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The Worst First Citizen

Sarah Passannante

Nero was the fifth emperor of Rome and the last member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.¹ Taking the throne at the age of sixteen, he ruled for just under fourteen years.² In his performance as emperor, he was then and remains today a controversial figure. As emperor, he sponsored many public games and began many public works.³ At these games he compelled some nobles to perform, gaining the ire of the upper classes.⁴ Extant sources--Suetonius, Tacitus, and Cassius Dio, for example--are overwhelmingly negative, accusing him of every flaw a Roman could have, from greed to lust to cruelty. However, these negative sources are all written by wealthy upper class citizens for an audience of other wealthy upper class citizens. There is evidence that his populist style of rule endeared him to the common people. In his life, Nero was warmly welcomed by his people on his return from Naples in 67 C.E., and Pliny, in his panegyric of Trajan, claimed that the people had enjoyed Nero's performances.⁵ This was seen even after his death, where on three different occasions, individuals pretended to be Nero, pretending to have survived his apparent death.⁶ Using this facade, they were able to gain many supporters.⁷ While he may have been liked by the common people, they were not a demographic that left behind much written testimony. As such, only the writings of the hostile upper class survive. When these authors wrote, they strove to portray Nero in a negative light. As a result, he survives in the written memory only as a tyrant. One author who wrote about him as a tyrannous figure was

¹ Champlin, Edward. Nero. Harvard University Press. 2003. Print. Pg. 36.

² Ibid. Pg. 36.

³ Ibid. Pg. 68-73.

⁴ Hurley, Donna W. (trans). Suetonius: The Caesars. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2011. Print. Pg. 235-236.

⁵ Champlin, Edward. 2003. Pg. 67-68.

⁶ Ibid. Pg. 12-15.

⁷ Ibid. Pg. 12-25.

Suetonius. Suetonius portrayed Nero as a tyrannical figure and, in doing so, created a stock figure that he could and did use throughout his biographies to disparage other emperors.

The *princeps* held a place in Roman society between that of a citizen and that of a king.⁸ In Rome, the notion of “monarchy” was despised; the emperor, while an autocrat, had to be sure to portray himself otherwise.⁹ Cassius Dio described Octavian as desiring the title of “Romulus” but taking “Augustus” instead, out of fear of upsetting the people.¹⁰ The Romans could not stand to be ruled by a human king, but could bear a more-than-human autocratic magistrate. Throughout the Julio-Claudian dynasty, of which Nero was a member, there was still no official description or position for the *princeps*.¹¹ It was not until the reign of Vespasian--a period which Suetonius was writing after--that the position of *princeps* was made official, and that the title of *Imperator* was taken formally.¹² Throughout this thesis, I will be using *princeps* and emperor interchangeably.

While there was no job description for the position of “emperor,” certain qualities were still expected of them. He sat at the top of the social hierarchy, and was the figurehead of public honor.¹³ The *princeps* was Rome’s premier citizen--as such, they needed to perform all aspects of citizenship as well as possible.¹⁴ To be a full citizen of Rome was to be a *vir*, a citizen man; to be a good citizen was to successfully perform masculinity.¹⁵ Therefore, to be the emperor was to embody the epitome of male virtue. In *The Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius told the lives of the emperors from birth to death. When portraying certain emperors, Suetonius divided their sections

⁸ Wallace-Hadrill, A. (1982) ‘Civilis princeps: Between Citizen and King’, JRS 72:32–48 Pg. 23, 43-47.

⁹ Shelton, Jo-Ann. *As the Romans Did*. Oxford University Press. 1998. Print. Pg. 227-229.

¹⁰ Ibid. Pg. 227.

¹¹ Boatwright, Mary. Gargola, Daniel. Lenski, Noel. Talbert, Richard. *A Brief History of the Romans*. Oxford University Press. 2014. Pg. 193.

¹² Ibid. Pg. 213-214.

¹³ Edwards, CH. “Unspeakable professions: public performance and prostitution in ancient Rome.” In H, J P, S, M B, editors, *Roman Sexualities*. Princeton University Press. 1997. Pg. 89-90.

¹⁴ Ibid. Pg. 89-90.

¹⁵ Clarke, John. 1998. *Looking at Lovemaking*. University of California Press. Print. Pg. 279.

by good and evil deeds. Nero's Life was divided into recountings of his deeds that Suetonius described as, by section, "irreproachable," "worthy of some praise," and finally, "disgusting acts and criminal deeds."¹⁶ He laid out the "disgusting" section in a way that allowed him to create a negative "type" of an emperor.

To convey whether an emperor was admirable and worthy of replication, or evil and worthy of scorn, Suetonius developed a number of tropes. A trope is a type of literary or rhetorical device; it is a convention where the writer uses a motif they can expect the audience to recognize.¹⁷ Not only can tropes help a reader follow a plot, they can also help readers know who they're meant to sympathize with and who they're meant to dislike. The notion of a trope would have been familiar to Suetonius and his audience; the first book on literary tropes was published long before his time, by Aristotle, in the form of the *Poetics*, a work in which he examined defining traits of various dramatic genera and the tools used within them. More contemporary with Suetonius was Quintilian's *Institutes of Oratory*, where he examines devices he defines as tropes, figures of speech, and figures of thought.¹⁸ Quintilian viewed an understanding of these *schema* as essential, especially for a skilled orator.¹⁹ As someone who worked as an orator before turning to writing,²⁰ Suetonius would have at the very least been familiar with these ideas in the context of rhetoric, if he was not already familiar with their more literary relatives.

Suetonius wrote biography; he wrote narratives and thus used devices to tell those stories. Biography is the account of a person's life, from cradle to grave, often including references to their ancestors. In ancient Rome, biographers examined people's lives and if they should be

¹⁶ Hurley, Donna W. 2011. Pg. xxii.

¹⁷ "trope, n." OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/206679.

¹⁸ Butler, H.E. Loeb Classical Library. 1920-1922. Accessed penelope.uchicago.edu. Book VVI, Ch. 6, Book IX, Ch. 1-3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Book VVI, Ch. 6, Book IX, Ch. 1-3.

²⁰ Hurley, Donna W. 2011. Pg x.

imitated.²¹ When producing collections of biographies, writers would often place depictions of people who lived good lives against people who lived bad lives, as “Juxtaposed examples ask the question ‘What is a good (and by implication bad) poet (or general or philosopher)?’”²² Biographers used the characters of their subjects as tools to teach the reader how to improve their own character.²³ In addition, the private and public selves were not separate; one’s character was simply one’s character, good or bad.

Suetonius was no exception to these genre norms in his set of biographies *The Twelve Caesars*, in which he covers the lives of the first twelve emperors of Rome, from Julius Caesar to Domitian. In this work, Suetonius contrasts “good” emperors and “bad” emperors, providing context for what it meant to be a good--or a bad--emperor. In addition, while writing the *Lives of the Caesars*, Suetonius wrote with an agenda. He had his own opinions on the figures he wrote on, and he was impacted by the political pressures of his time. To make his points, he used various rhetorical devices, tropes among them. He developed his own tropes when necessary to advance his agenda and to make people understand who to root for. He created tropes by having repeated ways of describing a person or scenario that had intent behind it beyond just stating facts, but to evoke certain emotions.

One trope that he cultivated was that of the effeminate tyrant. This trope was narrowly distinct from the archetype of the eastern luxurious tyrant in that it was designed to uniquely be used against Roman individuals. The behaviors used in crafting it were complete inversions of Roman norms; the reason the actions were so heinous was because the target (Nero initially) was an elite Roman. He crafted this trope through his tale of Nero, who he raised up as the epitome of

²¹ Ibid. Pg. xiii.

²² Hurley, Donna W. 2011. Print. xiii.

²³ Gill, Christopher. “The Question of Character-Development: Plutarch and Tacitus.” *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1983, pg. 472.

a tyrant and bad ruler. In *Nero 29*, Suetonius uses this scene to epitomize what a bad emperor looked like, with the intention of providing a framework on how poor emperors' behaved, thus functioning as a rhetorical tool for smearing emperors as tyrants, shaping the way future emperors were written about in the rest of *The Twelve Caesars*, as seen in his Lives of Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Domitian. This scene specifically is crucial as in it, Nero disregards almost every Roman norm. It creates a bite-sized emblem of all the ways in which Nero was unfit to rule. In addition, it is not subtle--all of his failings are out front and on the nose, making it impossible for the reader to miss. Suetonius used this scene to craft his literary archetype of a tyrant as being a man who fails to perform his gender correctly. In Rome, a man was expected to have complete control over himself and over non-men.²⁴ The next step, then, is that the emperor must control himself fully, just as he exercises dominion over his empire. Each aspect displayed in *Nero 29*--passive sexual behavior, public intimacy, lack of self-control, etc.--work together as separate tropes to develop this image of a tyrant. By portraying Nero as effeminate and pathetic, Suetonius is portraying him as unable to control himself, much less an empire. In doing this, Suetonius uses a series of motifs to create a trope he can use to signal an individual as a tyrant without necessarily saying so directly. This feminine, lustful figure is used by Suetonius to characterize Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Domitian as tyrants.

In the past, many have grappled with the historicity of some of the more outlandish claims Suetonius makes, trying to determine whether or not they are true accounts.²⁵ The accuracy of his bibliographies is not the concern of this paper. Rather, the focus will be on determining to what ends he included these scenes. I am interested in his intention behind how

²⁴ Williams, Craig. *Roman Homosexuality*. Oxford University press, 1999. Pg. 155.

²⁵ Hurley, Donna W. 2011. Print. Pg xxvii.

he portrayed the emperors and what insight this gives to what sort of expectations Romans had towards their emperors.

Suam quidem pudicitiam usque adeo prostituit, ut contaminatis paene omnibus membris novissime quasi genus lusus excogitaret, quo ferae pelle contactus emitteretur e cavea virorumque ac feminarum ad stipitem deligatorum inguina invaderet et, cum affatim desaevisset, conficeretur a Doryphoro liberto; cui etiam, sicut ipsi Sporus, ita ipse denupsit, voces quoque et heulatus vim patientium virginum imitatus. Ex nonnullis comperi persuasissimum habuisse eum neminem hominem pudicum aut ulla corporis parte purum esse, verum plerosque dissimulare vitium et callide optegere; ideoque professis apud se obscaenitatem cetera quoque concessisse delicta.

