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Nero and Sporus

The purpose of this paper is to propose a new understanding of the relationship between Nero and the young freedman Sporus whom he apparently 'married' sometime during his tour of Greece in AD 66-67. It is generally assumed at present that Nero was motivated by lust, if not love, in this relationship (1). This understanding of the relationship assumes that Dio preserves a full and correct explanation of his behaviour when he claims that Nero treated Sporus as he did because of his resemblance to his wife Poppaea Sabina whom he had accidentally killed in AD 65 : Καὶ οὕτω γε αὐτὴν ὁ Νέρων ἐπόθησεν ὥστε μετὰ τὸν θάνατον αὐτῆς τὰ μὲν πρῶτα γυναῖκά τινα προσφερῆ οἱ μαθών οὖσαν μετεπέμψατο καὶ ἔσχεν, ἔπειτα καὶ παῖδα ἀπελεύθερον, ὃν Σπόρον ὠνόμαζεν, ἐκτεμών, ἐπειδὴ καὶ αὐτὸς τῇ Σαβίνῃ προσεῴκει, τά τε ἄλλα ὡς γυναικὶ αὐτῷ ἐχρῆτο καὶ προϊόντος τοῦ χρόνου καὶ ἔγημεν αὐτόν, καίπερ Πυθαγόρᾳ τινὶ ἐξελευθέρῳ γεγαμημένος, καὶ προῖκα αὐτῷ κατὰ συγγραφὴν ἔνειμε, καὶ τοὺς γάμους σφῶν δημοσίᾳ οἵ τε ἄλλοι καὶ αὐτοὶ οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι ἑώρτασαν. "Nero missed her [Poppaea Sabina] so greatly after her death that on learning of a woman who resembled her he at first sent for her and kept her ; but

(1) M. Griffin, *Nero : The End of a Dynasty*, London, 1984, p. 169 : 'Nero demonstrated his sexual dependence on her [Sabina] by having Sporus, a young freedman who resembled her, castrated and using him as a substitute'. This romantic or erotic interpretation has been standard throughout modern treatments of the reign of Nero. See also e.g. M. Grant, *Nero*, New York, 1970, p. 175 ; G. Walter, *Nero*, London, 1957, p. 207. Unusually, R. Holland, *Nero : The Man behind the Myth*, Stroud, 2000, p. 204-05, seeks to minimize any sexual element to the relationship between Nero and Sporus. Instead, he interprets Nero's treatment of Sporus as an exotic art project, even going so far as to claim that Nero 'may only ever have pretended to have sex with his Poppaea-substitute'. E. Champlin, *Nero*, Cambridge, Mass., 2003, p. 148, argues similarly : 'the more closely it is examined, the less erotic, the more dramatic, the liaison appears'. C. Vout, *Nero and Sporus* in J.-M. Croisille and Y. Perrin (eds.), *Neronia VI : Rome à l'époque néronienne*, Brussels, 2002 (Collection Latomus 286), p. 493-502, and C. Vout, *Power and Eroticism in Imperial Rome*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 136-66, are unhelpful here in that she investigates the significance of Sporus to later historians of the reign of Nero as a symbol of all that was wrong with his reign rather than the substantial issue, the nature of this relationship itself. The fundamental flaw with this approach is that it refuses to acknowledge that Suetonius or Dio were limited in any way by their sources, by the historical 'facts', if one dare use such a word. It tends to treats their every word as a carefully chosen part in a greater literary construct rather than as an often clumsy paraphrase of an existing source.

later he caused a boy of the freedmen, whom he used to call Sporus, to be castrated, since he, too, resembled Sabina, and he used him in every way like a wife. In due time, though already "married" to Pythagoras, a freedman, he formally "married" Sporus, and assigned the boy a regular dowry according to contract ; and the Romans as well as others publicly celebrated their wedding" (2). Although Suetonius, our main surviving source for the relationship between Nero and Sporus, does not actually mention this fact, that Sporus bore a close resemblance to Poppaea Sabina, he treats the marriage of Nero to Sporus in a very similar fashion, as a matter of lust or love (3). Hence there is no good reason to deny that Sporus did bear a strong resemblance to Poppaea Sabina, or that the common source of Suetonius and Dio claimed as much at least. The greater question, however, is what significance Nero would have placed upon this strange resemblance between his former wife and the freedman Sporus (4).

