamations of praise that Seneca writes directly after this statement are indicative of its importance to Nero’s overall image (Sen. *Clem.* 2.1.3). This anecdote is quite clever in its ability to portray the young emperor not as an unwilling ruler, but rather a *princeps* who is reluctant to kill the people he rules. *vellem litteras nescire* does not imply a rejection of power and a lack of commitment on the part of the new *princeps*. It instead shows a ruler who will do what he must, but with an appropriate amount of forethought. In the *De Clementia*, Nero is a willing student who understands the complexity of his newfound role. He is also ready to live up to Seneca’s careful encomium and become the guiding force of the Roman Empire.

*De Clementia* is designed to reassure the ruling classes of Rome that Nero will be a gentle ruler who will act in their interests. Men who prioritize the needs and wishes of Rome’s prominent families are guiding the young *princeps*. Seneca presents Nero as a young but intelligent ruler who is capable of adhering to the precepts outlined in *De Clementia*, especially because his gentle personality predisposes him to embrace the virtue of *clementia* in a calculating fashion. The *exempla* used throughout the monograph provide an optimistic picture of a ruler who will lead Rome into its next Golden Age; Nero will be a second Augustus, and one who has no need to drag Rome through years of civil wars. He has (ostensibly) obtained his imperial power without bloodshed, a precedent that Seneca promises will continue as the young *princeps* grows into his new role.

As the modern reader knows, the optimistic predictions made at the outset of Nero’s reign would not come to fruition. In fact, Seneca’s portrayal of Nero in *De Clementia* becomes the subject of tragedy in the *Octavia*. The author of the *Octavia* allows Nero, now with several

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<sup>24</sup> There are other slight differences, such as the absence of Burrus and that he was condemning one man rather than two to death; see also Braund (2009: 382-3).

years of experience as *princeps*, to revisit the concepts put forth by his old tutor. Unlike the innocent Nero that Seneca presents in *De Clementia*, this Nero does not shy away from spilling blood. This is the Nero who killed Britannicus, but he had practical and long-practiced reasons for doing so. When he explains the perils of being last in the Julio-Claudian line, we begin to understand his actions. While the concept of *clementia* is appealing, the *Octavia* demonstrates that it does little to protect a young and inexperienced leader.

### **Nero the Wayward Student**

In lines 437-592 of the *Octavia*, Nero and Seneca debate the limitations of the power of the *princeps*. The issue arises when Nero gives his prefect the order to kill Plautus and Sulla, two men with ancestral connections to Augustus. Upon hearing this command, Seneca reminds his former pupil of the tenets he set forth in *De Clementia* and urges restraint. Nero defends his actions by explaining the realities he faces in his position as *princeps* and emerges as the victor. While Seneca's ideas are morally sound, and may function in a perfect world, they lack application in the realities of the Roman Principate. True to the Neronian message, the author of the *Octavia* still portrays Seneca as a teacher, but one whose approach is intrinsically flawed.<sup>25</sup>

Rolando Ferri makes a key observation on the portrayal of Seneca in the debate, "There is virtually nothing about him which the specialist finds new or not elsewhere documented and which the non-specialist might feel to be 'unauthentic.' Much as we like the fantasy of the [author of the *Octavia*] as one of the last faithful disciples of the old philosopher, we are forced to wonder why he made his Seneca so bookish."<sup>26</sup> Seneca's bookishness makes him seem out of

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<sup>25</sup> In fact, George W.M. Harrison suggests that Seneca here is meant to take on the role of Nero's nurse, parallel to the portrayals of Octavia and Poppaea with their nurses earlier and later in the play (2003: 121). This conclusion seems extreme, considering Seneca's historical role, although Harrison's ideas about the role of respect (or lack thereof) for advisory figures in the *Octavia* does carry interesting implications for the interaction between Nero and Seneca.

<sup>26</sup> Ferri (2003: 71).

touch with the realities of the Roman Principate, throwing doubt on his arguments for the efficacy of Stoics advising rulers, among other things. In the *Octavia*, Nero's answers to Seneca's sincere urgings for the moral high ground are bitter but effective *sententiae*, showing that he has internalized Seneca's lessons on rhetoric. The reader must conclude that Nero has not developed his cutthroat approach to leadership through stupidity, but experience. He has read the *De Clementia* and found it lacking.<sup>27</sup>

The debate between Seneca and Nero is a poignant scene considering Seneca's public role as Nero's tutor. In the play, Seneca tells us that he desires nothing more than that he had never encountered Nero and had stayed in exile on Corsica (*Oct.* 381-384).<sup>28</sup> For Nero, the feeling seems mutual. It is clear that he has rejected the *De Clementia* when he first steps on stage in the *Octavia*; his first line is an order to kill the potential successors, Plautus and Sulla (437-8).<sup>29</sup> Upon hearing this, Seneca protests, reminding Nero of the precepts that defined the beginning of his reign. Teacher and student have the following exchange (*Oct.* 442-7):

*SE: Magnum timoris remedium clementia est.*  
*NE: Extinguere hostem maxima est virtus ducis.*  
*SE: Servare cives maior est patriae patri.*  
*NE: Praecipere mitem convenit pueris senem.*  
*SE: Regenda magis est fervida adolescentia.*  
*NE: Aetate in hac satis esse consilii reor...*

*SE: Clementia* is a great remedy for fear.  
*NE: Killing an enemy is a leader's greatest virtue.*

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<sup>27</sup> Hine (2006: 57) points out that Seneca had portrayed Nero as a critical reader in *De Clementia*.

<sup>28</sup> Williams (1994) presents an in-depth analysis of Seneca's monologue that precedes the debate between him and Nero. He interprets the monologue as an allegory for Nero's reign.

<sup>29</sup> The emperor Trajan commented that five years of Nero's reign were better than the reigns of other emperors. This mysterious five years is known as the *quinquennium Neronis* and originates in Aurelius Victor (*Liber de Caesaribus* 5.1-4). The exact five years to which Trajan refers have been hotly debated. For a detailed bibliography, see Bird (1994: 65-66). Griffin (1976: 426) has suggested that Nero's execution of Plautus and Sulla marks the transition between the *Quinquennium Neronis* and the "bad" part of Nero's reign.

SE: Saving citizens is more important to the father of the country.

NE: It is appropriate for a soft old man to order boys around.

SE: Rash youth should rather be guided.

NE: At this age, I think I've had enough advice...

Several themes emerge in the above stichomythia. Seneca responds to Nero's blatant disregard for the message of his early government (*clementia*) and ignores the fundamental fact that the emperor is afraid of potential assassins and usurpers to the throne. It is clear that the philosopher still occupies a privileged position in court since he can (and does) question the severity of Nero's actions. In response, Nero points out that, like any responsible monarch, he is disposing of his enemies (*extinguere hostem*). Seneca counters by redefining Nero's enemies in this case as citizens, adding that preserving the people of Rome (*servare cives*) is his duty as the *pater patriae* in Rome. The use of *pater patriae*, which suggests experience and wisdom, is striking as Seneca attempts to reassert his authority as Nero's older and wiser teacher.

It is at this point that Nero calls Seneca a *mitem...senem* and suggests that his lessons are only fitting for young boys (i.e. the opposite of the wise *pater patriae*). This outburst is telling since Seneca was, after all, Nero's teacher in boyhood. The philosopher becomes flustered at this point in the dialogue, and betrays his state of mind with an immediate change of rhetorical tactic; Nero goes from *pater patriae* to a boy in his adolescence. While Nero reasserts his authority at the end of this portion of the argument, it becomes clear that the roles of the two men are reversed. While Seneca portrayed himself as a confident and capable guide in *De Clementia*, in these lines of the *Octavia*, and in this argument overall, he shows a distinctive loss of control. He cannot provide convincing evidence that he is qualified to advise the ruler of Rome; Nero bests him at every turn.

When Seneca shifts the focus of the debate to the question of whether it is better to be feared or loved by the people, he appears to gain the upper hand. Seneca interrupts Nero several

times as his pupil tries to defend his actions, ensuring that the philosopher gets the last word in lines 455-461. He even leaves Nero at a loss for words in line 458, *NE: Metuant necesse est...SE: Quicquid exprimitur grave est*, “They should be afraid...” “Anything that is repressed is oppressive.” Effective rhetorician that he is, Seneca twists Nero’s words. The question that started the argument had nothing to do with the general public, but only Plautus and Sulla. Nero initially refers to two specific men, but Seneca has made his order of execution a concern of the Roman citizenry as a whole. Nero is speaking of fear as awe, the meaning of which can extend to the veneration of a ruler, basic respect. Seneca, on the other hand, uses the word *exprimo*, which holds the implication that Nero is repressing his people by killing these men unjustly.<sup>30</sup> He again extends Nero’s order to kill two men to the oppression of the rest of the Roman people. In the following three lines, he makes Nero look more ruthless as he objects to Seneca’s precept that a *consensus* is necessary for the establishment of law. Nero’s argument, *Destructus ensis faciet*, “A drawn sword will make it happen,” juxtaposed with Seneca’s immediate objection, *Hoc absit nefas*, “Let this unspeakable thing not happen,” gives the impression of a philosopher holding off a rash tyrant (*Oct.* 461). For now, it appears that Nero is, in fact, an adolescent who needs further guidance.

Unfortunately for Seneca, his mandates in the *De Clementia* can only extend to an abstract, philosophical realm.<sup>31</sup> When Nero is allowed to speak at length, he brings the argument back to the original point: the execution of Plautus and Sulla. Seneca begins to lose ground in light of Nero’s overwhelming practicality, although the shift is subtle at first. Nero begins his speech, *An patiar ultra sanguinem nostrum peti, / inultus et contemptus ut subito opprimar?* “Or

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<sup>30</sup> Ferri (2003: 259).

<sup>31</sup> See Williams (1994: 180), who comes to a similar conclusion: “Nero’s victory over all opposition by the play’s end despatches the ideal Stoic ruler to the philosophical wilderness.”

should I endure that they go after my blood to a further degree, so that I am murdered without warning, unavenged and disrespected?” (*Oct.* 462-3). The word *ultra* alone in line 463 should give pause since it implies that Nero has been attacked by one or both of these men before.<sup>32</sup> Nero adds logic to his seemingly brutal remark about drawn swords controlling his citizens; he has particular people in mind, not Rome as a whole. Nero’s execution order applies to political rivals he judges as dangerous. He goes on to explain the public’s favor towards the two men and the danger that their proxies in Rome might act against the emperor (*Oct.* 464-8). Most importantly, the milder punishment of exile has not been adequate; Nero has already attempted to take the route of *clementia*. With the line *tollantur hostes ense suspecti mihi*, “Let my suspected enemies be removed with a sword,” he repeats the word *ensis*, now a balanced retribution for men whom exile has not curbed (*Oct.* 469). Contrary to the promises of Calpurnius Siculus, *clementia* has not sheathed the sword of this ruler. Nero found *clementia* ineffective when faced with these enemies.

Seneca attempts to regain control of the argument by reminding Nero of the precepts intended to characterize his reign. After a speech in which he refers to the example of Augustus (see below), he reiterates the idea of the prince’s obligation to his country (*Oct.* 487-491):

*plebisque votis atque iudicio patrum  
tu pacis auctor, generis humani arbiter  
electus, orbem spiritu sacro regis,  
patriae parens. quod nomen ut serves petit  
suosque cives Roma commendat tibi.*

By the prayers of the populace and the judgment of the senators,  
You were chosen as the creator of peace, the arbiter  
Of the human race, you rule the world with a sacred character,

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<sup>32</sup> See Ferri (2003: 262). It should be noted that the only “attack” we have on record from either man is the accusation that Sulla was plotting to murder Nero on the Milvian Bridge in 58 CE, which Tacitus dismisses as paranoia (*Tac. Ann.* 13.47). By the time the events of the *Octavia* took place, Nero may have had other reasons to suspect Plautus and Sulla in the ever-turbulent Julio-Claudian court.

Father of the country. Rome asks that you preserve this name,  
And entrusts her own citizens to you.

Seneca once again refers to Nero as the *pater patriae*, dropping the pretense of a tutor attempting to steer his wayward charge. The idea of moral obligation is present in the image of Rome, in addition to the senators and the people, conferring authority on to Nero to guide the government. By mentioning the *votis* of the people and the *iudicio* of the Senate, Seneca stresses the idea of Nero's legitimacy as the ruler of Rome. He alludes to his constant comparison of Nero and the gods in *De Clementia* with the designation of the *spiritu sacro* but emphasizes his former student's legal rule of Rome with the enjambment of *patriae pater*. Stubbornly, he holds onto the ideal he created at the outset of Nero's reign and fails to offer a convincing solution to the problem of Plautus and Sulla. It is at this point that we begin to see what Ferri means by a "bookish" Seneca; he seems so wholly devoted to his philosophical precepts that he cannot deviate from them for the sake of practicality.

Unlike Seneca, Nero has come to recognize that a significant source of his legitimacy centers on the fear and reverence of the Senate and the people (*Oct.* 492). In the reality of the Principate, sound Stoic principles are too idealistic; it is not practical for Nero to be a philosopher king. Nero emphasizes the range of his power, *servare cives principi et patriae graves / claro tumentes genere quae dementia est, / cum liceat una voce suspectos sibi / mori iubere?* "What kind of madness is it for a prince to be enslaved to citizens, hostile to their country, swollen with their famous pedigrees, when with one word I can order those under suspicion to die?" (*Oct.* 495-8). The word *dementia*, which sounds so similar to *clementia*, is telling; this Nero, the non-ideal Nero, does not feel the moral obligation to the people of Rome that Seneca laid out in *De Clementia*. He refers explicitly to Plautus and Sulla in the word *suspectos*, repeated from the initial instance in line 469. The ideal ruler that Seneca sets out may

be merciful in every situation, but Nero is embracing a cold reality. He could eliminate a very real threat to his life with *una voce*, which refers to both the simplicity of his order and his supremacy as emperor. He is not threatening the Roman people as a whole, but men who he sees as a threat.

The first adaptation of the widely-imitated confrontation between Seneca and Nero in the *Octavia* may have been Tacitus' scene in book 14 of the *Annals*, where Seneca attempts to retire gracefully from Nero's service. The most striking change between the scene in the *Octavia* and the scene in Tacitus is the deference that Nero shows (or, at least, pretends to show) his former tutor. When Seneca finishes his request to retire, the emperor replies, *quod meditatae orationi tuae statim occurram, id primum tui muneris habeo, qui me non tantum praevisa, sed subita expedire docuisti*, "The fact that I can answer your premeditated statement immediately is the foremost gift I have from you. You taught me to give not only prepared speeches but to speak extemporaneously" (Tac. *Ann.* 14.55). This speech illustrates a significant change from the 17-year-old Nero, who delivered a speech written by Seneca for Claudius' funeral speech. The debate between Nero and Seneca in the *Octavia* also reflects Nero's confident command of rhetoric. The official view of Nero as the student has given way to a man who has learned from his teacher too well. It also provides an image of Seneca as an advisor whose use is limited; he may have had value while guiding Nero as a child, and may have competently supervised the first five years of his reign. His inability to control Nero, combined with the realities of the Roman Principate, has made him an obsolete force in the court of the emperor.

In Tacitus' narrative, Nero claims that he still needs his old tutor and values his advice; Seneca, nevertheless, drops out of the public view. In the *Octavia*, Nero dismisses him as a *mitem...senem* who can only be of use to young boys and proves this stark conjecture by

providing a convincing argument for the murders of Plautus and Sulla and the divorce of Octavia (for the latter, see below). Part of Seneca's failure is his inability to be as flexible in his argumentation as his pupil. Nero seems to have changed his approach to government when he saw that Seneca's approach was ineffective. Further, one of Seneca's strongest *exempla*, Augustus, is quite complex. While the first *princeps* eventually displayed the values outlined in *De Clementia*, he rose to power by violence. Nero, who holds the Roman Empire's most desirable position of authority, has come to understand the setbacks of *clementia* in a way that Seneca cannot comprehend.

### **The Two Reigns of Augustus**

Nero's distinguished lineage set him apart from even his half-brother Britannicus because of his direct blood connection to Augustus through his mother, Agrippina. Seneca highlights this relationship in *De Clementia*, just as he had at the beginning of Nero's reign. Augustus had become an obvious *exemplum* for Roman emperors and was especially relevant due to Nero's ancestry. He is a problematic figure, however, as even Seneca acknowledges in the *De Clementia*. The parallel between Nero and Augustus is used in both *De Clementia* and the *Octavia* with very different results. In fact, this comparison most compromises Seneca's argument in favor of *clementia* in the debate scene of the *Octavia*. Augustus is thus a contradictory *exemplum*, and different interpretations of the same man lead to different interpretations of the same policy for Seneca and Nero.

In Susanna Braund's words, Seneca "combines advice with encomium"<sup>33</sup> when he introduces a story on Augustus' merciful nature. He is Rome's most successful ruler, beloved by the people, and exemplifies the qualities Seneca extols in *De Clementia*. The story does not

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<sup>33</sup> Braund (2009: 244).

present Augustus as a blameless man; his rise to power was accompanied by the bloodshed of those closest to him. As Nero's suggested role model, Augustus has a problematic presence throughout the *De Clementia* and is at times directly at odds with Seneca's overall message (Sen. *Clem.* 1.9.1):<sup>34</sup>

*hoc quam verum sit, admonere te exemplo domestico volo. Divus Augustus fuit mitis princeps, si quis illum a principatu suo aestimare incipiat; in communi quidem republica gladium movit. cum hoc aetatis esset, quod tu nunc es, duodevicesimum egressus annum, iam pugiones in sinum amicorum absconderat, iam insidiis M. Antonii consulis latus petierat, iam fuerat collega proscriptionis.*

I want to show you how true this is with an example from your family. The Divine Augustus was a gentle *princeps* if one starts to judge him from the beginning of his reign; but he was warlike in the time of the Republic. When he was your age, around eighteen years old, he had buried his dagger into the heart of his friends, and then he attacked the side of the consul Mark Antony in an ambush, and he already had been a participant in proscriptions.

Seneca repeatedly presents a gentle (*mitis*) personality as an exemplary quality in *De Clementia*, and he depicts Augustus as *mitis* in his old age.<sup>35</sup> His past, however, is more complicated, as Seneca describes above to his young student. Augustus was purported to usher in a Golden Age, but such an innovation required serious changes in the character of an otherwise warlike and cunning persona. Seneca emphasizes this with his reference to Augustus' age. Nero is allowed to be young and innocent while Augustus had to endure civil war and the soul-exhausting actions that went with it in his youth.<sup>36</sup> The actions of the first *princeps* take on a veneer of criminality:

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<sup>34</sup> Sullivan considers Seneca's view of Augustus' true intentions naive (1985: 117).

<sup>35</sup> See Seneca *Clem.* 1.7.2, quod si di placabiles et aequi delicta potentium non statim fulminibus persequuntur, quanto aequius est hominem hominibus praepositum miti animo exercere imperium et cogitare; 1.13.4, e contrario is, cui curae sunt universa, qui non alia magis, alia minus tuetur, nullam non rei publicae partem tamquam sui nutrit, inclinatus ad mitiora...; 1.22.3, gravior multo poena videtur, quae a miti viro constituitur; 1.25.1, crudelitas minime humanum malum est indignumque tam miti animo.

<sup>36</sup> Griffin (1976: 410) notes that for rhetorical effect, Seneca disrupts Augustus' age and the chronology of events somewhat: "For the sake of comparison with Nero, he backdates Octavian's crimes to

he secretly stabs friends, he attacks Mark Antony when he was consul, as Seneca reminds us, by ambush (*insidiis*), and proscriptions had been the mark of a tyrant since the advent of Sulla. Seneca subsequently states that Nero is superior to Augustus in his bloodless ascent to power. *haec est, Caesar, clementia vera quam tu praestas, quae non saevitiae paenitentia coepit, nullam habere maculam, numquam civilem sanguinem fudisse*, “This *clementia* that you exhibit is real, Caesar, which doesn’t start from weariness of cruelty; your *clementia* has no blemish, and it has never shed the blood of a citizen” (Sen. *Clem.* 1.11.2). As far as Seneca is concerned, this is the ultimate form of encomium, but one that comes with a heavy moral obligation.<sup>37</sup> It is Nero’s failure to maintain that commitment, as his teacher promised he would, that makes him so susceptible to criticism later.

Augustus became a widely accepted role model for all new rulers in Rome; the fact that Seneca includes so many references to him in *De Clementia* shows that in general, his example was already viewed with reverence and awe. Seneca, however, is careful to include a disclaimer of sorts in his use of the first emperor as an *exemplum*: Nero will be like Augustus in his old age and will not lead Rome back to the civil wars of Octavian. This dichotomy between the bloody Octavian and the peaceful Augustus reflects the overall problem with Nero’s history. He is, of course, from a distinguished lineage, but one with a violent history. When Nero ascends to the Principate, he is young and innocent and has been allowed to keep that innocence intact (or so Seneca would have us believe, in spite of the rumors of Britannicus’ murder). This does not remain true in the later part of his reign.

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demonstrate that Nero has *already* earned the right to be judged superior to Augustus.” See also Braund (2009: 262) and Malaspina (2000).

<sup>37</sup> See also Stacey (2007: 34).

The same comparison between Nero and Augustus appears in Seneca's argument for *clementia* in the *Octavia* (*Oct.* 472-484):

*pulchrum eminere est inter illustres viros,  
consulere patriae, parcere afflictis, fera  
caede abstinere, tempus atque irae dare,  
orbi quietem, saeculo pacem suo.  
haec summa virtus, petitur hac caelum via.  
sic ille patriae primus Augustus parens  
complexus astra est, colitur et templis deus.  
illum tamen Fortuna iactavit diu  
terra marique per graves belli vices,  
hostes parentis donec oppressit sui;  
tibi numen incruenta summisit suum  
et dedit habenas imperi facili manu  
nutuque terras maria subiecit tuo.*

It is noble to distinguish oneself among famous men,  
To look after your homeland, to spare the stricken,  
To shy away from savage murder, to give pause to anger,  
Rest to the world, and peace to one's age.  
This is the highest excellence, by this way is the sky reached.  
In such a way Augustus himself, father of his country, first  
Embraced the stars, and is worshipped as a god in temples.  
Nevertheless, Fortune tossed him for a long time  
On land and sea through the painful conditions of war,  
Until he subdued the enemies of his father;  
Bloodless, [Fortune] submitted her will to you,  
And gave you the reins of authority with an easy hand,  
And brought the lands and sea under your command.

This section of Seneca's speech sums up the major themes of *De Clementia* in a few lines. He sets up Augustus as a model for Nero and emphasizes the distinction *parens patriae*, a title that he applies to Nero twice in this argument overall to remind him of his duty (other examples occur at *Oct.* 444 and 490). He adds the honor of divinity that the first *princeps* achieved and implies that Augustus would not have attained the status of a god if he had not embraced the virtue of *clementia* in his later life. He specifies that Augustus participated in civil war and violence to avenge his adoptive father Julius Caesar, and thus justifies the bloody actions of the

first *princeps*. He concludes the argument with a reminder of Nero's (supposedly) bloodless ascent to the throne, which recalls a similar statement in *De Clementia, praestitisti, Caesar, civitatem incruentam*, "You have been responsible for a bloodless state, Caesar..." (Sen. *Clem.* 1.11.3). All of this sounds noble in the face of Nero's apparent cruelty. The first *princeps* was war-weary, asserts Seneca, and was forced to employ violence because of family obligation. Nero is lucky in that he has no such obligation, and can rule peacefully.

The Nero of the *Octavia* does not see things so simply, nor does he understand the value of innocence. He counters Seneca's example of Augustus with the reminder of Julius Caesar's ill-fated *clementia*. He characterizes Caesar as *aequatus Iove*, "equal to Jupiter" (*Oct.* 500-501), and undermines Seneca's claim that a godlike and merciful emperor would be protected by his people (Sen. *Clem.* 1.13.4-5). Nero asserts that Caesar's policy of *clementia* was detrimental to the peace of Rome, and takes a sarcastic tone as he argues against Seneca's assertion that Augustus achieved his divine status using the later, gentler attitude towards his enemies (*Oct.* 503-10):

*quantum cruoris Roma tunc vidit sui,  
lacerata totiens! ille qui meruit pia  
virtute caelum, divus Augustus, viros  
quot interemit nobiles, iuvenes senes,  
sparsos per orbem, cum suos mortis metu  
fugerent penates et trium ferrum ducum,  
tabula notante deditos tristi neci!*

How much of her own blood did Rome,  
Cut to pieces, see? That man who deserved  
The sky with his pious virtue, the divine Augustus,  
How many noble men did he kill? They were young,  
Old, scattered all around the world, and they fled their homes  
And the sword of the three leaders, from fear of death,  
When a tablet noted those consigned to a piteous murder!

The phrase *quantum...totiens* is vivid, evoking a pathos for the bloody events of the civil war. In its nature as a rhetorical question, it is also incredulous, highlighting the disbelief that Seneca can still suggest *clementia* as a viable solution at this point in Nero's principate. In the *De Clementia* and his short speech in the *Octavia*, Seneca envisions *clementia* as a cure. Once the Divine Augustus embraced a more merciful attitude, bloodshed in Rome ceased. Nero, however, sees *clementia* as a primary cause of the civil war. Because Julius Caesar failed to eliminate his enemies, because he was zealous in his policy of *clementia*, Rome erupted into civil war in the power vacuum created by his assassination.

The example of Augustus serves to solidify this point. Nero is sarcastic and cynical about the reasons for the apotheosis of the first *princeps*. With the word *ille* in line 504, there is a clear tone of a point rejected ("as for *that* man, the one you've given as an example repeatedly..."), emphasized by the designations that Augustus *meruit*, or "earned" his divinity by *pia virtute*, "religious virtue." A description of the scope of men who were killed in the proscriptions follows, the most vivid of which is the detail that they were *sparsos per orbem* (*Oct.* 507). Nero develops this image further, specifying three geographical locales of conflict throughout the Roman Empire: Rome itself, Phillippi, where Octavian killed Caesar's assassins, and Egypt, which represents Octavian's victory over Antony and Cleopatra (*Oct.* 510-522). He ends this line of logic with one of Seneca's own ideas; Augustus only adopted a policy of *clementia* when he was tired of fighting (*Oct.* 524-6). He was not a stable leader because he spared his enemies; he was a stable leader because no one was left who could dare rise against him. As far as Nero is concerned, *clementia* is not a starting point to a successful reign, but an indication of governmental instability (as for Julius Caesar) or of the regard that a firm and practical ruler earns (as for Augustus).

Nero discredits Seneca's assertion that Augustus' practice of *clementia* provided him with a stable position as Rome's ruler. Seneca's Augustus is an appealing *exemplum*, but it is difficult to deny Nero's interpretation of history; Augustus was only able to maintain the policy of *clementia* when he had eliminated most threats to his position. Nero does not feel secure enough in his power to follow this example, and is, in addition, mindful of the disastrous end of Julius Caesar. The final section of their argument highlights the disconnection between Seneca's ideal ruler and the realities of the Principate. The specter of Augustus haunts another all-important aspect of Nero's legitimacy: the succession. Because of the system of succession (or lack thereof) established by the first *princeps*, Nero finds himself seeking extra precautions to protect his legacy.

### **Divinity and Succession**

In the *De Clementia*, Seneca portrays Nero as skeptical of the idea that a ruler should monitor his speech and actions even more than an average person. *ista servitus est, non imperium*, "That is slavery, not power," objects Seneca's Nero (Sen. *Clem.* 1.8.1). Seneca responds by comparing Nero's lot with that of the gods. Nero's persona as *princeps* is lofty indeed, as Seneca perceives it (Sen. *Clem.* 1.8.3-4):

*est haec summae magnitudinis servitus, non posse fieri minorem; sed cum dis tibi communis ipsa necessitas est. nam illos quoque caelum alligatos tenet, nec magis illis descendere datum est quam tibi tutum: fastigio tuo adfixus es. nostros motus pauci sentiunt, prodire nobis ac recedere et mutare habitum sine sensu publico licet; tibi non magis quam soli latere contingit. multa circa te lux est, omnium in istam conversi oculi sunt; prodire te putas? oriris.*

This is slavery of the highest consequence: you are not able to be less important; but you have this obligation itself in common with the gods. The sky holds them firmly, tied down, and they are not allowed to descend safely from their sublimity any less than you: you have been tied to your summit. Few people know where I go, and I can go out and leave and change my clothes without the public knowing. You can hide no more than the sun. The light that surrounds you is blinding, yet the eyes of all are turned to it. Do you think you are going out? You are rising.

This encomiastic praise is nothing new, especially in consideration of the deification of Nero's adoptive father Claudius, as well as the precedent set by praise of other emperors. Sun imagery would become still more prominent in Nero's public fashioning.<sup>38</sup> Through careful praise, Seneca makes Nero's obligation to the Senate and people appealing.<sup>39</sup> He is constrained, but he faces the same challenges as a god. His subjects hold him to a higher standard than others, but he is always in their sight, as necessary as the sun.

The comparison between Nero and the sun is admonitory but flattering. Seneca punctuates this conceit with the memorable quip, *prodire te putas? oriris*, This serves to continue the distinction between the movements of Nero (who seems to rise above the crowd, as all eyes are on him) and the general public (who can have private lives), increasing the onus of his moral responsibility as emperor. Through adulation, Seneca reminds his pupil that the Senate and the people grant the emperor's power. More importantly, it is appropriate that Nero be characterized as rising at the point of publication for *De Clementia*. The rising sun is an image synonymous with promising youth, both flattering to the addressee of Seneca's philosophical discourse and, in its imposition of moral obligation, reassuring to those concerned with the emperor's possible politics.

This flattering encomium has not convinced the Nero of the *Octavia*. The last issue that Seneca and Nero discuss in their argument is the question of Nero's divorce from Octavia. Preoccupied with Plautus and Sulla, Seneca only comes to her defense when Nero mentions the

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<sup>38</sup> See Fears (1976: 495) for the commonality of sun imagery in imperial panegyric. See Braund (2009: 250-251) for further bibliography on sun imagery and its application to rulers throughout Roman literature. For Nero's use of sun imagery later in his reign, see Champlin (2003a), Chapter 5.

<sup>39</sup> Braund (2009: 251). See also (2009: 60-61): "It is perhaps a stroke of genius to associate the emperor with the gods while imposing severe restraints on his freedoms. Extraordinary power brings extraordinary responsibilities." Undoubtedly, Seneca was an effective instructor on paper.

importance of children for the continuation of an emperor's line. The *princeps* asserts that there will be no possibility of divinity for him if he is ignominiously murdered, and comments that he will establish a dynasty with *digna...subole* (*Oct.* 532). As Nero knows from experience, the gods do not make an emperor divine after his death; it takes a loyal son in a position of power to make such a proclamation (*Oct.* 528-9). As we learn later, he is referring to Poppaea, not Octavia, as the mother of these children. Seneca takes this opportunity to speak on behalf of Octavia, but makes an error as he does so, *Implebit aulum stirpe caelesti tuam / generata Divo, Claudiae gentis decus / sortita fratris more Iunonis toros*, "She will fill your palace with heavenly offspring, begotten by a god, the glory of the Claudian race, allotted the beds of Juno in the custom of her brother" (*Oct.* 533-535). Seneca uses the same tactic as he did above and compares Nero to a god, highlighting his obligation to observe higher standards than others. He also reminds the *princeps* that Octavia is now the daughter of a god, increasing the prestige of the marriage and their potential children.

The argument falls flat with the hyperbolic nature of the word *impleo*, however. Seneca intends to emphasize Octavia's virtue as a potential mother, but at the point the *Octavia* is meant to take place, she and Nero have been married for nearly seven years without any children.<sup>40</sup> In addition to Octavia's constant expressions of hatred towards her husband in the first scene of the play (*Oct.* 1-33), the reader knows that even if Octavia were capable of having children, there is little likelihood that she would do so with Nero. He refers to the bad relations between him and his wife with regret in line 537. The elevated reference to Juno's wedding bed reflects the nurse's advice to Octavia at the beginning of the play, but as in that instance, this model of

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<sup>40</sup> See Ferri (2003: 277) on Lucian's use of this same verb.

marriage is problematic given Jupiter's constant affairs and illegitimate children (*Oct.* 201-221). It is also impracticable for Nero, who would solidify his power with a legitimate heir.

The ensuing exchange drifts again into the more abstract and philosophical. Seneca persists in defending Octavia by highlighting her virtues (*probitas fidesque...mores pudor*, *Oct.* 547) and pointing out the transitory nature of Cupid and Venus (*Oct.* 550, 553, 557-565). Nero, now with the upper hand, brings the conversation back to the pertinent question of children by describing Venus in these terms, *hanc esse vitae maximam causam reor, / per quam voluptas oritur, interitu caret, / cum procreetur semper, humanum genus...* "I believe that she is the most important reason for life, because of whom joy happens, and the human species, since it is always regenerating, lacks death" (*Oct.* 566-8).<sup>41</sup> With this, Nero detracts from the impression that he is marrying Poppaea from attraction alone, which was Seneca's principal argument in the previous part of the speech. While Nero cannot point to the same virtues Seneca can for Octavia, he can point to the undeniable fact that Poppaea has shown herself capable of bearing children. He persists in winning philosophical arguments with matters of practicality, detracting from Seneca's credibility. All of the virtues he sees for Octavia are, in the abstract, strong, but they pale in comparison to the overarching concern of any Roman family, the presence of an heir. Judging by Nero's suspicion of other family members, whom else but a son could he trust?

The author of the *Octavia* provides the character of Seneca with added complexity by giving him one last compelling argument, the only one after the initial stichomythia that seems to cast doubt on Nero's cold practicality (*Oct.* 572-577):

SE: *Vix sustinere possit hos thalamos dolor  
videre populi, sancta nec pietas sinat.*  
NE: *Prohibebor unus facere quod cunctis licet?*

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<sup>41</sup> See Williams (1994: 186) for significant similarities between Nero and the figure of Cupid, especially as related to Stoic philosophy.

SE: *Maiora populus semper a summo exigit.*  
NE: *Libet experiri viribus fractus meis*  
*an cedat animis temere conceptus favor.*

SE: The people, indignant, would hardly be able to bear seeing this marriage, and sacred piety would not allow it.  
NE: I alone will be prohibited from doing what everyone else can?  
SE: The people always expect more from their leaders.  
NE: It is pleasing to see whether the people's favor for Octavia, rashly imagined in their passion, can be broken by my strength.

The public support of Octavia is corroborated by Tacitus' account of the people's thanksgiving when they believed that Nero had recanted his decision to divorce her (Tac. *Ann.* 14.60-1).

Judging by the riot occurring later in this play, this could be the one argument that might change Nero's mind. Still, Seneca loses credibility when he claims that *pietas* would not allow Nero to go through with the marriage to Poppaea. Nero has demonstrated throughout the dialogue that he has little regard for *pietas*, and Seneca could have scant hope at this point that such a qualm might turn him back. *Pietas* has clearly not been a factor in his decision-making for a very long time. Further, Nero's counter-argument that divorce is permitted to everyone is much more compelling than Seneca's *De Clementia*-inspired assertion of higher expectations accorded to a leader. This argument is not strictly a matter of mercy but pragmatism since Nero has shown the role of children in an emperor's ultimate reception and apotheosis. The people may expect *maiora* from their emperor, but in Nero's case, this may very well include viable heirs.

Nero is not meant to be a sympathetic character. The last two lines quoted above, particularly *libet experiri*, show a disturbing disregard for the public reaction to his decision to marry Poppaea; he sees testing the people's favor as something amusing. Up until this point, he has limited his aggression to Plautus and Sulla, and in his speech on the drawbacks of *clementia* as related to Julius Caesar's era, he seemed to demonstrate a form of concern for the public welfare. By eliminating his rivals, he reduces the likelihood of civil war. He asserts the need to

instill fear in the people, but it is only now that he seems to display a false sense of entitlement to his power. One of the main points of *De Clementia* was the moral onus on the *princeps* to act in the best interest of the state. In this, the phrase *libet experiri* has no place. Seneca has lost all control of the debate; he now seems to be exacerbating Nero's sense of superiority. Now, Nero interrupts Seneca's sentences, until he finally uses his authority to end the conversation, emphasizing the philosopher's lack of power. Nero *must* have the last word. He claims to be fulfilling the wishes of the people, *et ipse populi vota iam pridem moror, / cum portet utero pignus et partem mei*, "And I myself now delay the prayers of the people no longer, since she is pregnant and carries a part of me" (*Oct.* 590-1). Poppaea may not be the wished-for empress for Rome, but her pregnancy promises political stability. Nero implies that once his new empress bears a child, the people will come over to his way of thinking.

