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TIBERIUS ON CALIGULA THE SNAKE AND OTHER CONTEXTUAL PROBLEMS

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Suetonius alleges that the emperor Tiberius had allowed Caligula to indulge in singing and dancing in the hope that these would soften his savage nature. He then supports his allegation that Tiberius had spotted the true savage nature of Caligula even before he had succeeded him to the throne by referring his reader to several statements that he was supposed to have made in reference to this savagery (*Calig*. 11):

> *Quod sagacissimus senex ita prorsus perspexerat, ut aliquotiens praedicaret exitio suo omniumque Gaium uiuere et se natricem populo Romano, Phaethontem orbi terrarum educare*.
>
> This last was so clearly evident to the shrewd old man, that he used to say now and then that to allow Gaius to live would prove the ruin of himself and of all men, and that he was rearing a viper for the Roman people and a Phaethon for the world.[1]

It is clear that Suetonius himself believed that Tiberius had intended these remarks in severe criticism of Caligula, but he does not provide us with the full and proper context for any of them so that it is difficult to check whether he is correct in so believing. As far as the alleged comparison of Caligula to a snake is concerned, it is all too easy to interpret this as a hostile remark, both because of the generally negative depiction of snakes within Greek and Roman literature as a whole and because of the same generally negative attitude towards them within modern western culture also.[2] Certainly, modern commentators have not expressed any

[1] All text and trans. will be taken from J.C. Rolfe*, Suetonius I* (Loeb Classical Library 31), Cambridge MA 1913, 418–19.

[2] See e.g. Plut. *De sera num. vind.* 567f. where it is argued that even the emperor Nero deserved better than to be reincarnated as a viper (ἔχιδνα). Instead, he is depicted reincarnated as a frog.

great reservations as to the interpretation of the comparison in this way, but seem to have been generally content to accept the significance of the remark almost exactly as presented, to the point that it has been deemed to require little, if any, explanation.[3] Yet Suetonius preserves an account of an omen that Tiberius is alleged to have experienced shortly before his death where he lets slip that Tiberius had actually possessed a pet snake (*Tib*. 72):

> *Bis omnino toto secessus tempore Romam redire conatus, semel triremi usque ad proximos naumachiae hortos subuectus est disposita statione per ripas Tiberis, quae obuiam prodeuntis submoueret, iterum Appia usque ad septimum lapidem; sed prospectis modo nec aditis urbis moenibus rediit, primo incertum qua de causa, postea ostento territus. Erat ei in oblectamentis serpens draco, quem ex consuetudine manu sua cibaturus cum consumptum a formicis inuenisset, monitus est ut uim multitudinis caueret. Rediens ergo propere Campaniam Asturae in languorem incidit, quo paulum leuatus Cerceios pertendit*.
>
> Twice only during the whole period of his retirement did he try to return to Rome, once sailing in a trireme as far as the gardens near the artificial lake, after first posting a guard along the banks of the Tiber to keep off those who came out to meet him; and again coming up the Appian Way as far as the seventh milestone. But he returned after merely having a distant view of the city walls, without approaching them; the first time for some unknown reason, the second through alarm at a portent. He had among his pets a serpent, and when he was going to feed it from his own hand, as his custom was, and discovered that it had been devoured by ants, he was warned to beware of the power of the multitude. So he went back in haste to Campania, fell ill at Astura, but recovering somewhat kept on to Circeii.

[3] J. A. Maurer, *A Commentary on C. Suetonii Tranquilli Vita C. Caligulae Caesaris Chapters I–XXI*, Philadelphia 1949, 43 merely notes that this is the only occasion where Suetonius uses the term *natrix*. H. Lindsay, *Suetonius: Caligula*, London 1993, 72 does not comment at all on the comparison of Caligula to a snake, perhaps because he thinks that it speaks for itself. D. W. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius' Life of C. Caligula* (APA American Classical Studies 32), Atlanta 1993, 31 emphasizes the poisonous nature of snakes and draws attention to the frequent association of Caligula with poison by Suetonius, this despite the fact that there is no explicit reference to poison here. D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula: A Commentary* (Collection Latomus 225), Brussels 1994, 143 refers us briefly to the hydra of Phaedrus 1,2,24. Similarly, Caligula's modern biographers tend simply to repeat Suetonius' allegations rather than to pursue the question of their proper context, although they do so in such a way as to avoid committing themselves fully to his presentation of events. See e.g. J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius (Caligula)*, Oxford 1934, 19; A. A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power*, London 1989, 38.

