PART I

NERO’S WORLD
I: NERO THE PERFORMER

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When Nero succeeded his adoptive father, Claudius, as emperor in 54 CE, he was not yet seventeen years old. His early influences were various. Suetonius claims that his child-minders had included a barber and a dancer (Suet. Nero 6.3), while, at the time of his ascension to the throne, he remained the pupil of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the distinguished philosopher, rhetorician, and tragedian whom his mother Agrippina had brought back from exile on Corsica in order to guide him. The liberal education Nero received included no little exposure to the arts, and he soon demonstrated an aptitude and enthusiasm for such activities as sculpture, painting, poetic composition, song, the playing of the lyre, and horsemanship (Tac. Ann. 13. 3.7; Suet. Nero 20.1, 22.1). Little of this was in itself a cause for scandal. His newly acquired skills as a rider allowed Nero to emulate his putative Trojan ancestor, Ascanius, and lead a successful performance in the circus of the equestrian exercise known as the Game of Troy (Tac. Ann. 11.11; Suet. Nero 7; Verg. Aen. 5.545–603). Though Quintilian urges that the orator should study music simply in order to understand how to move the emotions and regards playing the lyre as something that even chaste girls should spurn (Quint. Inst. 1. 10. 31), Nero’s near–contemporary, the future emperor Titus, also demonstrated skill as a singer and a lyre–player (Suet. Tit. 3), and it seems unlikely that either would have been allowed to follow such a path had it been seen as inherently morally corrupting. Yet from these apparently respectable beginnings something extraordinary and bizarre developed, and, by the end of his reign, Nero was not so much the ruler of the Roman world as a full-time performance artist. This chapter will examine the evidence for this process; will set out the different ways in which Nero’s antics are interpreted by the principal ancient witnesses to his reign; and will consider what more modern treatments regard as being at issue in such conduct or in accusations thereof.
So much of Nero’s career as a performer is indeed so exceptional that many will be tempted to regard what Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio report as wholesale malicious invention. Yet any absolute refusal to believe would surely be unjustified. It is quite true that the fall of a Roman emperor is characteristically followed by the condemnation of his memory: the new monarch typically promises to eschew the excesses of his predecessor’s reign and it is open season for writers to claim what they wish about the former ruler and his court.¹ When, for instance, we learn that Nero killed his second wife, Poppaea, by kicking her in the stomach when she was pregnant with his child, it will be important to recall that an identical crime against his sister is attributed by Herodotus to the demented Persian monarch, Cambyses (Suet. Nero 35.2; Dio 62.28.1; Hdt. 3.32.4). Yet it is hard to dismiss all the evidence in this way.

One of the earliest historians of Nero’s reign, Cluvius Rufus, was present at the 65 CE celebration of the festival called the Neronia and actually announced to the audience that the ruler would sing Niobe (Suet. Nero 21.2); he took on the same role during the emperor’s tour of Greece in 66–7 CE (Dio 63.14.3). Many will have seen Cluvius do just this. Another contemporary witness to Nero’s reign was C. Plinius Secundus. Though only seven fragments survive of his thirty-one-book history of the Roman people under the later Julio-Claudian emperors, and only four of these concern Nero, much else can be extracted from the thirty-seven books of the same writer’s Natural History, which were composed at most a decade after Nero’s death and which survive in their entirety. Pliny’s outright hostility to Nero emerges repeatedly (see, e.g., Plin. HN 2.92, 4.10, 7.45–6, 30.14–15), but some details are buried so deep in otherwise very dry disquisitions that their inclusion can scarcely be attributed to the desire to denigrate the fallen monarch. When we are told that Nero ate chives in order to benefit his singing voice (Plin. HN 19.108) or that he treated bruises and sprains suffered when driving his chariot with a solution of powdered boar’s dung (Plin. HN 28.238), what Pliny is really interested in are the chives and the dung. All this has the ring of truth to it. No less valuable is the evidence of numismatics. Suetonius reports that the emperor struck coins depicting himself in the flowing robes of a lyre-player (Suet. Nero 25.2–3), and coins of this sort from the years 62 to 68 CE have indeed been found, though there is some question over whether the figure presented is Nero himself or the god Apollo, to whom he habitually

assimilated himself (RIC nos. 73–82, 121–3, 205–12, 380–1, 414–17, 451–5; Tac. Ann. 14.14.2; Suet. Nero 53; see La Rocca, Chapter 4 this volume).

