Nero: suspension of disbelief

K. R. Bradley

JOHN F. DRINKWATER, *NERO: EMPEROR AND COURT* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019). Pp. xviii + 449, figs. 16. ISBN 978-1-108-47264-7. $44.99.

Nero: an unexpected choice of subject perhaps from the historian of Roman Gaul, the Gallic Empire and the Alamanni.[1] But the readers of J. F. Drinkwater's new book will not be disappointed. In a major contribution, meticulously prepared and comprehensive in purview, the author completely and engagingly upends conventional views of Nero, depicting the last of the Julio-Claudians as a figure far different from the murderous, tyrannical monster of tradition. His book is a biography of Nero, but not a womb-to-tomb chronography of the conventional sort; rather, like the studies of M. Griffin and E. Champlin (the two most prominent modern precursors with which it will be compared), it presents Nero's life-story through the lens of an historical thesis. Nero, Drinkwater maintains, was a quintessentially passive and malleable figure who cared little for politics and government: his interests lay in art and sport, and he was content, increasingly as his reign progressed, to leave the public domain to others as long as his private passions were accommodated. The course of public events was controlled in actuality by a succession of advisory teams of courtiers, whose existence Drinkwater theoretically and schematically determines, and some of whose members he can identify: at the outset, for instance, perhaps most notoriously, Agrippina and her allies Seneca and Burrus; later, such familiar characters as Tigellinus and Poppaea. Drinkwater eschews a "'life and reign'" approach (1), concentrating instead on assessing the terrible crimes which the tradition ascribes to Nero, and presenting arguments largely to absolve the emperor of responsibility for them. The narrative is arranged as a set of historical issues to be solved empirically, all centring on the fundamental question of how the Principate, a still-evolving institution in the mid-1st c. A.D., functioned during the 14 years of Nero's reign (A.D. 54-68). In the process, much is taken as historically inevitable, including the turmoil that followed Nero's suicide, an event which Drinkwater attributes to a conscious decision made by the last team of courtiers to sacrifice an expendable ruler for the greater good of saving the Principate as a system of government: the radical notion of a *Putsch*, that is, replaces the usual explanation of personal ineptitude as the reason for Nero's fall from power. Ultimately, it seems, Nero becomes an almost pitiable character, historically trapped in the wrong place at the wrong time, driven tragically to a premature end.

The immediate question the book raises is whether a genuine biography of Nero is possible. As every Romanist will be aware, there is no contemporary, or near-contemporary, record of his life with which to work. The kinds of materials from which a definitive assessment of his personality and rule might be made — letters, diaries, note-books — do not exist. When A. N. Wilson wrote his recent biography of Queen Victoria, he was able to draw upon what he termed "an abundance" of the monarch's extant letters, together with "the reminiscences, diaries and correspondence of those who knew her", listing in his bibliography some 32 archives of original contemporary documents which he had read and explored.[2] The contrast with what is possible for Nero is staggering: there are just three substantive narrative accounts of his reign, all written at dates far removed from the events concerned, and all hostile to Nero. That of Tacitus in the *Annals* (early 2nd c. A.D.) will always retain primacy. It breaks off in A.D. 66, however, and whether attention lingers on the typology of stock characters long ago discovered in the work or on the modernising view of authorial alienation it conveys, the dramatic, moralistically-driven narrative is self-evidently shaped by literary concerns that constrain the record of events.[3] The same is true of Suetonius' slightly later biography. His *Caesares* are controlled by

1 J. F. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul: the three provinces, 58 BC-AD 260* (London 1983); *The Gallic Empire: separatism and continuity in the north-western provinces of the Roman empire, AD 260-274* (Stuttgart 1987); *The Alamanni and Rome 213-496 (Caracalla to Clovis)* (Oxford 2007).

2 A. N. Wilson, *Victoria: a life* (New York 2014) 13 and 606-8.

3 B. Walker, *The* Annals *of Tacitus: a study in the writing of history* (Manchester 1952); D. Sailor, *Writing*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759420000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

firm ideas of generic form and content at large, perhaps purposefully set against those of Tacitus, and artistry in Nero's life is especially evident in the record of the emperor's response to the crisis of A.D. 68.[4] Suetonius was rather more than a "rhetorician" (9). The last account, that of Cassius Dio in his grand history of Rome, was written in the Severan era but it survives only in fragments excerpted many centuries later by Byzantine scholars, a fact that should undercut the trust many scholars place in it. Altogether the historical record for Nero's life is meagre and subject to many limitations, a point that can hardly be overstated (cf. 9-10).

