

## CHAPTER 1

# The Performing Prince

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### The Training and Pastimes of Princes

Earlier this year I turned on the BBC television World Service to find an image of Prince Harry, the younger of the future crown princes of Great Britain, astride a polo pony in an exhibition game of polo at the Meadowbrook Club in Long Island. He was making a brief ceremonial visit to New York to lay a wreath at the site of Ground Zero and followed it up with some interviews and this unusual match.

Now polo is not a national game in Britain like cricket or football (soccer and/or rugby). It is mostly played under the auspices of private clubs and ordinary folk will only see it if it is screened because a member of the royal family is playing. The game is an archaic revival, originating in central Asia, brought to Britain from India in the nineteenth century and since modified. I would say that as an expensive game and a team game for the elite it is highly appropriate to a young prince, especially as it requires swift reflexes and skilled horsemanship. It invites comparison with the *Lusus Troiae* (“Troy Game”) re-introduced to Rome by Caesar, a ritual event in which elite Roman youth performed intricate choreographed manoeuvres on horseback (Suetonius, *Divus Julius* 39).

Suetonius pointedly says that Augustus put on the Troy Game because he thought it a becoming and ancient practice for the nature of elite families to make itself known (*notescere*): so the game was directed to the self-presentation of future nobles and princes to the people of Rome (*Divus Augustus* 43.2). Virgil features the first instance of this game, its etiology so to speak, as a tradition of the Julian *gens* in *Aeneid* 5.548–78.

The point I want to make is that monarchies – new or established – develop an appropriate training for their princes, and an appropriate way for the young men to be presented to their subjects. The princes William and Harry both followed their public

school with military training, and have served in the army; Harry indeed went secretly to Afghanistan to share the experiences of his fighting force, and afterwards trained to be a helicopter pilot. No one would criticize this choice, and most citizens would be content even with the far more symbolic military service or titular positions as commanders of military units.

Within the dynasty developed by Augustus Caesar the military training of the emperor's successors followed the republican Roman tradition which sent the youth in his first years of military service (*stipendium*) to serve under his father's command, or if the father was unmilitary, under a friend's protection. Nicolaus of Damascus' *Life of Augustus* records that Julius Caesar took his great-nephew Octavian and Octavian's best friend Agrippa to fight Sextus Pompey in Spain and was expecting them to join him in the Parthian expedition of 44 BC. Octavian in turn promoted the military career of his stepsons. Even if Marcellus was not healthy enough for combat – as may have been the case – both Tiberius and Drusus fought and became officers, fighting for Rome over 15 years, in Gaul, in Germany, in the Raetian and Vindelician Alps of Tyrol. Drusus led a naval expedition eastwards in the North Sea as far as the mouth of the Elbe, and was fighting in Germany as consul and commander when a tragic fall from his horse killed him. In a sense there was no gap between this first princely model and the first training under Tiberius in 8 BC of Gaius Caesar, born in 20 BC as son of Agrippa and adopted as heir of Augustus. In 20 BC Tiberius had led a diplomatic expedition to show the flag and recover the Parthian standards; in AD 1 Gaius went out to Armenia on a similar military expedition, while his younger brother Lucius went to command Roman forces in Gallia Transalpina. Both princes died – one of wounds, one of disease – but their place was taken by Drusus' son Germanicus (born approx 15 BC) and Tiberius' son by Agrippa's daughter Vipsania, also called Drusus. Emperor Augustus had Tiberius adopt these two princes as successors. Germanicus was commander in chief of the two legionary camps on the upper and lower Rhine when Augustus died, whereas Drusus had been sent out from Rome to the mutinous legions in Pannonia. These two events form Tacitus' opening scenario once he has passed Augustus' funeral and obituaries.

So there were Roman princes rising through the army for 60 years from 45 BC onwards and they would also occupy superior commands until the sinister death of Germanicus in AD 19 and suspected poisoning of Drusus in 23. Other potential princes survived, Drusus II and Nero, the sons of Germanicus (Gaius was still below puberty): but not for long. They were accused of treason by Sejanus, imprisoned, and starved to death.

