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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Running in the Family: Inheritance and Family Resemblance in Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*

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Abstract

The ancestry sections in Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* demonstrate the inheritance of character traits down the family line. The effectiveness of this as a rhetorical technique rests on an expectation of inheritance and resemblance along the family line. This study investigates the mechanism of that resemblance from the evidence available in Suetonius' text—nature or nurture?—and then proposes that since the mechanism appears to be not quite the same as that evidenced in earlier writers, the biographer's model of inheritance and degeneration is part of a conversation about succession to the principate. Part one sets out the patterns of resemblance/difference that appear from the lists of ancestors, part two the evidence for nature and nurture of character traits in Suetonius' *Lives*, and part three compares the way resemblance works in Suetonius with the way it works in other authors. As modern views on nature and nurture have changed with social and political changes, the final section proposes that the changes over the first century of the principate have to do with the political and social changes in that period. Suetonius' model of hereditary vice, not hereditary virtue, arises from a disaffection with the system of hereditary succession.

Keywords: nature; nurture; degeneration; vice; virtue; emperors; Suetonius

Almost every one of Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* uses ancestors to illuminate the character in question.[1] The resemblance of the ancestor(s) and subject usually follows the pattern that the descendant is like, but worse than, the ancestors—what Seager called an 'ironic foil'.[2] There is a trajectory, but in

[1] The text of Suetonius' *Lives* is taken from Kaster (2016). Translations are taken (unless indicated) from the Loeb—Rolfe (1997) and (1998), revised by Hurley—with occasional adjustment.
[2] Seager (2007) 38.

the noble families it is clearly downward.[3] This trajectory is clearest in *Nero* where Nero degenerated so far from the virtues of his ancestors that it was 'as if' (*quasi*) only his vices were hereditary and innate. Suetonius is self-consciously using the ancestors as rhetorical devices, making a literary point through the emphatic comparison of the Caesar with his ancestors, but also hinting at a deeper assumption about inheritance and making a political point about an inherited principate.

If we accept that the ancestors are being used as a rhetorical device, to show us a resemblance between the Caesar and his ancestors,[4] then a practical issue arises: what is the mechanism of resemblance? Could this persuasive strategy work without a shared expectation of resemblance between fathers and sons? Certain patterns over the twelve Caesars suggest that resemblance has patterns and rules. Vice, it would seem, can be expected to be passed along, but virtue cannot. As it turns out, there is very little evidence in Suetonius that character is ever (or could be) formed or changed after birth. And if there is corruption, it does not come from power (absolute or otherwise).[5] The model is a 'nature' one, even though that model cannot explain the difference between Titus and Domitian. That difference can only be explained by powerful exterior forces stronger than even nature or nurture.

The reason to investigate this question is that knowing Suetonius' position on inheritance will put us in a better position to read the full meaning of his text in relation to other aspects of characterisation such as character change and degeneration. It has often been assumed that Suetonius is basically 'essentialist',[6] and Bradley has said 'the principle it [*Nero* 1.2] assumes, that character was determined to some degree by heredity, fitting well with ancient conceptions that personality was fixed at birth and did not change over time, can be understood to be operative throughout',[7] but this has not been systematically shown. In the process of characterising his Caesars through their resemblances and dissimilarities to their ancestors, Suetonius follows or creates a pattern of inheritance and degeneration. Suetonius' assumptions in this area must be basically the same as his audience's if he can expect them to connect the dots. Here I hope to set out what those assumptions are.

In this study I do three things. First, I outline the patterns of resemblance that appear in Suetonius. In part two, I collect the relevant passages of Suetonius on fixed or developing character and what little evidence there is for inheritance of traits (nature) or another person's influence on character

[3] The Caesars who come from 'shorter' lines (Augustus, Vespasian, Otho, Vitellius) do not exhibit this pattern. Their family trees go to lengths to establish the respectability of the family rather than their virtues or vices. For more detail, see Garrett (2018) 65–7.

[4] This is argued in Garrett (2021).

[5] Cf. Philo *Leg.* 190 on the combination of absolute power and youth being fertile ground for evil—but this is not what Suetonius would say.

[6] Gascou (1984) 430–6 argues for Suetonius' *essentialisme;* Galtier (2009) follows Gascou.

[7] Bradley (1998) 16.

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(nurture).[8] It seems that vices are probably inherited (but it is not clear what causes virtues). Finally, in the last part of this study I consider the similarities and differences between Suetonius' position on inheritance and that of his peers and predecessors. He fits into a trend over the long term but also bucks the trend of his immediate predecessors in the Flavian period. Although Suetonius does not object to the principate per se, his tendency to highlight the inheritance of vice rather than virtue suggests he sees problems in the notion of an *inherited* principate, problems that reflect the ideology of the Trajanic and Hadrianic eras. In light of the recent stable succession that was achieved *outside* the bloodline, viz. the transition from Nerva to Trajan and then Hadrian, Suetonius' criticism of inheritance might constitute approval of the apparently new and improved model of succession—at least *outward* approval of the official version.[9]

1. Patterns

An analysis of the ancestors in Suetonius' *Lives* appears to turn up certain patterns of resemblance along family lines. The agnate line is always of primary interest, and the direct biological line is almost always the main concern (although the *Tiberius* pushes the limits of both these rules). Sons seem to resemble their fathers and ancestors in character traits—but really only in vice. I argue that this model of resemblance and difference (i.e., vices are passed on, but not virtues), which is only specifically mentioned in *Nero*, does appear to be basically applicable across the *Lives* (as Bradley suggested).

Vice is, in Suetonius, a powerful force that grows over the generations. Close to the beginning of *Nero* Suetonius explains why he wants to tell us about the ancestors:

> *pluris e familia cognosci referre arbitror quo facilius appareat ita degenerasse a suorum uirtutibus Nero ut tamen uitia cuiusque quasi tradita et ingenita rettulerit.*
>
> *Ner.* 1.2

> I think it is a good idea for a number of members of the family to be examined, so that it might more easily appear that Nero degenerated so far from the virtues of his ancestors that he revived only vices, as if they were hereditary and innate.[10]

[8] Nature (similar behaviour because of inherited traits) and nurture (similar behaviour because of learnt traits) are problematic terms, but I use them because they are the terms modern psychologists use to describe patterns in personality traits.