The hostility to Nero the three narratives share explains the monstrous reputation that still dominates modern perceptions of him: tyrant, matricide, arsonist, persecutor of the early Christians. It has often been attributed to a "senatorial tradition" that formed soon after his death, on the assumption that relations between Nero and the senate of his day were unremittingly antagonistic. There is no justification for such a view: the senate was a body of some 600 men, but at no time in Imperial history can its full membership be registered or the opinions of all of its members be known. It is inconceivable, however, that all 600 held identical views on any given subject at any given moment — Tacitus' record of its debates proves otherwise — and one of his now-lost authorities, the Elder Pliny, was a member of the equestrian order, as later was Suetonius. Tacitus famously identifies the authors on whose works he had drawn when writing of Nero — Fabius Rusticus and Cluvius Rufus, as well as the Elder Pliny —, and it is a safe assumption that Suetonius and Cassius Dio knew them too. But those writers' works have not survived, their contents and points of view cannot be known, and no amount of source-criticism (here mercifully avoided by Drinkwater) will remedy the situation.[5] That the tradition was not completely hostile to Nero is inferable from the structure of Suetonius' *Life* and a brief notice in Josephus (*AntJ* 20.154). There is little today, however, to act as a counterweight to the prevailing negative image of the monster, an image (as the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* shows) that formed relatively soon after Nero's death. Drinkwater nonetheless sets out to restore the balance, at once rejecting the tradition entirely as the product of Nero's "enemies".[6]

Some contemporary records do, of course, exist. The *Octavia* is one of a number of what might be called subsidiary literary sources available to Nero's biographer, while documentary materials (coins, papyri, inscriptions) might be expected to offer controls of various kinds on the dominant tradition. Seneca's treatises and letters and the various compositions of Lucan, Petronius, Persius and Calpurnius Siculus all have historical import and require careful evaluation free from modish vanities of the double-speaking kind (C. E. Schorske's treatment of Adalbert Stifter, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and other Viennese authors in his stunning *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*[7] provides a model). Drinkwater takes the evidence of Neronian literature seriously. He is reluctant, however, to follow the widely-held notion of a Neronian literary renaissance (109), and in my view he seriously underestimates the ideological significance of Caesarian omnipotence in Lucan's epic — *omnia Caesar erat* (3.108) — as also of the Golden Age imagery in Calpurnius' *Eclogues* (1.33-88; 4 *passim*), not the result of a "literary" or "poetical conceit" (269, 270) but an appeal to a once paradisal age that Romans saw vividly reconstituted in their midst every year at the *Saturnalia*. His self-assurance in literary matters is indeed notable

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and empire in Tacitus (Cambridge 2008). Cf. J. H W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and change in Roman religion* (Oxford 1979) 155-66 on Neronian prodigies.

4 Purposefully: A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius: the scholar and his Caesars* (London 1983) 9-10. Artistry: T. Hägg, *The art of biography in antiquity* (Cambridge 2012) 223-27.

5 Or compensate for the stark reminder conveyed by the Younger Pliny's notice (*Ep*. 3.7.9-10) of the death of Silius Italicus, the last of Nero's consuls: in the early 2nd c. A.D. who was left to remember Nero at all? The basic point was understood by G. H. Lewes, "Was Nero a monster?" *Cornhill Magazine* 8 (July 1863) 113-28.

6 The *Octavia* is said (7) to be "early Flavian", but it may have appeared under Galba or later under Domitian. A. J. Boyle, in id. (ed.), Octavia: *attributed to Seneca* (Oxford 2008) xiv-xvi, summarises opinions; for biographical purposes, such indeterminacy compounds the difficulties presented by the late and largely one-sided narratives.

