CHAPTER 1

# *Introduction*
## *Neronian Myths*

Nero was not like other emperors. Yes, Caligula also had incestuous affairs and appeared (at night) on stage. Yes, Tiberius also put senators on trial, and yes Caracalla also murdered his brother (Geta). But, from antiquity to today, what separates the story of Nero from those of other emperors is its afterlife. The spectre of Nero preoccupied pagans for decades and Christians for centuries after the emperor's death in Rome. For us, Nero is something of a historical phenomenon. When we try to assess what his contemporaries thought about his life and reign, we have only a sketchy picture to help us. We have no historical or biographical, let alone autobiographical, accounts of Nero from his own time, AD 37–68. As is true of most powerful figures throughout history, there were probably mixed reviews of his performance. The Jewish historian Josephus (writing only shortly after Nero's death) suggests this when justifying his own lack of testimony about the emperor:

> [For] many historians have written the story of Nero, of whom some, because they were treated well by him, have out of gratitude been careless of truth, while others from hatred and enmity towards him have so shamelessly and recklessly revelled in falsehoods as to merit censure.[1]

What we are left with, then, is a series of images of Nero, most of which we encounter through the accounts of later commentators. As a result, both for the ancient Romans and for us, the emperor's potential to transform from one paradigmatic character to another (say, a mad tyrant to an Antichrist) according to the demands of genre or context, was and is immense.[2]

[1] Joseph. *AJ* 20.154, trans. Feldman 1965b: 85–6.
[2] I call the idea of the association between Nero and the Antichrist a 'paradigm' because it acts as a fixed term not only for the expectation of Nero's apocalyptic return, but also for the iniquity of the emperor during his lifetime. Once conceived, the Nero-Antichrist could be used in literature of all kinds as a concept that was fully formed and (supposedly) supported by the authority of the earliest of Christians.

By the second century AD, Nero had become the byword for imperial iniquity and ineptitude. As Martial (now famously) exclaimed, 'What is worse than Nero?'[3] Juvenal branded Domitian a 'bald Nero' as a cutting slur upon the last of the Flavians' reputation.[4] At this point, the 'real' emperor was only a hazy memory for the few who would have been alive during Nero's reign. Part of that memory for some, however, was what happened in the decades after the emperor's death: the appearances of the pseudo-Nerones, or the false Neros – imposters from the east claiming to be Nero and pronouncing their right to reclaim Rome. Suetonius recalls, 'twenty years later [after Nero's death], when I was a young man, a mysterious individual came forward pretending to be Nero; and so magical was the sound of his name in the Parthians' ears that they supported him to the best of their ability, and only handed him over with great reluctance'.[5] There were two, possibly three, such pretenders in those twenty years. The people of Rome knew Nero was dead – his grave was there for all to see on the Pincian Hill and his funeral had cost the state 2,000 gold pieces. But for others, the fact that it was not the praetorians who took Nero's life, but his own attendant at his own request, appears to have cast doubt over the whole scenario. Thus (dead) reminders of Nero would, once in a while, arrive in Flavian Rome – the heads or bodies of those pretenders brought back by the victorious army from the east. As I said before, Nero was not like other emperors.

The prospect of Neros in far off lands heading to Rome to reclaim the throne was, however, lacklustre compared to the threat posed by the emperor's return in the Christian imagination. Nero's 'second coming' heralded the onset of the apocalypse. This is because during his reign, in AD 65, a group of Christians in Rome were put to death – some were fed to beasts, others fixed to crosses, and still more set alight at night as torches. Their crime was arson – Rome had caught fire the year before and this group of undesirables had been picked by Nero and his court to take the blame. But, this was the first time the Christians had faced death at the hands of the Roman state, and Nero's position as figurehead of that state ensured his culpability in the historical record. From the third century onwards, Nero was inserted into a range of Christian texts, their authors affirming that the emperor was in fact the Antichrist described in Bible passages. When Victorinus of Pettau (Pannonia) writes the first-ever commentary on the Book of Revelation, Nero is there as the beast who emerges from the sea. When John Chrysostom delivers a homily on 2

[3] Mart. *Spect.* 7.34.4. [4] Juv. 4.38. [5] Suet. *Ner.* 57.

Thessalonians, Nero is there as the man of lawlessness, sent by Satan to spread deceit and lies over the world. Indeed, Nero fit so well into this role, his coming was even understood by Jerome as a prophecy in the Old Testament's Daniel. How better to explain complex theological concepts to Christian converts than to appeal to someone already infamous for their cruelty, deception, and perversion. By projecting Nero back into biblical texts, these late-antique writers created an association between the emperor and the Antichrist that had sufficient authority – that of the New Testament authors – and utility to ensure its preservation across time and space.