As a result, from AD 23 onwards there were no princes posing as successors and thus serving as models to the young Domitius Ahenobarbus, who would become Nero over 30 years later. The Roman principate passed from the disillusioned and geriatric Tiberius to his immature and soon demented grandson Caligula, then from Caligula to his aging uncle Claudius without any major warfare or serious imperial generals. Nero, meanwhile, had grown up the neglected child of a dead and nasty (*detestabilis* according to Suetonius, *Nero* 5) father and a disgraced and exiled mother, reared by his aunt Domitia Lepida, or by her employees (the legendary barber and dancing master.) Born in AD 37, he would have been 12 when his mother was restored to power as Claudius' last wife, and was adopted by the emperor as soon as he reached the toga of manhood in AD 51, an event which paved the way for Nero's succession after Claudius'

opportune death in AD 54. When he became emperor at 16, Nero had had no military training; only the theoretical guidance of Seneca and Afranius Burrus, the honest Prefect of the Praetorian Guard. The young Nero is credited with two appropriate princely activities – participating in the *Lusus Troiae* (Tacitus, *Annals* 11.11), and advocating tax immunity for the Julian ancestral city of Ilium (*Annals* 12.58). But this seems to have been his last judicial speech: once beyond puberty and secure in power he would not compose his own speeches or even give them effectively. Instead, the role models of his dead grandfather and father would be ominously indicative. Nero’s grandfather seems to have been landowner of huge grazing areas, and was already in his youth famous for his love of chariot-racing. While Suetonius suggests no scandal in this, his legendary cruelty was transmitted to Nero’s father, who notoriously drove his galloping team over a child in the road (*Nero* 5).

Suetonius includes among Nero’s disgraces and crimes his love of charioteering (*Nero* 20–21): an aspect of youthful character written into a narrative that starts from Nero’s training in music, follows his apparently obsessive studies with the citharode Terpnus, and returns to Nero as singing performer after his words on charioteering (*Nero* 20–22). Suetonius begins with Nero’s extreme enthusiasm, in his boyish talk as a fan of the chariot races – something predictable in any Roman – his constant attendance and pressure on the team owners to increase the number of race offerings and prizes. But soon the prince wanted more (a recurring pattern) . . . He wanted to race in person and have the public as his audience; he displayed himself to the common folk in the Circus Maximus, while using a freedman to wave the starting handkerchief. In describing Nero’s trip to Greece in AD 66 (not treated in our surviving text of Tacitus which ends in 65), Suetonius offers details of Nero’s chariot-racing in Greece and failed attempt to drive a 10-horse team at Olympia (not surprisingly he was thrown: cf. *Nero* 24.2). He also gives some attention to describing the spectacular imitation of Greek Olympic victors by Nero: as if he, too, had gained an eiselastic victory in a sacred game (i.e. one which entitled the victor to make a ceremonial entrance into the city), he breached the city walls of Naples, Antium, Alba, and Rome itself. And Champlin has rightly drawn our attention to Dio’s account of the marvelous *trompe l’œil* of the golden sun charioteer depicted on the awning which fluttered over the audience, as if indeed Nero was the sun in his heaven (Dio 63.5.2): “When the audience looked up to the sun, they would see Nero himself instead – in fact the emperor’s image very neatly preserved his people from the sun’s burning rays and the stars around him indicated that his chariot was indeed a heavenly one.” (Champlin (2003a) 118). The various artifacts, including coins, statues, and the colossus of the *Domus Aurea* now wore radiate crowns identifying their emperor not so much with Apollo as with the sun god himself.

While Nero’s love for charioteering is certainly part of the story in Suetonius’ catalogue of disgraces and vices, however, it occupies a relatively small part of the narrative. Such brevity can be explained in several ways. First, chariot-racing did not really scandalize Romans as did acting or singing, and professional charioteers were not legally disqualified like actors (Rawson (1991) 475–86). In addition, we can add to the fashionable glamour of Nero’s famous grandfather the tales of Caligula’s pontoon bridge over the Bay of Naples, which he crossed first on horseback, then in a two-horse chariot. Instead I want to concentrate on what truly scandalized orthodox Romans: Nero’s public ambitions as a singer. This is an art which many of us enjoy as audience, or in performance as

amateurs. We can understand the techniques and how Roman vocal training differed from modern classical training. As a charioteer Nero was no doubt as stimulated by the risk and excitement of speed as by any desire for display. As a musician risk does not apply beyond the embarrassment of a failed performance, but despite Nero's reported nervousness his desire for self-display seems to have been insatiable.

