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*'De Monstris'*: The Madness of Isolation in Suetonius' "Caligula" and "Nero"

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MCL 495-001: Capstone

Dr. Matthew Wells

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The emperors Gaius Caesar ‘Caligula’ (r. 37-41 CE) and Nero (r. 54-68 CE) are regarded as some of Rome’s most infamous and notorious rulers due to their erratic, destructive, and complex behaviors. In his biographical work *The Lives of the Caesars*, the literary artist Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (c. 69-122 CE) provides a concise, informative, and illustrative depiction of the reigns of these two emperors. Suetonius’ particular literary technique and style used in the narration for both Nero and Caligula contributes to an enduring legacy of madness and depravity that has been influential in our understanding of these two rulers well into the modern age. Suetonius calls attention to the madness of two emperors by highlighting their extreme personal shortcomings in their role of *princeps*<sup>1</sup> to the Roman people, and by portraying the two rulers as being almost entirely divorced from reality. In doing so, Suetonius communicates that the various modes of isolation experienced by these two emperors were the result of a novel Roman imperial system. Juxtaposing Suetonius’ “Caligula” and “Nero” allows us to see how Suetonius identifies the unacceptable aspects of their reigns as being consequence of an isolation that was not only the direct result of their personal education and ideologies, but also due to the expectations and pressures of the ancient Roman world with respect to ideal leadership, power, and ultimate authority.

In order to fully explore Suetonius’ depiction of Nero and Caligula with respect to their isolation and madness, I will first provide a brief historical account of the nature of the Roman imperial government from Augustus up until the period of Caligula in 37 CE. This history will illustrate the delicacy, nuances, and duties of the position of *princeps*. Next, I will examine Suetonius’ life and literary style in order to confirm him not as a historian, but as a performative and sensational biographer whose works have ironically endured as historical fact. With this background having been established, I will assert that deficient personal education prior to

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<sup>1</sup> Lit. ‘the foremost’.

assuming the role of *princeps*, dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, and the emphasis on Hellenism<sup>2</sup> and competitive grandeur in politics were sources of isolation for both Caligula and Nero within Suetonius' narratives.<sup>3</sup> The results of this isolation can be seen in their interaction (or lack thereof) with the government, their cults and deification, antisocial habits, and the causes of their deaths. I will proceed to analyze Suetonius' lives of "Caligula" and "Nero" in light of these aforementioned elements, commenting on notable differences, literary techniques, and comparisons between the two depictions. I will establish that Suetonius' depictions of the sins of Caligula and Nero are shown as distinctly unacceptable to the Roman people compared to his other imperial biographies. To highlight this difference I will draw upon the lives of Augustus (r. 27 BCE-14 CE), Tiberius (r. 14-37 CE), and Domitian (r. 81-96 CE) as portrayed by Suetonius. Finally, I will conclude that, within the narrative of Suetonius' piece, Nero and Caligula were portrayed as isolated by their madness, and as a result they remain among Rome's most notorious emperors.

The socio-political background of the Roman empire from the Augustan period of 27 BCE to the rise of Caligula in 37 CE is fundamental to understanding the delicacy of the Roman order. The Augustan reforms and 'restored Republic' mandated that the empire be headed by both a singular man (the *princeps*) and by a legislative Senate composed of elected officials who had risen through the *cursus honorum*.<sup>4</sup> Despite these branches being established as co-equals,

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<sup>2</sup> While the application of the term "Hellenism" varies throughout scholarship, in this instance I will be applying it in reference to Miriam T. Griffin's analysis of Nero's reign (see bibliography) in regards to his affirmation of Hellenistic inspired ideologies in the period of his leadership. Examples of Hellenistic ideologies visible in Nero's reign include: the treatment of imperial authority as a derivative of the model of Hellenistic kingship and the inclusion of Greek architecture and artistic styles within civic reforms and public works.

<sup>3</sup> N.B. For the purpose of quotation from Suetonius, I will be using the Loeb Classical Library 1998 translation by J.C. Rolfe. The manner of in-text citation I will use will include the name of the emperor followed by the chapter referenced - e.g. (Gaius, #), and (Nero, #). The Latin and Greek will be provided in the footnotes for reference.

<sup>4</sup> Lit. "course of honor." This refers to the ladder of Roman offices which senators and government officials participated in.

Augustus, in his role as *princeps*, slowly took authority over the Senate. Augustus, by all accounts, managed to maintain a balance of favor between the senatorial class, army, and public, thus securing the title of *princeps* for himself. This was not a title that would automatically be extended to his successors; indeed, without the support of the Senate and the troops, the *princeps* or *imperator*<sup>5</sup> could not maintain ultimate authority:

It is evident that *in fact* the *princeps* could not maintain his authority unless the army was, for all practical purposes, at his command and Augustus' use of *praenomen Imperatoris*, although it was a personal appellation and not an official title, emphasized the relation between troops and their imperator; but this does not alter the fact that the legal basis of the new constitution was conferment upon the *princeps* of a social commission by the Senate and people of Rome.  
(Bowman, Champlain, and Lintott, 2008. 161)

This dynamic of support for the *princeps* is an essential element in the legacy of the emperor.

