

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

NOTES ON SUETONIUS

Tristan Power, *Collected Papers on Suetonius*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021. Pp. xviii + 288. Hardback, £120.00/\$160.00. ISBN 978-0-367-55565-8.

Power will be familiar to students of Roman imperial history as one of the editors of an important recent collection of essays on the biographies by Suetonius and as the author of numerous papers on his life and writings.¹ In the present volume, he republishes with additions and corrections twenty-one of these papers published during the period 2007 to 2015 and requests that they be the versions cited henceforth.² In addition, he includes eleven entirely new papers (twelve, if one includes the substantial introduction) bringing the total number of papers within this volume to thirty-two (thirty-three if one includes the introduction). The need for such a collection of recently published papers is questionable in an age of e-mail, PDF, and online databases, all the more so when these papers have mainly appeared in the best and most well-known academic journals easily available in printed or digital format. Nevertheless, it is useful to have these scattered papers gathered together in this way, with whatever corrections and additions the author saw fit to make, although it is the eleven new papers that must form the principal selling point of this volume.

Power divides this volume into four parts, each containing eight papers. In the first part, ‘Illustrious Men’, he discusses biographies from Suetonius’ *Illustrious Men*, in the second part, ‘Poetic Allusions’, he analyses Suetonius’ use of poetry in both his *Illustrious Men* and his *Lives of the Caesars*, in the third part, ‘Textual Conjectures’, he either offers new arguments in support of existing emendations to the text of these works or new emendations, while in the fourth part, ‘Suetonius and History’, he investigates Suetonius’ use of historical sources and evidence. While this is a broadly satisfactory attempt to group his papers together according to common theme or purpose, it should be noted that the same paper could sometimes have been equally well placed in another group. For example, his new paper entitled ‘Jesus’ Flight into Egypt in Suetonius’ might have been better placed in the part entitled ‘Textual

¹ See T. Power and R. K. Gibson, *Suetonius the Biographer: Studies in Roman Lives* (Oxford, 2014).

² The collection omits only two relevant papers published during this period, both in the edited volume of 2014 (above, n. 1).

Conjectures' rather than that entitled 'Suetonius and History' because, as will be discussed next, his argument rests entirely on textual conjecture. To describe the contents of the volume purely in terms of its subject matter, three papers deal with the career of Suetonius (Chapters 1, 25, 26), nine deal with various aspects of the *Illustrious Men* (Chapters 2–9, 17), and twenty deal with various aspects of the *Lives of the Caesars*. In the last category, there is a distinct emphasis on the life of Galba (six papers) followed by the lives of Nero (four), Caligula (two), and Claudius (two). Finally, the volume concludes with a consolidated bibliography and an index of people, places, and key topics.

It is neither practical nor desirable to attempt to review all thirty-two papers within this volume individually. Instead, I will focus on the eleven new papers, partly because of the fact that they are new, and partly because of the fact that they are entirely representative of Power's general approach and methodology throughout his work as a whole. Furthermore, I will deal with these new papers in the order that they occur. Many of these papers are so brief, consisting of only three or four pages, that they do not require much comment, but there are some important exceptions.

The first part, 'Illustrious Men', contains two new papers. In Chapter 4, 'Horace and the Gladiators Bithus and Bacchius', Power argues that the scholiasts on Horace, *Satires* 1.7 derive their information concerning Bithus and Bacchius from a lost part of Suetonius' *Illustrious Men*, possibly from his life of Horace, rather than from his *Shows and Contests of the Romans*. This seems plausible. In Chapter 7, 'The Sister of Passienus Crispus', he seeks to explain the origin of a strange error in Suetonius' life of Passienus Crispus according to which Passienus was once asked by the emperor Nero whether he had had commerce with his own sister, as he had with his, and cautiously replied 'Not yet'. It has long been realised that, since Nero was only a child still when Passienus died, this story cannot be true. Power follows the modern consensus in assuming that that the emperor involved here must have been Caligula rather than Nero, because of his alleged affair with his sister Drusilla, and that the scholiast who preserved this fragment of the life of Passienus has mistakenly substituted a specific reference to Nero for a vague reference to 'that emperor' where the latter referred to Caligula in continuation of the immediately preceding anecdote. The problem, as far as Power is concerned, lies in explaining why the scholiast mistakenly assumed that this story must relate to the reign of Nero rather than to that of Caligula. His basic argument is that the scholiast was misled by his knowledge both of the tradition preserved at Dio 61.11.4 that Nero used to boast of committing incest with his mother and of the fact that Passienus committed a kind of incest with a sister when he married first Domitia, then her sister-in-law Agrippina. This is all rather convoluted and quite unpersuasive. If one insists that the scholiast must have had some tradition concerning Nero in mind when he made his mistaken substitution, then the fact that Nero married his step-sister and sister-by-

adoption Octavia is surely of more direct relevance here. Yet Power never once mentions this marriage.

