

The Magic of Representation in Nero's Tradition

Nero liked to play pretend. Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio all confirm Nero's penchant for acting, which he employed both on and offstage as tool to control narratives about himself and those who surrounded him. He made his court into a theater, in which he moderated the behavior of his fellow actors, and eliminated those who refused to play along (Bartsch 1994: 1-35). I argue that years of play-acting took a psychological toll on Nero, and he, as he appears in his tradition, developed the superstitious belief that representations could be used to manipulate life. (Shumate 1997: 394-401 argues that Nero was the result of the principate's focus on performance, e.g. *species* and *adulatio*.) Nero created ideal representations of himself and his entourage, which he hoped would affect change in reality.

In order to explicate Nero's approach to representation, I briefly discuss how contemporary film theorist André Bazin conceives of the relation between representation and life. The link between a person and their representation is primal; Bazin suggests that the first statue was a mummy, an entity which collapsed the difference between person and representation. After the mummy crumbled, it was replaced by terra cotta statuettes, and for the first time, the two were separated. But the link between them remained. Substitutes for living beings, such as the arrow pierced clay bear found in prehistoric caves, and the voodoo doll, are attempts to manipulate this link. Nero understood the connection between person and representation, and developed a strategy of creating and manipulating doubles in order to play out the version of his life that he wanted to live.

For example, Suetonius (*Ner.* 21.3) and Dio (62b.9.4-6) report that when onstage, the emperor liked to wear theatrical masks molded after his own features, or the features of the

women he was involved with. Here I agree with Edward Champlin (2003: 103), who argues that this move allowed Nero to acknowledge narratives about himself (e.g. that he slept with his mother and killed her) onstage, and spin them to his advantage. By wearing a mask that looked like him over his own face, he elided the difference between his onstage and offstage personae, and suggested that he really was an Oedipus or an Orestes. Similarly, after his wife Poppaea's death, he surrounded himself with her representations in an attempt to keep her by his side. In addition to wearing her mask onstage, he, according to Dio, kept company with a female courtesan and an ex-slave boy who resembled her; he "married" the latter (62.28.2-3). Nero didn't want to give Poppaea up, so instead he introduced figures to stand in for her, allowing him to pretend that she was still alive.

Finally, I suggest that Nero's deliberate confusion of reality and representation engendered a corresponding uncertainty between the categories of life and death. Suetonius reports that Nero's last words were *qualis artifex pereo* (49.1). I posit that Nero was *talis artifex* as to actually preclude death. He lived through his representations so successfully in life, that after his death they persisted in rumor, religious doctrine (including the Christian narrative of the antichrist), and, most strikingly, the False Neros in the East (Champlin 1998: 97-8). In the end, Nero lived on because his tradition superseded his person, and others stepped in to fill his role.

Bibliography

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