The revelation that Tiberius had used to keep a pet snake ought to be enough in itself to caution us against any simple assumption that he would necessarily have intended any comparison of Caligula to a snake in a hostile fashion.[4] More importantly, this anecdote may even preserve the original context of the apparent comparison of Caligula to a snake. It is important to note here that Suetonius does not explain what exactly Tiberius understood by the fact that he was to beware of the power of the common people. The temptation is to assume that he probably interpreted this omen as a warning against a threat to his own life, and that is why he suddenly turned back again from Rome.[5] It is equally possible, however, that he interpreted it as a warning against a threat to someone within his entourage instead, someone near and dear to him, and that this is why he turned back. The death of a pet snake which he had used to feed with his own hand would easily have lent itself to interpretation as a symbol of the death of someone near to him whom he had used to feed at his own table, a 'pet' in the sense of a dear favourite, although not necessarily the only favourite. It is my suggestion, therefore, that Tiberius fled Rome because he interpreted the death of his pet snake as the warning of a threat to the life of one of his current favourites and intended successors, Caligula, rather than to his own life.[6] His claim that he was rearing Caligula as

[4] He seems to have been the only emperor to keep a pet snake. On the keeping of animals as pets, see e.g. F. D. Lazenby, "Greek and Roman Household Pets", *CJ* 44 (1949) 299–307; M. M. Innes, "*Deliciae Meae Puellae*", *G&R* 62 (1952) 78–85.

[5] See F. B. Krauss, *An Interpretation of the Omens, Portents, and Prodigies Recorded by Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius*, Philadelphia 1930, 110–15 on animal prodigies involving snakes. Unfortunately, he merely paraphrases Tacitus' text, 114, and does not attempt to analyse who it was that the snake represented in this instance. Nor does B. Levick, *Tiberius the Politician*, Beckenham 1976, 217 attempt to explore the symbolism of the snake. She suggests that the prophecies of the astrologers (cf. Tac. *Ann*. 4,58) prevented Tiberius from returning to Rome, although Suetonius does not mention any astrologers in this particular context. Since it is highly unlikely that any type of ant in Italy could really have killed or devoured the snake, she correctly points out that the snake was probably already dead when the ants swarmed over it. H. Lindsay, *Suetonius: Tiberius*, London 1995, 183 rightly dismisses the implication that some astrologers had been plotting to keep Tiberius from Rome, for whatever reason, but fails equally to explore the symbolism of the pet snake. A. Vigourt, *Les présages impériaux d'Auguste à Domitien*, Paris 2001, 279, interprets the snake as the divine protector of Tiberius himself and draws attention to the story that Tiberius Gracchus had died shortly after killing a male snake which he had found in his bed (Plut. *Tib. et C. Gracchus* 1). On ants as a symbol of the Roman people, see also Suet. *Nero* 46,1.

[6] It is often the name of a deceased pet which lends its death a special meaning. E.g. Lucius Aemilius Paulus interpreted the death of his daughter's puppy Persa as a sign that he would defeat Perseus of Macedon (Cic. *Div*. 1,45,102); the emperor Julian interpreted the death of his

a snake for the Roman people ought to be interpreted in this context, as his own explanation of the symbolism of the death of his pet snake, that the snake represented Caligula, and the ants the people of Rome, so that he concluded that the omen signified that he was rearing Caligula as a snake for the people of Rome, that is, as a victim for them. Yet Suetonius, or perhaps the author of his immediate source, has torn Tiberius' words from their original context so that they appear to depict Caligula as the threat rather than the victim.