[9] In the time of Suetonius there was a certain amount of discomfort about the way Hadrian came to power. On the possibly rushed succession of Hadrian, see Burnett (2008).

[10] My translation. The *quasi* is difficult and has produced a range of translations in published editions. It will be clear that I do not go as far as Wardle (1994) 96 who thinks the *quasi* 'undercuts severely any notion that Suetonius believed in heredity'.

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There follows a list of ancestors in chronological order with pertinent character traits for each one. Although some of the ancestors are more like Nero than others (the consul of 16 BCE is especially similar), each has a specific vice in common with him. As the generations approach Nero, each Ahenobarbus is worse than the last, with the predictable result that Nero's father is the worst, surpassed only by Nero himself.

The point of the long introduction to *Nero* seems to be to make us expect to see in Nero some kind of family resemblance to vices of the Ahenobarbi, which are *quasi tradita et ingenita* 'as if hereditary and innate'. But the *quasi* complicates things: if it is only 'as if', what exactly causes this resemblance? There seems to have been an expectation of nature, but the *quasi* also suggests that it is more complicated than that, and there might be some element of nurture, or that in Nero's case something went awry. The evidence within the *Nero* does in fact suggest nature. A further complication comes from the fact that Suetonius only ever mentions this issue here.[11] Is Nero the odd one out, or can we apply the same principle to the other Caesars? It seems that we *can* apply the same principle elsewhere, but Nero's case is drawn to our attention because it is extreme—nearly all the Caesars degenerate, but Nero has degenerated *so far* that he is similar *only* in vice.

In other *Lives*, too, vices are faithfully transmitted from generation to generation, overpowering virtues. Gluttony is a vice that appears in the Vitellii; Galba has his family's avarice.

While ancestral vices are paradigmatic, it is harder to predict what will become of virtues. Nero was apparently surprising for not replicating his family's virtues, but the other Caesars do little better on that score. Claudius and Caligula are so unlike their virtuous fathers that the biographer makes a virtue of this necessity and juxtaposes them ironically, instead of trying to find resemblance, but he never explicitly mentions or explains the difference.[12] Tiberius is unusual for inheriting both virtues and vices, although virtues are not usually among the character traits that repeat over the generations. In fact, virtues do not seem to be connected with ancestry, except for the negative correlation that they do not spring spontaneously from vicious parents. There are conditions that can engender only vice, but no conditions guarantee virtue. Although Suetonius respects nobility, it would appear that a noble family cannot produce a virtuous Caesar. In noble families, Suetonius often emphasises high status and ancestral virtues, for they foreshadow only degeneration in their descendant. But in a new family, as long as there are no obvious vices in the line, the important thing is respectable status.

Many vices appear in the Caesars with no apparent antecedent in the family tree, but Suetonius presents them instead as degeneration from virtues. The *Caligula* is the strongest example; the *Claudius* another. Neither is explicitly said to have degenerated—the word *degenerare* is used in Suetonius only at *Nero* 1.2 (in the passage we have seen) and *Augustus* 17, of Antonius—but rather

[11] There is always the possibility that the lost beginning of *Divus Iulius* might have explained the principle.

[12] On the fathers of Caligula and Claudius, see now Penella (2018).

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the point is made by ironic description of the father. Vices can spring up spontaneously, but virtues cannot.

There is also a pattern of degeneration over the dynasty, similar to the pattern of degeneration over the generations of a family, but in this case even between unrelated Caesars. Whoever begins a new dynasty comes to power under his own steam and is generally virtuous, and his successor(s) undo(es) his good work. Augustus is followed by Tiberius, who is not all bad but is certainly not the favourite Augustus had been; Caligula succeeds Tiberius and is assassinated. The new dynasty[13] proceeds from Claudius, who is not of a new family but has low status within the family until his surprise accession, to Nero, with whom the degeneration is total. Nero is the morally bankrupt conclusion of the Domitii Ahenobarbi, *and* the house of Claudius, *and* the Julio-Claudians. There is a series of deaths and assassinations, and we begin again with Vespasian, whose house will end with Domitian. I suggest a possible explanation for this pattern in part three.

2. The Evidence in Suetonius for the Mechanism of Resemblance

The way Suetonius uses ancestors to foreshadow traits seems to me to be our best evidence that we should be making a connection between the ancestors and the Caesar, and it suggests resemblance is biological. The closest Suetonius ever comes to explaining his assumptions on this question is the statement that Nero revived the vices of his ancestors as if they were hereditary and innate, and degenerated from their virtues. Because the vices are only *quasi* hereditary (*tradita*, from *trado*) and *quasi* innate (*ingenita*, from *ingigno*), we cannot quite assert that the mechanism of resemblance between Nero and his ancestors is nature. We also cannot quite rule it out. First, I collect the evidence for 'nature' and then the sparse evidence for 'nurture'.

2.1 Nature

Outside the ancestry sections, there are two pieces of evidence in the *Lives* that suggest either nature or nurture of character traits: *Caligula* 25.4 and *Nero* 6.1. It so happens that both suggest nature, and both are about vices.

When Nero was born, his father Domitius suggested that a child born to him and Agrippina would be *detestabilis*, and moreover a 'public evil':

> *de genitura eius statim multa et formidulosa multis coiectantibus praesagio fuit etiam Domitii patris uox inter gratulationes amicorum negantis quicquam ex se et Agrippina nisi detestabile et malo publico nasci potuisse.*
>
> *Ner.* 6.1

> Many people at once made direful predictions about his birth date, and a remark made by his father Domitius was also taken as an omen; for while

[13] *Vesp.* 25 indicates that Claudius-Nero should be considered a 'house' on a par with the Flavian 'house'.

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> receiving the congratulations of his friends, he said that nothing that was not abominable (*detestabilis*) and a public bane could be born of Agrippina and himself.[14]

Detestabilis is exactly the word Suetonius had recently used to describe the father (5.1). Already we see a resemblance between father and son. Presumably Domitius' joke suggests that he recognises that both he and Agrippina have objectionable characters, and he thinks it is likely to follow that their progeny will have the same. The verb *nasci* (to be born) suggests that the boy is already like this at birth, and his character has nothing to do with who raises him or how he is raised. No extra stage between birth and adulthood is required to create this abomination. After the list of vicious ancestors, Suetonius' readers are already well aware that the *malum publicum* will be the end result. The anecdote builds up the theme of similarity between ancestor and progeny, and it suggests that his readers were familiar with a theory of character inheritance. This comment gives Agrippina a role in the character of her child, and by doing so attributes more to the maternal line than Suetonius ever gives a mother. Otherwise, it fits perfectly with, and strengthens, the overall picture of inherited vices that opens the *Nero*.

