1 The erotics of *imperium*

> Ἐκ δὲ τῶν μοιχειῶν ὡς καὶ τὴν πᾶσαν Κελτικὴν καὶ Βρεττανικὴν κεχειρωμένος, αὐτοκράτωρ τε πολλάκις καὶ Γερμανικὸς καὶ Βρεττανικὸς ἐπεκλήθη.
>
> And because of his adulteries, he was hailed as imperator often and also as Germanicus and Britannicus, as though he had subdued the whole of Germany and Britain [rather than had his wicked way with a Celtic and a British woman].
>
> Cassius Dio, 59.25.5

Anecdotal history

The history of the Roman Empire is a history of expansion, exploitation and munificence. It is also a history of sexual intrigues, insinuation and gossip. Suetonius, writing in the second century CE, observes a recurrent pattern. Caesar routinely committed adultery. This time in the dining room. The wives of Rome's elite are paraded before him, inspected like slaves on the market. After careful deliberation, he picks his favourite and leads her backstage to bed. When they resume their places at table, the husbands and other wives dare not comment. The body of the woman does the talking: her hair is dishevelled and her ears are red.

The Caesar in question is Caligula and, more surprisingly perhaps, Augustus. Suetonius tells a similar story about each of them. Whether we describe him as a 'biographer' or 'historian' depends, in part, on how seriously we take the sex. His *Lives of the Caesars* are stuffed with similar anecdotes: sexual encounters with women, men, girls, boys, mothers, sisters, eunuchs. Are we right to call them 'anecdotes' or is this to accord them too little authority? The repetition of an action by two quite different emperors impels an examination of its function in the text.

Example 1

Adulteria quidem exercuisse ne amici quidem negant, excusantes sane non libidine, sed ratione commissa, quo facilius consilia aduersariorum per cuiusque mulieres

exquireret. M. Antonius super festinatas Liuiae nuptias obiecit et feminam consularem e triclinio uiri coram in cubiculum abductam, rursus in conuiuium rubentibus auriculis incomptiore capillo reductam. . . . condiciones quaesitas per amicos, qui matres familias et adultas aetate uirgines denudarent atque perspicerent, tamquam Toranio mangone uendente.

Now as far as extra-marital affairs are concerned, not even his closest allies deny those, although they give the excuse that the cause of these affairs was not the emperor's lust, but his good sense in order more easily to discover what his enemies were plotting from their women. In addition to his hasty marriage to Livia, Mark Antony also charged him with dragging the wife of a former consul out of the dining room in front of her husband and leading her to his bedroom, and that she was returned to the dining room with her hair all over the place and with red ears. . . . Antony also claimed that deals were sought with his friends who stripped and inspected Roman matrons and mature virgins as though Toranius the slave dealer were selling them.[1]

Example 2

Quas plerumque cum maritis ad cenam uocatas praeterque pedes suos transeuntis diligenter ac lente mercantium more considerabat, etiam faciem manu adleuans, si quae pudore submitterent; quotiens deinde libuisset egressus triclinio, cum maxime placitam seuocasset, paulo post recentibus adhuc lasciuiae notis reuersus vel laudabat palam uel uituperabat, singula enumerans bona malaue corporis atque concubitus.

He would often invite these women to dinner with their husbands and as they walked past the foot of his couch would study them carefully and slowly as though buying slaves. He would even raise with his hand the face of any of them who lowered their gaze in modesty. Then whenever he fancied, he would leave the dining room, when he had summoned the woman he liked best away with him, and would return a little later with the signs of their sexual intercourse still fresh and either praise or criticise her publicly, recounting every plus or minus of her body and her performance in bed.[2]