In the nineteenth century, this fully formed paradigm, complete with scriptural authority, once again emerged in mainstream debate. The French philosopher and theologian Ernest Renan, frustrated by Protestant accusations that the pope was the Antichrist, took it upon himself to remind his fellow scholars, if not the wider public, that the earliest Christians had already identified the Antichrist: it was Nero. Hence, the fourth volume of his *History of the Origins of Christianity* was entitled *Antichrist* (1873) and entirely devoted to Nero. If Renan revived the paradigm, however, it was F. W. Farrar, the Dean of Canterbury, who popularised it. Despite being a liberal Protestant himself, Farrar was as disturbed as Renan by sectarian quarrels over the identity of the Antichrist. Like Renan, he felt sure that the earliest Christians must have had the definitive answer. To demonstrate this, the Dean wrote a two-volume historical novel, *Darkness and Dawn, or Scenes in the Days of Nero: A Historic Tale* (1891). In doing so, Farrar not only introduced the Nero-Antichrist to the readers of historical fiction, but he also repeatedly reminded them in no uncertain terms that Nero was guilty of committing all the worst crimes of which he had ever been accused in ancient historiography. Nero made a victim of anyone who had a semblance of morality – pagan or Christian. Farrar laments, 'the wickedest age the world has ever seen was also the most incurably sad'.[6] In fact, Farrar's novel presented such a simplistic view of an evil Nero railing against all that was Christian and good that some in his audience found it wearisome. Others, however, were more receptive, notably Polish novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz, who decided to take Farrar's message, add a love story to the plot, and write *Quo Vadis*.

The debate raged in various arenas. In the same year as Farrar published *Darkness and Dawn*, Edward Fountain, a Cambridge-educated medical doctor, got up in front of the Turnham Green Literary Society to deliver

[6] Farrar 1891: II. 9.

his 'A Defence of Nero' as a response to Farrar's novel. He presented himself to his audience as the voice of reason amongst a litany of prejudice:

> I am in earnest to-night ... we have now before us a neglected man, for whom I believe no one has ever said a good word. Surely this is an occasion on which it is only our due to be both sad and serious. For if, after Nero has been maligned for eighteen centuries, it should have been reserved for me to discover that he was really an altogether respectable man and emperor (you will observe that I do not maintain that he was anything more than respectable), it makes one begin to wonder how many others may have been falsely accused, how many men may have been imprisoned for thefts and crimes, and how many have been hung for murders that they never committed, whether good reputations are as false as bad ones, and what is really the value of any earthly reputation at all.[7]

Fountain himself, though, had quite a reputation for making deliberately provocative and subversive arguments. The review in the *Richmond and Twickenham Times* characterised his speech as yet another 'brilliant display of logical fireworks', brought about by the good doctor's 'love of paradox'.[8] And, it takes fireworks to address such a topic – audiences required fire and colour and spectacle if they were to entertain attempts to 'rehabilitate' such an emperor. By taking on the topic, Fountain was able to demonstrate his talent and dexterity in curating such a display.

Fountain begins by confronting the perception that Nero is a 'poisoner, a murderer, and a matricide'. He says that to accuse anyone of all three is preposterous, as a poisoner is necessarily a murderer, and a matricide is necessarily a murderer as well. Therefore, there are two crimes, not three.[9] He also clears up the problem of succession, in other words, whether Nero was ever entitled to be emperor at all. Nero was to Claudius what Tiberius was to Augustus, and if that succession pattern was good enough for Augustus, why not for Claudius? Further, Britannicus was 'subject to epileptic fits' and therefore a wholly unsuitable candidate for emperor.[10] Fountain absolves Nero from all accusations of poisoning (or attempting to poison) his family members (stepbrother, stepfather, mother, aunt) in one fell swoop – how on earth could any Roman historians be sure poison was used without a post-mortem?[11]

The last charge Fountain tackles is that Nero acted and sang on stage. What is so wrong with that, Fountain asks. If his actions corrupted young nobles, surely there were worse things these nobles could be getting up to

[7] Fountain 1892: 3. [8] Fountain 1982: 2. [9] Fountain 1892: 7.
[10] Fountain 1892: 10–11. The emphasis is Fountain's. [11] Fountain 1892: 15–22.

than playing the lyre? If older members of the senate had a problem with it, it was their problem and not Nero's.[12] In wrapping up his deliberately subversive speech, Fountain puts his finger on the problem we all face as historians so far removed from the subjects of our study: 'Eighteen centuries of malice, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation are enough punishment for any errors of judgement.' Fountain proposes his solution: 'It is time now to reverse the verdict, and to call upon the new world to redress the balance of the old.'[13] Many, however, including those in Fountain's own audience and writers since, had absolutely no desire to redress the balance when it came to one particular aspect of the Nero tradition – the idea that the earliest of Christians, those who had been Christ's disciples, believed that Nero would return as the Antichrist. For a scholar, novelist, playwright, or paradox-loving doctor to rewrite this part of Nero's profile would be for her or him to reject millennia of ingrained Christian tradition and belief.