If this story about Nero were not proof enough that the mechanism of resemblance is nature, there is a serendipitous comment, more explicit about the mechanism of resemblance, that suggests a connection between Caligula's paternity and his daughter's character traits. While describing Caligula's marriages, Suetonius mentions Caligula's own belief that his paternity of his daughter was proved by her nasty temper:

> *nec ullo firmiore indicio sui seminis esse credebat quam feritate, quae illi quoque tanta iam tunc erat ut infestis digitis ora et oculos simul ludentium infantium incesseret.*
>
> *Calig.* 25.4
>
> And no evidence convinced him so positively that she was sprung from his own loins (*sui seminis*) as her savage temper, which was even then so violent that she would try to scratch the faces and eyes of the little children who played with her.

This reference is quite specific in attributing the girl's behaviour to nature: either Suetonius or Caligula (perhaps both) sees her origins in *suum semen,* i.e., in Caligula's seed or paternity. David Wardle thought it just as likely to be a joke as to reflect Caligula's belief in heredity.[15] Caligula does seem to have had a dark sense of humour, and it is faintly humorous to think of Caligula seeing his own savagery in his daughter and asserting his pride in it, just as it subverts expectation when Domitius acknowledges his own bad

[14] On this saying, cf. Dio Cass. 61.2.3.

[15] Wardle (1994) 237, see also 96 in the same work.

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character. Both jokes must function on the basis of some kind of understanding that there is, or might be, a connection between parents' and children's character traits, even if it is not taken very seriously.

For our purposes, this passage from *Caligula* is interesting in two ways: first, it characterises Caligula himself by the implication that he shares these character traits with his daughter, much as the portrait of Germanicus (*Calig.* 1–6) characterises Caligula by the emphatic differences between them. In each case the secondary character throws light on the primary. Second, it betrays an interest (if not necessarily belief) in character inheritance on the part of Caligula, perhaps also the author. The child's behaviour shows who fathered her, not who raised her, just as Domitius' joke was about who the parents were, not about who raised Nero. This reference to the proof of little Julia's parentage rules out an external origin for her own character traits because they are explicitly attributed to Caligula's *semen*, 'seed'.

2.2 Nurture

If we are to look in Suetonius' *Lives* for evidence of nurture, we could look for a change in character during the lifetime. Such changes do occur in Plutarch, for whom *paideia* is crucial, although even in Plutarch both nature and nurture models co-exist.[16] There are stories in Suetonius about childhood, but, as I have argued elsewhere, they mainly demonstrate consistency from child to adult.[17] There is no evidence in Suetonius for the effects of external influences, carers, teachers, even mothers, being of significant impact. Tutors or teachers appear in Suetonius twice to show their (i.e., the tutors') low status (*Claud.* 2.2 and *Nero* 6.3). Only once in the *Lives* is curriculum relevant, and then the focus is on the adults in charge of the curriculum rather than the young Caesar: at *Nero* 52, the two people who choose what *not* to teach the young Nero are his mother and his tutor. Their choices to keep him away from the dangerous influences of philosophy (Agrippina's choice) or the early orators (Seneca's choice) are, for Suetonius, what drive Nero to poetry, and here we might think back to sections 20–5, the long passage on Nero's obsession with music and theatre. One wonders at 52 whether a little bit of philosophy and the early orators might not have done some good. *Nero* 52 is the only time in the series a mother appears to be significant in the role of carer or educator, but it does not seem to be meant to convince us that it was the rearing by Agrippina and Seneca that made Nero the eventual disaster he became. That was already there at birth, as we know from *Nero* 6.1.

One final mention of a young Caesar's tutor appears at *Tiberius* 57, where his tutor does not mould the character, but notices something—cruelty—in the child that will turn out to be consistent into adulthood. No one tried to change the young Tiberius, but when, at *Caligula* 11, Tiberius is said to have 'willingly indulged' Caligula's interest in singing and dancing, it is because he (Tiberius)

[16] Duff (2008) demonstrates that both static and developmental models occur in Plutarch's *Lives*. See also the references below in n. 54.

[17] On the continuity of character traits from child to adult in Suetonius, see Garrett (2019).

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thought it might 'soften' (*mansuefacere*) Caligula's *ferum ingenium*. We know, and Suetonius knows, that it did not work. But Suetonius does not rule out the possibility that he, as well as Tiberius, thinks that it was worth a try.

The rarity of these references to formative influences on young Caesars, such as mothers and tutors, suggests that Suetonius is not interested in the effect of external pressure such as teaching or imitation on the character traits of the Caesars. Once the Caesar is grown up, any apparent 'change' is rarely anything more than a transition in the structure of the *Life*.[18] Caesars often reveal their own characters 'little by little,' *paulatim*, but in the structure of the *Life* the transition is actually sudden: it seems like a change in character when in fact, on closer inspection, this is not stated to be the case. Sharp transitions are especially evident in *Tiberius* 42 and *Nero* 27.1, marking the revelation of traits that had been there all along, actively hidden with more or less success by their owner until there was no longer any reason to keep them secret. Suetonius' Caesars are fully formed in character as children, only needing to choose whether they exercise or conceal their vices. Whether or not it is manifest, the vice is innate.

Only with the Flavians, where the principate is finally passed down father to son, does it become possible for a Caesar to behave 'outside' his *natura*. Referring to Vespasian's one vice, Suetonius does something unusual. He dwells on the source of the vice, distinguishing between *natura* and *necessitas* as possible causes:

> *sola est in qua merito culpetur, pecuniae cupiditas … quidem* ***natura*** *cupidissimum tradunt idque exprobratum ei a sene bubulco qui negata sibi gratuita libertate quam imperium adeptum suppliciter orabat proclamauerit uulpem pilum mutare, non mores. sunt contra qui opinentur ad manubias et rapinas* ***necessitate compulsum*** *summa aerarii fiscique inopia … quod et ueri similius uidetur, quando et male partis optime usus est.*
>
> *Vesp.* 16.1–3

> The only thing for which he can fairly be censured was his love of money … Some say that he was **naturally** covetous, and was taunted with it by an old herdsman of his who, on being forced to pay for the freedom for which he earnestly begged Vespasian when he became emperor, cried: 'The fox changes his fur, but not his ways.' Others on the contrary believe that he was **driven by necessity** to raise money by spoliation and robbery because of the desperate state of the treasury and the privy purse … This latter view seems the more probable, since he made the best use of his gains, ill-gotten though they were.