In fact, however, the problems with this paper run much deeper than this, beginning with the initial assumption that this story must refer to a conversation that Passienus had with Caligula rather than with Nero, and that it was the scholiast who had introduced the mistaken reference to Nero. It is equally possible that Suetonius' source for this event had already included this error, in which case one needs to ask whether there is anyone with a name capable of confusion with that of the emperor Nero who had ever been accused of incest with his sister. One recalls here both that Nero's name before his adoption by the emperor Claudius was Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus and that the emperor Tiberius had charged his natural father, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, with treason and various other crimes, including incest with his sister (Suet. *Ner.* 5.2), shortly before he himself died. I suggest, therefore, that, in its earliest form, this story had probably referred to a conversation between Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus and Passienus, but that the name of Nero was mistakenly substituted for that of his father in due course because of the resemblance between their names before he was adopted by Claudius. As to the nature of this conversation, when Gnaeus had asked Passienus whether he had had commerce with his own sister, this was simply an ironical way of asking whether he had been charged with treason yet. The conversation was not really about incest at all.

The second part, 'Poetic Allusions', contains just one new paper. In Chapter 10, 'Caesar and Sophocles' *Electra*', Power seeks to identify the specific verses in Sophocles' *Electra* that formed the direct basis for the lines from Atilius' *Electra* that were recited at the funeral of Julius Caesar according to Suetonius' life of the same (*Iul.* 84.2). The problem here is that Suetonius does not actually quote the verses from Atilius, but merely states that they expressed a similar sentiment to a line from Pacuvius that was also recited at the funeral and which he does quote. Power argues that the lines from Atilius were probably based on Sophocles' *Electra* 97–9, a simile comparing the killing of Agamemnon to the cutting down of an oak tree, despite the fact that these lines bear no real resemblance in content or sentiment to the line from Pacuvius. It is all quite unconvincing.

The third part, 'Textual Conjectures', contains three new papers. In Chapter 18, 'Suetonius, *Iul.* 49.2 and *Galb.* 20.1', Power defends the reading *et vinum* instead of *eum* at *Iul.* 49.2 so that the text says that Caesar had brought the drinking-cup *and wine* to Nicomedes. He offers two arguments in favour of *et vinum* against Kaster's decision to prefer *eum* in his recent OCT edition of the text.³ The first is that 'without the word "wine", which is a strong aphrodisiac,

³ R. A. Kaster, *C. Suetoni Tranquilli De vita Caesarum libri VIII et De grammaticis et rhetoribus liber* (Oxford, 2016).

the sexual insinuation becomes faint, if not entirely obscured'. This is untrue. Since the rest of the sentence makes it quite clear that Caesar was serving drink to a king at a full banquet, the obvious implication in that cultural context is that he was serving wine, not water, beer, or anything else. The wine does not need to be explicitly mentioned. More importantly, the use of the term *exoletus* to describe the rest of those serving the drinks at the feast makes the sexual insinuation abundantly clear. His second argument consists of another example (*Galb.* 20.1) where Kaster has allegedly edited his text 'too drastically'. However, even if Kaster does err in his editing of *Galb.* 20.1, and Power may well be correct in this case, this does not mean that he is necessarily wrong anywhere else. Each editorial decision stands alone to be examined on its individual merits.

In Chapter 21, 'Oedipal Nero: The Farewell Kiss', Power begins by defending the longstanding emendation of *papillas* at *Ner.* 34.2 to read *pupillas* instead, with the result that Suetonius describes how Nero kissed the eyes rather than the breasts of his mother Agrippina as he said goodbye to her for the last time following their celebration of the feast of Minerva together at Baiae. His comparative analysis of the three sources for this incident, Tacitus, Dio, and Suetonius, in support of the reading *pupillas* is convincing. However, he then proceeds to argue that the lost common source of Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio for the claims both that Nero kissed the eyes of his mother at their last parting and that he closely inspected her naked body after her death, drew heavily upon Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1260–70, in its treatment of these matters. This is nonsense. The alleged similarities between these accounts either do not exist or have to be grossly exaggerated in order to reach this conclusion. For example, Power talks about the 'salacious detail of Oedipus' posthumously undressing Jocasta' as if she was undressed after her death in the same way that Agrippina was, but all Oedipus did was remove some golden pins from her clothing as she lay dead upon the ground. The text does not say either that he removed all of these pins or that her body was in anyway uncovered as a result of this action. There simply was no undressing.