## Music and Musical Performance in Nero's Rome

First we should eliminate as an option for Nero as performer the immensely popular art of pantomime *dance*. Imperial pantomime increased constantly in prominence in Rome after its introduction by the celebrity dancers Pylades and Maecenas' lover Bathyllus in 22 BC. Fanatical partisanship over famous mimes was so strong that the association of senators and knights with pantomime dancers had to be regulated, but under Nero, who was an enthusiastic follower, the latter were recalled to the city from which they had previously been expelled by Tiberius (cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 4.14). Lucian (*De Saltatione* 63/24) has two anecdotes explicitly from Nero's time. In one the Cynic Demetrius condemned mime until a performance of the Ares and Aphrodite sequence from *Odyssey* 8 convinces him of the dancer's unlimited expressive powers: in the other Nero himself entertains a visiting dignitary from Pontus with a mime show. The dignitary begs the emperor to let him take back the dancer to Pontus so that he could communicate through his body language with barbarians who did not share any common tongue. But Hall, so expert in the singing of tragedy, is surely mistaken in seeing Nero as a performer, and not a spectator of pantomime (Hall (2002) 426; Champlin (2003a) 78–9 makes the same claim). Not only was Nero no dancer, but as a singer he had no use for pantomime, which was performed silently with closed masks that covered the mouth, expressing itself through gesture and body movement, and leaving the vocal and verbal aspect to the accompanying choral singers.

The problem is just how much credence we should give to the comments of both Suetonius and Dio that at the end of his life Nero was planning to turn to pantomime. Suetonius *Nero* 54 is the only time our sources use the word *saltare* (to dance) about Nero: we are told there of Nero's private hopes if he should survive the final rebellion, that he would appear as an organist (on two types of organ) and a bagpipe player (*utricularius*), and on the very last day become a *histrion* and dance Turnus. This is a significant choice, and I would not attempt to deny that Nero coveted the heroic role of Turnus the tragic failure. This role is not taken from tragedy or lyric, and so would be a natural candidate for dancing that could express complex and shifting emotional anguish. But this does not mean that Nero actually implemented his pipe-dream. Both Suetonius and Dio talk only of plans, and of Nero's jealousy of the mime actor Paris. "Nero ordered Paris to be slain because the emperor had wished to learn dancing from him but had not the capacity" (*Nero* 54 = Dio, *Epitome* 63.18.2). The Suetonian chapter is particularly scrappy and disjointed, but in either case we are not talking of any actual performances.

Roman entertainments both private and public involved instrumental music; Cicero's client Titus Annius Milo, tribune of the people in 57 BC, traveled with his own *symphonia* (chorus) and Seneca, in a letter describing gladiatorial shows, comments on the music



involved, recalling both the old-fashioned choruses of men and women accompanied by pipes, and the overcrowded modern choral interludes (*commissiones*), with a file of singers filling all the streets while the auditorium was surrounded by brass-players and every kind of pipe and organ resounded from the stage itself (*Letters* 84.10).

Leaving aside mythological dance, the art of singing took two forms at Rome; that of singing tragedy (all tragedy contained both recitative and monody, and all tragic actors needed to sing), and the far more creative art of the citharode (*kitharodos*, *kitharistes*). There are undoubted differences but also similarities, and it is more than likely that performers were not purists and borrowed techniques from other musical forms. Let us start with singing tragedy or tragic roles. Nero announced his first performance as Niobe, a role involving multiple lament for slaughtered children; his other favorites were “Canace in labor,” Orestes as mother-killer, the blinded Oedipus, and the maddened Hercules. It is natural to compare famous operatic catastrophes – Wozzeck’s killing of Marie and suicide, Jenufa’s infanticide, the suicide of Madame Butterfly or death of Violetta in *Traviata* – but these are not often presented in singers’ recitals, because of the cost of an orchestra, and I would suggest that it is difficult to achieve the emotional involvement needed for such tragic material in short installments in a concert hall. Were these operatic scenes traditional settings of favorite Euripidean and post-Euripidean tragic texts? They were performed in Greek. Hall (2002) cites both instances of papyri with traditional Euripidean settings, and named *citharodoi* who composed their own settings for the inherited text. These performances would be in character (hence Nero put on masks shaped in his own image or that of the woman he loved at the time; cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 21.3). Like tragic monodies they would be accompanied by a piper.