So what kind of an emperor does this? What are we supposed to think of him? The answer is easier with Caligula, as the opening epigraph from Cassius Dio typifies. Posterity paints him as a madman whose sexual proclivities stem from, and add to, his overall monstrosity.[3] He commits incest with his sisters, assumes the passive role in relations with an actor, and tries to initiate intercourse with the moon.[4] The first of these are punishable offences, classified as 'stuprum' under Roman law,[5] and the last is an act of 'hubris': whereas Jupiter would often leave Olympus to satisfy himself with a mortal and the moon herself fall for Endymion, the fates of Actaeon and Tiresias highlight the human folly of looking lasciviously at a god.[6] They

add up to a catalogue of prodigality indicative of a tyrant. They stress in slightly different ways the transgressive nature of Caligula's rule.[7]

The episode in the dining room sees him humiliate his senatorial guests by stealing their wives from under their noses.[8] The status of these women, combined with the fact that their husbands are present and helpless, could be seen to symbolise the extent to which elites were disenfranchised by his power. Stories about him making senators run beside his chariot and wait on him at table serve a similar function: they make a mockery of traditional Roman hierarchy.[9] But what happens in the dining room hits harder: there he is given the opportunity to assert his sexual potency, thereby questioning their identity as men. Staying within the narrative for a moment, whose masculinity suffers most – those whose wives he does choose or those he does not? Or does it depend on what he says when he retakes his seat at table? Stepping outside, and imagining the narrative being read by an educated audience, it is difficult to suppose that their primary response is anything other than to resent.

But what happens to this reading if we do as Suetonius does and factor Augustus into the equation (figure 1)? Morally, Augustus is not a Tiberius, Caligula or Nero. He has become the model Roman emperor, renowned for his modesty and family values.[10] He actually legislated against adultery; not only is he supposed to have forced a freedman to kill himself because of his relationships with Roman matrons but he also banishes his own daughter for adulteries and prohibits her burial in his mausoleum.[11] It must be conceded that Suetonius does not present the Augustan episode as *fact*, as he does with Caligula, but rather as rumour or invective voiced by his enemy. He does not claim that Augustus did this but that Mark Antony charged him with doing it. According to Suetonius, Antony also accused him of waxing his legs and of sleeping with Julius Caesar so as to become his heir.[12]

Not that this last charge is in any way exceptional. Similar murmurings surround emperors from Vitellius to Hadrian.[13] In a system in which imperial succession was never fully resolved, stories of intercourse between emperors seem to have been an important way of conceptualising the passage of power from one to the other. Earlier, however, at the start of the section on Augustus and the matrons, Suetonius does admit that not even Augustus' friends could deny that he had adulterous relationships, although they are clear that this was due to 'ratio' rather than 'libido', deliberate policy as opposed to passion.[14] A few paragraphs further and he ditches this caution for an Augustus who is said to have violated virgins.[15] A later *Lives of the Caesars*, written in the fourth century at the

1 Head of the statue of Augustus as Pontifex Maximus from the Via Labicana in Rome.

earliest, elaborates that he was in the habit of sleeping with 12 catamites and 12 girls.[16]

Even the best emperors have sex. More sex than an average mortal. Augustus already alerts us to the potential that a reaction to this story might be more nuanced than one of 'simple' disgust. Whether there is any validity in Antony's charge or in anything Suetonius tells us is, in a sense, irrelevant. To be rumoured to have acted like this – whilst simultaneously banning others from adultery – might earn Augustus respect. When Suetonius parades the women, it is for the gratification of the reader also. In the first version of the story, the rumour that Roman matrons and mature virgins are stripped and inspected forces the reader to imagine the scene (the physicality of their bodies made all the more tangible by the emphasis on age), while in the second, Caligula raises one of their heads so as to make his audience look with him. Do they feel for this woman and her objectification or share in the emperor's lust? In this way, men are urged either to envy the emperor (who else can sleep with whomever he pleases?) or the senator whose wife

was chosen (if only *their* wife was so desirable!). This raises the question: is it an outrage or an honour to be intimate with the emperor? Can we resist fantasising about succumbing to his touch?