Lying on his deathbed in August 14 CE, the emperor Augustus asked his gathered friends whether he had played the mime of life well (Suet. Aug. 99.1). He was surely aware that every aspect of being a monarch was a form of performance and that his public appearances were a means to fashion an image of himself for his watching subjects. Recent scholarship emphasizes the degree to which Seneca’s work on kingship addressed to the young Nero, the de Clementia, reflects this view and puts words into the new emperor’s mouth as a form of script for him to perform.2 Here the theater provides an analogy that covers the life of the emperor as a whole; but the central position of spectacular entertainment in the ruler’s interaction with his subjects endowed such experiences with a special significance all their own. It was clearly important to Augustus to show that he shared many of the pleasures of the people and he was careful, when attending the Circus, actually to watch the contests and not, like Julius Caesar, to catch up on his paperwork (Suet. Aug. 45.1). Boxing was a particular passion (Suet. Aug. 45.2). Yet Augustus also took various measures to impose order on athletic, gladiatorial, and theatrical performances (Suet. Aug. 44.1–3, 45.3–4) and was careful not to attend contests conducted in the Greek manner (Suet. Aug. 45.2). In the speech to the Senate composed for him by Seneca that marked his acceptance of power, Nero promised to rule according to the model of Augustus (Suet. Nero 10.1). Like him he therefore acted early to curtail some forms of theatrical license (Tac. Ann. 13.24.1, 13.28.1–2; Suet. Nero 16.2), but also displayed the virtue of affability or comitas through his provision of public performances of various sorts (Suet. Nero 10.1–12.4).3 Suetonius includes all these actions among the inoffensive or positively laudable features of Nero’s reign and sets them in contrast to the abuses that he will go on to describe (Suet. Nero 19.3), but such a division is rather too clean-cut, and already Nero was going beyond just performing the role of the affable disciplinarian and pursuing enthusiasms fit to make Augustus shudder.

In 59 CE, Nero murdered his mother and then held major games—the Ludi Maximi—in celebration of the salvation of the empire. He also began to give more public expression to his enthusiasms for charioteering and for song. Judging the former to be the lesser of two evils, his

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2 See Star 2012: 119, 125–6, 139.
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guardians, Burrus and Seneca, allowed him to drive his chariot in an enclosed space in the Vatican valley and before a select audience (Tac. Ann. 14.14.5). The size of the audience soon increased and the crowd gladly egged him on (Tac. Ann. 14.14.5). By the end of the same year, Nero had also sung in public for the first time. At the games called the Juvenalia, which marked the shaving of his first beard, members of the nobility took to the boards and Nero himself topped the bill: strumming his lyre and watched over by his voice coaches, he performed an *Attis* and a *Bacchae* in a voice that Suetonius and Dio describe as weak and dark (Suet. Nero 20.1; Dio 61.20.2) but which it later became customary to call heavenly (Tac. Ann. 14.15.9, 16.22.1; Suet. Nero 21.1; Philostr. Vit. Ap. 5.7). The cohorts of soldiers, centurions, and tribunes were all on hand to watch, as was Burrus, whom Tacitus describes as “grieving and applauding” (Tac. Ann. 14.15.7). The same writer claims that it was at this performance that Nero first gathered together the band of Roman knights who led the formal rhythmic applause that became a feature of his performances (Tac. Ann. 14.15.8, 16.4.4, 16.5.1, Suet. Nero 20.3, 25.1; Dio 61.20.3–4; 63.8.3; Philostr. Vit. Ap. 5.7). This, Suetonius claims, was a practice that the emperor imported from Alexandria (Suet. Nero 20.3).