In contrast the citharode was a virtuoso. Hall has little to say of this art, because sources are fewer than for tragic singing, but citharodes were celebrities who might tour the Mediterranean world like the pre-classical Arion, or the third-century Stratonicus of Athens, who was both virtuoso and innovator: Athenaeus claims Stratonicus, who wrote his memoirs and was the subject of a monograph by Callisthenes, invented *polychordia* “multiplicity of notes” in unaccompanied harp-playing (think of Yo-Yo-Ma playing a Bach chaconne). He was also first to take pupils in harmony and to compile a table of musical intervals (*Deipnosophistae* 8.352). The typical citharode aimed to appear wealthy and entered the stage in the lavish costume of a star recitalist, holding and playing his own cithara. This was not a four-stringed lyre but a more complex instrument of seven strings, each with its own set of harmonics, and ancient music used a full range not just of major and minor enharmonic or diatonic modes, but of modes based on different scales called Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Dorian, Hypodorian etc. Myth made Apollo the inventor of the lyre, and so the first citharode, and he was often represented playing in a long robe with his hair flowing loose on his shoulders. He was a natural model for young rulers to assimilate to and Augustus, who once appeared at a notorious costume party “of the Twelve Gods” disguised as Apollo (Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 70), assimilated himself to the god. He allowed the myth to circulate that Apollo had impregnated his mother Atia in the form of a serpent, but more specifically he made Apollo *Citharodos* the patron of his Palatine temple: the cult statue in the cella was Scopas’ version of Apollo as *citharodos*, as was the colossal statue standing before the temple. Finally, if more ambiguously, Augustus



had a statue of himself with the costume and attributes of Apollo set up in the Palatine library (on Augustus and Apollo, see Galinsky (1996) 215–20; see also Miller (2009)).

At Nero's accession Seneca's mock Saturnalian "Pumpkinification of Claudius" brings on Apollo to hail the prince's coming to power. As P. T. Eden puts it, "Augustus' identification with Apollo had been partial and discreet. Nero's became total and extravagant and glibly and dangerously vain" (Eden (1984) 78):

Phoebus adest cantuque iuuat, gaudetque futuris  
et laetus nunc plectra mouet, nunc pensa ministrat  
detinet intentas cantu fallitque laborem,

...

Phoebus ait "*uincat mortalia tempora uitae  
ille mihi similis uultu similiisque decore  
nec cantu nec uoce minor.*"

Phoebus is at hand and aids the Fates with his song and rejoices in what is to come, gladly now wielding his plectrum, now furnishing the fated threads. He distracts the Fates with his song and makes their toil pass unnoticed. . . "Let that hero surpass the span of a mortal life, that hero like me in features and in beauty, not inferior in either song or voice." (*Apocolocyntosis* 4.15–17 and 21–3)

Champlin (2003b), in a strong discussion of Nero's self-representation as sun charioteer, has recently revived the argument for dating Nero's adoption of the Apolline persona of the *citharodos* later than 54, and reads these lines in *Apocolocyntosis* 4 as a later interpolation (see also Mratschek in this volume). To my mind the most convincing and vivid of Champlin's arguments comments is that while 4.32 pictures Nero's *adfuso ceruix formosa capillo*, "beautiful neck, with flowing hair," no examples of Nero's coinage show him with the long hair of the citharode before the fourth series, in 59 (see also Bergmann in this volume). Once we accept this argument there is no other evidence to support the notion that he adopted his Apolline persona before his mother's death in 59. It is then consistent to understand that the teenaged prince who would bring in a new golden age (*talis Caesar adest, talem Roma Neronem / aspiciet* – "Such a Caesar is here, such a Nero will Rome look upon," *Apocolocyntosis* 4.30) was the new persona adopted by Nero, as Apollo *Citharodos*. He was thus hailed as OUR APOLLO by his newly founded clique of cheerleaders, the Augustiani. An anonymous epigram declares,

Dum tendit citharam noster, dum cornua Parthus

Noster erit PAEAN, ille hekatebeletes

While our lord strains his cithara, and the Parthian his bow, ours will be Apollo the Healer, but theirs the far-hurler of the distant thunderbolt. (Suetonius, *Nero* 39)

Cassius Dio's ironic apostrophe at 62.9 to Nero as citharode describes him as smooth-cheeked (i.e. fairly un-Roman) and with the long hair of Apollo (even more un-Roman).

