Introduction: Angles on an Emperor

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For the ancient historians who write about Nero, the man and his "age" are synonymous. As if anticipating Carlyle's famous formulation about world history being "but the biography of great men," and with no Herbert Spencer to tell them otherwise, Nero's ancient chroniclers write the "age" of Nero as the biography of the man himself, the outsized performer who torched the city of Rome and brought the Julio-Claudian dynasty crashing down. Put differently, and perhaps more correctly, when Nero's ancient chroniclers wrote their histories and biographies, they were not setting out to write his "age." They did not think in terms of ages *per se*, but only of the larger-than-life Roman men who happened to initiate ages upon their rise, and to conclude them upon their fall. For "the big three" of Roman imperial history (Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio), "big men" are the drivers of history, and there was never a bigger man to spin history with than Nero.

To help us understand the implosion of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the imperial crisis of 69 CE, Nero's ancient historians have precious little to say about social, political, and economic structures. They do not think in these terms, and they have neither the methods nor the vocabulary to tell us what we moderns would like to know. As we peer back from our own present to the deep past, looking from this side of numerous paradigmatic "turns" (cultural, linguistic, spatial, performative, quantitative, and so on), we want to know what can be regarded as "factual," or at least "reasonably surmisable," about the workings of the Roman world under Nero, only to be treated to stories about palace intrigue, million-dollar mushrooms, asses'-milk baths, humans lit as torches, and torch-lit orgies. We find history put to us as brilliantly salacious entertainment: a performance of outrage that is also a bid for moral authority, performed by men who are themselves politically

active and well placed (both Tacitus and Dio were Roman senators, and Suetonius was handpicked by Hadrian to hold multiple top-level posts in his administration), writing to men of similar cultural wherewithal and rank. History for the imperial "big three" has to do with uncovering and censuring the moral rot of their script's main players – their lack of moderation and megalomania. It is satire by other means, tragically tinged. Told the way the ancients tell it, Roman imperial history is tragic, not because historians look to tragedy for models (though they certainly do that), but because of what they take history's purpose to be, and because of where they choose to shine the genre's spotlight: on bigger-than-life protagonists feasting in their palaces, on their desires, their family intrigues, their delusions, and their cruelties.

Given the way that Nero has been passed down to us, it is no wonder that "the age" of Nero Claudius Caesar (37–68 CE) has appealed to the popular imagination more than any other period in ancient Roman history. It has been the object of repeated scholarly reevaluations, many of them focusing directly on the compelling figure of the emperor himself. The potent admixture of the historical and the imaginative in his reception, to include his immediate reception in the age that he came to define, has given us a deeply complex figure: a radical innovator who conformed to the traditions of Augustus; a leader among brilliantly talented poets who himself wrote laughably bad poems; a military bungler who pulled off a long-sought peace accord with the leaders of Parthia and Armenia; a self-delusional fool who was also a crafty propagandist. Abounding in such incongruities, the fourteen years of Nero's rule have been approached with strikingly different emphases: as a golden age that went sour and a time of marked Christian persecution; an era of architectural innovation capped by the glory (or monstrosity) of the Domus Aurea; a time of rapprochement between the Romans and Greeks of the eastern empire, and, of course, the death throes of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, whose policies the Flavians would react against in turn.

It is because he has been passed down to us as too many outrageous versions of the same man that Nero remains imaginable as something other than what all, and what little, the ancients made of him. He does not take to being sewn together merely as the sum of his parts because we have been left with far too many parts to work with, and because many of them do not take to being sewn into human form. But it is from this mass of contradictions and monstrous assertions and open ends that new ways of thinking about Nero and his age must emerge and new versions of the man be conceived. This Cambridge Companion

proposes to offer a comprehensive overview of the period that pays special attention not only to the monsters that Nero was made into, by the ancients and many others since, but to the processes and the cultural stakes of these constructions. This Companion looks not only to the historical debates that the age of Nero has spurred, but also to the many ways in which Nero was received and interpreted in the Roman and Christian eras of the first centuries CE and beyond. It treats the refulgence of the plastic and literary arts in the Neronian period, and it offers fresh interpretations of the relations of the main authors of the day (Seneca, Petronius, Persius, Lucan) to the age in which they lived.