The Juvenalia were followed in 60 CE by the Neronia or Quinquennial Games. This was a self-consciously Greek performance (Tac. Ann. 14.20.1, 14.21.4, 14.21.5; Suet. Nero 12.3) and involved musical, gymnastic, and equestrian contests as well as a prize for eloquence, which Nero won unopposed. Oil was distributed to knights and senators in order to encourage them to indulge in some wrestling (Suet. Nero 12.3, cf. Tac. Ann. 14.47.3). In 64 CE, Nero came one step closer to completely public performance when he took to the stage in the city of Naples. Whereas the Juvenalia had been held in the palace or gardens, now he gathered the townsfolk to listen to him perform over a number of days (Tac. Ann. 15.33; Suet. Nero 20.2–3). Nero had by now begun to quote to his friends the Greek proverb that there was no respect for an art that lay hidden (Suet. Nero 20.1) and the very Greekness of the city made it an appropriate setting for this first public appearance (Tac. Ann. 15.33.2). In 65 CE, such delights were finally exposed to the Roman people at large. The second staging of the Quinquennial Games was brought forward a year and here Nero both recited one of his own poems from the stage (Tac. Ann. 16.4.2; Dio 62.29.1) and entered the contest for lyre-players as if on a par with the
A recurrent theme in all Nero’s performances at Naples and at Rome is his unabashed embrace of all things Greek. Here we may look back to Suetonius’ statement that the emperor Augustus had avoided attendance at Greek-style contests. If Nero now had a model, it would appear to have been the first-century BCE monarch of Alexandria known as Ptolemy Auletes or Ptolemy the Piper. The last of the Ptolemies was also, in the view of Strabo, the worst of his line (Strab. 17.1.13); his epithet derived from his habit of accompanying choruses on his flute and competing in musical contests held in the palace at Alexandria (Strab. 17.1.11). The last of the Julio-Claudians appears to have found him an eminently attractive model and the two are coupled together in a passage from Plutarch’s moral works (Plut. Mor. 56 F).

Already in 64 CE, Nero had planned to travel to the Roman province of Achaia in the Greek mainland, and this dream was finally realized in 66–7 CE. The cities in which the great musical contests were held had for a while made it their practice to send Nero the prize for players of the lyre and, when the ambassadors of one such city visited Rome, he invited them to dinner, accepted their invitation to treat the guests to a performance, and responded to their applause with the statement that only the Greeks knew how to listen and only they were worthy of his pursuits (Suet. Nero 22.3). Now all the great festivals were brought into one twelve-month period; an unprecedented musical contest was held at the Olympic games; and Nero was able to treat audiences at each and every one to the display of his talents (Suet. Nero 23.1). The same fiction of open competition seen at the second performance of the Quinquennial Games was maintained and the same reverence shown for the judges (Suet. Nero 23.2–24.1; Dio 63.9.2). At Olympia, Nero competed in the hazardous ten-horse chariot race, fell out, and suffered serious injury, but still was awarded the crown (Suet. Nero 24.2; Dio. 63.14.1). When finally he returned to Italy, Nero was officially a Periodonikes, that is to say the winner of the Grand Slam, and carried with him 1,808 first prizes (Dio 63.8.3, 63.10.1, 63.20.5, 63.21.1).

In token of his affection, he granted freedom to the province of Achaia (Suet. Nero 24.2).

It can be little surprise if his Greek experience rather turned Nero’s head. When in 68 CE, the Gallic rebellion of Vindex was announced, the emperor was in Naples and absorbed in watching the wrestlers in the

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\textit{palaestra} (Suet. \textit{Nero} 40.4; Dio 63.26.1). When finally he wrote to the Senate, it was to apologize for a sore throat, as if he was unable to perform to a suitable standard (Suet. \textit{Nero} 41.1; Dio 63.26.1–2), and, even when he made his way back to Rome, he showed more interest in a new form of water-organ than in the war (Suet. \textit{Nero} 41.2; Dio 63.26.4). What hurt most about the rebellion was a letter from Vindex to the Senate mocking his qualities as a lyre-player (Suet. \textit{Nero} 41.1; Dio 63.22.4–6). Nero’s preparations for his campaign consisted of organizing a train of wagons for his props and dressing a legion of concubines as Amazons (Suet. \textit{Nero} 44.1). He planned to celebrate his victory with paeans of his own composition, a performance on the water-organ, and by dancing the part of the dying Turnus (Suet. \textit{Nero} 44.2, 54). When instead defeat seemed inevitable, Nero proposed to retreat to Alexandria and to support himself as a professional musician (Dio 63.27.2). His last words were the notorious: “What an artist dies in me!” (Suet. \textit{Nero} 49.1; Dio 63.29.2).

Such in outline is the career of Nero the performance artist. We will not vouch for the truth of each and every allegation, least of all those from the final year of his life when the clash between imperial duty and artistic fantasy is described in ever more colorful terms, but nor is there any reason to dismiss this as a fiction spun from whole cloth. What then do these episodes mean both to the ancient witnesses on whom we depend and to modern scholars of Nero’s reign?