The stability that was reached in Augustus' reign did not extend into Caligula's rule due in part to the public image of Augustus as 'perfection.' Furthermore, "if under the Principate there grew up an imperial patriotism and a genuine gratitude for the benefits conferred by Roman rule, the credit is mainly due to Augustus himself" (Cambridge, 183). Tiberius expected the same affection as his predecessor, but it became abundantly clear with Caligula that the political security and accommodations made for Augustus had to be earned and not freely given.

The fragility of the new Augustan model was not unknown to Suetonius, who wrote during the early imperial era of Rome under the Hadrian regime (r. 117–138 CE). While not much is known of his personal life, Suetonius acquired a reputation for his documentation of scandalous events and prurient mind. (Rolfe, 1913. 224). His works, although perceived as historical biographical narratives, are inevitably affected by his position neither as a historian nor a biographer, but as an author of performative and investigative pieces. While Suetonius' histories include too many anecdotes and varying structures to be consistent with the paradigm of

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<sup>5</sup> Lit. 'commander.' This title was adopted by emperors following the end of the Republic as part of their cognomen.

classical history, his works do not wholly not satisfy the elements of classical biography either: “The ‘Lives [of the Caesars]’ differ no less from the original Greek conception of biography than from that of modern times. The former consisted in a description of the ideal βίος, the art of living, as a model for imitation, and the type endured for many centuries” (Rolfe 1913. 215). It is necessary, therefore, to approach Suetonius’ depictions of the emperors not with certainty to their factuality as history or modern or classical biography, but rather as a performative depiction of imperfect imperial life.

With respect to Suetonius’ depiction of Nero and Caligula in the *Lives of the Caesars*, these emperor-characters are portrayed as abnormally mentally isolated from both reality and the position of *princeps*. Suetonius attributes their proclivities to being the result of poor personal education prior to assuming authority, damaging and corrupt interpersonal relationships, and the ever-present emphasis on Hellenism and competitive grandeur in their political lives. These sources translated into characteristically isolating behaviors including their interaction with (or absence from) authorial duties, their attempts at deification and self-image, their abnormal and antisocial erratic behaviors, and ultimately their deaths at the hands of an unhappy Senate. Observing the text from this perspective, we see how Suetonius creates the biographies of Nero and Caligula as a critique of their upbringings and the resulting subsequent effect on their abilities to lead. By highlighting elements of isolation through the text, it is evident that Suetonius believed that Nero and Caligula were both agents of mayhem and victims of an isolating Roman imperial system and culture.

As with all his *Lives*, Suetonius begins with a lengthy historical background to the man who would become Rome’s most reputable *monstrum*:<sup>6</sup> Caligula. Gaius Caesar was born to

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<sup>6</sup> Lit. ‘Monster,’ (Gaius XXII).

Germanicus Julius Caesar (15 BCE-19 CE), a notable and beloved commander under Augustus. From a young age, Gaius Caesar accompanied his father on his various campaigns and garnered for himself a positive reputation among the army, who bestowed upon him the name ‘Caligula’ (lit. ‘little boots’). When his father died (presumably at the hands of Augustus’ successor Tiberius), Caligula was sent to Capri to join Tiberius who became his new guardian. Suetonius details how Tiberius, known for his *crudelitas*,<sup>7</sup> began to raise Caligula in his image. This cruelty would be adopted and expanded upon by Caligula and endure throughout his career. Suetonius clearly depicts Caligula in his early life as separate from the likes of respectable men. He writes,

Yet even at the time he could not control his natural cruelty and viciousness, but was a most eager witness of the tortures and executions of those who suffered punishment, revelling at night in gluttony and adultery, disguised as a wig and a long robe, passionately devoted besides to the theatrical arts of dancing and singing, in which Tiberius very willingly indulged him, in the hopes that through these his savage nature might be softened.<sup>8</sup> (Gaius, XI)

Here, Suetonius remarks on the failed attempt of Tiberius to tire Caligula’s depravity through indulgence, famously claiming that even the licentious and barbarous Tiberius was appalled at Caligula’s behavior and understood that “To allow Gaius to live would prove the ruin of himself and of all men, and that he was a rearing viper for the Roman people and a Phaethon for the world”<sup>9</sup> (Gaius, XI). Suetonius’ narrative demonstrated how Caligula’s early formation as a man of cruelty and perversion isolated him from those around him. While other men partook in the

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<sup>7</sup> Lit. ‘cruelty.’

<sup>8</sup> *Naturam tamen saevam atque probrosam ne tunc quidem inhibere poterat, quin et animadversionibus poenisque ad supplicium datorum cupidissime interesset et ganeas atque adulteria capillamento celatus et veste longa noctibus obiret ac scaenicas saltandi canendique artes studiosissime appeteret, facile id sane Tiberio patiente, si per has ansuefieri posset ferum eius ingenium.*

<sup>9</sup> *Aliquotiens praedicaret exitio suo omniumque Gaium vivere et se natricem populo Romano, Phaethontem orbi terrarum educare.*” N.B. ‘Phaethon’ refers to the son of Helios in Greek mythology, who in his hubris, attempted to wield the sun-chariot of his father. He was unable to do so, and as the sun descended to the earth, it caused catastrophic damage.

same wantonness, Suetonius' use of the quotation from Tiberius, a man of infamous impropriety, further elevates the extent to which Caligula was, by nature, base.

