

Neronian Propaganda

Upon the death of Claudius in 54 AD, Nero honored his adoptive father with an emotional demonstration of filial piety and devotion, a generous *laudatio* (eulogy), and the obligatory consecration of divinity.¹ Then, in a sort of inaugural address to the people of Rome, he announced a bold proclamation: he would rule according to the principles of Augustus (*ex Augusti praescripto imperaturum se professus*).² The atrocities that would follow over the next 14 years of Nero's reign, however, certainly seem to fall short of ethereal Augustan standards. His sinister, sensational actions – e.g., stomping his pregnant wife to death, murdering his mother, and fiddling while Rome burned³ -- were well-documented by the authors of antiquity, and they have been well-preserved in the popular culture of the modern era, from Peter Ustinov's Nero callously laughing as the lions attack the Christians in *Quo Vadis* to Dom DeLuise's Nero belching and cracking coarse jokes in *History of the World: Part One*.

Yet, when Nero's reign ended with his suicide in 68 AD, the reaction of the *hoi polloi* of the Roman world – the *plebs sordida*, as Tacitus scornfully calls them⁴ -- reflected a much different person from the vulgar monster depicted in the darker passages of Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio. For years, his supporters adorned his tomb with fresh flowers, erected statues of him wearing the stately *toga praetexta* in the Forum, and circulated copies of his imperial edicts, just

¹ Suetonius, *Nero* 9

² *Nero* 10.1

³ *Nero* 35.3; 34.3; 38.2.

⁴ Tacitus, *Histories* 1.4.

as if he were still living and would at any moment return to Rome to exact revenge on his political adversaries.⁵ In fact, over the next several decades, “False Neros” emerged throughout Greece and Asia Minor, and many enthusiastic supporters refused to believe that their beloved emperor was dead.⁶

Nero’s posthumous popularity, therefore, suggests that he was quite adept at influencing the perceptions of the Roman people . . . very much like the emperor whom Nero, in his inaugural address, aspired to emulate. Just as Augustus employed various methods of written, oral, and visual communication to respond to public pessimism after decades of bloody civil warfare, to secure his own power in office, and to rebuild Roman confidence in traditional moral values such as *pietas*, *disciplina*, and *virtus*,⁷ Nero also used many of the same strategies to portray himself in a positive light. Thus, although imaginative Hollywood filmmakers and hostile classical writers may often depict him as a tyrannical buffoon completely unconcerned with his public image, Nero was, in reality, a very sophisticated propagandist.⁸

Part of Nero’s attempt to influence public opinion involved an ambitious building campaign, and there was certainly no greater component of that campaign than the *Domus Aurea*, an opulent complex constructed in the aftermath of the catastrophic fire of 64 AD. The main palace had hundreds of rooms, extensive colonnades, coffered ceilings, lavishly colorful artwork, and a spectacular revolving dining room. Much more than a mere imperial residence,

⁵ *Nero 57*

⁶ Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 10-35.

⁷ Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, translation by Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 101.

⁸ Of course, “propaganda” is a somewhat slippery concept (John Alexander Lobur, *Consensus, Concordia, and the Formation of the Roman Imperial Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1-11). For the purposes of this paper, though, “propaganda” means the symbolic communication of values and ideas and the subtle methods Nero employed to portray himself positively to the Roman people.

though, the *Domus Aurea* employed an innovative *rus in urbe*⁹ philosophy, using hundreds of acres of prime urban property to incorporate woods, fields, meadows, and even a large lake (*stagnum Neronis*) into the overall design scheme, reflecting Nero's ambitious desire to control and rearrange the appearance of nature itself.¹⁰

