

## Character inheritance in Suetonius' *Caligula* and *Nero*

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century C.E. the Roman author Suetonius wrote biographies of the first twelve Caesars, starting with Julius Caesar, progressing through Augustus, the first emperor, to Domitian. It was not the first series of *Lives* of the Caesars—Plutarch had written such a series, of which only part survives today.<sup>1</sup> We are fortunate enough to have in our possession almost the whole of Suetonius' series, the only loss the beginning of the Julius Caesar. For my purposes that loss is particularly regrettable, because I am interested in the rubric that begins each of the *Lives*. Almost every one is introduced with an account of the subject's ancestors. Roman ancestors were vehicles of status, and as expected they demonstrate status in Suetonius' *Lives*. Other biographers had started off their work with a mention of the father or perhaps some more remote ancestor, in an effort to give their subject a divine or royal pedigree. Lists of magistracies and occupations speak volumes about the respectability of a Caesar's family, but where that respectability is in question Suetonius goes to particular trouble to establish 'the precise degree of nobility'<sup>2</sup> of a family. In several of the *Lives*, though, Suetonius goes further than professions and offices and reports on the ancestors' character traits. Virtues and vices contribute nothing to the status or wealth of the family, so I attribute this level of research to Suetonius' interest in character inheritance. I find that, in Suetonius, character traits are passed on according to a predictable model: virtue degenerates into vice, and vice is inherited faithfully, compounding on itself over the generations. In this paper I want to look at two of Suetonius' Caesars that demonstrate this principle: Caligula, an example of the father's considerable virtue degenerated in the son, and Nero, the product of a long line of vicious ancestors, nastier than any of them.

When Nero is born, his father, Domitius Ahenobarbus, quips that the new arrival must be 'abominable and a public bane' because nothing else could come from him and his wife, Agrippina.

Many people at once made many direful predictions from his horoscope, and a remark of his father Domitius was also regarded as an omen; for while receiving the congratulations of his friends, he said that 'nothing that was not abominable and a public bane could be born of Agrippina and himself.'<sup>3</sup>

A similar comment appears at Dio 61.2.3. Now, Domitius might never have made that remark—certainly, Barrett thinks it is 'distinctly implausible' that he would have so slurred his first-born.<sup>4</sup> Whatever its historicity, this remark suggests Suetonius is conscious of, and to some degree interested in, the heredity of character from parents.

---

<sup>1</sup>C.P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 72.

<sup>2</sup>A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius*, 2nd ed. (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995), 105.

<sup>3</sup>*De genitura eius statim multa et formidulosa multis coniectantibus praesagio fuit etiam Domiti patris vox, inter gratulationes amicorum negantis quicquam ex se et Agrippina nisi detestabile et malo publico nasci potuisse.* (*Nero* 6.1).

Latin and translations are taken from J.C. Rolfe, *Suetonius*, Revised ed., 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998; reprint, 2001).

<sup>4</sup>A.A. Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 57.

Another statement, this time in the omniscient voice of the biographer, declares his interest in the inheritance of character from more distant ancestors. He says,

It seems to me worth while to give an account of several members of this family, to show more clearly that though Nero degenerated from the good qualities of his ancestors, he yet reproduced the vices of each of them, as if transmitted to him by natural inheritance.<sup>5</sup>

So, Suetonius would have it appear that vices are inherited faithfully from parents and ancestors, whereas virtue in the parent is not passed on to the son, but degenerates into vice. The statement clarifies the role of the ancestors in the *Life*: the audience should compare Nero with his ancestors and find all their many vices present in one man, the last of his line.

The Greeks and Romans knew that physical features were inherited from parents—the Hippocratics had noticed that children resemble their parents,<sup>6</sup> and Aristotle explained why children looked more like their family members than other people.<sup>7</sup> It seems character traits were also thought to be inherited. Inherited character is a theme in Greek tragedy such as Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.<sup>8</sup> In Roman historiography it is quite common for a trait to appear in several generations of one family—for instance, it has been said that in Livy 'people with similar names tend to behave in similar ways.'<sup>9</sup> Recent work<sup>10</sup> has established that there was a long tradition, beginning in the Republic, of Roman aristocrats cultivating a specific family identity by, amongst other things, advertisement of familial character traits. Families advertised that they inherited their ancestors' famous virtues, especially to differentiate their members from other candidates in election campaigns.<sup>11</sup> Voters could assume that the candidate in question was in possession of the virtues of his famous ancestors, and elect accordingly—well might Cicero say that the people 'had elected *a* Piso, not *this* Piso.'<sup>12</sup>