Here, necessity is the opposite of volition.[19] Nowhere else is there such a long deliberation on whether or not a trait is innate. The default position seems to

[18] The occasions when it is more than a structural transition occur at *Tib.* 42 and *Dom.* 10.

[19] Also, at *Dom.* 6.1 (*necessario* is contrasted with *sponte*) and *Tib.* 23 (Tiberius was chosen more out of necessity than choice). Elsewhere, Suetonius uses *necessitas*—and similar words such as

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be that the traits are natural, and we can assume so unless told otherwise.[20] Even Nero's vices are explicitly of his nature, *not* his age (*Ner.* 26.1). In Vespasian's exceptional case, however, the biographer does not want to give the impression that the vice was natural, so he must take pains to rule nature out. Making the distinction between necessity and nature acknowledges that his Caesars can act—if necessary—outside of their innate traits.

The only time when the change might be a change *in character* is in *Domitian*. The change occurs during his reign when, from a beginning of *clementia* and *abstinentia*, he becomes grasping and cruel. These characteristics do not come from his nature; they are also not 'nurture' in the traditional sense of having been learnt while growing up. Other Caesars change their behaviour on accession, but Suetonius likes to have an explanation for that, usually that they had been deliberately hiding something, or their reputation later turned out to be mistaken.[21]

It is a matter of some controversy whether Domitian's change in behaviour, which is said to be *super ingenii naturam*, is in fact a change to his *ingenium*. The problem is in the word *super:*

> *circa administrationem autem imperii aliquamdiu se uarium praestitit mixturaque aequabili uitiorum atque uirtutum, donec uirtutes quoque in uitia deflexit, quantum coniectare licet* ***super*** *ingenii naturam inopia rapax, metu saeuus.*
>
> *Dom.* 3.2
>
> In his administration of the government he for some time showed himself inconsistent, with about an equal number of virtues and vices, but finally he turned the virtues also into vices; for so far as one may guess, it was **outside** his natural disposition that he became rapacious through need and cruel through fear.

Super means 'on top of', 'in addition to', but it has proved so difficult to explain how Domitian could become cruel and greedy 'in addition to' his natural disposition that *super* is often translated 'contrary to'.[22] Even that translation does not answer the question of what is in fact happening here.

necessario and *necesse*—to indicate that there is no alternative: e.g., *Aug.* 6; 81.1; *Tib.* 6.1; 18.1; 37.4; 62.1; *Calig.* 2; 29.2; 30.2; *Ner.* 4; 23.2; 40.2; 43.2; and *Vesp.* 4.3, where *necessario* occurs with *obligo*.

[20] Wallace-Hadrill (1995: 151) states that Suetonius 'is anxious to demonstrate that virtues or vices were "natural" inborn characteristics.' I agree that Suetonius would attribute vices and virtues to nature, but I would modify 'is anxious to demonstrate' since the source of vices and virtues is rarely examined.

[21] E.g., Galba was trying to keep a low profile in the lifetime of Nero (*Galba* 9); Tiberius (42) and Nero (27.1) were both hiding their vices but eventually dropped pretence; Titus (7.1) was suspected of vices but in fact did not have them.

[22] Rolfe's translation: 'it was **contrary to** his natural disposition that he was made rapacious through need and cruel through fear' (my emphasis). Although the translation is difficult, and mine is not perfect, I must take issue with modern translations. 'Contrary to' is hardly a translation for *super*, but for some reason it is a common choice here. The translation of *super* into 'contrary to'

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Another way to deal with *super* is Lambrecht's solution: *super ingenii naturam* means that the vices in question were already present in Domitian and were only amplified by the outside forces.[23] This approach is reasonable but it has two flaws: it does not explain how his earlier behaviour tended towards *clementia*, and it is not consonant with the other part of the statement, in which Domitian *deflexit* the virtues into vices.

It seems that Domitian actually changed. He had both natural vices and natural virtues, and then 'he turned the virtues also into vices'.[24] There are external forces acting upon him, need and fear, but he is also in charge of the change since he (not need or fear) was the one who 'turned' the virtues into vices. It is as if he made a decision to change virtues into vices. A more normal state of affairs would see Domitian (born with natural virtues and vices) hiding his vices from others until he could safely let them out, as happens with Caligula, Nero, and Tiberius. But it does not appear that Domitian was hiding anything. He changed, and only that can explain the difference between him and his family. His character *when he became emperor* was not what it later became, but that later development was not something he learnt from a parent or tutor.

We know from *Vespasian* 16 that Suetonius can imagine a situation in which someone can exercise a vice or virtue that is not in their *natura*; uniquely among the Caesars, Domitian's *ingenium* is changed by external forces. Although Suetonius does not go as far as we would like in explaining the difference between Domitian and his father and brother, it does appear that he also struggles with it—and that, perhaps, explains his need to attribute Domitian's cruelty and rapacity to outside forces here, just as he attributes Vespasian's *cupiditas pecuniae* to outside forces at *Vesp.* 16, and nowhere else

comes from the Loeb (present in the original 1914 as well as the current version) but it is also used in the Penguin edition. It seems to me that the explanation for this 'contrary to' lies in the need to relate the comment at *Domitian* 3.2 to the later change at 10.1, as some translators explicitly do, including the Loeb of Rolfe/Hurley, with a note at 'natural disposition' to 'see chaps. ix and xi. 1'. The passage in question marks the transition from good to bad which had been foreshadowed at 3.2:

> *sed neque in clementiae neque in abstinentiae tenore permansit, et tamen aliquanto celerius ad saeuitiam desciuit quam ad cupiditatem.*
>
> *Dom.* 10.1
>
> But he did not continue this course of mercy or integrity, although he turned (*desciuit*) somewhat more speedily to cruelty than to avarice.