Suetonius condemns Nero's propensity for investing so much time, money, and energy into such extravagant construction projects, calling it one of his very worst attributes (*non in alia re tamen damnosior quam in aedificando*, however, he was no more prodigal in any other thing than in building), and he bristles at Nero's display of arrogance when the *Domus Aurea* is finally completed (*ut se diceret quasi hominem tandem habitare coepisse*, he was saying that he had finally begun to live like a human being).¹¹ Tacitus, moreover, criticizes Nero's attempts to transgress natural boundaries by trying things, in the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, that nature had specifically forbidden (*ingenium et audacia erat etiam, quae natura denegavisset, per artem temptare*), and Martial sarcastically complains that the *Domus Aurea*, a single house, had enveloped the entire city (*unaque iam tota stabat in urbe domus*).¹²

As Elsner points out, however, Roman emperors, starting with Augustus, had always used extravagant construction projects to promote their own personalities and to distinguish themselves from their predecessors.¹³ The *Domus Aurea* may have been the personal residence of the Emperor Nero, but it was also the center of state business and the headquarters of the official imperial administration; it was never intended to be a "private" building. It was a public

⁹ Martial, *Epigrams* 57.21.

¹⁰ Richard C. Beacham, *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 224-228.

¹¹ *Nero* 31.1-2.

¹² Tacitus, *Annales* 15.42; Martial, *De Spectaculis* 2.4.

¹³ Jas Elsner, "Constructing Decadence: The Representation of Nero As Imperial Builder" in *Reflections of Nero*, ed. Jas Elsner and Jamie Masters, 112 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

symbol of Roman government, and if Nero had reigned as long as Augustus, Elsner argues, the *Domus Aurea* never would have been considered prodigal at all.¹⁴ Perhaps writers would have praised Nero's ambitious efforts to transform Rome "from a city of brick into a city of marble," just as Suetonius does for Augustus.¹⁵

As part of the sprawling *Domus Aurea* complex, Nero commissioned the sculptor Zenodorus to construct the Colossus, a 120-foot statue for the palace's majestic vestibule. Both Suetonius and Pliny the Elder write that the Colossus was originally designed to reflect the image of Nero himself, but Pliny implies that it was later modified to resemble the sun god.¹⁶

. . . Destinatam illius principis simulacro Colossum fecit . . . qui dicatus Soli venerationi est damnatis sceleribus illius principis.¹⁷

(Zenodorus) made the Colossus, marked for the image of that emperor . . . which, with the wicked deeds of that emperor having been condemned, was dedicated to Sol for veneration.

Pliny's description is decidedly ambiguous, and scholars have long disagreed about the exact appearance of the statue.¹⁸ The conventional wisdom, however, has been that it was originally designed to be a representation of Nero as Sol, but with the death of Nero in 68 AD, all of the salient Neronian attributes were removed. Albertson, however, argues for a reverse interpretation: rather than making Nero appear similar to the sun god, Zenodorus designed the sun god to resemble Nero.¹⁹ The towering Colossus, then, wearing a radiate crown on his head

¹⁴ Elsner, 123.

¹⁵ Suetonius, *Augustus* 28.3.

¹⁶ Suetonius simply says that it was built in the image of Nero himself (*ipsius effigie*, 31.1).

¹⁷ Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 34.45.

¹⁸ Fred C. Albertson, "Zenodorus's 'Colossus of Nero,'" *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 46 (2001): 95-118.

¹⁹ Albertson, 111.

and steering a rudder with his right hand,²⁰ would have portrayed Nero as a powerful, capable *gubernator*, prepared to navigate dangerous waters and lead the Roman people to an Augustan-style Golden Age of renewed peace and prosperity.²¹

In addition to the Colossus, Pliny also mentions that Nero ordered a 120-foot image of himself to be painted on a giant canvas near the Gardens of Maecenas (*Nero princeps iusserat colosseum se pingi CXX pedum linteo*).²² Although Pliny dismisses the project as a prodigious symbol of Neronian profligacy and megalomania, a mere example of “the insanity of our age” (*nostrae aetatis insaniam*), the colossal painting would have complemented and reinforced the positive symbolism of the colossal statue, with both 120-foot images of the emperor framing the *Domus Aurea* as a sort of imperial “magic kingdom.”²³ At any rate, Pliny reports that the painting was destroyed by a bolt of lightning (*accensa fulmine*) almost as soon as it had been completed, and since it is doubtful that the Colossus was completed before Nero’s death,²⁴ the imagery of the twin Colossi probably never came to full fruition.