Rivals might create, or at least encourage, negative stereotypes about certain families,<sup>13</sup> and these stereotypes, good or bad, would be passed on to descendants.<sup>14</sup> Jasper Griffin has said that over time the better known families 'came to possess a definite character, so that a Gnaeus Piso was expected to be hard and proud, a Lucius

---

<sup>5</sup>*pluris e familia cognosci referre arbitror, quo facilius appareat ita degenerasse a suorum uirtutibus Nero, ut tamen uitia cuiusque quasi tradita et ingenita rettulerit.* (Nero 1.2).

<sup>6</sup>Hippocratic Treatises, *On Generation* 8.2.

<sup>7</sup>Arist. *GA* 4.3; Devin Henry, 'Aristotle on the Mechanism of Inheritance,' *JHB* 39 (2006), 428-9.

<sup>8</sup>The theme is discussed in J.J. Peradotto, 'The Omen of the Eagles and the ΗΘΟΣ of Agamemnon,' *Phoenix* 23, no. 3 (1969), 256; P. Vellacott, 'Aeschylus' Orestes,' *CW* 77, no. 3 (1984), 148.

<sup>9</sup>A. Vasaly, 'Livy's Depiction of the Appii Claudii in the First Pentad,' *TAPhA* 117 (1987), 203.

<sup>10</sup>G.D. Farney, *Aristocratic Family Identity in the Roman Republic* (Doctoral thesis, Bryn Mawr College, 1999); G.D. Farney, *Ethnic Identity and Aristocratic Competition in Republican Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup>H.I. Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64; Farney, *Ethnic Identity*, 20.

<sup>12</sup>*obrepisti ad honores errore hominum...Piso est a populo Romano factus, non iste Piso. praetura item maioribus delata est tuis.* (Cic. *Pis.* 1-2); Farney, *Ethnic Identity*, 21.

<sup>13</sup>———, *Family Identity*, 12.

<sup>14</sup>———, *Family Identity*, 14.

Piso to be cultured and civilized, a Domitius Ahenobarbus to be ferocious'.<sup>15</sup> The Claudian pride that appears in Suetonius' *Tiberius* is also attested in Livy and Tacitus.<sup>16</sup> I think Suetonius is playing up to these stereotypes in the *Nero* by creating a portrait of a son who inherits his ancestors' vices. What is interesting about Suetonius' treatment of character inheritance is that virtue is *not* inherited. Vices and virtues behave differently, but predictably so: as he describes in the *Nero*, vices are inherited faithfully down the generations, but virtues, where they are present in the parent, 'degenerate'. On the one hand, it is a commonplace of Roman epic for sons to be described as degenerate—such as Neoptolemus at Verg. A. 2.549 and Sextus Pompeius at Lucan 6.420<sup>17</sup>—but those instances seem to be mentioned as exceptions. Valerius Maximus (3.5) discusses instances of degeneration from the father as if they are remarkable. On the other hand, Suetonius treats degeneration as one of two equally likely outcomes.

In Suetonius' *Lives*, a work populated for the most part by less than savoury characters, a subject's vice can be explained by virtuous or vicious ancestors alike—whichever is convenient. Caligula is the prime example of a depraved creature, degenerated from his father's ample virtue. There is no evidence of vice in Germanicus which Caligula might inherit—instead, although at first he capitalises on his father's popularity, he inverts every one of Germanicus' virtues. Suetonius' idealisation of Germanicus makes the portrait of Caligula the 'monster' all the more effective.