The Nero of the *Octavia* is certainly not the figure Seneca had in mind in the *De Clementia*. In fact, Nero's rejection of *clementia* is a tragedy in itself. He is not the image reflected in Seneca's hopeful mirror for princes; the reality of his character is cold, calculating, and unmerciful. Nero certainly cannot be faulted, however, for being unintelligent or impractical. His arguments are sound, and he is inclined to address the dangers of his position head-on by eliminating his rivals and establishing a succession. The overwhelming problem Nero faced, however, was the maintenance of a system that was becoming increasingly unsustainable the farther removed it was from the personality and force of Augustus. In their visions of the Roman Principate, Seneca and Nero essentially put forth different versions of the same man. Seneca sees a successful but regretful leader who courageously came to embrace the virtues of the Stoic sage. Nero sees a man who was rewarded with the ability to pardon potential dissidents because of the power and influence he accumulated by ruthless but effective means.

The tragedy here is not that Nero will not follow the precepts so carefully set out by Seneca, but that he feels that he *cannot* follow them without exposing himself and Rome as a whole to the repeated chaos of the civil wars.

## **Conclusion**

In the *De Clementia*, Seneca paints the picture of an obedient student who is eager to learn from the example of his famous ancestors. He will embody the best aspects of Augustus, and as he learns and grows, he will lead his empire into a prosperous and peaceful Golden Age. Seneca convinces his readers that there are definite signs of Nero's innate gentleness, as well as natural intelligence. *This* emperor will not embody the dangerous aspects of the others. *This* emperor will show himself to be above the temptations of absolute power.

In light of these promises, Nero's failure as a ruler, or at least the image of failure constructed by his successors, is all the more dramatic. Instead of entering another Golden Age, Rome was consumed in fire during his reign and erupted into civil war at the end of it. He did not rise above the paranoia of previous emperors but gave into the temptation of informers after being threatened by conspiracies. Although it is possible that Nero possessed a capable intellect, he did not possess the genius that Augustus did for taking power without appearing to take power. A man like Augustus may have been able to seem to follow the precepts of *De Clementia* while maintaining a practical defense against usurpers to the throne. Nero was not able to achieve this subtle balance, and Seneca was not able to help him to do so.

The *De Clementia* achieved one more thing that was particularly damning to Nero's legacy. In encouraging the young Nero to respect his power and the people he ruled, Seneca outlined the range of that power. Several times, Seneca compares the emperor to the gods and reminds the reader that no ruler before the members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty possessed this

scope of power in Rome. Connected to Seneca's assurances of a gentle pupil who would honor this moral obligation, the descriptions of the extent of Nero's *imperium* are comforting. When these guarantees are stripped away, however, and a Nero who rejects this moral obligation emerges, the effect is frightening. When the *Octavia* takes place, Nero is far from the idealistic youth we saw in Seneca's work. He is a cunning ruler with endless power at his disposal and, what is more terrifying, he will take advantage of it for his own ends.

In the *De Clementia*, Seneca outlined the promise of a bright future, but he misjudged his pupil's personality. The propaganda may have been effective in establishing Nero's power, but this emperor's history reveals a young man who is constantly asserting his independence; he could only tolerate mentors for so long. One last striking effect of the *Octavia* is to portray Nero alone: he does not seem to be influenced by advisors or, indeed, anyone. Poppaea is there, but she does not provide him with guidance of any kind. There are soldiers and prefects, but they take orders. When any of Nero's advisors argue with him, he uses his power to achieve his wishes, in spite of their strong misgivings. Octavia has distinctive opinions, but Nero exiles her. The Nero of the *Octavia* gives the impression of independent, absolute power; he rejects Seneca and his design of a philosopher king. The legacy of this rejection, portrayed both in the *Octavia* and in Tacitus, solidifies the modern impression of a ruler who ruined every promising aspect of his reign.

## Chapter 2: Agrippina and the Consequences of Legitimacy

The reception of Nero has become inextricably linked with the murder of his mother, Agrippina.<sup>1</sup> Both ancient sources and modern scholars have interpreted her death as a significant turning point in Nero's reign.<sup>2</sup> The murder of Agrippina has had a marked effect on the retrospective interpretation of her prominence on Nero's early coinage. Her portrait was once a symbol of Nero's illustrious ancestry, but became a reminder of the tyranny of the *princeps* after his reign. Due to the clever manipulation of the public story of Agrippina's death by his advisers Seneca and Burrus, Nero suffered surprisingly few adverse political consequences for this act of violence during his reign. His reputation and legacy, however, would be much damaged, as the accounts in the primary sources show. The label of matricide would become a defining feature of Nero in his afterlife.

Tacitus offers a vivid account of the death of Agrippina, far outstripping the descriptions of Suetonius and Cassius Dio in narrative detail. As a result, the death of Agrippina coupled with Tacitus' portrayal of her overbearing character has been the centerpiece of many studies on the mother of Nero. This portrayal by Tacitus has, however, tended to overshadow the original purpose of Agrippina on Nero's coinage. Since she was a descendant of Augustus, the use of her

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<sup>1</sup> There have been two important studies on Agrippina. Barrett (1996) offers a detailed examination of her life with a focus on her roles as the daughter of Germanicus, the sister of Caligula, the wife of Claudius, and the mother of Nero. Ginsburg (2006) analyzes both literary and material evidence to offer a "resisting reading" of her character in Tacitus. Agrippina also appears prominently in studies on Imperial women in general; a representative example is Ferrero (1911), whose early analysis of Agrippina's influence is still relevant to scholarship today. Other useful volumes are Santoro L'Hoir (2006), who examines stereotypes of powerful women in Tacitus, and Wood (1999), who analyzes trends in the material evidence featuring Imperial women.

<sup>2</sup> Cassius Dio claims that Nero's behavior became notably more depraved after the murder of his mother (61.11.1) while Tacitus notes that after her death, *seque in omnes libidines effudit, quas male coercitas qualiscumque matris reverentia tardaverat* (Ann. 14.13). Griffin (1984: 83-84) discusses the idea of the death of Agrippina as a turning point in more depth. Bergmann (2013: 333-335) has recently observed that soon after the death of Agrippina in 59, Nero's portraiture underwent a distinctive break with Augustan iconography.

portrait highlighted Nero's legitimacy and promised that he would reflect the strength of his ancestors. The interpretation of this image changed for two reasons. First, Tacitus' characterization of Agrippina as an overbearing mother has influenced the idea that Agrippina's presence on coinage is a reflection of her ambition for power. Second, it is now impossible to view these coins without remembering that Agrippina would be killed at Nero's orders. The play *Octavia* emphasizes the effect of her murder on the Nero's post-mortem reception. By killing his mother, Nero effectively cut himself off from his maternal ancestry and thus compromised his legitimacy as a descendant of Augustus.

### ***Dux femina: Agrippina in the literary sources***

Tacitus provides the most detailed account of Agrippina's role in Nero's reign, and has created the dominant literary portrait of her. His narrative of her death, in particular, has informed the interpretation of her personality. The accounts of Suetonius and Cassius Dio provide additional facts that help to shape our understanding of the character and motivations of Agrippina. All three historians present Nero's mother as a domineering and ambitious woman who oversteps the boundaries of her position.

Nero boasted a variety of ties to the Julio-Claudian dynasty through Agrippina. Her most important connection was obviously her great-grandfather Augustus, but she also benefitted from the popularity of her father, Germanicus.<sup>3</sup> Germanicus was viewed positively long after his death, which is confirmed by Nero's first appearance in the *Annals*, at the Troy Pageant (Tac. *Ann.* 11.11-12):

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<sup>3</sup> Wood (1999: 289-295) provides an excellent analysis of Agrippina's emphasis on her relationships with Augustus and Germanicus to promote Nero. Barrett (1996: 189) attributes continued regard for Germanicus as a reason the Praetorian Guard will not participate in Agrippina's murder. According to Rose (1997: 32), Roman soldiers continued to celebrate Germanicus' birthday until the end of the third century CE.

*sedente Claudio circensibus ludis, cum pueri nobiles equis ludicrum Troiae inirent interque eos Britannicus imperatore genitus et L. Domitius adoptione mox in imperium et cognomentum Neronis adscitus, favor plebis acrior in Domitium loco praesagii acceptus est...verum inclinatio populi supererat ex memoria Germanici, cuius illa reliqua suboles virilis; et matri Agrippinae miseratio augebatur ob saevitiam Messalinae.*

Claudius presided over games in the Circus, when young noble boys would participate in the Troy Pageant on horseback. Among them were Britannicus, the emperor's son, and Lucius Domitius, soon admitted by adoption into power and the cognomen Nero. The stronger public favor towards Domitius was seen as an omen...to be sure, the admiration of the people was an offshoot of Germanicus' memory, as Nero was his only remaining male descendant. In addition, pity towards his mother Agrippina was increased by Messalina's torment of her.

In this passage, we can see that goodwill toward the memory of Germanicus in Rome is high in spite of Caligula and that Nero, Germanicus' only male descendant, has come to enjoy that popularity. The public also holds Nero's mother Agrippina the Younger, Germanicus' only surviving child, in high regard. Messalina's persecution of her recalls the treatment of her mother in the year after the murder of Germanicus.<sup>4</sup> Suetonius tells a similar story but adds the detail that Agrippina and Nero were so popular that Messalina tried to have Nero strangled in his sleep (Suet. *Ner.* 6.4). As a result of such persecution, Agrippina and her son were objects of pity and admiration.

During the discussion of potential wives for Claudius, Agrippina's connection to Germanicus is a potent factor. After the fall of Messalina, she becomes a primary contender for marriage with the emperor. Her supporter is the freedman Pallas, who lists her family associations at a *consilium* in which Claudius' freedmen discuss potential wives for the lonely emperor (Tac. *Ann.* 12.2):<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Barrett (1996: 66).

<sup>5</sup> This scene is a parody of a *consilium* by Tacitus and is probably of his invention. Other sources do not mention it (Mellor 2011: 133).

*at Pallas id maxime in Agrippina laudare quod Germanici nepotem secum traheret, dignum prorsus imperatoria fortuna: stirpem nobilem et familiae [iuliae] claudiaeque posteros coniungeret, ne femina expertae fecunditatis, integra iuventa, claritudinem caesarum aliam in domum ferret.*

But Pallas especially praised Agrippina, because she would bring the grandson of Germanicus with her, and he was absolutely worthy of imperial status: [Claudius] should ally himself with a noble lineage, and join the branches of the Julian and Claudian families, so that a woman of proven fertility, still young, would not carry the fame of the Caesars to another house.

Tacitus tells us that this argument, coupled with some well-calculated visits by Agrippina, wins Claudius over. While the other freedmen suggest women for their fertility, as well as the possibility that they will treat Claudius' current children well, the mention of family connections proves far more persuasive.<sup>6</sup> The link to Germanicus not only holds sway in the minds of the Roman people but also the emperor himself. The fear that a different family will profit from Agrippina's connections if Claudius does not marry her proves the power of her lineage.

It is thus from Agrippina that Nero derives his more useful lineage. For Nero, she is an essential link to a legacy of political power. In addition to this impressive pedigree, Agrippina's machinations were largely responsible for his final position as the emperor of Rome. Once married to Claudius, she convinced her new husband to recall Seneca to Rome from exile (Tac. *Ann.* 12.8). She made Burrus the head of the Praetorian Guard (Tac. *Ann.* 12.42). Both of these men would become Nero's most important advisers and would be instrumental in his policy at the outset of his reign. It is clear that Agrippina understood the ins and outs of the Julio-Claudian court, as well as how best to advance her son's prospects.

While Agrippina's shrewdness in appointing these advisers is undeniable, Cassius Dio and Tacitus both undercut her intelligence by portraying her as a scheming stepmother. Cassius

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<sup>6</sup> Ginsburg (2006: 17-18).

Dio asserts that Agrippina went to great lengths to marginalize Britannicus at court, and succeeded in ruining his reputation (Cass. Dio 61.33.10-11):

καὶ ὁ μὲν πολὺς τε ἐκ τούτου ἦν καὶ διὰ στόματος ἤγετο ἅπασι, τὸν δὲ Βρεττανικὸν συχνοὶ μὲν οὐδ' εἰ ἔζη ἐγίνωσκον, οἱ λοιποὶ δὲ παραπλήγα καὶ ἐπίληπτον, ταῦτα κηρυττούσης τῆς Ἀγριπίνης, ὥιοντο.

And because of this (i.e. Agrippina's scheming), [Nero] was considered important, and was on the lips of everyone, but many people did not know if Britannicus was alive, and the rest thought that he was a cripple and an epileptic because Agrippina started these rumors.

Agrippina succeeds so completely in her designs that the Roman public either thinks that Britannicus is dead or unsuitable for a position of power. She effectively removes all public goodwill towards him. Both Cassius Dio and Tacitus describe how she cements Nero's supremacy by systematically removing everyone favorable to Britannicus at court (Cass. Dio 61.32.1, 5; Tac. *Ann.* 12.41).<sup>7</sup>

Tacitus also accuses Agrippina of compromising Britannicus in the public eye. Shortly after his new marriage, Claudius formally adopted Nero as his son. Nero prematurely assumed the *toga virilis* and Claudius and the Senate gave him the title *princeps iuventutis* (Tac. *Ann.* 12.41). When he and Britannicus appeared at games in the Circus, Nero wore triumphal robes, but Britannicus still wore the garb of a boy. *spectaret populus hunc decore imperatorio, illum puerile habitu, ac perinde fortunam utriusque praesumeret*, "As the people saw one dressed in the clothes of command, and the other in boys' garments, they thus predicted the future of each" (Tac. *Ann.* 12.41). Tacitus implies that Britannicus' lack of a *toga virilis* at this occasion demonstrates that Claudius no longer considered him a successor, at least in the eyes of the Roman people. Instead, the disparity in dress between the two more likely reflects a difference

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<sup>7</sup> On Agrippina in the role of *saeva noverca*, see Ginsburg (2006: 107-112). Santoro L'Hoir (2006) discusses Agrippina and other Imperial women in the role of *noverca*.

in age. Although Nero assumed the *toga virilis* prematurely, he was the elder by four years; giving Britannicus such honors would have been excessive. Besides, to promote Nero as a potential heir was a practical choice for Claudius, particularly if Messalina's exploits had placed the paternity of Britannicus in doubt.<sup>8</sup>

After the death of Claudius, which Agrippina allegedly engineered, she continued to play a key role in Nero's accession. She physically detained Britannicus and his sisters so that the soldiers and Praetorians would declare Nero emperor without distractions (Tac. *Ann.* 12.66-68). Tacitus includes the detail that, *dubitavisse quosdam ferunt, respectantis rogantisque ubi Britannicus esset: mox nullo in diversum auctore quae offerebantur secuti sunt*, "They say that certain people hesitated, looking around and asking where Britannicus was: soon, with no other option available, they accepted what was put before them" (Tac. *Ann.* 12.69). During these events, Nero seems a mere puppet of her ambition to rule Rome. In fact, Suetonius tells us that Nero handed over all of his private and public affairs over to her at the start of his reign (Suet. *Ner.* 9.1). This attestation supports the idea of Agrippina's initial dominance in the Neronian Principate, a state of affairs that was not to last long.

Tacitus characterizes Agrippina as a woman who, at Nero's accession, is not content to be a mere symbol of Nero's genetic prerequisites for the throne. She attempts to involve herself at all costs and incurs the hatred of her son in the process. She is dismayed when Seneca and

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<sup>8</sup> Ferrero (1911: 76) reminds us that neither Britannicus nor Nero had any "right" to the throne; the Senate would make the official choice. He points out that emperors since Augustus had groomed multiple young men, when possible, for the Principate. This practice would give the Senate a selection of contenders and would provide for the unexpected death of potential principes. See Ginsburg (2006: 25) on the logical nature of Claudius' decision. See Trillmich (1978: 55-63) and Wood (1999: 256) on the doubt of Britannicus' paternity. Mellor (2011: 134) suggests that Agrippina's connection with Germanicus would have helped Claudius maintain the favor of the soldiers.

Burrus take control early in Nero's reign. Her power begins to wane when the Senate, at Nero's suggestion, overturns several Claudian measures (Tac. *Ann.* 13.5):

*quod quidem adversante Agrippina, tamquam acta Claudii subverterentur, obtinere patres, qui in Palatium ob id vocabantur, ut adstaret additis a tergo foribus velo discreta, quod visum arceret, auditus non adimeret. quin et legatis Armeniorum causam gentis apud Neronem orantibus escendere suggestum imperatoris et praesidere simul parabat, nisi ceteris pavore defixis Seneca admonuisset, venienti matri occurrere. ita specie pietatis obviam itum dedecori.*

The Senators, who were called into the Palatine palace on account of it, upheld the measure, even with Agrippina's opposition, as though the laws of Claudius were being overturned. Doors were added at the back [of the meeting room] so that she could stand hidden by a curtain, which obstructed her vision, but did not impair her hearing the proceedings. Further, when the Armenian ambassadors were pleading the case of their people to Nero, she was preparing to ascend the emperor's dais and preside at once. While others were frozen in fear, however, Seneca suggested that Nero intercept his mother as she came up. In this way, with the appearance of duty, he blocked embarrassment.

Agrippina transgresses two boundaries. The first is her apparent insistence upon hearing the proceedings of the Senate; she has gone so far as to have doors installed at the back of the meeting room so that she can spy on the activities of the Senate. Tacitus seems to insinuate that by listening, Agrippina could somehow affect the actions of the government. It is unclear how she could have done this, since he specifies that she is *discreta*, and hidden by a curtain. Her presence so close to the distinctly masculine space of the meeting of the senators is the issue. Judith Ginsburg observes that the meeting's location in the Palatine, in the reception hall of the imperial *domus*, further blurs the boundary of Agrippina's transgression. As a *matrona* who has had so much experience with the Imperial court and as the mother of the emperor, it seems natural that Agrippina would be attentive to the proceedings of the Senate.<sup>9</sup> Tacitus, however, portrays it as a symptom of her overwhelming ambition.

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<sup>9</sup> Ginsburg (2006: 39). In Barrett's opinion, "Agrippina's behavior was not nearly as remarkable as Tacitus wants to imply." He suggests that Agrippina's ability to listen in on Senate meetings was an honor (1996: 150).

Seneca and Nero prevent Agrippina from embarrassing the young *princeps* with a display of filial piety. Agrippina's transgression is clear as she approaches the Armenian deputation since she plans to invade the space rightfully belonging to her son and his advisers. Her influence is apparent in the fearful reaction of the people around the emperor, apart from Seneca (*ceteris pavore defixis*). This description provides the impression that she feels a false entitlement to her son's power. In Tacitus, Agrippina, as a dangerous *dux femina*, attempts to take control of the Roman Empire, and in front of foreign ambassadors, no less.<sup>10</sup> Seneca and, at times, Burrus appear in the *Annals* as the only members of Nero's court equal to Agrippina's wiles. In fact, Miriam Griffin notes that they use Agrippina's overbearing nature as leverage to better control Nero later.<sup>11</sup> Once Nero begins an affair with the freedwoman Acte (which Seneca and Burrus encouraged), she starts to lose influence over her son (Tac. *Ann.* 13.12-13).

Desperate to improve her standing, Agrippina now cultivates the favor of her marginalized stepson, Britannicus. This results in the boy's murder by Nero; in this instance, Agrippina overplays her hand and loses (Tac. *Ann.* 13.14-15).<sup>12</sup> The outcome of the conspiracy of Agrippina's enemy Junia Silana, on the contrary, shows that she still had a great deal of power (Tac. *Ann.* 13.19-20). Junia Silana, a woman whom Agrippina had prevented from an advantageous marriage, tried to take her revenge by accusing the empress of conspiring with Rubellius Plautus, one of Augustus' living descendants. Seneca and Burrus prevented Agrippina from suffering the wrath of her panicked son (Tac. *Ann.* 13.21). She was allowed to exile her

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<sup>10</sup> See Santoro L'Hoir (1994: 17-24) and (2006: 112-118) on conventions of the *dux femina* in Tacitus. See Ginsburg (2006: 112-116) for Agrippina specifically embodying this stereotype.

<sup>11</sup> Griffin (1984: 74). See chapter 1 of this dissertation for Tacitus' positive portrayal of these two men.

<sup>12</sup> Griffin (1984: 74). Tacitus also tells us that Nero murders Britannicus because of visible sympathy given to him by other members of his court during a prank at Saturnalia (Tac. *Ann.* 14). Suetonius provides a very different reason: Nero murdered his stepbrother because he was jealous of the quality of his voice (Suet. *Nero* 33.2).

enemies and obtained several honors for her friends besides. It is clear that Nero and his advisers hoped to keep her happy; she cannot have lacked political clout, even in the disfavor of the emperor.<sup>13</sup> Although Tacitus makes a great effort to describe the privileges and honors taken away from Agrippina, he cannot maintain the conceit that she lost her full range of political influence. Nevertheless, her subsequent disappearance from the *Annals* up until her murder provides a false but powerful impression of a complete loss of power.

As a character in Tacitus, Agrippina is an exceptional villain. It has been challenging for scholars to look at her imagery from Nero's early principate without the influence of the extraordinary events of her life as described by the ancient historians. Both Tacitus' portrayal of Agrippina's character and the impression of her loss of power are prevalent in interpretations of her presence on early coinage. While to completely omit the version of Agrippina found in the historians from the modern consciousness is impossible, the numismatic evidence provides several hints that allow us to consider her more objectively in the context of Nero's early reign.

### **Emphasizing a Dynasty: Legitimizing Nero in Coinage**

Coins of the Roman Empire fall into two broad categories. The mints at Rome and Lugdunum struck the central coinage of the Roman Empire, which was under the direct control of the emperor and his regime. Local officials, who were not under the direct supervision of the central authority, controlled mints in the provinces. The emperor and members of his family appeared on both coins minted in Rome and the provinces, but the process behind the selection of images and their meaning differed.<sup>14</sup> Agrippina's image, like that of other female members of

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<sup>13</sup> Ginsburg (2006: 45).

<sup>14</sup> See Hekster, Manders, & Slootjes (2014: 13): "...specific cities and regions will have had more direct ties with individual rulers, stronger traditions in depicting powerful women, less hesitation in equating rulers with divinities etc. In short, local expectations of what was usually depicted on local coinage may

the imperial house, appeared on coins minted in both Rome and in the provinces. While she only appears on coinage minted in Rome up until 56 CE, her portrait continues to appear on provincial coinage throughout her life and, in the case of Alexandria, after her death. The focus of Tacitus' portrayal of Agrippina is Rome, thus Nero's visual program on coins minted in Rome is key to understanding his characterization and its reception.

Agrippina's position in the Julio-Claudian court was unprecedented, which is reflected by her prominence on the coinage of three different emperors. To understand her significance on Nero's coinage, it is important to identify previous instances of Imperial women on the coinage of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.<sup>15</sup> Julia, the daughter of Augustus, was the first woman to appear on the imperial coinage (Figure 2.1). The coin shows the head of Augustus on the obverse, and the profile of Julia between the profiles of two males on the reverse.<sup>16</sup> Most scholars have identified the heads as Julia's sons Gaius and Lucius, but Brian Rose believes that the coin features Julia between the heads of Agrippa and Augustus.<sup>17</sup> In either interpretation, the coin communicates a dynastic message, designating Julia as the bearer of political power. The *corona civica* above the trio furthers a message of stability; the successor(s) will continue the legacy of Augustus. This first appearance of a woman of the Julio-Claudian court thus recognizes Julia as an important link to the future of Rome, although the coin does not contain her name or titles.

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have been more influential than central examples in the types of messages that were broadcast by coin types issued in a particular city or region."

<sup>15</sup> For the ancestors on Julio-Claudian coinage, see Rose (1997) for a comprehensive analysis of ancestors in Julio-Claudian imagery, Wood (1999) for Julio-Claudian women in particular, Hekster, Manders, and Sootjes (2014) for the ancestral imagery of Nero specifically, and Ginsburg (2006), who also analyzes Nero's ancestors, but with a focus on Agrippina.

<sup>16</sup> *RIC I* (2) Aug. 405.

<sup>17</sup> Fullerton (1985), Ginsburg (2006: 58-59), and Puglisi (2009: 934) believe that the two male heads are Gaius and Lucius. Rose (1997: 14-15) believes that the two male profiles on the coin are Augustus and Agrippa, asserting that the portraits represent men, not boys.

Livia, closest in prestige to Agrippina as the wife and mother of emperors, does not appear on Imperial coinage until the reign of her son Tiberius, when she is displayed as the personification of SALVS AVGVSTA, “Augustan health” (Figure 2.2).<sup>18</sup> Although the coin does not include Livia’s names and titles, her portrait, with its hooked nose and soft chin line, is recognizable.<sup>19</sup> The reverse features the legend SC, with Tiberius’ titles. Just before this coin was issued, Livia had recovered from an illness, and, Wood points out, “as the almost incredibly hardy matriarch of a dynasty with four living generations, she was particularly well-suited to personify the good health of the entire imperial house and, by extension, the Empire.”<sup>20</sup> The commemoration of Livia’s recovery both reassures the viewer of the healthy future of the state and provides a reminder of Tiberius’ connection to Augustus.<sup>21</sup>

At the accession of Caligula, the family of the *princeps* took center stage as the new emperor used dynastic connections to legitimize his rule. The most visible manifestation of this strategy was the rehabilitation of Caligula’s family, who had been persecuted under Tiberius. One of Caligula’s first acts as *princeps* was to transfer his mother’s ashes from the island of Pandateria, where she had died in exile, to the Mausoleum of Augustus (Suet. *Calig.* 15). He issued a coin commemorating this occasion, with an obverse featuring the bust of Agrippina the Elder with the legend AGRIPPINA M F MAT C CAESARIS AVGVSTI, “Agrippina, daughter of Marcus, mother of Caius Caesar Augustus” (Figure 2.3). The reverse featured a *carpentum*,

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<sup>18</sup> *RIC I* (2) Tib. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Wood (1999: 109-111). The other coins in the series personify *Iustitia* and *Pietas*, and these feature idealized portraits with diadems. Livia’s *salus* coin is the only one that does not contain idealized features and a diadem.

<sup>20</sup> Wood (1999: 110).

<sup>21</sup> Ginsburg (2006: 60-61).

which referred to the games instituted in celebration of Caligula's mother, and the inscription MEMORIAE AGRIPPINAE, "for the memory of Agrippina."<sup>22</sup> While this coin represented the rehabilitation of his family, it reminded the viewer of Caligula's blood connection to Augustus. Caligula's coinage also honored Germanicus, who had been adopted into the Julian *gens*, but Agrippina the Elder, with her more direct connection to Augustus, received greater emphasis.<sup>23</sup> Caligula continued to highlight his family on coinage with the "three sisters" sesterius, which was the first coin to feature Agrippina the Younger. This coin gave the greatest prominence to living imperial woman to date, as it featured both the images and the names of Caligula's sisters, Agrippina the Younger, Drusilla, and Julia Livilla.<sup>24</sup> These coins demonstrate that images of the female members of the Julio-Claudian family were becoming more important indications of dynastic continuity.

The coinage in the reign of Claudius saw a rise in dynastic imagery, and the strong demarcation of a successor, especially after the disastrous adultery and execution of Messalina. Early in his reign, Claudius associated himself with his mother and father on coinage, as well as his grandmother Livia, whom he deified.<sup>25</sup> Having been relatively little known before his ascension to power, Claudius connected himself to the Julio-Claudian line with prominent relatives; Livia was particularly useful in this respect since she was "mother" to the Claudian side, and wife of the Julian Augustus.<sup>26</sup> After his marriage to Agrippina the Younger (who we

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<sup>22</sup> *RIC I* (2) Gai. 55.

<sup>23</sup> See Trillmich (1978: 181-183).

<sup>24</sup> *RIC I* (2) Gai. 33. Wood (1988: 458), Rose (1997: 33), and Ginsburg (2006: 65).

<sup>25</sup> *RIC I* (2) Claud. 109 (Drusus the Elder); *RIC I* (2) Claud. 65-68 (Antonia); *RIC I* (2) Claud. 101 (Diva Livia).

<sup>26</sup> Rose (1997: 39-40).

will now refer to again as simply Agrippina), she and her son received special emphasis on his coinage. She was the first living empress to be represented, titles and all, on coinage with her emperor husband.<sup>27</sup> It is significant that Claudius had not previously given this honor to his wife, which shows that Agrippina's direct descent from Augustus set her apart and made her image powerful.<sup>28</sup> Claudius aimed to distance himself from the controversy of Messalina and align himself with a wife who evoked a glorious past and a bright future for Rome.<sup>29</sup>

Tacitus portrays Claudius' designation of Nero as his primary heir as a product of the machinations of Agrippina. More likely, he adopted Nero to provide additional security for the succession, a logical step. Claudius' coinage in Rome suggests that Nero's ascension to the Principate would have been no surprise to the Romans; he had been an heir for four years.<sup>30</sup> After Nero's adoption and before Claudius' death, coins featuring Claudius' laureate head on the obverse and Nero's bare head on the reverse were issued (Figure 2.4).<sup>31</sup> Claudius' laureate head reflects his greater authority and experience, but Nero is wearing a toga, indicating his ascent to manhood and thus his readiness to assume adult responsibility. The titles featured on the reverse of the coin further this sense of passing on power, NERO CLAVD CAES DRVSVS GERM PRINC IVVENT, "Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus, first of the youth." Nero's name itself is an effective piece of propaganda, reflecting both his adoption by the current emperor and his relationship with the Julian line and the ever-popular Germanicus. This coin, minted in

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<sup>27</sup> *RIC I* (2) Cl. 81.

<sup>28</sup> Rose (1997: 42).

<sup>29</sup> See Trillmich (1978: 55-63) and Wood (1999: 256).

<sup>30</sup> Rose (1997: 45).

<sup>31</sup> *RIC I* (2) Cl. 82, 83.

Rome by official authorities responsible for issuing coins consonant with the emperor's public message, clearly marks Nero out as Claudius' successor.

Once Nero ascended to the Principate, he (or, more likely, his advisors) distanced himself from Claudius' evident unpopularity. Works such as the *Apocolocyntosis* and the laughter that accompanied Nero's solemn eulogy for Claudius highlight the danger of being linked too closely with the previous administration (Tac. *Ann.* 13.2-3). Nero famously claims that he will rule by the example of Augustus at the outset of his reign and attempts to distinguish himself from Claudius by his application of *clementia* and court cases argued before the appropriate authorities (Suet. *Ner.* 10; Tac. *Ann.* 13.4).<sup>32</sup> He deified his adopted father, however, and took full advantage of his subsequent status of *divi filius*. Claudius' deification allowed Nero to remind the public that he was the son of a god—like Augustus—and his action enhanced the value of his family connections.

All of Nero's coinage from his first year focused on ancestral connections.<sup>33</sup> Agrippina is featured more prominently than any other Imperial woman to date. She appears on two gold coins in Nero's early reign. In the first, Nero and Agrippina face each other in profile on the obverse, and the legend features Agrippina's titles (Figure 2.5).<sup>34</sup> The *corona civica* appears on the reverse, and Nero's titles appear on the legend. In the next coin, Agrippina and Nero are jugate on the obverse, with Nero in front (Figure 2.6).<sup>35</sup> He seems to gain more prominence compared to the other issue, and his titles are now on the obverse while Agrippina's are on the

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<sup>32</sup> See also the previous chapter on the comparison to Augustus in *De Clementia*.

<sup>33</sup> Hekster, Manders, & Sloopjes (2014: 12)

<sup>34</sup> *RIC I* (2) Ner. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *RIC I* (2) Ner. 6-7.

reverse. The reverse features the deified Claudius and Augustus driving a quadriga of elephants. Agrippina does not appear again on Roman coinage.

If one has read Tacitus, the interpretation of Agrippina's presence and absence on Nero's coinage offers a wealth of possibilities.<sup>36</sup> Some have argued that these coins are evidence of her ambition and that she herself made the decision to put her portraits on coinage. Some see the prominence of her portrait as proof of her overbearing influence.<sup>37</sup> While the Agrippina portrayed in Tacitus might have insisted upon her portrait alongside her son's, there are more nuanced reasons why she would have been beneficial to Nero's image. Many see her disappearance from coinage as proof of the validity of Tacitus' narrative of lost power.<sup>38</sup> Sutherland sums up these impressions most concisely as "the intrusion and swift exclusion of Agrippina on coinage."<sup>39</sup> Judith Ginsburg, however, has rightly questioned the foundation of this argument, which ignores previous trends in Imperial portraits on coinage, especially concerning the figure of Agrippina.<sup>40</sup>

The emphasis in Nero's early coinage on his tie to Agrippina rather than Claudius highlights the focus on his identification with Augustus. No previous emperor had been

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<sup>36</sup> This refers to Agrippina's presence on coinage specifically in Rome; in other parts of the empire, she appears on coinage until her death.

<sup>37</sup> See Sutherland (1951: 143-147; 151-155) and (1976: 118), Barrett (1996: 152), and Shotter (2008: 57). Wood (1999: 421), speaking about Agrippina's presence on Claudius' coinage, provides a similar impression of her agency with regard to her image on coinage, "The success of Agrippina Minor in thrusting herself into the forefront of political activity and of the public consciousness became evident immediately upon her marriage to Claudius, and is perhaps reflected in the shift in content of his coins."

<sup>38</sup> Shotter (2008: 58), Braund (2009: 432) and Bergmann (2013: 334-335).

<sup>39</sup> Sutherland (1976: 118).

<sup>40</sup> Ginsburg (2006: 57).

identified so closely with his mother rather than his father.<sup>41</sup> Agrippina's prominence reflects the strength of Nero's matrilineal connections. In addition to being the sister, wife, and mother of emperors, she was the great-granddaughter of Augustus. Neither Claudius nor Nero's natural father, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, could boast this distinction. Nero thus uses his mother's portrait on coinage to lend legitimacy to his initial promises to rule by the example of Augustus. She serves as a connective force, one that legitimizes Nero in the eyes of the Roman people at the outset of his reign.

The first Agrippina coin, which features mother and son facing each other, makes a concerted effort to balance the two figures (Figure 2.5). Nero faces right, taking the more prominent position, but his mother's titles are in the nominative on the obverse of the coin, while his are on the reverse in the dative.<sup>42</sup> The impression given is of partners in power. For an emperor who sought to differentiate himself from his predecessor, this was a savvy political move. Her image on Nero's coinage was powerfully retrospective, to use Rose's term.<sup>43</sup> The portrait of Agrippina evokes reminders of a glorious legacy, stretching back to the beginning of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Agrippina represents a tradition of men in power, as well as the appropriate lineage (i.e. Augustus) to wield it wisely.<sup>44</sup> She symbolizes both the illustrious past and promising present of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, while Nero represents the future.

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<sup>41</sup> Rose (1997: 47).

<sup>42</sup> Wood (1999: 293).

<sup>43</sup> Rose (1997: 5).

<sup>44</sup> "Descent from one's imperial predecessors, especially from that Julian founder (i.e. Augustus), conferred legitimacy on the current regime" (Ginsburg 2006: 62).

The second Agrippina coin, which features Agrippina and Nero jugate, displays a change in the prominence of the figures (Figure 2.6).<sup>45</sup> Once again, mother and son are portrayed as partners: bareheaded, and with no sort of attribute to designate superior status. Here, however, Nero, as the ruler of Rome, appears in the foreground, overlapping his mother, and his titles are featured on the obverse. Agrippina's presence so early in Nero's reign is effective in its assertion of his hereditary legitimacy as emperor at the outset of his reign. The implication of her placement in a secondary position is that the young ruler is coming into his own, no longer relying so much on his mother's experience, but still acknowledging it.<sup>46</sup> While Agrippina, the great-granddaughter of Augustus, acts as an important reminder of the past, Nero's prominence looks forward to the rest of a glorious reign.<sup>47</sup> This image highlights Nero's promise to rule with the tenets of the first Julio-Claudian emperor in mind.

The reverse of this coin also looks back at Nero's ancestors, and features a quadriga of elephants drawing both the divine Claudius and Augustus, with the legend AGRIPP AVG DIVI CLAVD NERONIS CAES MATER EX S C, "Agrippina Augusta, wife of the Divine Claudius, mother of Nero Caesar, from a decree of the Senate."<sup>48</sup> While Agrippina's titles to remind us that her son accorded her the honor of priestess of the cult of the Divine Claudius, they also highlight her, and thus Nero's, connection to Augustus. This coin presents Nero as the full

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<sup>45</sup> *RIC I* (2) Ner. 6-7.

<sup>46</sup> As Barrett (1996: 150) remarks, "All the same it would have been natural for Nero to have been heavily dependent upon her until he could find his own feet."