The realisation that Suetonius may seriously misrepresent the original intent of any comments that he attributes to Tiberius concerning Caligula, whether deliberately or not, urges caution when one attempts to understand his allegation also that Tiberius claimed that he was rearing Caligula as a Phaethon for the world. Here one must turn to the parallel passage within Tacitus where he also claims that some of Tiberius' remarks had suggested a foreknowledge of the type of ruler that Caligula would become (*Ann*. 6,46):

> *Mox incertus animi, fesso corpore, consilium, cui impar erat, fato permisit, iactis tamen vocibus, per quas intellegeretur providus futurorum; namque Macroni non abdita ambage occidentem ab eo deseri, orientem spectari exprobravit. Et Gaio Caesari, forte orto sermone L. Sullam inridenti, omnia Sullae vitia et nullam eiusdem virtutem habiturum praedixit. Simul crebris cum lacrimis minorem ex nepotibus conplexus, truci alterius vultu, "Occides hunc tu" inquit "et te alius."*
>
> Soon, mentally irresolute, physically outworn, he left to fate a decision beyond his competence; though remarks escaped him which implied a foreknowledge of the future. For, with an allusion not difficult to read, he upbraided Macro with forsaking the setting and looking to the rising sun; and to Caligula, who in some casual conversation was deriding Lucius Sulla, he made the prophecy that he would have all the vices of Sulla with none of the Sullan virtues. At the same time, with a burst of tears, he embraced the younger of his grandsons: then, at the lowering looks of the other: "Thou wilt slay him," he said, "and another thee."[7]

horse Babylonius as a sign that he would conquer Persia (Amm. Marc. 23,3,6). It is unfortunate, therefore, that Suetonius does not preserve the name of Tiberius' snake. It was probably this that led him to identify the snake as a symbol of his eldest grandson and heir, Caligula, rather than of Tiberius Gemellus. As Tiberius' will suggests (Suet. *Tib*. 76), he seems to have intended his two grandsons to rule together in some way, even if the Senate did not actually respect this (Suet. *Calig*. 14; Dio 59,1,1–3).

7 Text and trans. from J. Jackson, *Tacitus IV* (Loeb Classical Library 312), Cambridge MA 1937, 234–35. This passage has usually been accepted entirely at face-value. See e.g. R. Seager, *Tiberius*, London 1972, 244, who describes Tiberius' apparent conviction that Caligula would kill Gemellus as 'lucidly fatalistic'.

The similarities between the accounts by Tacitus and Suetonius of the last days of Tiberius encourage the belief that they relied on the same main source for this period, or some edition of the same source at least.[8] Hence one is immediately struck by the similarity between Suetonius' allegation that Tiberius had compared Caligula to Phaethon, that is, to the son of the sun-god Helios, and Tacitus' allegation that he had referred to himself as the setting sun and to Caligula as the rising sun. In the context, it is a distinct possibility that their two accounts preserve separate fragments from the the same anecdote preserving a fuller account of the original remark that Tiberius had made to Macro. It is not difficult to imagine Tiberius declaring to Macro that he had noticed how he preferred the rising to the setting sun, but then adding, in continuation of the solar imagery, that he should beware that his new sun did not turn out to be a Phaethon instead. In such a context, Tiberius' criticism would have been aimed at Macro rather than at Caligula. The moral of the story of Phaethon is not that he was an evil or unusually incompetent person, but that his youth inclined him to over-confidence in his abilities.[9] Hence Tiberius may have been warning Macro against premature action in support of Caligula, and therefore against himself, rather than declaring a belief that Caligula would never be ready to succeed him because of some innate flaw. He may have intended to declare merely that Caligula could turn out to be a Phaethon in certain circumstances, if entrusted with too much power prematurely, and not that he would definitely turn out to be a Phaethon.