In addition to his education in *crudelitas*, Suetonius' depiction of Caligula's academic education further elaborates on the failure of his formal education in his formative years. Suetonius states, "As regards to liberal studies he gave little attention to literature but a great deal to oratory"<sup>10</sup> (Gaius, LIII). This lack of education in literature and emphasis on oratory is notable in regard to his subsequent career. Oratory, by nature, is the art of persuasion. Suetonius' mention of Caligula's disregard for history and erudition demonstrates Caligula's urge for isolated personal gain. While clearly oratory is a necessary skill for a leader, Suetonius implies that a potential cause of Caligula's madness was the omission of a well-balanced education that, coupled with a persuasive speaking style, served to feed Caligula's desire for personal success.

Suetonius expands on Caligula's madness by revealing the base nature of his personal relationships. Suetonius asserts that "towards those to whom he was devoted his partiality became madness"<sup>11</sup> (Gaius, LV). Suetonius' assessment of the nature of Caligula's relationships encapsulates the plethora of anecdotal evidence he weaves throughout his narrative to support this claim. True to his reputation, Suetonius vividly recounts Caligula's incest and defilement of his sisters and grandmother. While incestuous relationships were not uncommon among the Roman elite, the language of Suetonius in this passage, along with a later nefarious claim by Caligula that his mother was born of incest from Augustus and his daughter, Julia, illustrates that the incest Caligula engaged in was a great sin. Suetonius also illustrates the obsessive and incestuous relationship of Drusilla (his sister) and Caligula. He further elaborates on the extent of

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<sup>10</sup> "Ex disciplines liberalibus minimum eruditioni, eloquentiae plurimum attendit."

<sup>11</sup> "Quorum vero studio teneretur, omnibus ad insaniam favit."



Caligula's devotion when he recounts the deification of Drusilla following her death. The obsessive fixation for honoring those to whom he was most devoted was shared with another being dear to Caligula - his horse. Suetonius recounts,

He used to send his soldiers on the day before the games and order silence in the neighborhood, to prevent the horse Incitatus from being disturbed. Besides a stall of marble, a manger of ivory, purple blankets and a collar of precious stones, he even gave this horse a house, a troop of slaves and furniture, for the more elegant entertainment of the guests invited in his name; and it is also said that he planned to make him consul.<sup>12</sup> (Gaius, LV)

While the violent and extreme incestual behavior that Caligula partook in isolated his character, his irrational devotion for his horse (which he appears to anthropomorphize in this passage) further illustrated his mental isolation from reality. There were abusive displays of power, heartlessness, and brutality by Caligula in his endless attempt to assert his dominance over the will of others. To those who did not achieve favor with the emperor, Caligula was disdainful and barbaric. He continued his lustful and debauched activities from his youth until his death, displaying throughout arrogance,<sup>13</sup> shamelessness,<sup>14</sup> and innate brutality<sup>15</sup> in his prostituting and treatment of elite men, women, and his own family to other members of the elite class.

In politics, Suetonius describes Caligula as vicious, cruel, and self-absorbed throughout his life to both those of the senatorial class and his close allies alike. He executed members of the Senate with whom he was displeased, mimicking the habit of his mentor Tiberius (Gaius XXVI).

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<sup>12</sup> *"Incitato equo, cuius causa pridie circenses, ne inquietaretur, viciniae silentium per kilites indicere solebat, praeter equile marmoreum et praesaepe eburneum praeterque purpurea teguenta ac monilia e gemmis domum etiam et familiam et suppellectilem dedit, quo lautius nomine eius invitati acciperentur; consulatum quoque traditus destinasse."*

<sup>13</sup> 'Superbia' (Gaius, XVII).

<sup>14</sup> 'Ἀδιαπρηψία' (Gaius, XXIX).

<sup>15</sup> 'Saevitiam ingenii' (Gaius, XXVII).

As a result of his aggression, he garnered little support in his life or his political career. In fact, Caligula's bipolar cruelty and extreme partiality towards those around him further distanced him from the respect and care of the Roman population and those who swore to protect and serve alongside him in his political life. Caligula's political life was erratic, deranged, and unpredictable. From the onset of his reign (as emphasized by Suetonius' characterization of Caligula as a narcissistic *princeps*) Caligula's lust for sole authority in the Principate was fundamental to his legacy. Caligula's famous assertion "Let there be one lord, one King"<sup>16</sup> (Gaius, XXII) not only illustrated to Suetonius' audience the danger he posed to Augustus' 'restored Republic,' but also marked the beginning of his desire for ultimate authority. To this end, Caligula was not satisfied with the role of *imperator* or *princeps*, but instead longed for what his predecessor Augustus had achieved: deification. The means by which Suetonius recounts Caligula's process to accomplish this goal is extensive, and includes everything from Caligula beheading Greek and Roman statues in order to to replace them with his own likeness, to erecting statues and commissioning a bridge over the temple of the deified Augustus. By documenting these acts, Suetonius makes the same point that classicist Christopher J. Simpson makes:

There can be little doubt that Caligula, just like his imperial predecessor, wanted to blur the distinction between a cult already acceptable to the majority of Romans, on the one hand (i.e. that of his *genius* or *numen*), and his manifestation as a "divine" being on the other. Far from rejecting a currently favoured Augustan "restraint," I suggest that Caligula can be clearly seen to have imitated Augustan excess. (Simpson, 1997. 112)

Suetonius shows that his pursuit of Augustan levels of success (and excess) was an effort made by Caligula in order to isolate himself as the greatest Roman figure. While Augustus was deified upon his death, Caligula, in his desire to outshine and outrank his predecessor, deified his living

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<sup>16</sup> "εἷς κοίρανος ἔτω, εἷς βασιλεύς." This is a direct quotation employed by Suetonius taken from (*Iliad*, 23) where Ajax challenges Odysseus to settle a wrestling contest.