Germanicus is portrayed as handsome, courageous, learned, kind and popular. Suetonius says:

It is the general opinion that Germanicus possessed all the highest qualities of body and mind, to a degree never equalled by anyone: a handsome appearance, unequalled valour, surpassing ability in the oratory and learning of Greece and Rome, unexampled kindness, and a remarkable desire and capacity for winning men's regard and inspiring their affection.<sup>18</sup>

Caligula, on the other hand, is unattractive<sup>19</sup> and weak in both body and mind.<sup>20</sup> Caligula's curious mixture of self-assuredness (*confidentia*) and timidity (*metus*) is attributed to his mental weakness, and immediately followed by a statement of his

---

<sup>15</sup>J. Griffin, 'The Creation of Characters in the *Aeneid*,' in *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome*, ed. B.K. Gold (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 124.

<sup>16</sup>C. Gill, 'The Question of Character Development: Plutarch and Tacitus,' *CQ* 33 (1983), 484. Tacitus, at *Annales* 1.4.3, mentions the *uetus atque insita Claudiae familiae superbia*. Livy also speaks of the *insita superbia* of Tiberius' ancestor, Appius Claudius Caecus at *Ab Urbe Condita*, 2.27. For the tradition of Claudian pride see T.P. Wiseman, 'The Legends of the Patrician Claudii,' in *Clio's Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1979), 55-139. Livy's treatment of the Claudii is discussed in Vasaly, 'Livy's Depiction of the Appii Claudii in the First Pentad,' 203-26.

<sup>17</sup>P. Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 89-90.

<sup>18</sup>*formam et fortitudinem egregiam, ingenium in utroque eloquentiae doctrinaeque genere praecellens, beniuolentiam singularem conciliandaeque hominum gratiae ac promerendi amoris mirum et efficax studium.* (*Cal.* 3.1).

<sup>19</sup>*horridum ac taetrum* (*Cal.* 50.1).

<sup>20</sup>*ualitudo ei neque corporis neque animi constitit* (*Cal.* 50.2).

contempt for the gods (*Cal.* 51.1). This passage is reminiscent of that in which the corresponding virtues in Germanicus are paired.<sup>21</sup>

The list goes on. Germanicus is ‘respectful and mild’<sup>22</sup> even to his critics; Caligula is neither respectful nor mild, not even towards the Senate (*Cal.* 26.2). Germanicus is so patient that he does no more than renounce the friendship of his enemy Piso (*Cal.* 3.3), especially remarkable when one considers that Piso is supposed to have murdered him (*Cal.* 1.2-2); whereas Caligula has, not only his enemies, but his relatives and friends, killed (*Cal.* 26.1). Although Germanicus is an extraordinary general, his son has only one, frivolous, military campaign.<sup>23</sup>

Caligula manages to disappoint even in what he fails to do. Germanicus corrects his one flaw, his skinny legs, by conscientious exercise;<sup>24</sup> Caligula, who shares this same defect,<sup>25</sup> does not deign to do the same.

The contrast could not be greater than that between the people’s attachment to father and son, demonstrated by the reactions to their deaths. Germanicus dies young, and an affectionate public suspects him poisoned. Impassioned mourning ensues. Once again, the life of the father flags a contrast in the life of the son. Caligula, who started as the people’s darling, is assassinated and his body hastily dealt with until his sisters’ return from exile. The dismay at Germanicus’ demise is described over two sections (*Cal.* 5-6), in marked contrast with a brief sentence dismissing Caligula’s funeral arrangements (*Cal.* 59).

Further evidence of Suetonius’ interest in character inheritance appears at *Cal.* 25.4—his short-lived daughter, Julia Drusilla, is an unlikeable character and the way she scratches her playmates’ faces convinces Caligula, or so Suetonius says, that she is truly his daughter.<sup>26</sup>

Like little Julia, Nero is the faithful heir to his parents’ and ancestors’ vices. In fact his ancestors set out, sometimes with little variation, examples of exactly the kinds of behaviours and attitudes that the audience should expect from Nero himself. The list begins with Nero’s great-great-great-grandfather, Gnaeus, who rode through his province on an elephant, staging a triumph when denied one by the Senate, and was enraged to be robbed of his father’s place as pontiff (*Nero* 2.1); just as Nero has his own pseudo-triumph after a musical contest (*Nero* 25.1-2) and kills Britannicus out of jealousy and concern for his own succession (*Nero* 33.2). The catalogue of ancestors continues from father to son all the way to Nero, getting progressively worse with each generation, apart from the anomaly of Nero’s great-grandfather, who is ‘the best of the lot,’ which is not saying much.