The historical facts behind the many Neros that have come down to us are looked for by many of the essays of this volume, and good headway is made in the posing of new plausibilities based on fresh critical reassessments of the information we have. That said, no single, generally accepted version of Nero and his age emerges from this effort. The coeditors of this volume thought it best not to try to make that happen because not only would such a result be hard to pull off, it would risk sending the wrong message, since it would make the Nero so attained (the one offered as historically plausible by consensus) seem the point of this project, as well as somehow more real and historically significant than the monsters into which he was made. Whatever such a Nero would look like, he could be nowhere near as compelling and/or historically significant as the Neros he gave rise to.

A common thread of many of the essays in this Companion concerns Nero the performer. His ancient chroniclers make Nero's failure to separate stage acting from ruling his signature delusion. But here (to give just one instance of where modern critical methods invite new reckonings of the same old information) we have a place where "the performative turn" in recent humanities and social sciences scholarship has added vast new dimensions to what an emperor's public playacting might be taken to entail and mean – as self-work, and as the assertion of a certain kind of political identity. No longer do we go looking for "the real man," *Nero ipse*, behind the mask (only to find him hollow inside). Instead, we look to the performances he put on as a means of centering and defining himself, in acts of posing (so as to become) a self of a certain kind. The use of such performances as a means of political self-realization and getting things done is by no means unique to Nero. Rather, it is the openness with which he staged himself as this, then that, then again as something else that made his self-performance unique among Rome's emperor actors. Taken this way, rather than as mere delusion, Nero's playacting has much to tell us about

what kind of emperor he strove to appear, and what kind of performances the audiences he played to in Rome, and beyond (though clearly not all of them), could be relied on to crave and applaud.

Nero's theatricality trends through many, if not most, of the chapters of this volume because it has to do not only with his passion for the theater, but with the whole way he ruled: the palaces he built, the parties he hosted, the literature he gave rise to, the rituals he staged, and so on. This is but one area among many where this *Companion to the Age of Nero* produces new approaches to key questions, by studying them from multiple angles, and taking up with them across multiple chapters. Other areas where a number of chapters converge to produce new insights into Nero and his age concern the complicated relationship between Seneca and Nero, as well as, more generally, the complications that go with "doing philosophy" in any imperial court. This volume reassesses Nero's work as a builder, looking at the development of imperial architecture, and of the emperor's image prior to, during, and after his age. Several chapters assess the "Augustan" expectations to which Nero played, and the ways in which writers of his age take up with and redeploy some of the most troubling features of the Augustan poets whom they emulate. In addition, two of this volume's chapters provide a skeptical reassessment of Nero's treatment of the Jews and/or those Jews who followed the sect of Christos, much of which has to do with how Nero's theatricality was amplified through the desires and hatreds of later generations.

Matthew Leigh opens this volume with the problem of Nero's self-stylization as an Artist Emperor, his fatal confusion of the role of an actor with the role of a ruler. The historians tell stories of a young man whose passions for performance, and all things softly refined and Greek, could not be kept in check. The consequences for the real world over which he ruled were "tragic" in a metaphorical sense, but Nero dealt with them as if he were performing a series of demanding roles on a tragic stage: *Orestes matricida, Hercules furens*, and so on. One is right to be suspicious of this "crazed actor" of the historians as a fact of history. And yet Leigh insists that there is solid substance behind the stories, as evinced by the matter-of-fact-ness of certain descriptions of Nero's daily regimes of diet and vocal training, and by the existence of coins promoting Nero as a lyre-player. Leigh points out that the emperor's youthful enthusiasms for horses, painting, music, and acting, while unproblematic in themselves, became a source of scandal when these passions became overheated and all-consuming. Both Augustus and Nero (perhaps reprising his great-great-grandfather's last act) ended

their lives by calling attention to the theatricality of the roles they had played as emperors. But what for Augustus was stylized rule, for Nero was rule both via and as style – performance devoid of substance.