<sup>47</sup> Neither Augustus nor his heirs in Rome used the type featuring jugate heads. This symbolism seems to be derived from the Hellenistic period and was often used in designations of heredity in the provincial coinage. Particularly interesting examples occur in Antony's "Fleet coinage" from his time in Greece (*RPC* 1463), where he is jugate with Octavia, and in Ephesus, where the Second Triumvirate appears jugate (*RPC* 2569).

<sup>48</sup> See Rose (1997: 46) on similar imagery for *Divus Augustus* on Tiberius' coinage.

dynastic package; both his adoptive father and his genetic great-great-grandfather are gods. His selection as emperor is indisputable, solidified both by the consent of the previous ruler, now deified, and his connection with the founder of the Julio-Claudian line. Agrippina repeats the function of Julia in the Augustan coinage; she is a vessel conferring power onto her son by both blood and marriage. The inclusion of Agrippina's name and titles, however, provides an important reminder of her unprecedented influence, and thus her son's qualifications for his position as *princeps*. This coin is an affirmation of Nero's right to rule and his potential as a ruler.

After this issue, Agrippina disappears from the coinage, which again, has been read as physical evidence of her fall from power. The numismatic evidence, however, is not as clear as it seems regarding Agrippina, especially if one looks at the use of Claudius' image in Rome during Nero's early Principate.<sup>49</sup> Although Nero emphasizes his connection to Agrippina early on in his reign, he also takes advantage of the deified status of Claudius, using the impressive title F DIVI, "son of a god." In addition to RIC 6-7 described above (Figure 2.6), at least one other issue from early in Nero's reign reminds the public of his connection to the Divine Claudius. The obverse of this coin features a laureate portrait of Claudius with the simple legend DIVVS CLAVDIVS AVGVSTVS, "Divine Claudius Augustus," while the reverse shows Claudius the god in a quadriga with a triumphal arch (Figure 2.7).<sup>50</sup> This coin reminds the public of Nero's adoptive divine father and affirms his right to the position of *princeps*. EX SC (*ex senatus consulto*, "from a decree of the Senate"), the only legend on the reverse, enhances the

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<sup>49</sup> Ginsburg (2006: 73) also disagrees with the reading that Agrippina's disappearance from coinage implies a loss of power. In her view, her appearance on the coinage reflects "how much Nero's authority depended on Agrippina."

<sup>50</sup> RIC I (2) Ner. 4.

impression of legitimacy with a reminder of the Senate's approval.<sup>51</sup> After the initial years of Nero's reign, Claudius, like Agrippina, does not appear again in Nero's Roman coinage.

Three coins acknowledge Nero's legitimacy as a member of the Julio-Claudian line, two featuring his mother, two featuring his adoptive father. Because Agrippina appears *with* her son on these coins, Nero's connection to her gains more emphasis. Since Nero distanced himself from several of Claudius' administrative practices, it is natural that Agrippina is more prominent than Claudius. Claudius and Agrippina's disappearance from coinage later in Nero's reign is coherent, indicating that Nero is now an emperor in his own right. The imagery of Claudius and Agrippina served to legitimize Nero's claims to power and indicate his familiar legacy. As Nero accomplished more during his reign, he soon replaced this initial imagery with issues emphasizing his good relationship with the Senate (SC in a wreath on a variety of issues),<sup>52</sup> his elevation to *pontifex maximus*,<sup>53</sup> and his shrewd appointment of general Corbulo to handle the increasingly restless Parthians in the east (shown by issues of Roma in military dress).<sup>54</sup> Agrippina and Claudius disappear because they have served their purpose; Nero is securely ensconced in his position of power, and the coinage focuses on his accomplishments in that position of power. Thus, while it is true that Agrippina's appearance on coinage with her son represents an innovation, the message her appearance represents is consistent with the official message of Nero's early principate.

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<sup>51</sup> Nero's inclusion or omission of EX SC or SC on all denominations of his coinage has been the object of much debate. MacDowell (1979: 64-73) provides a thorough background.

<sup>52</sup> *RIC I* (2) Ner. 12 is one example.

<sup>53</sup> *RIC I* (2) Ner. 12-23

<sup>54</sup> *RIC I* (2) Ner. 34, 42.

Given Nero's later reception, we must not forget the other interpretations of Agrippina's presence on the early coinage. Her image boasts of Nero's legitimacy, but it is also convenient for those imagining her as an overbearing *dux femina*; she must even overshadow her son on currency! Tacitus reports several actions that reflect her unwillingness to give up power, leading to an alternative interpretation of her appearance and disappearance on coins. In these readings of Agrippina's presence and absence in Neronian coins, Agrippina single-handedly dictated the imagery on imperial coinage, which in itself is quite unlikely.<sup>55</sup>

The murder of Agrippina would present an additional reading of this imagery. The coinage reflects that Nero's legitimacy relied heavily on his mother's connection to Augustus. As a young emperor, Nero thus portrays himself as the culmination of a long and proud line of ancestors. The emphasis on Agrippina fits well with her overall responsibility for Nero's ascension to emperor. Whether one believes the accusations that she killed Claudius or not, it was she who, by marrying Claudius, put her son in a position to inherit the throne. Nero later used this position of power to carry out Agrippina's murder. These coins become a reminder of Nero's status as a matricide after his reign.

### **The Death of Agrippina: The Historical Narrative**

The murder of Agrippina became a pivotal event in Nero's history. Her death is so significant that the author of the *Octavia* refers to it twice, both in a choral ode early in the play and in a ghostly speech by Agrippina. She has been dead for three years by the time the *Octavia* takes place, but the author of the play includes her prominently; her role in Nero's life as well as the manner of her death are essential components in the interpretation of Nero's narrative. In the

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<sup>55</sup> Sutherland (1951: 152-155) believes that she had a man "on the inside" who helped her dictate the coin types and that he was removed from power around the time of Britannicus' murder.

*Annales*, the story of her murder is dramatic, and no doubt exaggerated, and provides Agrippina with a death appropriate to her character.<sup>56</sup> Matricide represents the first action on Nero's part that compromised his legacy. In the litany of offenses that Nero committed during his reign, the murder of Agrippina usually comes first.

Briefly, the events of Agrippina's death as described in Tacitus *Annals* 14.1-13 are as follows.<sup>57</sup> Nero and his freedman Anicetus concoct a plan to assassinate Agrippina at sea with a collapsible boat. This plan does not work as originally intended, and Agrippina manages to swim to safety. Once at her villa, she sends a message to Nero, who panics and, in consultation with Seneca and Burrus, sends a freedman to kill her. Her final words, *ventrem feri!* "Strike my womb!" reflect the ferocity of her character (Tac. *Ann.* 14.8).

In the aftermath of the murder, Nero seemed to suffer surprisingly few political consequences, at least at first. Seneca and Burrus were instrumental in maintaining the Senate's acceptance of the wayward *princeps*.<sup>58</sup> Seneca wrote a letter to the Senate in Nero's name detailing her previous crimes and asserting that her death was deserved (Tac. *Ann.* 14.11). The Senate reacted by voting for several thanksgivings for the emperor's safety. All accepted the

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<sup>56</sup> See Dawson (1969) for a list and examination of discrepancies in Tacitus' account of the shipwreck. Although I am inclined to disagree with his theory of the real events, his analysis of the text and its possible exaggerations is useful in reading Tacitus' account. Scott (1974: 107) examines the "levity" of Tacitus' account of her death and argues that he uses the narrative to emphasize the impression of Nero's lack of competence for the imperial throne.

<sup>57</sup> The account in Suetonius occurs at *Nero* 32.1-4, and in Cassius Dio 61.12.2-13.5.

<sup>58</sup> Other scholars have had difficulty in ascertaining the immediate effect of Agrippina's murder on the Senate and the general public. Warmington (1969: 46-48) finds it difficult to say how the public reacted, and predicts that while people were aware of the murder, Agrippina had not won much sympathy. Grant (1970: 66-67) asserts that the murder had little impact on Nero's standing in Rome due to the machinations of Seneca and Burrus. Griffin (1984: 76) comments that Seneca and Burrus were of little help during the murder itself but were instrumental in providing an official version of Agrippina's death that incriminated Nero as little as possible. Barrett (1996: 194) believes that any opposition to Nero as a result of the assassination was "underground and scattered," as illustrated by Thrasea Paetus' isolated act of defiance.

official interpretation of events except for the stubborn Thrasea Paetus, who walked out of the Senate in silence (Tac. *Ann.* 14.12). His protest seems to have had little effect. Nero enhanced the characterization of Agrippina as a criminal by recalling the enemies she had exiled (Tac. *Ann.* 14.12). The recall of these individuals provided the impression that her unjust rule in Rome was over; thanks to Nero's actions, the public was again safe.<sup>59</sup> When he finally returned to Rome, he entered amid festivities and rejoicing, an event that Tacitus compared to a triumph, especially since it culminated at the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus (Tac. *Ann.* 14.13). According to Cassius Dio, Nero even celebrated games on her birthday, which makes it possible that he and his advisers later downplayed the murder to make the public forget (Cass. Dio 61.17.2).<sup>60</sup>

In view of Nero's reign as a whole, however, the death of Agrippina would become a significant turning point. The vividness of Tacitus' narrative, as well as his placement of the story at the beginning of a book, reflects the pivotal nature of this event.<sup>61</sup> According to Aurelius Victor, the emperor Trajan claimed that the reign of Nero contained the best five years that the empire had ever experienced (Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 5.1-4):

*Qui cum longe adolescens dominatum parem annis vitrico gessisset, quinquennium tamen tantus fuit, augenda urbe maxime, uti merito Traianus saepius testaretur procul differre cunctos principes Neronis quinquennio.*

[Nero], although as a mere adolescent he had possessed his power for as many years as his stepfather, nevertheless did so well for five years, especially in expanding the city, that Trajan very often deservedly asserted that other emperors did not come close to the five years of Nero.

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<sup>59</sup> Barrett (1996: 194).

<sup>60</sup> Barrett (1996: 194).

<sup>61</sup> Shotter (2008: 74).

Some have placed these five years, the *Quinquennium Neronis*, at the beginning of Nero's reign, speculating that the death of Agrippina marked the end of this successful period.<sup>62</sup> The early part of Nero's reign seems to represent a politically stable era where the emperor and the Senate worked together. Aside from the death of Britannicus, it is difficult to find fault with Nero during this comparatively innocent period. Miriam Griffin sees Agrippina's death as a critical event in Nero's relationship with Seneca and Burrus; their refusal to help murder his mother compromised his trust.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Tacitus and Cassius Dio both claim that after the death of Agrippina, Nero slipped into vices that her influence had prevented (Tac. *Ann.* 14.13; Cass. Dio 61.11.1). In the historical narrative, the death of Agrippina seems to be an extreme assertion of independence on Nero's part. The impression of the *princeps* under strict guidance by his advisers fades.

While the political repercussions of Agrippina's murder were not immediately apparent after the fact, the figure of Nero the matricide became prevalent in the rhetoric of those who rebelled against the emperor. In the aftermath of the Pisonian Conspiracy, Nero questions the soldier Subrius Flavus on why he chose to turn against the emperor. The response is telling: "*oderam te,*" inquit, "*nec quisquam tibi fidelior militum fuit, dum amari meruisti. odisse coepi, postquam parricida matris et uxoris, auriga et histrio et incendiarius extitisti.*" "I hated you," he said, 'nor was there any soldier more faithful to you than I while you deserved to be loved. I began to hate you after you became the murderer of your mother and wife, a charioteer, an actor,

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<sup>62</sup> On the *Quinquennium Neronis* in general, see chapter 1, note 29 of this dissertation. Lepper (1957), Batomsky (1962), and Murray (1965), among others, have attempted to place Agrippina's death at the end of the alleged *Quinquennium Neronis*. I am not persuaded by the concept of the *Quinquennium Neronis* since Victor's text seems to refer to events at disparate points throughout his reign.

<sup>63</sup> Griffin (1984: 75); Kleijwegt (2000: 81) observes that after the murder of Agrippina, the primary role of Seneca and Burrus becomes damage control.

and an incendiary” (Tac. *Ann.* 15.67). In the view of this formerly loyal soldier, the murder of Agrippina was a turning point. The emperor stopped deserving the loyalty of his followers with this act, and Nero’s crimes stemmed from there. After the death of Nero, Antonius Honoratus would shame the Praetorian Guard for considering rebellion against Galba, when they had tolerated the crimes of Nero for so many years: νῦν δὲ Γάλβαν προδιδόναι, τίνα φόνον μητρὸς ἐγκαλοῦντας ἢ σφαγὴν γυναικός, ἢ ποίαν αἰδουμένους θυμέλην ἢ τραγωδίαν τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος; “But now, if they betrayed Galba, what murder of his mother or slaughter of his wife could they accuse him of? Or what appearance on stage or tragic performance of an emperor should they be ashamed of?” (Plut. *Galb.* 14.2-3). Among the accusations against Nero, the murder of his mother is the first in both of these instances.

Suetonius and Cassius Dio also include indications of public disapproval at Nero’s treatment of Agrippina. In Cassius Dio, the people rejoice publicly by tearing down statues of Agrippina, but they rebel privately (Cass. Dio 61.16.2a). In one instance, they hang a bag around Nero’s neck, implying that he deserves the punishment of a parricide (Cass. Dio 61.16.1). In another, someone throws a baby into the forum with a tag reading, “I will not raise you, in case you kill your mother” (Cass. Dio 61.16.2). Suetonius also reports lampoons written or recited around Rome: Νέρων Ὀρέστης Ἀλκμέων μητροκτόνος, “Nero, Orestes, Alcmeon: mother killers”; Νεόψηφον. Νέρων ἰδίαν μητέρα ἀπέκτεινε, “A new reckoning; Nero killed his own mother”; *Quis negat Aeneae magna de stirpe Neronem? / Sustulit hic matrem, sustulit ille patrem*, “Who denies that Nero is from the great race of Aeneas? One got rid of his mother, the other picked up his father” (Suet. *Ner.* 39.2). These satires demonstrate that the murder of Agrippina had a lasting effect on public opinion. Unfortunately, Suetonius includes them in a list of pasquinades that mock a variety of Nero’s exploits, so it is impossible to know whether

they appeared just after the murder of Agrippina. It is, perhaps, noteworthy that he places them near the story of Nero's fall from power. The last quip alludes to the fabled connection between the Julian family and the legendary Aeneas. The public, apparently, began to associate Nero's murder of Agrippina with a break with family honor during his reign.

The death of Agrippina was a shocking action on Nero's part. Like other aspects of his reign, it is impossible to know whether her assassination would have seemed so shocking if his rule had ended differently. Seneca and Burrus proved their worth as advisers by spinning the matricide as a decision that protected the Roman public, but as the Senate grew more discontent after their deaths, their version of events did not last. After Nero's fall from power, the murder of Agrippina would become a defining event of his reign.

### ***Octavia* and the Tragedy of Agrippina's Lineage**

No text highlights the effect of Agrippina's death on Nero's legacy more effectively than the *Octavia*. Instead of the ambitious *dux femina* that Tacitus has immortalized, this play shows us an Agrippina who regrets her noble lineage because of the monster that her son has become. The unknown author of the *Octavia* has the very woman who gave Nero legitimacy disown him. This rejection has dire consequences for his legacy as a member of the Julio-Claudian line. Although the events of the play take place in 62 CE, three years after the death of Agrippina, her importance in Nero's reign is so marked that she appears as a ghost.<sup>64</sup> The unknown author of the *Octavia* has made an apt decision; much like a ghost, Agrippina would haunt the rest of Nero's reign, becoming ever more prevalent as he approached his death.

Agrippina speaks twice in the *Octavia*. Early in the play, the chorus tells the story of Agrippina's death. Her first speech occurs when the women of the chorus quote Agrippina

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<sup>64</sup> See Ferri (2003: 294-295) and Boyle (2008: 218-219) on precedents for the appearance of ghosts in Senecan and Greek tragedy.

directly as she laments the betrayal of the son for whom she had given so much (*Oct.* 309-376). The second speech occurs later in the play, just after the debate between Seneca and Nero. She is a ghost emerging from Tartarus, preparing to exact the vengeance of the Furies on her son (*Oct.* 593-645). It is unclear who sees her aside from the audience. Agrippina's ghost provides an analysis of the failure of Nero's reign, focusing on the implications of Nero's failure from a dynastic standpoint.

Agrippina's second speech is, initially, a response to Nero's decision to divorce Octavia and marry Poppaea. Agrippina views Nero's marriage to Poppaea as the starting point of his downfall (*Oct.* 593-7):

*tellure rupta Tartaro gressum extuli,  
Stygiam cruenta praeferens dextra facem  
thalamis scelestis: nubat his flammis meo  
Poppaea nato iuncta, quas vindex manus  
dolorque matris vertet ad tristes rogos.*

I have emerged from Tartarus, the earth ripped open,  
Carrying a Stygian torch to wicked marriage beds  
In my bloody right hand: Poppaea, joined to my son,  
Was married in sight of these flames, which an avenging hand  
and maternal pain will change to sad funeral pyres.

Like Tantalus in the *Thyestes*, Agrippina has been ripped from the underworld to wreck well-deserved havoc on sinful relatives. Her first lines recall those of Tantalus (*Sen. Thy.* 1-4):

*quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit  
avido fugaces ore captantem cibos?  
quis male deorum Tantalos invisas domos  
ostendit iterum?*

Which infernal god dragged me from my wretched place  
As I chased fugitive food with a greedy mouth?  
Which god maliciously shows Tantalus  
The hateful houses again?

Both figures emerge from their torment in Underworld to exact vengeance on tyrannical figures and complete the downfall of their families. Agrippina's connection to Nero, however, is more personal than Tantalus' connection to his descendants. The author of the play emphasizes her maternity in a variety of ways. As Rolando Ferri points out, it was the role of mothers to carry torches at the weddings of their children, which she claims to have done in this case.<sup>65</sup> Her right hand is *cruenta*, a reminder of the murders she committed to ensuring her son's rise to power. It is also a perversion of the idea of blood lineage, which in a just world would have been enough to establish legitimacy without violence.

Agrippina never identifies herself by her own name in this speech. The repetition of words such as *natus* and *mater* make her identity clear. While describing the shipwreck that nearly killed her, Agrippina's ghost characterizes the event as *nati...crudelis nefas*, "the wrong of a cruel son" (*Oct.* 603). The impetus that allowed Nero to give the order to kill her and institute a *damnatio memoriae* after she survives the shipwreck is described as *odia nati; saevit in nomen ferus matris tyrannus*, "the hatred of a son; the wild tyrant rages against the name of his mother" (*Oct.* 609-10).<sup>66</sup> This description culminates in the lament of Nero's supposed *damnatio memoriae* against Agrippina: *simulacra titulos destruit mortis metu / totum per orbem, quem dedit poenam in meam / puero regendum noster infelix amor*, "He destroyed my statues and inscriptions under penalty of death through the whole world, which my unfortunate love gave to the boy to rule, to my detriment" (*Oct.* 611-613). The references to Nero as a son and Agrippina as a mother not only reveal her identity to the reader but also gives Agrippina agency in the

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<sup>65</sup> Ferri (2003: 296).

<sup>66</sup> The only evidence of a formal *damnatio memoriae* against Agrippina appears in Cassius Dio 61.16.2. The inscriptions in which her name was erased may have been due to the general hatred of Nero after his reign. See Ferri (2003: 299).

wrongs Nero committed, including his eventual execution of Octavia. The emphasis on matricide provides a context for punishment; he has damned himself in his argument with Seneca, but Agrippina reminds us that he has also committed other unspeakable (*nefas*, repeated in lines 603 and 605) crimes against his family. She expresses guilt at her role in giving Nero the power of the principate but defends herself by stating that she did it out of maternal love, *noster infelix amor*. In fact, there is no mention of Agrippina's thirst for power in and of itself in the *Octavia*; the overwhelming implication is that she acted for her son's sake, and suffered (along with Rome) as a result.

Agrippina's primary role in the *Octavia* is as Nero's mother. The *Octavia* only mentions her influence in his rise to power, and then her murder. There is nothing to identify her as the daughter of Germanicus or the sister of Caligula. Although she mentions that the angry ghost of Claudius threatens her in the afterlife (*Oct.* 614-617), the emphasis is on her son Nero. Twice in the play, we hear of her involvement in Nero's succession. The first choral ode provides a vivid account of the unsuccessful assassination-by-shipwreck from the point of view of Agrippina. As she struggles in the waves, she laments (*Oct.* 332-337):

*“haec” exclamat “mihi pro tanto  
munere reddis praemia, nate?  
hac sum, fateor, digna carina,  
quae te genui, quae tibi lucem  
atque imperium nomenque dedi  
Caesaris amens.”*

“You're giving this reward to me  
for such a great gift, son?” she shrieks,  
“I confess I deserve this ship,  
After all, I gave birth to you, I gave you  
Light, empire, and the name of Caesar,  
In my madness.”

Agrippina curses Nero for his ungratefulness while confessing her responsibility for unleashing him on the world. Although she starts by complaining about unjust rewards (ironically termed *praemia*) in spite of her aid to Nero, she quickly changes course, acknowledging that what she experiences is deserved. She is the agent of Nero's power, first by his birth (*luce*), then his power (*imperium*), and, most importantly, his name (*nomen...Caesaris*). She defends herself by stressing that she was *amens*, the last word in an enjambed line. Still, its placement next to that all-important name, *Caesaris*, displays the extent of her responsibility for Nero's position. In the next part of the speech, she implicates herself in the murder of her former husband Claudius, adding a new injustice to Nero's rise to power. She thus reminds the audience that her son's destructive force is inherited and extends to both the Julian and the Claudian sides of the family.

The story in the choral ode at the beginning of the play goes on to describe Agrippina's desperate escape from the shipwreck, as well as her dramatic death at the blows of her son's henchmen. The death scene bears a distinctive similarity to the Tacitean version of events (*Oct.* 368-372):

*caedis moriens illa ministrum  
rogat infelix  
utero dirum condat ut ensem:  
"hic est, hic est fodiendus", ait  
"ferro, monstrum qui tale tulit."*

Dying, ill-starred, she asks the  
agent of murder  
To bury the awful sword in her womb,  
"Here! Bury the your iron here!" she says,  
"In the womb that created such a monster."

Tacitus has Agrippina express this idea more succinctly, *ventrem feri*, "Strike my womb!" (*Tac. Ann.* 14.8). The *Octavia*, more concerned with the demise of Nero's family, specifies that Agrippina's womb released such a terror upon the world or, more pointedly, Agrippina's family.

She wishes to punish the source of her son's birth. Her last request symbolizes the destruction of the line; she had been portrayed as the vessel continuing the Augustan line in the coinage of three emperors. Now, she symbolically eliminates this power.

The image from the chorus's story is carried forward to Agrippina's second appearance as a ghost later in the play. The ghost of Agrippina ends her speech (*Oct.* 636-643):

*utinam, antequam te parvulum in lucem edidi  
aluique, saevae nostra lacerassent ferae  
viscera! sine ullo scelere, sine sensu, innocens,  
meus occidisses, iunctus atque haerens mihi  
semper quieta cerneris sede inferum  
proavos patremque nominis magni viros,  
quos nunc pudor luctusque perpetuus manet  
ex te, nefande, meque quae talem tuli.*

If only, before I brought you, tiny, into the light,  
And nursed you, savage beasts had torn out our  
Organs! Without any crime, without feeling, innocent,  
You would have died, mine, joined to me, clinging,  
From your quiet seat among the ghosts, you would gaze  
At your ancestors, your father, men of great name,  
Whom now, shame and perpetual mourning await,  
Because of you, a disgrace, and me who bore such a one.

Agrippina dies from the requested blow to her womb, and in the afterlife, she expresses the wish that this had happened before Nero was born. Ferri comments on the overdramatic nature of this desire, as being torn apart by wild beasts is a punishment of mythological proportions.<sup>67</sup> This is appropriate to a son like Nero, who himself played the starring role in so many tragedies with mythological themes.

The *Octavia* gives no hint of the power-hungry woman to whom Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio have described, but only a mother regretting the actions of her son. She repeats the same metaphor for giving birth both in her angry tirade at the shipwreck (*lucem...dedi* at 335)

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<sup>67</sup> Ferri (2003: 305).

and in this last wistful speech (*te parvulum in lucem edidi* at 636). This is a common metaphor, but especially appropriate in Nero's case, considering his often-mentioned association with Apollo and Helios. One might also consider Seneca's assertion in *De Clementia* that all eyes are upon Nero when he goes out in public or Suetonius' report of the rumor that he was bathed in the rays of the rising sun just after he was born (Sen. *Clem.* 1.8.4; Suet. *Nero* 6). The author draws attention to this metaphor by putting it upon Agrippina's lips twice, and in a similar context. She not only gave birth to him but was the initiator of his public appearances. She is the reason he appeared *in lucem*.

The absence of the light, the wish that Nero had never been exposed to it, is also the desire for a life without the gaze of the public. In Agrippina's fantasy of Nero's peaceful afterlife, he does the gazing (*cerneres*, "you [Nero] would gaze"), observing the greatness of his ancestors much like Aeneas observes his descendants in the *Aeneid*.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, if Nero had died in the womb, he would have been completely identified with Agrippina, inseparable from both her and his ancestors, unable to taint the Julio-Claudian line. Agrippina expresses this wish powerfully in the desire that Nero would be *iunctus* and *haerens* to his mother for eternity and as a result *innocens*. While regret is, at first, doubtful in the context of Agrippina's infamous actions, one cannot help but remember that before the birth of Nero, the historians largely painted her as a victim, the subject of the cruelty of Caligula and Messalina. In the *Octavia*, Nero is the reason for her most reprehensible actions; she has, after all, claimed that she was *amens* when she helped her son rise to power (*Oct.* 332-337).

Because Agrippina was so instrumental in Nero's accession to the Principate, he is, in effect, inseparable from her (*haerens* and *iunctus* in a different fashion), and Agrippina is

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<sup>68</sup> Virgil, *Aen.* 6.679 ff., *at pater Anchises...convalle virenti...omnem...suorum...recensebat numerum carosque nepotes*. See Ferri (2003: 306) for other connotations of the parade of souls.

inseparable from her ancestors. Hence her wish, too late, that her son could merely look upon the *nominis magni viros*. Her tenderness towards the *parvulum* version of Nero implies that her vengeance has become a punishment in itself, one that simultaneously honors and disgraces her role as Nero's mother. As it is, she ends her speech with a rapid departure from the quiet fantasy world she creates. In this world, Nero had never grown and, as a result, she has no reason to dishonor her proud lineage, and her son is not able to.

In the last line of her speech, she reiterates what her roles have been and their effect on her legacy: *noverca coniunx mater infelix meis*, "Stepmother, wife, mother, calamitous to my family (*Oct.* 645). It is noteworthy that here in her afterlife, she does not mention that she is also the great-granddaughter of Augustus, the daughter of Germanicus, or the sister of Caligula. Anything before Nero is missing. Her son now defines her as much as she and her ancestors defined her son. The author emphasizes this by his placement of *mater* in the center of the line; *infelix* might be used to describe her as a stepmother and wife, but the focus of her speech has been primarily her tragic story as a mother. *meis* refers not only to Claudius, Britannicus, and (soon) Octavia, but the ancestors mentioned in the previous lines. Nero too is included in this designation. At the beginning of his reign, Agrippina's presence in each of these roles contributed to Nero's rise to power. After her death, they would become reminders of his greatest crime.

The focus of Agrippina's lament in the *Octavia*, much like the focus of the coinage, is her connection to famous ancestors that allowed Nero to ascend to the Principate. She emphasizes Nero's break with those legitimizing ancestors; the *damnatio memoriae* described by Agrippina's ghost is a further indication of compromised legitimacy. Nero causes her name to be erased from monuments, but this, in effect, will also erase his connection to Augustus and his

distinguished ancestry. As a result, the *Octavia* becomes a tragedy of the Julio-Claudian line that represented Nero's power.

### **Conclusion**

At the outset of his reign, Nero asserted that he would follow in the footsteps of his great-great-grandfather, Augustus. The portrait of Agrippina on Nero's early coinage supported this promise. Nero, a blood relative of his declared role model, had a noble lineage. The negative characterization of Agrippina, however, implies that a blood connection to Augustus did not guarantee a virtuous disposition, as Nero's subsequent behavior illustrated. He physically and metaphorically destroyed his blood connection with Augustus when he killed his mother. Tacitus remarks that after her death, Nero *seque in omnes libidines effudit*, "poured himself into every desire," having been restrained by some remaining modicum of respect for her (Tac. *Ann.* 14.13). As Seneca and Burrus lose influence, his similarities to the ideal of Augustus fade in all but name.

Suetonius tells us that Nero first heard about Vindex's rebellions in the West on the anniversary of Agrippina's demise (Suet. *Nero* 40.4). He later adds that Nero, who was not prone to dreaming, had a vivid dream in which he was steering a ship, and the helm was ripped from his hands (Suet. *Nero* 46.1). The biographer places this anecdote just before his account of Nero's death, implicitly connecting the murder of Agrippina with the fall of Nero. While Nero continued to rule Rome for almost a decade after he became a matricide, the memory of Agrippina lingered. In his initial coinage, paired with his mother, Nero is represented as the glorious culmination of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Now, those triumphant images serve as a reminder that he was responsible for the death of the very woman who had given him power. Matricide would be the first major crime of his reign, the first event on the path to his downfall.

Chapter 2 Images

**Figure 2.1:** *RIC I (2) Aug. 405; ANS 1937.158.390*

Obv. Head of Augustus, r., bare, inside oak wreath. AVGVSTVS DIVI F.

Rev. Head of Julia between heads of Gaius and Julius Caesar, all r. bare, wreath central above. C MARIVS TRO III VIR.

Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society



**Figure 2.2:** *RIC I (2) Tib. 47; ANS 1944.100.39281*

Obv. Head of Livia, r., draped, hair fastened with knot on back of head. SALVS AVGVSTA.

Rev. TI CAESAR DIVI AVGVSTI P M TR POT XXIII: Legend surrounding large S C

Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society



**Figure 2.3:** *RIC I (2) Gai. 55; ANS 55.1952.81.2*

Obv. Bust of Agrippina the Elder, r., with hair falling in queue in back of her neck.

AGRIPPINA M F MAT C CAESARIS AVGVSTI.

Rev. Carpentum drawn r. by two mules. SPQR MEMORIAE AGRIPPINAE.

Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society



**Figure 2.4:** *RIC I (2) Cl. 82, 83; ANS 1944.100.39359*

Obv. Head of Claudius, r., laureate. TI CLAVD CAESAR AVG GERM PM TR POT PP.

Rev. Bust of Nero, l., draped. NERO CLAVD CAES DRVSVS GERM PRINC IVVENT.

Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society



**Figure 2.5:** *RIC* I (2) Ner. 2; ANS 1935.117.362

Obv. Head of Nero, r., bare, facing head of Agrippina, l., bare. AGRIPP AVGV DIVI CLAVD NERONIS CAES MATER.

Rev. Oak wreath around EX SC. NERONI CLAVD DIVI F CAES AVGV GERM IMP TR P.

Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society



**Figure 2.6:** *RIC* I (2) Ner. 6-7; ANS 1967.153.219

Obv. Nero and Agrippina jugate, r., bare. NERO CLAVD DIVI F CAES AVGV GERM IMP TR P COS.

Rev. Quadriga of elephants bearing Divine Claudius and Divine Augustus, l., seated on thrones on top of the quadriga; each hold staff. AGRIPP AVGV DIVI CLAVD NERONIS CAES MATER.

Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society



**Figure 2.7:** *RIC I (2) Ner. 4.*

Obv. Head of Claudius, I., laureate. *DIVVS CLAVDIVS AVGVSTVS.*

Rev. Triumphal arch on top of quadriga, r. *EX SC.*

Photo source:

“*RIC I: Nero (54-68 AD).*” <http://www.ancientcoins.ca/>.

[http://www.ancientcoins.ca/RIC/RIC1/RIC1\\_Nero\\_1-200.htm](http://www.ancientcoins.ca/RIC/RIC1/RIC1_Nero_1-200.htm) (accessed August 15th, 2015).



### Chapter 3: The *magnificentia* of Nero's House

Nero's reputation as a builder of public and private luxury remains a key aspect of his public persona, as Martial's quip, *Quid Nerone peius? Quid thermis melius Neronianis?* "What is worse than Nero? What is better than Nero's baths?" illustrates (Mart. 7.34.4-5). The particular focus of criticism, however, was his building program after the Great Fire. This conflagration broke out in July of 64 CE, a disaster that swept through ten of the city's fourteen districts. The fire demolished some of Rome's oldest monuments; Tacitus names the shrine to Vesta and Rome's household gods among other monuments and artifacts (Tac. *Ann.* 15.41). A significant portion of Rome's population was left homeless. The rumor circulated that while the Emperor watched the blaze from the Gardens of Maecenas, he played the lyre and sang a ballad about the destruction of Troy (Suet. *Ner.* 38.2). This fire destroyed Nero's palace, the *Domus Transitoria*, and he soon began construction on a new imperial palace, which he called the *Domus Aurea*. This building would become one of the most notorious manifestations of Neronian decadence, both for its connections to the Great Fire and for the sheer size of its grounds and gardens. The *Domus Aurea* served as proof of Suetonius' statement, *Non in alia re tamen damnosior quam in aedificando*, "He was in no other respect more ruinous than in building" (Suet. *Ner.* 31).

The *Domus Aurea* was a villa in the heart of Rome, a concept never seen in the city before or after the time of Nero. The denigration of this building by Tacitus and Suetonius as well as Nero's contemporaries, Pliny and Martial, ensured that it was seen as a symbol of Nero's extravagance and disregard for the people.<sup>1</sup> When considering the archaeological evidence for

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<sup>1</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.42-43, Suet. *Ner.* 31, Plin. *HN* 36.111, Mart. *Spect.* 2. As I will discuss below, most of the primary sources treat the *Domus Aurea* as Nero's private space. They portray the palace as a selfish and expensive whim of a tyrannical emperor. Morford (1968) first questioned the tradition of the palace as a private dwelling, and examined its place in Nero's political agenda. Champlin (1995) and Moorman

the *Domus Aurea* complex, however, it becomes clear that Nero did not build a pleasure villa purely for personal enjoyment. Rather, the buildings that made up the complex either had distinct political purposes or were intended for the general enjoyment of the public *as well as* the emperor himself.

### **The *Domus Aurea* Complex**

Tacitus and Suetonius tell us that Nero built two palaces with the help of his architects Severus and Celer (Tac. *Ann.* 15.42; Suet. *Ner.* 31). The first, the *Domus Transitoria*, or House of Passage, was designed to connect his property on the Palatine Hill with the imperial properties on the Esquiline. Most of this structure was destroyed in the Great Fire, which also leveled several other buildings on the Palatine Hill. The fire allowed Nero to rethink the overall layout of his palace as the valley between the Palatine, Esquiline, and Caelian hills, now called the Colosseum Valley, became available for Nero's new complex, the *Domus Aurea*.<sup>2</sup> The word *complex* is essential, since the *Domus Aurea* was not a single building but was a large park with multiple buildings of varying size throughout.<sup>3</sup> The components of the *Domus Aurea* were the palace and vestibule on the Palatine Hill, the *stagnum Neronis* in the valley, and the Esquiline Wing on the south slope of the Esquiline Hill.

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(1995) analyze the *Domus Aurea* in the context of a public building. Elsner (1994) in particular examines the negative reception of the *Domus Aurea* in the ancient sources, and concludes that had Nero not died so young, it may have been viewed in a positive light.

<sup>2</sup> On the effects of the fire on Nero's architecture, see Macdonald (1982: 25-31) and Luciani & Sperduti (1993: 34-46). For the layout of the *Domus Aurea* in the context of the areas destroyed by the fire, see Ball (2003: 3) and Coarelli (2007: 159-160).

<sup>3</sup> The exact size of the land encompassing the *Domus Aurea* is difficult to ascertain. The most influential studies are Van Essen (1954), who defines a large scope for the grounds, and Warden (1981), who thinks that the grounds were significantly less vast. Ball (2003: 4) and Coarelli (2007: 182) opt for a combination of their conclusions.

The largest component of the complex, the main palace, sat on the north side of the Palatine Hill, adjacent to the Forum. This building most likely housed the offices for Nero's imperial administrators.<sup>4</sup> Its vestibule, containing a 120-foot Colossus, was later replaced by Hadrian's Temple to Venus and Roma.<sup>5</sup> Colonnades lined the Sacra Via along the approach to the Forum where the Arch of Titus now stands, providing a fitting entrance both to Rome's governmental center and the main building of the palace.<sup>6</sup> Recent excavation in this area has also brought to light a tower from the Neronian era, which would have commanded an excellent view of the lake and the parkland. Evidence of a mechanical device associated with the structure has led archeologists to speculate that it is Nero's rotating dining room referred to by Suetonius in his description of the *Domus Aurea*.<sup>7</sup> More research and excavation is necessary before we can become confident about the link between this structure and Suetonius' description.