---

<sup>21</sup>*incertum pietate an constantia maiore compescuit* (*Cal.* 1.1).

<sup>22</sup>*lenis adeo et innoxius* (*Cal.* 3.3).

<sup>23</sup>*militiam resque bellicas semel attigit neque ex destinato* (*Cal.* 43.1).

<sup>24</sup>*formae minus congruebat gracilitas crurum, sed ea quoque paulatim repleta assidua equi uectatione post cibum.* (*Cal.* 3.2).

<sup>25</sup>*gracilitate maxima ceruicis et crurum* (*Cal.* 50.2).

<sup>26</sup>*nec ullo firmitate indicio sui seminis esse credebat quam feritatis, quae illi quoque tanta iam tunc erat, ut infestis digitis ora et oculos simul ludentium infantium incesseret.* (*Cal.* 25.4).

As the list draws ever closer to Nero, the more and more like him his ancestors appear, even down to specific actions. His great-great-grandfather Lucius, ‘a man of no great resolution, though he had a violent temper,’<sup>27</sup> attempts suicide but is eventually too terrified to go through with it. He supplies a paradigm for the last sections of the *Nero*,<sup>28</sup> in which Nero behaves similarly and displays the same indecisive and cowardly nature.<sup>29</sup> Getting closer to Nero, his grandfather, Lucius, provides quite a neat paradigm for the actual subject of the *Life*. Lucius is ‘haughty, extravagant, cruel,’<sup>30</sup> all descriptors that could be as easily applied to his grandson. Suetonius provides an example of Lucius’ cruelty in the same section, and reports that he arranged stage shows starring knights and married women.<sup>31</sup> At *Nero* 11 Suetonius informs us that Nero himself made a habit of casting senators and knights in his shows. These anecdotes about the nasty Domitii demonstrate the specific vices that Nero revives, ‘as if they were inborn and inherited.’<sup>32</sup> Each of his ancestors contributes a particular vice, which converge to create the monster, Nero. With every generation the vices compound, each son worse than his father.

Predictably, then, Nero’s father is himself an unattractive combination of his ancestors’ vices. Suetonius’ portrait of Domitius, called *detestabilis* (*Nero* 4) just as Nero himself is (*Nero* 6.1), is an abridged version of Nero. Within just a few sentences he is characterised as cruel (*Nero* 5.1), dishonest (*Nero* 5.2), and, in one sweeping statement, guilty of treason, adultery, and incest with his sister.<sup>33</sup> Nero, too, is cruel (*Nero* 26.1), and guilty of calumny (*Nero* 32.1), disrespect for the emperor (*Nero* 33.1), adultery (not to mention other alarming forms of sexual transgression, *Nero* 28-9), and incest—this time, for want of a sister, with his mother (*Nero* 28.2). Every part of Suetonius’ portrait of the father is directly relevant to the son, flagging elements of Nero that will appear later.

As for ancestral virtues, Suetonius mentions ‘the virtues of his ancestors’<sup>34</sup> but the only evidence of said ‘virtue’ is that some of them had military successes and magistracies in the Republic. Nero shows no sign of aptitude for or interest in military leadership, being instead pre-occupied with the arts, and he is cowardly, requiring help even to kill himself. Suetonius does not furnish any specific examples of ancestral virtue: he conveniently neglects to mention Nero’s great-great-great-uncle, killed by Pompeius in 82 BCE, praised for his *uirtutes* by Helvius Mancianus Formianus in a speech recorded by Valerius Maximus.<sup>35</sup> Admittedly this Domitius is not a direct ascendant of Nero, but in the catalogue of the Claudii in the *Tiberius* the biographer had looked beyond ancestors, and the man killed in 82 BCE is considerably closer to Suetonius’ own time than, say, Tiberius’ remote ancestor, the Tiberius Nero who took on Hasdrubal, cited as the most recent example of virtue in that family, let alone

<sup>27</sup> *uir neque satis constans et ingenio truci* (*Nero* 2.3).

<sup>28</sup> T.S. Barton, ‘The *Inuentio* of Nero: Suetonius,’ in *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History and Representation*, ed. J. Elsner and J. Masters (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 51.