He so prostituted his own chastity that after defiling almost every part of his body, he at last devised a kind of game, in which, covered with the skin of some wild animal, he was let loose from a cage and attacked the private parts of men and women, who were bound to stakes, and when he had sated his mad lust, was dispatched by his freedman Doryphorus; for he was even married to this man in the same way that he himself had married Sporus, going so far as to imitate the cries and lamentations of a maiden being deflowered. I have heard from some men that it was his unshaken conviction that no man was chaste or pure in any part of his body, but that most of them concealed their vices and cleverly drew a veil over them; and that therefore he pardoned all other faults in those who confessed to him their lewdness.²⁶

I will argue that this scene was written to emphasize Nero's worst, least emperor-appropriate qualities. I will begin with a close reading of the scene in which I will through lenses of gender and class examine the various "problematic" aspects of this scene and discuss what, exactly, made them problematic to a Roman audience, drawing on contemporary sources of various genres. I will proceed in the same order which the vices are displayed: inappropriate careers, performing oral sex, being anally penetrated, and male-male marriage. After establishing how these actions violate norms and why they were particularly heinous for

²⁶ Rolfe, J.C. Trans. Lives of the Caesars, The Life of Nero. Loeb Classical Library. 1907. Accessed penelope.uchicago.edu 29.

the emperor to pursue, I will argue that Suetonius used this scene to craft a caricature of a tyrant that he used as a rhetorical device in character assassination against other emperors. I will identify and examine instances of this motif being used in his biographies of Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Domitian.

Performance, Prostitution, and Passivity:

There has been much debate over what exactly is happening in this passage; I will follow the line of thought laid out by Champlin and Powers--that is, that the first half depicts a sexual pantomime of *damnatio ad bestias*, a type of execution where the victim is thrown to wild beasts.^{27, 28} He dresses himself in furs and then “attacks” (*inuaderet*) the genitals of men and women. *Inuaderet* is not the word found in the text; it is simply what has become customary as *euaderet*, the word found in manuscript M, the oldest known copy of *The Caesars*, does not make sense.²⁹ Instead, Powers suggests that *euaderet* is a corruption of *deuoraret*, meaning that the line would read as “[Nero] feasted on their private parts,” in a sexual sense.³⁰ Cassius Dio and Aurelius Victor use similar verbiage, supporting this idea. Cassius Dio described Nero’s action as ἐσθίων, devouring--he was “devouring parts of their bodies.”³¹ This consumptive language would match well with *deuoraret*--feast on their genitals--more so than the simple violence of to attack their genitals--*inuaderet*. Dio relied on the same source as Suetonius, so we would expect to see similar facts and language.³² Aurelius Victor describes Nero as “*genitalia uultu contrectabat*”--“nuzzling their genitals.”³³ Again, the facial, sexual nature of these words match *deuoraret* better than *inuaderet*. Victor drew on Suetonius, possibly before the error in

²⁷ Champlin, Edward. Nero. Harvard University Press. 2003. Print. Pg. 169.

²⁸ Power, Tristan. “Nero in Furs (Suet. Ner. 29).” *Materiali e Discussioni per L'analisi Dei Testi Classici*, no. 73, 2014, pp. 205–209.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Pg. 207.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 207-208.

³¹ *Ibid.* Pg. 206-207.

³² *Ibid.* Pg. 207.

³³ *Ibid.* Pg. 207.

transcription occurred, giving a clue to the original word.³⁴ The writings of Dio and Victor support an interpretation of *euaderet* as a corruption of *deuoraret* instead of *inuaderet*. Therefore, he is not actually “attacking” the bound people’s genitals but instead is “feasting” on them. *Deuoraret* and its cognates were used sexually in other contexts, such as inscriptions, to refer to oral sex.³⁵ Therefore, in this scene, Nero is performing oral sex on the restrained men and women.³⁶

In this scene, Nero is cast as an actor in a pantomime. Sexual pantomimes were popular entertainment at this time, so this idea has roots in contemporary performance.³⁷ This scene greatly resembles the set up of *damnatio ad bestias*. An animal (Nero in furs) is released into an arena and consumes victims who are tied to stakes. This is described as a “game” by Suetonius, indicating that it should not be taken literally--Nero is not actually eating anyone no more than he actually is a wild animal. Instead, he is performing oral sex (as discussed above) on the victims, parodying *damnatio ad bestias*.³⁸ Pythagoras “dispatches” him--*coniceretur*. The *confector* was the attendant at these punishments, in charge of ultimately slaying the animal.³⁹ This is the role in which he is cast. In this game, Nero becomes an actor, playing the role of the wild animal, while the people tied to stakes (possibly slaves) play the roles of the doomed victims, and Pythagoras plays the role of the executioner. For Nero, the role of actor was a socially inappropriate one.

Gladiators, actors, and prostitutes were both *de jure* and *de facto* associated in Rome.⁴⁰ They were seen as epitomes of shameful behaviors; they all sold of themselves.⁴¹ In a similar

³⁴ Ibid. Pg. 207.

³⁵ Ibid. Pg. 207

³⁶ Champlin, Edward. 2003. Print. Pg. 169

³⁷ Clarke, John. 1998. Pg. 211.

³⁸ Champlin, Edward. Pg. 169.

³⁹ Ibid. Pg. 169.

⁴⁰ Edwards CH. 1997. Pg. 66-76.

⁴¹ Ibid. Pg. 83-85.

vein, gladiators and actors were associated with sexually passive men.⁴² All three careers were legally marked with *infames*; a loss of legal rights was conferred upon those who practiced them.⁴³ Men who pursued any of these careers lost their status as a full citizen. They could not stand for local magistracies and had restrictions on their ability to present cases before the praetor; passive men and gladiators could not represent others, and actors could only represent others in exceptional circumstances.⁴⁴ In addition, actors could be beaten circumstantially.⁴⁵ The ability to not be beaten was the hallmark of a Roman citizen; to be allowed to be beaten was to appear as the penetrable slave. In allowing this, actors were telegraphed as available for penetration. In addition, actors were often thought to be prostitutes.⁴⁶

These careers--acting and prostitution especially--were associated with passivity as they inherently involved surrendering control of their bodies; one was selling themselves for the pleasure of others.⁴⁷ Gladiators, in spite of this, were seen as extremely virile and attractive--overly so in fact.⁴⁸ In spite of this, they were still mocked for not having control of their own bodies. Being overly sexual and aggressive was not a good thing; their sexuality made them dangerous to the social hierarchy, as it would be problematic for a low class man like themselves to have sex with a high status women.⁴⁹ Actors, especially pantomime actors, were seen as uniquely feminine.⁵⁰ Pantomime actors had to exist in a state of fluidity, constantly transforming from role to role in each act--this flexibility was anathema to the hardness of masculinity. Their bodies were actively perceived as soft and feminine, St. Cyprian claiming

⁴² Ormand, Kirk. *Controlling Desires*. Praeger Publishers. 2009. Print. Pg. 136.

⁴³ Edwards CH. 1997.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Pg. 72-73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. 73-74.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Pg. 81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Pg. 67.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Pg. 78.

⁵⁰ Lada-Richards, Ismene. "« Corporeal Technologies » in Graeco-Roman Pantomime Dancing." *Corps en Jou.* (2010). Pg. 11

“...the entire honour and vigour of the male gender is softened up because of the dishonour of a sinewless body.”⁵¹ In addition, the men had to portray women, decreasing their masculinity. The dancers’ transitions between male and female placed their gender presentation in constant shifting, unacceptable for the Roman man who is meant to be *druus*--hard and unyielding--and nothing else.⁵² Lucian, in the voice of the character Crato, referred to the art of pantomime dancing as a “trivial, feminine thing,” showing that to pursue this art was not considered a worthy expenditure of time for a man, much less an elite male.⁵³ As a result of these associations, it was less acceptable for citizen men to pursue these careers. Contemporaries discussed how poorly it came across for elite men to become performers, for example, Juvenal chastising a man for pursuing acting, and Tacitus discussing the shame put on those forced to perform under Nero.⁵⁴ Legally and socially, a man who pursued any of these paths was no longer a true *vir*. In this scene, Nero is associated with all three of these types of performers. He performs a mimicry of *damnatio ad bestias*; in his play, he is portrayed as lesser than even a gladiator--he plays the role of the animal attacking the victims. In addition, by putting on a sort of pantomime, he is behaving as an actor. In addition, Suetonius goes so far as to say that Nero “prostituted” his chastity, directly comparing him to a prostitute.

Here, Suetonius is comparing Nero to three categories of men commonly thought of as unmanly, two of which were explicitly perceived as pathetic. Nero is not hard and strong but soft and malleable. The emperor should be firm and in charge--instead, his body, and therefore his will, is weak and bendable. In addition, Suetonius is comparing him to men who, in their careers, sell their bodies. This is wholly inappropriate for a *vir*, even more so an emperor. To the reader,

⁵¹ Ibid. Pg. 12.

⁵² Ibid. Pg. 16-17.

⁵³ Ibid. Pg. 12.

⁵⁴ Edwards, CH. 1997. Pg. 86-87.

this raises the question of if he would sell his body, what else would he sell? Would he sell out the nation? To be placed in the role of actor, prostitute, and gladiator is to be cast as an individual unfit to be trusted with rule. The emperor is the top of the social hierarchy; they have the greatest ability to maintain it, or to destroy it.⁵⁵ In addition, as emperor, he should have *dignitas*; this is incompatible with the *infamia* of these careers he was associated with in this scene. In casting Nero as an actor, gladiator, and prostitute, Suetonius is depicting him as having careless disregard for the entire Roman social structure. Nero is portrayed as making a mockery of the very *mores* he is meant to safeguard as emperor. In addition, this would have especially galled the elite Romans who would read this biography--they resented no longer having as much political power as they had enjoyed under the Republic, and to portray the emperor who subjugated them as playing as the bottom of the social hierarchy would have been infuriating. Nero mocked the very social order he was meant to uphold, threatening the stability of the hierarchy, which would be distressing to Suetonius' fellow elites.

Oral Sex:

By giving oral sex, Nero emasculated himself and damaged his place in the social hierarchy by allowing another person to dominate him. In ancient Rome, while some Romans, namely prostitutes, performed oral sex, it was socially unacceptable for a citizen to perform oral sex, especially for true men.⁵⁶ To perform oral sex was to damage one's place in the sexual hierarchy. The *Carmina Priapea*, a collection of first century CE epigrams about the god Priapus, demonstrate the severity of the stigma against oral sex, evidencing the extent to which it would have been inappropriate for the emperor to perform it.⁵⁷ There is not currently consensus on whether the *Priapea* was written by one author or several, though there is evidence to support

⁵⁵ Ibid. Pg. 89.

⁵⁶ Clarke, John. 1998. Pg. 221-222.