Thus, when in 1903 the Oxonian scholar Bernard Henderson wrote his *Life and Principate of the Emperor Nero*, he maintains that John's beast in Revelation 'indubitably = Nero – "the legend of whose healing and return to reign was in everyone's mouth"'.[14] Henderson is sure of himself in this statement, even though the rest of his narrative seeks to unpick traditional, hostile interpretations of Nero. Henderson believed that Nero was the victim of 'propaganda' spread by writers who lived under later dynasties, namely Tacitus (*fl.* late-first to early-second centuries AD), Suetonius (*fl.* early- to mid-second century AD), and Cassius Dio (*fl.* late-second to early-third centuries AD). However, despite Henderson's best intentions to approach Nero without judgement, he must endorse the perception that biblical writers themselves chose Nero as their Antichrist figure, here John's beast from Revelation, because this was too significant a part of Christian tradition to refute. Increasingly, since Henderson, the response has been either to continue pushing Nero into the mould of the Antichrist (as practised by biblical and theological scholars) or to ignore the association altogether (as we see in most classical scholarship and in popular representations of the emperor).

That Nero's role as the Antichrist was off limits to revisionism is highlighted by the fact that so many other aspects of his reign were frequently subject to rewrites. After Fountain and Henderson, Mary Stocks (scholar, political activist, writer, and journalist), in her own brilliant display of logical fireworks, produced a play entitled *Hail Nero!*

[12] Fountain 1892: 36–7. [13] Fountain 1892: 40. [14] Henderson 1903: 440.

*A Reinterpretation of History in Three Acts* (1933). The protagonist would be unrecognisable to the readers of classical or Christian histories; hers was a Nero driven by social activism and women's rights, who championed Locusta (usually depicted as the woman to call for deadly poisons) because she was a talented chemist, and who set up a holiday resort for the people (a sort of ancient Butlin's complete with donkey rides along the beach) at Antium. Although Stocks' Nero did burn Rome, and 'fiddle' while watching the flames, he had to take such a drastic measure in order to rid the Suburra (the slums of Rome) of the pests and diseases that lived in the very walls of its houses. Moreover, he had to perform in order to keep the people who would otherwise have been in those houses entertained. Stocks is extremely clever in her reinterpretation – the play is an exercise in assuming the most positive and most innocent explanation for every crime Nero is accused of committing, and in presuming that all of his actions are those of a good man with the best of intentions. But, part of her cleverness, particularly in terms of ensuring the play's success with audiences and critics, was that Stocks ended her play while the fire was still burning. There were no rumours about who started the fire, no arrests of Christians, and there was certainly no persecution. Had she taken her play any further than July AD 64, and tested her audience's response to a rejection of Nero's role as first persecutor, it is doubtful her play would have had the successful runs in Manchester (1933), Sheffield (1938), the Oxford Playhouse (1938), and the National Sylvan Theatre in Washington, DC (at the Washington Monument, 1939) that it did.

In the printed version of the play, John Stocks, husband of Mary and professor of philosophy at the University of Manchester, wrote in the preface:

> In those days [antiquity] the historical conscience and the law of libel were both young and weak ... it is not beyond the resources of modern scholarship to restore even Nero to respectable company. This restoration has already been effected to some extent by professional historians. The author of this drama uses the privileges of the imagination to carry the restoration a stage further.[15]

The 'restoration' to which John Stocks referred is typified by the works of historians like John Tarver (*Tiberius the Tyrant*, 1902) and J. Stuart Hay (*The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus*, 1911). In early- to mid-twentieth-century biographies of Nero, scholars do, in a somewhat more measured

[15] Stocks 1933: vii–viii.

way, what Mary Stocks did in her play – assume that the sources are giving a less favourable interpretation of events than is fair or necessary. And, like Stocks, they do not touch the Nero-Antichrist paradigm. Thus, Arthur Weigall, after providing the traditional narrative of Nero as 'cruel, bestial, vicious, vain, cowardly, and utterly irresponsible', declares:

> I want to show that there is another side of the picture altogether, a side which can now only be rendered apparent by recognizing the cause of the prejudice against him, by piecing together the many admissions of his merits grudgingly made by various ancient writers, and by interpreting Nero's character and the motives of his actions in the light shed by both of these.[16]

It is clear that Weigall feels some anxiety that his credibility as a scholar might be called into question, that he might be accused of jumping on the bandwagon of historical revisionism: 'It is not that, in this age of white-wash, a merely fashionable attempt is here to be made to show him in the best light.'[17] With scholars nervous about treading new ground with regard to Nero the man, it is unsurprising that none were willing to take on Nero the Antichrist.