In Chapter 23, 'Vespasian's Sexual *Iliad*', Power suggests a new emendation to *Vesp.* 23.1, where Kaster's text runs as follows (Power's translation).

utebatur et versibus Graecis tempestive satis, et de quodam procerae staturae improbiusque venato:

μακρὰ βιβάς, κραδάων δολιχόσκιον ἔγχος,

He also used Greek verses aptly enough, and of someone of large stature and with an obscenely large penis:

Far-striding, waving a spear that casts a long shadow.

Here Vespasian is described quoting *Iliad* 7.213 in humorous reference to an unnamed man. The manuscripts read *nato* rather than *venato*, but this does not make sense, and numerous attempts have been made to emend it. Most commentators have assumed that Vespasian was joking about the large size of the penis belonging to the man in question and have suggested emendations accordingly, including that adopted by Kaster above from Mooney.⁴ Power rejects the ‘awkward hapax’ *venato* and suggests that the last phrase read *improbiusque quatiante* (‘and thrusting rather obscenely’) instead. I do not find this any more convincing than *improbiusque venato*. I suggest that Vespasian was comparing the man himself to Ajax’s spear rather than his penis, because of his height and slender build, and that the term under discussion probably refers to how thin the man was. Accordingly, I suggest that the *improbiusque nato* of the manuscripts be emended to *improbiusque tenuato* (‘obscenely thin’) instead. In support of this, one notes that Vespasian only used Greek verses ‘aptly enough’, that is, that the relevance of the verse to the circumstance in which it was used was clear, even if it was not perfect, meaning that the man to whom Vespasian was applying the verse did not necessarily have to be waving something spear-shaped in the manner of Ajax, whatever exactly one means by ‘waving’.

The fourth part, ‘Suetonius and History’, contains five new papers. In Chapter 26, ‘The Disgrace of Suetonius’, Power re-examines the circumstances surrounding the dismissal of Suetonius from his post under the emperor Hadrian as described by the late fourth-century *Augustan History* (*Hadr.* 11.3). He emphasises the fact that many others were dismissed from the service at the same time as Suetonius to conclude that, whatever minor indiscretion provided the immediate pretext for his removal, the real reason was that the emperor wanted to perform a thorough restructuring of his secretarial offices at this point. The discussion includes a suggestion that the problematic manuscript reading *uniussu eius*, variously emended to read, for example, *iniussu eius* or *in eius usu*, should be emended to read *unice Suetonius*. Unfortunately, I see no merit in such a radical emendation of the text.

In Chapter 28, ‘The Conspirator against Caligula’, Power tackles the contradiction between Suetonius (*Calig.* 57.4) and Josephus (*AJ* 19.87) concerning the identity of the person who was accidentally splashed with blood during Caligula’s sacrifice of a flamingo on the day that he was assassinated, whether the emperor himself as reported by Suetonius or the senator Asprenas as reported by Josephus. Power takes issue with my argument that Suetonius misunderstood the common source that he shared with Josephus in this matter and mistakenly identified the person splashed with blood as Caligula rather

⁴ In defence of his choice here, see R. A. Kaster, *Studies on the Text of Suetonius’ De Vita Caesarum* (Oxford, 2016) 247–8.

than Asprenas.⁵ He claims instead that Suetonius deliberately changed this detail ‘in order to maintain his narrow biographical focus on the emperor’. I am not sure how one distinguishes between an accidental error and a deliberate error, or why Suetonius should be treated as almost infallible, so there is nothing to be gained by discussing this matter any further here.

Chapter 29, ‘Jesus’ Flight into Egypt in Suetonius’, is by far the longest of the new papers and bears a title that is sure to catch the eye of any that peruse this volume. It basically consists of an attempted emendation of yet another problematic phrase in Suetonius with a full exploration of its potential implications for Suetonius’ use of source material should one accept this emendation. Kaster (and others before him) edit the relevant line from Suetonius’ life of the emperor Claudius (*Claud.* 25.4) as follows (Power’s translation):

Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit.