In his chapter, Josiah Osgood looks at one of the main interest groups that senatorial historians, such as Tacitus and Dio, tend to feature as chief among the suffering victims of the Neronian age: the members of the Roman Senate. Osgood examines what it meant to be a senator under Nero, in an age when the powers of the Senate had long since become secondary and circumscribed, and yet were still, in some respects, very real. He reminds us that Nero was himself a man drawn from the Senate's own order who regularly sought out senators' advice and approval. He ascended to the throne in 54 CE riding a wave of enthusiasm as the *Wunderkind* who would restore dignity to the institution that Claudius had relentlessly persecuted. The evidence suggests that there were many good years of cooperation between the emperor and the Senate before Nero began to feel threatened by certain members of their order. Many of the vices that later moralizing historians scold Nero for engaging in were in fact accepted modes of luxurious living among senators. Thus, rather than directly affronting the Senate and its *mores* with his parties, playacting, and poetry salons, Nero may in fact have been reaching out to the Senate as one of its own, playing to the Senate on the Senate's own terms: a bid for *gratia* and cohesion after the debacles of Claudius and Caligula. It was only late in his career that this symbiosis was spoiled and a new climate of suspicion and rivalry took hold. But, in the end, it was not the Senate that brought Nero down. Despite impressions of risk-taking and outright senatorial defiance that senatorial writers have left for us, the Senate was very slow to condemn him and desert one of its own.

Carlos Noreña looks at the way the empire was governed under Nero, and to do that he must first clear away a number of basic confusions about what "government" was under the emperors, and what role Nero himself may have had in running things in distant parts of the Roman world. Here again the ancient historians tend to paint cartoon pictures of an autocratic Nero doing whatever he pleased by deciding and decreeing. In fact, "government" under the emperors was a highly complex system that did not take to being worked that way. Rather than a monolith of institutions, offices, and laws used as devices for carrying out the emperor's will, Rome's imperial government is better thought of as a set of evolving political arrangements worked out between the emperor, his imperial agents, and distant others whose interests were all being taken into account and promoted at the same

time. Rome's imperial government, in other words, was "a system for the management of interests." For his part, Nero was heavily managed, and his policies much worked upon, by these interests through his advisory *concilium*, the Senate, the knights, civil servants, local elites, and even his own freed slaves. Seen for the complex interests that they protect and promote, many of Nero's fiscal policies, vilified by historians, make good economic and political sense, and even the conspiracies of his last years can be seen as a shakeup and a re-composition of the emperor's inner circle made necessary by the emergence of new configurations of power. In the end, a new provincial elite emerged that "Nero" (the set of existing political and economic arrangements that operated under that name) was too slow to accommodate.

Anthony Barrett examines the interactions that took place between Nero and another group within his court, but not officially within his *concilium*: the women of his family (Agrippina, Domitia Lepida, Octavia), and certain other women who took his fancy (Poppaea Sabina, Antonia, Acte). Nero, he shows, had a long history of craving and developing the company of strong women, all of whom (excepting Acte) he would eventually tire of and destroy. The most famous of these women is Agrippina, who seems to have boldly inserted herself into the running of things early in his career, only to be rendered irrelevant not long after his accession, having split with Seneca and Burrus, whose careers she had done much to rescue and promote. Agrippina, Barrett makes clear, was not out of line for aggressively promoting the interests of her son, but for promoting herself as virtual co-regent with him, invested with powers of her own that she was determined to wield as she pleased. The other main example of the same type is Poppaea Sabina, Nero's second wife. Despite telling stories of her traveling with herds of asses to supply milk for her daily bath, the ancient sources (esp. Josephus) demonstrate that Poppaea was a woman who wielded very real unofficial powers that came with being who she was, as well as the emperor's wife. As her efforts taken on behalf of her friends from Judaea show, Poppaea could get demolition projects canceled and prisoners released. For the ancient historians who tell of Poppaea's scheming and relentless ambition, such women were functions of the bad emperors who failed to assert their Roman male authority over them and keep them under control. But the fact that Nero was wont to welcome such women into his world, and to leave them free to develop and show off their powers in public, puts him solidly in the respectable traditions of Augustus (Livia) and Germanicus (the Elder Agrippina). Rather than a sign of weakness, Nero's association with such women

might be taken to mean that he was not afraid of them and that he saw clear advantages to showing himself in their company.

Cedric Littlewood begins a series of essays on literature with a general discussion of the crucial role Neronian literature plays in establishing certain Augustan texts and authors as canonical. Especially in the high genres of epic and tragedy, the poetic reception of Augustan literature is characterized by inversion, contrast-imitation, and a determination to outrage decorum by saying what may not be said. But what exactly may not be said? Precisely the same material accommodates critiques of Augustan myths and ideals or, alternatively, a narrative of decline in which post-Augustan culture is portrayed as degenerate. A Neronian determination to remember the violence of pre-Augustan poems, for example, in Persius' reintroduction into satire of an "epodic" voice or in Lucan's allusions to the *Georgics*, is a pointed reversal of literary history and a challenge to Augustan reconciliations. The lament for lost grandeur, prominent in texts such as Petronius' *Satyrica*, is an ancient commonplace. The loss of political liberty is often advanced as a cause of literary decline, but, we should note, often by deeply unreliable narrators.