The fact that Tacitus turns from a description of how Tiberius had criticized Macro for looking to the rising rather than the setting sun, that is, for paying more regard to Caligula rather than to Tiberius himself, to a description of how Tiberius had criticized Caligula by claiming that he would have all of Sulla's vices, but none of his virtues, is particularly interesting here because of the fact that the young Pompey the Great was supposed to have reminded the dictator Sulla that more people worshipped the rising than the setting sun when Sulla had initially refused to grant him a triumph in 81 BC.[10] This raises the suspicion that Tiberius' criticisms of both Macro and Caligula had formed part of a single larger conversation between all three figures during which Macro had supported

8 Dio 58,28,4 also preserves Tiberius' remark to Macro about forsaking the setting sun in favour of the rising sun, so confirming the much closer relationship between Dio and Suetonius than between Dio and Tacitus. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between the three, see D. Woods, "Nero, "Doryphorus", and the Christians", *Eranos* 104 (2006), forthcoming.

9 On Phaethon, see Ov. *Met*. 2,1–366; Lucr. 5,400.

10 Plut. *Pomp.* 14.

Caligula in some request to which Tiberius had been refusing to accede. Now, if this had been the case, it is difficult to understand why Caligula should have criticised Sulla because Sulla had actually granted his request to the young Pompey the Great. The obvious suggestion, therefore, is that he did not criticize Sulla so much as Tiberius by declaring that he was no Sulla, that is, that he was not displaying the same greatness of spirit or generosity as Sulla had displayed when he had granted his request to Pompey. Unfortunately, Tacitus' source seems to have misunderstood this claim – 'You are no Sulla !'– in flattery of Tiberius and, therefore, in criticism of Sulla, perhaps partly because of a tendency to exaggerate the sycophancy of Caligula in the assumption that he was in such a dangerous position that he dared never openly disagree with or criticize Tiberius, and partly because of his own negative attitude towards Sulla as a bloody tyrant. Tiberius' reply seems to have been that Caligula would prove himself no Sulla either, and that while he himself did not possess all of Sulla's virtues, Caligula would possess none of them, only his vices.

It is my argument, therefore, that Tacitus and Suetonius preserve partial and misleading fragments from a single rather heated exchange between Tiberius and Caligula during which Macro had spoken in support of Caligula. Tiberius had invoked a perhaps common solar metaphor in criticism of Macro, this had reminded Caligula of a previous famous occasion when a disputant, Pompey, had used such a metaphor in support of his successful request from Sulla, and he had then proceeded to compare Tiberius unfavourably with Sulla, who had replied in like manner. Unfortunately, neither Tacitus nor Suetonius seem to realise that the remarks which they preserve had in fact formed part of a single original exchange, so that it is clear that neither had access to a full account of this exchange. Instead, they seem to have relied upon a common source which had summarized Tiberius' remarks alone during this exchange and in such a way as to conceal their connected nature. Since Tacitus records that Tiberius burst into tears and embraced his youngest grandson, Tiberius Gemellus, at the same time as his declaration that Caligula would possess none of Sulla's virtues, it is clear Tiberius Gemellus must have been present throughout the whole of the exchange also. Fortunately, Josephus (*AJ* 18,211–23) allows us to identify the occasion of this exchange. He claims that, shortly before his death, Tiberius sought to decide who should succeed him, Caligula or Tiberius Gemellus, by means of augury. In particular, he sent orders to each to visit him the following morning, and decided that he would interpret the identity of the first to arrive to see him as an omen and appoint him to succeed him. According to Josephus, Tiberius secretly hoped that his natural grandson Gemellus would be the first to arrive, but it was actually his

grandson by adoption Caligula who arrived first. He was then extremely upset and angry with himself, and warned Caligula as follows:

> My son, although Tiberius is closer akin to me than you are, by my own decision, and with the concurrence of the gods, it is to you that I convey and entrust the Roman empire. I ask you, when you grow familiar with the office, not to forget either my kindness to you in appointing you to such an exalted rank or your bond of kinship with Tiberius. Bear in mind that it was by the help of the gods and after consulting them that I took my stand to bestow such felicity upon you. Let my cordial gift of it inspire the same feeling in you. At the same time give thought to Tiberius too because he is your kinsman, and above all because you see that if Tiberius remains alive he will be a wall of defence for your empire and for your personal safety, but that if he departs, this will be the prelude to misfortune. Indeed, it is dangerous for those who have reached such a pinnacle of power to be isolated; nor will the gods allow to go unpunished any acts that are contrary to justice and that annul the law with its injunction to the contrary.[11]

In sentiment, this is exactly what Tacitus claims that Tiberius declared to Caligula following his heated exchange with him, 'Thou wilt slay him and another thee'. Indeed, Josephus proceeds to treat this speech as if it had been a straighforward prophecy that Caligula would indeed kill Tiberius, exactly as reported by Tacitus, although this is not the case at all. It had clearly been intended as a warning rather than a prophecy. Furthermore, Tacitus' claim that Tiberius 'left to fate' (*fato permisit*) the decision concerning the succession may well be read in specific reference to the way in which Tiberius had tried to elicit an omen concerning the succession, exactly as described by Josephus again. It is arguable, therefore, that Tacitus (*Ann*. 6,46) preserves an extremely abbreviated version of the same basic account best preserved by Josephus (*AJ* 18,211–23), and that they draw on the same ultimate source in this matter. When read in conjunction, these different versions of the same ultimate tradition cast new light upon one another. In particular, it seems that Tiberius rebuked Macro as one who looked to the rising rather than the setting sun because he suspected that he had revealed the nature of the test to Caligula and ensured that he had reached Tiberius first the morning following the summons. This did not invalidate the result, however, because such treachery on the part of Macro in conspiring to foil Tiberius's wish that his natural grandson would succeed him would itself have been regarded as part of 'fate'.

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[11] Trans. L. H. Feldman, *Josephus XII* (Loeb Classical Library 433), Cambridge MA 1965, 135–37.

The recognition that Suetonius – and even Tacitus ! – may preserve alleged imperial quotations in such a way as to distort their original meaning and intent almost beyond recognition requires a much more open mind when it comes to the interpretation of quotations attributed to various other emperors also, not just Tiberius. Consider one of the most famous quotations attributed to Caligula, his alleged declaration that he wished that the Roman people had only a single neck. Three different authors preserve some account of this alleged declaration, all interpreting it in a hostile fashion. Hence Suetonius reports (*Calig*. 30):

> *Infensus turbae faventi adversus studium suum exclamavit: "Utinam p. R. unam cervicem haberet!" cumque Tetrinius latro postularetur, et qui postularent, Tetrinios esse ait.*
>
> Angered at the rabble for applauding a faction which he opposed, he cried: "I wish the Roman people had but a single neck," and when the brigand Tetrinius was demanded, he said that those who asked for him were Tetriniuses also.

In a long description of the growing antagonism between the emperor and the Roman mob at various public events, Dio preserves a similar account, which he appears to date to AD 39, while Seneca also preserves a rather vaguer description of the same outburst.[12] Again, modern commentators seem generally content to accept this as a reasonably accurate account of an angry outburst by Caligula while attending the games one day.[13] There is, however, another possibility. One needs to remember, first, that the emperors sometimes busied themselves with other matters as they sat in attendance at the games. For example, the reputation of Julius Caesar had suffered when he was seen to be conducting business at the games rather than paying due attention to them.[14] The second point to bear in mind is that the job of emperor involved a lot of paperwork (as we would now call it), to the extent that the emperor himself was even required to sign individual death warrants. Indeed, Suetonius records it among the good deeds of the early reign of Nero that he had wished not to have to sign such documents (*Nero* 10). My suggestion, therefore, is that when Caligula declared that he wished that the people had only one neck, he had been commenting in exasperation at the amount of paperwork that he was having to complete even at the games. He had probably intended his comment in reference to the subjects of a specific group of death

12 Dio 59,13,6; Sen. *Dial*. 5,19,2.

13 Lindsay (above n. 3) 122; Hurley (above n. 3) 124; Wardle (above n. 3) 258.

14 Suet. *Aug*. 45.1.

warrants, because they were distracting him from the games, rather than in reference to the general public at the games, because of something that they had said or done. Unfortunately for him, a courtier or servant overheard his remark, failed to note the distinction between these two groups of people, and misrepresented its significance, therefore, as he transmitted it to others subsequently.

