

An Artful Telling: Suetonius on Nero's Death (*Nero* 47-50)

Of necessity, historians have relied heavily on Suetonius' account of Nero's death (*Nero* 47-50, 68 CE; e.g., Lanciani 1892, 185-90; Champlin 2003, 1-6)—the extant text of Tacitus' *Annals* breaks off in 66 CE, while his *Histories* begin with the reign of Galba; Dio's *History*, on the other hand, survives in epitomes for the whole of Nero's principate (Dio 61-63; see 63.23-29 on the emperor's death), and the *princeps* is mentioned only indirectly in Plutarch's surviving *Lives* (e.g., *Gal.* 7; *Otho* 18). Even considering the relatively thin textual evidence for Nero's final days, this paper argues that sticking too closely to Suetonius' account is fraught with problems. Suetonius' narrative, as I shall argue, is highly stylized and goes out of its way to stress Nero's precipitous fall. The biographer paints Nero as a tyrant who was laid low more by his own excesses than by any political or economic circumstances. He also denies the emperor the popular support credited to him by other authors (e.g., Tac. *Ann.* 16.4.4; *Hist.* 1.4). Suetonius' *Nero* 47-50, therefore, is in no way an objective account of Nero's death and should be read with more caution than it sometimes receives.

One overarching theme of *Nero* 47-50 is the emperor's total disgrace. Suetonius' narrative is carefully crafted so that the *princeps*' new misfortunes match up point-by-point to his previous follies. For example, the biographer writes that Nero hid in a small *cella*, where he reclined on a common couch covered with an old cloak (48.4). The tiny room and shabby furniture stand in distinction to Nero's spacious and lavish *Domus Aurea* (31). Suetonius continues that although Nero was hungry and thirsty, he refused the coarse bread offered to him and drank only tepid water (48.4). Before his downfall, Suetonius' Nero used to feast in excess (27) and chill his water with snow (27.1; 48.3). The emperor who once took great care of his body and hair (51) also flees Rome in rags (48.1).

The most striking aspect of *Nero* 47-50, however, is its similarity to Suetonius' account of Domitian's death (*Dom.* 14-17), another tyrannical emperor guilty of roughly the same set of vices. In each *Life*, Suetonius describes the emperor as rejected by all but his loyal nurse, who buries the *princeps*' un-mourned corpse. The *nutrices* serve to emphasize the denunciation of the *principes* by all who "mattered" in society: the head of state, driven from power, is mourned by no one but a female ex-slave. Suetonius has a penchant for using death scenes to sum-up an emperor's career (Wardle 2007), so it is not surprising that these two comparable emperors are laid to rest in a parallel fashion. These internal correspondences, however, are all the more reason to read *Nero* 47-50 with caution.

Bibliography

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