The citharode had to apply four skills; that of composer, that of poet, and the skills of both singer and player. He must first create his poetic text and set it to melody, then perform it. He would be busy enough handling his lyre, and we should assume he





carried no other stage-props (scepters, cloaks, etc.). Would a Roman citharode compose his text in Greek or in Latin? Would it be in order for him to repeat performances of his own composition? How could it not be, when so much artistry had preceded the public show?

And not just artistry. Orators and actors as well as singers, were expected to devote hours per day and years to training their voices. Our ancient sources are mostly rhetorical: the teacher of Herennius, composing around 85 BC (*Rhetorica ad Herennium* 3.20), Cicero, Seneca Rhetor, Pliny's encyclopedia, Quintilian on the art of performance (*Institutio Oratoria* 11.3). (See Wilson (2002): on Quintilian, see Fantham (1982).) But although these rhetoricians insist on the difference between their training (and aims) and that of actors and singers, they do not provide enough detailed information on voice training. For Herennius' teacher the aim was to improve the volume, flexibility, and strength (*magnitudo mollitudo firmitudo*) of the voice, all qualities as necessary for acting and singing as for orating. Declaiming strengthens the voice: strength and evenness will be built up if we begin speaking in a calm low pitch, sparing the windpipe as we also do by varying the intensity of a continuous speech and avoiding sharp exclamations and shouting, which harm the voice and offend the audience. We should practice uttering long phrases in a single breath, and declaiming both sitting down and lying flat. Hence Cicero, distinguishing the needs of orators and actors, acknowledges that the voice is essential to the orator, but counters this with a warning against becoming a slave to his voice like the Greek tragic actors:

They practice for several years by reciting aloud while seated. Then every day before they are going to speak their lines, they lie down and gradually raise the pitch of their voice and after the performance they sit down and let it drop, moving from the highest pitch, all the way to the lowest, in a certain sense regaining control of it. (*de Oratore* 1.251, trans. May and Wisse; cf. Seneca Rhetor, *Controversiae* 1.16)

It had long been traditional to cite Demosthenes as an example of a speaker who cured his defects – a lisp on R (*traulismos*) and the tendency to stammer – by exercises such as speaking with his mouth full of pebbles (cf. *de Oratore* 1.260).

Pitch, then, was all important. It is disappointing that Armin Krumbacher's little book on ancient voice training is largely concerned not with training in singing, but with spoken delivery, as used with differing intensity by orators, reciters of poetry, and declaimers (Krumbacher (1921). There is one short section on vocal exercises (74–81) which transcribes from an anonymous late antique manuscript (*Anonymi scriptio de musica*, ed. Johann Friedrich Bellerman, Berlin 1841), an elaborate exercise which may nonetheless be the same as the practice mentioned by Cicero. In this exercise the singer runs up the scale (DO-RE-MI-FA) rising by an interval in each run until he has covered two octaves; then leaps directly from DO to FA in each key (*agoge*). In the second part of the exercise he descends in the same fashion (*analysis*). The exercises involving the fifth and the octave are now lost. In a different form of exercise the singer enunciated a series of note pairs each assigned a syllable: Krumbacher cites the slide from TO-A to TA-E, that is, e.g., from A to B and B to C; or alternatively TO-E (D to F) to TO-O. The pattern is of shifting syllables accompanying the shift of pitch. And pitch was clearly a major issue. Cicero reports (*de Oratore* 3.225) that Gaius Gracchus when speaking



(not singing) had a slave with a pitch pipe stand by him and blow the desired pitch if Gracchus' voice was losing pitch or if he was straining his voice.

But Suetonius actually knows about Nero's personal training methods, such as the lead plate he used to weigh down his chest while lying down and declaiming, his purges with syringe and vomiting, and his avoidance of foods that might choke him (*cibus officientibus*). Nero's voice, we are told, was small and husky (*Nero* 20.1 = Dio 62.20.2). It looks as though it was a failing to sound husky (*fuscus*) although the flaw might have appealed to some in the audience. On the other hand, Quintilian offers some more general precepts of discipline in training: sexual intercourse, he declares, restores the voice when it has sunk from clarity to huskiness.