The approach adopted by Henderson and continued by Weigall and others proved not to be a particularly effective way of breaking down stereotypes associated with Nero. To say that the only problem with the evidence of the Roman historians is that they wrote under later emperors, and to see the remedy as simply to look harder at the literary evidence to find nuggets of merit in Nero's behaviour, does not acknowledge that these texts are fundamentally works of persuasive literature. In the 1970s, Hayden White insisted that all writers of history must interpret events in order to construct a comprehensive narrative. While historians might know or inherit some 'facts', a coherent history requires 'creative imagination' both to fill in inevitable gaps in knowledge and to explain causes and consequences. Thus history becomes story: 'just as there can be no explanation in history without a story, so too there can be no story without a plot by which to make it a story of a particular kind.'[18] The historian then makes a decision – will her or his history be framed as a comedy, a tragedy, a satire, a romance, an epic, or something else? That decision, and the form the narrative finally takes, is dictated by a writer's chosen mode of interpretation (for example, idiography, where the historian elaborates on vague details in order to ensure their vividness in the mind's eye of the

[16] Weigall 1930: 11. [17] Weigall 1930: 11. [18] White 1973: 297.

reader), and her or his ideological framework (for example, liberal, conservative, Marxist).[19]

An awareness and understanding of this process has dramatically impacted the way in which classicists approach Nero. The first volume fully to adopt this critical approach to the sources for our emperor is Jaś Elsner and Jamie Masters' *Reflections of Nero* (1994). The clue is very much in the name – a stellar line-up of distinguished scholars show how different aspects of Nero's life and character are imagined in and reflected through the ancient sources into the modern world, whilst simultaneously problematising traditional histories of Nero by questioning and, in some cases tearing down, the very 'foundations of the Neronian myth'.[20] However, by the time Elsner and Masters were compiling their volume, discussion of the Nero-Antichrist paradigm had fallen out of classical scholarship almost altogether, with only cursory mentions made in passing in the introductory or concluding statements of a few biographical works.[21] Thus, this was not part of the Neronian myth interrogated or corrected in *Reflections*.

If classical scholars and popular writers have shied away from investigating Nero's reception in the Christian tradition as the Antichrist, biblical scholars have felt no such apprehension. Ever since the first commentary on Revelation written by Victorinus, New Testament scholars have been far more at ease with discussing the Nero-Antichrist paradigm and the early-Christian context that constructed it. The prevailing consensus amongst modern academics is that Nero was first associated with the Antichrist by biblical writers, possibly Paul (or ps.-Paul), but definitely John of Patmos.[22] The argument goes that John's first beast in Revelation is a thinly veiled metaphor for the emperor Nero, whose reign saw the first persecution of Christians by imperial order.[23] Further, modern scholars can cite evidence for their interpretation – many notable historians and exegetes of late antiquity also recognised the similarities between biblical descriptions of the Antichrist and historiographical accounts of Nero as told by the ancient sources. Both Nero and the Antichrist were cruel, destructive, deceptive, and murderous.

The problem is, while Elsner and Masters, alongside other scholars of ancient history, have followed a more critical approach to both literary and non-literary evidence for the Roman imperial period, many biblical

[19] White 1973: 299–307. [20] Elsner and Masters 1994: 5.
[21] For example, Warmington 1969: 168; Griffin 1984: 15–16; Champlin 2003a: 17–18; Grau 2015: 172–8.
[22] On the disputed authorship of 2 Thessalonians, see Chapter 2, pp. 58–9.
[23] For example, Bell Jr 1979: 93–102; Bauckham 1993: 384–452; van Kooten 2007: 205–48.

scholars have continued to use older biographies of Nero as authoritative texts when discussing the Nero-Antichrist paradigm – Bishop (1964) and Griffin (1984), the former of whom freely acknowledged his heavy reliance on Henderson's early-twentieth-century biography, are particularly popular.[24] Rojas-Flores (2004), for example, goes as far back as the nineteenth century and uses the works of F. W. Farrar in his exploration of Nero as the beast in Revelation. The number 666 adds up to Nero Caesar, and Farrar is one author who has confirmed this.[25] Consequently, Rojas-Flores worked with a portrayal of Nero which did not appreciate how late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century ancient historians understand images of emperors.

