

*Comissimus multa ioco transigebat: Quotation, Humor, and Double-Voicing in Suetonius' Life of Vespasian*

Although his biographies have been mined for the details they offer about his imperial subjects, Suetonius has not enjoyed a particularly positive reputation as an author. Indeed, his use of various thematic rubrics does not align with our contemporary sense of biography and thus represents a challenge to modern readers. Instead, studies on Suetonius have traditionally focused on his social background or historical value (Wallace-Hadrill). However, scholars have begun to examine Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* as literary works informed by their imperial context, including questions of style, form, and coherence (Power and Gibson, Schulz, Galfré and Schubert). As part of this rehabilitation, several studies have explored how citations operate within the *Lives* (Damon, Mitchell, Power, Galfré).

In this paper, I argue that such references were integral to Suetonius' artistry and invite reflection upon the various emperors that Suetonius treats by examining the *Vespasian*, within which Suetonius extensively records excerpts from the emperor's words. Suetonius lets Vespasian (and others) speak fairly frequently throughout the comparatively brief *Life*; in almost all those moments the emperor is depicted more as a humble soldier than as a literary sophisticate. However, Suetonius' interweaving of the emperor's own sayings and several quotations supposedly included by the emperor himself produce a form of double-voicing that shapes the reader's interpretation of his biographical subject. These utterances condition Vespasian's reception, but perhaps more importantly demonstrate one of Suetonius' core compositional strategies.

Much of Vespasian's speech throughout is framed around a discussion of his sense of humor (Milns, Reekmans), which Suetonius notes included the base and vulgar alongside

examples that revolve around pronunciation and other aspects of wordplay (*Vesp.* 22.1). Similarly, Vespasian's direct quotations of Greek literature further demonstrated his cleverness and acumen, even if the implications of those quotations can border on the crass. For instance, Vespasian purportedly described the physical features of a man in vulgar fashion using a line of Homer (Suet. *Vesp.* 23.1 = Hom. *Il.* 7.213). The humor comes from the clash between text and context: he casts the unknown man as Ajax, whose reputation as a hero was second only to Achilles and who was generally well-respected in the Latin, but the emperor's crassness thoroughly undermines the comparison by imbuing the reference with heavy sexual innuendo. Likewise, he uses Menander (Suet. *Vesp.* 23.1 ~ Men. *Theoph.* fr. 1.2) to criticize a freedman who had attempted to dodge paying into the *fiscus*; the passage's original context helps undercut his target by activating a range of possibilities that have bearing on how a reader should interpret his actions. Even at the end of his life, Suetonius suggests Vespasian maintained his humor and quotes several jokes, including a jest about his own baldness and the claim that he was becoming a god ("vae" inquit "puto deus fio", *Vesp.* 23.4). The latter joke and Vespasian's subsequent death operate both intra- and intertextually, alluding to both Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* 4.3 and to an earlier joke by Vespasian (*Vesp.* 20.1), providing a sense of artistic unity to the biography while problematizing Vespasian's connections to Claudius.

Ultimately, the quotations within the *Vespasian* are central to our understanding of Suetonius' strategy of representation. Far from innocent inclusions to enliven his portrait, the references within the *Vespasian* challenge the reader to reflect both intertextually and intratextually upon his imperial subject. Likewise, Suetonius' technique of double-voicing necessitates reflecting on the original contexts of his quotations to appreciate fully the biographer's arguments about his subjects. More than that, though, by signaling connections

between different parts of the text, Suetonius' use of such quotations offers one avenue through which to harmonize the disparate parts of his *Lives of the Caesars* and understand the project as a literary whole.

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