⁵⁷ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Print. Pg. 138-141.

both hypotheses.⁵⁸ The collection is of a comedic nature, at times mocking Priapus' victims, at other times mocking Priapus himself for impotence.^{59,60} These poems varyingly focus on his phallus, his punishment of thieves, and sacrifices to him.⁶¹ 46.3% of the collection's poems are focused on Priapus making threats of punishment against thieves.⁶² These poems are written in the voice of the god, threatening the would-be thieves with various types of forcible penetration. Priapea 13, 22, 28, 35 are some of those poems about threatening thieves, in which they particularly highlight the status of oral sex as shameful for men:

“Bugger the boy, fuck the girl.
For the bearded thief the third degree.” (lit. “a third punishment remains”)

“Indemnities for theft by woman, man, or boy:
Her, pussy, him, head; the last, his ass.”

“You people with dishonest intentions/ Who try to steal from this garden/
You'll be buggered with my yardstick. / If so hard and weighty a
punishment / Fails to dissuade, I'll aim higher.”

“I'll bugger you, thief, for the first offense. / The second time, into the
mouth it goes. / But if you commit a third theft / Your ass will taste my
vengeance -- / And then your mouth again”⁶³

In these four poems, the god lays out precise punishments for those who dare trespass, all involving various degrees of sexual assault, with oral rape being the most severe. For poems 28 and 35, the punishments within scale with the number of offenses. In poem 35, oral rape is the punishment for the second offense, as well as a component of the third offence, suggesting oral

⁵⁸ Goldberg, Christiane, “Priapea”, in: Brill's New Pauly, Antiquity volumes edited by: Hubert Cancik and, Helmuth Schneider, English Edition by: Christine F. Salazar, Classical Tradition volumes edited by: Manfred Landfester, English Edition by: Francis G. Gentry.

⁵⁹ Michalopoulos, Charilaos N. “Disease, Bodily Malfunction, and Laughter in the Priapea.” *Illinois Classical Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Fall 2018. Pg. 420-421, 425.

⁶⁰ Holzberg, Niklas. “Impotence? It Happened to the Best of Them! A Linear Reading of the ‘Corpus Priapeorum.’” *Hermes*, vol. 133, no. 3, pp. 368–381. 2005. Pg. 373-376.

⁶¹ Goldberg, Christiane, “Priapea.”

⁶² Richlin, Amy. *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1992. Pg. 120.

⁶³ Trans. Hubbard, Thomas K. *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*. University of California Press. 2003. Print. Pg. 353.

rape as an even more severe punishment than sodomy. Poem 28 makes this even more clear, with the god saying, “You’ll be buggered with my yardstick. / If so hard and weighty a punishment / Fails to dissuade, I’ll aim higher.” Here, he is directly stating that suffering from *irrumatio* is a worse punishment than anal rape. While this indicates that, for Romans, being penetrated orally was worse than anally, it does not add a gendered component. However, poems 13 and 22 lay out separate consequences for females, boys, and adult men. Instead of scaling with the number of offenses, punishment shifts with gender and age. Females face vaginal rape, boys sodomy, and men oral rape (*irrumatio*). Each punishment is tailored to the social norms of each category; the god must threaten thieves with something that will frighten them too much to attempt to steal. The fact that oral sex would be used as the ultimate threat against a male thief indicates the severity of the offense of oral sex for a man specifically; that is, as an action, it is gendered in its status. As Ormand observes, in poems 13 and 28, the word *irrumatio* is never used, suggesting that perhaps it is too vulgar for even the god to say.⁶⁴ This further emphasizes how disgusting the idea of a man performing oral sex was for the man performing it. Priapea 13, 22, 28, and 35 lay out the idea that oral sex was especially bad for a Roman man, demonstrating that it was problematic for Nero to perform it.

The degree to which oral sex was shameful for a Roman man is further seen in Quintilian 11.1.84, within a work where he is giving orators guidance on how to deliver cases, the *Institutes of Oratory*:

There is a greater trouble when one makes a complaint concerning shameful matters, such as an act of sexual immorality, especially among males, or an act of oral violation. I do not even propose the victim speaking: for what would be appropriate for him other than groans, tears, and cursing of his life, so that the judge could understand his grief rather than hear it. But the advocate will also have to express himself similarly,

⁶⁴ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 139.

since it is more shameful for those having suffered this kind of injury to confess it than those who dared to do it.⁶⁵

In this passage, Quintilian describes being orally assaulted as the deepest shame, to the extent that it would be inappropriate for the victim to even try to express their pain in words. Notably, he states that it is more shameful to be the victim than the perpetrator, even though the victim did not do anything wrong. Notably, Quintilian refers to the victim as confessing his injury. This verbiage is that of one admitting to a crime; for a Roman man, to be orally raped is to sin against their gender, even if against their will. To be orally raped was to be utterly dominated and shamed by another, thereby making it especially humiliating for the “impenetrable” man.

Oral sex did exist in Rome--outside of literature, both graffiti and art reference it--it simply was not an appropriate activity for elite Romans. Graffiti in Pompeii features references to the prices of male and female prostitutes charged for performing oral.⁶⁶ One unique feature is a series of wall paintings from the suburban baths of Pompeii depict both cunnilingus and fellatio, both alone and in group sex settings.⁶⁷ The suburban baths were unique in that they did not have separate changing rooms for men and women--they used the same room, perhaps at different times. Therefore, the room had to be decorated to both their tastes, as both genders would view it throughout their time using the baths.⁶⁸ The main wall paintings depict various scenes of sexual activity, and each painting is meant to amuse the viewer, in some cases evoking different laughs from each gender.⁶⁹ In addition, each piece increases in perversion, beginning with a depiction of simple male-female penetrative sex in scene I, cumulating in a unique M-M-F-F foursome in scene VII.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Trans. Hubbard, Thomas K. 2003. Pg.429.

⁶⁶ Clarke, John. 1998. Pg. 226.

⁶⁷ Clarke, John. 1998. Pg. 212-232

⁶⁸ Ibid. Pg. 213.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Pg. 213, 226-229.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Pg. 227.

Scene IV depicts a small man performing cunnilingus on a larger woman.⁷¹ It is unique among preserved images--while we have some images of mutual oral stimulation, we have no other images of a man performing cunnilingus unreciprocally.⁷² Here, in this painting, the artist turns several artistic tropes on their head, emphasizing the ridiculousness of the scene. To begin with, the man is portrayed as smaller than the woman. Men were generally portrayed as larger than women in this style of art. By portraying him as small, the artist decreases his potential for an air of dominance. In addition, he is fully clothed, while she is completely nude, except for some jewelry. Usually, in scenes of a sexual nature, men are completely naked and women are clothed.⁷³ Also of note, his eyes are bugging out, indicating his enthusiasm to be performing oral sex, while the woman's face is blank--it seems like she is tolerating his actions more than demanding them.⁷⁴ These artistic inversions support the power inversion integral of the type sex occurring. In portraying the man as small, clothed, and overexcited, the artist has created an image that would be ridiculous to both male and female Roman viewers. The man is, artistically and sexually, rendered as a woman. This piece was meant to make the viewer laugh in its total inversion of the social order; the idea of a man being completely passive to a woman--and excited to do it--was humorous.

Scene VII of the suburban baths is also of note. In this painting, a man anally penetrates another man, who orally penetrates a woman, who is having cunnilingus performed on her by another woman.⁷⁵ As the series of scenes as a whole increases in perversion, so does the chain of participants in this foursome, going from the perfectly valid, to the utterly debased. The man who is penetrating the other man is raising his right arm, a trope artists used to indicate a victorious

⁷¹ Ibid. Pg. 223-225.

⁷² Ibid. Pg. 224.

⁷³ Ibid. Pg. 226.

⁷⁴ Ibid. Pg. 226.

⁷⁵ Ibid. Pg. 235-236.

general.⁷⁶ Here, he is victorious not on the field of battle, but on the field of love--in penetrating without being penetrated, he is attaining the maximum amount of sexual satisfaction with the lowest amount of sexual debasement.⁷⁷ While the other man succeeds in obtaining some legitimate sexual pleasure by receiving fellatio, he loses his status as a full man in being penetrated, preventing him in being victorious like the other man. However, he is in better shape than the women, who both perform oral sex. The first woman performs fellatio, afflicting her with oral impurity; however, she receives some sexual pleasure from the other woman.⁷⁸ The last woman in the chain gets the shortest end of the stick. She would be laughed at by both men and women as she is the only one who is being debased--in her case, by performing cunnilingus--without receiving any sexual pleasure.⁷⁹ This painting “ranks” the sex acts within it by debasement in order of appearance--the penetrating men is completely valid, victorious even; the penetrated man is worse off, but receives sexual pleasure through fellatio; the first woman is suffers from *irrumatio* but receives oral sex; the last woman is forced to be a cunnilinctor and receive no respite. In doing this, the artist reaffirms the hierarchy of sexual acts, placing oral sex, especially cunnilingus, at the bottom.

In ancient Rome, there was a cultural fixation on the idea of oral purity, in part due to the mouth's use in oration and in friendly greetings in the form of kisses.⁸⁰ Performing oral sex dirtied the mouth and rendered one impure.⁸¹ This resulting impurity was thought to be miasma-like, that it would spread out from the unclean individual and infect other members of society.⁸² These factors increased the stigma of oral sex--not only did it damage one's own self,

⁷⁶ Ibid. Pg. 235-236.

⁷⁷ Ibid. Pg. 236.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Pg. 236-237.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Pg. 230.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Pg. 220.

⁸¹ Ibid. Pg. 220-222.

⁸² Ibid. Pg. 222.

but it threatened others as well. In performing oral sex, Nero makes his mouth impure. As emperor, this is uniquely problematic. He needs to have a pure mouth to fulfill his duties. He needs to make decrees to the people, he needs to perform the duties of the censor, he needs to speak with foreign dignitaries, and he must perform the duties of pontifex maximus. All of these positions require the highest degree of oral purity; because he is sullied, he can not adequately perform them. In addition, because of its miasma-like nature and Nero's high position, he would spread impurity among the elites, or even the whole empire.

In *Nero 29*, Nero performs oral sex on bound individuals. It is unclear whether or not he performed this sexual pantomime in public or private. To me, it reads as likely public for several reasons. First, it was a parody of *damnatio ad bestias*. *Damnatio ad bestias* was generally a public affair and prime entertainment for the masses--it was basically always an affair with an audience.⁸³ Logistically, there would have been a limited number of spaces where Nero could set up stakes for his victims and a cage for him to be released from--it likely would have had to be in a pre-existing arena. In addition, it is paired with Nero's marriage to Pythagoras, which would have been a major production with guests. These pieces of evidence suggest, but do not confirm, that this was a public event.