7 C. E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: politics and culture* (New York 1981).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759420000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

throughout: the *Apocolocyntosis* came into being as a "private joke" between Seneca and Nero (105), while the *De Clementia* was composed "to 'jump-start' [Nero] into acting the fully functioning *princeps*" (159). Paradoxically, however, Seneca's surviving works are too multifarious to permit knowledge of their author as a real person (53).[8]

As for documents, Drinkwater pays special attention to the Imperial coinage, paticularly in his discussion of the post-accession phase of Nero's reign when Agrippina's influence was seemingly at its height. The images of Nero's mother that appear on his early coins are indeed remarkable, and Drinkwater's view that Agrippina herself was responsible for them will attract suppport, as will his later attribution (22, 28, 38-39) of other types directly to Nero. He overlooks nonetheless how little is known about the selection of legends and images on Rome's coinage — "the question of who was responsible for coinage policy … defies any direct answer"[9] — as well as how little is known about the impact that legends and images made on the population at large. To style Agrippina a "Queen Mother" (42), eagerly ambitious to preside over an early Neronian regency, may in any case strike some readers as verging on the anachronistic. Again, Drinkwater is careful to integrate into his analysis of Neronian military history the exploits recorded on the career inscription of Silvanus Aelianus (*ILS* 986), a figure of consequence who otherwise is completely unknown (precisely why that is so remains a topic of much speculation [139-40, 146-47]). Inscriptions at times certainly help to flesh out events known imperfectly from the literary record, as with the progress of Nero's tour of Greece in 66-67 (remembered not least for the massive plundering of art-works), but, ironically, prosopographical investigation is discountenanced when political activity is assessed, due to a "paucity of data" (153; cf. 225).[10]

Altogether, it remains inescapably true that the day-to-day succession of events in Nero's life, not to mention his reactions to them, can never be more than partially glimpsed (the ink interminably spilt on a timetable for the *bellum Neronis* is a fine illustration); and even a year-by-year record is hard to establish. Indeed, the very historicity of some of the most memorable events in the tradition is in doubt: witness B. D. Shaw's startling contention that the persecution of Christians as Tacitus describes it never took place at all,[11] and the equally forceful denial and repudiation of his case from other scholars.[12] Lesser questions add to the confusion: did Plutarch see Nero perform at Delphi? Was Nero at Corinth for the liberation of Greece?[13] Under these circumstances, any pronouncement on the character or personality of Nero is hazardous, any attempt to overturn the traditional portrait a risk.[14]

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8 Literary renaissance: J. P. Sullivan, *Literature and politics in the age of Nero* (Ithaca, NY 1985). Lucan: cf. Liebeschuetz (supra n.3) 140-45. Golden Age: cf. D. Feeney, *Caesar's calendar* (Berkeley, CA 2007) 131-34; J. Fabre-Serris, "Néron et les traditions de l'âge d'or," in J.-M. Croisille, R. Martin and Y. Perrin (edd.), *Neronia* V: *Néron: histoire et légende* (Coll. Latomus 247; 1999) 187-200. *De clementia*: contrast S. M. Braund (ed.), *Seneca:* De Clementia (Cambridge 2011) 56, stating that the work was written for a broad audience. The proclamation at A. A. Barrett, E. Fantham and J. C. Yardley (edd.), *The emperor Nero: a guide to the ancient source*s (Princeton, NJ 2016) xix, that *De Clementia* "yields very little direct historical information", is inexplicable.

9 R. P. Duncan-Jones, "Implications of the Roman coinage: debates and differences," *Klio* 87 (2005) 463.

10 Tour: N. M. Kennell, "Nero ΠΕΡΙΟΔΟΝΙΚΗΣ," *AJPh* 109 (1988) 239-51. Art works: K. W. Arafat, *Pausanias' Greece* (Cambridge 1996) 139-55 (excellent on the Greek tour), with Paus. 2.17.6, 2.37.5, 10.7.7 and 10.19.2. Still valuable on Neronian consuls is P. A. Gallivan, "Some comments on the fasti for the reign of Nero," *CQ* 24 (1974) 290-311.

11 B. D. Shaw, "The myth of the Neronian persecution," *JRS* 102 (2015) 73-110.

12 B. van der Lans and J. N. Bremmer, "Tacitus and the persecution of the Christians," *Eirene* 53 (2017) 299-331; C. P. Jones,"The historicity of the Neronian persecution," *New Testament Studies* 63 (2017) 146-52, with very strong language.