Nero was not deterred from constant daily training because he longed to appear on stage. Similar details are gathered by Tacitus in his first discussion of Nero's passion for singing (*Annals* 14.14, dated to AD 59). But Tacitus is more concerned with Nero's abuse of his power to violate *decorum*, as in his promiscuous exposure of young noblemen on stage and equestrians in the arena, both achieved by shameless bribery.

In all the theater arts there was a careful social grading: between respectable composing and shameful performing (as when Caesar forced Laberius to act on the public stage in a play he himself had composed), between the dressed and naked body, conspicuous in arena combat, between private and public performance (Thrasea and Piso seem to have performed as amateur actors), and of course between the status of persons. It does not seem to me peculiar to Rome that elite critics found the exposure of imperial bodies so distasteful.

Both Tacitus and Suetonius offer similar details about Nero's first actual stage appearance; according to Suetonius his first appearance was at Naples, since it was a Greek city and had its own Games (*Nero* 20.2; not in Tacitus or Dio). Tacitus (*Annals* 14.1) records, "Last of all Nero himself trod the boards, trying out his cithara with enormous care and rehearsing as his voice-trainers stood by him" (*adsistentibus phonascis*). Nero surrounded himself with a military cohort and used as his herald the consular Gallio, Seneca's brother (he would later use Cluvius Rufus, the consular historian). But even for this first presentation he had trained a claque, the Augustiani, who boosted his singing with rhythmically coordinated cries of enthusiasm (on the Augustiani, see Suetonius, *Nero* 20.3; Tacitus, *Annals* 14.15; Dio 62.20.4–5). To increase his opportunities for singing at Rome Nero first sponsored the Juvenalia in 59, games to honor the shaving of his first beard, on the Greek model with contests in both Greek and Latin oratory, poetry, athletics, and music: offence was avoided by awarding him the crown for oratory, and would subsequently be avoided by Greek cities with a similar anticipation of musical crowns. In the following year the Neronia (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.20 = Dio 62.21), was founded as the first of the quinquennial games over which Nero would preside.

Some of the emperor's extremely nervous behavior as contestant seems to be associated with Nero's tour of Greece in 66, although the Greek games committees were already sending him the prizes for singing in advance, and he himself claimed that only the Greeks knew how to listen critically and deserved to hear him (Suetonius, *Nero* 22.3–4). He first ordered the presiding committees of the Olympic games to move their scheduled date forward by a year, and others to repeat games they had already held that year, so that he could perform successively in all four contests; Olympian, Isthmian (at Corinth),



Pythian (at Delphi), and Nemean. Suetonius reports that he did not even clear his throat (*exscreare*) and used his arm to wipe away the sweat from his brow; when he dropped his stick during a tragic aria (Oedipus?) he panicked and was only reassured when a fellow actor swore he had seen nothing because he was enraptured by the wild applause for Nero's singing (Suetonius, *Nero* 24.1). He spread criticism of living competitors and was so jealous of previous victors that he had their statues hauled away. Everyone knows the tales of compulsory listening: women giving birth in the theater, men climbing over the walls to escape, and Vespasian falling asleep at the wrong moment (Suetonius, *Nero* 23.2, 24.2).

From our three main sources we can assemble the acclamations Nero received from the Augustiani, who called "Glorious Caesar! Our Apollo, Our Augustus, another Pythian! We swear by your name that no man surpasses you." They acclaimed him "Pythian victor, Olympic victor, victor in the grand tour, universal victor." He had also evolved his own formula proclaiming victory, declaring before the Greeks that "Nero Caesar wins this contest and crowns the Roman people and the inhabited world that is his own" (Dio 62.20). Again when Nero entered Rome through the ritual breach in the walls which Greek cities accorded their own victors, according to Dio (62.20.5) the citizens cried out "Hail, Olympic victor! Hail, Pythian victor! Augustus, Hail to Nero our Hercules, Hail to Nero, our Apollo, the only victor of the grand tour, the only one from the beginning of time; Augustus, Augustus, O divine voice! Blessed are those that hear thee." As Champlin (2003a) has demonstrated, Nero's return to Rome was presented in the form of a triumph, with an array of his crowns, wooden boards inscribed with the names of the games, then Nero himself dressed in the purple robe and gold embroidered cloak of a *triumphator*, in the triumphal chariot which Augustus had used, holding the Pythian laurel, and accompanied not by his sons like a true Roman but by the Greek citharist Diodorus. The city was decked out with garlands, glittering with lights and fragrant with incense, and Nero did not stop at the Capitol but went on to pay a special personal visit to Palatine Apollo.