It is significant that his "victims" were a mixed-gender group--it means he performed both cunnilingus and fellatio, which have their own unique consequences. To perform oral sex was to be dominated by the "penetrator." In light of this, the fact that he is depicted performing cunnilingus is of special note. Cunnilingus was seen as especially emasculating; it places a woman as dominant over the man.⁸⁴ Nero submits himself before multiple women. He is not only rendered not a *vir*, but less than a woman. Only a true *vir* has the moral qualities necessary to run

⁸³ Christesen, Paul, and Donald G. Kyle, eds. *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013. Pg. 381, 389-390

⁸⁴ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 254, 258.

an empire, and Nero willingly took on a status lower than a woman. Nero was portrayed willingly and publicly performing an act that was thought to be completely and utterly humiliating; in doing so, Suetonius established him as being fully aberrant from proper manhood. For a man to be orally penetrated is the deepest shame; it is more shameful for a victim to admit it in the court of law while seeking recompense than it is for the perpetrator if he is caught.⁸⁵ In spite of this, Nero performed it, possibly in public.

Anal Penetration

Nero was anally penetrated by his freedman, Pythagoras, which was unacceptable behavior on grounds of gender, age, and status. We know from other sources (Tacitus, Cassius Dio) that “Doryphoros” was actually named Pythagoras. Nero did have a freedman named Doryphoros, but he died two years prior to the events in this passage.⁸⁶ While it is possible that Suetonius could have gotten the name wrong, as Champlin and Powers both point out, it is more likely that *doryphoros* (“Spear-bearer”) was a nickname, as the word was associated with tyrants’ bodyguards.^{87, 88} Masculinity was a matter of control and domination and could be reinforced--or undermined--by one’s sexual behaviors.⁸⁹ Ideas of sexuality were not the same in ancient Rome as in modern America; ideas of homosexuality and heterosexuality did not exist as they do today.⁹⁰ The gender of the object of one’s desires was less important than whether one was the object of desire or the objectifier.⁹¹ In ancient Rome, it was unacceptable for an adult man to be penetrated; a real man was never dominated. Sexual behaviors were an important part of the policing of the performance of gender. To be a “real” man, a *vir*, one was expected to have

⁸⁵ Quintilian. Trans. Hubbard, Thomas K. 2003. Pg. 429.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Champlin, Edward. 2003. Print. Pg. 169.

⁸⁸ Power, Tristan. 2014. pp. 206.

⁸⁹ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 140-141.

⁹⁰ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 260-261.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* Pg. 260-261.

certain kinds of sex. A *vir* could penetrate men or women anally, orally, or vaginally.⁹² Williams states that “Roman assumptions about masculine identity rested...on a binary opposition: men, the penetrators, as opposed to everyone else, the penetrated. The penetrated other included women, boys, and slaves; adult Roman men who displayed a desire to be penetrated were consequently labeled deviants and anomalies.”⁹³ An adult man could desire to penetrate other men; he just could not desire to be penetrated himself. Williams refers to the primacy of men needing to be the penetrators as the “prime directive” of Roman sexuality.⁹⁴

The “penetrated-penetrator” division results in a definition of gender along active partner-passive partner lines. This dichotomy consists of two categories--men, and everyone else. For a man, his normative sexual partners were women, girls, and boys--not men of the same age. It was not acceptable to engage in casual sex with freeborn Romans, freeborn Roman boys even less so. Penetrating a freeborn boy was considered *stuprum*, a crime.⁹⁵ *Struprum* was a term that, in a legal context, referred to sex with an unallowable partner, and violated the *pudicitia* (the chastity) of the victim.⁹⁶ While they were acceptable objects of desire, it may be shameful for the boy later in life to have been penetrated. A common tactic to slander a political opponent was to accuse him of having been penetrated as a boy; it was thought that it could impact one for the rest of their life.⁹⁷

In Rome, men were meant to have certain virtues. One of these was *virtus*. Williams asserts that though it can be translated etymologically as “manliness,” it was used to refer to a number of masculinely desirable traits and could instead be translated as “virtue” or “valor.”⁹⁸

⁹² Parker, HN. “The Teratogenic Grid.” In H, J P, S, M B, editors, Roman Sexualities. Princeton University Press. 1997.

⁹³ Williams, Craig. Roman Homosexuality. Oxford University press, 1999. Pg. 7.

⁹⁴ Ibid. Pg. 18

⁹⁵ Skinner, MB. In H, J P, S, M B, editors, Roman Sexualities. Princeton University Press. 1997.

⁹⁶ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 176-177.

⁹⁷ Skinner, MB. 1997.

⁹⁸ Williams, Craig. 1999. Pg. 139, 146.

Virtus was something men were expected to have and exceptional women could achieve--this trait was admirable in both men and women, though it was defined differently for between the genders and could only rarely be achieved by women.⁹⁹ However, *mollis*, the feminine equivalent, was not cross-desirable; in fact, it was explicitly bad in men.¹⁰⁰ Men were expected to be hard, *durus*. Roman men were expected to have a certain ruggedness--they should not shave too much or put in too much effort to their hair and clothes.¹⁰¹ A man should not overindulge in perfumes or make up, even if the goal is to attract women.¹⁰² In overindulging, they become soft or *mollis*. To be soft was the antithesis of masculinity; it was an exclusively feminine trait. To be *durus* was to be strong, dominant and a man; to be soft was to be weak and passive. Men could not be aligned with womanhood in any way and still be considered a good man; to be soft was the antithesis of what it meant to be a man in Rome. One notable quality was *pudicitia*, or sexual chastity.¹⁰³ *Pudicitia* was aspirational for women, the feminine *virtus*--they could earn praise for having outstanding *pudicitia*.¹⁰⁴ Men, however, were slightly different. They were expected to have *pudicitia*--it was not something worthy of praise, but a virtue that they were expected to possess as a bare minimum.¹⁰⁵

To be an adult man who was penetrated had specific negative associations in Rome regarding control. In one of his poems (Martial 2.51), Martial describes a passive man who lacks all self-control; whenever he has any money, he spends it on active prostitutes, even to the point of going hungry.¹⁰⁶ He lacks control of his own body while being penetrated and, as a result of the same character defect that causes him to crave that, lacks control of his spending, even at the

⁹⁹ Ibid. Pg. 145-146.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Pg. 146.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Pg. 141.

¹⁰² Ibid. Pg. 141-142.

¹⁰³ Noreña, C. 'Hadrian's Chastity', *Phoenix* 61: 296-317. 2007. Pg. 297=298.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Pg. 298-299.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Pg. 299-300.

¹⁰⁶ Trans. Hubbard, Thomas K. 2003. Print. Pg. 424.

detriment of his own health. This was thought to be fact for passive men in Rome; to be dominated sexually was to be controlled by another, as well as their own desires. Musonius Rufus, a Stoic philosopher, disparaged the idea of excessive sex on similar grounds. To partake in sex for any reason other than reproduction, even with one's spouse, was unacceptable. To do so was to lack proper self-control and served as a "...grave indictment of manhood."¹⁰⁷ While he was a Stoic and therefore more of a hardliner than the general population may have been, his ideas were in line with what was thought of as normative among Romans.¹⁰⁸ If one could not control their sexual desires, they could not control themselves and were not a proper man. In the Priapea, discussed earlier, Priapus, the god of gardens, fertility, and male genitals, rapes trespassers to dissuade them from stealing from his garden. In doing so, he asserts his dominance over them.¹⁰⁹ A Roman man was meant to be aggressive and assertive. A man was one who used sex as a weapon to assert himself over others--it was embarrassing, undesirable to be penetrated as a man; doing so put one in the weaker, passive position, sexually and socially.¹¹⁰ Men were expected to be dominant in all spheres of their lives, and to rule over all non-men. Roman masculinity focused on control; therefore, to lapse in manliness was to lapse in control.

In addition, there are class-based associations with penetration. In Rome, citizens could not be beaten, but slaves could be, and, in addition to being beatable, slaves were seen as available sexual objects.¹¹¹ Ormand asserts that therefore, "a citizen who was beaten or penetrated, then, ran the risk of slipping in the class structure of being taken, quite literally, for a slave."¹¹² Citizens took steps to avoid such confusion. For example, citizen boys wore the *bulla*, a type of amulet. This marked them as citizens and thus sexually unavailable. Plutarch suggested

¹⁰⁷ Trans. Hubbard, Thomas K. 2003. Print. Pg. 394-395.

¹⁰⁸ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 222.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Pg. 138-141.

¹¹⁰ Williams, Craig. 1999. Pg. 155.

¹¹¹ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 135-136.

¹¹² Ibid. Pg. 136.

that this was why they were invented, so that they could be easily identified as unavailable when nude.¹¹³ One exception to the unbeatability of citizens were soldiers, who could be beaten but only within a very specific framework.¹¹⁴ In addition, while they could be beaten, they could not be penetrated; the story of a soldier who killed his commanding officer for trying to violate him was held up as an act of honor, worthy of praise.¹¹⁵ This specific framework--only being able to be beaten with a vine staff--was another way of distinguishing between a penetrable slave from an inviolable citizen man,

In *The Annals*, Tacitus recounts the trial of Valerius; “Suillius accused Valerius of corrupting the soldiers, asserting that with money and stuprum he had bound them to himself for the purpose of committing every crime; of adultery with Poppaea; and finally of softness of body (*mollis*). At this the defendant broke his silence and burst out: ‘Suillius, cross-examine your sons: they will confess that I am a man.’”¹¹⁶ Here, Valerius silently endures accusations of adultery and *stuprum*, but snaps when accused of being *mollis*. It is significant that to be called *mollis* is a bridge too far; it emphasises how severe of an accusation it was, to outweigh even *stuprum*, a crime, in magnitude.¹¹⁷ In response, Valerius suggests that he is not *mollis* as he has penetrated Suillius’, his accuser’s, sons. To defend his manhood, he claims to penetrate--eg. he is a *vir* because he penetrates. He penetrates, so he is not *mollis*, but *durus*. This reaffirms the significance of both penetration and being soft in the dynamics of Roman masculinity.

Martial, Musonius Rufus, the Priapea, and Tacitus, while all writing in different genres for different purposes, reveal coherent truths about masculinity in Rome. For a man to be *mollis* is unacceptable; to be *durus* is good. In addition, a man should have *pudicitia*--it is not

¹¹³ Fagan, Garret G. *Bathing in Public in the Roman World*. The University of Michigan Press. 2002. Pg. 211-212.

¹¹⁴ Ormand, 2009. Pg. 136.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Pg. 136.

¹¹⁶ Tacitus. *The Annals*. 11.2 Trans. J. C. Yardley. Oxford University Press. 2008. Pg. 215.