13 C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford 1971) 17.

14 Much relevant documentary material has long been available in E. M. Smallwood, *Documents illustrating the principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero* (Cambridge 1967). M. G. L. Cooley (ed.), *Tiberius*

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To emphasise that point, I will digress for a moment to refer to the reflections made by two eminent writers in their biographies of modern subjects. As with A. N. Wilson on Queen Victoria, both had at their disposal immense volumes of source-material that can only make the ancient historian gasp. But it is not the quantity of sources alone that is at issue so much as the thought given to the biographical enterprise in and of itself. First, H. Lee, whose great biography of Virginia Woolf begins with her subject's own daunting outburst — "My God, how does one write a Biography?" — before enumerating the choices available to Woolf's biographers:

> They can start at source, with her family history, and see her in the context of ancestry, country, class. They can start with Bloomsbury, fixing her inside her social and intellectual group and its reputation. They can start by thinking of her as a victim, as someone who is going to kill herself. They can start with a theory or a belief and see her always in terms of it, since, like Shakespeare, she is a writer who lends herself to infinitely various interpretation. What no longer seems possible is to start: Adeline Virginia Stephen was born on 25 January 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and of Julia Stephen, née Jackson.[15]

Lee's point is that "there is no such thing as an objective biography" and she concludes her reflections by drawing attention, for achieving success, to "the process that makes biography come alive: making lives vivid through scenes and moments", a process derived in fact from Woolf's own constantly developing views on life-writing.[16] Secondly, B. Crick, who defines his subject this way when introducing his equally great biography of George Orwell: "the main tale must be of how [Orwell's] books and essays came to be written and of how they were published", which Crick states following much deliberation on "the fine writing, balanced appraisal and psychological insight that is the hallmark of the English tradition of biography", of which, however, he had become very sceptical:

> All too often the literary virtues of the English biographical tradition give rise to characteristic vices: smoothing out or silently resolving contradictions in the evidence and bridging gaps by empathy and intuition (our famous English "good judgment of character" which, compared to the French stress on formal criteria, lets us down so often); and this is all done so elegantly that neither contradictions nor gaps in the evidence are apparent to any but scholarly eyes carefully reading the footnotes or cynically noting their lack. *None of us can enter into another person's mind; to believe so is fiction.* We can only know an actual person by observing their [*sic*] behaviour in a variety of different situations and through different perspectives. Hence the great emphasis I found myself placing on reporting the views of [Orwell's] contemporaries at unusual length and in their own words, neither synthesising nor always sensitively resolving them when they conflicted. Wyndham Lewis once remarked that good biographies are like novels. He did not intend to let the cat out of the bag.[17]

Under the conditions implicit in these remarks made by writers whose biographical subjects' lives were relatively close to their own, it is a question whether a true biography not just of Nero but of any Roman emperor is feasible. A chronicle of events during an emperor's lifetime, or of events with which he was associated, may well be compiled; but with sources that are few, partial and mostly not contemporary, little more than this can be expected. As A. R. Birley allowed when writing of Hadrian's life (perhaps facetiously?), truth sometimes reveals itself only to a historical novelist.[18] Drinkwater is well aware of the intersection between history and historical fiction, and of the danger of fiction sliding into fantasy (13; contrast

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to Nero (Lactor 19; London 2011), is also invaluable, giving as it does the consular *fasti*, items from the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium*, and the texts of various coins, inscriptions and papyri; also included are generous selections from the *Octavia*, *Apocolocyntosis*, *De clementia*, from Calpurnius Siculus, and even Frontinus (on Corbulo).

15 H. Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (Vintage edn., New York 1999) 3.

16 Ibid. 3 and 20.

17 B. Crick, *George Orwell: a life* (Toronto 1980/2019) xxxiv and xxxi (my emphasis).

18 A. R. Birley, *Hadrian: the restless emperor* (London 1997) 249.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759420000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

140-42 and 183-87). But as an historian who perhaps fits the archetype of the "very English empiricist for whom judgement and reflection must be founded upon facts",[19] he is confident regardless that conclusions on Nero's personality can be secured. This is his considered opinion of a Nero he finds far removed from "the deranged, murderous tyrant" of tradition (418):