When two people bear a close physical resemblance to one another, the most natural assumption is that they are closely related to one another, although this need not always be correct. Certainly, several tales preserved by Valerius Maximus, and by Pliny the Elder after him, prove that many Romans were inclined to think in this way (5). Most importantly, when two such similar people did not appear to be related to one another, the obvious suspicion was that the father of one had committed adultery with the mother of the other. Hence the close resemblance between Sporus and Poppaea Sabina must have raised some suspicion that they were in fact much more closely related to one another than their different family and social backgrounds would seem to have suggested at first sight.

It is important at this point to ask how Poppaea Sabina finally managed to persuade Nero to divorce his wife Octavia and marry her instead. What finally persuaded him to promote her from the position of much loved mistress to legal wife ? Tacitus alleges that Sabina had played an important role in convincing Nero to kill his mother Agrippina in AD 59 because she had realized that Agrippina would never tolerate her marriage to Nero, but the fact that Nero did not actually marry Sabina until AD 62 proves that other factors must have been at play also (6). In so far as Tacitus describes how Nero had both Faustus Cornelius Sulla Felix, the husband of Antonia, his step-sister and the natural daughter of his predecessor Claudius, and Gaius Rubellius Plautus, a great-grandson of

(2) Dio 62,28,2-3. Text and translation from E. Cary, *Dio Cassius VIII* , Cambridge, Mass., 1925 (Loeb Classical Library 176), p. 134-37.

(3) Suet., *Nero* 28,1.

(4) Vout, *Power and Eroticism* [n. 1], p. 157-61, explores the significance of this alleged resemblance to later historians of the reign of Nero, but fails to explore what it would have meant to Nero and his contemporaries.

(5) Val. Max. 9,14 ; Plin., *NH* 7,50-56.

(6) Tac., *Ann*. 14,1.

the emperor Tiberius, executed immediately before his decision to divorce Octavia and marry Sabina, and claims that this had caused Nero to cast away some of the fears which had caused him to delay the marriage, the suspicion must be that he had delayed the marriage because of fears that his divorce of the natural daughter of his predecessor would have weakened his claim to the throne and could have encouraged other members of the dynasty to plot against him (7). Hence his execution of the strongest possible alternative claimants to the throne freed him to engage in a marriage which ought to have weakened his claim to the throne. Yet given Nero's natural fear concerning the strength of his dynastic claim to the throne, one wonders whether he might not have taken some more positive action also, besides simply executing Sulla and Plautus. Two points need to be borne in mind here. First, when he had been besotted by the charms of the freedwoman Acte during the earliest years of his reign, and may even have been contemplating marriage with her, he had tried to pretend that she was of royal birth, descended from the Attalids of Pergamum (8). Second, the family and political circumstances surrounding the birth of Sabina were such that it was not impossible that she might have been the daughter of the emperor Tiberius. The facts that her mother, Poppaea Sabina the Elder, had been one of most beautiful society women of the day, that Tiberius had enjoyed a reputation for forcing his attentions upon Roman noble women even, and that Titus Ollius, Sabina's apparent father, had eventually suffered execution because of his close association with the disgraced praetorian prefect Sejanus, may all have encouraged the suspicion that Poppaea Sabina had attempted to use her charms to protect herself, if not her husband also, and that Poppaea Sabina the Younger was the result of this liaison (9). This need not actually have been the case, of course. It matters here only that Nero and Sabina may have seized upon this situation to promote the idea that she was really the daughter of Tiberius rather than of Titus Ollius. In that case, she would have had a better dynastic pedigree than Octavia, and it could have been argued that a marriage to her would have strengthened rather than weakened Nero's claim to the throne. I suggest, therefore, that Sabina managed to persuade Nero that she was of imperial descent, that Nero shared this information with his closest advisors and friends, and that no-one dared object very strongly to his proposed divorce of Octavia and marriage to Sabina now that

(7) TAC., *Ann*. 14,57-59. His ruthless treatment of his potential legitimate rivals, particularly during his later years, is well known. See R. S. ROGERS, *Heirs and Rivals to Nero* in *TAPhA* 86, 1955, p. 190-212. His problem, however, was that the less he had to fear from potential legitimate rivals, the more he had to fear from potential illegitimate rivals.