He banished the Jews from Rome for their continual rioting that was led by Christ.

If one accepts that the ‘Chrestus’ mentioned in the Latin is identifiable as Jesus Christ, and most commentators do, then there is an obvious problem in that Christ had been crucified long before Claudius had acceded to the throne in AD 41. So how does one solve this problem? Rather than trying to strain the meaning of *impulsor* to mean something that it does not, Power prefers to emend the text so that it reads as follows (his translation):

Iudaeos enim pulso orbe Christo assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit.

For indeed when the Jews, after they had driven Christ from their region, constantly made disturbances, he expelled them from Rome.

He next interprets the term *orbe* to refer to Judaea, and assumes that this line can only refer to the time when the Holy Family was forced to flee to Egypt because Herod the Great was trying to kill the child whose rule as King of the Jews had been foretold by the movement of a star as described by the gospel of Matthew (2.13–14) alone among the gospels. As a result, he argues that the restored text of Suetonius now provides independent confirmation of the flight of Christ and his family into Egypt. Yet there are numerous problems with this emendation. Technically, no-one expelled the Holy Family from Judaea: they left voluntarily. The sudden reference to the expulsion of Christ from Judaea

⁵ D. Woods, ‘Caligula, Asprenas, and the Bloodied Robe’, *Mnemosyne* 71 (2018) 873–80.

almost fifty years previously seems quite irrelevant in the context, a description of Jewish disturbances in Rome in the AD 40s or thereabouts. However, the greatest problem with all of this is that his proposed emendation is not the only possible emendation. With slightly different assumptions about what errors may have occurred during the transmission of the text, one can easily propose very different emendations. The most surprising point here is that no-one seems to have tried to solve the difficulty posed by this line by emending it previously, so that Power does not have to defend the merits of his emendation against any earlier attempted emendations. It is to be hoped, however, that his efforts will inspire others to propose different emendations with less startling implications. In the hope of stimulating more discussion of this issue, I propose an alternative emendation, and translation, as follows:

Iudaeos impulsione Chresto assidentium tumultuantis Roma expulit.

He expelled the Jews from Rome for causing disturbances by their stirring up of those devoted to Chrestus.

The advantage of this emendation is that it solves the chronological problem posed by the manuscript reading, but does not require that Suetonius should have somehow gained access to relatively obscure facts about the childhood of Christ.

In Chapter 31, ‘Nero’s Amazons, Sporus, and Alexander’, Power briefly re-examines Suetonius’ description of Nero’s preparations for an expedition against Vindex (*Ner.* 44.1) before going off on a tangent about Nero’s treatment of Sporus (*Ner.* 28.1) and his alleged recruitment of a new legion named after Alexander the Great (*Ner.* 19.2). Power argues that when Suetonius states that Nero gave his concubines male haircuts and equipped them with Amazonian axes and shields, he did not dress them up as Amazons, but as Roman soldiers, claiming that ‘Amazonian’ here simply means light weapons of a kind best suited to female combatants. There are three problems with this theory. First, no evidence is offered to prove that ‘Amazonian’ was ever used in the required sense of ‘light’ rather than as something an Amazon would use. Indeed, since the shields given to the concubines are specifically described as *peltae*, i.e., light shields, it is redundant to describe them as ‘Amazonian’ (= ‘light’ also). Second, there is no evidence to suggest that Nero meant to dress these women up as Roman soldiers. The fact that he ordered them to cut their hair in manlike fashion proves only that he wanted them to look like men, but the idea that he wanted to make them look like Roman soldiers in particular is contradicted by his apparent decision to furnish them with axes, which, regardless of size or weight, were not a standard Roman infantry weapon. Third, Power attempts to justify his claim that Nero dressed his concubines as Roman soldiers rather than Amazons on the basis that it ‘is consistent with the

sexual inclinations of Nero, who was fond of role play and gender reversal'. Yet there would have been no less role play in dressing the women as Amazons rather than as Roman soldiers, and gender reversal is inherent in the very idea of Amazons, manly female warriors. In short, it better respects Suetonius' actual words to say that he believed that Nero ordered his concubines to be dressed as Amazons rather than as Roman soldiers, although the reality of Nero's preparations may have been very different and the probability is that Suetonius is merely transmitting the worst sort of anti-Neronian propaganda here.