The *stagnum Neronis*, a decorative artificial lake, was created in the valley between the Palatine, Esquiline, and Caelian Hills. As is widely known, the Flavians would later drain the lake and build the Flavian Amphitheater in an ostentatious display of public munificence.<sup>8</sup> Suetonius claims that there were buildings *ad urbium speciem*, "in the form of cities," surrounding the lake, and that the entire valley was a park filled with woods, fields, and gardens (Suet. *Ner.* 31). To the south of the lake stood the Temple to the Divine Claudius, with a nymphaeum on the east side of the platform. Vespasian would complete the Temple to the

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<sup>4</sup> See Moorman (1998: 361) on this likely use of the Palatine building and Griffin (1984: 129) for the need of space for administrative purposes.

<sup>5</sup> Barosso (1941), Macdonald (1982: 21), Coarelli (2007: 182).

<sup>6</sup> Macdonald (1982: 21).

<sup>7</sup> David, Fedeli, & Villedieu (2013) provides the details of this excavation.

<sup>8</sup> See Morford (1968) and Welch (2002) for representative analyses of the Flavian reconstruction of Neronian space in the Colosseum valley.

Divine Claudius during his reign (Suet. *Vesp.* 9). The Aqua Claudia ran to the southeast of the temple and nymphaeum and provided water not only for the lake, but Nero's many water features throughout the grounds.<sup>9</sup>

The only certain extant structure of the *Domus Aurea* is the Esquiline Wing, which the ancient sources do not seem to mention specifically. The Esquiline Wing (sometimes called the Esquiline Pavilion) was fortuitously preserved because it was buried in the foundations of the Baths of Trajan.<sup>10</sup> The pavilion sits on the south side of the Esquiline Hill, and would have commanded an impressive view of the grounds of the *Domus Aurea* in the Colosseum Valley. The overall design of the building was intended to enhance this prospect in every way possible.<sup>11</sup> In many ways, the plan is peculiar and experimental. The western part of Esquiline Wing is designed on a more traditional plan, with perpendicular wings on two sides of a large rectangular courtyard.<sup>12</sup> The eastern part is much more complex, consisting of two symmetrical wings that framed an eight-sided room identified by scholars as the Octagonal Suite.<sup>13</sup> Pentagonal courts on either side of the Octagonal Suite continue the play with shape and symmetry that characterizes the experimental nature of the Esquiline Wing as a whole. Overall, this section of the structure is designed to take advantage of the flow of natural light through a series of clever architectural innovations.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Luciani & Sperduti (1993: 41), Segala & Sciortino (1999: 11), Coarelli (2007: 217) and Claridge (2010: 158, 303).

<sup>10</sup> Ball (2003: 9). These baths were constructed after a fire destroyed other structures on the Esquiline Hill in 104 C.E.

<sup>11</sup> Ball (2003: 10).

<sup>12</sup> Coarelli (2007: 182-3).

<sup>13</sup> De Romanis (1822), Fabbrini (1982), Meyboom and Moorman (1992: 139).

<sup>14</sup> Ball (2003) refers to this aspect of the structure of the *Domus Aurea* throughout his study.

In the ancient sources, the *Domus Aurea* is a damning representation of Nero's tyranny. The main objection to this structure is not its opulence but its scale; the sprawl of the villa was the chief complaint among the ancient sources. Tacitus, for instance, describes Nero's policies for rebuilding Rome after the fire with approval, but he criticizes the construction of the *Domus Aurea* (Tac. *Ann.* 15.42):

*ceterum Nero usus est patriae ruinis exstruxitque domum, in qua haud proinde gemmae et aurum miraculo essent, solita pridem et luxu vulgata, quam arva et stagna et in modum solitudinum hinc silvae, inde aperta spatia et prospectus, magistris et machinatoribus Severo et Celere, quibus ingenium et audacia erat etiam, quae natura denegavisset, per artem temptare et viribus principis inludere.*

In fact, Nero exploited the ruins of his fatherland and constructed a house, which was not so fantastic for the gold and jewels, luxury already being well established and common, as for the fields and lakes. Like the countryside, there were woods here, open spaces and views there. Severus and Celer were the architects and engineers who had the genius and boldness to attempt through art even what nature had denied, and to play with the resources of the emperor.

The key here is the distinction Tacitus draws between decadence and scale. He dismisses luxury as something that has been seen in Rome for a long time now; Nero's construction of a lavish palace was not noteworthy at this point in the Julio-Claudian dynasty. The issue instead is the scale of a complex that mimics nature by incorporating such vast spaces in an urban setting. Tacitus also condemns Nero for taking advantage of the tragedy of the Great Fire to build the palace he wanted. Although Tacitus praises Nero's efforts at rebuilding the city in the preceding paragraphs, the *Domus Aurea* remains a blight on his image.

Tacitus is not the only critic of this complex. Pliny the Elder, a contemporary of Nero, speaks of the entire city being surrounded by the houses of Nero and Caligula, but designates Nero's as the more extravagant with the designation "golden," *bis vidimus urbem totam cingi domibus principum Gai et Neronis, huius quidem, ne quid deesset, aurea*, "Twice we saw the whole city surrounded by the houses of Emperors Gaius and Nero, the latter's even golden, so

that nothing would be lacking” (Plin. *HN* 36.111). Tacitus is more biting in his commentary, describing the building projects in the aftermath of the fire as *ceterum urbis quae domui supererant*, “The rest of the city, the part that remained aside from his house...” (Tac. *Ann.* 15.43). In the same vein, Suetonius quotes a popular verse from Nero’s day, *Roma domus fiet; Veios migrate, Quirites, / Si non et Veios occupat ista domus*, “Rome will become a house; move to Veii, Quirites, / If that damn house does not take up Veii as well” (Suet. *Ner.* 39). If we believe Suetonius, the verse appeared during Nero’s reign and reflects apprehension on the part of at least a portion of the people living in Rome. While all of these quips come from sources hostile to Nero, they emphasize that the size of the *Domus Aurea* was unprecedented. The scale of the palace is an understandable criticism since the *Domus Aurea* with its grounds took up approximately one-fourth of the area of Republican Rome, according to Luciani and Sperduti.<sup>15</sup>

Suetonius has left the most influential description of the *Domus Aurea*. Although he mentions the size of the complex, his focus is its luxury (Suet. *Ner.* 31.1-2):

*non in alia re tamen damnosior quam in aedificando domum a Palatio Esquilias usque fecit, quam primo transitoriam, mox incendio absumptam restitutamque auream nominavit. de cuius spatio atque cultu suffecerit haec rettulisse. vestibulum eius fuit, in quo colossus CXX pedum staret ipsius effigie; tanta laxitas, ut porticus triplices miliarias haberet; item stagnum maris instar, circumsaeptum aedificiis ad urbium speciem; rura insuper arvis atque vinetis et pascuis silvisque varia, cum multitudine omnis generis pecudum ac ferarum. in ceteris partibus cuncta auro lita, distincta gemmis unionumque conchis erant; cenationes laqueatae tabulis eburneis versatilibus, ut flores, fistulatis, ut unguenta desuper spargerentur; praecipua cenationum rotunda, quae perpetuo diebus ac noctibus vice mundi circumageretur; balineae marinis et albulis fluentes aquis. eius modi domum cum absolutam dedicaret, hactenus comprobavit, ut se diceret quasi hominem tandem habitare coepisse.*

Nevertheless, he was in no other respect more ruinous than in building, and constructed a house extending from the Palatine to the Esquiline hill, which he called the Passageway House at first. Soon, this palace was destroyed by fire, and

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<sup>15</sup> Luciani & Sperduti (1993: 36). Of course, this figure does not apply to the time of Nero. I include it here as a useful comparison.

he called the restored version the Golden House. Concerning its expanse and decoration, it will be sufficient to explain the following. It had a vestibule, in which a colossus in Nero's image stood 120 feet high; the house was so wide that it had a triple portico a mile long; similarly, a lake like the sea was contained in the grounds, surrounded by buildings like cities; in addition, the fields within were dotted with crops, vineyards, pastures, and woods, with a multitude of every type of wild and domestic animal. In other parts, everything was dripping with gold, embellished with gems and mother of pearl; dining rooms were inlaid with turning ivory panels and fitted with pipes, so that flowers and perfumes could be scattered from above; the principal dining hall was spherical, and was perpetually turned day and night like the world; the baths flowed with seawater and sulfur water. When he dedicated a completed house of this kind, he approved of it thus far, saying that at last, he had begun to live like a man.

Several themes emerge in this passage. Suetonius indicates that Nero was a spendthrift by emphasizing that he built two sumptuous houses, the more luxurious after the disaster of the Great Fire. He refers to the vast grounds with the descriptions of the fields, forests, and animals within the park, as well as the detail that the lake was *maris instar*, "like the sea." Most captivating, however, is his description of the gilded interior, with its moving panels that sprinkled perfumes and flowers. Seneca also mentions these features, although he does not associate them specifically with the *Domus Aurea*. Instead, he offers a veiled critique of his former pupil by criticizing luxury in general (Sen. *Ep.* 90.15):

*Hodie utrum tandem sapientio rem putas qui invenit quemadmodum in immensam altitudinem crocum latentibus fistulis exprimat, qui euripos subito aquarum impetu implet aut siccat et versatilia cenationum laquearia ita coagmentat ut subinde alia facies atque alia succedat et totiens tecta quotiens fericula mutantur?*

Today do you think it was a wiser man who found some way to spray saffron from hidden pipes from a great height, or who filled and dried canals with a sudden rush of water, or who joined together moveable panels in dining rooms in such a way that one image, and then another appears, the roof changing as often as the dishes on the table?

These fascinating accounts of Nero's dining room, whether exaggerated or not, have captivated the scholarly imagination. Many have argued that the Octagonal Suite in the Esquiline Wing was the location of these marvels and have speculated on a device that would allow the ceiling to

rotate.<sup>16</sup> Nero's bizarre pronouncement after the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, that *quasi hominem tandem habitare coepisse*, has also been the subject of comment.<sup>17</sup>

The *Domus Aurea* is an extraordinary building entirely different from any other structure built in Rome. Thus, analyses of various aspects the *Domus Aurea* abound on both the philological and archaeological sides. Laura Fabbrini and Larry Ball have written key archaeological studies.<sup>18</sup> Fabbrini was the first to suggest that the *Domus Aurea* was built on the remains of the *Domus Transitoria*, an assertion since proven by Ball's analysis of masonry in the Esquiline Wing. The innovation displayed by Severus and Celer in the construction of this building makes it an essential link in our understanding of Rome's Architectural Revolution.<sup>19</sup> And yet, it may have been this very creativity that contributed to the negative interpretation of the *Domus Aurea*.

Nero's record as a builder follows the overall precedent that the rest of the Julio-Claudian emperors established. The types of buildings that he commissioned do not diverge from the architectural contributions of his predecessors. Jas Elsner points out that none of his projects in

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<sup>16</sup> Moorman (1998) provides an excellent bibliography and reviews and disproves all the theories about this mechanism to date. Some have also posited that the newly excavated tower near the *stagnum Neronis* was the dining room Suetonius describes. See David, Fedeli & Villedieu 2013.

<sup>17</sup> See Moorman (1998: 361) and Champlin (2003a: 201-209) for interpretations of this statement. Both see the phrase as a reference to the Esquiline Wing as a retreat within the *Domus Aurea* complex, and I am inclined to agree with their view.

<sup>18</sup> Ball (2003) and Fabbrini (1982). Coarelli (2007: 180-186) focuses primarily on the stylistic aspects of the painting within the *Domus Aurea*. On the overall plan of the *Domus Aurea*, see Meyboom & Moorman (1992). Previously, Boethius (1960) presented a comprehensive analysis of the *Domus Aurea*, although his assertion that its construction had been hurried and disorganized for the reception of Tiridates has since been disproved.

<sup>19</sup> The Roman Architectural Revolution refers to a period of architectural advances that started during Nero's reign. One major change was a new conception of space in the planning phases of buildings. For instance, Severus and Celer were more concerned with shaping space in the Esquiline Wing than limiting it. For this purpose, they used concrete in new and innovative ways. See Kleiner (2010: 117-118) for a basic description. Ball (2003) goes into much more depth with regard to specific aspects of the Esquiline Wing throughout his book.

Rome are particularly outrageous, and speculates that the *Domus Aurea* would not possess its current bad reputation had Nero lived to old age.<sup>20</sup> Even Martial, a harsh critic, complimented Nero's baths with the quip, *Quid Nerone peius? / Quid thermis melius Neronianis?* "What is worse than Nero? What is better than Nero's baths?" (Mart. 7.34.4-5). Suetonius tells us that Nero's baths included not only the traditional bath circuit, but also a Greek-style gymnasium, a nod to Nero's love of Greek customs. The Roman people apparently appreciated these amenities (Suet. *Ner.* 12.3). We also know that before the fire, Nero commissioned a wood theater in the Campus Martius (Suet. *Ner.* 12.1). This theater was so admired that Tacitus complained of certain writers who spent too many pages praising a structure so inconsequential to politics (Tac. *Ann.* 13.31). We can glean more details of Nero's building program from his coinage celebrating his completion of the harbor at Ostia, a victory arch, and the Macellum, a new commercial building.<sup>21</sup>

As Jas Elsner observes, all of these buildings are common features of any emperor's building program.<sup>22</sup> In commissioning these buildings, including his palace, Nero was conforming to the practices established by previous emperors.<sup>23</sup> Nero's response to the Great Fire is also beyond reproach. Tacitus approves of Nero's regulations and initiatives for reconstruction. The emperor limited the height of buildings and required that they be built farther apart to prevent future fires from spreading. He also offered incentives to those who rebuilt quickly or restored buildings that had been destroyed (Tac. *Ann.* 15.43). Why, then, did

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<sup>20</sup> Elsner (1994). See also Beste & Von Hesberg (2013).

<sup>21</sup> RIC I (2) Ner. 178, 148, and 184, respectively. The arch was located on the Capitoline Hill, according to Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.18). See also Kleiner (1985: 67-96).

<sup>22</sup> Elsner (1994: 119), Beste & Von Hesberg (2013: 315).

<sup>23</sup> Elsner (1994: 113) remarks that emperors not only had to match the accomplishments of their predecessors but also had the added anxiety of fostering their own image.

the *Domus Aurea* represent the breaking point between public beneficence and luxury? And what role did Nero envision for it in his building program?

One catalyst was undoubtedly the scale and more importantly the cost of the *Domus Aurea*. The Romans tended to view the construction of large projects with suspicion, and in the financial hardship brought on by the Great Fire, the *Domus Aurea* seemed ruinous. Scholars agree that the *Domus Aurea* tradition has been distorted and that the objections to it fit standard rhetorical tropes.<sup>24</sup> The impression that Nero used Rome's treasury for his pleasure when the Roman people were in need has proven to be a damning accusation, but, as we will see, this was clearly not the case. The seemingly prolific use of space was intended to create a park in the center of Rome, a logical extension of the existing imperial gardens on the Esquiline Hill. The Esquiline Wing was the only portion of the complex that was intended to be private in the way the ancient sources claim that the entire *Domus Aurea* was private. Like Nero himself, the Esquiline Wing represents a paradox. Its survival is both useful and misleading in our view of Nero the builder.

### **Archaeological Predecessors of the *Domus Aurea***

An epigram by Martial encapsulates the now standard interpretation of the *Domus Aurea*, that Nero intended it for his pleasure alone. Martial even claims that Nero destroyed the homes of the poor to build his urban pleasure villa (Mart. *Spect.* 2):

*hic ubi sidereus propius videt astra colossus  
et crescunt media peggmata celsa via,  
invidiosa feri radiabant atria regis  
unaque iam tota stabat in urbe domus;  
hic ubi conspicui venerabilis Amphitheatri*                    5

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<sup>24</sup> Morford (1968) seems to have been the first to draw comparisons between criticisms of the *Domus Aurea* and standard rhetorical tropes. See Boatwright (1998) for common associations of gardens with luxury and the connotations for the gardens of the *Domus Aurea*. For Nero's possible programmatic intentions in his construction of the *Domus Aurea*, see Champlin (1995).

*erigitur moles, stagna Neronis erant;  
 hic ubi miramur velocia munera thermas,  
 abstulerat miseris tecta superbus ager;  
 Claudia diffusas ubi porticus explicat umbras,  
 ultima pars aulae deficientis erat.           10  
 reddita Roma sibi est et sunt te praeside, Caesar,  
 deliciae populi, quae fuerant domini.*

Here, where the starry colossus looks at the stars close up,  
     And the high cranes climb from the middle of the street,  
 The hateful palace of a wild king used to shine,  
     And one house stood in the whole city;  
 Here, where the august mass of the distinguished  
     Amphitheater is built, the lake of Nero was;  
 Here, where we marvel at the baths, a swift gift,  
     An arrogant field had taken houses from the wretched,  
 Where the Claudian colonnade unfolds its scattered shadows,  
     That was the far part of the end of the palace.  
 Rome has been returned to herself, and with you as our protector, Caesar,  
     The pleasures, which once belonged to the master, now belong to the people.

While other ancient authors lament the amount of space occupied by the *Domus Aurea*, Martial describes Nero as taking land away from the people. The line *abstulerat miseris tecta superbus ager* characterizes Nero as a leader who exploits the most wretched people of Rome. He has taken away their only homes to create an unnecessarily grandiose palace for himself. Martial then praises the current emperor Vespasian, who uses the same land for the benefit of the Roman people, unlike Nero, the *rex ferus* who considered the city his private playground.

Is Martial telling the truth when he makes this accusation? What existed on the grounds of the *Domus Aurea* and the *Domus Transitoria* before their construction? Archaeological, literary, and numismatic sources allow us to examine Martial's claim, particularly for the Esquiline Hill.

The Esquiline is the location of the best-preserved remains of the *Domus Aurea* and it was also a focus of previous interest to the Julio-Claudians and their entourage. In his first

*Satire*, Horace describes the newly constructed Gardens of Maecenas and the history of the Esquiline (Hor. *Sat.* 1.8.8-16):

*huc prius angustis eiecta cadavera cellis  
conservus vili portanda locabat in arca;  
hoc miserae plebi stabat commune sepulcrum;                    10  
Pantolabo scurrae Nomentanoque nepoti  
mille pedes in fronte, trecentos cippus in agrum  
hic dabat, heredes monumentum ne sequeretur.  
nunc licet Esquiliis habitare salubribus atque  
aggere in aprico spatari, quo modo tristes                    15  
albis informem spectabant ossibus agrum.*

Here previously, a fellow slave placed bodies of those  
Thrown from their tiny rooms to be carried in a cheap coffin.  
A common tomb for the miserable public stood here,  
For that loafer Pantolabus, or the prodigal Nomentanus.  
Here, a tombstone marked a space a thousand feet wide,  
And three hundred feet toward the field, a monument no heirs could follow.  
Now, one can live on a healthy Esquiline, and  
Take a walk on a lovely ridge, where sad men  
Used to see a field unsightly with white bones.

Before the Gardens of Maecenas, the Esquiline was a common graveyard. Horace sees it as a blessing that Maecenas has taken the initiative to turn an eyesore into a fashionable garden.

Archaeological evidence discovered during the modern development of this area in the nineteenth century has borne out Horace's claim.<sup>25</sup> After the construction of the Gardens of Maecenas, the Esquiline became a fashionable place to live and a variety of other gardens sprung up as an escape for the wealthy.<sup>26</sup>

By Nero's time, a significant part of the Esquiline was imperial property, as Maecenas willed his gardens to Augustus in 8 BCE. Other gardens on the Esquiline followed suit, and the Julio-Claudians thus acquired a broad swath of land, which Nero later tried to connect to the

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<sup>25</sup> Lanciani (1897: 409-410). See also Coarelli (2007: 180).

<sup>26</sup> See also Juv. *Sat.* 3.70-1 and Prop. 4.8.1-2 for the Esquiline as an area for the wealthy.

Palatine with the *Domus Transitoria*.<sup>27</sup> Land on the Esquiline hill was prime real estate, giving rise to the possibility that Nero did indeed displace people from their homes with the construction of his palace. If so, they were rich people rather than the helpless poor Martial describes. Was there an inhabited area on the Esquiline or elsewhere that Nero seized from previous occupants?

According to Tacitus, Nero watched the devastation of the fire from the Gardens of Maecenas. Once the fire was over, he threw this area open to refugees who had lost their homes in the conflagration (Tac. *Ann.* 15.39). The Colosseum Valley would have been densely populated, but if the Great Fire destroyed the *Domus Transitoria*, it destroyed other habitations in the valley as well.<sup>28</sup> It is possible to criticize Nero for not building new housing for his citizens displaced by the fire in the Colosseum Valley. Tacitus makes it clear, however, that Nero offered incentives for the reconstruction of buildings according to new guidelines to prevent later fires. He also subsidized the grain supply, and aside from the *Domus Aurea* (and the rumors of singing while the fire was burning, which even Tacitus finds difficult to believe), his behavior in the aftermath of the fire is that of a concerned leader.

The Flavian use of the *Domus Aurea* land after Nero's death weakens Martial's accusation of property theft from the poor. In a period where they sought to defame their predecessors to solidify their power, they chose to build an amphitheater and a set of baths, as well as restore a Temple of the Divine Claudius in the Colosseum Valley. If housing had been so sorely needed, they would have used the space to build *insulae* for the people.<sup>29</sup> After the

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<sup>27</sup> See Luciani & Sperduti (1993: 1-9) for a complete account of the history of the Esquiline Hill.

<sup>28</sup> Morford (1968: 161).

<sup>29</sup> See Morford (1968: 165). As Boethius (1960: 128) remarks, "Instead of the Imperial villa in the center of town we see the largest pleasure grounds created by any megalopolis for the masses."

Great Fire, those who had lived in the valley relocated, willingly or not, to other parts of the city.<sup>30</sup> The evidence suggests that the only people who could have conceivably lost their property to the *Domus Aurea* were those wealthy enough to live on the fashionable Esquiline Hill.

Archaeological evidence from the Esquiline offers additional indications of the structures that preceded the *Domus Aurea*. A significant part of the Esquiline Wing, particularly the West Block, was built on a section of the *Domus Transitoria* destroyed by the fire. The West Block takes the basic form of a peristyle house and was clearly built within the limitations of existing structures.<sup>31</sup> The Esquiline Wing thus demonstrates that the *Domus Aurea* was not an entirely new palace, but in part a restoration of the *Domus Transitoria*, altered to take advantage of the availability of land.<sup>32</sup>

The remains of the *Domus Transitoria* in this area re-used existing walls from several structures, which Larry Ball has distinguished by masonry types.<sup>33</sup> The earliest phase of masonry forms a series of rooms that do not indicate Roman houses, but a high-end commercial space, for the level of masonry and design is “finer than purely utilitarian.”<sup>34</sup> Ball compares the structure to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE Campo della Magna Mater at Ostia, a religious center that also contained shops and guildhalls. Both the pre-Neronian structure and the guildhall in Ostia “had a

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<sup>30</sup> Newbold (1974) discusses the possible impact of the fire on the common people of Rome. He suspects that as a result of raised rents from the lack of property, an overcrowding problem arose from the new regulations and the *Domus Aurea*. He does not offer a reason why the Flavians chose to build the Colosseum instead of more housing for the people, however.

<sup>31</sup> Ball (2003: 95).

<sup>32</sup> Fabbrini (1982: 21).

<sup>33</sup> Ball’s monograph provides an extensive analysis of all of the previous building phases (2003). Fabbrini’s excavation provides an initial survey of the earlier Neronian phase (1982).

<sup>34</sup> Ball (2003: 30). See also Coarelli (2007: 469-471).

large, open space lined with rooms of different sizes.”<sup>35</sup> The *Domus Transitoria* was effectively built into the remains of these shops, which provided a preexisting retaining wall running from east to west, later convenient for the construction of the Esquiline Pavilion.<sup>36</sup>

The most innovative aspects of the Esquiline Wing, the Pentagonal Court and the Octagonal Suite, are attributed to the genius of Severus and Celer. The Pentagonal Court was built over a previous structure, another series of high-end shops that cut east to west across the Esquiline Hill. Nero’s architects took advantage of existing foundations and reshaped the space.<sup>37</sup> The archaeological evidence below the Esquiline Wing suggests that a large shopping district and the *Domus Transitoria* were replaced by Nero’s building rather than the houses of either the wealthy or the common people of Rome.

Numismatic evidence sheds additional light on this destruction and reuse of commercial spaces. One of the prominent reverses on Nero’s later sestertii is the *Macellum*, a new marketplace (Figure 3.1).<sup>38</sup> The structure portrayed on the coin is ornate, a detailed example of Neronian architecture.<sup>39</sup> This coin was struck years after the actual construction of the *Macellum* in 59 CE, but just after the Fire, between 64-68. The celebration of a new and ornate structure strictly for commercial purposes explains why Nero was willing to build his palaces over this older commercial district. The new *Macellum* was located near the site where Nero demolished

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* Ball also notes that pre-Neronian commercial structures in the area of the Meta Sudans have a similar layout.

<sup>36</sup> Ball (2003: 33; 56-61).

<sup>37</sup> For a full analysis of all masonry types and the overall makeup of the Pentagonal Court, see Ball (2003: 44-94).

<sup>38</sup> *RIC I* (2) Ner. 184. This coin was struck between 64 and 68 CE.

<sup>39</sup> Fabbrini (1982: 24).

the old shops.<sup>40</sup> It is possible that this coin was struck to mitigate criticism of his destruction of the shops on the Esquiline Hill.

Suetonius mentions an accusation against Nero that strengthens the link between the *Macellum*, or at least the coin celebrating it, and the *Domus Aurea*. Suetonius tells us that Nero used siege machinery to demolish various warehouses (*horrea*) that stood in the way of his architectural progress (Suet. *Ner.* 38). Could these *horrea* have been the preexisting commercial structures that were built over to make way for the *Domus Transitoria*? If so, a coin boasting of the construction of the *Macellum* would have been well timed indeed. Whether or not Suetonius is referring to the demolition leading up to the construction of the *Domus Transitoria*, the existence of the *Macellum* and its emphasis on the coinage indicates that Nero was not willfully destroying property without supplying some alternative to his citizens.

It is clear that Martial's accusation was exaggerated. If Nero is guilty of seizing any property, he did not deprive Rome's poor of housing. Instead, he built his palace in a wealthy neighborhood near property that his family already owned. Furthermore, the archaeological evidence shows that he built over high-end shops, not homes, and he replaced the shops. If Nero is innocent of Martial's charge of theft (*abstulerat...*) should we accept his overall assessment of the *Domus Aurea* as *invidiosa feri...atria regis*?

### **An Emperor's Playground? The *Domus Aurea* in its Urban Context**

Nero is often characterized as an emperor who only saw his position of power as a means to attain his desires. The above poem from Martial is illustrative of this view of Nero (Mart. *Spect.* 2), as is Tacitus' accusation that he took advantage of the Great Fire to build a palace for his own pleasure (*Nero usus est patriae ruinis exstruxitque domum*, Tac. *Ann.* 15.42). Suetonius'

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<sup>40</sup> Coarelli (2007: 215-216).

description also suggests disapproval of the opulence with which Nero decorated his urban villa; there was a good reason he named it the “Golden House” (Suet. *Ner.* 31). Overall, the literary evidence characterizes the *Domus Aurea* as Nero’s personal playground. Some scholars view the palace as the hurried attempt of the architects Severus and Celer to fulfill the emperor’s decadent wishes.<sup>41</sup> They point in particular to the upcoming visit of Tiridates in 65 C.E. as a factor in such haste. Careful examination of the *Domus Aurea* demonstrates, however, that reused structures, organization of the complex, and experimental design were all carefully planned. While Nero’s palace is undoubtedly opulent, its extravagance has a focused political purpose.

When Severus and Celer began the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, they incorporated the remains of the *Domus Transitoria* and the pre-existing shops into their design. The re-use of the earlier structures is calculated and efficient, particularly the Pentagonal Court, for which Severus and Celer used the commercial ruins.<sup>42</sup> In addition, sections of the West Suite show various practical improvements on the old design of the *Domus Transitoria*. These include the addition of a colonnade and several small adjustments intended to provide greater comfort in certain rooms throughout the year. These changes reflect a deliberate analysis and modification of the old plan of the *Domus Transitoria*. Severus and Celer clearly took the time to consider the best form for the new Esquiline Wing.<sup>43</sup>

The lack of symmetry between the plans of the east and west blocks of the Esquiline Wing has led some scholars to think that Nero’s architects designed the *Domus Aurea* too

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<sup>41</sup> Boethius (1960), Luciani & Sperduti (1993: 37), and Beste & Von Hesberg (2013: 321) all draw this conclusion. Warden (1981) goes so far as to argue that the innovative eastern part of the Esquiline Wing was constructed during the era of Vespasian, a theory since disproven by analysis of the masonry.

<sup>42</sup> Fabbrini (1982: 22) and Ball (2003: 63).

<sup>43</sup> Ball (2003: 113). Fabbrini (1982: 21) also points out that the considering the scope of the construction, it is difficult to believe that the Esquiline Wing of the *Domus Aurea* could have been completed in just four years.

quickly.<sup>44</sup> While it is true that there are some experimental aspects to the Esquiline Wing -- some rooms are oddly shaped either due to the limitations of previous structures or mistakes in rethinking the possibilities of construction with concrete -- the material evidence reveals an innovative plan that could not have been completed without considerable forethought.<sup>45</sup> From an architectural viewpoint, the load-bearing walls were prepared for nearly seamless additions of separating walls where aesthetically necessary.<sup>46</sup> Severus and Celer were far from careless in their designs, and the *Domus Aurea* is hardly a hasty project.

The opulence of the *Domus Aurea* has also been singled out as an indication of Nero's egomania. The Colossus in particular provided the Senate and the upper classes with an uncomfortable reminder of their loss of power.<sup>47</sup> Such a palace was seen to represent the deferral of the Roman government to the wealth and power of one man. There is a disjuncture between the *Domus Transitoria* and the *Domus Aurea* in this regard. While ancient writers revile the latter for its lavishness, we know almost nothing about the former, which may have been just as decadent, in spite of the silence of the sources.

The Esquiline Wing represents a more exclusive area of the *Domus Aurea* complex. A graffito cited by Suetonius that laments that Rome was becoming a house provides a significant insight into the role of the Esquiline Wing (*Roma domus fiet; Veios migrate, Quirites, / Si non et Veios occupat ista domus*, Suet. *Ner.* 39). In the house of an upper-class Roman, the distinction

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<sup>44</sup> See n41.

<sup>45</sup> Fabbrini (1982: 20) captures the tone of the plan well, "L'insieme doveva apparire come un organismo agile e aperto, ricco di scorci, impreziosito da contrasti cromatici tra i pavimenti intarsiati e le pareti rivestite di *crustae* marmoree."

<sup>46</sup> i.e. the use of semibonds (Ball: 2003: 115).

<sup>47</sup> La Rocca describes a similar phenomenon occurring in the late Republic (1986: 8); see Griffin (1984: 125-142) on the political ramifications of the *Domus Aurea* with regard to the Senate. See also Morford (1968: 165).

between private and public is considerably more blurred than it is in the modern world. Houses were open to the public, but certain areas of the house were more exclusive than others.<sup>48</sup> The more important the guest, the farther into the house they would be invited. The very structure of the Roman house offers incentives for clients to attain the privilege of access. In a peristyle house, for example, the flow of the rooms offers visitors in the *atrium* a view of the more exclusive gardens, as well as the *tablinum* of the patron, and possibly a glimpse of the dining rooms, where the most important clients would be allowed. The Esquiline Pavilion serves a similar purpose; people were meant to see it from a distance as the highest attainment of privilege.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, if we believe Suetonius' description, its facade would have glittered with gold and jewels in the sunlight, impossible to miss. The large picture windows that overlooked the garden have a double objective; those of high enough status to enter the Pavilion can both see and be seen. Even with its impressive size, the *Domus Aurea* maintains the basic structure and function of an upper-class Roman house. The greatest man in Rome, the emperor, has the largest house with the most visible demarcations of status.

Despite its visibility, the interior of the Esquiline Wing retained a certain amount of mystery and potential wonder for those not allowed within. The extravagant dining room described by Suetonius has often been paired with the Octagonal Suite in the Esquiline Pavilion, which seems plausible. The Octagonal Suite is the centerpiece of the building, and would have commanded an impressive view of the parkland in the complex. As Suetonius describes it, *Praecipua cenationum rotunda, quae perpetuo diebus ac noctibus vice mundi circumageretur,*

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<sup>48</sup> Wallace-Hadrill (1994).

<sup>49</sup> Champlin also notes the idea of visibility, but more in the sense of the emperor on stage in the Golden House (Champlin 1995). La Rocca observes that the more important the magistrate, the larger and more impressive his house needed to be (1986: 8). See also Wallace-Hadrill (1994: 4).

“The principal dining hall was spherical, and was perpetually turned day and night like the world” (Suet. *Ner.* 31.2). This sentence has shaped much of our understanding of the trappings of the *Domus Aurea* and has contributed most to the general fascination with the building.

Many liberties have been taken in the translation of Suetonius’ description. In other interpretations, such as Rolfe’s Loeb translation, the mechanics of the dining room seem more impressive, “The main banquet hall was circular and constantly revolved day and night, like the heavens.” He adds as a note, “Suetonius’ brevity is here inexact; it was evidently the spherical ceiling which revolved.”<sup>50</sup> Considering the archaeological remains, it is difficult to see how the ceiling could have revolved. The translation, however, reflects Suetonius’ biographical method, which focuses on the most decadent aspects of the *Domus Aurea* to paint the picture of Nero’s *luxuria*.<sup>51</sup>

The rotating ceiling is hard to reconcile with the real architectural innovations and intentions present in the Esquiline Wing of the *Domus Aurea*. It has been proposed that a wooden apparatus on the lip of the oculus in room 128 would have controlled the rotating ceiling.<sup>52</sup> Such a device would block out the light, an essential feature in the design of the Esquiline Wing as a whole and the Octagonal Suite in particular.<sup>53</sup> The oculus would have displayed the movement of the stars and sun, and the view of the park complex offered by the window at the edge of the room would have provided an additional vista for diners. It is a massive, imposing room that allows for a panoramic view of the natural world (Figure 3.2).

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<sup>50</sup> Rolfe (1997: 131).

<sup>51</sup> Bradley (1978: 170).

<sup>52</sup> Prükner & Stolz (1974).

<sup>53</sup> Moorman (1998: 354-344) rejects the idea of an apparatus covering the oculus for precisely this reason. Ball (2003: 219-221) emphasizes the importance of the light streaming through the oculus in the design of the Octagon Suite and the surrounding rooms.

Suetonius does not refer to a rotating ceiling, but a passing of the days and the nights *vice mundi*, “like the world.”<sup>54</sup> It is quite possible that the focus of this description is the round shape of the room and the effect of natural scenery through the oculus and picture window.

The effect of the Esquiline Wing of the *Domus Aurea* as a whole is that of a fantastic extension of the miniature world of the park.<sup>55</sup> With his vineyards, forests, and artificial lake, Nero attempted to present an idealized rustic world outdoors. The Fourth Style paintings in the *Domus Aurea* present windows to mythical landscapes and impossible buildings, adding an element of otherworldliness to the interior of the most exclusive dining rooms. The flow of light was intended to allow visitors to feel that they had never left the outdoors but had stepped into a mythical garden. This effect is enhanced by Nero’s other seeming obsession, the appearance and sound of flowing water, especially strong in the Octagonal Suite with the waterworks at the back of the complex.<sup>56</sup> If the park of the *Domus Aurea* represents the world in miniature, the Esquiline Pavilion is a yet more distilled version of that world, a bright and paradisaical retreat for the emperor and his closest associates.

### **Nero’s Garden of Delights**

Nero was far from the first powerful man in Rome to build a pleasure villa, but *Domus Aurea* has one clear distinction, as Larry Ball notes: “Architecturally the *Domus Aurea* was not necessarily superior to the villas of the other great aristocrats, in either scale or decoration. Where Nero beat them all was in convenience.”<sup>57</sup> Although Nero spent most of the day on the

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<sup>54</sup> Moorman (1998: 356) proposes that the room “turned” because of the changing view of the viewer.