(8) SUET., *Nero* 28,1. Cf. DIO 61,7,1.

(9) On the parentage of Sabina, see TAC., *Ann*. 13,45. On Tiberius as a sexual predator upon Roman noble women, see SUET., *Tib*. 45. Strictly speaking, this last only describes Tiberius' passion for oral sex, given and received, but it would be naïve to assume that this was all that ever occurred.

he had found a reason to argue that it would strengthen rather than weaken his claim to the throne. It is never wise to attempt to dissuade an absolute ruler from his plans, least of all in matters of the heart ([10]).

Two further arguments may be adduced in support of this thesis. First, when Sabina was killed in AD 65, Nero's first instinct was to seek marriage to his step-sister Antonia, whom he had executed on a trumped-up charge when she refused his offer ([11]). This encourages the suspicion that he believed that his marriage to Sabina represented part of the same pattern of marriage, or proposed marriage, to female members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty – Octavia, Sabina, Antonia. Second, the idea that Nero believed that Sabina was the daughter of Tiberius best explains also his decision to murder her young son by a previous marriage, Rufrius Crispinus. Suetonius claims that Nero had the young boy drowned because he used to play at being a general and an emperor, but that is hardly a sufficient explanation ([12]). Obviously, Nero must have regarded him as a potential rival to any children by his marriage to Sabina, but the mere fact that he was an imperial step-son ought not in itself to have made him seem particularly dangerous. True, Nero had himself used his position as imperial step-son to worm his way onto the throne, but he had enjoyed the very important advantage of being of imperial descent also. Hence there must be a suspicion that Nero felt that Crispinus had some potential claim upon the throne independent of his status as imperial step-son, that is, that he was of imperial blood also.

Given the resemblance between Sporus and Sabina, and the possibility that Nero believed that Sabina was the daughter of Tiberius, then Nero may well have believed that Sporus was of imperial descent also. Since Sporus was only a boy when Nero 'married' him in AD 66, and Tiberius had died in AD 37, it is clear that Tiberius cannot have fathered Sporus himself, but he could have fathered his father or mother, although nothing now is known about either of these. Hence the resemblance between Sporus and Sabina may have led Nero to conclude that Tiberius was the grandfather of Sporus as well as the father of Sabina.

Three arguments may be adduced in support of the thesis that Nero believed Sporus to be of imperial descent. First, there is the nature of the sexual relationship itself. Two examples prove that Nero was accustomed to use sexual violence in order to assert his authority over other males whom he regarded as potential rivals for the throne. First, Tacitus reports that Nero had subjected his step-brother Britannicus to some form of sexual abuse before the latter died in controver-

(10) See Dio Chrys., *Or.* 21,9 reporting that no-one ever dared to contradict Nero in anything, or declare that anything which he commanded was impossible to perform, even human flight !

(11) Suet., *Nero* 35,4.