The two statements are certainly related to each other, at least structurally—the statement at 3.2 foreshadows the change that occurs at 10, with the same two vices named (cruelty and avarice)—but they are not so related that we can make *super* into *contra.* On the controversial meaning of *super* here, see Mooney (1930 [1979]) 520; Steidle (1963) 95 follows Mooney; see also Gascou (1976) 271 n. 1, who objects rightly to 'contrary to' in Rolfe's 1914 edition; Wallace-Hadrill (1995) 151; also, Jones (1996) 34. That no one can solve this probably indicates that it can remain ambiguous.

[23] Lambrecht (1995) 526.

[24] *Deflecto* certainly has a sense of 'changing' something into something else: *OLD* 5a.

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finds a reason to attribute a Caesar's trait to the outside world.[25] If characters do not really change or suffer the impact of outside influences, as a rule, evidence is leading away from a 'nurture' model of character. We can safely say that Suetonius is 'essentialist' and that is what allows him to use an anecdote from childhood as well as one from adulthood. Only Domitian breaks the mould.

When we read Suetonius' *Lives* we can expect little change over the lifetime, and we can be expected to make the connection between vices of the ancestors and the vices of the Caesar himself. If virtue is present in an ancestor, as it is in the *Caligula* and *Claudius*, it is probably conspicuously absent from the Caesar.

3. How Does this Pattern Fit with other Roman Literature?

We can observe how Suetonius' patterns fit with or go against the patterns we see in other Roman literature.[26] Starting with the late Republic, then the Flavian period, we will find that the pattern is both nature and nurture in the Republic, where virtue is inherited, then mainly nurture in the Flavian period, where anyone can have merit. In Suetonius we have a return to the nature model, but now it is not virtue that comes down the family line, but vice. Perhaps this is a response to the perceived failure of the dynastic model of the first century of the principate, and confusion about Domitian.

3.1 Republic

If Suetonius' idea is, as it seems to be, that character is inherited, this would not be completely different from ideas that appear in republican authors, such as Cicero (who is particularly useful on the topic, thanks to his prolific output). This is not the place to undertake a comprehensive survey of republican literature. We can say that during the Ciceronian period the idea of 'nobility' functioned on the basis of the assumption that character, especially virtue, was heritable. In fact, the assumption of inherited virtue appears to be fairly central to republican politics, as it might justify the common practice of electing the son to an office held by the father. Although Balmaceda sees that it is the *gloria* that is inherited, not the *uirtus*,[27] it seems to amount to the same thing: Treggiari claims, based on evidence from Cicero, that the electorate appointed noblemen's sons not because they automatically deserved the

[25] Domitian had a childhood of *inopia* and *infamia* which included accusations of sexual experiences with the future emperor Nerva (*Dom.* 1.1), but this does not appear to have been a 'corrupting' influence or an early sign of depravity, *contra* Galtier (2009), esp. 95 n. 51. Similar themes occur for Nero (his childhood tutors are a dancer and a barber, *Nero* 6.3) and Vitellius (he is among the *spintriae* of Tiberius, *Vit.* 3.2). A modern reader might expect these youthful experiences to cause or explain future character defects, but in all these cases Suetonius' point is either an illustration of impecunious circumstances or an explanation of the cloud of bad reputation in which the Caesar was later enveloped.

[26] On ideas about heredity and degeneration through history, see Legendre (1985) and Finucci and Brownlee (2001).

[27] Balmaceda (2017) 38.

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honour, but because voters 'were supposed to believe that merit ran in families.'[28] Not only 'merit', even very specific character traits run in families. In republican literature, there are dozens of references to 'family' character traits, or assumptions that the virtue of the father lives on in the son. It is a commonplace of Roman historiography that famous families had certain characteristics, not always good ones:

> a Gnaeus Piso was expected to be hard and proud, a Lucius Piso to be cultured and civilized, a Domitius Ahenobarbus to be ferocious.
>
> Griffin (1982) 124[29]

Any reader of Livy is alive to the similarities between men with the same name.[30] Cicero refers to the *frugalitas* bred into the line of the Pisones Frugi (*Sest.* 21), the *deuotio* of the Decii Mures (*Tusc.* 1.89), and wisdom in every generation of Nasica's ancestors (*Brut.* 2.12). These are examples of what Farney calls 'family identity'.[31]

The expected similarity between father and son has a broader application—and it does not only apply to the nobility. Without specifying a family, Varro shows the ubiquity of the concept when he explains how a nominative form can be predicted from an oblique case 'as the father's qualities may be seen from the son, and the son's from the father' (Varro, *Ling.* 10.59).[32] That the concept is broadly understood is most apparent in Cicero's speeches, where the expectation of similarity between father and son often has the force of character witness. He defends Fonteius by the good name and achievements of his ancestors (*Font.* 41); representing Scaurus, he parades Scaurus' father and grandfather as models of virtue (*Scaur.* 45–9); and, in a most blatant appeal to belief in character inheritance, he posits the virtue of Sulla's father: since the father is virtuous, would the son really be vicious? (*Sull.* 58). He extends the concept to teacher and student in his *Pro Q. Roscio*, where Cicero argues that Roscius, a talented actor hired to teach his skills to another, must have produced a good student, 'for no one would think that a good comic actor could be created by a very bad actor any more than that a moral son could be born of an immoral father' (*Q. Rosc.* 30).[33]

Cicero's analogy goes in one direction only—good to good, but not bad to good—and it is the same direction as Suetonius' inheritance and degeneration, but Cicero provides evidence of both nature and nurture. Tutors and mothers are both important to the development of the young orator, according to Cicero in *Brutus* 110–11. Whether or not Cicero himself believes in the

[28] Treggiari (2003) 142.

[29] Hereditary features in particular historical families are discussed by Wiseman (1979) (on which, see Cornell (1982)); Vasaly (1987) and (1999); Harrison (1996); Cooley (1998); Farney (1999).

[30] Vasaly (1987) and (1999).

[31] Farney (1999) and see now Garrett (2021).

[32] Trans. Kent (1951).

[33] Trans. Corbeill (1996) 77.

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transmission of character,[34] when he proposes to use a father/son argument the effectiveness of the argument rests upon the audience's common belief in family resemblance, and possibly also belief in the actual inheritance of character. In this period, similarity of fathers and sons is so much the default position that dissimilarity might even create doubt in paternity. Vergil's Priam doubts whether Neoptolemus is really Achilles' son, since he behaves unworthily of him (*Aen.* 2.540–9).