*corpus*.<sup>17</sup> Suetonius convinces the reader that Caligula, in his egomania, desired confirmation from all living beings that he was exceptional. In fact, he required the affirmation to the extent that he believed that he ought to be treated as divine.

In addition to his assumed divinity, Caligula exploited his high-ranking political position for the pursuit of personal excess and pleasure. On this matter, which was the habit of all emperors, Suetonius remarks “In reckless extravagance he outdid the prodigals of all time in ingenuity”<sup>18</sup> (Gaius, XXXVII). Aware of his growing thirst for sole authority and extravagance while, at the same time, plagued by his disaffection, the Senate was witness to several of Caligula’s notorious political ventures. While Caligula’s proposition to appoint his horse to the position of consul was one of his most infamous political statements, by the end of his career the peak of his insanity culminated in a single battle, which Suetonius describes,

Finally, as if he intended to bring the way to an end, he drew up a line of battle on the shore of the Ocean, arranging his ballistas and other artillery; and when no one knew or could imagine what he was going to do, he suddenly bade them to gather shells and fill their helmets in the folds of their cloths, calling them ‘spoils from the Ocean, due to the Capitol and Palatine.’<sup>19</sup> (Gaius, XLVI)

While Suetonius’ comical illustration of these events clearly shows that Caligula was deranged and isolated from reality, Caligula’s obsession with the Ocean was a symptom of a greater ailment - one clearly of the mind.

On his mental state, Suetonius remarks that from his youth, “He was sound neither of body or spirit...But was terrified by strange apparitions, once for example dreaming that the

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<sup>17</sup> Lit. ‘body.’

<sup>18</sup> *Neoptatus sumptibus omnium prodigiorum in genia superavit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Postremo quasi perpetraturus bellum, directa acie in litore Oceani ac ballistis machinisque dispositis, nemine gnaro aut opinante quidnam coepturus esset, repente ut conchas legerent galeasque et sinus replerent imperavit, ‘spoilam Oceani,’ vocans ‘Capitolio Palatioque debita.’*

Ocean talked with him”<sup>20</sup> (Gaius, L). Suetonius makes the claim that “I think I may fairly attribute to mental weakness the existence of two exactly opposite faults in the same person, extreme assurance and, on the other hands, excessive timorousness”<sup>21</sup> (Gaius, LI). Suetonius clearly believed that Caligula was plagued by an affliction and isolation of the mind. This instability was noted by Suetonius throughout the work as a means to explain the character of Caligula. His weakness of mind, already impacted by the horror of insanity, culminated in mental weakness. Suetonius purports that the extremities of his confidence and his cowardice were symptoms of mental illness that he exhibited in his career and life, thus causing him to be separate from reality.

At the beginning of the life of “Caligula,” Suetonius foreshadows that Caligula’s education perpetuated a horridness within his nature that grew. As the monster that Caligula became reared its bloodthirsty head upon Rome, untethered by his mental instability and egomania, the ‘Phaethon’ Tiberius feared did, indeed, reign. His assassination at the hands of the Praetorian guard by order of the Senate was inevitable for the survival of the Roman ‘restored Republic.’ Caligula had failed at what Augustus had been able to do. Suetonius’ depiction of Caligula illustrated that the *monstrum* of the people was the result of his own isolation into himself, his cruelty, and his grandeur.

Following the death of Caligula and his successor Claudius (r. 41-54 CE), the young emperor Nero assumed the role of *princeps*. Nero was born Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus to Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus (c. 2 BCE-41CE) and Agrippina the Younger (15-59 CE), sister to Caligula and the to-be wife of Claudius (r. 41-54 CE) following the death of Domitius.

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<sup>20</sup> *Valetudine ei neque corporis neque animi constitit....sed pavisa miris rerum imaginibus, ut qui inter ceteras pelagi quondam speciem conloquentem secum videre sisus sit.*

<sup>21</sup> *Non imerito mentis valitudini attribuerim diversissima in eodem vitia, summam confidentiam et contra nimium mentum.*

Suetonius was highly critical of both Domitius, who he described as “by all parts of his life... detestable”<sup>22</sup> (Nero, V), and Agrippina, on account of her reputation for collusion and manipulation. In the same way manner as he did for Caligula, Suetonius anecdotally remarks that Nero’s father foreshadows his son’s cruelty when Suetonius remarks that Domitius, upon the birth of his son, and “while receiving congratulations from his friends, he said that ‘nothing that was not abominable and a public bane could be born of Agrippina and himself’”<sup>23</sup> (Nero, VI). Suetonius once again heavily emphasizes the destruction that would come later in Nero’s life, and states that even Nero’s tutor, Seneca, was wary of Nero in his youth. Suetonius writes, “They say that on the following night Seneca dreamed that he was teaching Gaius Caesar, and Nero soon proved the dream prophetic by revealing the cruelty of his disposition at the earliest possible opportunity”<sup>24</sup> (Nero, VII). Suetonius makes it clear to the audience that Nero’s upbringing would create a tyrant. Nero’s character is compared to Caligula by both Seneca and by Suetonius, who conclude that he was equally as perverse and fraught with baseness and debauchery. Suetonius illustrates this when he writes, “Petulancy, lewdness, luxury, avarice, and cruelty, he practiced at first with reserve and in private, as if prompted to them only by the folly of youth, but, even then, the world was of opinion that they were the faults of his nature, and not of his age”<sup>25</sup> (Nero, XXVI). Nero is framed in Suetonius’ work as an emperor doomed to failure