(12) Suet., *Nero* 35,5. On the basis of Pseudo-Seneca, *Octavia* 728, K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero : An Historical Commentary*, Brussels, 1978 (Collection Latomus 137), p. 215, suggests that Nero may have had him murdered as early as AD 62 even.

sial circumstances in AD 55 : *Tradunt plerique eorum temporum scriptores, crebris ante exitium diebus illusum isse pueritiae Britannici Neronem, ut iam non praematura neque saeua mors uideri queat, quamuis inter sacra mensae, ne tempore quidem ad complexum sororum dato, ante oculos inimici properata sit in illum supremum Claudiorum sanguinem, stupro prius quam ueneno pollutum*. "The assertion is made by many contemporary authors that, for days before the murder, the worst of all outrages had been offered by Nero to the boyish years of Britannicus : in which case, it ceases to be possible to regard his death as either premature or cruel, though it was amid the sanctities of the table, without even a respite allowed in which to embrace his sister, and under the eyes of his enemy, that the hurried doom fell on this last scion of the Claudian house, upon whom lust had done its unclean work before the poison" ([13]). Second, Suetonius hints that Nero had orally raped a certain Aulus Plautius before he had him killed because of a fear that his mother was grooming him as a potential alternative candidate for the throne : … *in quibus Aulum Plautium iuuenem, quem cum ante mortem per uim conspurcasset : "Eat nunc", inquit, "mater mea et successorem meum osculetur," iactans dilectum ab ea et ad spem imperii impulsum*. "Among these was the young Aulus Plautius, whom he forcibly defiled before his death, saying "Let my mother come now and kiss my successor," openly charging that Agrippina had loved Plautius and that this had roused him to hopes of the throne" ([14]). The fact that Nero treated both Britannicus and Aulus Plautius in this way encourages the belief that he had decided to dominate Sporus sexually for much the same reason. The main difference is that he apparently did so for a much longer period of time, for about 18 months before his own death. This proves only that he regarded Sporus as a much less immediate danger than either Britannicus or Plautius. It does not prove that he would not have killed him eventually. The other difference is that he went through a public marriage ceremony with Sporus and paraded their relationship openly for all to see. Yet this tells us more about the relative social status of Nero's victims, that he was able to indulge himself much more openly in his abuse of Sporus because of the latter's servile origin, than it does about any difference in the nature of these sexual relationships.

The second argument pointing to the belief that Sporus was of imperial descent lies in the decision by Nero to have him castrated, an element of the 'marriage' of Nero and Sporus which distinguishes it very clearly from other

(13) TAC., *Ann*. 13,17. Text and translation from J. JACKSON, *Tacitus V*, Cambridge, Mass., 1937 (Loeb Classical Library 322), p. 28-29.

(14) SUET., *Nero* 35,4. Text and translation from J. C. ROLFE, *Suetonius II* , Cambridge, Mass., 1914 (Loeb Classical Library 38), p. 148-49. It is not clear how Aulus Plautius was related to the Julio-Claudian dynasty. See BRADLEY, *Suetonius' Life of Nero* [n. 12], p. 214-15.

alleged same-sex marriages or relationships during the same period ([15]). Suetonius explains this as an attempt by Nero to transform him into a woman : *Puerum Sporum exsectis testibus etiam in muliebrem naturam transfigurare conatus cum dote et flammeo per sollemnia nuptiarum celeberrimo officio deductum ad se pro uxore habuit ;* .... "He castrated the boy Sporus and actually tried to make a woman of him ; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil, took him to his house attended by a great throng, and treated him as his wife" ([16]). The problem with this explanation is that the mere removal of a man's testicles does not in fact transform him into a woman, and Nero could hardly have thought that it would have ([17]). Dio Chrysostom proceeds a step further, and claims that Nero even offered great honours and large sums of money to anyone who could transform Sporus into a woman ([18]). Yet there is no other evidence in support of this claim, and when it is read in context, one may suspect that it is a piece of rhetorical exaggeration, not meant to be taken too seriously ([19]). At best, perhaps, it may have been a popular tradition circulating when Dio was writing, probably during the late reign of Domitian (AD 81-96). One cannot even argue that Nero ordered the castration of Sporus in order to make it clear to all concerned that he was the dominant partner in the relationship, the penetrator rather than the penetrated. If that had been the case, then he ought to have ordered the removal of the whole genitalia rather than just the testicles as Suetonius suggests ([20]). The only real advantage to Nero in removing Sporus' testicles was that this prevented any future possibility that he might father children. Yet there is no reason why Nero should have feared this possibility, except if he believed that such children might pose a threat to himself or his heirs, that they too might have had some claim to imperial descent.