¹¹⁷ Williams, Craig. 1999. Pg. 180-182.

necessarily worthy of praise, but it is needed. If a man lacks it, he is less morally sound than a woman, which is unacceptable. For a Roman man, penetration is not merely sexual, but a means through which they can assert their manhood and their dominance over others.¹¹⁸ To be penetrated was to be controlled by another person and made lesser. In addition, to be penetrated was to sacrifice the inviolability of the body of a full Roman--to become less than a citizen. A man who played the passive role by choice was not merely deviant, but not really a *vir* at all.

As the chief specimen of Roman *mores*, the emperor should be the foremost example of manhood; yet, he, in this scene, violates all of these rules. As the emperor should rule over everyone, he should adhere strictly to the prime directive. In portraying Nero as sexually passive, Suetonius is casting him as someone who is dominated by others. The emperor should dominate his subjects and thus should be able to lead them to subjugate other peoples; if the emperor is under the dominion of a freedman, he cannot conquer others. Penetration also plays a role in perceptions of self-control; one who was passive in sex would be perceived to lack self-control. The emperor should have full control of himself; instead, he was controlled by his desires and dominated by his active partner. In casting these aspersions, Suetonius suggests that if the emperor cannot control himself, he cannot control his nation and is an unfit ruler. In addition, if Nero was *mollis*, he could not lead a nation of *durus* men. Just as men should not obey a woman, they should not obey a man who is *mollis*, which renders Nero unable to be emperor. Further, *pudicitia* was a basic component of being a man--it was not even aspirational, it was simply expected. In spite of that, Nero flouts it, abusing it by playing the passive role in public. In this, he is not even a woman, but less than one, rendering him further unfit to lead a nation of manly men.

¹¹⁸ Williams, Craig. 1999. Pg. 155.

Male-Male Marriage:

After describing the mimicry of *damnatio ad bestias*, Suetonius continues, describing how Nero and Pythagoras married, with Nero “playing the part of the bride”--that is to say, the passive role. Not only was Nero penetrated by Pythagoras, but he was “married” to him. Nero violated acceptable behaviors in marrying a man. To understand how Nero violated norms, it is necessary to understand Roman marriage customs. Laws dictated who could get married, and to whom. For a couple to have *conubium*, to qualify to marry, they had to, at a minimum, both be Roman citizens, be old enough, and not be too closely related.¹¹⁹ In addition to these rules, further restrictions were put in place. Under Augustus, it became illegal for elites to marry actresses, the daughters of actors, gladiators, and pimps, and Ulpian attested to the fact that elites could not legally marry women of ill repute.¹²⁰ The essential elements of a Roman wedding were relatively few; they seemed to generally feature torches, a bridal veil, a wedding bed, and a procession, the public procession appearing to be of special importance.^{121, 122}

The invective poet Juvenal disparaged the idea of same-sex marriage, writing:

One says, ‘I must attend a ceremony tomorrow, early in the morning, in the Quirinal valley.’ ‘What is the reason for the ceremony?’ ‘Why do you ask? A friend takes a husband; not many are invited.’ Should we live long enough, it will come to be that these things are done openly; they will want them reported in the daily news. Meanwhile one great problem remains for these brides: they are not able to give birth, and so keep the affections of their husbands. But it is better, that nature does not give jurisdiction over their bodies to these souls; they die sterile.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Hersch, Karen K. *The Roman Wedding: Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pg. 20.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 21.

¹²¹ Hersch, Karen K. “INTRODUCTION TO THE ROMAN WEDDING: TWO CASE STUDIES.” *The Classical Journal*, vol. 109, no. 2, pp. 223–232. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5184/classicalj. 2014. Pg. 228-229.

¹²² *Ibid.* Pg. 18.

¹²³ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 259-260.

Juvenal suggested that, given time, Roman society would degrade to the point that men will often marry other men. In current society, such behavior is hidden away. In the future Juvenal decries, it will no longer be in the shadows but done openly, even “reported in the daily news.” This establishes that such activities should not be publicized, but hidden. He fears they will come to be treated in the same way as “normal” marriages. Juvenal critiques a specific aspect of these couplings; namely, that they cannot produce children. The idea of uplifting marriage, specifically as a method of producing legal children, as a cultural norm was further enshrined in law, in the Julian marriage law, which granted benefits to men and women who marry and have children.¹²⁴ Male-male unions, Juvenal points out, cannot procreate. As a result, these “brides” cannot keep their husbands’ loyalty. In addition to issues of reproduction, for one man to marry another, one had to play the role of the bride.¹²⁵ By defining roles along a bride-husband axis, Juvenal is defining gender roles and therefore sexual roles in these marriages. To be the bride in a male-male marriage was unacceptable for two reasons. First, it was demeaning to one’s manhood to equate himself with a woman. Second, one member of the pair had to play the passive role--as Juvenal gives a dichotomy of husbands and brides, and places brides in the (failed) childbearing role, the man who is the bride is surely the one who is assigned the passive sexual position. In addition, by taking the passive role of bride, a man would have to submit to his husband’s rule--this would violate the tenant of male domination.

Suetonius compares this marriage to Nero’s marriage to Sporus, where Nero played the role of husband, and Sporus played the role of wife. Sporus was a male slave who Nero had castrated and then married in a proper ceremony, with witnesses and all the appropriate marital trappings.¹²⁶ After the ceremony, Nero proceeded to treat him as his wife, dressing him in the

¹²⁴ Ibid. Pg. 129-130.

¹²⁵ Ibid. Pg. 259.

¹²⁶ Hurley, Donna W. (trans). 2011. Pg. 245.

attire of an imperial woman and appearing with him in public as his spouse.¹²⁷ Therefore, Nero being married to Pythagoras in the same way he married Sporus suggests that he had a public ceremony--or at least one with witnesses--and had all the necessary trapping of matrimony, including appropriate dress and perhaps even dowry. Assuming he was following Roman wedding norms, Nero would have celebrated with a public procession. This would match what is attested to in Tacitus, who claims that Nero had a full wedding ceremony, mentioning all of the standard accoutrements.¹²⁸ Nero is described as “going so far as to imitate the cries and lamentations of a maiden being deflowered,” suggesting that he made use of the nuptial bed at this public ceremony.¹²⁹ After his public wedding, Nero and Pythagoras are described as consummating their marriage in a setting sufficiently public for others to be privy to his cries. If Nero truly behaved in his marriage with Pythagoras as he did with Sporus, that would suggest that they appeared in public together as husband and wife, with Nero cast as the empress, like Sporus, and Pythagoras the emperor.

As emperor, Nero should be the model of a good husband. He should have a single freeborn wife and children, in accordance with his own laws. While he did have, at times, a regular wife, it was unacceptable that he played the role of a wife. Instead of maintaining his masculine positionality, he plays the role of wife to a husband. This is problematic, as he is therefore implied to play the passive role in sex--he is dominated by another person. Further, this sex occurs in a public or semi-public setting. The ceremony itself was public and others were able to hear Nero at the very least, indicating a complete lack of modesty. This degree of exposure violated all norms of modesty and *dignitas* expected of the emperor. In addition to the violation of gender-based marriage norms, Nero further violated Roman mores by marrying a

¹²⁷ Ibid. Pg. 245.

¹²⁸ Tacitus. *The Annals*. 15.37. Trans. J. C. Yardley. 2008. Pg. 356.

¹²⁹ Hurley, Donna W. (trans). 2011. Pg. 246.

freedman. While it was acceptable for a man to be the active partner with people from various social classes in sexual acts, it was not acceptable or legal to marry across these class lines.^{130, 131} In marrying a freedman, Nero would be marking him as his social equal on the class level.¹³² It is already problematic for the emperor to declare a mere freedman his equal, but it is worse, as Nero would be playing the role of the bride--the weaker, lower status role. Again, this places Pythagoras the former slave in higher status than Nero the emperor. To be the bride is to be under the control of the husband; Nero would be placing himself at the mercy of a freedman. To be married as a husband is described as *ducere uxorem*--to lead a wife.¹³³ In becoming a bride, Nero is abdicating his leadership--instead, he is being led by Pythagoras. In writing this, Suetonius is suggesting that instead of Nero the emperor controlling himself and leading Rome, Pythagoras the mere freedman is holding the reins.

Beyond Nero

Suetonius used Nero to create a negative “type.” He crafted a new rhetorical tyrant who was effeminate, sexually passive, lacked control over himself or others, and was associated with careers marked with *infamia*. He used this trope throughout the *Lives of the Caesars*, most notably in the *Lives* of Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Domitian. In his attacks on other emperors, Suetonius does not need to use every piece of this framework every time; broken down, the distinct qualities of the rhetorical tyrant exemplified in this scene function effectively as separate weapons due to their connection to the broad image of the Neronian rhetorical tyrant. He uses the smears to damage their characters and make them seem like inadequate rulers. It is important to note that, in life, Otho and Vitellius purposefully invoked their connections to Nero to ride the

¹³⁰ Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 232

¹³¹ Hersch, Karen K. 2010. Pg. 18, 20.

¹³² Ormand, Kirk. 2009. Pg. 232.

¹³³ Hersch, Karen K. 2010. Pg. 16.

coattails of his post-mortem popularity with the Roman populace.¹³⁴ After taking the throne, Otho put Nero's and Poppaea's portraits back up and took steps to complete the Domus Aurea.¹³⁵ He even went as far as to take "Nero" as his cognomen.¹³⁶ Vitellius similarly connected himself, making sacrifices to Nero's spirit and allowed for his songs to be performed in public again.¹³⁷ While their connections to Nero in life allowed them to gain the favor of the common people, after death, Suetonius was able to twist their connections into negative traits, denigrating them in the eyes of the elites.

Suetonius cast Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Domitian as bad emperors through the use of the trope of the Neronian tyrant. In addition, their connection to Nero is enhanced by the fact that three of the four passages directly mention Nero, keeping him in the forefront of the reader's mind. The emperors are connected with various parts of the Neronian framework. First, Suetonius portrays Galba as of questionable masculinity. He is unable to control his sexual desires, having unusual targets of desire, and potentially being passive. Then, Otho is portrayed as having inappropriate sexual habits, being passive and effeminate. He is shown to be passive sexually to Nero. In addition, he has inappropriate grooming habits associated with passivity, removing his body hair and making an effort to never have a beard. Like Nero, he is occupying a womanly space. Next, Vitellius is portrayed to be sexually passive at times. Like Nero with Pythagoras, Vitellius is sexually passive to Asiaticus, a freedman. Finally, Domitian is sexually passive and implied to behaving as a prostitute. Domitian is passive to two men, Claudius Pollio and Nerva, similar to how Nero was sexually passive to Pythagoras. At times in his passivity, he is made out to be like a prostitute, offering sex in exchange for money and political power. This

¹³⁴ Varner, Eric. "Nero's Memory in Flavian Rome." *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2017. Pg. 238.