Only sometimes – in the same way that Romans might dream about being visited by Selene or Jupiter. Suetonius' reader might well recall that the Augustan poet Ovid's Jupiter is preoccupied with pursuing male and female mortals and is equated with Augustus early in the *Metamorphoses*.[17] More specifically, the third-century historian Cassius Dio has his Caligula claim that impersonating Jupiter is his pretext for seducing numerous women.[18] In this context, serialisation of the emperor's private life is emphatically used to equate him and his treatment to a god. For all these authors such speculation is a means of contemplating the incomprehensible, of comparing the incomparable. The bottom line is that we mere mortals have no idea what it is like being a god or an emperor. But we can have fun imagining. One could argue that these stories give us a graphic and (more than purely descriptive) emotive way of getting the measure of their supremacy. At its most concrete, imperial supremacy might be measured in troops, territories, riches, palaces or lovers. Second-century author Lucian has one of his characters, a cobbler, list in the following order, gold, silver, clothing, horses, dinners, handsome favourites and beautiful women as important imperial attributes.[19] We can read Suetonius' twin 'anecdote' in a similar fashion. Presenting the selection of the women as a slave-auction along with Caligula's enumeration or rating of their bodies suggests that they are seen as commodities.[20] The story does more than moralise about individual emperors, it is also a general statement about what qualifies (as) 'imperial power'.

The main storyline

I mean a vagarious history with all the odd ends and scraps in it that nobody ever thinks of recording but which are the real stuff of life. What people said informally, what they did when they were not on parade, all the gossip and rumour without the necessity to prove anything. (Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels.*)[21]

Imperium as sex

Imperium equals sex, at least in these stories. Sex is a way to talk about *imperium*. This equation was not unique to Suetonius. The rumours spread by Tacitus that the young Nero had raped his rival Britannicus are a more brutal indictment of the link between sex and power.[22] Acknowledging this

link leads us down a path well worn by academic theory, and by tabloid journalism. We shall come to theory presently.[23] But at its crudest, sex sells. In recent history, Mitterrand and Clinton both constructed and had their leadership (de-)constructed in terms of their sexual prowess. In the ancient Greek world, so did tyrants and Pericles. Similar is true of kings throughout sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.[24] And not just kings. So prevalent was this monarchy equals male potency paradigm that female autocrats were viewed as prostitutes or virgins to rationalise (glamorise as well as sanitise) their control.[25] Nor is this tendency towards the sexualisation of authority a purely western phenomenon. In Japan, for example, emperors flaunted their courtesans and these courtesans their relationships in literature. *The Tale of Genji* exemplifies how a history of court society can be one of sex and beauty in place of bureaucratic power.[26] But this 'universality' should not blind us to the obvious: that there are dramatic differences in these formulae and contexts (not least that *The Tale of Genji* is written by a woman). I shall be discussing what was special about the Roman formulation in the next section of this chapter. But suffice it to say at the moment that, shared humanity aside, particular acts and relations, and stories about such acts and relations, signify differently depending upon who is listening and taking part.

That said, this is not a book about the discourse of 'sex is power'; or at least it is not principally about the theory of that discourse. Rather it is about the Roman Empire and the representation of this empire in ancient literature and visual culture. 'Visual culture' encompasses a wide range of representations, displays and experiences of *imperium* (doodles of the emperor's face, dreams about his palace or his body) in addition to the usual categories of 'official and public art'.[27] Each of these representations feeds off another to turn an emperor into *the* Emperor.[28] They are informed by the literature and the stories that featured in this literature to substantiate and challenge the power of an individual and a nation. Suetonius shows us that stories about an emperor's sex life are an important part of this process. It is as though his potency depends on his sexual activity. It also depends on his desirability. Later in his *Life of Augustus*, Suetonius describes the first Roman emperor in the following terms:

> Forma fuit eximia et per omnes aetatis gradus uenustissima. . . . Vultu erat uel in sermone uel tacitus adeo tranquillo serenoque, ut quidam e primoribus Galliarum confessus sit inter suos, eo se inhibitum ac remollitum quo minus, ut destinaret, in transitu Alpium per simulationem conloquii propius admissus in praecipitium propelleret.