(15) Vout, *Power and Eroticism* [n. 1], p. 138, emphasizes this point. It is particularly important to note that Nero's decision to castrate Sporus distinguishes his 'marriage' to him very clearly from his previous 'marriage' to another freedman called Pythagoras in AD 64. See Tac., *Ann*. 15,37. The fact that Dio and Suetonius (*Nero* 29, but mistakenly referring to Pythagoras as Doryphorus) directly compare the two alleged marriages does not mean that they had in fact been similar in nature and intent.

(16) Suet., *Nero* 28,1. Text and translation from Rolfe, *Suetonius II* [n. 14], p. 130-31.

(17) A. Weigall, *Nero*, *Emperor of Rome*, London, 1930, p. 274, solves this problem by assuming that Sporus was a hermaphrodite, but it hardly seems possible that Nero should have kept his possession of such a novelty secret. He certainly was not reluctant to show off a team of hermaphroditic horses which he had obtained from Gaul (Plin., *NH* 11,262).

(18) Dio Chrys., *Or*. 21,7.

(19) It need not be taken any more seriously than his susequent claim (*Or*. 21,8) that the Romans chose the wealthiest men as their emperors.

(20) The removal of the testicles alone does not necessarily prevent the future enjoyment of penetrative sex. See V. L. Bullough, *Eunuchs in History and Society* in S. Tougher (ed.), *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, Swansea, 2002, p. 1-17, at 7.

The third argument pointing to a belief that Sporus was of imperial descent lies in the strange desire of Nero's immediate successors to continue to associate themselves with him. It is particularly strange that the praetorian prefect Nymphidius Sabinus who had played such a large part in the final downfall of Nero should have wished to associate himself so strongly with Nero's 'wife' Sporus as he seems to have done ([21]). It is not clear what advantage should have accrued to him as a result. Nor is it clear what advantage Otho should have thought that he gained by continuing to associate himself with Sporus ([22]). This desire to associate themselves with Sporus suggests that Sabinus and Otho believed that he represented some form of continuation with the Julio-Claudian dynasty quite apart from his non-legal 'marriage' to Nero, that is, that he was of imperial descent himself, and could be used to strengthen their own claims to the throne in the right circumstances, not least in the case of Sabinus who supported his bid for the throne with the claim that he was the illegitimate son of the emperor Caligula. It might well have served his purpose to parade Sporus before all in order to remind them that the Julio-Claudians did indeed leave illegitimate descendants, even if their legitimate unions had not always been as productive as they might have. At the very least, one suspects that Sabinus and Otho retained Sporus within their entourages as much because they wanted to prevent anyone else using him against them as because they had any particular use for him themselves. Certainly, there is no evidence to suggest that they experienced any personal or sexual attachment to him.

The nature of Sporus' name itself supports the thesis that his importance to Nero lay in his illegitimate descent rather than in any other factor. It has been suggested that this was not the boy's original name, but that Nero gave this name to him as a joke, that it appealed to his sense of humour to describe a boy whom he had just castrated by the Greek term meaning 'seed' or 'semen' ([23]). Yet there is an alternative explanation, if this was indeed a nickname. Plutarch reports that the Latin adjective *spurius* was believed to have been derived from a Sabine word allegedly used as a term of abuse in reference to illegitmate children : τοὺς γὰρ Σαβίνους φασὶ τὸ τῆς γυναικὸς αἰδοῖον ὀνομάζειν σπόριον, εἶθ' οἷον ἐφυβρίζοντας οὕτω προσαγορεύειν τὸν ἐκ γυναικὸς ἀγάμου καὶ ἀνεγγύου γεγενημένον. "They assert that the Sabines used the word *spurius* for the *puden-*

(21) PLUT., *Galba* 9,1-3. So V. RUDICH, *Political Dissidence under Nero : The Price of Dissimulation*, London, 1993, p. 223, claims : 'While his [Nymphidius Sabinus'] affair with Sporus may have been a product of genuine passion, he seems to have imagined that any publicity given to his links with the fallen dynasty, even of an obscene or semi-obscene nature, was bound to enhance his prospects of successful usurpation. Although perhaps reflecting indirectly on the mores and attitudes of his contemporaries, this is suggestive of a personal idiosyncrasy'.