¹³⁵ Hurley, Donna W. 2011. Pg. 255.

¹³⁶ Varner, Eric. 2017. Pg. 238.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* Pg. 238.

connection to prostitution is similar to Nero's accusations of acting as an actor and gladiator, as these three careers were connected in *infamia*. At other times, he is implied to, while emperor, have been passive in sex to Nerva out of simply enjoying it, like how Nero pursued penetration as emperor out of pleasure. In addition, he has inappropriate relationships with prostitutes, depilating them and socializing with them while swimming. He places himself as an equal to or below them, similar to how Nero performed cunnilingus on women and was passive and played the role of wife to a freedman. While not every aspect of the framework is used in each instance, these emperors were made out to be bad emperors through the application of Neronian tropes.

Galba

Suetonius used the tropes developed in *Nero 29* to smear Galba as being an inadequate ruler. This can be seen in *Galba 22*:

He was more inclined to unnatural desire, and in gratifying it preferred full-grown, strong men. They say that when Icelus, one of his old-time favourites, brought him news in Spain of Nero's death, he not only received him openly with the fondest kisses, but begged him to prepare himself with delay and took him one side.

Libidinis in mares pronior et eos non nisi praeduros exoletosque: ferebant in Hispania Icelum e veteribus concubinis de Neronis exitu nuntiantem non modo artissimis osculis palam exceptum ab eo, sed ut sine mora velleretur oratum atque seductum.

In this passage, Suetonius uses the trope of the Neronian tyrant to cast Galba as an inadequate ruler, portraying him as possibly passive and a slave to his desires. Suetonius sets the tone for the passage quickly, starting the sentence with "*libidinis*," a conjugation of *libido*. This was not a neutral word but instead a wholly negative descriptor, appearing only as a severe vice in the *Lives*.¹³⁸ In the Life of Nero, conjugations of *libido* are used twice to describe his vices.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Wardle, David. "Suetonius and Galba's Taste in Men: A Note." *Latomus*, vol. 74, no. 4, 2015, pp. 1006–1013. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/48574596. Pg. 1007-1008.

¹³⁹ Rolfe, J.C. Trans. *Lives of the Caesars, The Life of Nero*. Loeb Classical Library. 1907. Accessed penelope.uchicago.edu Passage 26, 28.

In using *libidinis*, Suetonius is casting a negative judgement over the rest of the sentence. He portrays Galba as actively desiring “full-grown, strong men” as sexual partners. While there is some consensus that the *exoletosque* were indeed men, not boys, it is debated whether or not they were prostitutes.¹⁴⁰ The language used to describe the men he desires (eg. *durus*) casts them as very masculine--they are not described as one might expect him to depict a typical target of desire for a *vir*, as soft and passive. In addition, Suetonius does not state which party is active and which is passive. This could be a deliberate attempt to develop ambiguity in the situation.¹⁴¹ By leaving this question open ended, Suetonius leaves room for the reader to dwell on it.

Galba is, like Nero, seen to be controlled by his own sexual desire. When he sees Icelus, he ignores pressing matters to have sex with him. The matter at hand is how to proceed in the wake of Nero’s death. In his reaction, Galba ignores the news, neglecting to prepare to seize the emperorship in favor of sex. He is a slave to his own lust; instead of meeting with his other military and political consultants, he pulls his lover aside to have sex with him. By showing Galba as being unable to control his lust, delaying the onset of his reign, Suetonius shades him as unfit for office. In addition, Suetonius neglects to confirm Galba’s active status. He hints that he is active, in his asking of Icelus to “prepare himself,” but actively chooses not to take the final steps necessary to confirm it. Normally, a freedman preparing himself for a sexual encounter would likely signal that the freedman is passive but here, the lack of explicitness on the issue combined with a reference to being attracted to *durus* men sets the reader up to wonder whether or not Galba is obeying the prime directive. Galba’s lack of control is enhanced by the fact that he “begs” Icelus to prepare himself. “Begging” smacks of desperation, of the kind of unrestrained sexual desire a *vir* should never have, much less the future emperor. In addition,

¹⁴⁰ See: Wardle 2015 (Pg. 1009) vs. Charles 2012. (Pg. 1079-1081)

¹⁴¹ Charles, Michael B., and Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides. “Galba in the Bedroom: Sexual Allusions in Suetonius' Galba.” *Latomus*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1077–1087. Pg. 1080-1081.

Galba's begging functions as a role reversal--the should-be dominant man begs his partner for sex. It calls to mind the lovesick poet chasing after his beau more than the future ruler of the emperor of Rome. Suetonius casts Galba as subservient to his desires and his freedman, casting doubt on his ability to control a nation.

In addition, Galba performs erotic behavior in public, hitting on another of the trope's motifs. Upon greeting Icelus, Galba kissed him openly. This was an inappropriate greeting when romantically charged; it was unacceptable to kiss one's lover in public.^{142, 143} Hurley renders them as "passionate kisses" and Edwards translates them as "most ardent kisses."^{144, 145} This clearly was not a chaste greeting between lovers but one of passion and desire. If a chaste kiss between spouses in front of their child was too inappropriate, the ancient Romans would have had to have found such lewd affection outside of the home intolerable. This is a direct call-back to Nero's public lustful displays, further connecting the two and strengthening the image of Galba as unworthy for the throne.

By indirectly casting him as a Neronian tyrant, Suetonius is able to subtly cast aspersions on Galba. Galba is placed on shaky ground with his sexual preferences--maybe active, maybe passive, maybe a *vir*, maybe not. By comparing him to the Neronian trope but having him just fall short of it, Suetonius portrays Galba as tyrant aligned, and untrustworthy. This enhances Suetonius' image of Galba as someone who was not fit to be emperor. It supports his general lack of control of his freedmen and contrasts with his stinginess with other people.

¹⁴² Hawley, Richard. "'Give me a thousand kisses': the kiss, identity, and power in Greek and Roman antiquity." Leeds International Classical Studies. 6.5. 2007. Pg. 7,

¹⁴³ Williams, Craig. 1999. Pg. 17-18.

¹⁴⁴ Hurley, Donna W. 2011. Pg 280.

¹⁴⁵ Edwards, Catherine. Suetonius Lives of the Caesars. Oxford University Press. 2000. Pg. 240.

Otho

Suetonius used the framework he created in *Nero 29* to paint a picture of Otho as unqualified to be emperor. This is demonstrated in *Otho 2* and *Otho 12*:

Otho 2:

After his father's death he pretended love for an influential freedwoman of the court, although she was an old woman and almost decrepit, that he might more effectually win her favour. Having through her wormed his way into Nero's good graces, he easily held the first place among the emperor's friends because of the similarity of their characters; but according to some, also through immoral relations

Otho imperator IIII. Kal. Mai. natus est Camillo Arruntio Domitio Ahenobarbo cons. A prima adulescentia prodigus ac procax, adeo ut saepe flagris obiurgaretur a patre, ferebatur et vagari noctibus solitus atque invalidum quemque obviorum vel potulentum corripere ac distento sago impositum in sublime iactare. Post patris deinde mortem libertinam aulicam gratiosam, quo efficacius coleret, etiam diligere simulavit quamvis anum ac paene decrepitam; per hanc insinuat Neroni facile summum inter amicos locum tenuit congruentia morum, ut vero quidam tradunt, et consuetudine mutui stupri.

Suetonius used the trope of the effeminate tyrant to set the tone of what kind of ruler Otho would be from the very beginning of his biography. He drew on the motif of unusual passivity, directly connecting to Nero's inappropriate passivity with Pythagoras. Of particular note is the end of the last line of the passage, "...*et consuetudine mutui stupri*," rendered here as "...also through immoral relations." This suggests that Nero and Otho had a sexual relationship of some sort, though it does not hint at what kind or what positionality. However, Michael Charles renders this as "...exchanged sexual gratification."¹⁴⁶ This would indicate much more distinct sexual behaviors. I personally take the Latin more in line with Charles' interpretation, as I feel it better captures the reciprocal sense of *mutui*. Taken together, then, Otho was friends with

¹⁴⁶ Charles, Michael B., and Anagnostou-Laoutides, Eva. "UNMANNING AN EMPEROR: OTHO IN THE LITERARY TRADITION." *The Classical Journal*, vol. 109, no. 2, 2014, pp. 199–222. Pg. 206.

Nero due to the fact that they had similar characters and they also were rumored to have had sexual relations.¹⁴⁷ The use of *mutui* is important; the fact that they “exchanged sexual gratification” suggests that they took turns penetrating each other. Otho was about five years older than Nero; this was not a particularly large age gap, but still worth acknowledging. While it still wouldn’t be appropriate for Otho to penetrate Nero, as he both was not that much younger and was freeborn, it is still noteworthy as it means that Otho was penetrated by someone younger than him. In addition, the fact that they penetrated each other in turns means that Otho was penetrated by someone who was at times passive, an even further violation of his manhood. Suetonius cast aspersions on Otho from the very beginning of his biography by comparing him to Nero’s archetypical tyrant.

Otho 12:

Neither Otho's person nor his bearing suggested such great courage. He is said to have been of moderate height, splay-footed and bandy-legged, but almost feminine in his care of his person. He had the hair of his body plucked out, and because of the thinness of his locks wore a wig so carefully fashioned and fitted to his head, that no one suspected it. Moreover, they say that he used to shave every day and smear his face with moist bread, beginning the practice with the appearance of the first down, so as never to have a beard; also that he used to celebrate the rites of Isis publicly in the linen garment prescribed by the cult. I am inclined to think that it was because of these habits that a death so little in harmony with his life excited the greater marvel.

Tanto Othonis animo nequaquam corpus aut habitus competit. Fuisse enim et modicae staturae et male pedatus scambusque traditur, munditiarum vero paene muliebrum, vulso corpore, galericulo capiti propter raritatem capillorum adaptato et adnexo, ut nemo dinosceret; quin et faciem cotidie rasitare ac pane madido linere consuetum, idque instituisse a prima lanugine, ne barbatus umquam esset; sacra etiam Isidis saepe in lintea religiosaque veste propalam celebrasse. Per quae factum putem, ut mors eius minime congruens vitae maiore miraculo fuerit.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. Pg. 206-207.