<sup>55</sup> See Champlin (1995) for the idea of the *Domus Aurea* complex as the world in miniature.

<sup>56</sup> Ball (2003: 76) and Fabbrini (1982: 8) both confirm the existence of the waterworks.

<sup>57</sup> Ball (2003: 6).

Palatine, the *Domus Aurea* supplied him with a beautiful and convenient retreat without leaving the city. The vast park, complete with exotic animals, as well as the Esquiline Pavilion, can be considered a different world from the bustle of the Forum. In fact, the majority of the *Domus Aurea* is a garden, and by Nero's time, *hortus* was a culturally loaded term.

Roman authors identified two types of gardens, each with a different connotation. Gardens with a utilitarian purpose, that is, producing food, were praised as industrious enterprises for the poor in particular. Pleasure gardens that often accompanied rural villas were viewed with suspicion and criticism. Pliny the Elder, Diodorus Siculus, and Strabo provide a lens for this Roman attitude towards gardens and the reception of the parkland of the *Domus Aurea*.

Pliny the Elder, Nero's contemporary, discusses the origins of *horti* as they were known in his time. Starting with the mythical Gardens of Hesperides, he then discusses the garden of Tarquin the Proud and the reference to gardens in the Twelve Tables (Plin. *HN* 19.19.50). He continues (Plin. *HN* 19.19.50-2):

*iam quidem hortorum nomine in ipsa urbe delicias agros villasque possident. primus hoc instituit Athenis Epicurus otii magister; usque ad eum moris non fuerat in oppidis habitari rura. Romae quidem per se hortus ager pauperis; ex horto plebei macellum, quando innocentiore victu!*

Now indeed people have fields and pleasure villas in the city itself under the designation of "gardens." Epicurus, the instructor of leisure, instituted this in Athens; up until his time, there was no custom of putting the country in towns. Certainly at Rome, the garden by itself was a farm for the poor; from the garden, a poor man had his marketplace, nourishment much more innocent!

Pliny does not mention the *Domus Aurea* here, although he disparages its size in other sections of the *Natural History*. His reference to "fields and pleasure villas in the city itself," seems to indicate a veiled criticism of Nero's extensive gardens in the city. We cannot forget that the gardens connected to the *Domus Aurea* had already been imperial property by the time of Nero's

reign, and added to the large size of the *Domus Aurea* as well as the *Domus Transitoria*. The mention of Epicurus, *magister otii*, and the origins of the city-garden in Greece can also be seen as references to the *Domus Aurea*. Nero had long been a Hellenophile, as illustrated by the *Neronia*, a series of Greek style games he instituted in Rome (Suet. *Ner.* 12.3), as well as his love of the theater and his later tour of Greece. Continuing yet another Greek custom in Rome fits well with his personality.

Diodorus Siculus, the Greek author of a fragmentary universal history, recounts the creation of the Hanging Gardens (Diod. Sic. 2.10). He contends that King Syrus built this wonder of the world for one of his concubines who was Persian by birth, and missed her homeland. Syrus instructed that the Hanging Gardens mimic the “distinctive landscape of Persia.” The idea of the Hanging Gardens as a miniature version of Persia within the walls of Babylon is intriguing in the context of the *Domus Aurea*. *Rus in urbe* was certainly an old concept in Rome, as shown by *horti* mentioned above. The grounds of the *Domus Aurea*, however, like the Hanging Gardens, were intended to mimic the landscape of a country retreat, creating a fantastic space in the context of daily life in Rome. Diodorus Siculus also describes an imaginary island off the coast of Libya, a sort of paradise for pleasure villas, which includes fruit trees, flowers, and exotic animals for the pleasure of the inhabitants (Diod. Sic. 5.19). Golden Age imagery is a significant part of Nero’s public persona, and the gardens of the *Domus Aurea* complex were meant to communicate a sense of pleasure without worry, a holiday atmosphere in which everyone was invited to take part.<sup>58</sup>

The most immediate inspiration for both the *Domus Aurea* and the *Domus Transitoria* was not these mythical gardens, but the palaces of the Greek East from the Hellenistic Era,

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<sup>58</sup> See Champlin (1995: 344).

especially Alexandria.<sup>59</sup> Strabo describes the royal palace complex of Alexandria in detail

(Strab. 17.1.8-9):

ἔχει δ' ἡ πόλις τεμένη τε κοινὰ κάλλιστα καὶ τὰ βασιλεία, τέταρτον ἢ καὶ τρίτον τοῦ παντὸς περιβόλου μέρος. τῶν γὰρ βασιλέων ἕκαστος ὥσπερ τοῖς κοινοῖς ἀναθήμασι προσεφιλικάλει τινὰ κόσμον, οὕτω καὶ ὀικησιν ἰδίᾳ περιεβάλλετο πρὸς ταῖς ὑπαρχούσαις, ὥστε νῦν τὸ τοῦ ποιητοῦ ἐξ ἐτέρων ἕτερ' ἐστίν. ἅπαντα μέντοι συναφῆ καὶ ἀλλήλοις καὶ τῷ λιμένι καὶ ὅσα ἔξω αὐτοῦ...

ἔστι δ' ἐν τῷ μεγάλῳ λιμένι κατὰ μὲν τὸν εἴσπλουν ἐν δεξιᾷ ἡ νῆσος καὶ ὁ πύργος ὁ Φάρος, κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἐτέραν χεῖρα αἶ τε χοιράδες καὶ ἡ Λοχιάς ἄκρα ἔχουσα βασιλείον. εἰσπλεύσαντι δ' ἐν ἀριστερᾷ ἐστὶ συνεχῆ τοῖς ἐν τῇ Λοχιάδι τὰ ἐνδοτέρῳ βασιλεία, πολλὰς καὶ ποικίλας ἔχοντα διαίτας καὶ ἄλση. τούτοις δ' ὑπόκειται ὁ τε ὀρυκτὸς λιμὴν καὶ κλειστός, ἴδιος τῶν βασιλέων, καὶ ἡ Ἀντίρροδος νησίον προκείμενον τοῦ ὀρυκτοῦ λιμένος, βασιλείον ἅμα καὶ λιμένιον ἔχον.

But the city contains very beautiful public lands and royal palaces, which take up a quarter or even a third part of the city enclosure; for just as each of the kings, from love of splendor, added some decoration to the public ornaments, so also would he build a residence for himself at his own expense, in addition to those already built, so that now, just as the poet says, "there is one building after another." All, however, are connected both with each other and with the harbor, even the ones that are outside the harbor...

And in the Great Harbor at the entrance, on the right, are the island and the tower (the Pharos), and on the other side are the reefs and the promontory Lochias, which contains the royal palace; and as one sails in on the left, there are inner palaces connected to those on Lochias which have many groves and colorful pavilions. A man-made harbor lies below these and is blocked off, belonging to the kings, as does Antirrhodos, an island in front of the artificial harbor, which has both a royal palace and a little harbor.

The palace complex that Strabo describes carries some striking similarities to ancient descriptions of the *Domus Aurea*, and perhaps offers an insight into the culmination of Nero's architectural program.

The initial plan for the *Domus Transitoria* demonstrates that Nero began his reimagining of the urban landscape long before the Great Fire of 64. Nero intended to connect all of the imperial properties between the Palatine and the Esquiline by building his first palace. This

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<sup>59</sup> For the structure of Hellenistic palaces, see La Rocca (1986: 8-17).

would have created a sprawling palace complex, “one building after another,” like the palaces of Alexandrian rulers. The devastation of the Colosseum Valley allowed him to achieve this concept more completely; his palace could now take up the same amount of space within the city as a Hellenistic palace. He was also able to add the gardens that characterized the complex at Alexandria, as well as those of other Hellenistic rulers. The pavilions located throughout the grounds of the Alexandria palace complex may have inspired the Esquiline Pavilion, a colorfully painted building in the gardens. Nero’s various canals also make sense in this general scheme, as well as his pride in the restoration of the harbor at Ostia; the palace at Alexandria was connected to the harbor from various points.<sup>60</sup> Rome was not a harbor town, but Nero was attempting to establish the interconnectedness that characterized Alexandria.

Strabo’s description coupled with La Rocca’s analysis of Hellenistic palaces help us to gain a clearer picture of Nero’s intentions in building the *Domus Aurea*.<sup>61</sup> Nero’s overall fascination with Egypt, which he expressed in various ways, strengthens the connection to Alexandria. Most importantly, he had only planned to visit two places during his short reign, Greece and Alexandria. Initially, Alexandria would have been his first journey, but this intention was cut short by a bad omen on the morning he intended to leave (Suet. *Ner.* 19). He did not get the chance to travel to Alexandria before his death, but there is evidence that he had planned such a trip.<sup>62</sup> Nero’s identification with the sun god, expressed by his affiliation with Sol and Apollo on coinage, and enhanced by the construction of the Colossus on the grounds of the *Domus Aurea*, is reminiscent of the similar associations of the pharaohs. In fact, one crucial

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<sup>60</sup> Both Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.42) and Suetonius (*Ner.* 31) refer to Nero’s plans to build a canal that would have allowed ships to sail from Rome to Ostia. Tacitus mentions that the remains of this enterprise could still be seen in his time.

<sup>61</sup> La Rocca (1986).

<sup>62</sup> See Chapter 4.

aspect of the palace at Alexandria is the mingling of the sacred with the everyday.<sup>63</sup> Rulers were regularly identified as living gods, an alarming concept for the Romans. This was surely one of the reasons why Nero and his construction of the *Domus Aurea* aroused the ire of the upper classes at Rome. During the Julio-Claudian period, the emperor was required to walk the tenuous line between the proper display of power and a perceived descent into luxury.<sup>64</sup> So far as the Senate was concerned, Nero's palace served to elevate him to the undesired status of living god, an unacceptable concept that the Romans reserved for the Greeks and other foreigners.

Cicero makes an important distinction in the idea of a wealthy Roman's use of *luxuria*. *odit populus Romanus privatam luxuriam, publicam magnificentiam diligit*, "The Roman people hate private luxury but love public spectacle" (Cic. *Mur.* 76).<sup>65</sup> Where did the *Domus Aurea* fit in this spectrum of *luxuria* and *magnificentia*? There can be little doubt that the senatorial classes perceived Nero as a threat to society; they would have been the ones whose positions were most threatened by such an overt display of autocratic power.<sup>66</sup> Although he took great pains early on to appease Rome's elite under the careful guidance of Seneca, there seems to have been a turning point in which he incurred their displeasure, to the extent that several senators orchestrated an assassination plot against him. The executions that followed would cement Nero's reputation as an emperor hostile to the Senate. What of the common people, however? The historians would have us believe that Nero was a widely hated emperor, especially in the aftermath of a fire that

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<sup>63</sup> See La Rocca (1986: 13) for this idea both at Alexandria and at other Hellenistic palaces.

<sup>64</sup> Elsner (1994: 114-115).

<sup>65</sup> See Boatwright (1998) for an interesting analysis of this dynamic, especially concerning Julio-Claudian women. La Rocca also discusses this concept as it applies to imperial gardens (1986: 8-9). See also D'Arms (1998: 39).

<sup>66</sup> See Griffin (1984: 137) and Champlin (1995: 344).

he was rumored to start. Suetonius tells us about pasquinades against Nero scrawled on the walls of Rome (Suet. *Ner.* 39), and that at the announcement of his death, the common people ran around Rome wearing caps of freedom (Suet. *Ner.* 57). At the same time, he tells us of mysterious acts of devotion by the people, such as putting fresh flowers on his statues, not to mention sudden reappearances from the east (Suet. *Ner.* 57). In Nero's case, what was termed *luxuria* by the Senate may very well have been considered *magnificentia* by the people. While the *Domus Aurea* took up a significant amount of public space in Rome, that space remained mostly open to the public.

Evidence shows that the *Domus Aurea* was accessible to all. It would have been difficult and expensive for Nero to keep the common people out of the grounds of the *Domus Aurea*. The parks were located in one of the most frequented areas of the city, the Forum. Such a large area would have required a garrison of soldiers or a wall for which we have no evidence, archaeological or literary. Indeed, the privacy of "private" gardens in the Roman world is a tangled problem. We have evidence of private roads which led into the *horti Lolliani* and the *horti Agrippae*, but this does not conclusively prove that gardens as a whole, however private, were limited only to the people who owned them.<sup>67</sup>

The gardens of the *Domus Aurea*, as well as other imperial gardens, seem to have been opened to the public on various occasions. Even before the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, Tacitus describes Nero's public feasts with disdain, *ipse quo fidem acquireret nihil usquam perinde laetum sibi, publicis locis struere convivia totaque urbe quasi domo uti*, "In order to convince everyone that nowhere but Rome was a delightful place for him, he spread feasts in public places and used the whole city as if it were his house" (Tac. *Ann.* 15.36). A Flavian

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<sup>67</sup> *CIL* VI 31284-5 and *CIL* VI 29781, respectively.

reading would have us believe that Nero *deprived* the people of places that rightfully belonged to them. Before this passage, however, Nero has just announced to the citizens that he is delaying his trips to Greece and Egypt because he knows that the people cannot bear his absence. *haec atque talia plebi volentia fuere, voluptatum cupidine et, quae praecipua cura est, rei frumentariae angustias, si abesset, metuenti.* “These things were preferable to the plebs from their desire for pleasures and, what is their primary concern, their fear of a shortage of grain in Nero’s absence” (Tac. *Ann.* 15.36). Tacitus emphasizes the problem of the grain supply, which will become worse at the imminent outbreak of the Great Fire. Nero was clearly concerned with this problem, as his coinage shows.<sup>68</sup> Tacitus does drop the valuable hint, however, that the people liked Nero’s presence in the city because of their *voluptatum cupidine*, their “desire for pleasures.” This distinction, and Tacitus’ immediate transition to Nero’s luxurious activities leads me to believe that the feasts included the public.

In making Rome his house, Nero was engaging in *magnificentia*, not *luxuria*, at least from the perspective of the lower classes. There were times when imperial gardens were used for public or semi-public events and in which Nero was accessible to the *plebs*. He held spectacles displaying his disturbingly inventive punishments for the Christians in the Circus as well as in his Gardens. Tacitus describes the emperor at this occasion *habitu aurigae permixtus plebi vel curriculo insistens*, “mingling with the plebs dressed as a charioteer, or standing on a chariot” (Tac. *Ann.* 15.44). Earlier in this book, Tacitus refers to Nero performing at the Youth Games, which were held in his Gardens (Tac. *Ann.* 15.33). Their purpose was therefore not entirely different from that of the Flavian Amphitheater, which the Flavians built as a monument to their public generosity.

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<sup>68</sup> For example, see his *congariium* and *annona augusti* types. *RIC* 1 (2) 154 and 390, respectively.

How similar were the activities in the public areas of the *Domus Aurea* to the later Flavian Amphitheater? Nicholas Purcell makes the perceptive observation that with the inclusion of wild beasts on the grounds of the *Domus Aurea*, engaging in hunts would have been one of the activities intended in that space. The Colosseum would later play host to *venationes*, replicating an activity in which Nero must have engaged on the grounds of his villa.<sup>69</sup> An arena can act as a personification of a dynasty that people can see from afar. Nero may have used his gardens for many of the same purposes, but they did not embody the striking architectural gesture of the Flavian Amphitheater. Thus, the arena became the more acceptable and more lasting symbol of the public beneficence of the ruling class.<sup>70</sup>

Nero did not intend to use the broad space of the *Domus Aurea* only for himself and his inner circle. From a logistical point of view, the park as well as the bureaucratic center on the Palatine must have been open to the public. It is possible that the gardens on the Esquiline were semi-private, but the historians tell us that Nero opened them to the citizens for special occasions. Nero thus envisioned the *Domus Aurea* as a means to provide public entertainments to the Roman citizens. This was an essential duty for an emperor of Rome, and one in line with the precedents established by the rest of the Julio-Claudians. The Flavian destruction of essential components of the *Domus Aurea* complex, however, would change it from a symbol of *magnificentia* to *luxuria*. The Esquiline Wing, a comparatively small component of the complex, would become symbolic of the entire palace.

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<sup>69</sup> Purcell (1987: 201).

<sup>70</sup> See Morford (1968), Elsner (1993), and Moorman (1998) on the distortion of Nero's building agenda. All draw the conclusion that Nero's buildings would not have been criticized to such an extent had his reign not ended prematurely. See Beard (1998: 30) and Wallace-Hadrill (1998: 5) on how Vespasian changed the perception of gardens as a private place.

## A Looming Edifice

Seneca encapsulates the effect of the Nero's palace on the elite in a short passage from the *Thyestes*. Although the dates of Seneca's tragedies are difficult to ascertain with certainty, it is widely believed that the *Thyestes* was written later in his life, most likely between 60-62.<sup>71</sup> In the play, a messenger describes Atreus' terrible deeds to the chorus. The speech begins with the following description (Sen. *Thy.* 641-647):

*In arce summa Pelopiae pars est domus  
conuersa ad Austros, cuius extremum latus  
aequale monti crescit atque urbem premit  
et contumacem regibus populum suis  
habet sub ictu; fulget hic turbae capax  
immane tectum, cuius auratas trabes  
uariis columnae nobiles maculis ferunt.*

On the top of the citadel is part of the House of Pelops.  
It is turned toward the south, and its farthest side  
Rises like a mountain, and crushes the city.  
It holds the people, insolent to their kings,  
Under its lash; here, the huge roof, big enough  
For a crowd, shines, and noble columns,  
With various hues, bear its gilded beams.

This passage has strong parallels with the description of Latinus' palace in *Aeneid* 7.170-91.<sup>72</sup>

R.J. Tarrant and J.J.L. Smolenaars have both commented that this description of the *Domus Pelopeia* is a criticism of imperial Rome and the unprecedented power of its emperors. While the description of Latinus' palace emphasizes collaboration between rulers and ruled, the *Domus Pelopeia* is separate from the people, a symbol of oppression. In fact, the detail *et contumacem regibus populum suis / habet sub ictu* echoes the sentiment in *De Clementia* that a tyrant cannot

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<sup>71</sup> See Tarrant (1985: 10-13), who draws much from Fitch (1981). This conclusion has not yet been convincingly challenged.

<sup>72</sup> See especially Smolenaars (1998), who analyzes the dialogue between the *Aeneid* and the *Thyestes*. Tarrant (1985: 183) and Faber (2007: 433) also comment on this example of intertextuality.

be satisfied *nisi eodem tempore grex miserorum sub ictu stetit*, “unless at the same time the crowd of miserable people stood under his lash” (Sen. *Clem.* 1.26.4). In certain contexts, Nero’s contemporaries considered any palace a symbol of oppression. In the *Thyestes*, this description of the *Domus Pelopeia* underlines the tyranny of Atreus and sets the scene for a ruler out of control.

It is tempting to read the *Domus Aurea* into these lines, especially with the detail that the *Domus Pelopeia* is *conversa ad Austros*, “facing south,” like the Esquiline Wing. Tarrant comments that this detail is “oddly precise,” and posits that Seneca is instead drawing a comparison to Augustus’ residence on the Palatine. It is unlikely that Seneca wrote the *Thyestes* as late as 64-65, when the *Domus Aurea* would have been in construction.<sup>73</sup> Smolenaars believes that Seneca is making a Virgilian reference to the Temple of Apollo at Cumae, which faces southeast over the city.<sup>74</sup> Neither of these theories takes the *Domus Transitoria* into account, however.

The remains of the *Domus Transitoria* have been identified in the West Suite of the Esquiline Wing of the *Domus Aurea*. This predecessor of the Esquiline Wing was built on the remains of a line of high-end shops that extended east to west along the south side of the Esquiline Hill. Could Seneca have been referring to the *Domus Transitoria* in this description? It would surely have been as lavish as the *Domus Aurea* and would have commanded a similar view of the city, as different as it was before the fire. 62 CE marked the death of Burrus (Tac. *Ann.* 14.51) and Seneca’s subsequent loss of power in the Neronian court (Tac. *Ann.* 14.52).

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<sup>73</sup> Tarrant (1985: 183).

<sup>74</sup> Smolenaars (1998: 56).

Seneca would have had good reason to criticize the *princeps* and his expressions of power during this period.

The description of the *Domus Pelopeia* is useful for reconstructing the view of the *Domus Aurea* by Rome's elite, whether it represents the *Domus Transitoria* or an imaginary palace. The palace is sumptuous, with gilded beams and painted columns, but this alone does not make the *Domus Pelopeia* a symbol of tyranny. The house is also massive, its interior described as *capax turbae*, with a wall *aequale monti*. Seneca tells us that the house contains a grove of trees in a deep valley (Sen. *Thy.* 651-56). This furthers the impression of an excessively large palace and is reminiscent of Tacitus and Pliny's criticisms of the *Domus Aurea*.

The first lines are the most evocative of the Esquiline Wing, with the idea of a king's palace on the apex of a hill that *urbem premit*, "crushes the city." Throughout Rome's history, the Esquiline Hill had been considered an excellent vantage point from which to view the city and its surroundings as it grew.<sup>75</sup> Even today, looking from the remains of the Esquiline Wing, a view of the Colosseum Valley opens up before the visitor, something that Severus and Celer must have been emphasized in their designs. Similarly, those who had the privilege of dining in Nero's inner sanctum had the freedom to look down on the sumptuous park, the colonnade, and the Forum beyond. The Esquiline Pavilion was designed to make those in power *feel* as if they had power; the people below may have been able to see into the structure, but those within were able to observe the city over which they had control. Like the sun with which he identified, Nero was always watching, and had unfettered access to this power, as well as control over who would be allowed to join him in this power.

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<sup>75</sup> Luciani & Sperduti (1993: 4).

The sense of Nero as a tyrant looming over the city is also present in the *Octavia*. There is no mention of palaces in the play save Agrippina's assertion that Nero would build a palace and then perish. At one point, however, the emperor seems to be surveying Rome and assessing its vulnerabilities as he plots revenge against his own people for their treatment of Poppaea (*Oct.* 831-837):

*mox tecta flammis concidant urbis meis,  
ignes ruinae noxium populum premant  
turpisque egestas, saeva cum luctu fames.  
exultat ingens saeculi nostri bonis  
corrupta turba nec capit clementiam  
ingrata nostram ferre nec pacem potest,  
sed inquieta rapitur hinc audacia,  
hinc temeritate fertur in praeceps sua.*

Soon, let the roofs of the city tumble in the flames I set,  
Let fires of catastrophe repress the guilty people,  
And ugly poverty and savage hunger with lament.  
The massive, spoiled crowd rejoices in the good things  
Of our age, and does not accept clemency,  
And ungrateful, cannot handle our peace,  
But a raucous audacity is taken from these benefits,  
And is borne headlong in its own heedlessness.

Here, Nero embodies the fear of a ruler with absolute power and asserts his control over both the citizens and city. A central theme of the *Octavia* is the failure of Seneca's exhortation to *clementia*. This passage illustrates the emperor's rejection of *clementia* and his desire to take vengeance on his people and become the tyrant he feels that they deserve. The course of action (the fire) is a wish or an exhortation, and one that this savage Nero has every intention of carrying out. He has the power to bring disaster to the city, and to reshape it according to his whims.

In this passage, we can see the beginnings of the connection between the *Domus Aurea* and the Great Fire. In the *Octavia*, Nero's reasons for starting the fire were not for the purpose

of a new building project. Rather, the Fire is a symbol of the denial of *pax* and *clementia* that have so far marked Nero's reign. He will now abandon these principles and rule the people through fear: *fracta per poenas, metu / parere discet principis nutu sui*, "Broken by punishments, [the people] will learn by fear to obey the command of their prince" (*Oct.* 842-3). The *Octavia*, an early point of reception for Nero's reign, shows that the fire was not originally linked with the *Domus Aurea*. Nowhere in this play does Nero mention the wish to build a palace, although Tacitus and Suetonius, writing later, connect the construction of the *Domus Aurea* to the Great Fire (*Tac. Ann.* 15.42; *Suet. Ner.* 38). This connection must have surfaced at some point between the *Octavia* and the later historians. It seems that the Great Fire first represented Nero's tyranny, which was in turn symbolized by the sprawling *Domus Aurea*. The Esquiline Wing, with its wide vantage point (*premit urbem*), combined the dread of an absolute ruler with the threat of destruction from the fire.

The *Thyestes* and the *Octavia* both demonstrate interpretations of the *Domus Aurea* by the upper classes, exemplified here by Seneca and his imitator. The palace became a symbol of an emperor who was out of control in his luxury, and who had the audacity set his power apart from the rest of the men in Rome. Their focus was on the image of the emperor looking down on the city from his elevated vantage point, a position of power from which so many of them were excluded by the institution of the Principate. The fire and the palace became intertwined in the narrative of selfishness and greed that would come to be representative of Nero.

## **Conclusion**

Martial's poem demonstrates that the Flavians succeeded in altering the reception of the *Domus Aurea*. In their narrative, epitomized by the construction of the Flavian Amphitheater, Nero's palace came to represent a selfish and tyrannical ruler. The only part of the *Domus Aurea*

still extant is the Esquiline Wing, which was fortuitous for the persistence of the Flavian narrative. The Esquiline Wing actually was a structure aimed at the pleasure of the emperor alone, along with his inner circle, rather than the people of Rome at large. Deprived of its original context within the grounds of the *Domus Aurea*, it confirms the story of Nero as a flighty and entitled ruler who builds according to a whim. If we consider the *Domus Aurea* as a complex, however, we can see Nero's original intention. The *Domus Aurea* complex was mostly open to the public; the park was intended as a benefit for the people as well as the emperor.

Still, the opulence and sheer scale of the palace reminded the upper classes uncomfortably of the power they had lost with the advent of the Principate. The *Domus Aurea* represented a show of power that was wholly new in Rome. Similarly, Nero's Greek Tour, which he also intended as a gesture of public munificence, came to be seen as the whim of an undeserving and thoughtless tyrant. In reality, both the *Domus Aurea* and the Greek Tour were planned with precise political goals in mind, but they were novel concepts. They seemed to the elite of Rome to enhance the glory of one man, rather than Rome as a whole. The Flavians and later historians thus manipulated these examples of Nero's public beneficence to alter his public persona.

Chapter 3 Images

**Figure 3.1:** *RIC 1 (2) Ner. 185; ANS 1937.158.473*

Obv: Head of Nero, radiate, r. NERO CLAVD CAESAR AVG GER P M TR P IMP P P  
Rev: Front view of *Macellum Magnum*. Above the steps, male figure std. l., holding scepter.  
MAC AVG SC II.



**Figure 3.2:** View of the inside of the Octagonal Suite  
Photo courtesy of Dr. Kathryn McDonnell



#### Chapter 4: Singing Diplomacy: Nero's Tour of Greece

Nero went on a tour of Greece from approximately October of 66 CE to December of 67, his first and only trip outside of Italy.<sup>1</sup> He stopped at Corinth, Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, Argos, and Lerna, following the circuit of music competitions so that he could perform as a citharode in each one. Nero also granted the province of Greece freedom at a ceremony in Corinth, and earned the adoration of the Greek people. Modern scholars have categorized the tour as an example of Nero's obsession with performance, particularly acting and singing.<sup>2</sup> It is rarely considered a political act, and is instead read as an example of the emperor's tyrannical nature. The ancient sources present the Greek Tour as a symptom of Nero's disconnection from reality. The image of Nero singing to captive audiences has come to epitomize his reign, and the Greek Tour is a vivid manifestation of this type of megalomania.

The original intention of Nero's exploits in Greece, however, was more complicated than a chance for a mad emperor to extort applause from his citizens. For Nero, the Greek Tour was an effort to form a better connection with the eastern empire, specifically Greece and Egypt. In his recent study on *kitharoidia*, Timothy Power has pointed out the significance of Nero's decision to perform specifically as a citharode; this type of musical professional had the legendary ability to unite and harmonize communities.<sup>3</sup> Coinage in Alexandria, a city

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<sup>1</sup> The main primary sources for the Greek Tour are Suetonius *Nero* 22-25 and Cassius Dio 63.8-20. For the chronology and stops along Nero's Greek tour, Bradley (1978) provides most thorough and convincing discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Many modern scholars agree with this interpretation, to an extent. Griffin (1984: 164) sees the tour as an escape for Nero from political issues in Rome and wonders whether the empty compliments of flatterers influenced his decision to make this journey. Morford (1985: 2024) argues that with the Greek Tour, Nero let "his vanity destroy what was left...of his political and military power." Champlin (2003a: 54) simply states, "Nero did not go to Greece to see the sights: he went to be seen," a view that Mratshek (2013: 55) echoes in his analysis.

<sup>3</sup> "Anecdotal accounts suggest that citharodic performance could mobilize the entire population of a city like few other events" (Power 2010: 43).

particularly fond of *kitharoidia*, celebrates the Greek Tour, and these issues suggest that Nero intended to travel to Egypt next. He was thus planning to promote the interests of his regime in Egypt, specifically Alexandria, as well as in Greece. The citharodic performances, the liberation of Greece, and the coinage celebrating the Greek tour all point to a cohesive policy in the eastern provinces. Nero's aim was to increase his influence and solidify his power, and he intended to use the glamorous appeal of the citharode to help with this goal. He was not just interested in Greek culture, but intended to use it for a political purpose.

### **A Megalomaniacal Odyssey**

Suetonius and Cassius Dio provide our central narratives for the Greek Tour while authors such as Philostratus and Pausanias offer additional anecdotes of Nero's activities.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the text of the *Annals* ends in 66 CE, so we do not have Tacitus' account of events. He does, however, provide us with descriptions of Nero as a performer earlier in his reign. These texts describe the perceived purpose of the Greek Tour, Nero's actions while in Greece, and the reaction of the Greek people to the singing emperor. Overall, the primary sources paint a picture of an unbalanced emperor addicted to the applause of his captive audience. He leaves Rome in the hands of a freedman, allowing his enemies to rally against him. As such, this journey appears as the last indulgence of a foolish ruler.

Aside from the Greek Tour, Nero only traveled in Italy, although he had once planned to visit Alexandria, a trip he abandoned allegedly on account of bad omens (Suet. *Ner.* 18; Tac. *Ann.* 15.36). Suetonius and Cassius Dio provide different motivations for Nero's trip, but agree that the Tour was a symptom of Nero's obsession with music, philhellenism, and applause. Both

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<sup>4</sup>Suet. *Ner.* 22-25; Cass. Dio 63.8-20; Philostr. *Ner.*; Paus. 10.7.1.

authors suggest that Nero's only reason for touring Greece in such a manner was for the adoration that accompanied his performances.

According to Suetonius, Greek cities that held musical contests sent him the crowns for the citharodic contests on their own initiative before he went on the trip. Nero was so grateful for these attentions that he invited the emissaries who had brought the prizes to his table and sang for them. Perceiving their apparent delight at his talent, he declared that *solos scire audire Graecos solosque se et studiis suis dignos*, "only the Greeks knew how to listen and they alone were worthy of his exertions" (Suet. *Ner.* 22.3).<sup>5</sup> Suetonius gives us the impression that Nero went to Greece on a whim shortly after making this statement. His subsequent report that Nero ordered that all of the contests occur in the same year so that he could make his way through all of them suggests a great deal of advanced preparation (Suet. *Ner.* 23.1).<sup>6</sup> Cassius Dio does not include the description of Nero receiving awards from Greece beforehand, but states that the emperor decided to go to Greece *ἵνα καὶ περιοδονίκης...γένηται*, "so that he would become a circuit-victor" (Cass. Dio 63.8.3). A *περιοδονίκης* was a citharode who went through the circuit of Greek festivals and won all of them (or, possibly, four out of the six contests). This was the likely reason that Nero neglected to visit Athens or Sparta. The cities were famous centers of Greek culture, but no longer held significant festivals by the time of the Greek Tour.<sup>7</sup>

The evidence for Nero's exact itinerary is problematic, but it seems that he made his way through all of the major festivals in Greece (the Olympia, Pythia, Isthmia, Nemeia, Actia, and

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<sup>5</sup> Power (2010: 93) believes that Nero is referring specifically to *kitharoidia*, an art that Nero revived in Rome. If this is the case, Nero means that the Romans have not yet learned to appreciate the art of the citharode, as they would later in his reign.

<sup>6</sup> See Griffin (1984: 162).

<sup>7</sup> Kennell (1988) argues that becoming a *περιοδονίκης* was one of Nero's goals for the Greek Tour. See also Gallivan (1973: 231-1) and Mratshek (2013: 54).

Heraia) and was indeed awarded the top prizes for his citharode playing.<sup>8</sup> Suetonius and Philostratus both describe his scrupulousness in obeying the rules. Suetonius comments, *quam autem trepide anxieque certaverit, quanta adversariorum aemulatione, quo metu iudicum, vix credi potest*, “One can scarcely believe how nervously and anxiously he competed, how sharp his rivalries with opponents were, and how much fear he had of the judges” (Suet. *Ner.* 23.2). In *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Philostratus describes a rumor that δέδιεν ὁ χρηστός Νέρων τὰς Ἡλείων μάστιγας· παρακελευομένων γάρ αὐτῷ τῶν κολάκων νικᾶν τὰ Ὀλύμπια καὶ ἀνακηρύττειν τὴν Ῥώμην ἣν γε ἔφη ἰσχυρῶς βασιλεύουσιν Ἡλεῖοι, λέγονται γὰρ μαστιγοῦν καὶ φρονεῖν ὑπὲρ ἐμέ.’ “The worthy Nero is afraid of the Eleans’ whips. When his hangers-on exhorted him to win the Olympics and announce Rome as the conqueror, he said, ‘Yes, if the Eleans do not begrudge it, for it is said that they use whips and believe that they are above me’” (Philostr. *VA* 5.7.2). Both authors describe a deluded emperor who has forgotten that he has already won by virtue of being the emperor. He believes that his skill in competition matters and, what is more outrageous, that he has the talent equal to the professional musicians against whom he competes. It is a manifestation of his hubris that characterizes most descriptions of the Greek Tour.

Philostratus presents a darker aspect of Nero’s competitiveness and hints at a passion for music verging on obsession. He paints a humorous picture of the singing emperor in *Nero*.<sup>9</sup> One of the interlocutors, Menecrates, asks whether Nero has a bad voice. The other character, Musonius, responds by explaining that Nero has a fair voice, neither outstanding nor laughable.

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<sup>8</sup> See Bradley (1978) for a proposed schedule of Nero’s travels in Greece.

<sup>9</sup> This dialogue was originally attributed to Lucian since it was found in a manuscript of Lucianic works. More recent analyses of the work, however, have led to a consensus that it was written by one of the Philostrati, most likely the first. See Macleod (1967: 505-507) for a convenient list of reasons for its attribution to Philostratus.

In fact, the most disturbing thing about his performance is that he is too good for a king (Philostr. *Ner.* 6).<sup>10</sup> As Musonius describes, Nero tries too hard, νεύει μὲν γὰρ τοῦ μετρίου πλέον ξυνάγων τὸ πνεῦμα, ἐπ' ἄκρων δὲ δίσταται τῶν ποδῶν ἀνακλώμενος ὥσπερ οἱ ἐπὶ τοῦ τροχοῦ, “Holding his breath, he nods immoderately, and leaning back, stands on his tiptoes like people on the wheel” (Philostr. *Ner.* 7). Nero’s behavior on stage displays the effort he put into acting like a real citharode; he embraces the role with no qualms. Unfortunately, the results are humorous rather than awe-inspiring; Philostratus remarks that in spite of the harsh consequences for laughter, the audience cannot hold in its mirth (Philostr. *Ner.* 7).

The position of the audience during these performances was complicated and, at times, dangerous. Suetonius provides us with perhaps the most striking description of an audience during Nero’s performances in Greece, *cantante eo ne necessaria quidem causa excedere theatro licitum est. itaque et enixae quaedam in spectaculis dicuntur et multi taedio audiendi laudandique clausis oppidorum portis aut furtim desiluisse de muro aut morte simulata funere elati*, “While he was singing, no one was permitted to leave the theater even for an urgent reason. As a result, some women were said to have given birth during the spectacles, and many people, tired of listening and applauding while the gates of the entrance were closed, either secretly jumped from the walls or, faking their deaths, were carried out” (Suet. *Ner.* 23.2). A simulation of joy at Nero’s performance becomes a duty for the audience. There is also an element of the ridiculous about this description, which fits well with Suetonius’ depiction of Nero as childlike and susceptible to flattery. The audience is not enjoying their emperor’s performance, but Nero is so willing to believe the version of reality put forth by his flatterers that he is unaware of the

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<sup>10</sup> See Power (2010: 88) for a series of anecdotes on the problem of kings performing too well in the arts.

effect of his actions.<sup>11</sup> Tacitus, on the other hand, attributes Nero's insistence upon audience participation to an abuse of power rather than to ignorance of the feelings of his people. Nero emphasizes his control over the upper classes by having his cronies spy on the spectators to make sure they are showing appropriate signs of enjoyment (*Tac. Ann.* 16.5). Whether due to fear or flattery (or in some cases, both), Nero forces his audiences, both Greek and Roman, to become actors, as Shadi Barstch observed.<sup>12</sup>

Other signs of Nero's tyranny over the Greeks can be seen in aspects of his tour that are described in passing. Pausanias complains that Nero took the opportunity to loot Greece of all of its most beautiful artwork, sometimes depriving temples of their holy artifacts (*Paus.* 10.7.1).<sup>13</sup> In addition, Nero attempted to either close or plug up the Pythian Oracle, so that Apollo's voice could never compete with his (*Cass. Dio* 63.14.2; *Philostr. Ner.* 10). Philostratus tells the story of the emperor's minions killing a competitor who refused to defer to Nero. He specifies that aside from this one man, the other competitors fell to Nero like wrestlers throwing a bout (*Philostr. Ner.* 8-9). The singing emperor thus deprived professional musicians of the glory that they had earned.<sup>14</sup> The ancient writers paint the picture of a tyrant inflicting endless outrages upon Greece for his benefit.