In these authors, the expectation is that merit is inherited, and degeneration is possible but remarkable. When we look for the mechanism, it appears that both nature and nurture are part of the conversation.[35] There is a strong line of evidence for nature, but we should not forget that imitation (*aemulatio* or *imitatio*) was an important Roman method of acculturating young Romans. Polybius (e.g., 6.53) and Cicero (e.g., *Phil.* 2.26) furnish several examples, often (but not always) within the family. Polybius suggests both adoptive and natural family affect the character of Scipio Aemilianus, when he approves of the young man's spending time with his natural father in his childhood.[36] Cicero expresses the inevitability that Verres' son, even if he had been born with an angelic character, would turn out to be disagreeable from association with his family (*Verr.* 2.3.160). For Cicero at least, character can be formed from both inherited and acquired traits.[37]

3.2 Principate

The swift and complete change of the political system appears to have affected the way authors thought about inherited nobility and also the concept of inheritance more generally. At the very point where actual inheritance of power became a reality, an expectation of inherited merit became less central to the political system, and the sources show a recalibration of ideas about inheritance. In the Tiberian author Valerius Maximus, a section 'on sons who degenerated from famous parents' (*qui a parentibus claris degenerauerunt,* 3.5) lists famous names who were infamously dissolute or depraved, in stark contrast with their illustrious fathers.[38] Their degeneration merits comment because it is both uncommon and unexpected. The *Senatus Consultum de Pisone Patre*, of a similar era, shows concern that Piso's sons distance themselves from their father by becoming completely different (*dissimillumus*) from him.[39] The

[34] Tyrrell and Purser (1894) 156, on *Att.* 10.4, claim Cicero did not believe in heredity. Perhaps so, but Cicero had said elsewhere that it is important to appeal to the common beliefs of humankind: *Inv. rhet.* 1.29; *Orat.* 2.68.

[35] On imitation, especially in the wealthy classes, see Baroin (2010).

[36] Polyb. 31.24–5, especially 31.25.9; see also Cooley (1998) 207.

[37] On the mix of both in Cicero, see Van der Blom (2010) 101–3.

[38] On Valerius Maximus' purpose and methods, see Lawrence (2015). Much later, dissimilarity is still a reason to question paternity: the *Historia Augusta* reports the rumour that Commodus was not the son of Marcus Aurelius, based almost entirely on the need to reconcile the incredible dissimilarity of their characters (*Marc.* 19).

[39] *SCPP* line 96, in the translation of Griffin (1997) 252; the Latin is given by Potter and Damon (1999) 28. The issue of family traits in the Piso family is discussed in Cooley (1998) 203–7.

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implication is that they are expected to be like him, but that they have some control of the process.

Various works of the early empire show that both views of character continue to co-exist. Seneca's dramas still refer to children 'born that way'[40] and express surprise at a daughter dissimilar to her family (*Phoen.* 81), but his letters (e.g., *Ep.* 44.3, 21.2) encourage the study of philosophy as a path to nobility. Tacitus reports that, during the reign of Nero, there were those who protested that Seneca should retire as Nero's tutor, because Nero had his ancestors for teachers (*Ann.* 14.53). His ancestors, including his father, were by this time long dead. Any teaching they did would have to be through some kind of family history, perhaps through their masks. Pliny the Elder in the *Natural History* is more interested in teachers than parents when he talks about famous artists.[41] Unsurprisingly in a book about teaching, Quintilian also gives more credit to teaching than *natura* when it comes to oratory, although *natura* is still important. But it is not clear whether *natura* is also inherited, or only innate (*Inst.* 2.19.2–3). Martial also refers to inherited character.[42] Juvenal is thinking about both nature and nurture: the appearance of parental character traits in children, particularly as a comment on the nobility, is a theme of his *Satires*,[43] but *Satire* 14 is concerned with the teaching of bad habits to children.

In the Flavian era, when most of the old families had died out, and even the *princeps* was a new man, the discussion of heredity and degeneration appears to go through an intermediate stage between Cicero and Suetonius. An obvious reason to discuss heredity in this period is that Vespasian was the first emperor to manage to leave his empire to a natural son;[44] another reason for such a recalibration would have been the obvious difference between Vespasian's two sons, Titus and Domitian, which cannot be explained by the nature model. The late Republic's inherited merit and Suetonius' inherited vice are bridged by Flavian writers' outward preference for acquisition of both.[45] Statius is a useful source since nature and nurture are visible themes of his work, and his view on it also changes over time. Statius' earlier work, the *Thebaid*, does not privilege rearing over inheritance: rather, sons reproduce

[40] *Ne mali fiant times? / nascuntur.* Sen. *Thy.* 313–14. 'The unstated assumption is that any child of Atreus must be evil': Tarrant (1985) 134. Cf. Suet. *Ner.* 6.1.

[41] See esp. *HN* 35.145–6 for artists identified as 'pupil of' rather than 'son of', and 36.24 for the artist Cephisodotus, who inherited his talent from his father.

[42] Mart. 6.64, esp. lines 1–5; see Watson and Watson (2003) 86–9, esp. 88, with the idea 'that a child's character is inherited from his parents'; both mother and father are implicated here.

[43] *uitiorum exempla domestica*, Juv. 14.32; on *Satire* 14, Stein (1970) and Colton (1977). *Satire* 8 treats topics close to those discussed here, nobility of family and degenerating behaviour along the family line, with Nero a particular target (8.198, 8.211–26) and Catiline and Cicero the ultimate examples of the concept (8.231–50). On *Satire* 8, Henderson (1997); on the *Satires* more generally Keane (2007) esp. 35–6.

[44] We know that this was a topic of conversation: in the time of Vespasian, Helvidius Priscus appears to have questioned hereditary succession (Dio Cass. 65.12, interpreted by Syme (1970) 126–7).

[45] On Statius, I am indebted to the work of Neil Bernstein (2003) and (2008).

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their fathers' crimes,[46] but in later works, the *Achilleid* and the *Silvae*, education is at least as important as inherited character for identity and nobility.[47] This is a shift away from the republican reverence for nobility inherited from family. In an era that saw the very visible success of Vespasian, a *nouus homo*, and the creation of a new 'nobility,' there was a new appreciation for the merits of self-made men. Bernstein reads the various works of Statius as discussions of 'the value of descent in assessing status,'[48] part of a conversation that he sees in other literature of the period. Newlands goes as far as to say that, in the *Silvae*, Statius 'proposes a provocative new concept of nobility to which economic, moral and artistic values *rather than* hereditary qualifications are essential.'[49] This reflects a change from the republican period to the imperial.