(22) DIO 64,8,3.

(23) CHAMPLIN, *Nero* [n. 1], p. 149-50.

da muliebria, and it later came about that they called the child born of an unmarried, unespoused woman by this name, as if in mockery" ([24]). There are two possibilities at this point, either that Nero called the boy Sporus (Σπόρος) in order deliberately to evoke the Latin name Spurius (Σπόριος), or that he did in fact call him Spurius, but that Suetonius and Dio agree in calling him Sporus because they derive their information from a common Greek source which had mispelled his name as Σπόρος rather than Σπόριος. One is inclined to favour the former possibility, not least because Nero may have been acting in accordance with an apparent popular etymology of the term *spurius* as repeated at a later date by Isidore of Seville (c.AD 630) : *Item spurius patre incerto, matre uidua genitus, uelut tantum spurii filius ; quia muliebrem naturam ueteres spurium uocabant ; uelut ἀπὸ [τοῦ] σπόρου, hoc est seminis ; non patris nomine* ([25]). "Again, the *spurius* son is born from an unknown father and from a widowed mother, as if he were the son of a *spurium* only – for the ancients termed the female generative organs *spurium*, as though the term derived from the term σπόρος, that is, "seed" – and he has no name from the father" ([26]). Hence Nero may have called Sporus (Σπόρος) such in the belief that this represented the Greek origin of the usual Latin name for illegitimate children, Spurius. In this way, he may have been attempting to demonstrate his literary learning once more, as well as revealing his contempt for a potential illegitimate rival to the throne.

A final point. Two other overlooked or much misunderstood notices lend support to the idea that Nero was as much concerned with potential rivals of illegitimate imperial descent as he was with potential rivals of legitimate imperial descent. The first point of interest here is the claim by Dio at the beginning of this note that Nero sent for a woman who closely resembled Sabina before he castrated and married Sporus because of his resemblance to her also. The implication is that his interest in this woman resembling Sabina was sexual, but this need not have been the case at all. He may simply have wished to remove her from general circulation and the possibility of children because he suspected her of illegitimate imperial descent in the same manner as Sabina herself. The second point of interest lies in the claims by both Suetonius and Dio that Nero kept a concubine who closely resembled his mother Agrippina ([27]). Again, both authors assume that his interest in this lady was necessarily sexual. Instead, he

(24) Plut., *Quaest. Rom.* 103.

(25) Isid., *Etym.* 9,5,24. Ed. J. Oroz Reta and M.-A. Marcos Casquer, *San Isidoro de Sevilla : Etimologías I*, Madrid, 2006, p. 786.

(26) Trans. S. A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and O. Berghof, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Oxford, 2006, p. 207.

(27) Dio 61,11,4 ; Suet., *Nero* 28,2. The resemblance of this alleged mistress to Agrippina may have played a large part in the origin of the rumour that Nero was guilty of incest with his mother. See Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero* [n. 12], p. 162-63, on Tac., *Ann.* 14,2.

may simply have wished to remove her from general circulation and the possibility of children because her resemblance to his mother caused him to suspect that she may have been of similar imperial descent, but by the illegitimate line, that is, that Germanicus, the nephew and adopted son of Tiberius and the brother of the emperor Claudius, may have been her father or grandfather also. Naturally, once it became known that Nero was preventing either lady from relationships with men, the suspicion arose that this was because he was jealous and wanted to preserve their charms for his sole pleasure. He could not advertise his real fears or motivations too loudly in case that should encourage potential enemies to attempt to use either lady against him.