A recurrent motif in narratives of Nero’s reign is that of the confusion of roles and responsibilities.\footnote{See, e.g., Edwards 1994: 89–91; Champlin 2003: 81.} When Augustus spoke of playing the mime of life, he surely felt that his part within the performance had been that of the statesman and the ruler. Nero, by contrast, appears to have put his obligations as ruler of the Roman world second to the imperatives of his art. This is surely what is at issue when we are told that Nero justified his failure to come to Rome to respond to the rebellion of Vindex on the grounds that he was suffering from a sore throat. Professional actors and singers must do all that they can to train and to improve their vocal performance. To this end Nero slept with a lead plate over his breast, ate chives, foreswore apples, and induced himself to vomit (Plin. \textit{HN} 19.108, 34.166; Suet. \textit{Nero} 20.1). He also employed professional voice-trainers or \textit{phonasci} and demonstrated strict obedience to their commands (Suet. \textit{Nero} 25.3; Tac. \textit{Ann.} 14.15.6). In order to protect his voice, he therefore avoided any addresses to the troops and relied on the services of an intermediary (Suet. \textit{Nero} 25.3). Some insight
into what is so wrong with such conduct is offered by Quintilian, whose *Institutio Oratoria* was published in the reign of Domitian and sets out the author’s principles for the education of the ideal public man of Rome. Vocal training *per se* is embraced and there is no little common ground between the orator and the *phonascus* (Quint. *Inst*. 11.3.19–20). The difference is that the public man has far too much to do to be able to set aside fixed times in which to go for a walk, nor can he deliberately take time out to rest his voice because he has so many trials in which to speak (Quint. *Inst*. 11.3.22). The principles of diet are also significantly different: the *phonascus* aims at the production of a soft and tender voice, the statesman at one that is strong and durable (Quint. *Inst*. 11.3.23). The latter must often speak in a harsh and excited manner, must work through the night and breathe in the soot of the lamp, and even put up with sweat-soaked garments (ibid.). The voice of the *phonascus* is like the body of the athlete, carefully fashioned in the gymnasium for a specific event but unable to adapt to the rigors of a military campaign; the orator, by contrast, must be able to bear sun and wind and storm and never abandon his client (Quint. *Inst*. 11.3.24). The implications of these distinctions should be clear and their relevance to Nero evident: to the statesman or the emperor, the condition of his voice is significant inasmuch as it permits him to fulfill the responsibilities of public life; to the *phonascus*, by contrast, the voice is everything; the message delivered is of no relevance compared to the grace and tunefulness of the delivery itself. An emperor unable to address the troops for fear of straining his vocal chords or reluctant to speak to the Senate at the height of a national crisis because suffering from a sore throat has lost contact with what should be the substance of his role.

This emphasis on the inability to distinguish form from substance may be related to the recurrent suggestion that Nero the performer gradually loses his ability to distinguish myth or fiction from reality.7 For Suetonius, one cannot properly know Nero unless one knows his family (Suet. *Nero* 1. 2). The biographer therefore describes the virtues and the vices of various members of the *gens Domitia* beginning with an account conflating Cn. Domitius (cos. 122 BCE) and Cn. Domitius (cos. 96 BCE). It was in fact the latter who as consul defeated the Allobroges and the Arverni and who, according to Suetonius, “rode through the province on an elephant accompanied by a crowd of soldiers as if amidst the solemnities of a triumph” (Suet. *Nero* 2.1). There is in this an element of playacting, and the unearned or bogus triumph becomes

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7 On this topic, see especially Bartsch 1994.
a feature of his descendant’s reign be it after the diplomatic successes of Corbulo in 54 CE, on Nero’s return to Naples after the murder of Agrippina in 59 CE (Tac. Ann. 14.13.2–3), at the coming of Tiridates to Rome in 63 CE (Suet. Nero 13; Dio 63.1.1, 63.4.3), or finally on his return from Greece in 68 CE when he entered in the city on the same chariot that Augustus himself once rode in triumph (Suet. Nero 25.1; Dio 63.20.3). The same zeal for role-playing is also apparent in Nero’s plans to lead a regiment called the “phalanx of Alexander” on campaign to the Caspian gates (Suet. Nero 19.2) and in his notorious performance of a song on the Sack of Troy as he saw Rome burn in 64 CE (Tac. Ann. 15.39.3; Suet. Nero 38.2; Dio 62.18.1). Game and reality merge most strikingly in one detail of Nero’s stage performances. The very fact that Nero played the matricides Orestes and Alcmeon or the incest-stained patricide Oedipus (Suet. Nero 39.2; Dio 63.9.4) appears to have invited identification with the more scandalous aspects of his own family life. This can only have been heightened by his decision to wear a mask depicting his own features for certain male roles and those of the dead Poppaea for any female characters that he played (Dio 63.9.5).