The shifting definition of nobility is reflected in the debate about inherited character traits: in this period, when maternal connections gained new currency for status or 'nobility,' the maternal side also became a source of character traits, such as in the Menoeceus episode in Statius' *Thebaid*.[50] This shift supports the idea that the preference for nature or nurture reflects a broader social structure. The increased interest in the maternal family as a factor in social status is something that we also see in Suetonius, especially for the less noble families of Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian.

If the Flavian period took up education and rearing as the crucial thing, the pendulum swings back in the period of Suetonius, Plutarch, and Tacitus—at least to the point of swinging back to a mixture of both nature and nurture. Yet the question remains unsettled in this period, just as it does in our own.

Gill tested the assumption of a model of fixed character in Tacitus and Plutarch, finding that character in both Plutarch and Tacitus comes from both innate *and* acquired traits.[51] For example, Tacitus never uses children to demonstrate adult character traits, something Suetonius does do, but some elements of Tacitus' characterisation suggest change over the lifetime;[52] and his *Dialogus* (28) suggests there is the possibility of a child being influenced by vice (at least early on). Within Plutarch's huge corpus we can see both inheritance and acquisition. Some passages suggest learnt character: Lycurgus takes two puppies from the same litter and teaches them to behave differently, and Cornelia's exceptional care for her sons' rearing is responsible for their virtues.[53] Other passages in Plutarch show a strong interest in inherited vice. A passage in the *Delays of Divine Vengeance* refers to family traits, suggesting inheritance rather than imitation; in *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*

[46] Davis (1994).

[47] Bernstein (2008) 81, 106.

[48] Bernstein (2008) 27.

[49] Newlands (2002) 6, my emphasis.

[50] E.g., Stat. *Theb.* 10.806–9. Nobility through mother's line: Bernstein (2008) 20, character from maternal and paternal sides, Bernstein (2008) 177.

[51] Gill (1983). On fixed character, see also Swain (1989) and Pelling (1990).

[52] On character change in Tacitus, see particularly Hands (1974), Woodman (1998), Gill (1983) 482–6.

[53] For Lycurgus, ps.-Plut. *De lib. educ.* 3a–b; for Cornelia, *Ti. Gracch.* 1.4.

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the saying of Hesiod is quoted, that children are born like their parents; the genealogical ending of the *Antonius* sees Antonius' vices passed on to his descendants.[54] It might have been possible to decide on whether Plutarch sees traits as inherited or acquired by looking at his use of formative childhood experiences, but Duff has shown that Plutarch's *Lives* use both a developmental and a static model of character, sometimes both in the one *Life*.[55] With Tacitus and Plutarch, we are back to a mixture of nature and nurture, but with perhaps a slightly sharper focus on inheritance of vice, rather than virtue.

What this means is that Suetonius' model of inheritance is not the same as Cicero's (inasmuch as, for Suetonius, virtue is not inherited, although vice is) but it is also not the same as authors closer to his own time, Tacitus and Plutarch, who ascribe more to the influence of mothers and educators than Suetonius does. Between Cicero and Suetonius, the cluster of authors in the Flavian period seems to have reacted against the idea of inherited power by emphasising the importance of education, rearing, and status mobility. It is in itself interesting that Suetonius, in the Hadrianic period, appears to break from the pack on this issue, not quite like the Flavian authors but also not quite like his contemporaries.

3.3 A Response to the Changing Political System?

The way Suetonius deals with this issue reflects a larger conversation that was going on outside the text. Chong-Gossard's discussion of sex in Suetonius connects the portrayal of sexual relationships in Suetonius with social issues of his age, including the new practice of adopting successors,[56] and I propose to do something similar by linking succession, a constant theme of the first century, with the discussion of inheritance and degeneration.

We have already seen that in the Roman Republic the political system favoured, or appeared to favour, sons of known families.[57] Degeneration was 'possible'[58] but not likely. The model of inherited virtue, then, suits the system: an expectation that good men have good sons simplifies the electoral process. In the Augustan period and early empire, however, with the rise of new men and the disappearance of what was left of the republican nobility, a model of acquired virtue is more appropriate to the political situation. It allows for merit in unknown families—one of the requirements of the non-hereditary Senatorial rank that Weisweiler proposes continued into the Principate[59]—and the influence of good training. It also allows for Caesars from new families,

[54] Plut. *De sera* 559d; *Quomodo adulator* 63e; *Ant.* 87, on which see Brenk (1992) 4348–75. See also Albini (1997), especially on the pseudo-Plutarchan treatise *On the Education of Children* in which both nature and nurture are important but with emphasis on what a parent can do to supplement what nature has granted.

[55] Duff (2008) 1–26, esp. 10–11, dealing mainly with *Themistocles*.

[56] Chong-Gossard (2010) 296.

[57] Arguing that noble families were not as successful in reproducing their pre-eminence over the generations as Cicero (et al.) would have us believe, Hopkins and Burton (1983) 32.

[58] Treggiari (2003) 151. E.g., Val. Max. 3.5.

[59] Weisweiler (2020).

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like Vespasian. Good sons may arise from bad parents, as appears from the trope of tyrants with virtuous sons in Statius.[60] Such an occurrence would have been unexpected in the literature of the pre-Augustan period.

However, when we come back to Suetonius, it is more likely that a good parent will have a bad son, or that a bad family would have an even worse son. None of his Caesars are good sons from bad families. Where, in the time of Cicero, degeneration was 'possible', for Suetonius it is the default option. The Julio-Claudians and Flavians have shown the error of passing down power within the family, and the model by which power passed from Nerva to Trajan and then Hadrian might have seemed obviously superior, or it might have been a good idea for Suetonius to say that it was. Suetonius' picture of inherited vice and diluted virtue appears to invert the republican model that virtues are inherited faithfully, justifying the political advantage given to those of known families.