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<sup>22</sup> *omnia parte vitae detestibilem.*

<sup>23</sup> *inter gratulationes amicorum negantis quicquam ex se et Agrippina nisi detestabile et malo publico nasci potuisse.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ferrunt Senecam proxima nocte visum sibi per quietem C. Caesari praecipere, ut fiden somnio Nero brevi fecit prodita immanitate naturae quibus primum potuit experimentis.*

<sup>25</sup> *Petulantiam, libidinem, luxuriam, auaritiam, crudelitatem sensim quidem primo et occulte et uelut iuuenili errore exercuit, sed ut tunc quoque dubium nemini foret naturae illa uitia, non aetatis esse.*

as a result of his nature; influenced by both his family and his position as the nephew of Caligula - not to mention his own, individualized, barbarity.

Nero's natural disposition, which mimicked that of his uncle, garnered for him a reputation of cruelty that was indulged not only by Agrippina who sought to establish her son as *princeps*, but also through his education. Although his education was more robust than Caligula's, Nero was isolated by his desire for personal pleasure. He shared little interest in professional politics if it did not suit him personally. Nero was brought up by two tutors, a barber, and a dancer, but valued the performing arts above all. Suetonius remarks on Nero's education when he writes, "He was instructed, when a boy, in the rudiments of almost all the liberal sciences; but his mother diverted him from the study of philosophy, as unsuited to one destined to be an emperor; and his preceptor, Seneca, discouraged him from reading the ancient orators, that he might longer secure his devotion to himself."<sup>26</sup> (Nero, LII). Suetonius is quick to remark on Seneca's role in Nero's education due to the lasting impact that he would have on the young emperor. By remarking on his failure to fully educate Nero, Suetonius makes it clear that Seneca was forcing Nero to rely on him in his coming role as *princeps*. Similarly, Agrippina had a firm control over Nero's education in order to mold him into the ideal emperor. Suetonius suggests that Agrippina and Seneca failed to understand the irrevocable damage that they would cause by the pursuit of their personal agendas, bought at the cost of isolating Nero's education.

Nero's personal relationships, as detailed by Suetonius, were Gaian by all accounts. Suetonius remarks that, "There was not a kind of relationship that he did not violate in his career of crime"<sup>27</sup> (Nero, XXXV). His *crudelitas* spared no victim - neither his sister to whom he was

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<sup>26</sup> *Liberalis disciplinas omnis fere puer attigit. Sed a philosophia eum mater auertit monens imperaturo contrariam esse; a cognitione ueterum oratorum Seneca praeceptor, quo diutius in admiratione sui detineret.*

<sup>27</sup> *Nullum adeo necessitudinis genus est, quod non scelere perculerit.*

married, nor his mother whom he assassinated, nor to Seneca whom he drove to suicide, or his wives and unborn child whom he murdered ... no one was left untouched. To further flesh out the full picture of Nero's cruelty and insanity, Suetonius spares no detail in his accounts of Nero's sexual exploits and marriage to Sporus, whom he castrated, cross-dressed, and married. In addition, Nero's formerly fond relationship with his mother only endured until he assumed authority at the age of sixteen, after which time he became aware of the influence his mother had over him and his political seat. Suetonius details the resulting multiple attempts on her life and documents the great lengths that Nero went to in order to ensure that he alone assumed ultimate authority. Although he finally succeeded, the damage done by his mother to his psyche and ego clearly impacted his future relationships. Suetonius remarks on how many of the prostitutes and women with whom he had entanglements often bore the resemblance of Agrippina (which caused further gossip and disdain for Nero among the *populus* and classes). Because of his barbaric treatment of those around him, his family, the elite, and people of Rome lived in habitual fear of his wrath. This formulated a monstrous identity for him within the gossip and propaganda of the *populus* - towards which "He bore nothing with more patience"<sup>28</sup> (Nero, XXXIX). Suetonius mentions this to illustrate how Nero, aware of his wilting image, was still so consumed by the need for attention that even this negative attention was better for the young *princeps* than none at all.

Nero's personal relationship with the government was also strained. To the senatorial elite, Nero felt nothing but hostility in the latter years of his reign - a stark contrast from the promise to return to an Augustan peace that he made at his inauguration (Nero, X). With regards to Nero's truculent relationship with the governing elite, historian Andrew Gallia remarks on Nero's image, claiming that, "Nero's manifest hostility to the senatorial elite was taken as a sign

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<sup>28</sup>*fuert nihil eum patientibus.*

of insecurity” (Gallia, 43). Suetonius shares this sentiment, and comments on how, because of his insecurity, Nero lashed out at those who questioned his inexperience. The disdain for the emperor by the *populus* was apparent and grew over time as a result of Nero’s increasing lack of consideration and lack of care for leadership, and his emphasis on theater and cruelty. This hatred was intensified as he pursued the idea of a divine Neronian image, continued to incur large expenditures to the detriment of the Senate and *populus*, and pursued a decidedly un-Roman emphasis on Hellenism.

