

## Two Notes on Suetonius<sup>1</sup>

### 1. *Vers. Pop. 5 FLP Courtney (apud Jul. 80.3)*

In his account of events leading up to the assassination of Julius Caesar (*Jul.* 80), Suetonius preserves a fascinating bit of contemporary verse.<sup>2</sup> Though customarily included in collections of fragmentary Latin verse, the pasquinade is surely complete in itself. Whether the text is quite sound is another question. I quote 80.3-4:<sup>3</sup>

*subscripsere quidam Luci Bruti statuae: 'utinam uiueres—'. item ipsius Caesaris:*

*Brutus, quia reges eiecit, consul primus factus est:  
hic, quia consules eiecit, rex postremo factus est.*

*conspiratum est in eum a sexaginta amplius, Gaius Cassius Marcellus et  
Decimus Brutus principibus conspirationis.*

Despite the hazards involved in emending the text of an author as utterly and irretrievably anonymous as this one,<sup>4</sup> I suggest that *postremo* should be emended to *postremus*. Once abbreviated to *postremu'*, the smallest slip of the pen would have produced *postremo*. There would have been nothing to arouse the suspicion of the copyist, since the meaning of *postremo* is at least adequate. Caesar did more or less 'become king in the end', and might well have done so in name as well as in fact, if he had not been assassinated.

There are two specific advantages to reading *postremus*. First, it produces better parallelism. Everything else in the two lines is strictly parallel, except *hic* for *Caesar*, but

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<sup>1</sup> I quote Suetonius (including the embedded quotation) from the Teubner text of M. IHM, *Suetonius, Vol. I, De Vita Caesarum Libri* (Stuttgart 1908).

<sup>2</sup> To call the piece 'late Republican' would be to miss the point of the author's words: though inelegant, either 'proto-imperial' or 'deutero-regal' would be more accurate.

<sup>3</sup> The squib is number 5 of the 'Versus Populares' in E. COURTNEY, *Fragmentary Latin Poets* (Oxford 1993), number 4 of the 'Versus Populares in Caesarem et Similia' in the editions of the *Fragmenta Poetarum Latinarum* by W. MOREL (Stuttgart 1927<sup>2</sup>) and K. BÜCHNER (Leipzig 1982). There are no variants, though BÜCHNER reports that FAERNUS emended both instances of *quia* to *qui*.

<sup>4</sup> Emended or not, the epigram is neatly phrased as well as metrical, so it must have had a specific author. For what it is worth, it is also much more precisely datable than the general run of Latin verse.

*Caesar* would not scan, and *hic* is clear enough when placed on Caesar's statue.<sup>5</sup> Second, and more important, *postremus* produces better, that is, more pointedly epigrammatic, meaning: it is the *lectio facietior*. If he had not been assassinated, Caesar would have become not just 'king in the end', with the assumption of kingship seen as the last in an escalating series of usurpations, but 'last of the kings', eighth in a series whose seventh was Tarquinius Superbus. And (so our author hopes) not just 'the latest king', 'last of the kings so far', but 'last king ever', because he will soon be overthrown or assassinated and the Republic restored.<sup>6</sup> This interpretation particularly suits the Suetonian context, as more threatening. The next sentence (80.4, quoted above) introduces the conspirators who will soon kill Caesar. It is clear that *utinam uiueres* on Brutus' statue implies *utinam Caesar moriatur*. That *postremus rex* implies the same is less obvious, but such an implication is still, I think, present.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Nero 29

As with the other eleven Caesars, Suetonius provides fascinating details of Nero's sex-life:

*Suam quidem pudicitiam usque adeo prostituit, ut contaminatis paene omnibus membris nouissime quasi genus lusus excogitaret, quo ferae pelle contactus emitteretur e cauea uirorumque ac feminarum ad stipitem deligatorum inguina inuaderet et, cum affatim desaeuisset, conficeretur a Doryphoro liberto; cui etiam, sicut ipsi Sporus, ita ipse denupsit, uoces quoque et heulatus uim patientium uirginum imitatus.*

The principle to be followed in emending passages such as this is of course *lectio turpior potior*. Resisting the urge to alter *paene* in the first line to *pene*, I suggest instead that *uim* in the last line should be emended to *uirum*. In other words, I suggest that Nero, in his mock-marriage to Doryphorus, pretends to be undergoing not forcible rape but simple de-

<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the slightly non-parallel construction of the *textus receptus* might be defended as the *lectio difficilior*, so this argument is somewhat double-edged. Fortunately, I have another.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps also because our author hopes that no Roman will ever dare to attempt such a deed again, once everyone sees what happens to Caesar.

<sup>7</sup> That *postremus* can also mean 'worst' (*OLD* s.v. *postremus* 5) may add something to the general effect.

floration, for which *uirum pati* is the appropriate idiom.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the two are not incompatible, but Suetonius' language (*denupsit*) refers specifically to marriage rather than rape. The error posited would have been particularly easy in this context, where the preceding sentence certainly deals with rape: a sort of assimilation by subject.<sup>9</sup>

My proposal may seem absurd or banal, flattening rather than sharpening Nero's turpitude. After all, defloration is neither criminal nor perverted, while rape is both. However, it seems to me that the imitation of a virgin bride being deflowered, particularly when the imitator is a far-from-virginal male, is more perverted than the imitation of being raped, in that it provides the opportunity for a virtuoso display of conflicting emotions, a piquant combination of willingness and unwillingness, knowledge and ignorance, pleasure and pain, *uerba* and *heiulatus*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *OLD* s.v. *patior* 2.c: "(of a female) to submit to or experience sexual intercourse with".

<sup>9</sup> In 28.1, Suetonius similarly juxtaposes Nero's rape of the Vestal Virgin Rubria with his attempt to marry Acte and his actual 'marriage' to Sporus. The latter two are perfectly willing partners, and very loyal: Sporus is with him at the end (49.1) and Acte helps with his burial (50).

<sup>10</sup> We might connect this to Nero's attempt to experience, or to pretend to experience, all forms of human activity, including labor pains in the *Canace* (21.3) and homosexual marriage as both bride (with Doryphorus) and groom (with Sporus). In this respect, his theatrical interests and his polymorphously perverted sex-life overlap.