### Acceptable Diversions / *Voluptates Concessae*

Tacitus twice applies this phrase to the quieter and less public alternative of poetry: unspecified in *Annals* 13.2 but used in 14.16 to introduce Nero's poetic activities. While these did not involve public performance, they are an aspect of his cultural display.

What do we know about Nero's poetry? Tacitus gives us a context and a criticism; Suetonius a response to that criticism, and Dio more than one context for its performance.

There is controversy about which lines of precious verse are actually Nero's and which merely parody him; we shall come to that last.

In *Annals* 13.2 Tacitus claims without specification that Seneca and Burrus tried to distract the prince with acceptable pastimes: what were these? In 14.16, he adds that Nero also pretended enthusiasm for poetry, so that his theatrical arts would not be the only ones known. Nero gathered together amateurs: persons who had some skill in such compositions, but were not yet generally recognized (*quibus aliqua pangendi facultas necdum insignis erat*, *Annals* 14.16). How amateur were they? The only man we can name is Lucan, a genius if a perverse one. Tacitus alleges that these young men brought

ready-made verses to pad out his versification, claiming that any reading of this poetry exposes its lack of continuous inspiration (*non impetus et instinctu uno*) and its hybrid style (*nec ore uno fluens*). Suetonius on the other hand returns to Nero's poetry, blaming Seneca for inhibiting Nero from oratory other than his own, so that the prince, inclined to poetry, happily and effortlessly composed poems, and did not publish other men's work as his own "as some people think" (*Nero* 52). Suetonius has seen Nero's notebooks and first drafts (*pugillares libellique*) with some of the best-known lines written in his own hand, making it clear that they were not transferred or dictated, but refined by many insertions and erasures and interlinear additions.

Tacitus also reproaches Nero as the first emperor incapable of delivering his own speeches (*Annals* 13.3.). Certainly Nero avoided oratory and speech-making, and his imperial debut, a eulogy of Claudius composed for him by Seneca, provoked such laughter he may well have avoided further public speaking. His explanation of Agrippina's deadly conspiracy was also Seneca's work. Nero communicated with the senate by letter, and on at least one occasion refused to address the soldiers of the guard for fear he would damage his throat (Suetonius, *Nero* 25.3).

Among the titles of Nero's poems note the cult associations of *Attis* and *Bacchantes*, assigned to an early performance on the cithara (Dio 62.20.3); Persius' unidentified quotations in 1.93–5 include a reference to "*Berecynthius Attis*," and 1.99–102 describes a Bacchanal, as the votaries "fill their twisted horns with Mimallonian booms, as the Bassaris about to behead the snatched up calf and the Maenad steering her lynx with vine tendrils redoubles the cry of Evoe! while Echo renews it in response" (see fragments 3 and 4 Courtney (1993)). If this is not Nero, it surely is a parody or pastiche of his style as already the scholiasts pointed out. Other shorter excerpts are less easily assigned, but the *Troica* seem to be well attested. Dio (62.29) claims that at a festival Nero came down into the orchestra and read his own poems about Troy. Because the excerpts made by Xiphilinus from Dio are not in fixed sequence we do not know whether – as the Loeb text suggests – this event preceded or (less likely) followed the great fire of 64, when Nero ascended to the roof of the Palatine imperial palace, and putting on his citharode's costume sang the Capture of Troy (*halosin Iliou*, as he called it), but to the spectators it was the capture of Rome. Courtney (1993) suggests this was a named section of the larger *Troica*, and Nero's poems may have been aimed at a very large scale, like Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* in 45 books. In this context Dio claims that Nero was planning an epic following all the great deeds of Rome and was trying to decide on the number of books this would require (62.29). It is reported that when he asked Cornutus (the friend of Seneca and teacher of Persius and Lucan) whether he should write 400 books, Cornutus replied that would be too many: no one would read them. So Cornutus was exiled (as he was, but probably for a more significant reason: see Bryan in this volume). The fragments of the *Troica* accepted by Courtney are preserved by Servius: we have a brief allusion to Cynthian Apollo as lord of Troy (Servius on *Georgics* 3.360) and lines quoted by Servius' commentary on *Aeneid* 5.370 with a synopsis assigning to Nero's *Troica* the story of the lost Paris' rediscovery at the shepherds' games, the hypothesis of Euripides' *Alexandros*.