A final point. Suetonius occasionally preserves enough contextual detail to create the impression that his understanding of the context and significance of an alleged imperial comment differs from that preserved by other sources. For example, Suetonius clearly understands that Nero made his famous comment about being sustained by his 'humble art' sometime before the revolt by Julius Vindex in March AD 68. Hence he describes the beginning of Vindex's revolt in the perfect tense, and the occasion of Nero's alleged remark in the pluperfect. He also presents the remark as if he made it in direct response to a prediction by some astrologers (*Nero* 40,1–2):

> *Talem principem paulo minus quattuordecim annos perpessus terrarum orbis tandem destituit, initium facientibus Gallis duce Iulio Vindice, qui tum eam provinciam pro praetore optinebat. Praedictum a mathematicis Neroni olim erat fore ut quandoque destitueretur; unde illa vox eius celeberrima:* τὸ τέχνιον ἡμᾶς διατρέφει, *quo maiore scilicet venia meditaretur citharoedicam artem, principi sibi gratam, privato necessariam. Spoponderant tamen quidam destituto Orientis dominationem, nonnulli nominatim regnum Hierosolymorum, plures omnis pristinae fortunae restitutionem.*
>
> After the world had put up with such a ruler for nearly fourteen years, it at last cast him off, and the Gauls took the first step under the lead of Julius Vindex, who at that time governed their province as propraetor. Astrologers had predicted to Nero that he would one day be repudiated, which was the occasion of that well known saying of his: "A humble art supports us," doubtless uttered to justify him in practising the art of lyre-playing, as an amusement while emperor, but a necessity for a private citizen. Some of them, however, had promised him the rule of the East, when he was cast off, a few expressly naming the sovereignty of Jerusalem, and several the restitution of all his former fortunes.

In contrast, Dio, or rather the surviving epitome of Dio by Xiphilinus, clearly understands that Nero made his famous remark during his very last days, immediately before his final flight and suicide on 9 June AD 68, when Nero did not need any astrologers to tell him that his reign was about to come to an end (63,27,2):

> Ὑπὸ πάντων δέ ὁμοίως ἐγκαταλειφθεὶς ἐβουλεύσατο μὲν τούς τε βουλευτὰς ἀποκτεῖναι καὶ τὴν πόλιν καταπρῆσαι ἔς τε τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρειαν πλεῦσαι, ὑπειπών ὅτι "ἂν καὶ ἐκ τῆς ἀρχῆς ἐκπέσωμεν, ἀλλὰ τό γε τέχνιον ἡμᾶς ἐκεῖ διαθρέψει·" ἐς τοῦτο γὰρ ἀνοίας ἐληλύθει ὥστε καὶ πιστεῦσαι ὅτι ἄλλως τε ἰδιωτεῦσαι καὶ προσέτι καὶ κιθαρῳδεῖν δυνήσεται.
>
> Now that he had been abandoned by everybody alike, he began forming plans to kill the senators, burn down the city, and sail to Alexandria. He dropped this hint in regard to his future course: "Even though we be driven from our empire, yet this little talent shall support us there." To such a pitch of folly, indeed, had he come as to believe that he could live for a moment as a private citizen and especially as a lyre-player.[15]