Another important Neronian construction project was the Arch of Nero, a monument erected on the Capitoline Hill between 58 and 62 AD in order to commemorate Nero’s victory (via the general Domitius Corbulo) over the Parthians.²⁵ A statuary group crowned the arch, with Nero depicted as the majestic *triumphator*, a palm branch in one hand and an eagle-tipped scepter in the other. Victory stood to the left of Nero’s chariot – the first recorded example, in fact, of Victory standing beside a mortal on a Roman arch – and Pax stood to the right, holding

²⁰ Such reconstructions are based, in part, on numismatic evidence from the early 3rd century AD (Albertson, 107).

²¹ Albertson, 111.

²² Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 35.51.

²³ Beacham, 228.

²⁴ Albertson, 102.

²⁵ Samuel Ball Platner, as completed and revised by Thomas Ashby, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 41.

the caduceus and the cornucopia.²⁶ This representation of Nero, therefore, depicted him not only as a formidable *imperator* who could protect the city from foreign aggression but also as a benevolent *princeps* who could, with the full cooperation of sympathetic divinities, usher in an era of peace and prosperity . . . very much like Augustus.

Although Nero was certainly very savvy about he portrayed himself on colossal statues and prominent triumphal monuments in the heart of Rome, he was just as careful about his numismatic portraits, which, though much smaller, reached a far wider audience:

The coinage was an extremely useful means of propaganda. At the time of the Early Roman empire the means of propaganda, intended to reach the common people, were limited. They included, in addition to the coinage, only such things as games, statues, buildings, and, of course, word of mouth. Thus, the coinage became the TV commercial and the newspaper ad of the ancient world.²⁷

When Nero first became emperor in 54 AD, coins reflected the overbearing influence of his mother Agrippina; she was often depicted on the obverse side of the coin, her name in the nominative case, with the young, boyish emperor relegated to the reverse side and the dative.²⁸ By the very next year, however, Nero's inscriptions appeared on the obverse side, and his portraits revealed a greater physical maturity. Though portraits of Agrippina still appeared in 55 AD, she was usually relegated to the background, in the shadows of Nero's face, and then after 55 AD, she disappeared entirely.²⁹ Thus, in his early years in office, Nero wanted to reassure Roman citizens that he was strong enough to resist his mother's domineering personality and

²⁶ Fred S. Kleiner, *The Arch of Nero in Rome: A Study of the Roman Honorary Arch Before and Under Nero* (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985), 78-79.

²⁷ Mary Elizabeth Kelly Thornton, "Nero's New Deal," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 102 (1971): 621-622.

²⁸ Thornton, 623.

²⁹ Ulrich W. Hiesinger, "The Portraits of Nero," *American Journal of Archaeology* 79, no. 2 (1975): 114.

mature enough to assert his own authority, and the coinage of this time period communicated this message very effectively.

Nero's numismatic portraits changed significantly once again in 64 AD. His face and chin became much heavier and thicker, he often wore a full beard, and whereas previous portraits always showed him bareheaded and costumeless, he now regularly wore a radiate or laurel crown and either an aegis across his shoulder or a full-length soldier's cloak.³⁰ These portraits certainly reflected the emperor's advancing maturity, but in the case of the radiate crown and the aegis especially, they also clearly associated Nero with divinity, creating a sort of "cosmic symbolism that now surrounded the person of the emperor (and) brought imperial imagery beyond anything previously sanctioned for the living head of the Roman state."³¹