He was exceptionally good-looking and very attractive at all stages of his life. . . . Whether he was in conversation or silent his expression was so placid and untroubled that one of the Gallic chieftains confessed to his men that he had been so influenced and mollified by it that it stopped him from pushing Augustus over a cliff as he was intending when he had been allowed to approach him on the pretext of having a meeting as they crossed the Alps.[29]

Augustus' body is exceptional and his face calm and serene. As the first and model emperor, one might extrapolate that this is how an *imperator* ought to be. So powerful is his physical presence that a dangerous Gallic leader, whose intention it had been to push Augustus over a cliff, changes his mind and turns to putty before him. The verb used ('remollio') means 'to soften' and carries in its root ('mollis') intimations of a gendered nature. The adjective connotes softness, smoothness and tenderness, qualities that are diametrically opposed to the ideals of Roman manhood ('uirtus'). It is commonly found in invective to term someone effeminate or sexually passive or, as is the case here, to describe a foreigner whose identity, however masculine, is anything Other than Roman.[30] As such, it adds an air of sexual attraction to Augustus' impact (and to the reader's response to this impact) and suggests that the Gaul's reaction might stem from desire. This suggestion is strengthened when we realise that 'remollio' is also the verb used by Ovid to describe the effects of the fountain of Salmacis which seduces the son of Hermes into its waters and into the greedy embrace of the naiad with whom he will be permanently coupled as Hermaphroditus.[31] Her eyes are said to shine brightly, as those of Augustus do later in Suetonius' paragraph. Their gazes are compared to the sun. Not that there is direct literary influence at work here. Roman readers would recognise a language redolent with sexual undertones when they were supposed to. Or to put it differently, not all attempts at selling and subverting the emperor through sexual potency and attraction had to be as explicit as the opening anecdotes.

If 'sex is power' is not the subject of this book, it is the tool of its analysis. I could have decided to focus on stories and images of the emperor eating or fighting to revisit the history of the Roman Empire.[32] Instead I have chosen to concentrate on stories and images of the emperor desiring and being desired by his subjects: in other words, how imperial power, intimacy and transactions with the emperor were constructed and contested through the representation of sexual relations. It is difficult to know what to call this kind of representation, worse still reactions to it. 'Sexual' is an accurate assessment of many of the stories told by Tacitus and Suetonius (the sleeping

with matrons, the rape of Britannicus) but is a shabby approximation for the complexities of our response.

As far as the description of Augustus' face and body are concerned and the many images of the emperor onto which this kind of description impacts, 'sexual' or even 'sexualised representation' is misleading. I have already intimated that visual images of *imperium* are going to play as big a part in this project as the literary ones. Obviously these do not show emperors having sex. But, like Suetonius' description, they do confront us with the physicality of the emperor. As with aspects of his vocabulary, there might be features of a statue (its subject matter, use, position, colour, posture) which stir intimate feelings. Other images, not designed for such a purpose, might, in the context in which they stood (a context resonant with stories of imperial and divine sexploits) have elicited these same feelings in some viewers. Art historians have long talked about the ways in which Roman imperial art instils fear, awe, and so on in the viewer (figure 2).[33] Where do psycho-sexual responses fit in this equation? As we shall soon see, ancient writings about art encourage rather than preclude them. Later in this chapter I shall explore in detail some of the ways in which imperial images might work to promote feelings of identification and/or desire.