It has been argued that the most probable explanation of these different opinions as to when Nero delivered his comment about the usefulness of his art is that their ultimate common source in this matter did not date it precisely so that Suetonius and Dio each felt free to transfer it where they thought most appropriate.[16] It has also been suggested that Suetonius is more likely to be at fault here since Dio tends to follow their common source more closely.[17] In fact, one cannot exclude the possibility that their common source had included both version of events, an initial description of the first delivery of this remark at some unspecified date before Vindex's revolt, and a second description of the final delivery of a slight variant of the same remark just before Nero's flight and death. This would have appealed to the sense of humour of the author of their common source who seems to have enjoyed depicting the imperial end in such a way that it recalled previous imperial misbehaviour and appealed to the reader's sense of poetic justice. In brief, their previous words are shown to return to haunt the emperors at their deaths. So just as he seems to have depicted the bystanders at the death of Caligula recalling his alleged wish earlier that the Roman people had only one neck and gloating that it was he that had only one neck, but that they had many hands,[18] so he seems to have depicted the emperor who had apparently once boasted that

[15] Text and trans. from E. Cary, *Dio Cassius: Roman History VIII* (Loeb Classical Library 176), Cambridge MA 1925, 184–87.

[16] G. B. Townend, "The Sources of the Greek in Suetonius", *Hermes* 88 (1960) 98–120, at 104.

[17] K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero: An Historical Commentary*, Brussels 1978, 247.

[18] Dio 59,30,1c. It was probably the same author who claimed that the assassins of Caligula deliberately avoided killing him with one blow (Jos. *AJ* 19,106), an allusion to Caligula's alleged saying, 'Strike so that he may feel that he is dying (Suet. *Calig*. 30,1).

he could live by his 'humble art' reduced to such a state that it seemed for a short while at least that he might really have to prove his previous boast.

Be this as it may be, it is clear that the ultimate common source for Suetonius and Dio had presented Nero's alleged remark concerning his 'humble art' as if he had intended it in reference to his skill as a lyre-player. Yet if Suetonius is correct when he presents Nero's remark as a response to the prediction by some astrologers that he would one day be deposed, then he may well have intended it in oblique reference to his reputation as a skilled druggist or poisoner rather than as a lyre-player. Hence his apparent use of the present tense. His lyre-playing did not in fact sustain his reign, whether one understands this in a political or in a financial sense, but his skill as a poisoner did, or was thought to do so at least. He was rumoured to have had his step-brother Britannicus poisoned in AD 55, and his praetorian prefect Afranius Burrus poisoned in AD 62.[19] Whether he did or not is irrelevant. What matters here is only that he was widely suspected of having poisoned them, not least because of his continued close association with an alleged poisoner Lucusta.[20] Given the recent history of the dynasty, Nero would naturally have assumed that any threat to his rule would come from someone close at hand, a member of the court, and therefore someone amenable to poison in the manner of previous perceived threats. Hence when the astrologers predicted that he would be deposed one day, his deliberately ambiguous reply that his 'humble skill' sustained him may have alluded to his reputation as a skilled amateur poisoner, schooled by Lucusta, rather than to his skill at the lyre. A quick gesture or glance towards his golden medicine-box would have been sufficient to indicate the true meaning of his words to his immediate audience.[21] Unfortunately, such casual allusiveness did not easily lend itself to the full and accurate transmission of his word and deed subsequently.

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[19] On the death of Britannicus, see Dio 61,7,4; Suet. *Nero* 33; Tac. *Ann*. 13,16. On the death of Burrus, see Dio 62,13,3; Suet. *Nero*. 35; Tac. *Ann*. 14,51.

[20] There may well be an entirely innocent explanation as to the close association of Lucusta with Agrippina, then Nero, that she provided a medicine believed to be effective against Nero's epilepsy rather than that she provided him with poisons for use against his enemies. However, the secrecy and shame surrounding Nero's condition meant that her true role could not be disclosed. See D. Woods, "The Consequences of Nero's Ill-Health in AD64", *Eranos* 102 (2004) 109–16.

[21] See Suet. *Nero* 47,1 where Nero places some 'poison' in a golden pyxis.