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<sup>11</sup> Bartsch (1994: 25) also observes the influence of flatterers in Cassius Dio's descriptions. Further, she cites this poignant remark from Plutarch, "What constructed a tragic stage for Nero and put upon him masks and buskins? Was it not the praise of flatterers?" (*How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 56F).

<sup>12</sup> Bartsch (1994: 3). While Tacitus is speaking of Roman audiences specifically (his account does not reach the Greek Tour), it is difficult to tell whether Suetonius is speaking of Greek or Roman audiences. He places the account of the audience reaction in the section about the Greek Tour (*Suet. Ner.* 23.2), but he does not explicitly say that the members of the audience are Greek.

<sup>13</sup> Mratshek (2013: 57) takes this as a sign of Nero's out-of-control philhellenism; the emperor employs a "near-obsessive appropriation of all things Greek."

<sup>14</sup> See Morford (1985) on Nero's participation in performance as a negative turning point in his patronage of the arts.

Underlying all of this, especially in Cassius Dio, is the very Roman sense of disapproval and embarrassment at Nero's actions. Most accounts of the Greek Tour reflect a fundamental anxiety over Nero's lack of interest in military conquest. Cassius Dio criticizes Nero's preference of singing over leading armies (Cass. Dio 63.8-63.10). In particular, he accuses him of corrupting the soldiers, who act so un-Roman as to enjoy Nero's singing because of the rewards they receive (Cass. Dio 63.10.2-3). Nero kills his blameless general Corbulo on the tour, signifying a further break with military achievement (Cass. Dio 63.17.6). C.E. Manning suggests that this action, in particular, alienated the soldiers and was a major reason the emperor lacked military support at his death.<sup>15</sup> Nero chooses to show his talent on the stage rather than the battlefield; where Augustus and Agrippa came to Greece as conquerors, Nero comes as a singer (63.8.2).

Juvenal also condemns the Greek Tour as a Roman embarrassment, *haec opera atque hae sunt generosi principis artes, / gaudentis foedo peregrina ad pulpita cantu / prostitui Graiaequae apium meruisse coronae*, "These are the works, and these are the arts of the noble leader, / rejoicing to prostitute himself with a loathsome song on a foreign stage, / and to earn the celery of the Greek victory crown" (Juv. 8.224-6). He states the problem at the heart of Nero's performance in the verb *prostitui* shortly after the reference to Nero's noble ancestry; those who traditionally performed in Rome were slaves with no control over their bodies.<sup>16</sup> Nero's performance was thus disturbing to many in Rome. Acting on the public stage displayed the

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<sup>15</sup> Manning (1975: 173).

<sup>16</sup> Juvenal prefaced this statement by saying that of all of Nero's outrages, singing was the worst (Juv. 8.20-24). See Edwards (1994: 88). Power (2010: 51-52) refers to the status of the citharode as a sex symbol in Juvenal 6.379-392 and connects it to the poet's conceit that the emperor prostitutes himself on stage.

emperor in the same context as a slave, implying vulnerability for both himself and Rome as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

The final straw, however, seems to be the lavish ceremony Nero throws himself upon his return to Rome to advertise and celebrate the Greek Tour. The *adventus*, or imperial arrival, seems to combine modified elements of a Roman triumph with a Greek homecoming celebration for victors in music festivals.<sup>18</sup> Like a Greek victor, Nero throws down the walls of the cities he enters; celebrations occurred in Naples, Antium, Albanum, and finally Rome.<sup>19</sup> He processes with his entourage through Rome wearing purple robes with gold spangles. His claque follows him and carries placards displaying the singers he conquered in Greece, much like a victorious Roman general might display the battles he won and the people he conquered. The ceremony ends at the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, rather than at the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Nero's choice to end the triumph here underlines his privileging of artistic achievement over military victory. During the procession, Nero rides in a chariot Augustus had used in his triumphs. In Suetonius' and Cassius Dio's accounts, this undeserved use of the chariot seems to underline the depths to which the office of emperor has sunk (Suet. *Ner.* 25.1; Cass. Dio 63.20.3). As a result of the Greek Tour, Nero makes a mockery of one of Rome's oldest traditions.<sup>20</sup> The "triumph" is the last we hear of Nero before the drawn-out tale of his

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<sup>17</sup> See Edwards (1994: 83-87) for the specific legal restrictions on actors. In brief, actors were considered *infames*, without reputation, and unable to hold office, among other things. They lacked all of the qualities that emperors were supposed to possess.

<sup>18</sup> Champlin believes that this ceremony is "ostentatiously not a triumph," since the route ends at the Temple of Apollo rather than the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus (Champlin 2003a: 231). Suetonius (*Ner.* 25) and Cassius Dio (63.20) describe the triumph.

<sup>19</sup> Miller (2000: 415).

<sup>20</sup> Miller (2000: 417) posits that a major problem with this ceremony was its equation of Nero's artistic triumphs with the military triumph of his ancestors, especially Augustus.

death in Suetonius and Cassius Dio. In every account, this ceremony, along with the Greek Tour it celebrates, seems to be the final reason for Nero's eventual fall from power and subsequent death. Nero goes too far by equating his victories on the stage with the military victories of his ancestors.

All of these accounts depict Nero's Greek Tour negatively, as an illustration of Nero's failures as an emperor and a Roman. As such, scholars both ancient and modern have viewed the Greek Tour as fodder for Nero's overwhelming megalomania. In this version of events, Nero, although obsessed with Greek culture, cares little for the people of Greece. His actions, particularly the triumphal return, make him an embarrassment to Rome. At the same time, one of Nero's most famous acts while on his trip was to declare the freedom of the whole province of Greece. This one act does a great deal to redeem his character in the eyes of many authors, particularly Greeks. There is also evidence to suggest that the Greeks were grateful for his presence in their province and that his citharodic performances were not unwelcome. We must reevaluate Nero's reasons for this last major exploit.

### **Redeeming Nero's Odyssey**

Nero's regime left two significant pieces of evidence to indicate his programmatic intentions in Greece. As he embarked upon his tour, cities around Greece minted coins celebrating the event, which provide insight into the imagery associated with his travels. The speech he gave when he declared the freedom of the Greek province has also been preserved. These items offer a better context both for the accounts of the Greek tour discussed above and those of Greek authors that portray Nero in a more temperate light because of his declaration of Greek freedom.

Nero visited all of the major festivals, the Isthmian, Pythian, Nemean, Olympian, Heraian, and Actian. Along this route, coins were struck in Nicopolis, Patras, and Corinth (Figure 4.1). Apollo appears on the coinage of Patras,<sup>21</sup> alluding to Nero's participation in the music festivals throughout Greece and referring to his identification with that the god.<sup>22</sup> Nike holding a wreath is shown on the reverse of coins from Nicopolis, a city close to the Actian games.<sup>23</sup> This is most likely an allusion to his victory in the games and fits with Nero's insistence upon a celebration in Rome when he returned from Greece. The most prominent image of all three cities is that of a ship, or, more properly, a galley. This symbol appears nowhere on Roman coinage after 66.<sup>24</sup> The legend ADVENTVS AVGVSTI appears under the ship in the issue from Patras, adding clarity to the symbolism; the coin was a celebration of the emperor's arrival in Greece. There was thus a fairly consistent program for celebrating Nero's tour in Greek provincial coinage.

An inscription recording Nero's speech, given at Corinth and probably written by Nero himself, was found in Boeotia. The inscription is in Greek, implying that Nero added the extra diplomatic touch of speaking to the Greeks in their language to emphasize the ties between Greece and Rome:

An unexpected gift, Hellenes--though indeed there is nothing which cannot be hoped for from my munificence--I grant to you, so great that you would not have

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<sup>21</sup> Power (2010: 156) discusses these coins as an especially effective distillation of Nero's intent when traveling as a citharode through Greece: "These coins neatly condense the expansive ideological underpinnings of Nero's citharodizing in Greece; his victorious *kitharoidia* brings with it an Apollonian mandate to restore a 'foundational' order and prosperity to the liberated cities of Imperial Greece, in particular to the refounded city of Nicopolis itself."

<sup>22</sup> See *RPC* 1275 (Patras).

<sup>23</sup> *RPC* 1370-1374; see Burnett (1984) and Levy (1985), who provide convincing arguments for why these coins should be attributed to Nicopolis instead of Apollonia.

<sup>24</sup> *RPC* 1369 (Nicopolis), 1203-1204 (Corinth; 1204 features Nero with a radiate crown), and 1264, 1265, and 1271 (Patras).

dared to ask for it. All you Hellenes who inhabit Achaëa and what has up to now been called the Peloponnese, receive freedom and exemption from tribute, which you did not all enjoy even in the period of your good fortune; for you were subject either to others or each other. Would that I had been able to provide this gift when Greece was flourishing, so that more people might have enjoyed my favor; for that I blame the passage of time for having reduced in advance the magnitude of my favor. And now I do you a service not through pity but through goodwill, and I give thanks to your gods, of whose care for me I have had proof on land and sea, for enabling me to confer so great a benefit. For other rulers have freed cities, [but only Nero] a province.<sup>25</sup>

This proclamation confirms Nero's philhellenic tendencies, particularly in the regret that he had not been able to grant this gift "while Greece was flourishing." In this detail, Nero seems to be looking back nostalgically at Greece at its cultural height.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that he alludes to what he sees as the future of his program in the eastern provinces, a combination of Roman power and Greek culture. His specification that he frees Greece "not through pity but through goodwill" reflects an effort to forge stronger ties with the province, which may have been the overall point of his "singing tour." In the language of this speech, Nero casts himself in the role of a benevolent Hellenistic king conferring a gift upon a city under his protection.<sup>27</sup> The unexpected nature of this presentation of liberty, however, sets Nero apart, since there are few attestations of spontaneous gifts by Hellenistic kings.<sup>28</sup>

The effect of Nero's gesture is marked in the Greek authors, even those who wrote the most disapproving accounts of his reign. Plutarch, for instance, refers to Nero's crimes throughout his works but shows a more moderate view of Nero's character in the essay "God's

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<sup>25</sup> *ILS* 8794, trans. Millar (1977: 430).

<sup>26</sup> This sense of nostalgia for Greece's better days is a theme in the works of Greek authors of the Roman Imperial era, particularly the ancient novel. See Whitmarsh and Bartsch (2008).

<sup>27</sup> See Mratschek (2013: 55) on how the language of this speech "conformed to the conventions and established code of Hellenistic rulers."

<sup>28</sup> Bringmann (1993: 14-15) has only found six examples of spontaneous benefactions in inscriptions from the Hellenistic period.

Slowness to Punish.”<sup>29</sup> He describes the reincarnation of the soul of Nero as the gods decide not to condemn him to life as a viper (Plut. *Mor.* 567F):

φῶς ἔφασκεν ἐξαίφνης διαλάμπαι μέγα, καὶ φωνὴν ἐκ τοῦ φωτὸς γενέσθαι προστάττουσαν εἰς ἄλλο γένος ἡμερώτερον μεταβαλεῖν, ὀδικόν τι μηχανησαμένους περὶ ἔλη καὶ λίμνας ζῶον: ὧν μὲν γὰρ ἠδίκησε δεδωκέναι δίκας: ὀφείλεσθαι δέ τι καὶ χρηστὸν αὐτῷ παρὰ θεῶν, ὅτι τῶν ὑπηκόων τὸ βέλτιστον καὶ θεοφιλέστατον γένος ἠλευθέρωσε, τὴν Ἑλλάδα.

...he said that a light suddenly shone forth, and from the light came a voice commanding that [Nero] should transform into another, tamer creature, some musical animal that makes its home around marshes and ponds; for he had paid the penalty for the things he had done wrong, but the gods owed him mercy, because he set Greece free, the best and most divinely favored of his subjects.

This anecdote beautifully reflects an important component of the Greek attitude towards Nero.

Plutarch was an upper-class Greek with very strong Roman connections, but even these cannot interfere with an affection for the singing emperor. In the afterlife, Nero is transformed into a lesser creature, but he is still allowed to pursue his favorite hobby of singing for the masses.

Overall, Plutarch seems to consider Nero a weak and corrupted man, but with an underlying good nature.<sup>30</sup> Nero’s recognition of the virtue of the Greeks serves as the ultimate redeeming factor as he uses his power for the best possible purpose.

Pausanias criticizes Nero for taking works of Greek art back to Rome, but also remarks (Paus. 7.17.3):

ἀπιδόντι οὖν ἐς τοῦτό μοι τοῦ Νέρωνος τὸ ἔργον ὀρθότατα εἰρηκέναι Πλάτων ἐφαίνετο ὁ Ἀρίστωνος, ὅποσα ἀδικήματα μεγέθει καὶ τολμήματί ἐστιν ὑπερηκτότα, οὐ τῶν ἐπιτυχόντων εἶναι ταῦτα ἀνθρώπων, ψυχῆς δὲ γενναίας ὑπὸ ἀτόπου παιδείας διεφθαρμένης.

When I beheld this deed of Nero’s, Plato, the son of Ariston, seemed to have spoken very truly when he said that so many unjust deeds, outstanding in

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<sup>29</sup> Alcock (1994: 106-107).

<sup>30</sup> See Champlin (2003a: 25-26).

greatness and daring, are committed not by the men who happen upon them, but by a noble soul corrupted by an unnatural education.

As Greeks, beneficiaries of Nero's good will, Pausanias and Plutarch can attribute his bad behavior to chance; giving freedom to Greece is the indication of Nero's potential.<sup>31</sup> Even Philostratus, who criticizes Nero's singing pursuits throughout the *Life of Apollonius*, admits that, Νέρων ἐλευθέραν ἀφῆκε τὴν Ἑλλάδα σωφρονέστερόν τι ἑαυτοῦ γνούς, "Nero set Greece free, knowing something more wise than himself." (Philostr. *VA* 5.41). These attestations demonstrate that even the worst of emperors can be redeemed by his consideration for the Greeks.

Nero's plan to build a canal cutting across the Isthmus of Corinth also elicited a range of response, positive and negative. The canal, a massive project, was seen as the action of a madman and a tyrant, just as the *Domus Aurea* was.<sup>32</sup> Cassius Dio refers to blood spurting from the ground when Nero started the project (Cass. Dio 63.16). Other authors present the construction of the canal in a different light. Suetonius, for instance, places the building of the canal among Nero's "good" building projects (Suet. *Ner.* 19). Philostratus attributes Nero's motivation for building the canal to his tyrannical tendencies, and compares the deed to bridges built by Greece's enemies Darius and Xerxes (Philostr. *Ner.* 2). Like many critics of the Greek Tour, he links Nero's megalomania to the canal project, αἱ γὰρ τύραννοι φύσεις μεθύουσι μὲν, διψῶσι δὲ πη καὶ ἀκοῦσαι τοῦτο φθέγμα, "For tyrannical natures are drunk, but somehow thirst to hear this sound [i.e. praise]" (Philostr. *Ner.* 2). At the same time as he reprimands Nero,

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<sup>31</sup> Whitmarsh (1999) provides an analysis of Philostratus' *Nero* in connection with the impact of Nero's visit to Greece on Greek identity.

<sup>32</sup> See Alcock (1994: 102-103) and Whitmarsh (1999: 150).

Philostratus has his interlocutor Musonius in *Nero* assert that such a project would be a boon to trade in the region (Philostr. *Ner.* 1):

τὰς γὰρ περιβολὰς τῆς Πελοποννήσου τὰς ὑπὲρ Μαλέαν ζυγήρει τοῖς  
θαλαττουμένοις ἔικοσι σταδίων τοῦ Ἴσθμοῦ ρήγματι. τοῦτο δ' ἂν καὶ τὰς  
ἐμπορίας ὤνησε καὶ τὰς ἐπὶ θαλάττῃ πόλεις καὶ τὰς ἐν τῇ μεσογείᾳ· καὶ γὰρ δὴ  
κάκειναις ἀποχρῶν ὁ οἶκος καρπός, ἦν τὰ ἐπιθαλάττια εὖ πρᾶττη.

By breaking through two and a half miles of the Isthmus [Nero] proposed to save seafarers the voyage round the Peloponnese past Cape Malea. This would have benefitted not only commerce but also coastal and inland cities; for the inland cities find their home produce sufficient for their needs when the seaboard prospers.<sup>33</sup>

The benefits of a canal were significant, and the creation of a modern canal in the same location demonstrates the potential of Nero's undertaking. In fact, those constructing the modern canal found the well-executed remains of Nero's canal, which they estimated to have been about one-fifth completed.<sup>34</sup> In addition to declaring freedom for Greece, Nero attempted to improve the economy of the province with this ambitious project.

The proclamation of Greek freedom and the construction of the canal do not excuse one of the most prevalent charges against Nero during the Greek Tour, namely that he forced audiences to listen to him singing. Recent analyses of Nero's performances, however, lead to a modified picture of the spectators, which is informed by the different motivations of the *plebs* and the upper classes of Rome. In the same section where Tacitus describes spies noting the appropriate or inappropriate reactions of the upper classes at the *Neronia*, he admits that the *plebs* showed genuine admiration for Nero's singing, but *per incuriam publici flagitii*, "Through a lack of concern for public shame" (Tac. *Ann.* 16.4).<sup>35</sup> Pliny the Younger accuses the people of

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<sup>33</sup> Trans. Macleod (1967).

<sup>34</sup> Alcock (1994: 102).

<sup>35</sup> See Power (2010: 92-93).

Rome of encouraging the emperor's singing with their applause (Plin. *Paneg.* 46.4), suggesting that they genuinely enjoyed Nero's singing.<sup>36</sup> Shadi Bartsch proposes that while the *plebs* appreciated Nero's public appearances in the theater, the upper classes, who found themselves under added scrutiny from the stage, were less enthusiastic.<sup>37</sup> It is likely that this difference in the attitudes of the classes prevailed in Greece, especially considering the rumor that Nero took Rome's top men with him to kill them. Nero's cultivation of the *plebs* and displeasure with the senatorial classes became apparent in various ways toward the end of his reign. It is important to note that the senatorial classes would be those who wrote Nero's history.

Timothy Power has analyzed Nero's choice to perform in Greece as a citharode, a glamorous and highly trained type of musician.<sup>38</sup> He suggests that while the prestige of these musicians captivated Nero, the emperor chose to tour Greece as a citharode because of the legendary way *kithairodia* was meant to mobilize the population of a city.<sup>39</sup> Citharodes were also considered figures that promoted social harmony, an appropriate intention if Nero was indeed trying to strengthen ties between Rome and Greece.<sup>40</sup> Power thus interprets Nero's efforts as an attempt to restore prosperity to Greece.<sup>41</sup> This theory lines up with several other proposed reasons for Nero's Tour. C.E. Manning suggests that Nero performed in the Greek festivals because the largest possible number of people would see him.<sup>42</sup> Susan Alcock makes

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<sup>36</sup> Bartsch (1994: 31-32).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* See also Manning (1975: 169-170) on Nero's cultivation of the *plebs*.

<sup>38</sup> In fact, Power (2010: 18) believes that he gravitated towards this type of performance because it was prestigious and conspicuously lucrative.

<sup>39</sup> Power (2010: 43).

<sup>40</sup> Power (2010: 149).

<sup>41</sup> Power (2010: 156).

<sup>42</sup> Manning (1975: 167).

the case that Nero wanted to celebrate and strengthen ties between Rome and the Hellenistic world by declaring the freedom of the Greeks at Corinth, a city re-founded by the Romans.<sup>43</sup>

Nero's philhellenic enthusiasm, which led to the introduction of Greek-style festivals and gymnasia in Rome, was not looked upon favorably by posterity. As has been observed, Nero neglected to ensure the favor of the soldiers, a mistake that undoubtedly contributed to his subsequent fall.<sup>44</sup> We now see him differently from Hadrian, whose later philhellenism became a mark of intelligence because he also made an effort to gain the favor of the military. Nero's cultivation of stronger ties with Greece was considered to be a distraction, a lack of commitment to the office of *princeps*. This impression has clouded the true nature and intention of the Greek Tour and, by extension, Nero's policy in the east.

### **Nero's Alexandria Connection**

Nero's possible plan to extend the Greek Tour to Alexandria, an important center of the Hellenistic world, has been little discussed. Throughout his life, Nero had displayed a fascination with Egyptian culture as well as Greek culture, and it is thus no surprise that his plans to strengthen the connection between Rome and the Hellenistic world included Alexandria. His decision to appear as a citharode would have been well accepted by Alexandrians, whose love of citharode players was notorious. Numismatic evidence shows the promotion of the Greek Tour in Alexandria, as well as the possibility of Nero's ceremonial entrance into the city.

Nero had an intellectual and personal interest in Egypt, especially Alexandria. He commissioned an expedition to find the source of the Nile, according to *Natural Questions* (Sen. *QNat.* 6.8.3). While performing in Naples, the emperor was impressed by a group of

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<sup>43</sup> Alcock (1994).

<sup>44</sup> Manning (1975: 173)

Alexandrians, who applauded him in *modulatis laudationibus*, or rhythmic cheers, and subsequently trained a cadre of Roman knights to lead applause in this style at his performances (Suet. *Ner.* 20). Egypt is the only province outside of Italy other than Greece that Nero had planned to visit, but Suetonius and Tacitus explain that a bad omen deterred Nero from his visit (Suet. *Ner.* 19; Tac. *Ann.* 15.36). His plans were known so long in advance that baths had been built for Nero in Alexandria in preparation for his visit (Cass. Dio 62.18). Even at the end of his life, Egypt exerted a powerful pull on Nero. Suetonius tells us that Nero, during his last days, considered begging for the prefecture of Egypt if he was forced to step down as emperor (Suet. *Ner.* 47).<sup>45</sup> Cassius Dio adds the detail that Nero had formed plans to flee to Alexandria, where he intended to make his living as a professional musician (Cass. Dio 63.27). Cassius Dio's rumor is probably false, but I will return to Suetonius' claim at the end of this chapter.

Significant members of Nero's coterie during his childhood had connections to Egypt, in particular Alexandria. Chaeremon, one of his first tutors, had been an official at the Museum at Alexandria. As a young man, Seneca traveled through Egypt with his uncle, the prefect of Egypt, and later went on to author treatises on the famous landmarks and general geography of Egypt.<sup>46</sup>

Nero's shrewd choice of prefects highlights his understanding of the importance of Egypt as a province. An equestrian prefect chosen by the emperor rather than a governor selected by the Senate managed Egypt, unlike other provinces. The responsibilities of the prefect were much broader than those of a provincial governor, and included the administration of judicial matters,

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<sup>45</sup> Suetonius also describes a funeral in which Nero's Egyptian nurses bury him in an Egyptian porphyry sarcophagus (Suet. *Ner.* 55).

<sup>46</sup> Noeske (2004: 241) and Montevicchi (1975: 53). These treatises are no longer extant.

supervision of the grain supply, and command of the military, among other duties.<sup>47</sup> The Egyptian prefect also controlled the imagery on the coinage struck in Alexandria.<sup>48</sup> As we will see, the coinage of this mint bore strongly Neronian messages.

The first prefect chosen by Nero was Tiberius Claudius Balbillus of Egypt. Claudius Balbillus, who had originally been appointed by Claudius, was re-selected to continue this role by Nero. Born in Ephesus or Alexandria, an honorary inscription dedicated to him (and Nero, for appointing him) thanked him for visiting their village near the pyramids and engaging in worship of the sun god with the people there.<sup>49</sup> His understanding of Egypt's citizens is reflected in his choice of the image of the Agathodaemon on the reverse of both bronze and billon (i.e. debased silver alloy) coinage to convey a sense of connection between the Romans and the Egyptians (Figure 4.2).<sup>50</sup> Cnaeus Caecina Tuscus, who, according to Suetonius, was the son of Nero's nurse, was prefect from 62-64 (Suet. *Ner.* 35.5). He had experience as a judge in Alexandria and minted Egypt-friendly coin types with such images as Zeus Serapis and the personification of the Nile.<sup>51</sup>

Tiberius Julius Alexander, appointed by Nero in 65 C.E., was outstanding both in his qualifications as a military leader and in the length of time he served in the office. He remained prefect through the chaotic Year of Four Emperors as well as during the reign of Vespasian. Coins minted during his prefecture depict a personification of Alexandria on the reverse, an

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<sup>47</sup> Brunt (1975).

<sup>48</sup> Christensen (1988: 106).

<sup>49</sup> *OGIS* 666.

<sup>50</sup> *RPC* 5210. Montevecchi (1975: 50) tells us that the Agathodaemon was an image referring to the hope that Nero would usher in a new era of prosperity.

<sup>51</sup> Noeske (2004: 240); Christensen (1988: 106). *RPC* 5274 and 5273. Suetonius claims that Nero dismissed him because he bathed in the baths intended for Nero's visit (*Ner.* 35.5).

image that he adapts to fit the ruling emperor. The personification of Alexandria we find in the reign of Nero has a Greek flavor, but acknowledges the typical Egyptian imagery for the city. The bust of Alexandria is featured in profile, draped in a military cloak and wearing a characteristic elephant helmet (Figure 4.3).<sup>52</sup> This reverse fits in with other the imagery on Alexandrian coinage throughout Nero's reign, which featured other Egyptian deities and, later, Greek gods. The series of coins that Julius Alexander struck during the Greek Tour promoted Nero's visits to the different festivals throughout Greece. The existence of these coins lends support to the idea that Nero intended to continue his Greek Tour through Alexandria and suggests something more politically calculated and strategic than the whim of an emperor who wanted to perform in public. Nero's careful cultivation of the political stability of Alexandria, coupled with the coins advertising the Greek Tour, suggests an overarching strategy to solidify Roman interests in the eastern empire.

Nero's choice of prefects reflects his marked concern for the welfare and governance of Egypt. Egypt was an important province, but as we have seen, it exerted a particular fascination for Nero. Alexandria's reputation as a hotbed of fandom for *kitharoidia* no doubt enhanced its appeal for Nero. In his *Discourse on Alexandria*, Dio Chrysostom chastises the Alexandrians for being as obsessed with *kitharoidia* as Nero (Dio Chrys. *Or.* 32.60).<sup>53</sup> The emperor had been captivated by the Alexandrian style of applause; he no doubt hoped to find people with similar tastes to his on the stages in Alexandria. The people in that city would certainly have appreciated the appearance of an emperor-citharode. Nero saw a visit to Alexandria as an opportunity to combine Roman and Greek interests.

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<sup>52</sup> RPC 5289.

<sup>53</sup> Dio Chrysostom discusses the Alexandrian fascination with citharodes at length at 32.59-67. See also Power (2010: 59).

## The Alexandrian Perspective

Greek coins allude to Nero's tour with depictions of Apollo, victory, and arrival by ship, but they do not represent the only numismatic evidence for it. Coins minted in Alexandria also feature references to the festivals in which Nero participated but they have received little scholarly attention. This is surprising since they are a departure from both previous and subsequent reverse images on Alexandrian coinage. Before Tiberius Julius Alexander became prefect in 65, coins in Alexandria had tended to feature Egyptian symbols and deities, members of the imperial family, or personifications of Roman power.

Some of the changes in imagery in Alexandria coins may be attributable to the prefect in power. Claudius Balbillus, a staunch supporter of Agrippina, included her prominently on the coinage, and employed the image of the Agathodaemon, a symbol of connection between Rome and Egypt.<sup>54</sup> The Agathodaemon, represented by a snake, was a symbol of rebirth and implied that Nero's ascent to the principate would usher in a peaceful and prosperous era (Figure 4.2). This uniquely Egyptian symbol highlighted the benefits of the new ruler in this wealthy and powerful province. Caecina Tuscus had charge of Alexandrian coinage just after its debasement, in the regnal years 9 and 10.<sup>55</sup> Like Balbillus, he favored Egyptian imagery, including a personification of the Nile and a bust of Serapis, and also celebrated the marriage of Nero to Poppaea by featuring the new empress on the coinage.<sup>56</sup>

Julius Alexander deviates from these programs, emphasizing the connection between Rome and Alexandria with two prominent images: the personification of Alexandria and a hawk

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<sup>54</sup> Noeske (2004: 240). *RPC* 5210 and 5212.

<sup>55</sup> Alexandrian coinage includes regnal years, that is, a count of years since a new emperor ascended to power. Thus, regnal years 9 and 10 represent the years 63 and 64 C.E., give or take a few months.

<sup>56</sup> *RPC* 5275.

thought to represent the Egyptian god Horus (Figures 4.3 and 4.4).<sup>57</sup> In 67 CE, the Alexandrian mint under Julius Alexander's control issues a new series of coins, featuring Nero's Greek Tour with depictions of the Greek gods (Figures 4.5-4.10) and a ship (Figure 4.11).<sup>58</sup> He chose the imagery on the Olympian tetradrachms to reflect Alexandria's importance in Nero's reign. This fact highlights the importance of the Greek Tour in Nero's overall program of a stronger connection between Rome and the Hellenistic world.

The *sebastophoros* coin (Figure 4.11) provides the most immediate connection to the Greek coinage. This coin, from regnal year 13 (67 CE), features Nero radiate on the obverse and a ship on the reverse with dolphins in the exergue. The reverse bears the legend ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΦΟΡΟΣ, roughly translated "Caesar-carrier," paralleling the ADVENTVS AVGVSTI coins struck in Greece. The ship in question is often identified as a galley, and understandably so since one would expect the emperor to travel on a galley during official journeys. The similar Greek coinage features a galley, easily identifiable from its banks of oars.<sup>59</sup> The galley's ubiquity on coinage throughout Greece, and now in Alexandria, implies that the ship was an official symbol for this journey, which mint officials from Corinth, Nicopolis, and Patras adopted.<sup>60</sup> The lack of oars on the Alexandrian ship, however, designates it as a freighter, a vessel used for carrying grain and other supplies. In light of subsequent ceremonial journeys to and from Alexandria on a galley by Vespasian and several members of the Antonine dynasty, it

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<sup>57</sup> *RPC* 5289 and 5284. Emmett (2001: xv).

<sup>58</sup> *RPC* 5312-5317; 5306.

<sup>59</sup> *RPC* 1272, 1274, 1368, 1369.

<sup>60</sup> See Noreña (2011: 270), "The honorific system as a whole was driven by local initiative and local agency, but its characteristic expressions were largely shaped by the changing concerns of the central state."

seems that this coin alludes to a particular aspect of the emperor's arrival in Alexandria.<sup>61</sup> He travels on the same vessel that carries the grain so essential to Rome's survival, thus foregrounding Egypt's importance.<sup>62</sup>

The *sebastophoros* coin is perhaps the most compelling material evidence that Nero intended to visit Alexandria, a plan that was likely cut short by the uprisings of Vindex.<sup>63</sup> More importantly, it shows an Alexandrian adaptation of a symbol used for Nero's trip on Greek coinage. The presence of a ship on coinage evokes Nero's tour of Greece, but the type of ship and the legend ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΦΟΡΟΣ appeals to an Alexandrian cult ritual. The coin is thus prominent in its display of syncretism, combining Greek and Egyptian interests (the freighter) under the aegis of Rome (with Nero on the obverse). Whether or not this expresses Nero's immediate intention to visit Alexandria, it is a strong indication of his continuing diplomatic approach to the east.

The coinage that featured Greek gods is representative of Nero's tour of Greece. While references to Nero's Greek Tour on the western coinage are lacking, prefect Julius Alexander highlights Nero's journey with seven reverses on coins that were issued by more than one *officina*, and over two years (regnal years 13 and 14).<sup>64</sup> The coins symbolize different stops on Nero's tour of Greece at the Pythian, Olympian, Nemean, Actian, Isthmean, and Heraian games (Figures 4.5-4.10). Hoard studies demonstrate that these issues were relatively modest when compared with the staggering output of the Alexandrian mints during this period.<sup>65</sup> Still, their

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<sup>61</sup> Levy (1982-3: 110).

<sup>62</sup> Levy (1982-3:116).

<sup>63</sup> Pincock (1995: 271).

<sup>64</sup> Christensen (1988: 92).

<sup>65</sup> Christensen (1988: 61ff.)

numbers are significant enough that they should have been relatively common in the hands of the Alexandrians.

The tetradrachms clearly represent the gods with their attributes (Poseidon with his trident, Apollo with his arrows, etc.). They mark the association with each festival on the legend of each coin, which identifies the specific incarnation of the god, e.g. Pythian Apollo, Isthmian Poseidon, and Olympian Zeus. Coupled with the obverse of the radiate emperor, the choice of images highlights not only Nero's presence but also his participation in the games of those gods. Even if Nero had intended to visit Egypt after his Greek tour, the *sebastophoros* coin, not the Greek gods, would be the more logical numismatic acknowledgment of his arrival. The series of gods implies an anticipation of Nero's visit, an appreciation of his consideration for the Greeks, and an approval of his tour of Achaëa. His activities in Greece are promoted and glorified for the Alexandrian audience, implying that Nero's appearance at each Greek festival has a special relevance in Egypt. The only real hint to this, aside from a general appreciation of any attention to the cause of the Greeks, is the enthusiastic Alexandrian applause described by Suetonius and Dio in their descriptions of Nero's reign. It is possible that Nero's singing, or the approval of Nero's singing, had significant diplomatic implications in Alexandria. His potential performance there was perhaps intended to cater to the famous Alexandrian enthusiasm for citharodes.

The depiction of the Olympian gods on the Alexandrian coinage highlights a divide between the official imagery used in the east and west. Western coinage refers to coins minted in Rome itself and at the imperial mint at Lugdunum. Nero's hobby of performance aside, the Greek Tour was clearly more glorious in Alexandria than it was in Rome, considering that some of the Alexandrian coins celebrating it were likely minted after Nero's sudden return to Rome in 67. Conversely, the treaty with Tiridates, his reception in Rome, and the closing of the temple of

Janus is found nowhere in Alexandrian coinage, when the Janus type is one of the largest western issues of Nero's reign (Figure 4.12). The only possible reference to Nero's musical pursuits at all on coins minted in the west is the Apollo Citharoedus coin, and it is unlikely that it refers to the emperor singing. In fact, it becomes a telling example of how historians used the material evidence left by Nero for their agenda.

The Apollo Citharoedus coin is one of the few coins mentioned in a written source (figure 4.13).<sup>66</sup> The obverse of the coin features a radiate portrait of Nero, while the reverse depicts Apollo Citharoedus playing a cithara and wearing the *skeue* of a citharode. Suetonius describes it as part of Nero's celebrations after his Greek Tour. *sacras coronas in cubiculis circum lectos posuit, item statuas suas citharoedico habitu, qua nota etiam nummum percussit.* "He placed sacred victory crowns in his bedroom around his couches, as well as statues representing him in the garb of a citharode, a legend with which he even struck a coin" (Suet. *Ner.* 25.2). Suetonius tells us that Nero minted this coin in honor of his triumph upon his return from Greece in 67 CE, but the titles on the legend show the inaccuracy of this statement. Nero took the *praenomen* of *imperator* in 66, before his tour of Greece, and it appears in his titles in Roman coinage thereafter. The *Apollo Citharoedus* dupondius, with the titles NERO CLAUDIVS CAESAR AVG GERMANIC on the obverse, and PONTIF MAX TR POT IMP PP on the reverse, lacks *imperator* as a *praenomen*, and emphasizes the title of *Pontifex Maximus*. The coin is therefore a commemoration of Nero's participation in that office and was struck between 62 and the summer of 66 CE.<sup>67</sup> Still, Suetonius' falsehood (or misunderstanding) is

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<sup>66</sup> *RIC* 1(2) *Ner.* 211. Crawford (1983: 52) comments on how rare it is for coinage to be mentioned in a text.