<sup>29</sup> *praetrepidus* (*Nero* 41.2); *terrebat* (*Nero* 46.1); *reuocato rursus* (*Nero* 48.1); *pauefactus* (*Nero* 48.2); *conterritus* (*Nero* 49.2).

<sup>30</sup> *arrogans, profusus, immitis* (*Nero* 4).

<sup>31</sup> *equites Romanos matronasque ad agendum mimum produxit in scaenam* (*Nero* 4).

<sup>32</sup> *quasi tradita et ingenita rettulerit* (*Nero* 1.2).

<sup>33</sup> *maiestatis quoque et adulteriorum incestique* (*Nero* 5.2).

<sup>34</sup> *suorum uirtutibus* (*Nero* 1.2).

<sup>35</sup> V. Max. 6.2.8.

earlier Claudii such as Appius Caecus or Claudius Caudex.<sup>36</sup> I suspect that Suetonius knew about this virtuous Domitius, and chose not to mention him for fear of ruining an otherwise perfectly one-sided portrait of the cruel and dissolute Domitii Ahenobarbi. Even Nero's great-grandfather, described effusively by Cicero as 'a young man of great virtue',<sup>37</sup> and Velleius as 'a most eminent and most noble man',<sup>38</sup> has no specific virtue according to Suetonius (who is very specific about vices), but is damned with faint praise as 'without a doubt the best of his family' (*Nero* 3.1). Still, on the off-chance we read between the lines and do find a virtue here and there in Nero's ancestors, Suetonius has already covered his bases by explaining that virtue was degenerate in Nero. Vice is the only possible outcome: the ancestors he describes lead us to expect no virtue in Nero, and indeed we find none.

What I hope to show in my thesis is that Suetonius' awareness of character inheritance explains the careful research he performs on the subjects' ancestors. A list of their magistracies would demonstrate their status, and that ought to be enough, but anecdotes about their virtues and vices go further, demonstrating elements of their descendants' character that Suetonius would have us notice and remember when they appear in the subject himself. The vicious Caesars, and that is most of them, are the objects of probing investigation into their ancestors' traits, and Suetonius manages to make vice or conspicuous virtue, whichever is relevant, a sensible explanation for the most cruel and dissolute of Caesars.

Phoebe Garrett  
The University of Newcastle, Australia

---

<sup>36</sup>Suet. *Tib.* 2.1.

<sup>37</sup>*adulescens summa uirtute* (Cic. *Phil.* 10.13).

<sup>38</sup>*eminentissimae ac nobilissimae simplicitatis uiri* (Vell. 2.72.3).

## Reference List

- Barrett, A.A. *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Barton, T.S. 'The *Inventio* of Nero: Suetonius.' In *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History and Representation*, edited by J. Elsner and J. Masters. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.
- Farney, G.D. *Aristocratic Family Identity in the Roman Republic*. Doctoral thesis, Bryn Mawr College, 1999.
- . *Ethnic Identity and Aristocratic Competition in Republican Rome*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Flower, H.I. *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Gill, C. 'The Question of Character Development: Plutarch and Tacitus.' *CQ* 33 (1983): 469-87.
- Griffin, J. 'The Creation of Characters in the *Aeneid*.' In *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome*, edited by B.K. Gold, 118-34. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.
- Hardie, P. *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Henry, Devin. 'Aristotle on the Mechanism of Inheritance.' *JHB* 39 (2006): 425-55.
- Jones, C.P. *Plutarch and Rome*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- Peradotto, J.J. 'The Omen of the Eagles and the ΗΘΟΣ of Agamemnon.' *Phoenix* 23, no. 3 (1969): 237-63.
- Rolfe, J.C. *Suetonius*. Revised ed. 2 vols, Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. Reprint, 2001.
- Vasaly, A. 'Livy's Depiction of the Appii Claudii in the First Pentad.' *TAPhA* 117 (1987): 203-26.
- Vellacott, P. 'Aeschylus' Orestes.' *CW* 77, no. 3 (1984): 145-57.
- Wallace-Hadrill, A. *Suetonius*. 2nd ed. London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995.
- Wiseman, T.P. 'The Legends of the Patrician Claudii.' In *Clio's Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature*, 55-139. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1979.