In Chapter 32, 'Vitellius and the Baker and Cook', Power contrasts the claim by Suetonius (*Vit.* 16) that the emperor Vitellius was accompanied by only two companions during his final hours, a baker and a cook, to the claim by Tacitus (*Hist.* 3.84) that he was deserted by even 'the lowest of slaves' about this time in order to argue that most commentators err when they assume that Suetonius better preserves the detail from their common source in this matter, but that the senatorial Tacitus prefers to pass in silence over the detail of their sordid occupations. He prefers to believe that the inclusion of this detail is a 'clever embellishment' by Suetonius, 'his own invented elaboration' building upon his prior characterisation of Vitellius as a glutton. The problem with this approach, however, is that it does not explain all the differences in details between the authors at this point. For example, Suetonius claims that Vitellius took a sedan, with his baker and cook, to his father's house on the Aventine during his last hours, while Tacitus says that he took the sedan to his wife's house there instead. So where exactly did he go, and why did Suetonius change this detail, if this is what he did? Such a contradiction encourages the idea that Suetonius and Tacitus may have drawn upon two different traditions concerning the death of Vitellius. Certainly, it is premature to decide that Suetonius has merely embellished the same source as Tacitus without taking the other differences or contradictions into account also.

Finally, it is also possible to disagree with some of the arguments in the republished papers, where minor revisions may not have done anything to assuage lingering doubts. Two examples will suffice. In Chapter 20, 'Nero in Furs (Suet. *Ner.* 29)', originally published in *MD* 73 (2014), Power seeks to emend the verb used by Kaster and other editors to describe Nero's action when, dressed in an animal skin, he 'attacked' (*invaderet*) the genitals of some captives who had been bound to stakes. Power agrees with Champlin that Nero was probably performing oral sex upon the prisoners, and objects to the term *invaderet* because it contains no suggestion of eating.⁶ Since *invaderet* is merely an emendation of the reading *evaderet* in the earliest manuscript, he suggests that it should be emended to read *devoraret* instead. However, this

⁶ E. Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2003) 169.

objection to the emendation *invaderet* ignores the fact that Nero was disguised as an animal when he ‘attacked’ his victims and that animals normally attack by biting. Hence the suggestion of eating is implicit in the description of Nero’s disguise as an animal rather than in the verb used to describe his action, and Power’s suggested emendation is rendered unnecessary.

In Chapter 16, ‘The Servants’ Taunt: Homer and Suetonius’ *Galba*’, originally published in *Historia* 58 (2009), the situation is more complex. Suetonius (*Galb.* 20.2) describes how the new emperor Otho gave the head of his predecessor, Galba, to some military servants and how they mocked it, shouting *Galba Cupido, fruaris aetate tua*, ‘Cupid Galba, enjoy your age!’, in apparent reaction to his quotation of the Homeric line ἔτι μοι μένος ἔμπεδόν ἐστίν, ‘My strength is still firm’, when his appearance had been hailed as blooming and vigorous only a few days previously. Power argues that, ‘when the servants shout *Galba Cupido, fruaris aetate tua*, they are punning on the emperor’s words μένος ἔμπεδόν (‘intact strength’) as if he had been referring to his sexual prowess’. This does not seem to me to be very pointed or funny. I suggest that the key to understanding this joke lies instead in the revelation shortly after (*Galb.* 22) that Galba preferred sex with males rather than with females and, unusually, with older, adult males rather than adolescents or younger boys. Hence the instruction to Galba to enjoy his age may be interpreted in two ways, either to enjoy himself during his old age or to enjoy sex with other males of his age, that is, adult males. The connection to his Homeric quotation is that he naturally thought that his strength was intact and that he was as blooming as his flatterers claimed because his sexual interest in older males distorted his perception of his own attractiveness as well as that of older males more generally. Hence the servants are really mocking Galba’s sexual preference for older males.

In conclusion, Power has gathered together a thought-provoking collection of papers that will certainly appeal to any interested in Suetonius as author and historian. In reality, most of his papers do not really have an impact on our understanding of any major historical events, but tend to focus on minor details of vocabulary or presentation, so their appeal to a broader readership is likely to be limited. This is a pity. For while one could argue that that the large number of often very short chapters make this a bitty read, it also makes it the perfect volume for an unexpected interlude during the day. Furthermore, those who enjoy cross-word puzzles or brain-teasers will enjoy the emphasis on textual emendations. Certainly, I found this the most interesting and enjoyable book that I had read in recent months, even if I usually found myself strongly disagreeing with the author in the end.