In this passage, Suetonius undermines the depiction of Otho as noble in the preceding scene by utilizing tropes of the effeminate tyrant, specifically making implicit references to effeminacy and passivity. In the previous scene, Suetonius describes Otho's death as brave and manly.¹⁴⁸ In this scene, Otho is described as doing a number of feminine things. He is described as engaging in depilation, wearing a wig, and thoroughly removing his beard. Depilation was associated with men who were trying to make themselves appear more like ideal penetrable targets; they were accused of trying to appear womanish and of trying to look like those slaves and young non-free boys who were acceptable targets of desire.¹⁴⁹ Attractive slaves were described as *glaber* ("hairless").¹⁵⁰ By describing him as removing his hair, Suetonius was implicitly calling him passive. Purposefully removing his beard and keeping it from growing was imbued with similar accusations. Roman boys were considered full men upon growing and ceremonially clipping their first beards.¹⁵¹ Boys were considered at their most attractive right before they grew in their beards.¹⁵² A beard and the ability to grow it were considered markers of a *vir*; in contrast, the complete lack of a beard or ability to grow one signaled sexual availability. Otho notably did not simply shave--being clean shaving was in fashion in Augustan Rome, though out of fashion at the time of writing the *Lives*--he makes an effort to appear to have never had a beard.¹⁵³ He shaves every day and applies bread in an effort to prevent growth. This goes beyond being clean shaven and enters the realm of trying to erase all presence of a beard from his face. In going to this extent, he is erasing one of his markers of status as a *vir* and in doing so, marking himself as a target for desire. He is described as fastidiously wearing a wig out of desire to hide his thin hair. This degree of concern with appearance was considered a feminine trait.

¹⁴⁸ Hurley, Donna W. 2011. Pg. 288.

¹⁴⁹ Williams, Craig. 1999. Pg. 78, 141

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. Pg. 78

¹⁵¹ Ibid. Pg. 79

¹⁵² Ibid. Pg. 79

¹⁵³ Ibid. Pg. 79

Again, he is associated with femininity and, by proxy, passivity. By rendering himself hairless and being overly concerned with his looks, Otho is marked as an adult passive, in line with the trope of the effeminate tyrant.

The location of these accusations are of particular note for two reasons. First, this comes directly after the section where Suetonius describes Otho's death, where he kills himself to avoid dishonor. This manner of death is portrayed as honorable and manly. Therefore, this depiction flies in the face of that. Suetonius directly sets up this scene to be a contrast to that, saying "Neither Otho's person nor his bearing suggested such great courage," and "I am inclined to think that it was because of these habits that a death so little in harmony with his life excited the greater marvel." By giving the reader the manliness first, the effeminacy and passivity hits all the harder. By portraying honor in contrast with passivity, Suetonius strengthens the depiction of Otho as an effeminate Neronian tyrant. Second, it is important that section twelve is the last section of the Life of Otho. This is what Suetonius wants to stick in the mind of the reader. Suetonius ordered his biographies intentionally, and would end on a note fitting how he wanted the reader to feel about that emperor.¹⁵⁴ For example, though he includes negative remarks on Augustus, he wants to portray a positive image overall, and he ultimately ends on a scene of a good, respectable death.¹⁵⁵ In contrast, Otho's respectable death is denied the honor of being the end; instead, Suetonius lists his effeminate flaws. The fact that Suetonius uses the Neronian trope here shows that he clearly thought it was a strong way to cast a subject as a tyrant in the reader's eye.

¹⁵⁴ Hurley, D.W. 2014. "Suetonius' Rubric Sandwich," in T. Power and R. K. Gibson (eds.), *Suetonius the Biographer: Studies in Roman Lives*. Oxford. Pg. 21, 23, 25.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. 25

Vitellius

Suetonius used the tropes developed in *Nero 29* to portray Vitellius as being an inept emperor, painting him as passive to a freedman in *Vitellius 12*.

Having begun in this manner, he conducted a significant part of his rule according to the advice and counsel of the lowest of actors and chariot-drivers, and in particular, his freedman Asiaticus. As a youth Asiaticus had been his partner in mutual buggery but grew tired of this and ran away. Later, Vitellius found him again, working as a seller of cheap drinks in Puteoli, and threw him in chains but quickly released him and restored him to his former position as favourite.¹⁵⁶

talibus principiis magnam imperii partem non nisi consilio et arbitrio uilissimi cuiusque histrionum et aurigarum administravit et maxime Asiatici liberti. hunc adolescentulum mutua libidine constupratum, mox taedio profugum cum Puteolis poscam uendentem reprehendisset, coiecit in compedes statimque soluit et rursus in deliciis habuit; iterum deinde ob nimiam contumaciam et furacitatem grauatus circumforano lanistae uendidit dilatatumque...

The phrase “*hunc adolescentulum mutua libidine constupratum*,” has been translated in a number of ways by different translators. The Loeb edition renders it as “This fellow [his freedman Asiaticus] had immoral relations with Vitellius in his youth.” Thompson translates it as “This fellow had, when young, been engaged with him in a course of mutual and unnatural pollution...”¹⁵⁷ Hurley translates it as “When Asiaticus was quite young, Vitellius raped him to their mutual satisfaction...”¹⁵⁸ Edwards takes it as given above, “As a youth Asiaticus had been his partner in mutual buggery...” These translations give slightly different senses, with Hurley’s being the most disparate from the others. I take the Latin to be most in line with Edward’s translation, as I feel it best captures the reciprocal nature of *mutua*, and will be rooting my analysis in her translation.

¹⁵⁶ Edwards, Catherine. 2000. Pg. 255

¹⁵⁷ Trans. Thompson, Alexander. *The Twelve Caesars*. Ed. Forrester, T. Simon & Brown. 2013.

¹⁵⁸ Hurley, Donna W. 2011. Pg 298.

In this scene, Suetonius describes Vitellius' relationship with his freedman, Asiaticus. He claims that when Asiaticus was young, he and Vitellius had sexual relations. At a glance, this seems fine--a young freedman would be a perfectly acceptable object of desire for an elite man like Vitellius. However, Asiaticus was not merely a target of lust but was instead, "his partner in mutual buggery." Asiaticus and Vitellius took turns penetrating each other--this means that at times, Vitellius was passive to Asiaticus. Everything about that would be inappropriate--Vitellius, an elite citizen man, was penetrated by a freedman who was at times passive. In addition, the text specifies that this occurred when Asiaticus was a young man, meaning that not only was Vitellius penetrated by a freedman, but he was penetrated by a freedman who was younger than him. Vitellius, who, as a *vir*, should never be penetrated at all, was penetrated by someone lower in age, in class, and who was passive at times. This complete violation of sexual norms is a clear use of the inappropriately passive motif of the trope of the effeminate tyrant. Like Nero, Vitellius is passive to his freedman. This comparison comes right as Suetonius begins to describe Vitellius' reign--in doing this, he is casting him as a tyrant from the get-go. This event did not occur at the beginning of Vitellius' reign, it occurred long before he became emperor. However, by using this trope in this place, Suetonius is able to cast a negative tone over the entirety of Vitellius' reign. The trope of the passive Neronian tyrant is used by Suetonius to color Vitellius as being an unfit emperor from day one.

Domitian

Suetonius used the framework established in *Nero 29* to portray Domitian as being an incompetent ruler and dastardly tyrant, painting him as sexually passive to multiple people for career advancement and being a slave to his own lusts. Here, Suetonius is clearly portraying him as a passive in the same vein as Nero, and is using that to cast him as unfit for the throne.

Dom. 1:

He is said to have passed the period of his boyhood and his early youth in great poverty and infamy. For he did not possess a single piece of plate and it is a well known fact that Claudius Pollio, a man of praetorian rank, against whom Nero's poem entitled "The One-eyed Man" is directed, preserved a letter in Domitian's handwriting and sometimes exhibited it, in which the future emperor promised him an assignation; and there have not been wanting those who declared that Domitian was also debauched by Nerva, who succeeded him.

Pubertatis ac primae adolescentiae tempus tanta inopia tantaque infamia gessisse fertur, ut nullum argenteum vas in usu haberet. Satisque constat Clodium Pollionem praetorium virum, in quem est poema Neronis quod inscribitur "Luscio," chirographum eius conservasse et nonnumquam protulisse noctem sibi pollicentis; nec defuerunt qui affirmarent, corruptum Domitianum et a Nerva successore mox suo.

This section claims Domitian was debauched by two different people, Claudius Pollio, a praetorian, and Nerva, the emperor who would succeed Domitian himself. The text is explicit in that Domitian was passive to both Pollio and Nerva. At the time the sexual relations with Nerva occurred, he would have no longer been a *puer*, being around 17 years old, making the penetration even more shameful, as he would have been a full elite man, a supposedly impenetrable individual.¹⁵⁹ It is also worth noting that Nerva was thought of as being of questionable virility, meaning that Domitian was rendered as less of a man than one who wasn't particularly manly.¹⁶⁰ Of note is Suetonius' use of *mox*; it could indicate that Domitian's sexual relationship with Nerva continued into his emperorship.¹⁶¹ As emperor, Domitian would have no excuse in the form of political gain for his continuing to submit to play the passive role to Nerva. If he continued to be penetrated by him at that point, it was a sign he was doing it out of pleasure, not necessity.

¹⁵⁹ Charles, Michael. "DOMITIANUS' 1.1: NERVA AND DOMITIAN." *Acta Classica*, vol. 49, 2006, pp. 79–87. Pg. 79-80.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 87.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* Pg. 83.

In addition, this section makes a comparison of Domitian to a prostitute.¹⁶² The text references him spending his youth “in great poverty and infamy,” poverty to the extent that “...he did not possess a single piece of plate,” then immediately references his sexual relations. While Suetonius doesn’t directly say “Domitian prostituted himself for money,” he lays out all the pieces for the reader to draw together. Youthful sexual corruption was often presented as a form of prostitution in attacks in rhetoric and literature as it was seen as exchanging one’s body for some sort of reward.¹⁶³ Here, in the case of Domitian, the reward was implied to be money from Claudius Pollio and potentially political clout in the case of Nerva. While perhaps he did not literally work as a prostitute, he still “sold” his body. Of note is that Suetonius describes his youth, where he displayed his prostitute-like behavior, as being spent in *infamia*. This furthers the connection to careers marked with *infamia*, of which prostitution was one. This is a clear use of the component of the Neronian tyrant as being associated with inappropriate careers, like prostitution.

This scene was key for establishing Suetonius’ narrative for this *Life*, and he used the trope of the Neronian tyrant to do it. This was the first section of the *Life of Domitian*; this is where Suetonius set the tone for the rest of the *Life*. In addition, the later *Lives* included fewer references to personal names, so the fact that Suetonius used two indicates that he was attempting to make his claim as authoritative and assertive as possible, emphasizing this scene’s importance to his narrative.¹⁶⁴ Suetonius had reason to portray Domitian as a tyrant; he was the last emperor of the Flavian dynasty, who preceded the Nerva-Antoine dynasty, which he wrote under.¹⁶⁵ One method of validating the current rulers was to denigrate their predecessor as a

¹⁶² Charles, Michael. “CALVUS NERO’: DOMITIAN AND THE MECHANICS OF PREDECESSOR DENIGRATION.” *Acta Classica*, vol. 45, 2002, pp. 19–49. Pg. 41.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* Pg. 141.