Much of the dissonance in post-Augustan literature is created not by inverting models of smooth perfection, but by exposing and amplifying inherited tensions. Through selective reminiscence, and often jarring juxtaposition, dialogs between Augustan authors are revisited by their successors. Seneca's *Medea* combines Virgilian and Horatian texts in a meditation on the sublimity of limitless power that is as much a fulfillment of Augustan imperial ambition as its tragic demise.

Gareth Williams begins his study of Lucan's *Civil War* with a reminder of the now lost or fragmentary historical epics that might have provided its author with models. From the Augustan age alone we know that Rabirius wrote an epic on the war between Octavian and Antony, and that Sextilius Ena and Cornelius Severus wrote civil war poems. The Elder Seneca compares their treatments of the death of Cicero. In a twenty-three line fragment of Albinovanus Pedo's poem on Germanicus' expedition in the North Sea in 16 CE, Williams detects the high declamatory pitch and artificiality that will characterize post-Augustan and especially Lucan's epic.

Lucan's *Civil War* is a poem of "chaotic contradictoriness" whose fragmented form mirrors its subject. Fractures in Lucan's authorial voice – now turning away from its subject and throwing up digressions to prevent the narrative of Rome's dissolution, now driven on by burning energy – parallel the characterization of the poem's opposing

leaders. It is a conflict unresolved in the space of Lucan's poem, at least as it survives to us. The account of the elusive source of the Nile in Book 10 speaks perhaps to Nero's own ambitions (an expedition was launched ca. 61 CE), but more generally to all fantasies of global domination. If Nature is mysterious, so too are the gods who are invoked but never appear in Lucan's poem, as if to place the crime of the war and the shattering of the world beyond providence and understanding.

Kirk Freudenburg, in his chapter, "Petronius, Realism, Nero," explores the connections between the grandiose self-stylization and competitive playacting of the characters of the *Satyrica*, and the extreme aestheticization of politics in Neronian Rome. The playacting of Petronius' characters, and the confusions of art and reality, Freudenburg argues, "have less to do with their 'not getting' how things happen in the real world than with their 'getting' the ways of the late Neronian world all too well." The experience of Encolpius at Trimalchio's dinner, uncertain what is scripted, accidental, and improvised, is our own as readers of Nero's Rome. Nero singing while Rome burned, as if to the accompaniment of a play he had written, is the reverse image of Petronius making his own constrained and scripted death appear a mere accident. Tacitus' account of Petronius' final fiction both parodies and surpasses Seneca's more labored attempt to stage an image of his life. The *Satyrica* offers a series of painted windows into Roman reality. The "call of nature" (and what could be more natural than that?) that forces an intermission in the performance (*Sat.* 41–6) is revealed as a literary echo of Horace, *Satires* 2.8 and an opportunity for Trimalchio, on his return, to display his medical learning. Time and again Petronius plays a trick in order to show us how the trick is done. In this respect, Freudenburg sees a comical resemblance between the illusions of the *Satyrica* and the fakery of Nero's Rome in which Nero's actor-emperor flippantly exposes the codes of his own manufacture.

In "'Ain't Sayin': Persius in Neroland," Dan Hooley examines *nefas* (the unspeakable) in a satiric context. At the end of his programmatic first satire, Persius buries what may not be said in a hole, either sowing the seeds of free speech or consigning them to the grave. His close associate Thrasea Paetus, whose death ends what we have of Tacitus' *Annals*, once left a Senate meeting because "he could not say what he would, and would not say what he could" (Dio 61.15). Throughout his essay, Hooley looks in these apparently unpolitical satires for the words that cannot be spoken, for the implicit contrast between Persius' life under the guidance of his Stoic teacher, Cornutus, and Nero's life under the guidance of his Stoic teacher, Seneca. Nero's

insincere speech of thanks to Seneca from *Annals* 14.55–6 is shockingly juxtaposed with Persius' gratitude to Cornutus, a gratitude that remains unspeakable (*non enarrabile*, 5.29) in a world whose rhetoric is bankrupt. The Roman Socrates cum Alcibiades of *Satires* 4 offers an unflattering portrait of Seneca and Nero, but not so as to place Persius' relationship with his own Socratic teacher beyond criticism. In Neroland, who doesn't have the ears of an ass? Simply naming Midas/Nero would be too easy a satire. "You want me to say that Midas has asses' ears, and worse?" writes Hooley's Persius. "I know it, and I want *you* to think about that and where *you* fit into this fallen world that I'm showing."