Moreover, because the Nero-Antichrist has its own tradition in biblical studies, theologians cite preceding works from their own discipline. On these occasions, Jakob-Sonnabend's *Untersuchungen zum Nerobild der Spätantike* (1990) and Bauckham's *Climax of Prophecy* (1993), both of which advocate Nero's association with the biblical Antichrist, appear frequently.[26] The arguments in these works are founded upon the assumption that Nero was de facto a tyrannical emperor – the anecdotes related by the ancient sources were founded in truth and, therefore, Nero was undoubtedly the eschatological figure described in the New Testament literature written by Christians who remembered him. In order to balance the dialogue, a historical study of the Nero-Antichrist is necessary.

Thus, now is the ideal time for Classics to re-appropriate the Nero-Antichrist paradigm and add to the discussion already long underway in the works of our colleagues in Biblical and Early-Christian Studies. In this book, I reassess the Nero-Antichrist paradigm, adopting a post–Elsner and Masters approach. By exploring in detail the perception of Nero in first-century Rome and the wider empire using a range of literature and material culture, I argue that the paradigm can better be understood as the product of late antiquity rather than the first century. In doing so, I also contend that the so-called Neronian references in the

[24] For example, van Henten and Klauck cite Bishop and Griffin as biographies that will enlighten their readers as to Nero's character: van Henten 2000: 8 n. 9, 16 n. 59; Klauck 2001: 683 n. 2, 686 n. 13.
[25] Rojas-Flores 2004: 387 n. 35, see also 376 n. 3.
[26] See, for example, Harland 2000: 104; Friesen 2001: 137; van Kooten 2005: 180–1; 2007: 208–9. Kreitzer, who discusses Bishop's and Griffin's biographies of Nero in his article 1988: 94–5, 109, also appears in the footnotes of some of these texts: see Friesen 2001: 245 n. 18; van Kooten 2007: 208 n. 5, 211 n. 10.

Bible do not as easily fit the emperor as they may at first seem, and that alternative ways of interpreting their Antichrist figures can provide a better, more appropriate match. Consequently, late antiquity and the nineteenth century were the periods in which the Nero-Antichrist paradigm was at its most influential; the former saw its invention and use an exegetical device for explaining the nature of the Antichrist, and the latter saw it employed to address wider religious concerns and *fin de siècle* fears. When Ernest Renan wrote his *Antichrist* in 1873, he did not cite any references to the Nero-Antichrist paradigm in the Middle Ages, Renaissance, or Enlightenment, but went back to late antiquity for his evidence. This is because the nature of the paradigm was set in late antiquity, and did not change in the intervening period. In fact, the paradigm was far less pervasive between late antiquity and the nineteenth century, as other ways of exploring and understanding Christian eschatology came to the fore.

In 1991, William Gwyn dismissed the existence of the Nero-Antichrist paradigm after late antiquity. He writes, '[t]here is no persuasive evidence that many, if indeed any, people continued after the fifth century to identify Nero with Antichrist'.[27] Contrary to Gwyn's assertion in an otherwise excellent article, the paradigm did not die out entirely after antiquity, although it did fade in its potency, as both Perrin (1999) and Maier (2013) suggest.[28] Perrin notes that '[d]uring the Middle Ages, the theme of the Antichrist survives, but first place [in importance] is left to that of the devil'.[29] The Antichrist no longer commanded the volume of discussion that it had in earlier periods. Further, Maier explains how a fascination with Satan over the Antichrist affected the Nero-Antichrist paradigm: 'often Nero appears in exegetically steered apocalyptic commentary, influenced largely by Ambrosiaster's figuration of Antichrist'.[30] Ambrosiaster is one of the few late-antique writers to explore the relationship between Satan and the Antichrist when he states explicitly that the Nero-Antichrist was the son of Satan.[31] The Nero-Antichrist paradigm was still present in the background, influencing receptions of Nero during these periods, but it was subordinated to narratives about the power of the devil, and to the depiction of Nero as the archetypal bad emperor in the manner of classical historiography.[32]

[27] Gwyn 1991: 453. [28] See also Di Branco 2007: 26–40; Bjaï 2009: 89–108.
[29] Perrin 1999: 482. [30] Maier 2013: 389. [31] Ambros. *Comm. 2 Thes.* 2.7.
[32] For example, the thirteenth-century German chronicle *Die Kaiserchronik* (Chronicle of Emperors) on Nero: 4083–306, particularly 4108–13.