<sup>67</sup> Sutherland (1951: 170) believes that this coin was struck as a celebration of the beneficial relationship between the *princeps* as *pontifex maximus* and the gods, but an "irresponsible attempt to substitute the Neronian for the Augustan symbolism of the First Citizen." Striking this image on coinage was only

relevant to our understanding of the reception of the Greek Tour, as he uses a coin struck to commemorate an entirely different occasion as evidence of Nero's eccentricity. He assumes that the Roman emperor personally determined coin types and interprets the coin as a message from Nero himself for the citizens of the Roman Empire.<sup>68</sup> Suetonius refashions Nero's public image to fit a narrative that is largely the product of Flavian and Antonine authors. The Apollo Citharoedus coin, which had nothing to do with the Greek Tour, becomes an indication of Nero's obsession with singing.

Coinage thus shows us one of the potential sources of a disconnect between Nero's reception in Rome and his reception in Greece and Egypt. In Alexandria and Greece, Nero's message is directed to share his cultural enthusiasms. His message is systematic, promoting a fusion of Greek and Roman interests throughout the empire. His proclamation of Greek freedom, his performance at Greek festivals, and the set of Alexandrian reverses celebrating Greek festivals reflect an approach that highlights Rome's appropriation of Greek art and culture. Nero's "triumphal" return to Rome combined a thoroughly Roman celebration with a Greek festival of homecoming for victorious citharodes.<sup>69</sup> He thus modified a spectacle familiar to the Romans to demonstrate the diplomatic efforts of his tour. In this way, Nero sought to strengthen Rome's relationship with Greece and Alexandria, the center of Hellenic culture. As demonstrated by the example of the *Apollo Citharoedus* coin, this program was much less successful in Rome. It did, however, have lasting positive effect in the eastern provinces.

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irresponsible in hindsight, however, when the Flavians had succeeded in blackening Nero's reputation and the imagery that went with it. At the time, it was merely a revival of imagery used by Augustus.

<sup>68</sup> MacDowall (1979: 41) calls it "thoroughly Roman in style and undoubtedly circulated in the neighborhood of Rome."

<sup>69</sup> This celebration was most likely not meant to be an official triumph. See (Champlin 2003a: 229-234) for a full discussion of how this "triumph of an artist" resembled a Greek celebration for a victor in the games.

## Nero's Legacy in the East

Nero holds the unlikely distinction as the only Roman emperor who “returned” after his death, highlighting the differences between his reception in the eastern and western empire.

Suetonius recounts this phenomenon in the final paragraph of his biography of Nero (Suet. *Ner.* 57):

*obiit tricensimo et secundo aetatis anno, die quo quondam Octaviam interemerat, tantumque gaudium publice praebeuit, ut plebs pilleata tota urbe discurreret. et tamen non defuerunt qui per longum tempus vernis aestivisque floribus tumulum eius ornarent ac modo imagines praetextatas in rostris proferrent, modo edicta quasi viventis et brevi magno inimicorum malo reversuri. quin etiam Vologaesus Parthorum rex missis ad senatum legatis de instauranda societate hoc etiam magno opere oravit, ut Neronis memoria coleretur. denique cum post viginti annos adulescente me exstitisset condicionis incertae qui se Neronem esse iactaret, tam favorabile nomen eius apud Parthos fuit, ut vehementer adiutus et vix redditus sit.*

He died at the age of thirty-two, on the same day as he had killed Octavia, and [his death] provided such joy publicly that the common people ran about the whole city wearing caps of liberty. Nevertheless, there were people who for a long time decorated his tomb with spring and summer flowers, and who sometimes displayed his statues, dressed in a toga, on the *rostra*, and sometimes his edicts, as though he were still alive, and would return with great evil for his enemies. Even Vologaesus, king of the Parthians, when he sent ambassadors to the Senate to renew his alliance, begged earnestly that the memory of Nero be honored. In fact, twenty years later, when I was still a young man, someone had emerged from mysterious origins who boasted that that he was Nero, and his name was so popular among the Parthians, that he was aided enthusiastically and surrendered reluctantly.

Suetonius presents two reactions to the news of Nero's death. First, he maintains that the *plebs* celebrated at the news, which is consistent with the negative characterization of Nero presented by most ancient authors. His descriptions of flowers on Nero's tomb, however, show a continued regard for Nero after his death. He cannot have fallen from favor entirely in Rome. Suetonius' account also demonstrates that Nero was viewed positively in the east. The request of Vologaesus on behalf of the deceased emperor implies that Nero's diplomacy had a lasting effect

among the Parthians. Nero's diplomatic solution in Armenia lasted a half-century, in spite of the civil wars and unrest that plagued the Roman Empire just after his death.<sup>70</sup>

Among these descriptions of the reception of Nero's reign, Suetonius describes the rumor that Nero escaped his captors. People displayed Nero's statues and edicts *quasi viventis*, and believed that the emperor would come back and seek revenge. Tacitus corroborates the prevalence of this idea, *vario super exitu eius rumore eoque pluribus vivere eum fingentibus credentibusque*, "With different rumors concerning [Nero's] death, many pretended that he was still alive or believed that he was" (Tac. *Hist.* 2.8). Neither Tacitus nor Suetonius, although harsh critics of Nero, can deny that he had his share of public approval, even in Rome. The emergence of false Neros shows how powerful the memory of Nero was even after his death, particularly in the eastern empire. The prospect of Nero's posthumous return seems to have been popular in the east, but frightening to the Romans, especially in the context of later Flavian propaganda against Nero. In the *Historia*, Tacitus tells us of a "Nero" who originated from Pontus or Italy and recruited soldiers returning from the east until his subsequent capture (Tac. *Hist.* 2.8-9).<sup>71</sup> This false Nero emerged less than a year after the death of the original Nero, demonstrating that the legend of his return began quite early.<sup>72</sup> Ambitious people were eager to take advantage of his name and lingering power in the east. The second record of a false Nero occurred in the reign of Titus, just before the eruption of Vesuvius. Cassius Dio's epitomizer tells us that this "Nero" was a man from Asia named Terentius Maximus, who eventually fled to

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<sup>70</sup> Shotter (2008: 98).

<sup>71</sup> Cassius Dio's epitomizer mentions this false Nero briefly at 64.9.3.

<sup>72</sup> Champlin (2003a: 11).

the Parthians (Cass. Dio 66.19.3). The false Nero Suetonius heard of as a boy is the third such phenomenon, and the latest recorded.

A recently deciphered papyrus from Oxyrhynchus gives additional evidence of Nero's post-mortem popularity. The text features a poem in hexameters that describes the apotheosis of Nero's second wife Poppaea. The empress Poppaea, portrayed as a devious and cunning seductress in Tacitus, is presented as a loving wife who does not want to leave her husband, even in consideration of the divine rewards promised to her: "Having thus spoken, (Aphrodite) led her by the hand; [Poppaea] was downcast and did not / Rejoice in the offered (favour). For she was leaving her husband, (a man) equal / To the gods, and she moaned loudly from her longing" (*POxy.* 5101.23-25).<sup>73</sup> Both characters are not what they have become in the accounts of the Roman historians. Poppaea is not the adulteress who pushed Octavia from the throne, but a beloved queen who is devoted to her husband, and who fully deserves her deified status. Once in her place in the heavens, Poppaea searches for Nero, implying that she has become a protective goddess for the emperor (*POxy.* 5101.74). The text portrays Nero too as a beloved ruler "equal to the gods" (*POxy.* 5101.24). The papyrus in question has been dated to 200 years after Nero's reign, suggesting that the popularity of this poem and its subject matter endured.<sup>74</sup> Poppaea maintains the decadent trappings described by Tacitus; the poem begins with Bacchic imagery, and fragmentary lines describe gold dust, griffins, and lynxes (*POxy.* 5101.1-7). Aphrodite herself leads Poppaea to her place among the gods, no doubt a nod to her famous beauty (*POxy.* 5101.12). She is glorified rather than criticized for her glamor, however. The Bacchic imagery,

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<sup>73</sup> Trans. Schubert (2011: 73).

<sup>74</sup> On the dating of this papyrus, see Schubert (2011: 63-64).

in particular, has an eastern flavor in keeping with Nero's preparation of an Egyptian-style funeral at her untimely death.<sup>75</sup>

Vespasian, Nero's eventual successor, may provide the final clue to the different traditions in the west and east. While there is no question of the systematic destruction of Nero's posthumous reputation by the Flavians in Rome, the appearance of the false Neros and the papyrus text imply a more favorable view of the last Julio-Claudian. It should be remembered that while Vespasian rebelled in the Year of Four Emperors, he fought against Vitellius, not Nero. In fact, there is no reason to think that he was not a loyal general to Nero at the end of his reign. Suetonius implies that there was tension between the two men because Vespasian fell asleep during one of Nero's performances (Suet. *Vesp.* 4.4). Nero's appointment of Vespasian to put down the Jewish revolt, however, signifies that Nero trusted his military acumen (Suet. *Vesp.* 4.5). For all his faults, Nero had a talent for appointing competent military commanders. Vespasian was no exception.

Vespasian had significant support in the eastern empire as a result of his appointment by Nero. A good amount of Vespasian's troops would have been stationed in Alexandria (and, incidentally, paid there) during the revolt in Judaea.<sup>76</sup> He had strong political ties to Egypt, and it was the first province to declare for him when he launched his revolt against Vitellius (Tac. *Hist.* 2.74; Suet. *Vesp.* 7). The Parthians, another people sympathetic to Nero after his death, were the second to declare for Vespasian. That Vespasian kept Julius Alexander as prefect of Egypt demonstrates that he did not feel the need to make any major changes in the current policy in Alexandria. Nero's monetary reforms stayed in place both in the west and the east. It is

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<sup>75</sup> Tacitus describes her funeral in *Annals* 16.6.

<sup>76</sup> Christensen (1988: 103).

possible that Vespasian, having already gained the loyalty of the East under Nero's auspices, had no need to discredit Nero's legacy there.

Vespasian was quick to undo the special status of Greece in 67 C.E., however. Pausanias asserts that Vespasian took this action because the Greeks were not able to keep the peace amidst their newly found freedom (Paus. 7.17.4). While it is tempting to argue that Vespasian took away Greece's freedom as a propagandistic move, his decision was likely a practical one. Skirmishes in Greece would have been unwelcome as Rome began to emerge from civil war. Because of Nero's death and the reversal of Greek freedom, we will never be able to know the full results of this campaign to integrate Greek and Roman culture. We can only see the hints of positive effects in the reactions of Greek writers and a papyrus found in the sands of Egypt.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to ascertain exactly why Nero chose to flee from Rome at the end of his life. In spite of the rebellions in the West, several of the most significant legions as well as the Praetorian Guard were loyal to him *until* they heard the news that he had left Rome.<sup>77</sup> A common thread in the sources is Nero's hope to escape to Alexandria. Suetonius and Cassius Dio, as mentioned above, imply that this is nothing more than a harried and unfulfilled plan conceived in the panic that accompanied Nero's reaction to the rebellions in the west. Plutarch, however, states the rumor that Nero had fled to Egypt as the primary reason for the defection of the Praetorian Guard in the *Life of Galba* (Plut. *Galb.* 2.1). In all three of these sources, the idea of Nero's flight to Egypt is plausible enough to become a common factor in his story. When Nero felt that all else was collapsing, he seemed to feel that he could rely on the loyalty of this province.

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<sup>77</sup> See Shotter (2008: 164) for a complete list of legions loyal to Nero at the time of his flight.

Nero has been criticized for embarking on his Greek Tour at an inopportune time; leaving the center of the Empire in charge of a freedman was not a move calculated to garner the good opinion of the upper classes. The Roman sources gloss over the diplomatic implications of the Greek Tour in favor of the more outrageous idea that Nero was attempting to become a professional singer. The Greek Tour, overall, is portrayed as an expression of megalomania, and the gift of Greek freedom is seen merely as a method to gain applause. The Greek reaction to this declaration of freedom, however, cannot be overlooked; even Greek authors with strong connections to the Roman upper classes look at this edict with approval. It is, in fact, seen as Nero's one redeeming characteristic in many cases. In short, this gesture meant a lot to the Greeks and solidified their approval.

The edict of Greek freedom would not have affected the Greeks in Alexandria, but Julius Alexander apparently thought that coins referring to Nero's participation in the Greek festivals would both flatter Nero and help to boost his public image. The moving nature of Nero's grand gesture to those of Greek descent is palpable in Pausanias and especially Philostratus, who speak of it with admiration decades and centuries removed from the actual event. The approbation of Nero as a result of Greek freedom is unaffected by time. It is, therefore, plausible to assume that the Alexandrian Greeks, removed in space but still closely connected with their heritage, would have felt a similar measure of gratitude towards their emperor. That Nero intended to flee to Alexandria rather than Greece, where he certainly had the love of the people, was probably a strategic choice. First, Egypt was officially a province under the jurisdiction of the emperor and controlled by a knight of the ruling class who had no hope of gaining that office. It was safer to go to an official too low in social status to be a threat, but who could nevertheless gain from his protection of the emperor. Second, Alexandria, unlike Greece, had a strong military presence.

Rather than the improbable idea that Nero hoped to earn his living by singing there, he likely saw it as an opportunity to regain military control of the Roman Empire. As mentioned before, Vespasian still seems to have been loyal to him until it was clear that the rest of the empire was behind Galba; Nero may have counted on Vespasian's legions to back his cause. If Nero was indeed in a panic about the prospect of staying in Rome, the East (perhaps he also considered Armenia in his last plans) may have seemed his best chance of survival.

In a Roman context, Nero's Greek Tour seems like an expensive waste of time, much like the reception of Tiridates, who was invited to Rome to officially assume the crown of Armenia. Suetonius includes this celebration under his description of Nero's spectacles, describing the event as a lavish reception that includes the gilding of the theater of Pompey (Suet. *Ner.* 13). His generosity to the Armenian king is often seen as excessive, especially after the expenses associated with reconstruction after the fire. On the other hand, the continued Parthian regard for Nero cannot be denied, and the magnitude of the diplomatic victory is often passed over, although it does garner much positive commentary from modern scholars. The emergence and support of the false Neros shows an unprecedented popularity with a nation notoriously troublesome to the Romans. Nero's brand of diplomacy may have been flashy, but it certainly made a favorable impression—at least, in the eastern provinces.

The evidence of Nero's activities in the Near East point to an emperor who is committed to both peace and commercial success, and this is the context in which we should view the Greek Tour. While I do not deny that there was an element of megalomania in Nero's participation (and victory) in all of the games, it is clear that, diplomatically, the tour was not without practical purpose or political effect. The continued regard of the Greeks hundreds of years later emphasizes this. In fact, participation in the music festivals would have been a tremendous

opportunity for Nero to be seen by as many of his people as possible; in another context, this might have been considered a clever publicity strategy. The Alexandrian coinage, with its calculated advertisement of Nero's progress around the festivals, allows us to put the Greek tour in the perspective of a comprehensive diplomatic program focused on the eastern provinces.

Unfortunately for Nero's legacy, this aspect was clouded and manipulated by the writers of later dynasties, who had a vested interest in vilifying Nero and his policies. The only image that remains from these efforts is that of Nero, a singing emperor addicted to luxury. Considering the abrupt end to his reign so soon after the Greek Tour, this is not surprising; the positive effects could not become manifest in such a short time, nor with the upheaval that dominated the Roman Empire until the accession of Vespasian. An influential factor in Nero's downfall was undoubtedly the idea that he attempted to change too much, too soon, both politically and culturally. The Greek Tour is an example of both of these aspects, as Nero engaged in the ultimate expression of his love for Greek culture while fostering Roman solidarity with Near East.

Figure 4.1: Map of Nero's Tour of Greece.



**Figure 4.2:** *RPC* 5210; ANS 1944.100.53523.  
Obv. Laureate bust of Nero, r. ΝΕΡ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ ΑΥΤΟ.  
Rev. Agathodaemon, r., upright, with ears of corn and poppies.  
Image by author.



**Figure 4.3:** *RPC* 5289; ANS 1944.100.53525.  
Obv. Radiate bust of Nero, r., with aegis. ΝΕΡ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ.  
Rev. Bust of Alexandria, r., draped, with elephant headdress. ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑ.  
Image by author.



**Figure 4.4:** *RPC 5284; ANS 1944.100.53523.*

Obv. Radiate bust of Nero, r., with aegis. ΝΕΡ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ.

Rev. Hawk, std. l. ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑ.

Image by author.



**Figure 4.5:** *RPC 5313; ANS 1944.100.53563.*

Obv. Radiate bust of Nero, l., with aegis. ΝΕΡΩ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ ΑΥΤΟ.

Rev. Olympian Zeus, r., laur. ΔΙΟΣ ΟΛΥΜΠΙΟΥ.

Image by author.



**Figure 4.6:** *RPC* 5314; *ANS* 1944.100.53566.

Obv. Radiate bust of Nero, l., with aegis. ΝΕΡΩ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ ΑΥΤΟ.

Rev. Nemean Zeus, r., laur. ΝΕΜΕΙΟΣ ΖΕΥΣ.

Image by author.



**Figure 4.7:** *RPC* 5317; *ANS* 0000.999.23861.

Obv. Radiate bust of Nero, l., with aegis. ΝΕΡΩ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ ΑΥΤΟ.

Rev. Actian Apollo, r., with bow and arrows on l. and star on r. ΑΚΤΙΟΣ ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝ.

Image by author.



**Figure 4.8:** *RPC 5312; ANS 1944.100.53573.*

Obv. Radiate bust of Nero, l., with aegis. ΝΕΡΩ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ ΑΥΤΟ.  
Rev. Pythian Apollo, r., draped, with arrows in quiver on l. and star on r. ΠΥΘΙΟΣ  
ΑΠΩΛΛΩΝ.  
Image by author.



**Figure 4.9:** *RPC 5315; ANS 0000.999.23864.*

Obv. Radiate bust of Nero, l., with aegis. ΝΕΡΩ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ ΑΥΤΟ.  
Rev. Hera Argeia, r., veiled, with star on r. ΗΡΑ ΑΡΓΕΙΑ.  
Image by author.



**Figure 4.10:** *RPC 5316; ANS 1944.100.53573.*

Obv. Radiate bust of Nero, l., with aegis. ΝΕΡΩ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ ΑΥΤΟ.  
Rev. Isthmian Poseidon, r., with trident on l. and star on r. ΠΟΣΕΙΔΩΝ ΙΣΘΜΙΟΣ.  
Image by author.



**Figure 4.11:** *RPC 5306; ANS 0000.999.23850.*

Obv. Radiate bust of Nero, l., with aegis. ΝΕΡΩ ΚΛΑΥ ΚΑΙΣ ΣΕΒ ΓΕΡ ΑΥΤΟ.  
Rev. Freighter, r., with dolphins in exergue. ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΦΟΡΟΣ.  
Image by author.



**Figure 4.12:** *RIC I (2) Ner. 265; ANS 1957.172.1544.*

Obv. Head of Nero, r., laureate. NERO CLAUD CAESAR AUG GER PM TR P IMP PP  
Rev. Temple of Janus, doors garlanded, with window on l. side. PACE PR TERRA MARIQ  
PARTA IANUM CLUSIT.

Image courtesy of American Numismatic Society.



**Figure 4.13:** *RIC I (2) Ner. 211; ANS 1967.153.119*

Obv. Head of Nero, r., radiate. NERO CLAUDIUS CAESAR AUG GERMANIC  
Rev. Apollo Citharoedus, standing r., holding lyre, wearing a cloak. PONTIF MAX TR POT  
IMP PP SC.

Image courtesy of the American Numismatic Society.



## Chapter 5: *qualis artifex pereo*

In the 1951 film *Quo Vadis*, a young Peter Ustinov plays Nero. His performance would come to embody this emperor in the twentieth century for American audiences. Nero as a modern villain, however, was a familiar figure, especially because of the popularity of the novel *Quo Vadis?* on which the film was based.<sup>1</sup> Written in 1895 by Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz, who won a Nobel Prize for the work, and quickly translated into several languages, *Quo Vadis?* had already been adapted for stage and film by the time Ustinov took on the role of Nero.<sup>2</sup> In the story, a pagan man meets a virtuous Christian girl, and amid the oppression of the Christians by the villainous emperor Nero, the two fall in love. In the end, the man converts, and good prevails thanks to Christian virtue. Nero, however, steals the show in the cinematic *Quo Vadis*. Ever the appealing villain, he adds spectacle to the morality tale. Ustinov's portrayal of Nero, with his drawling, posh British accent, contributes an element of the outrageous to the character. The first scene that features the emperor in *Quo Vadis* represents a culmination of the myth of Nero as villain. Nero sprawls on a couch, clad in sumptuous-looking purple material, and surrounded by attendants. Slaves simultaneously style his hair, give him a pedicure, and accompany his singing on the lyre. Attentive advisors sit near the couch listening to Nero's composition; Petronius will later reveal that they have had to listen to him singing the same song all day.

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<sup>1</sup> Audiences might also have been familiar with Nero as the villain of Cecil B. DeMille's 1932 film *The Sign of the Cross*, which was based on a play of the same name by Wilson Barrett (Wyke 1997: 131).

<sup>2</sup> On the history and reception of *Quo Vadis?*, both as a novel and in its cinematic adaptations in America and Italy, see Wyke, who analyzes the political implications of the 1913 version of Enrico Guazzoni and the 1951 version of Mervyn LeRoy (1997: 112-131; 138-146). More recently, Scodel & Bettenworth have explored the novel *Quo Vadis?*, as well as five different adaptations of the novel in both film and television in America and Italy (2009).

This scene highlights three trademark features of the villain Nero. He is dependent on advisers to a childlike extent, but volatile if crossed in any way by these same advisers. As Nero composes his song, he stumbles over the lyrics and says “omnivorous” where he means “omnipotent.” He asks the men around him whether they approve of “omnipotent.” Seneca, who in *Quo Vadis* is a simple yes-man, praises the genius of Nero’s lyrics. Nero retorts that Seneca’s comment lacks conviction and turns to Petronius. The latter disagrees with Seneca and calls the lyric “feeble” and “puerile.” This verdict enrages Nero until Petronius adds that he should have kept “omnivorous,” calmly justifying his opinion by saying, “A genius, divinity, should hold to his first thoughts on any subject.” Nero giggles at the witty jest, flattered. This small interaction displays an emperor who surrounds himself with sycophants, and whose mood can suddenly change if he dislikes what they say. Petronius, in particular, shows a flair for blandishment with his witty praise of Nero’s lyrics. His calm demeanor as he risks the emperor’s wrath implies an element of control over his superior.<sup>3</sup>

The arrival of Petronius’ nephew, Marcus Vinicius, for an audience, demonstrates the threat beneath Nero’s capricious temperament. Nero is initially pleased when the herald announces Marcus’ arrival, but when Tigellinus points out that the emperor had ordered the legions to stay outside of Rome, Nero becomes angry at the commander’s disobedience. Petronius must intervene, offering the explanation that Marcus wanted a private audience out of deference to the emperor. His adroit flattery wins Nero over again, and he happily greets Marcus. This scene presents two of Nero’s advisers at odds with each other. While Petronius obviously enjoys the perks of Nero’s good graces, he also prevents the emperor from succumbing to the suggestions of cold-blooded Tigellinus, who encourages Nero to abuse his

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<sup>3</sup> On the role of Petronius in *Quo Vadis*, see Wyke (1997: 144) and Goldhill (2011: 221-223).

power. The audience quickly understands that the more persuasive of these two advisers controls the future of Rome. In all of this, Nero is a pawn with a dangerous amount of power. He cannot think for himself and is wholly in the control of those around him.

The Nero of *Quo Vadis* is the epitome of decadence. He sits on a golden couch and jewels festoon his fingers, but the spectacle that he gathers around himself adds an ostentatious element to his character. He demands that his soldiers wait outside of the city because he wants the returning legions to appear together in a triumph that will serve as an entertainment for the people. The scene featuring the triumph in question displays Nero at his most spectacular; he looks down upon crowds of people and soldiers from an enormous palace. His wife Poppaea stands next to him, wearing a sumptuous gown and leading two cheetahs. Maria Wyke has shown that part of the point of Nero as a villain is the spectacle that accompanies him. Audiences would buy tickets to see the triumphs and exotic animals, but the moral message of the film made such extravagance acceptable.<sup>4</sup> Nero and his court are thus strongly associated with the luxury of Rome.

Finally, *Quo Vadis* perpetuates the ancient slander of Nero's obsession with singing. Although we never see him performing for the people of Rome in a theater, he does sing several times throughout the film: when we first meet him, at a dinner party, and, of course, during the Great Fire. Singing is no mere hobby for the Nero of *Quo Vadis*; he considers himself a great artist. Petronius uses this obsession to flatter and control him, reminding him at one point that he must suffer for his art. As Nero melodramatically says, "It's lonely to be emperor." He revels in his identity as a tortured genius. In fact, his artistic inclinations drive the plot of *Quo Vadis* as his strong desire to create a great song causes him, in part, to set the Great Fire so that the flames

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<sup>4</sup> See Wyke (1994: 20-24).

will inspire him. The film links Nero's singing to the destruction of Rome; in the historical narrative, he ignores the suffering of the people in the Great Fire to pursue his art. In *Quo Vadis*, singing itself causes destruction.

*Quo Vadis* encompasses our expectations of Nero. When we think of a corrupt Roman emperor, the image of Peter Ustinov in purple robes, jewels, and crowns comes to mind. This image is still prominent in pop culture. Recently, the science fiction cartoon *Futurama*, which ran from the years 1999-2013, featured a character called Hedonism-bot, a robot who perpetually sprawls on a couch and demands outrageous entertainment at the expense of the lower classes. Peter Ustinov's Nero is clearly an antecedent of this image. Both scriptwriters and audience equate Hedonism-bot with a decadent Roman emperor, reflecting the persistence of this persona. These caricatures obscure the Neronian narrative along with the official message of Nero's reign; he has now become the "bad" emperor.

The portrayal of Nero in *Quo Vadis* is a distillation of the negative characterizations of the primary sources. Prominent echoes of this modern version of Nero, however, are found in the narrative of Nero's death. Tristan Power has remarked that the endings in Suetonius in particular "reaffirm the verdicts of his portraits."<sup>5</sup> Suetonius, and later Cassius Dio, emphasize the negative aspects of Nero's personality as he approaches his death and remind the reader of how he reached such an ignominious end. In the *exitus* narratives of Nero, the caricature of the villainous emperor begins to emerge.

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<sup>5</sup> Power (2014b: 59).

## Suetonian Strategies

It is difficult to understand fully the sequence of events that led to Nero's downfall.<sup>6</sup> There is no Neronian narrative of Nero's death; the succeeding generation of rulers would tell the story. For other parts of his reign, it is possible to identify some aspects of the Neronian narrative through material culture, such as coinage and architecture, or literature produced by his regime, like the *De Clementia*. No evidence of this kind remains for Nero's *exitus*. Of our three most important sources, Suetonius provides the fullest narrative of Nero's last days and hours. His biographies on other contenders in the Year of Four Emperors offer additional facts. The end of Tacitus' *Annals* is lost, although we can glean some information from the *Histories*. Dio offers a colorful interpretation of Nero's death, but we only have the version of his Byzantine epitomizers, and his narrative is centuries away from the actual event. We also learn details from Plutarch's *Life of Galba*. Historians must put together the puzzle pieces represented by these authors, some of whom offer contradictory evidence. All, however, agree that Nero's demise was a fitting and inevitable end to his reign.

I will provide a brief description of the events of Nero's downfall, consolidating the different narratives as much as possible.<sup>7</sup> While Nero was still on his Greek tour, his freedman Helius, to whom he had given charge of Italy, wrote begging the emperor to return to address the rumors of insurrection in the western provinces. At first, Nero did not take the rebellion

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<sup>6</sup> Many have tried to untangle the possible reasons for the revolt, along with the order of events, with varying degrees of success. Kraay (1949) provides an analysis of coinage related to the revolt that remains one of the best studies; he also makes the important point that the rebels never intended to restore Rome to a Republic. Bradley (1978: 241-290) believes that Nero handled the crisis as best he could, but ultimately acted too late. Brunt (1959) and Levick (1999: 43-64) attribute the rebellion to mismanagement of the provinces. Warmington (1969: 155-172) and Shotter (2008: 153-168) assert that Nero's neglect of military matters ultimately led to his downfall. See Wellesley (1989) for a general overview of Civil Wars of 69.

<sup>7</sup> This consolidation comes chiefly from Suetonius (*Ner.* 40-50) and Cassius Dio (63.26.1-63.29.3). Since the focus of this chapter is on Nero, I will not dwell on the sequence of events in the provinces.

seriously since its leader was Vindex, the propraetor for the province of Gaul. Gaul was a Senatorial province without any legions, and as a Gaul himself, Vindex had no hope of attaining the office of *princeps*. Nero decided to return to Rome, however, because of mounting pressure from his advisers. The emperor panicked when Vindex proclaimed that the popular Galba, the governor of Spain, was vying for the Principate. Nero resolved to lead an army to Gaul to regain control of his troops but lacked willing volunteers to join his cause. Gradually, his friends began to desert him, and one night, he awoke to an empty house and the news that the Praetorian Guard had declared their allegiance to Galba. Abandoned by all but three or four freedmen (the sources vary), he fled Rome, hoping to reach Alexandria. On the journey, he took refuge in the suburban villa of his freedman Phaon. Somehow, his location was betrayed, and just as the guards burst in, he stabbed himself in the neck with the help of his friends.

Suetonius provides us with the fullest account of Nero's death. He writes within the conventions of biography, recognized by ancients as a distinct literary genre.<sup>8</sup> The end of the *Nero* has been called the most colorful narrative in the *Lives of the Caesars*.<sup>9</sup> In general, Suetonius' biographies present a picture of the emperors arranged in different categories, such as

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<sup>8</sup> For representative scholarship on Suetonius' biographical style, see Wallace-Hadrill (1983: 9-24), who asserts that Suetonius is self-consciously not writing history, but depicting the life of his subject; Baldwin (1983: 214), who points out that Suetonius is "more concerned with individuals than institutions; Power (2014a: 8-12), who shows how Suetonius approaches his subjects with a "systematic consistency" (8); and Hurley (2014: 23), who demonstrates that Suetonius arranges his facts with a distinctive agenda.

<sup>9</sup> Townend (1967:96) calls this section Suetonius' "finest consecutive section of narrative," although he questions whether it would be as impressive if we possessed Tacitus' description of events. According to Warmington (1969: 155), "Suetonius has an extended account of Nero's last days, but it is highly coloured and sentimental in the manner of an ancient novel..." Champlin (2003a: 49) describes the story as a "stunning hour-by-hour drama of mounting desperation." Baldwin (1983: 174-5) speculates that Suetonius elaborated so much on this narrative because Nero's death marked the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. See Sansone (1993) for possible literary precedents for the story of Nero's death.

family lineage, public works, and appearance.<sup>10</sup> He focuses on the personality of the emperors at the expense of their full histories; while he provides a great deal of information about incidental aspects such as appearance or habits, he says almost nothing about war and foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> Tamsyn Barton has pointed out that Suetonius uses strategies found in invective to provide a distinctively negative impression of “bad” emperors such as Nero.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Suetonius does more than just presenting facts; he arranges, includes, and omits specific details to lead the reader to a certain conclusion. He certainly takes this approach in his narrative of Nero’s final days, where the biographer is careful to include distinctive details that lead to an adverse view of the emperor. An example of this strategy occurs early in the narrative, when Suetonius specifies that Nero first hears about the uprising in Gaul on the anniversary of his mother’s death (Suet. *Ner.* 40.4). This simple detail reminds the reader of one of Nero’s greatest crimes and emphasizes that the emperor’s actions have contributed to his bad end.

I will not embark upon an analysis of the sequence of events here, or speculate on the reasons for Nero’s flight from the city of Rome; such an enterprise exceeds the limits of this chapter. Instead, I will evaluate how the narratives of Nero’s last days include negative or

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<sup>10</sup> On Suetonius’ use of categories, and comparisons of this style to the rhetorical strategy of *divisiones*, see Townend (1967: 86) and Mellor (1999: 149). Hurley (2014) devotes an article to Suetonius’ use of *divisiones* within a rubric.

<sup>11</sup> As Wallace-Hadrill (1983: 17) says, “A biographer has a plain duty to depict his subject, especially when he is an ordinary human, existing in the dimension of social as well as political life.” See also Mellor (1999: 151) on how Suetonius provides these details to give us a better idea of his subjects’ character. Power notes that a significant portion of the verbs in Suetonius’ biographies have the emperors as the grammatical subject (2014a: 5). On Suetonius’ sources for these facts, see especially Baldwin (1983), who provides an in-depth analysis of possible sources for the *Lives*. On Suetonius’ style, see Damon (2014: 42-48).

<sup>12</sup> Barton (1994). Baldwin (1983: 216) hints at this in his monograph on Suetonius, “The reader of Suetonius needs vigilantly to discriminate between artistic motifs and patterns imposed by cold fact.” Hurley too characterizes Suetonius as a sorter of information, and asserts that he arranges his facts to produce a certain impression of his subjects (2014: 23; 36). Lounsbury (1987: 77-78) comes close to this conclusion but ultimately decides that Suetonius piles on too many facts to be convincing.

exaggerated interpretations of different aspects of his story. The primary sources present three distinctive *topoi* in their accounts of Nero's death. First, he is wholly lost without his advisers and becomes childlike when stripped of his power. He lacks the guidance of Agrippina, Seneca, or any others with his best interests at heart. Second, the luxury that usually surrounds him gradually falls away and is conspicuous in its absence. He no longer exists within the decadent environment of the *Domus Aurea*. Finally, there are constant reminders of Nero's identity as a singer and actor; even in danger, he believes that his life will become a continuation of the Greek Tour.

The *exitus* of Nero in the ancient historians, especially Suetonius, represents the realization of his identity as a "bad" emperor. Suetonius and Cassius Dio define Nero by his death as much as they do by his life; the emperor's reactions to these disastrous events emphasize and solidify many of the negative character traits highlighted by the ancient sources. In these narratives, Nero is wholly unequipped for the realities of his position of power, especially once he is deprived of competent advisers. He cannot make decisions for himself, let alone run an empire. Instead of managing his problems, he can only run away.

### **The Childlike Emperor**

Suetonius' description of Nero's last days presents Nero as an emperor who lacks the intelligence and leadership to save his Principate. His unstable temperament in particular prevents him from making sound decisions. This feature is more pronounced in Suetonius' narrative than that of Cassius Dio since the biographer allows us to glimpse Nero's point of view throughout the account. The reader is allowed to follow the emperor's thought process as he reacts to the collapse of his Principate, and Nero does not act like a confident and dependable leader. The crisis at the end of his life reveals a personality that is irrational and volatile. Nero is

impressionable in the most dangerous way, and is guided by either optimism or panic, depending on the circumstances. He is helpless and childlike when deprived of his power.<sup>13</sup>

In the ancient narratives, Nero does not react adequately to the news of the rebellion in the West.<sup>14</sup> Suetonius shows Nero as all-too-secure in his position, and thus vulnerable to the threats posed by the western rebellions (Suet. *Ner.* 40.3):

*tanta fiducia non modo senectam sed etiam perpetuam singularemque concepit felicitatem, ut amissis naufragio pretiosissimis rebus non dubitaverit inter suos dicere pisces eas sibi relatueros.*

He had such confidence not only in his old age but also his perpetual and unique good luck, that when some very expensive items were lost in a shipwreck, he did not hesitate to claim that the fish would return his missing items to him.

This statement is indicative of Suetonius' exposition of Nero's character. The biographer sees this emperor as childlike, with a child's easy acceptance of the *status quo* without regard to the future.<sup>15</sup> He cheerfully dismisses the loss of valuables in spite of the financial shortage that must have followed the Great Fire.<sup>16</sup> Nero is out of touch with reality and naïve in his constant expectation of good fortune. This characterization is prevalent during the narrative of Nero's fall.

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<sup>13</sup> This estimation of his character also appears in modern scholars, e.g. Shotter (2008: 174): "Like a spoiled child, when he succeeded in this aim [i.e. gaining popularity], his response would be characteristically warm-hearted, as he showed in his 'Liberation of Hellas'; but when he did not succeed, then his reaction would consist of tantrums and lashing out, often with great cruelty, against those who, in his view, had let him down."