It seems reasonable to attribute this change in views about nature and nurture to a social and political environment because in the modern era a preference for inheritance or environment has tended to correlate with broader social changes.[61] For instance, when, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Vives and Holland wrote their reconstructions of the lost beginning of Suetonius' *Divus Iulius*, they imported their own interest in education.[62] In eighteenth-century France, doctors saw hereditary causes in many diseases, sometimes linking common diseases with perceived moral degeneracy. Quinlan argues that the shift in attitudes to heredity followed a change in ideas about demographic decline and gender in French society.[63] In the nineteenth century, the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology became popular in France, where the various developments in the sciences were adapted to political causes across the spectrum.[64] Francis Galton wrote his studies on hereditary genius in late-nineteenth-century Britain, when the social and political upper class was concerned about the growing working class. Eugenics became popular in the USA and Europe, notably in Germany in the 1930s.[65] In fact, the interest in natural traits spilled over into Classical studies, with several studies of inheritance in Roman and Greek families in 1930s Germany.[66] After the war, the similarities between eugenics and Nazi policies put the topic out of fashion until the 1960s and 70s,[67] an apt example

[60] Bernstein (2008) 148–9. Bernstein also identifies this trope in Vergil and Valerius Flaccus.

[61] On the evolution of theories of heredity according to social movements, see e.g., Staum (1995); Quinlan (2006).

[62] See Garrett (2015) 129.

[63] Quinlan (2006).

[64] Staum (1995) discusses the political elements of the French interest in phrenology and physiognomy.

[65] Galton and Galton (1998) 101, with Galton (1874).

[66] The ancestors and inheritance were popular topics among classicists in 1930s Germany. Bethe (1935), Haedicke (1937), and Fuhrmann (1938) explored the evidence with varying degrees of critical success. Thiel (1935) described the nature of Tiberius in terms of the characteristics he inherited from his ancestors, as did Syme (1974) and (1984) 913.

[67] Pauly (1993).

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of the effect of social conditions on the question. Current psychological research locates personality traits in a mixture of both inheritance and environment.[68] It would seem on the basis of parallels in Roman and modern European society that Suetonius' approach to this issue could reflect contemporary society.

There are two trends in the *Lives* that suggest that Suetonius' approach to the origin of character traits is a response to something in his society. First, the noblest Caesars are the most vicious, most degenerate.[69] That impression is highlighted by the long lists of ancestors for the very noble Caesars. Augustus, Otho, and Vespasian are certainly better emperors than the high-born Nero and Galba, and Suetonius emphasises this pattern by making sure we know the first three have modest, but respectable, families. Even Caligula and Claudius are depicted in the light of their famous, better fathers. The second thing that suggests a response to society is that dynasties tend to degenerate over their duration just as an individual Caesar degenerates over his lifetime. Both of these trends—inheritance of vice (not virtue) and degeneration over the dynasty—show that the system of inherited monarchy is unsatisfactory, as it perpetuates the cycle of one vicious noble after another. In this way, the tendency of the dynasty to degenerate over time parallels the tendency of the individual to deteriorate over the lifetime. The longer the line, the worse the Caesar.

The awkward question of how one chooses the next *princeps* comes down to succession within the family, succession by adoption, and (when no arrangements have been made) violence. The stability of inheritance is preferable to violence, but when inheritance leads to degeneration, adoption is preferable to that, and after the death of Domitian, succession by biological relationship was discontinued, replaced by a fashion for adopting a worthy young man as a successor.[70] But even in the first century of the principate, Caesars almost always left their empire to an adopted son, not a biological one. The adoptions were often of stepsons; Suetonius notes the role of wives in the adoption of their sons, always with a disapproving tone.[71] This kind of adoption combines the worst of both worlds—not keeping the bloodline, not really choosing for merit—exactly the kind of adoption Pliny criticises (*Pan.* 7.4). Suetonius appears to prefer the kind of adoption Nerva made, and Galba had attempted, of a young man chosen for his nobility and merit,[72] but not at the behest of a wife. Suetonius could, then, be criticising inherited power when he paints a

[68] For modern approaches to inheritance and acquisition of personality traits, see psychological works such as Burt and Simons (2015) and Barlow (2019).

[69] Long ago noticed, but dealt with in a historical rather than literary way, by Friedländer (1908) 106.

[70] This was an issue explicitly raised in Pliny's *Panegyricus* 7.4–8.1. On the importance of this new system as reflected in literature, see Williams (1978) 274. On the issue of adoption and succession in Cassius Dio, see Davenport and Mallan (2014).

[71] Suet. *Claud.* 43; *Ner.* 6.4; also, *Tib.* 21.2 (but Suetonius does not agree that Augustus would have adopted Tiberius just because of Livia). Cf. a similar disquietude about the wife's role, Tac. *Ann.* 1.3.

[72] When Galba adopts Piso, the adopted man is explicitly both noble and good: *nobilem egregiumque iuuenem* (Suet. *Galb.* 17).

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picture of inherited vice through generations of the same family and redemption only in a new man.

Concluding Remarks

I believe Suetonius comments on the political system when he posits dynasty as tending to degeneration and the model of the new man with his own merit making the best *princeps.* After the dissolute Julio-Claudians and the end of the Flavians, he goes back to inheritance and degeneration to explain that the line weakens over time: virtues degenerate and vices compound. The paradigm shift between the Republic and the Principate changed the role of the republican nobility and the status of *nouitas*, and Suetonius is responding to that change when he styles his 'new men' as virtuous and his noble scions as degenerate wastrels. This model of character inheritance and degeneration reflects a broader social transition away from meritocracy to monarchy and then away from lineage-based power back to a kind of meritocracy.

Some of this is beyond Suetonius' power to manipulate. The pattern that we see now of the worst Caesars coming from the best families was perhaps already observed, and the process of 'predecessor denigration', attacking the last of a dynasty in favour of the first of a new group, was already well underway.[73] But it was certainly within Suetonius' power to emphasise or play down these patterns, as we see in the way he picks out the best from mediocre families, or the worst from good families, when it suits him. Considering these patterns of inheritance and degeneration gives us another viewpoint from which to look at the Caesars as family units or blocks, or to question the value of biological descent in this period. Within Suetonius' text, the patterns we have observed here could illuminate connections and contrasts between individual Caesars that we have not seen before, such as allowing the comparison of Caesars who come first or last in their group, or a closer analysis of the degeneration of one line until its extinction; and looking beyond Suetonius, the same patterns we have identified here might also prompt us to ask why Suetonius' approach to these Caesars is so heavily based on descent, when other authors only a little earlier show more interest in rearing and education.

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[73] 'Predecessor denigration' in this period is investigated by e.g., Ramage (1983) and (1989) and Charles (2002).

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