

## The End of Absolute Power: Suetonius in Early Modern Resistance Theory

In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Suetonius's *De Vita Caesarum* (Lives of the Caesars) enjoyed a wide print circulation in Europe (Crab 2019; Jensen 2018; Lounsbury 1987). Humanist scholarship on the text highlighted the utility of *dicta*, the memorable sayings of the emperors, among commonplace examples (or counter-examples) of princely conduct. While Erasmus of Rotterdam's assimilation of the text to the "mirror for princes" tradition demonstrates that the *DVC* could be read as a general commentary on power (Kaiser 2020), Suetonius's contribution to political theory in this area has largely passed unacknowledged (Crab 2019; Lounsbury 1987; Bowersock 1980). During the Wars of Religion, however, protestant writers from John Calvin to Isaac Casaubon used Suetonian emperors as universal examples of tyranny when they argued for the right to resist in natural law. A selection of these works indicate how early modern reception established the text and its author as inherently critical of rulers who abused their subjects. Caligula, perhaps the Suetonian tyrant *par excellence*, appears in such influential tracts as John Ponet's *A shorte treatise of politike pouuer* (1556); George Buchanan's *De jure regni apud Scotos* (1579); the *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* (1579) by "Junius Brutus"; and the *De la servitude volontaire* (first printed 1577) of Étienne de La Boétie, which was published after the author's death and adopted by Huguenot resistance theorists. Since these texts employ multiple ancient authors with minimal attribution, imperial *dicta* also provide a test case for identifying whether an author is citing Suetonius in particular or a related author who reports the same information (i.e. Tacitus or Cassius Dio). Even when Suetonius can be identified as the quoted source, individual authors deploy *dicta* with varying degrees of relation to their original or extended contexts. This study therefore also proposes some interpretive

methodologies for historical source analysis in texts of this type. First, I suggest that imperial *dicta* often indicate Suetonius as a primary source, especially when authors synthesize a picture of the emperor's character from multiple parts of the same text. Second, the tendency to extract *dicta* and to use them apothegmatically within extended prose recalls, and may even anticipate, the sententious use of Tacitus promoted by Justus Lipsius in the early seventeenth century (Waszink 2010). These considerations place Suetonius within mainstream currents of early modern political thought and illustrate how humanist reading practices shaped contemporary understandings of tyranny and resistance.

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