When Suetonius and Dio describe the end of Nero’s life, the conflation of tragedy and lived experience is a central motif: at Nero’s last public performance he ends a work titled Oedipus in Exile with the line “My wife, my mother, and my father drive me to my death” (Suet. Nero 46.3; cf. Dio 63.28.5); and after a career of playing matricides and exiles, he is finally obliged to play himself (Dio 63.28.4). Suetonius is a biographer, not a historian, and the shape he imposes on Nero the actor is one dictated by the logic of life-writing. If it is not Cn. Domitius and his mimic triumph, it is Domitius (cos. 16 BCE) with his youthful prowess as a charioteer, the sums expended on his shows, and even his readiness to put Roman knights and matrons on the stage (Suet. Nero 4). Nero cannot escape the toils of heredity and is just the most extreme manifestation of those vices innate to every member of his clan. Dio, by contrast, makes no effort to trace Nero’s more distant ancestry and puts all the emphasis on the machinations of Agrippina to secure the throne for her son. Yet both he and Suetonius put great emphasis on how Nero’s great escape from reality is finally foiled as reality itself takes on the qualities of tragedy. They both fashion his life in such a way as to suggest that no such flight is possible and that Nero must pay in tragic fashion for crimes that themselves are all too real.

At the height of his excesses of every sort, Nero is reported to have boasted that none of his predecessors had known how much they were allowed to do (Suet. *Nero* 37.3). These words may readily be applied to Nero’s own emergence as an artist. For the early years of his reign are marked by the adolescent emperor’s initial acceptance of, then struggle against, his mother, Agrippina, and his guardians, Seneca and Burrus. Tacitus opens Book 14 of the *Annals* with Poppaea’s schemes to bring about the death of Agrippina and thus facilitate Nero’s abandonment of Octavia. She mocks him as a ward subjected to the commands of others and as one who lacks not just power to command, but freedom itself (Tac. *Ann.* 14.1.1; cf. Dio 61.4.5). Such raillery clearly had its sting. It is therefore striking that Tacitus places his account of Nero’s first displays as a charioteer and a singer immediately after the death of Agrippina (Tac. *Ann.* 14.14–16), emphasizes that permission to ride his chariot was given in the hope of holding back public performance as a singer, and finally describes Burrus obliged outwardly to applaud Nero’s singing while inwardly he deplores what he sees. For all that these tensions are a key part of Nero’s individual biography, they also reflect those broader institutional problems most clearly addressed in Seneca’s *de Clementia*: the success or failure of a monarchical system of power depends almost entirely on the principles and proclivities of the ruler; those around the emperor can only influence him, and the schoolmasterly chiding of a Seneca and a Burrus is likely to yield to the more indulgent, if vicious, promptings of a Tigellinus.

The distress Nero’s performances provoked in the likes of Burrus and Seneca was clearly shared by others. Tacitus refers to the shock of those visiting Rome from the country towns of Italy and the distant provinces (Tac. *Ann.* 16.5.1). The high-minded Stoic Thrasea Paetus declined to join in the orchestrated cheerleading of the Augustiani (Dio 61.20.3–4), had no interest in hearing Nero play his lyre, and refused to sacrifice to the divine voice (Tac. *Ann.* 16.28.5; Dio 62.26.3–4). The tribunal of the praetorian cohort, Subrius Flavus, joined the 65 CE Pisonian conspiracy against Nero, but had no illusions about Piso himself: it would scarcely diminish the disgrace to the city were a lyre-player replaced by one accustomed to sing in tragic costume (Tac. *Ann.* 15.65.2). If Nero could be dispatched in favor of Piso, then Piso himself could be seen off and power handed to Seneca instead (Tac. *Ann.* 15.65.1). Confronted by Nero with the evidence for his participation in the conspiracy, Flavus replied that he had done so out of loathing for the ruler; while Nero deserved to be loved, nobody was more loyal to him; when, however, he slew his mother and his wife, and became