In the beginning of his account of Nero’s reign, Suetonius sets up a stark contrast between his promise of an Augustan age of rulership and the reality to follow. Suetonius writes, “To make his good intentions still more evident, he declared that he would rule according to the principles of Augustus, and he let slip no opportunity for acts of generosity and mercy, or even for displaying his affability”<sup>29</sup> (Nero, X). The desire to be compared favorably to Augustus motivated both Caligula and Nero, as it did many other emperors. Their spectacular failure to succeed therefore appeared more catastrophic by comparison. Nero disregarded the rule of the Senate, jealous of the power that they wielded; a power that he desired to solely possess. Suetonius draws attention to this fact when he writes, “at the formal opening of the work of Isthmus the prayer which he uttered in a loud voice before a great throng was, that the event might rest favorably ‘for himself and the people of Rome,’ thus suppressing any mention of the Senate”<sup>30</sup> (Nero, XXXVII). Nero not only privately considered himself to be solely superior to the Senate, but unabashedly displayed this to the people.

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<sup>29</sup> *Atque ut certiolem adhuc indolem ostenderet, ex Augusti praescriptio imperaturum se professus, neque liberalitatis neque clementiae, ne comitatis quidem exhibendae ullam occasionem omisit.*

<sup>30</sup> *in auspicando opere Isthmi magna frequentia clare ut sibi ac populo R. bene res verteret optabit dissimulata senatus communi.*



To further emphasize Nero's failure to achieve the promise of a unified Augustan system, Suetonius demonstrates that Nero's attention was primarily on public works and games and not on true leadership, which therefore slowly fell into the hands of the Senate. Further feeding into his megalomania, he established the Neronian games, and frequently assumed theatrical roles in his productions, thus forcing all elite men and women to attend and witness his 'greatness.' Nero's love for theatrics rivaled only his love for exorbitant spending. He squandered the savings of the government on the *Domus Aurea*,<sup>31</sup> his own personal palaces, bathhouses, and other luxuries, all bearing a clear influence of Hellenism present throughout their architecture. From Suetonius' characterization, Nero's indulgences in games, architecture, and theater, did not appear to be solely for his own benefit. As John Drinkwater notes,

Nero does not direct his regime, but is rather protected and isolated from it...the imperial administration, as ever, functioned very efficiently during Nero's absence; but such a situation could not persist. The more he was protected by being excluded, the more unpredictable he was bound to be when he insisted on acting on his own. (Drinkwater 2012. 167-8).

The Senate indulged Nero's whims, allowing him to participate in these distractions so that they could seize the opportunity to rule in his absence. Nero, indulged in his gluttony for theater and lust for attention, was ignorant of the growing resentment of the Senate and falsely assumed his authority was impenetrable.

Suetonius categorizes Nero's unpredictability as partially due to the influence of Hellenism, for which Nero clearly showed an affinity. Suetonius attributes Nero's love for not only the Hellenistic model of kingship and authority, but also its architecture, art, and sport, to the influence of Seneca in his early education. His institution of public games in the Hellenic style, his use of Greek, and dressing his warriors as Amazons, are all ways in which Suetonius

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<sup>31</sup> Lit. 'the Golden House'. This was an extravagant palace built by Nero in the heart of Rome following the fire of 64 CE.

illustrates the clear effect of Hellenism in Nero's reign. This focus on Hellenism was unnatural, even for the Roman tradition (which highly valued the past), since it contradicted the Augustan model of *princeps* in favor of Hellenistic monarchical identity: "His 'un-Roman' predilections for Greek culture were becoming abundantly clear, a development trumpeted in self-fulfilling hostile polemic as 'evidence' of diminishing acceptance of his rule." (Mratschek 2013. 56).

There was pride in the Roman establishment, especially since the formation of the Principate. When Nero disregarded the Roman system in favor of the model of Hellenistic monarchs, the public took note. Nero, swept away by the grandeur of the literature about these kings, was consumed by an even deeper desire for authority and infamy which isolated him from the Roman position of *princeps*. This unquenchable longing led him into a great many of his political scandals.

The most notorious political scandal of the Neronian age was the fire of Rome in 64 CE. According to Suetonius, Nero's irritation, megalomania, and erratic thirst for authority influenced the anecdote, which reads,

When someone in a general community said, 'when I am dead, be earth consumed by fire.' he rejoined 'nay, rather while I live', and his actions were wholly in accord. For under cover of displeasure at the ugliness of old buildings and the narrow, crooked streets, he set fire to the city, so openly that several ex consuls did not venture to lay hands on his chamberlains although they caught him on their estates with tow and firebrands, while some granaries near the Golden House, whose room he particularly desired, were demolished by the engines of war and then set on fire, because their walls were of stone.<sup>32</sup> (Nero, XXXVIII)

Suetonius clearly characterizes the insanity, cruelty, and inhumanity of Nero's participation in the catastrophe. Nero's callous desire for material goods and opulence was a result of his

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<sup>32</sup> *Dicente quodam in sermone communi: ἐμοῦ θανόντος γαῖα μειχθήτω πυρί, 'immo,' inquit, 'ἐμοῦ ζῶντος,' planeque ita fecit. nam quasi offensus deformitate ueterum aedificiorum et angustiis flexurisue uicorum, incendit urbem tam palam, ut plerique consulares cubicularios eius cum stuppa taedaque in praediis suis deprehensos non attigerint, et quaedam horrea circa domum Auream, quorum spatium maxime desiderabat, ut bellicis machinis labefacta atque inflammata sint, quod saxeo muro constructa erant.*

delusion of grandeur and authority. This authority, when questioned, triggered absurd and irrational reactions such as the burning of Rome. Nero's drive to illustrate the extent of his authority and power isolated him from a people who once adored him, and shuttered him into the fictionalization of success and power that he had constructed within his mind.