Seneca's works are treated in the next trio of essays. Chiara Torre argues for a more complex contextualization of Senecan drama in the art and culture of the Neronian age than it has previously received. Torre critiques the tendency to read the tragedies as *tragédies à clef*. Instead, she would have us pay attention to other less analyzed features. For one, she emphasizes the importance of the tragedies' continuing themes as echoed in the prose works, such as the relationship between monarchy and tyrannical power, the role of fate in the kingdom, and the role of the advisor figure. These themes, she suggests, are parallel across the poetry and the prose in their relentless movement from a more positive to a more negative view of power.

Torre's chapter also examines Senecan drama within a number of possible interpretive contexts related directly to their cultural milieu: as Augustanism "refigured" in order to reverse the optimistic stance of that earlier literature and represent the emperor as a sort of mad god; as a parallel to Fourth-style wall painting, in which domestic scenes are featured publicly and mythological innovation is striking; and as a reflection, metrically, of the heightened interest in music and pantomime under Nero. Examinations in this style, as she persuasively argues, help us fully understand the multidimensional nature of the theatricality marking the Neronian age.

Shadi Bartsch discusses philosophical, particularly Stoic, engagement in and disengagement from the state. Senators such as Thrasea Paetus could articulate political dissent in Stoic terms, but the philosophy was not opposed to monarchy. Although Stoics believed that "only the wise man is king" (*SVF* 3.369–700), there are many Stoic treatises on (actual) kingship from the third century BCE. Seneca's *de Clementia* exaggerates Stoic acceptance of monarchy as a possible form of government in the metaphor of the king as the mind of the body politic. This ideology for the new regime, Bartsch argues, stands in sharp contrast to the political writings of Cicero, for whom the Senate was the guardian,

protector, and defender of the republic. Seneca echoes Cicero's language, but appropriates it for imperial praise.

Seneca quotes the opinion of Zeno, Stoicism's founder, that the wise man will enter public life if nothing stands in the way (*Dial.* 8.3.20). It is a crucial qualification that Seneca, who asked Nero's permission to retire from public life in 62 CE, exploits. He argues that because there is in practice no state worthy of a wise man's participation, "leisure begins to be necessary for all of us" (*Dial.* 8.8.1–3). Bartsch closes her essay with a discussion of Seneca implicitly defending himself against the charge of inconstancy, of abandoning the course he had set earlier in life. "Besides the wise man, no one plays one role; the rest of us wear many masks" (*Ep.* 120.22).

Continuing several of the themes of Bartsch's essay, Catharine Edwards confronts the contradictions between Seneca's philosophical prose and his life as an imperial courtier in "Seneca and the Quest for Glory in Nero's Golden Age." Whether to select public service or private retreat; whether to care for the soul or for one's reputation; whether glory ultimately comes from literary achievement, philosophical teaching, or political preeminence – all these questions emerge in sharp relief from Seneca's complicated legacy. In the end, as Edwards points out, Seneca touts the value of philosophy as the locus of true distinction, and the opinion, not of society at large, but of a few select men – and one's conscience. *Virtus* is within. Similarly so for writing: philosophy will trump literary achievement as a route to fame.

And yet, this affirmation aside, Seneca's claims are ultimately not so simple. For one, his view that philosophy is superior to other exploits partly rests on the posthumous glory it bestows on the philosopher; yet glory is one of the indifferents that the Stoic philosopher is supposed to scorn. Another interesting contradiction inherent in the *Letters* is Seneca's concern therein to deliberately echo earlier literary sources in making his arguments. As such he betrays, Edwards suggests, "an ambition to create a new kind of literary masterwork." His particular interest in Ovidian intertext suggests that behind the sanguine philosopher, yet another Senecan persona might be lurking unacknowledged: that of the exiled poet, who, like Ovid, "even on the very edge of the Roman empire, insisted on goading the emperor – and championing the superior power of literature."

In Part IV, this volume turns to material culture and the monuments of Neronian Rome. Caroline Vout observes in Neronian art a similarly knowing display of artifice, a confusion of the real and imaginary similar to what Freudenburg observed in Petronius'