It may be objected at this point that the fact that Sporus was one of only four people to escort Nero during his last desperate flight from Rome suggests not only that Nero loved him, hence his apparent desire to have Sporus accompany him during his flight, but that he himself loved Nero back also, hence his apparent willingness to accompany Nero during this flight ([28]). In this context, therefore, one could argue that the evidence favours the traditional interpretation of their relationship as primarily romantic or erotic in nature. However, one must note here that it has been convincingly argued that the common source behind Suetonius' and Dio's accounts of the last hours of Nero contained 'a substantial admixture of fiction' ([29]). It is not unreasonable, therefore, to question whether the allegation that Sporus accompanied Nero during his final flight need be taken any more seriously that much of the rest of the fiction within this narrative. Yet even if Sporus did accompany Nero during his last flight, this need not indicate more than that neither he nor Nero wanted him to fall into the hands of any of Nero's potential successors. Their immediate aims were similar, even if their motivations may have been very different, and not the least romantic or erotic. Sporus probably feared for his liberty at best, if not his life also, and flight with Nero may have seemed to offer the best chance of escape. Nero, on the other hand, was probably keen to prevent Sporus being used as a political tool against him. Hence the mere fact of their flight together tells us nothing in itself about the relationship between Nero and Sporus. On the contrary, two pieces of evidence suggest that their relationship was strongly antagonistic by the time of Nero's flight at least, if this had not always been the case. First, it is difficult to

(28) The four were Phaon, Epaphroditus, Neophytus, and Sporus. See SUET., *Nero* 48 ; *Epit. de Caes*. 5,7. For the claim that Sporus loved Nero, as proved by the fact that he 'stood by him while he died', see e.g. J. BOSWELL, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality : Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, Chicago, 1980, p. 82.

(29) See D. SANSONE, *Nero's Final Hours* in *Illinois Classical Studies* 18, 1993, p. 179-89, who argues that 'the entire narrative of Nero's last hours was created by a moralizing writer whose model was the myth of Er, which concludes Plato's *Republic*'.

accept that Sporus could not have realized that it was an act of ill-omen to give Nero a ring depicting the rape of Proserpina during the taking of the auspices on 1 January AD 68 ([30]). This reads suspiciously like a deliberate attempt to unnerve Nero at least, if not to tempt fate to deliver an ill-blow also. Second, Dio Chrysostom reveals that Sporus had somehow precipitated Nero's final flight by revealing certain of his plans to members of his entourage ([31]). Again, it is difficult to believe this can have been entirely accidental. On the whole, therefore, the evidence suggests that Sporus was keen to revenge himself upon Nero in any way that he could for his castration and humiliation, even if he did end up joining him in his flight, that their relationship was one of mutual hatred rather than of love.

In conclusion, the marriage of Nero to Sporus had nothing to do with love, and probably little to do with lust either. It was not some form of prototype 'gay marriage'. It had been intended simply to humiliate a potential rival for the throne through the use of sexual violence against him. Nero seems to have come to believe that Sporus was of illegitimate imperial descent, and as such represented a potential threat to his position who deserved to be humiliated and prevented from furthering his illegitimate line, if not eventually killed also. As his attempt to gather into the palace some women whose looks suggested that they were probably of illegitimate imperial descent also reveals, Nero was far more concerned with potential threats to his rule by illegitimate descendants of his imperial predecessors than has been hitherto appreciated. So if Sporus really did accompany Nero as one of his last handful of companions during his attempt to flee Rome in June AD 68, he was probably motivated by concern for his own future rather than by attachment to Nero. As the circumstances surrounding his suicide a year later under Vitellius reveal ([32]), he could not assume that he would necessarily fare any better under a successor to Nero, no matter how uncertain or cruel life with Nero seemed. Better the devil you know.

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(30) Suet., *Nero* 46,2. As Champlin, Nero [n. 1], p. 147, states : 'It was a singularly ill-timed gesture – to give a picture of a descent into hell to a man who was then ceremoniously consulting the gods about the future on the most ominous day of the year'.

(31) Dio Chrys., *Or.* 21,9.

(32) Dio 65,10,1.