> He never harboured any crazed belief about his own omnipotence or divinity. Indeed, always in touch with reality, he … had no great ideological goals, religious or political. Devoted to art and sport, not administration and war, Nero wanted to be a different sort of *princeps*, not to establish a different sort of Principate or Empire. Until the very end, he worked tirelessly, if misguidedly, to achieve this goal. He was certainly not habitually lazy, but he was no saint. His self-indulgence, increasing absorption by his own interests and, at times, peculiar, especially populist, behaviour, provoked legitimate uncertainty about his character and suspicion of his motives. But this made him no 'monster'. He was neither vindictive nor indeed, with his great dislike of bloodshed, cruel. He was not morally depraved, not unusually anti-social in his behaviour, gluttonous, avaricious or lustful. He did not attempt to deprave others. In particular, he was neither a mad arsonist nor a vicious committed persecutor of Christianity. He was, however, capable of occasionally breaking away from the direction of his advisers to assert his will in ways which could lead to odd, unsettling, expensive and short-lived projects, both civil and military. Behind such insistence lay self-doubt. Nero possessed the strength, skill and courage to drive a ten-horse chariot team, but always questioned his ability, and suffered occasional deep remorse for what he had done or for what others had done in his name. This explains his adoption of the mask of Apollo, his need for the catharsis of the Greek trip and his final 'burn-out'.

That is a very different figure from the one known to Griffin, to whom Nero was a weak character desirous of popularity and acclaim, but fearful, insecure and vindictive, even paranoid. He brutally eliminated all his rivals to power, became a prodigal megalomaniac, and was unable to maintain the early image promoted for him of an Augustan *civilis princeps*. His cruelty and rapacity in turn alienated the aristocracy, caused disaffection among the provincials, and eventually led to revolt and provoked his suicide. On this view, therefore, Nero was hardly a passive figure but one directly responsible for his own demise, with the many defects in his personality preventing him from meeting the demands the emperorship made upon him. Hence the collapse of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.[20] Champlin likewise drew a portrait of a far-from-retiring character, revealing in every sense a theatrical ruler who consciously presented himself to the audiences of those he ruled as showman and actor, whose every performance was a display of obsessive self-justification and validation. A special logic was discovered in the stage rôles Nero is said to have played in the tradition, allowing him to disclaim personal responsibility for the crimes of which he was accused; and from the multiplicity of solar associations present in the tradition, a seductive case was made for seeing him as a "Roi-Soleil" in firm control of his own political ideology.[21]

Drinkwater will have none of this. He insists that there was never any rift between Nero and the senate, that there was no Stoic opposition to his rule, no reign of terror after the Pisonian conspiracy, no catalogue of crimes and follies, no lust for power. The killings of the tradition were all due to political expediency exercised within "the court". He allows a few "breakouts" from a figure disinclined to assume the burdens of office; but Nero's appetites for art and sport were purposely encouraged by the court's power-brokers in order to keep him diverted and otherwise occupied (see especially 26, 55, 161, 164-68, 196, 218 and 232). These conclusions are reached from a hypercritical reading of the sources that strips away all embellishment to leave a factual substrate explicable in terms of what seems plausible and realistic. The result is

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19 T. Eagleton, *The English novel: an introduction* (Oxford 2005) 113, of Jane Austen.

20 M. T. Griffin, *Nero: the end of a dynasty* (London 1984); cf. K. R. Bradley, "Approaches to the Roman empire: a perspective," *Int. History Rev.* 8 (1986) 92-96.

21 E. Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, MA 2003); cf. K. R. Bradley, "Nero the Sun King," *Scholia* 14 (2005) 122-27.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759420000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press

recourse throughout to reconstructions of what "must have been" or "will have been":

> There must have been a feeling abroad, even before Nero's accession, that with him as *princeps* things could only get better. (17)
>
> Though Lucan will have appreciated Nero's patronage, he … must have looked for signs that identified the *princeps* as a Julio-Claudian tyrant. (114)
>
> Tigellinus must have resented having a colleague [sc., as praetorian prefect] after Burrus had served alone. (155)
>
> The Greek visit, the Italian progress and the Roman 'triumph' must have left Nero in acute need of physical and mental recuperation. (294)

Drinkwater's procedure is to rely on that staple of ancient history, rational conjecture, and to reach conclusions that assume authority through the medium of the formal propositions in which he presents conjecture:

> I propose that the Neronian court as a whole was never a place where all were intimidated into dumb acquiescence. (82)
>
> I propose that it was not Nero but his chief advisers who, despite personal misgivings, harassed Montanus into suicide in order to warn off potential attackers of any station, and that the same advisers insisted on Nero being accompanied by bodyguards on his nocturnal adventures. (319)
>
> I propose that this [sc., Nero's assumption of a sole consulship in 68] was the Establishment's initiating the final stage of its plan for a Gallic campaign. (397)[22]

The obvious response is that the standard of rationality is essentially subjective: what is rational to you may not be comparably rational to me, and facts that you seem to establish I might find questionable:

> It was [Agrippina] who, showing her customary flexibility and flair, gave Corbulo the eastern command. (133)
>
> Yet even if the conspirators had managed to kill Nero and elevate Piso, they were bound to fail in the long term. They were not typical of their society, and represented no widespread opposition to the Neronian regime. (210)

Rational conjecture, it must be acknowledged, is often little more than guesswork; much depends on whether it is set in culturally appropriate terms. Thus, the ubiquitous presence of the gods in Rome's polytheistic world should, I think, be of some relevance to assessing Nero's associations with Apollo, the all-pervasiveness of Greek mythology in Roman culture to understanding his stage rôles, the decadent luxury of contemporary trends in Roman painting to appreciation of his Golden House.[23] With regard to Nero's mental health, patterns of Roman childcare may well be pertinent to discussion of his early development (280), and more could perhaps be added from socio-cultural studies on the ways in which Roman children were prepared for adult life. But there is insufficient primary material to justify the intrusion of terminology from modern clinical psychology, especially when the one relatively fulsome source that may be relevant, Suetonius' account of Nero's paternal ancestors, is brushed aside (276-86).[24] In any case, nothing on this theme can come close to the medical precision of C. R. Jamison's biography of the bipolar poet Robert Lowell, which I cite to illustrate again the challenges imperial biography presents.[25] As it is, by simply asserting that certain elements of the historical tradition "ring true" (e.g., 37, 48, 51) — an idiom incidentally favoured by Orwell's biographer —, Drinkwater asks his reader to follow his conviction that Roman actors

22 For further examples, see 1, 56, 114, 290, 350, 353, 354, 364, 397, 403 and 404.

23 Presence: K. Hopkins, *A world full of gods: pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman empire* (London 1999). Mythology: Champlin (supra n.21). Painting: E. W. Leach, *The social life of painting in ancient Rome and on the Bay of Naples* (Cambridge 2004) 156-85.

24 On the Domitii Ahenobarbi of Suet., *Nero* 1-5, see J. Carlsen, *Rise and fall of a Roman noble family: the Domitii Ahenobarbi 196 BC–AD 68* (Odense 2006).

25 K. R. Jamison, *Robert Lowell: setting the river on fire. A study of genius, mania, and character* (New York 2017).

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thought and behaved just like us, so that when, for example, Subrius Flavus, falsely on Drinkwater's calculation, accused Nero of arson, the charge is dismissed with a *riposte*, "'Well, he would, wouldn't he?'" (234; cf.314) that as far as I can tell has no more than rhetorical value. The cogency of his deterministic views will depend, accordingly, on the reader's willingness to share his assumptions of what is normative in human thought and behaviour.