Perhaps the best way to describe this evidence and the responses it evokes is to call it 'the erotics of *imperium*'. This phrase is by no means ideal. It functions as a tag rather than an explanation. What is 'erotic' to one person is not erotic to another. Its definition is difficult and, in part, culturally specific.[34] For this reason, the stories selected for analysis will be studied within and as contributory to their original literary context. This is harder to achieve with images. Even if we decide to discuss only those objects for which we have a secure archaeological setting, many different sorts of people (far more varied than will have read Suetonius) may have visited that setting. A slave's view is different from a consul's, a man's from a woman's, an Italian's from an Egyptian's. These views are filtered and distorted through the further dynamic of my predisposition as a modern viewer.

It hardly needs repeating here that this gap between ancient and modern sensibilities is unbridgeable. I will endeavour to use ancient written responses to objects, when I have them. But these are rare and as indivisible from their literary context as the stories about an emperor's private life. What is more, I am going to have to guard against the classic(ist's) problem of privileging the text. Not that any of this should deter us. In postulating several different, sometimes conflicting, interpretations of imperial images as both potential agents and objects of desire, and in teasing out in numerous

2 The arresting statue of Augustus from the Villa of Livia at Primaporta. Paint traces on this statue show that it was originally coloured.

ways the relationships between image and emperor, emperor and viewer, I hope to tap rather than pin down their power to stimulate. It matters little whether any of my responses matches those of a particular ancient. Once we put the emphasis on viewing, rather than conception, there can be no single answer. Instead I want to open up a world that sees the display of imperial power not as force, or written decrees, but as a series of stimuli (stories written by Suetonius, statues erected throughout the empire) to make subjects imagine what it might be like to be, or be with, the emperor; a world where responses to the emperor are neither embassies nor revolts but personal feelings, flights of fantasy and gossip.

History as gossip

'Gossip' is a dirty word in historical scholarship, squeezed or at best straightened out by the demand for scientific argumentation and verifiable data. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the material featured in my discussion tends to be missing from 'mainstream' accounts of the empire. Their findings are fuelled by official documents inscribed in stone, laws passed, campaigns waged, births, deaths, alliances and population studies.[35] The chapter that follows chooses to concentrate on the story of Hadrian (emperor from 117 to 138 CE) and his male lover Antinous. What do we actually *know* about this relationship? Virtually nothing. Literary sources agree that Antinous came from Bithynia in Asia Minor and that their relationship was sexual.[36] We assume that Hadrian met him on one of his notorious travels (for which we have considerable literary and epigraphic evidence),[37] and that Antinous accompanied him from there to Egypt, where he drowned, so we are told, in the River Nile.

Almost everything else, his death included, is a matter for speculation (who he was, why he appealed to Hadrian), but a speculation that is fixated on, channelled through, and strengthened by his portraits (figure 3). As we shall soon see, the surviving sculptures of Antinous in museums today, together with the many coins, inscriptions and memorials in other media, corroborate the ancient authors who claim that his image was everywhere. How do we account for this phenomenon? The conventional answer is that Hadrian was so upset at his loss that he went about obsessively commemorating him, a bit like literature's Laodamia or Alcestis making themselves 'simulacra' of their loved ones.[38] Small wonder that Edward Gibbon should have relegated these images to a footnote for 'still dishonour[ing] the memory of Hadrian'![39] They, or rather the kinds of responses they have elicited over the last millennia (such 'erotic' intimations as 'the attraction of the eyes is but half disclosed; their lure is not that of a woman yet it is that which wished to be noticed'),[40] sit uncomfortably with the accomplishments of Hadrian 'the great man'.

But it is precisely the intensity of the emotions they evoke that makes these images so powerful. This is where a sense of our shared humanity (or curiosity) with the ancients comes back again. Can anyone now, or could anyone then, appreciate an image of Antinous, and recognise it as Antinous, without thinking about Hadrian and the nature of the relationship?[41] One way of dodging this question has been to try to bring Antinous, and the display of passion he represents, under the umbrella of Hadrian's philhellenism. In this version, both Antinous and boy-love are Greek. Hadrian makes the