¹⁶⁴ Charles, Michael. 2006. Pg. 83.

¹⁶⁵ Charles, Michael. 2002. Pg. 21-23.

tyrant and unfit ruler.¹⁶⁶ To complete this important task, Suetonius utilized the image of the Neronian tyrant archetype.

Dom. 22:

He was excessively lustful. His constant sexual intercourse he called bed-wrestling, as if it were a kind of exercise. It was reported that he depilated his concubines with his own hand and swam with common prostitutes.

Libidinis nimiae, assiduitatem concubitus velut exercitationis genus clinopalen vocabat; eratque fama, quasi concubinas ipse develleret nataretque inter vulgatissimas meretrices.

This passage further exemplifies Suetonius' use of the Neronian archetype to denigrate Domitian. He is "excessively lustful;" he cannot control his own desires. In being excessive in his desires, he is made to be less of a man. This is emphasized by him calling his "constant sexual intercourse," "bed wrestling." Excessive sex is unmanly; wrestling, on the other hand, is manly. In comparing the two, he makes a mockery out of the masculine ideal which paints his own masculinity poorly. In addition, this excessive lust calls Nero's public passivity and performances of oral sex in *Nero 29* to mind.

Another aspect of the Neronian tyrant trope used is inappropriate relationships with people of lower class, his relationship with prostitutes being comparable to Nero's relationship with Pythagoras. In this passage, Domitian inappropriately associates with lower-status people. First, he "depilated his concubines with his own hand..." He personally depilated his concubines; in doing so, he took on a servile role. By servicing them in this manner, he placed himself below them, status-wise. To be lower in status than a prostitute--a woman with *infames*--was unacceptable for any *vir*, much less the emperor. It also raises questions--how did he know how to depilate someone? Perhaps he depilated himself in his days of offering himself to Nerva and Claudias Pollio, which would strengthen the image of him as a prostitute.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. Pg. 23-25.

In addition, he “swam with common prostitutes.” “Nataretque,” the verb rendered as “swam,” could mean either to swim or to float; it could refer to either swimming in rivers or lakes or to swimming in the plunge pool of a bath. It is unclear which version was meant based on the context. Depending on which of those meanings it took, this act of swimming had several different gender and class based associations in ancient Rome. As an exercise and military action, swimming was considered very manly. It was a skill that was expected for men of all social classes.¹⁶⁷ The ability to swim was an expectation for members of the military and even eventually became a requirement for new recruits.^{168, 169} To be a strong swimmer was to be thought of as manly, while weak swimmers were perceived as effeminate.¹⁷⁰ Roman swimming feats that were thought impressive by contemporaries were such things like swimming the Rhone in full armor while wounded or swimming the Danube fully armed in the thick of battle--the latter example earning a monument and inscription.¹⁷¹ These examples of swimming are *durus*, manly actions. In addition, swimming was a means by which Romans marked themselves as superior to barbarians; swimming, especially in battle narratives, was a means of proving supremacy over others, expanding its masculine nature.¹⁷² As an author, Suetonius put special emphasis on the ability of an emperor to swim, giving extra weight to its use here.¹⁷³ By portraying Domitian as swimming with common prostitutes, Suetonius is denigrating his masculinity in line with the Neronian framework. Swimming is meant to be a masculine, exercise intense activity that makes a man more *durus*. By not practicing swimming properly and

¹⁶⁷ Morgan, M. Gwyn. “Suetonius and Swimming: A Note on Div. Aug. 64. 3.” *Classical Philology*, vol. 69, no. 4. 1974. Pg. 277

¹⁶⁸ Crowther, Nigel. *Sport in Ancient Times*. Praeger Series on the Ancient World. Praeger Publishers. 2007. Pg. 88

¹⁶⁹ Morgan, Gwyn. 1974. Pg. 277

¹⁷⁰ Hall, Edith. “Drowning Act: The Greeks, Swimming, and Timotheus' Persians.” *The Theatrical Cast of Athens: Interactions between Ancient Greek Drama and Society*. Oxford University Press. 2006. Pg. 259.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.* Pg. 258-259, Pg. 261, n. 18.

¹⁷² *Ibid.* Pg. 259.

¹⁷³ Morgan, Gwyn. 1974. Pg. 277

instead swimming with--and, perhaps, as Housman suggests, having sex with--common prostitutes, Domitian is made *mollis*, like Nero.¹⁷⁴ This was an activity meant for men to perform with their fellow men--to do with fellow soldiers, with equals. Instead, Domitian participates with women--and not just women, but low-class prostitutes. In doing so, he is, like Nero, behaving inappropriately across lines of both gender and class.

For Domitian to swim with common prostitutes in the context of bathing is problematic as he crosses class lines inappropriately, like Nero with Pythagoras. Going to the baths was a complex social situation in Ancient Rome. People of all classes, including slaves, could go to the baths, so long as they could afford the entry fee.^{175, 176} It is not the idea of the emperor going to baths that contain common people that is the problem--it was considered a positive thing, an act of *civilitas* even, for the emperor to bathe among his people, and was politically smart as a way to foster goodwill among the public.^{177, 178} Rather, the problem is who Domitian chose to surround himself with. While nakedness and overall equity of access were factors, there was still room for reasserting the social hierarchy. People would compete to show off their wealth by surrounding themselves with wealthy friends and many servants.¹⁷⁹ Instead of doing that, Domitian socializes with common prostitutes. He fails not only to assert his rank as emperor, but lowers himself to the status of one who is the equal to prostitutes. This rhetoric of the emperor being unfit by failing to maintain their status is a clear echo of Nero's relationship with Pythagoras.

¹⁷⁴ Housman, A. E., and James Jayo. "Praefanda." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 180–200. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20163849. 2001. Pg. 196-197.

¹⁷⁵ Yegul, Fikret K. "Critics of Roman Bathing." *Bathing in the Roman World*. Cambridge University Press. 2009. Pg. 15.

¹⁷⁶ Fagan, Garret G. 2002. Pg. 199-206.

¹⁷⁷ Yegul, Fikret K. 2009. Pg. 15.

¹⁷⁸ Fagan, Garret G. 2002. Pg. 190-192.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Pg. 2016-2017.

Suetonius uses the Neronian trope of failing to properly perform class or gender roles. By depilating the prostitutes, Domitian lowers himself below them. How exactly he transgressed norms in swimming has two possibilities; this passage has not been sufficiently studied to know which Suetonius meant. Regardless, the Neronian framework is used. In the context of swimming as a sport, Domitian takes a manly thing and makes it *mollis*, failing to perform masculinity. In the context of bathing, by socializing with common prostitutes as equals, he degrades himself to their status. While neither behavior is as extreme as Nero playing passive to Pythagoras, they hit on similar concerns of denigrating one's class status by treating those who should be lower as one's superiors.

Conclusion

Suetonius portrayed the emperor Nero as a bad emperor. He did this by portraying him as an inadequate man. Nero's flaws culminated in the scene described in *Nero 29*. He portrays him as completely failing as a Roman man. Nero is sexually passive orally and anally, plays the roles of actor and gladiator, and marries a man, where he plays the role of the bride. Suetonius used this scene to epitomize what it meant to be a bad emperor. In doing so, he created a rhetorical framework he could lean on to cast aspersions on other emperors. He specifically used it on Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Domitian. In all their biographies, Suetonius uses aspects of the framework of the Neronian tyrant to make them seem inadequate. This trope's impact is not limited to just *The Lives of the Caesars*; it echoed throughout literary tradition, from Juvenal to Shakespeare to the modern day. Nero reentered the political sphere last February and March, when comparisons between him and then-President Trump flared up. In the Carnival parade in Mainz, Germany, a float ran depicting Trump as Nero, playing a lyre with Tweets coming out of it, with a mural of the U.S. capitol building burning behind him, resulting in #TrumpNero

trending.¹⁸⁰ The week after, Trump retweeted a picture of himself playing the fiddle with blurry flame tones as the background.¹⁸¹ Later, his response to the coronavirus pandemic also garnered comparisons to Nero, people connecting indulgences in luxury during crisis.¹⁸² Nero and his biographers may be long dead, but their influence is still strongly felt.

The mechanics of character assassination are important to study. Today, people use similar tactics to degenerate leaders and celebrities they do not like. Tactics are less focused on sexuality and gender in some fields, and are still all the rage in others. Attacks based on sexuality and gender still hold a place of prominence in today's political arena. For example, in 2007, Senator Larry Craig's long political career came to a halt when he was accused of trying to solicit gay sex in an airport bathroom.¹⁸³ While he later on decried his original guilty plea, his career never recovered and after finishing his current senate term, he retired from politics.¹⁸⁴ His behavior was aberrant from that of what was expected for a typical man--he was accused of being overly lustful and attempting to engage in homoerotic activity in an inappropriate location. This is reminiscent of Nero's public passive sexual activities. In addition, in the 2016 presidential debates, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio mocked Trump for having small hands and insulanted he had a small penis and was therefore less of a man.¹⁸⁵ In doing so, they were suggesting that being less of a man made him less qualified to be president

The need to be aware of how character assassination works has only grown in the digital age. Due to the structure of social media, individual people can acquire enough of a following to

¹⁸⁰ Brockell, Gillian. "Wait, so who is Nero, and why are people comparing him to Trump?" The Washington Post. 2020.

¹⁸¹ Bella, Timothy. "Trump tweets a meme of himself fiddling, drawing a comparison to Roman emperor Nero." The Washington Post. 2020.

¹⁸² Truitt, Bill. "Trump tweets a meme of himself fiddling, drawing a comparison to Roman emperor Nero." St. Louis Post-Dispatch. 2020.

¹⁸³ N.a. "Senator, Arrested at Airport, Pleads Guilty." The New York Times. 2007.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Siddiqui, Sabrina. Jacobs, Ben. "Donald Trump taunted by Cruz and Rubio during Republican debate." The Guardian. 2016.

have a significantly loud voice when it comes to decrying others as morally bankrupt. In addition, information can spread more quickly than ever before--without mass media, rumors of Trump's allegedly small hands may never have gotten off the ground, much less made it to the debate stage. On websites like Tumblr and Twitter, users will accuse others of not fitting into specific "correct" molds and spread that to their followers, who will spread it further. Like with Nero, it matters not if they actually did it, only what people hear and believe.

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