<sup>14</sup> There are several opinions on Nero's reaction to the rebellion. Warmington (1969: 163) pronounces, "It was not so much the cruelty as the frivolity and ineptitude of Nero which led to his downfall," which reflects the prevailing view of his behavior during his last days. Shotter (2008: 156) points out that Nero's initial inaction is justified since Vindex, with his unarmed province, would not have seemed like much of a threat. See Bradley (1978: 150-152) for a similar opinion. Both Griffin and Shotter believe that if Nero had stayed in Rome instead of fleeing, he might have maintained his power (Griffin 1984: 185-186; Shotter 2008: 164).

<sup>15</sup> Bradley (1978: 243) identifies this characterization of Nero as part of a "tradition of irresponsibility" associated with this emperor. Suetonius undercuts whatever serious strategy Nero implements.

<sup>16</sup> Levick (1999: 37) cites a cash shortage as one of the main causes of the revolt, as Nero tried to squeeze every penny from the provinces.

Faced with a real political challenge in the revolts in the West, Nero dismisses the situation as a distraction from his pursuits as an actor and singer. Instead of presenting himself as a persuasive and deserving leader, Nero hopes that the problem will go away. He is in Naples when he first hears about the uprisings in the Gallic provinces, and responds to the news by going to watch an athletic contest (Suet. *Ner.* 40.4). He carries out his official functions to a certain extent, writing a letter to the Senate in which he denounces Vindex and his actions against the Republic. Suetonius undercuts this action, however, by specifying that Nero does not make the speech himself, *excusato languore faucium, propter quem non adesset*, “having used a sore throat as an excuse, on account of which he could not be present” (Suet. *Ner.* 41.1). The impression is that Nero does the bare minimum in his capacity as Rome’s emperor; he does not take these threats seriously, as he should. His concern for a sore throat is likely due to his frivolous pursuit of singing, an excuse that he nevertheless expects the Senate to accept. Cassius Dio elaborates on this idea by explaining Nero’s general habit of keeping his voice low to save it for singing (Cass. Dio 63.26.1).

After Nero finally returns to Rome, the theme of irresponsibility continues. He invites Rome’s leading men to his house to consult about the uprising. This meeting would appear to be a prudent course, except that Suetonius alleges that Nero spends the greater part of the day talking about water organs.<sup>17</sup> Dio takes his criticism further and alleges that the whole meeting is a practical joke (Suet. *Ner.* 41.2; Cass. Dio 63.26.5). Nero flaunts the extent of his attention to frivolous matters by wasting the time and talent of the best men Rome has to offer. He seems to believe that the threat will simply go away; he has no need to address the problems in the west. Suetonius has him conclude his lecture on water organs thus, *iam se etiam prolaturum omnia in*

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<sup>17</sup> Bradley (1978: 254) sees Nero’s indifference in this situation as “no more than a literary representation.”

*theatrum affirmavit, si per Vindex liceat*, “Now he promised that he would perform everything in the theater, if only Vindex would allow it” (Suet. *Ner.* 41.2). In this meeting, Vindex is only an afterthought, a distraction from performing, which Nero sees as his most important occupation. The water organs are symptomatic of Nero’s overall distraction from his duties as emperor; he only wants to sing. His advisors are there to make him a better performer rather than help him deal with a crisis. The sole purpose of the principate is to satisfy the whims of the spoiled *princeps*.

When Nero finally recognizes the seriousness of the revolt, his behavior changes from naïve optimism to uncontrolled panic. At the news that other armies have defected to Galba, Nero smashes his favorite “Homeric” drinking cups in a fit of rage, much as an angry child might break a favorite toy (Suet. *Ner.* 47.1).<sup>18</sup> As his soldiers turn their backs on him, he begins to make erratic plans, which highlight his need for guidance (Suet. *Ner.* 47.2):

*varie agitavit, Parthosne an Galbam supplex peteret, an atratus prodiret in publicum proque rostris quanta maxima posset miseratione veniam praeteritorum precaretur, ac ni flexisset animos, vel Aegypti praefecturam concedi sibi oraret.*

He considered a variety of things, whether he would approach the Parthians or Galba as a suppliant, or, dressed for mourning, go forth in public and, in front of the rostra, beg for the mercy of the passersby with as much pity as he could, and if he had not changed their minds, he would beg that the prefecture of Egypt be given to him.

Suetonius communicates the desperation involved in Nero’s thought process with a series of short clauses. The prevalence of conjunctions gives the impression of Nero desperately listing ideas, none of which he can adopt. The erratic nature of his plans is apparent as, within the same clause, he debates whether to be a suppliant to the Parthians or Galba, two very different approaches. The last plan, that is, begging for the prefecture of Egypt, reflects his naivety. He is

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<sup>18</sup> Lounsbury (1987: 77) comments that Nero here is more concerned about his small possessions than he is about the empire as a whole.

ingenuous enough to believe that the people will grant him this elevated position after throwing him out of the office of emperor. Cassius Dio alleges that Nero hoped to be able to live as a private citizen in Egypt by playing the lyre, ἂν καὶ ἐκ τῆς ἀρχῆς ἐκπέσωμεν, ἀλλὰ τό γε τέχνιον ἡμᾶς ἐκεῖ διαθρέψει, “Although we are cast out of our empire,” Nero asserts, “talent will nevertheless sustain us there” (Dio 63.27.2).<sup>19</sup> This simple statement reveals two delusions. First, Nero seems to believe that he can seamlessly switch from the most elevated position in the land to a private citizen. Considering the luxury in which he is accustomed to live, this possibility is laughable. Second, Nero again emphasizes his obsession with music in his belief that he can live on the proceeds of his performances.

He cannot seem to commit to any of the plans he formulates, and true to his naïve character, he grows weary of considering his options and puts off a decision until the next day. His juvenile tactics prevent him from being successful. When Nero wakes up at around midnight, he is almost alone; his guards and gladiators refuse to kill him when he gives them direct orders to do so. Before this point of despair, Nero had been characterized as being so foolish that he ignores the variety of counselors around him. It is after he has lost the Senate and most of his inner circle of friends that he begins to realize the usefulness of advisers. Suetonius’ portrayal of Nero toward the end of his life emphasizes the unrealistic nature of his plans and makes his lack of leadership skills apparent. Without a strong guide, Nero is helpless.

At this scene, it is instructive to recall the ominous words of the ghostly Agrippina in the *Octavia*, who assures the reader that Nero will die *desertus ac destructus et cunctis egens*, “deserted, destroyed, and bereft of everything” (*Oct.* 631). In the narratives of his last days, the reader has an image of Nero completely deserted. His guards and slaves ransack his belongings

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<sup>19</sup> Gowers (1994: 132) remarks that the historians increase the impression of Nero’s naivety by including his belief that he can live as a private citizen.

and run away. By enumerating his wild and unfocused plans, Suetonius shows us a Nero, who, left to his own devices, is wholly unable to conceive of a plan of action in a crisis. He is a child who is so used to getting his own way that he can hardly comprehend the eventuality of a disaster, let alone manage an empire.<sup>20</sup> Nero expects that everything will come easily to him, and does not know what to do when faced with adversity. He seems to assume that a solution will present itself with as little effort as possible on his part. As a result, he does not understand the urgency of the revolts of Vindex in the West.

This narrative causes the reader to conclude that because of his constant supervision by more competent people (or at least talented flatterers), Nero is never allowed to grow up and make decisions on his own. His advisers have caused him to become overindulged and childish, unable to cope with a crisis. As he loses the trappings of his formerly elevated position, he only becomes more bewildered.

### **The Hedonistic Emperor**

One of the defining characteristics of Nero in the ancient historians was his addiction to luxury, exemplified by his construction of the *Domus Aurea*. Sumptuous feasts, scandalous parties, and spectacular entertainments accompanied this palace. Nero was portrayed as a ruler who engaged in luxurious practices while ignoring the welfare of the people. In the narratives of his last days, the reader has a satisfying glimpse of him losing these decadent surroundings. The idea that Nero squandered money on senseless luxury represents an essential component of his character in the narratives of the ancient historians. To complete his story arc as a villain, Suetonius and Cassius Dio illustrate the last of the Julio-Claudians at his lowest point just before

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<sup>20</sup> As Gowers (1994: 134) observes, "His reign had a permanently childish color, even after he had shaken off childhood."

his death. The luxurious trappings are gone, and the comparisons between his current, humble state and his former glory are constant in the narrative of his last days.

Having once commanded a retinue of hangers-on, Nero found himself with a handful of freedmen at the end of his life.<sup>21</sup> These men helped him finally decide upon a plan, emphasizing Nero's desperation without advisers again; he could not narrow down his list of last resorts without guidance. Phaon, his secretary *a rationibus*, offered the emperor his villa, where he could retreat from the dangerous city, collect himself, and consider flight or some other course of action. Nero dons an inconspicuous outfit for his journey, *erat nudo pede atque tunicatus, paenulam obsoleti coloris superinduit adopertoque capite et ante faciem optento sudario equum inscendit, quattuor solis comitantibus*, "He was barefoot and wearing a tunic, over which he put on a faded cloak, and with his head covered and a handkerchief drawn over his face, he mounted a horse, accompanied by only four comrades" (Suet. *Ner.* 48.1). Nero even had his mules shod in silver in addition to his princely attire during his reign (Suet. *Ner.* 30.3). These garments emphasize how far he has fallen from the emperor who was feasting without a care and among so many people just a few weeks before. The visual impression of his loss of power is vivid in his shabby clothes and his drastically reduced retinue.

Nero's fondness for disguises offers additional significance to his change of costume in Suetonius' narrative. Tacitus tells us that early in his reign, Nero would wander the city in disguise with a gang of young men and attack people returning home from dinner parties (Tac. *Ann.* 13.25).<sup>22</sup> Suetonius provides a list of the theatrical roles Nero played and adds that during his performance of *Hercules insanus*, a soldier was so convinced by his attire that he rushed to

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<sup>21</sup> Cassius Dio (63.28.3) comments that Nero had been proud of his large retinue.

<sup>22</sup> Suetonius (*Nero* 26.1) and Cassius Dio (61.9.1-4) also mention this hobby.

save his emperor (Suet. *Ner.* 21.3). During the Greek Tour, and perhaps in his performances in Rome, Nero also dressed in the sumptuous garb of a citharode.<sup>23</sup> Disguise had been a symbol of Nero's power; in Tacitus' story, a senator gave the emperor a beating when he insulted his wife. Realizing his mistake later, he sent an apology to Nero, who ordered the senator to commit suicide.<sup>24</sup> The stories of Nero's performances, with the deception of the soldier, show a similar expectation for the people to accept Nero's disguises. The disguise Nero assumes during his last hours instead demonstrates a loss of power. This humble garb is a far cry from his glamorous, citharodic trappings. Now, disguise is a necessity rather than a frivolous distraction.

As Nero makes the perilous journey to Phaon's house, his surroundings provide a further contrast to his former glory. Once the commissioner of the *Domus Aurea*, where he threw extravagant banquets, he is now reduced to hiding in ditches among the reeds. Suetonius encompasses his fall from glory in an iconic scene, where Nero, as a fugitive from his city, must be content with dirty water from a forest pool. As he scoops up the water to drink from his hand, he cries, *haec est Neronis decocta!* "This is Nero's distilled water!" (Suet. *Ner.* 48.3). He is referring to his favorite drink, which, according to Pliny the Elder, was Nero's innovation: *Neronis principis inventum est decoquere aquam vitroque demissam in nives refrigerare; ita voluptas frigoris contingit sine vitiiis nivis.* "The invention of Emperor Nero is to boil water and, having transferred it to a glass vessel, to cool it in snow; thus, there is the pleasure of coolness without the inconvenience of snow" (Plin. *HN* 31.40).<sup>25</sup> This process was an ostentatious

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<sup>23</sup> On the costume of a citharode, see Power (2010: 17).

<sup>24</sup> See Bartsch (1994: 17-20) for further discussion of Nero's nocturnal adventures.

<sup>25</sup> For the uses and implications of the word *decocta*, see Gowers (1994: 133). She discusses how this reference is particularly fitting for Nero at his death since he hurried to maturity and burned out early as a result.

expression of his wealth and privilege; after the whole procedure, the drink was still water.<sup>26</sup>

Snow to cool water was, at certain times of the year, a luxury in itself; Nero's process eliminated the *vitiis* of snow, taking the decadence of this invention to a new level. The verb *decoquo* hints at something more. The distilled water is, in many ways, a distillation of the historical impression of Nero's reign. He is such a flamboyant emperor that he makes humble water an expression of luxury. Facing death, Nero is forced to drink water in its natural state. He is doing what his Stoic tutor Seneca so often advised in his writings, living in accordance with nature, but very much against his will. Nero must experience the water of everyday people, and he finds it is not to his taste.

His situation deteriorates further when he sneaks into Phaon's villa. He must enter the house by crawling through a secret tunnel and in the process tears his cloak with thorns, humbling his garments further.<sup>27</sup> Phaon gives the emperor a *cella*, one of the most lowly rooms of a Roman house (Suet. *Ner.* 48.4):

*receptus in proximam cellam decubuit super lectum modica culcita, vetere pallio strato, instructum; fameque et iterum siti interpellante panem quidem sordidum oblatum aspernatus est, aquae autem tepidae aliquantum bibit.*

Taken into the nearest room, he laid down on a couch equipped with a modest mattress and an old blanket. Although he was wracked with hunger and thirst, he refused the dry bread that was offered to him, but he drank some warm water.

Nero is now as far as possible from his elevated position as the emperor of Rome, and Suetonius does his best to give a vivid impression of the squalid nature of his surroundings. The furniture is old, and covered with old blankets, the food is poor (*sordidus* could either refer to the fact that

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<sup>26</sup> Goddard (1994: 72) rightly asserts that this practice reflects a flamboyant waste of time.

<sup>27</sup> Sansone (1993: 180) comments that this detail contributes vividness to the story but adds that such an unnecessary detail leads him to believe that Suetonius is including elements of fiction in his narrative. Lounsbury (1987: 77) observes that the mounting details emphasize the increased fear and desperation of the emperor.

the bread is of a low-class recipe, or that it was dirty), and the water is *tepidae*; it has certainly not been cooled with snow. From a historical standpoint, this description is confusing; Phaon was the secretary *a rationibus*, and presumably had some standing in Nero's inner circle. It seems, then, that his villa might have been able to afford adequate furnishings, and especially more palatable food, for an exiled emperor.<sup>28</sup> The idea of Nero sleeping on a comfortable bed and eating a filling meal, however, is not nearly so satisfying as the former owner of the *Domus Aurea* subjected to conditions that lower him to the level of a slave. The shabby surroundings are more fitting for Nero's final drama and provide a small if satisfying retribution for the luxury he enjoyed during his life.

A further detail, the last description of Nero as a builder, conjures up the image of the *Domus Aurea*. One of Nero's most famous and most often misunderstood sayings is *qualis artifex pereo*, perhaps because it seems to represent so perfectly his disconnection from reality (Suet. *Ner.* 49.1). The quote has been translated as "What an artist the world is losing!" and "Dead! And so great an artist!"<sup>29</sup> Both of these interpretations provide further proof of Nero's megalomania; he not only believes that the world will miss him, but that the loss of his singing and poetry will be most devastating. Instead Nero, realizing how close to death he is, attempts to construct a poor tomb for himself from stray scraps of marble (Suet. *Ner.* 49.1):

*Tunc uno quoque hinc inde instante ut quam primum se impendentibus  
contumeliis eriperet, scrobem coram fieri imperavit dimensus ad corporis sui  
modulum, componique simul, si qua invenirentur, frustra marmoris et aquam  
simul ac ligna conferri curando mox cadaveri, flens ad singula atque identidem  
dictitans: qualis artifex pereo!*

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<sup>28</sup> See Townend (1967: 95), who also questions why Nero could not just enter through the front door. He attributes these mean surroundings to treachery by one of Nero's freedmen.

<sup>29</sup> As translated by Rolfe (1997: 171) and Graves (2003: 244), respectively.

Then, with each person on all sides insisting that he extract himself as soon as possible from the looming threats, he ordered a grave to be dug before his eyes, having measured out a space for his own body, and that bits of marble, if any were to be found were to be assembled, and that water and wood be collected to take care of his imminent corpse. Weeping at each thing, he said over and over again, “I die as such an artist!”

Nero, with his partiality for drama, finds the perfect thing to say. In many ways, this line resembles Agrippina’s epigrammatic final words, *ventrem feri!*, although Nero will have more to say before he dies.<sup>30</sup> Cassius Dio provides the same line in his account (ὦ Ζεῦ, οἷος τεχνίτης παραπόλλυμαι, which, aside from “O Zeus!” is similar in sense to the Latin), specifying that it is θρυλούμενον, or often-quoted (Cass. Dio 63.29.2). *Qualis artifex pereo*, with the translation “I die as such an artist!” exemplifies the construction of Nero in the narratives of his last days; he is too absorbed in his pursuits as a musician and actor to manage his empire effectively. He has had the luxury of ignoring the responsibilities of his position throughout his reign; now, his carelessness has caused his undoing.

Edward Champlin provides another interpretation of the phrase *qualis artifex pereo*: once able to command the construction of great monuments and palaces, Nero is reduced to stacking cast-off bits of marble to create his tomb.<sup>31</sup> In this case, the quip could be rendered, “I die as a builder of something like *this!*” This is an appealing interpretation; Nero is, after all, building his last structure in this scene. By calling for wood and water, he instructs his few followers to prepare the body for his funeral on the spot. He seems to have realized that he can hope for no grand, public funeral in the tradition of his ancestors. In this, the sense of contrast between the former emperor and the current fugitive is overwhelming. As he has at so many other points in

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<sup>30</sup> Lounsbury (1987: 78) complains that Suetonius detracts from the force of Nero’s words with too many other quotes in his zeal to include every fact.

<sup>31</sup> Champlin (2003a: 51).

his reign, Nero is imitating Augustus by building his pathetic version of a Mausoleum. Nero is now farther from his ancestor than he has ever been in his life. Both Augustus and Nero changed the appearance of Rome, but posterity remembers Nero as the emperor who destroyed Rome with both fire and, after his death, civil war. The makeshift tomb that Nero builds is a reflection of his position as the last of the Julio-Claudians; while Augustus built lasting structures and institutions, Nero can only play with the remnants of a once-great dynasty.

The story of Nero's last days gradually takes away the luxurious trappings to which the emperor had become so accustomed: the masses of followers, the palace, the lovely clothes, the banquets, and finally his hereditary right to be buried with the illustrious ancestors who gave him his elevated position in the first place. In the historical narrative, the *Domus Aurea* provided Nero with an unbelievable playground of decadence. The fact that he ended his life in torn clothes, hiding in one of the smallest rooms of a freedman's villa, gives the impression that he is being punished for his crimes against the Roman people, as if there is a sense of justice in the world. The fates have at last turned the tables on the villain Nero, and he suffers the deprivations that he has inflicted upon others.

### **The Singing Emperor**

Nero loses one more important element during his last days, and his *exitus* narrative constantly hints at it. Once a figure who could command the attention and acclaim of all the citizens of the Roman Empire, he is reduced to a skulking, hiding figure completely out of the public gaze. In spite of the lack of audience, he puts on a performance seen only by his last comrades.<sup>32</sup> Many scholars have admirably explored the concept of Nero as an actor and

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<sup>32</sup> Baldwin (1983: 175) questions how Suetonius knew such specific details of this account; he speculates that one of the freedmen came forward with the story later. Sansone (1993) believes that the richness of the details imply that an allegorical version of Nero's *exitus* existed, where the emperor straddled the worlds of the dead and living.

citharode.<sup>33</sup> It is worth revisiting the drama of Nero’s last days here with an eye to the attitude towards his Greek Tour. For that event, historians leave us with the impression that Nero considered himself an actor and singer more than an emperor, and the story of his death is no different.

In *Actors in the Audience*, Shadi Bartsch notes that in the narratives of Suetonius and Cassius Dio, Nero blurs the distinction between theater and reality during his last days.<sup>34</sup>

Cassius Dio defines the theatricality of Nero’s death at the outset of his narrative (Cass. Dio 63.28.3-5):

ἐλογίζετο γὰρ τά τε ἄλλα, καὶ προσέτι ὅτι πολυανθρωποτάτη ποτὲ θεραπεία  
γαυρωθεὶς μετὰ τριῶν ἐξελευθέρων ἐκύπταζε. τοιοῦτον γὰρ  
δρᾶμα τότε τὸ δαιμόνιον αὐτῷ παρεσκεύασεν, ἵνα μηκέτι τοὺς ἄλλους  
μητροφόνους καὶ ἀλήτας ἀλλ’ ἤδη καὶ ἑαυτὸν ὑποκρίνηται· καὶ τότε  
μετεγίνωσκεν ἐφ’ οἷς ἐτετολμήκει, καθάπερ ἄπρακτόν τι αὐτῶν ποιῆσαι  
δυνάμενος. Νέρων μὲν δὴ τοιαῦτα ἐτραγῶδει, καὶ τὸ ἔπος ἐκεῖνο συνεχῶς  
ἐνενόει, “οἰκτρῶς θανεῖν μ’ ἄνωγε σύγγαμος πατήρ.”

For he was considering, among other things, how once having prided himself on his large body of attendants, he was skulking with three freedmen. Such a drama did Fate prepare for him then, that he no longer played the parts of other matricides and beggars, but himself. And he was sorry for those he had wronged, as though he were able to make any of those things undone. Nero acted out such things as a tragedy, and he thought of this line continuously, “Wife, father, urge me to die piteously.”

The historian creates a contrast between Nero acting in a tragedy on stage and Nero participating in a real-life tragedy, which emphasizes the extent of his fall from power. He takes care to show that, having been abandoned by most of his retinue, Nero has the smallest possible audience, and

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<sup>33</sup> For a representative selection of scholarship on Nero as actor, see Gyles (1962), who explores whether Nero actually had talent; Manning (1975), who sees Nero’s performance as a cultivation of the *plebs*; and Edwards (1994), who examines the social implications of Nero as a performer. Woodman (1993) and Bartsch (1994: 1-62) analyze Nero’s acting as an expression of power. Related to Nero the actor, Power (2010) deals with Nero as a citharode, another important layer to his identity as a performer.

<sup>34</sup> See Bartsch (1994: 43-46) for an analysis of this particular passage. Griffin (2013: 470) laments that this theme has become too familiar in Neronian scholarship, “Everyone has their favorite vignette to illustrate the blurring of reality and fiction in Nero’s performances.”

yet maintains the pretense that he is performing. Cassius Dio specifies that Nero played the parts of matricides and beggars. With this observation, he effectively reminds the reader that Nero is a matricide; Suetonius tells us that he first got news of Vindex's revolt on the anniversary of Agrippina's death (Suet. *Ner.* 40.4).<sup>35</sup> Nero will soon make his other role a reality as he dons the apparel of a beggar to disguise himself. Dio refers to the story he is about to tell as a *δοῦμα*, heightening the sense of Nero's *exitus* as a performance.

Suetonius also sees Nero's behavior as something of a performance. An indication of this occurs when the emperor first hears the report that Spain had revolted with Galba. Nero faints and engages in the tragic gestures of mourning, such as tearing out his hair and ripping his clothes (Suet. *Ner.* 42.1). Instead of seeking out the Senate or experienced advisers, Nero goes to his *nutricula*. On one layer, this seems like a childish reflex, in line with the previous discussion of the characterization of Nero as foolish and naïve. On another layer, this scene also reminds the reader that Nero was a performer of tragedies and did not shrink from playing female roles. It is common practice for the heroine of a tragedy to seek out her nurse in times of trouble (for example, this happens in the *Octavia* with both the characters of Octavia and Poppaea).<sup>36</sup> When confronted with a crisis, Nero, like the tragic heroines he admired and sometimes portrayed, goes to his former nurse for comfort. His reaction to the terrible news is to escape into a role. When he regains his accustomed optimism, he writes *iocularia carmina* about the leaders of the revolt and performs them at banquets with lewd gestures. He also ribs an actor who is doing particularly well that he is taking advantage of Nero's absence from the theater,

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<sup>35</sup> Grant (1970: 195). Barton (1994: 52) discusses how Suetonius uses details such as these to undercut Nero's character.

<sup>36</sup> For other examples of the nurse in the role of confidant in both Greek and Senecan tragedy, see Ferri (2003: 134, 321-322) and Boyle (2008: 151 and 239).

with the implication that he will return as soon as the distraction of the revolt is over (Suet. *Ner.* 42.2). In this passage, Nero is more absorbed in his theatrical pursuits than in the business of maintaining his power. He either makes his life into a drama by reacting to bad news in an overly histrionic fashion or turns his troubles into songs he can perform before an audience.

As the threat in the West increases, Nero finally takes action. He assumes the consulship and starts to gather his forces, both decisive actions. Nero's acting persona, however, undercuts the plan from its inception. It soon becomes clear that Nero's intentions are theatrical rather than military (Suet. *Ner.* 43.2):

*ac susceptibus fascibus cum post epulas triclinio digrederetur, innixus umeris familiarium affirmavit, simul ac primum provinciam attigisset, inermem se in conspectum exercituum proditurum nec quicquam aliud quam fleturum, revocatisque ad paenitentiam defectoribus insequenti die laetum inter laetos cantaturum epinicia, quae iam nunc sibi componi oporteret.*

Once he had taken the office of consul, when he was departing the dining room after a banquet, he promised, while leaning on the shoulders of his attendants, as soon as he reached Gaul, he would present himself unarmed in sight of the soldiers and not do anything but weep, and once the rebels had been moved to pity, he would happily sing victory songs among the happy soldiers on the following day, and he should be composing those songs right now.

The fact that Nero makes such plans at a banquet shows that he has not given up his everyday lifestyle in the face of crisis.<sup>37</sup> As he faces his soldiers, he will not fight, but weep. He pictures himself on stage, moving the troops in the provinces with his display of emotion. He believes that he will persuade them just as easily as he won the crowns during the Greek Tour. The projected concert that he will give the soldiers (*laetus inter laetos*) continues a delusional faith in his powers of performance. In Greek custom, citharodes had a legendary ability to unite cities with song and Nero of this narrative hopes that his performance will have a similar unifying

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<sup>37</sup> Goddard (1994: 75) notes that Nero's response to crisis often involves food and drink.

effect on his soldiers.<sup>38</sup> This passage is noteworthy in its inclusion of Nero in both of his performative aspects; on consecutive days, Nero will treat the soldiers to tragedy and *kitharoidia*. He has composed a fantastic scene in his head and has scripted the reactions of his soldiers. He believes that they will follow his version of events just as the grateful Greeks did when he freed their province and won all of their games. In the most basic terms, he plans to approach his troops as a performer, not as an emperor or military commander, and he imagines that he will prevail in that *persona*. The one role he does not consider is that of *imperator*.<sup>39</sup> Suetonius underlines this conceit with Nero's remark that he ought to be composing victory songs rather than, for instance, consulting with his military advisers.

Suetonius further highlights the theatrical nature of Nero's military campaign as he describes his initial preparations (Suet. *Ner.* 44.1):

*In praeparanda expeditione primam curam habuit deligendi vehicula portandis scaenicis organis concubinasque, quas secum educeret, tondendi ad virilem modum et securibus peltisque Amazonicis instruendi.*

In preparing his expedition, his first concerns were to select wagons to carry his theatrical instruments, and to cut the hair of his concubines, who he would bring with him, in a man's style, equipping them with axes and shields of the Amazons.

It is only after accomplishing these tasks that Nero thinks about recruiting actual soldiers for his expedition. The order in which he makes his preparations is telling; his foremost care is the transportation of his theatrical instruments, which shows that he does not view himself as a commander or general, but as a performer. Suetonius specifies that Nero intends to bring theatrical instruments (*scaenis organis*), reminding the reader of his frivolous meeting about

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<sup>38</sup> Power (2010: 43).

<sup>39</sup> In fact, Warmington (1969: 169) cites Nero's lack of cultivation of the military as a major component of his downfall: "It made things worse in the crisis that he simply had no idea how to act; if he had acquired a military reputation, or even some prestige, like Claudius, there might never have been a venture like that of Vindex."

water organs (*organa hydraulica*) (Suet. *Ner.* 41.2); the impression of carelessness continues. The only indication that he understands the military nature of his expedition is his cadre of concubines dressed up as Amazons. Nero conflates the military with the theatrical, just as he did in his “triumph” when he returned from Greece.<sup>40</sup> He believes that his value as an artist is more relevant than his military acumen, a view with which most Romans would never have agreed. His misguided preparations reflect his expectation that his soldiers will participate in his warped view of Roman values.

The narratives of Cassius Dio and Suetonius include quotations from Nero as he reacts to his misfortunes. These lines, such as *qualis artifex pereo* and *haec est Neronis decocta*, enhance the theatricality of the account of Nero’s last days. While Suetonius often includes quips or wise sayings by his biographical subjects to provide insight into their personalities, the lines spoken by Nero are calculated to give the story of this emperor’s death a dramatic flair.<sup>41</sup> Suetonius begins to include these quotations at Nero’s realization that his allies have truly abandoned him, and none of his guards are willing to end his misery by killing him. *Ergo ego...nec amicum habeo nec inimicum?* “And so I have neither friend nor foe?” (Suet. *Ner.* 47). It is as if Nero is speaking a line of tragic verse tailored to express the hopelessness of this situation. He becomes less an emperor and more a character, an actor following a script for the death of an emperor.<sup>42</sup>

This tendency increases when he gets closer to his death. As he hears the approach of men on

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<sup>40</sup> On Nero’s version of a “triumph” to celebrate his victories on the Greek Tour, see Champlin (2003a: 210-234).

<sup>41</sup> Damon (2014: 53-54) discusses Suetonius’ use of quotes to illustrate certain qualities of emperors. See Wallace-Hadrill (1983: 21) on how Suetonius cites small samples of speech to give the reader a better idea of the character of his subjects. Mellor (1999: 151) discusses Suetonius’ scholarly habit of quoting his sources verbatim in Latin or Greek rather than paraphrasing. On possible sources for these quotes, see Baldwin (1983) in general. Suetonius’ sources for the Greek quotes, in particular, have been an object of some controversy; see Townend (1960) and the rebuttal by Wardle (1992).

<sup>42</sup> Bartsch (1994: 43-45).

horses in the villa of Phaon, he quotes Homer in Greek. He reminds us of his Philhellenism, another feature of his personality that seems to distract him from his duties as emperor. Nero's choice to quote Homer is ironic since he refers to a story of men committed to dying a glorious death, the opposite of the ignominious end that he faces. In the end, Nero pictured himself as a tragic hero. When, with the help of Epaphroditus, he finally stabs himself in the neck, the horsemen rush in, which gives Nero the opportunity to speak his last tragic line, *sero; haec est fides*, "Too late! This is loyalty" (Suet. *Ner.* 49.4). The dramatic timing of the sequence of events is impeccable.

Suetonius, however, is quick to remind us that we are not watching a play in which the actor dies and then rises again to triumphant applause. His Nero treated his death as a death scene, but the biographer undercuts the gravity and tragedy of his end with the harsh reality of the corpse's appearance, *atque in ea voce defecit, exstantibus rigentibusque oculis usque ad horrorem formidinemque visentium*, "And with this statement, he died, his eyes sticking out and stiff, to the horror and fear of those watching" (Suet. *Ner.* 49.4). Up until now, Nero has cut an absurd figure throughout the drama of his last days, but his death at least maintained the illusion of tragedy. At Nero's death, the account switches away from his point of view for the first time in several chapters.<sup>43</sup> The narrative abruptly pulls the reader from Nero's fantasy world and focuses on the reaction of his audience (*visentium*). Nero's friends do not see an actor artfully pretending to be dead, but the stark reality of an emperor who died in the midst of his fantasy. Lacking the conceit of an actor in a drama, Nero transforms into a failed ruler whose death would lead Rome into a year of civil war, a truly grim prospect.

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<sup>43</sup> Lounsbury (1987: 72-73) observes that in the narrative of Nero's death, the main verb refers to his point of view on all but two occasions. "Now Nero is in his last extremity, all centers on him."

The narratives of Dio and Suetonius display a version of Nero who can only react to disaster like an actor or a musician. After all, he was able to “conquer” Greece with his powers of performance; he naturally believes that this will translate to the last crisis of his reign. His affinity for acting inhibits his duties as emperor and is perhaps the ultimate reason for his downfall. While Nero’s decision to perform in public was surely a strategy to appeal to the *plebs* as well as the Eastern provinces, it took on a meaning of its own in light of his *exitus*. The image of Nero performing in public became so enduring that it overtook his historical narrative; he is not just an emperor but also a singing emperor.

**Conclusion: *Qualis artifex pereo***

Towards the end of his short reign, Galba adopted Lucius Calpurnius Piso Licinianus as his heir. During the celebration of this event, Galba made a speech in which he described his infamous predecessor (Tac. *Hist.* 1.16):

*sit ante oculos Nero quem longa Caesarum serie tumentem non Vindex cum inermi provincia aut ego cum una legione, sed sua immanitas, sua luxuria cervicibus publicis depulerunt; neque erat adhuc damnati principis exemplum...Nero a pessimo quoque semper desiderabitur: mihi ac tibi providendum est ne etiam a bonis desideretur.*

Let Nero be before your eyes, arrogant from the long pedigree of Caesars, who neither Vindex with an unarmed province nor I with one legion pushed from the necks of the people, but his excess and luxury. Never before was there an example of a condemned *princeps*...Nero will always be missed by the worst sort of person: you and I must see to it that good men never miss him.

This statement emphasizes the prevalence of the *exitus* narrative found in Suetonius and Dio.

Galba stresses Nero’s failure as a military commander by specifying that Vindex held an unarmed province, and he himself had only one legion. Nero lost power because he was too distracted by *immanitas* and *luxuria*, an aspect that Suetonius and Dio confirm in their descriptions of his theatrical preparations for a military campaign. Galba also characterizes Nero as *tumentum*, “arrogant” from his pedigree, which emphasizes that he did not share the admirable

qualities of Augustus, in spite of a blood connection. Here, Galba's speech recalls the associations between Nero and Augustus at the outset of Nero's reign, especially in Seneca's *De Clementia*. The reference to the *longa Caesarum serie* is also a reminder of the coinage that featured the young emperor with his mother and so proudly set Nero forth as the next leader in a distinguished family. Galba portrays Nero as a *princeps* who feels too entitled to his power because of his ancestors. Neither the hope that he would rule like Augustus nor his blood connection to Augustus made Nero a good emperor. He never deserved to hold the office.

In admonishing his destined heir Piso to keep Nero before his eyes, Galba sums up the figure he became in the ancient historians. Nero represents the culmination of the "bad" emperor, a negative *exemplum*. His ignominious end represents a warning to those in power. The ancient authors would fulfill Galba's wish that good men would never miss Nero. Films such as *Quo Vadis* use the figure of Nero in a similar way, placing him before the eyes of audiences as a villain. Wealth and spectacle may surround him, but he is foolish and immature, a figure to be ridiculed, not feared.

The four case studies of this dissertation have shown how this view represents the manipulation of the Neronian narrative. Because Nero ascended the Principate under the well-publicized guidance of his mother and tutor, the historical narratives would never allow him to grow and mature. Without the advice of Seneca, he lacked the capacity to rule Rome effectively. Further, his strong identification with Agrippina at the outset of the reign served as a reminder of his identity as a matricide. The *Domus Aurea* and the Greek Tour both fall into the categories of *immanitas* and *luxuria* and become symptoms of selfishness. Nero took advantage of the disaster of the Great Fire to build himself a palace and forced the Greeks to listen to his terrible singing.

In reality, Nero was most likely a mediocre emperor, encouraging innovation when it came to the arts and imperial policy in the provinces, but wholly unequipped to cope with the difficult political situation he inherited. He was no new Augustus, no matter how many accouterments of the first *princeps* he adopted. Had Nero continued to follow the guidance of his first advisers, he might have maintained the favor of the Senate. He might even have overcome the initial actions of rebellion in Gaul and Spain if he sustained the loyalty of the Praetorians. He might have then toured Egypt, finished his canals, and continued to court the favor of the *plebs* with fabulous entertainments. In this case, wealth might have poured in from the east, trade might have boomed, and the Senate might have been too frightened by the wrath of the *plebs* to speak against the emperor. Had Nero died of old age, he might have left an heir in control of the official narrative of his death.

Nero, however, died in the throes of a revolt, and his innovations became an exploitation of the people of the Roman Empire. Being the last of the Julio-Claudian line was most damaging to his legacy. He became the subject of unfavorable comparisons to his ancestor Augustus and the target of Flavian propaganda. The appeal of his flamboyant character lingered without the substance of his official message; Nero's flair for the spectacular proved especially susceptible to manipulation by his successors. The titles of matricide, incendiary, and singer would define him in his afterlife. The ancient sources distilled the Neronian narrative into the *χαρακτήρ* of the bad emperor.

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