Nero obviously wrote on Nature in the Lucretian sense; a line on the iridescence of pigeons (quoted explicitly by Seneca, *Natural Questions* 1.5.6) and three lines on the submersion of the Tigris, cited by the Scholiast on Lucan 3.261, who also notes the



similar verses from Seneca *Troades* 9–10, have come down to us (see Mayer (1978); Dewar (1991)). Both excerpts suggest skilful versifying and lively poetic imagination, but the Tigris quotation shows how contemporary poets were now all drawing on the same figures and diction. This was not plagiarism since they had been trained in *aemulatio*, overt imitation of their model by making minimal and recognizable changes: Gallio describes Ovid’s emulation of Virgil as not stealing but “borrowing openly with the intention of being recognized” ([*non subripiendi causa, sed*] *palam mutuandi ut agnosceretur*, Seneca Rhetor, *Suasoriae* 3.7).

What has survived of Nero’s poetry does him no discredit, but it clearly did not satisfy his restless mind. Suetonius reports that he also painted and sculpted (*pingendi, fingendi*, *Nero* 52), and much of his time as well as the literary record is taken up with the colossal enterprise of his Golden House which was expanding to fill the burnt out centre of the city with pavilions and parks:

ROMA DOMUS FIET; VEIOS MIGRATE, QUIRITES  
SI NON ET VEIOS OCCUPAT ISTA DOMUS.

ROME WILL BECOME A HOME: GO TO VEII, ROMANS –  
IF THAT HOME DOES NOT TAKE OVER VEII TOO. (Suetonius, *Nero* 39)

Nero’s artistic aspirations entailed enormous expense: hence taxes and confiscations. His gesture of giving Greece immunity from taxation can only have exacerbated the resentment of the western provinces, or his neglected armies; they had not been enforced spectators or listeners to his art, but this did not prevent Roman soldiers and auxiliaries from rising up against him. As early as 65 the military tribune Subrius Flavus summed up Nero’s offences against the *decorum* expected of elite civilians. “None of our soldiers was more loyal while you deserved our affection. I started to hate you when you became the murderer of your mother and wife, a charioteer and actor and arsonist” (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.67, trans. Yardley).

This article started by outlining the kind of sporting or artistic activity that modern constitutional monarchies find acceptable in a crown prince, and comparing it with the record of earlier Julio-Claudian princes such as Tiberius and Drusus, or Drusus’ son Germanicus: men trained and needed for serious military service on behalf of the now middle-aged emperor. It is against these alternative patterns of behavior that we should measure Nero’s evolution from early private indulgence in charioteering and singing to the lyre, and more decorously in poetic composition, to yield to his growing ambition to perform – that is to display himself – both as driver and singer in public.

We shall never know whether his natural vocal talents or his dedicated training achieved actual artistic success; what we do know is that he wore out his audiences. Was he as blind as Suetonius’ anecdotes suggest to the real element of coercion and pretence inherent in his increasingly frequent public performances in both Italy and Greece?

Did he really expect that he could abandon his imperial role to become a full-scale all but professional international performer? We shall never know.

According to Plutarch’s *Divine Vengeance*, when Nero died, he was originally turned into a viper (which destroys its mother by its birth), but a divine voice bade the



attendants turn him into “a vocal creature, frequenter of marshes and lakes” (*OIDIKON TI . . . PERI HELE KAI LIMNAS ZOON*, *Moralia* 567e). So Nero the singer became a frog: this may serve as a final judgment on his stage and competitive performances.

### FURTHER READING

Both Griffin and Mratschek in this volume will provide further facets on Nero the artist. In addition see Champlin (2003a and 2003b). On actors in the ancient world in general, see Easterling and Hall (2002).

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