The emergence of something akin to a court can inarguably be taken as a sequel to the rise of the Imperial monarchy, complete with attendant protocols and procedures.[26] In Suetonius' day, the kiss of greeting between emperor and senators had long been an item of imperial etiquette, and it was of regular interest to an author sensitive to social formalities. At *Nero* 37.2, he duly records Nero's refusal of the kiss as evidence of the emperor's disdain for the senate when he was setting out on or returning from journeys. There is every reason consequently to follow Drinkwater in the project of reconstituting the Neronian court and the various teams of courtiers to which he believes Nero always to have been subject. In theory, his thesis involves large numbers of courtiers: immediate members of the emperor's family, differing grades of *amici*, army commanders, powerful *liberti*, not all of whom can have been simultaneously, or permanently, at the emperor's beck and call. Career senators, men like Corbulo, wanted and expected appointments far from Rome itself, and membership of the *consilium*, still perhaps the best-known means by which the emperor received advice, was invariably *ad hoc*.[27] The succeeding teams are accordingly conceptualised as variously making up an outer circle or an inner circle, but in both cases, it seems, circles that are to be identified with what Drinkwater frequently calls, with no hint of unease, the "Establishment", the "imperial government", or the "central administration" (see, e.g., 61, 137, 141, 149, 154, 162 and 232). The relationship, however, of these terms to one another remains unspecified; and precisely how "the court" functioned is a topic that seems to me to require further elaboration and elucidation, whether within the *domus* or when the emperor was travelling. I imagine, for instance, that differing social statuses were at times a cause of friction and resentment. Powerful *liberti* close to the emperor there certainly were; but they were men who inevitably bore the *macula servitutis* of all manumitted slaves, and how at a certain moment they were regarded by, or interacted with, slave-owning senatorial *amici* is a question worth pondering. The names of Epaphroditus and Helius emphasised their servile origins as a matter of course, and the scorn for Pallas later expressed by the Younger Pliny (*Ep*. 7.29; 8.6) was and remains palpable — a far cry indeed from the platitudes of Seneca (*Ep*. 47, most notoriously) on the "brotherhood of mankind". It was as if by an act of manumission, one might recall, that Nero late in 67 conferred freedom on the Greeks from Roman servitude, reminding everyone of the social distance between freedom and slavery.[28] Nonetheless, given the passivity of the emperor that Drinkwater proposes, the logic of crediting his teams of advisers with any number of signal achievements throughout his reign is readily apparent: gains against Parthia, advances in Britain, avoidance of economic crisis through reform of the currency. It was a reign in which many successes can be postulated.

How, then, is the choice to be made among the competing portraits of Nero currently on display? The answer must come from the way Drinkwater consistently and scrupulously refers to his portrait as "my Nero" (e.g., 12, 416). The idiom is a tacit admission that all that can be done is to present a set of possibilities, as the individual historian perceives them, for consideration and comparison with the possibilities put forward by other, equally authoritative, scholars.

And this seems to me true on a much wider scale: no biography of a Roman emperor can claim universal assent when the limitations of evidence are so strong and authorial idiosyncrasies impossible to overcome. Here Drinkwater's focus is firmly fixed on the Principate as an institution, whose problematical nature, as he sees it, he captures with a striking "half-baked"

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26 A. Wallace-Hadrill, "The imperial court," in *CAH* 10² (1996) 283-308.

27 J. A. Crook, *Consilium principis* (Cambridge 1955) remains important.

28 *ILS* 8794 = Smallwood (supra n.14) 167 no. 64 (transl. Cooley [supra n.14] 254); cf. M. Bergmann, "Hatte Nero ein politisches und/oder kulturelles Programm? Zur Inschrift von Akraiphia," in J.-M. Croisille and Y. Perrin (edd.), *Neronia* VI: *Rome à l'époque néronienne* (Coll. Latomus 268; 2002) 281: "Die Griechen waren immer douloi = Sklaven".

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metaphor (14, 173) to express the notion that Rome's Imperial form of government, not a monarchy proper, was a system kept always in tension with its Republican origins through the enduring survival of the senate. This is the historical subject that commands his attention. He believes that the system was maintained in Nero's reign by a sequence of powerful underlings who manipulated a figurehead for their own ends, and that the figurehead himself appears now in the historical tradition only in caricature. This construct is the book's principal claim, and it will take its place as a rival to the rationalisations of other major historians. Whether the tradition of the monstrous Nero will disappear entirely remains to be seen.[29] But it should perhaps be kept in mind that Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio were closer to the events of Nero's reign, and knew the political realities of the Principate, far better than modern scholars, whatever the constraints that surround their writings. Suetonius in particular had a special vantage point as a member of the Imperial court under Trajan and Hadrian from which to compose his lives. Nonetheless, the boldly revisionist picture Drinkwater draws in his rich and absorbing book is marked by a rigour, an erudition, and a degree of insight characteristic of all his scholarly work: Nero will never be the same again.

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Acknowledgements

I gratefully, and warmly, acknowledge here a longstanding companionship with the author that began a generation ago in mutual consolation from introduction in the Oxford seminars of the then Camden Professor to the intricacies of the collection of imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta.* I also thank Patricia Clark for helpfully scutinising a draft of my text.

29 There will always be a Cavafy, I imagine, to write of the Erinyes' footsteps and Delphi's warning of the age of 73.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759420000197 Published online by Cambridge University Press