As his fate became clear, the growing anger of the Senate and people flushed him into hiding and despair, "The world, after tolerating such an emperor for little less than fourteen years, at length forsook him"<sup>33</sup> (Nero, XL). When it became evident that Nero was going to be forced to either kill himself or be killed, Nero stood alone, isolated by his own image, unable to even find a willing murderer. Suetonius remarks on this isolation when he writes, "He then endeavoured to find Spicillus, the gladiator, or someone to kill him; but not being able to procure any one, "What!" said he, "have I then neither friend nor foe?"<sup>34</sup> (Nero, XLVII). Even in death, Nero remained as isolated as he reigned. With the suicide of Nero, the Julio-Claudian dynasty which had endured from 27 BCE, also died in a state of isolation and madness.

Like Caligula, the *monstrum* that Nero had become, albeit categorically less vicious than his uncle, fulfilled the prophecy spoken by own father. Nero, indeed "*detestabile et malo publico*,"<sup>35</sup> isolated himself in his corrupted youthful desire to be beloved as a Hellenistic monarch worthy of poetic legacy. Suetonius's dramatic depiction of Nero's reign illustrates the mental isolation of an inexperienced, pretentious, and cruel man whose desires for pleasure, infamy, and entitlement procured a poetic legacy of failure. Much like Caligula, Nero failed to

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<sup>33</sup> *Talem principem paulo minus quattuordecim annos perpessus terrarum orbis tandem destituit.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ac statim spiculum murmillonem velquemlibet alium percussorem, cuius manu periret, requisivit et nemine reperto "ergo ego" inquit "nec amicum habeo nec inimicum?"*

<sup>35</sup> See (Nero, VI).

achieve the Augustan model of *princeps*, isolating himself on the Roman stage of history as a man worthy of hatred.

Suetonius' account of the lives of "Caligula" and "Nero" clearly illustrate two deranged emperors isolated from reality through the duties of *princeps*, and a departure from the accepted norms of morality. Both Nero and Caligula, in their education, were failed by those supporting them: Tiberius for his indulgence of Caligula, and Seneca and Agrippina for their coddling and manipulation of Nero. The relationships that both emperors engaged in illustrated a shared natural affinity for cruelty and entitlement separate from any moral baseline. With respect to their political lives, Caligula's madness and competitiveness with the Augustan model drove him to madness. His desire to be perceived as the sole authority over both mortals and immortals isolated him into a separate realm of reality, of his own creation. Caligula's self-constructed cult failed to garner the affirmation of the *populus*, his egomania sequestered him from the support of the Senate, and his growing mental afflictions drove him to insanity. Similarly, Nero's lust for extravagance led him into isolation from the very government that sought to alleviate the damage of his impulses. His desire for power thrust him far from *primus inter pares*,<sup>36</sup> but rather "Nero's vision of rule was suppressed, and the elite wrote histories that showed their vision of his reign. Nero was no longer the powerful Roman emperor who drew inspiration from the Hellenistic monarchs. He was merely a musician, who fiddled while Rome burned" (Van Overmeire 2012, 779).

In comparing the two emperors, there is no doubt that they are similar with respect to their character, their love and indulgence of power, and their abuse of the influence of *princeps*. While their paths differed in reaching this end, each sought to acquire a level of ultimate authority that was contrary to the actual nature of the role they possessed. Suetonius' account of

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<sup>36</sup> Lit 'first among equals.' This was a distinguished phrase applied to the role of *princeps*.

Caligula is predominantly an anthology of his atrocities, and in creating this narrative he constructs a record of barbarism that isolates his character and person from goodness and reality. Suetonius frames Nero's biography as a comedy in parts and manipulates the way that he uses literary quotations as a means to create a theatrical narrative. He uses dramatization and the art of quotation to illustrate the audacity and madness of his subject, since, "Given his unbridled ambitions as a tragic actor, in which he assimilated, or we should perhaps say devoured, his roles so far as to wear masks of his own face, it is not surprising that most of Nero's quotations are from tragedy" (Mitchell 2015. 351). The character Nero, as Suetonius constructs it, played the role of whatever position he thought benefitted him the most. Suetonius' use of tragedy as quotation within Nero's narrative simply foreshadows the impending doom that Nero would both cause and ultimately suffer.

When examining these two works, it is clear that Suetonius' treatment of Nero and Caligula were uniquely constructed within *The Lives of the Caesars* so as to isolate their characters as irrefutably mad. Suetonius' depictions of the sins of Caligula and Nero are distinctly inexcusable in comparison to his other imperial biographies, most notably of Augustus, Tiberius, and Domitian. While there can be no doubt that Suetonius believed that Nero and Caligula were categorically the most affluent reprobates among the twelve Caesars on account of the effort he went to to detail their sins, it must also be noted that he carefully constructs their failings as emperors with *gravitas*. In the construction of these two narratives, David Wardle states,

If *Tiberius*, *Caligula*, *Nero*, *Galba*, *Vitellius*, and *Domitian* are categorised as Suetonius' imperial villains, with *Diuus Iulius* and *Claudius* as hybrids, it is clear Suetonius does not slavishly adhere to a tyrant stereotype. Only *saevitia* (*creudelitas*) characterises each villain, and *superbia* appears only against Caligula; the model emperors Augustus and Julius Caesar were only adulterous. (Wardle 1994. 74).

In referencing this assessment it is even more clear that, woven throughout the narrative, Augustus is used by Suetonius as a model for imperial success. Examples of this can be found in Caligula's desire to be superior to Augustus, and Nero's opulence and inaugural promise to the Senate.<sup>37</sup> Though not without his own shortcomings, Augustus cannot be reasonably compared to Nero and Caligula. While Augustus dined on lavish meals and indulged his sexual appetites, Suetonius only briefly mentions similar blemishes in his account of Augustus' life. Even though Suetonius describes how Augustus slowly procured more power for himself than what was originally allotted as *imperator* and *princeps*, rather than portraying it as a malicious and nefarious undertaking, he points out that the power was given freely from the Senate. Augustus' acquisition of authority was the envy of Caligula and Nero, and Suetonius clearly shows that Augustus was able to earn it as a result of his generous and appealing character. Caligula and Nero were isolated from the possibility of ever achieving absolute power as a result of their *crudelitas*, and thus it is through their abuse of the role of *princeps* that made them even more monstrous.

Suetonius spends the majority of his narratives focusing on the abhorrent characters of both Caligula and Nero, despite his brief additions of positivity so as "not to use the techniques of deconstruction to paint a picture of these emperors as dark as possible" (Schultz 2019. 323). He lacks the same harsh criticism for Caligula's predecessor (Tiberius) in the *Lives of the Caesars* - his character faults are listed closer towards the end of his life instead of occupying the majority of the narrative. Suetonius, undoubtedly critical of Tiberius' immoral *exercitia*,<sup>38</sup> uses an anecdote at the beginning of Caligula's life (Gaius, XI) to contrast Tiberius' nature from the barbarous animal that Caligula would become. Tiberius, a man so depraved and with such a

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<sup>37</sup> See (Nero, X)

<sup>38</sup> Lit. 'practices.'

“cruel and coldblooded nature”<sup>39</sup> (Tiberius, LVII), feared Caligula to be worse than he, and as a result Suetonius’ depiction of Caligula as a tyrant was amplified, and his sins even more isolated in perversion.

Another of Suetonius’ depraved emperors was Domitian. The life of “Domitian,” which is a considerably shorter work, shares many of the same immoral depictions as “Nero,” but with considerably less care to their potential causes. Suetonius’s life of “Domitian” is a categorical narrative of the licentiousness and debauchery of his reign. When compared to both “Caligula” and “Nero,” - and apart from its length and obvious indulgence of Suetonius’ love for scandal - Domitian’s onerous sins were far from Nero’s or Caligula’s. Notwithstanding his baseness, Suetonius takes care to illustrate the morality of Domitian’s choices and the lack of effect his character had on the fundamental stability of the Roman Principate. Despite Domitian’s behavior and love for the immoral, his sins did not cause fundamental damage to the Roman Principate (unlike Nero or Caligula before him). In fact, Suetonius playfully remarks that following Domitian’s demise, a raven cried “All will be well”<sup>40</sup> (Domitian, XXIII). Domitian’s death ushered in a period of restructuring and rebuilding for the Roman system and introduced beloved emperors who positively contributed to the legacy of the empire. Caligula’s murder illustrated that the stability granted by Augustus in his Principate was easily fractured at the hands of a *princeps*. Nero’s murder fundamentally rocked the Roman world by the ending of the Judio-Claudian dynasty, and ushered the onset of a civil war and a year of four emperors. Suetonius therefore marks the sins of Caligula and Nero as unique when compared to Domitian in order to illustrate that despite their temperament, their damage was irrevocable and, as a result, all would *not* be well.

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<sup>39</sup> *saeva ac lenta naturam*

<sup>40</sup> ἔσται πάντα καλῶς.

Within the narrative of Suetonius' piece, Nero and Caligula were isolated by their madness. These two emperors shared much in common, including a troubled education, deeply flawed personal relationships, and megalomania spurred on by the idealization, expectations, and pressures of the Roman world in general and the Augustan model in specific. Nero and Caligula's insanity endures as a testimony to the danger of imperial rule. Without care, Suetonius intimates that those who are placed into absolute authority are at risk of damaging the delicacy of the Principate. Following the suicide of Nero, Rome fell into a state of chaos with the Julio-Claudian Dynasty destroyed and no heir produced. With the end of the Julio-Claudians came the rise of the Flavian Dynasty, following the aftermath of 69 CE which was "rich in vicissitudes, grim with warfare, torn by civil strife, a tale of horror even during times of peace" (Tacitus, 1.2). While Suetonius' biographies must be read with some reservation due to his perspective and knowledge of the aftermath and his penchant for performative literary style, his work is nevertheless a useful source of documentation. The legacy of Nero and Caligula's madness of isolation has endured for centuries, both within Suetonius and (as a result) within the greater history of the ancient world. Their barbarity, cruelty, and madness contributed to a larger image that Suetonius gladly wove into his performative biographies - for what better entertainment could there be than *monstra*?



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