In addition to this numismatic portraiture change of 64 AD, Nero also made some very subtle but very clever modifications to the composition of his coins. Before 64 AD, the Roman *aureus* (gold coin) contained 122.9 grains of gold. Nero's new *aureus*, however, contained only 114.1. Therefore, he could produce 45 *aurei* per pound of gold as opposed to 42. The silver *denarius*, moreover, was reduced from 61.46 grains to 52.68, meaning that he could produce 96 *denarii* per pound instead of 84.³² This devaluation of the Roman currency was not some diabolical scheme to fill the imperial coffers by cheating Roman citizens out of their hard-earned money. Instead, as Thornton argues, it was a very resourceful way of pumping more money into a struggling Roman economy.³³ Of course, both Tacitus and Suetonius condemn Nero for his excessive *liberalitas* and *largitiones*,³⁴ and when Galba becomes emperor in 68 AD, he pledges

³⁰ Hiesinger, 120.

³¹ Hiesinger, 121.

³² Thornton, 624.

³³ Similarities to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (i.e., President Obama's "stimulus package") certainly come to mind.

to correct Nero's reckless spending with a policy of disciplined financial restraint (*parsimoniam pro avaritia*, thrift in exchange for avarice).³⁵ To characterize Nero's financial policies as greedy, self-indulgent, or irresponsible, however, is to reduce him to his stereotypical Hollywood caricature. As Thornton explains, ". . . Although Nero is considered an emperor intent on spending money for his own purposes and needs and for constructing buildings for his glorification, in the light of modern economic theory it is difficult to refute the conclusion that Nero is trying hard to cure a severe depression."³⁶

Just as Nero was very conscientious about how he portrayed himself on monuments and coins, he was also very careful about his public orations, and this often meant using Seneca as his own personal ghost writer.³⁷ In fact, for his initial public address as emperor, the *laudatio* at the funeral of Claudius, Nero employed the services of Seneca (*oratio a Seneca composita*), and although Tacitus praises the eloquence of the speech itself (*multum cultus*), he is absolutely merciless in criticizing Nero's decision to use a ghost writer.³⁸ He says that the old men in the crowd (*seniores*) actually laughed during the somber eulogy, amazed that Nero was depending upon another man's eloquence (*Neronem alienae facundiae eguisse*), and as an especially vicious slap in Nero's face, Tacitus points out that even the disturbed mind of Caligula didn't impair his oratorical proficiency (*etiam C. Caesaris turbata mens vim dicendi non corruptit*). Tacitus also cites at least two other examples of the hand of Seneca in Nero's work – a clemency speech on behalf of Plautius Lateranus and a letter written to the senate upon the death of

³⁴ Patrick Kragelund, "Nero's *Luxuria* in Tacitus and in the Octavia," *Classical Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2000): 494-515.

³⁵ *Histories* 1.37.

³⁶ Thornton, 629.

³⁷ Charles A. Messner, "Nero's Ghost Writer," *Classical Journal* 41, no. 8 (1946): 374-375.

³⁸ *Annales* 13.3.

Agrippina.³⁹

Rather than condemning Nero's use of a ghost writer as proof of his apathy or stupidity, however, another interpretation seems more plausible: Nero wanted to appear as sophisticated and eloquent as possible, and so he turned to one of Rome's most talented writers to help craft a very important public image. To offer an analogy from the modern era, even the most well-educated and articulate American presidents employ a small army of ghost writers, speechwriters, and rhetoricians. For President Obama, for example, to deliver an important speech before the U.S. Congress or the U.N. General Assembly without the assistance of a professional wordsmith would be considered arrogant and foolhardy. Naturally, Obama wants to appear *facundus* and *doctus* in his public orations, and so did Nero.

Nero's exploitation of Seneca's talents may have extended beyond public orations, moreover, as Nero appears in the *Apocolocyntosis*, Seneca's Menippean satire about the apotheosis of Claudius. As Claudius is dying, Clotho cuts off the thread of his fate (*abruptit stolidae regalia tempora vitae*), and as Lachesis then begins to weave new fates, the snow-white threads suddenly turn to gold, ensuring that the death of Claudius will be followed by a golden renaissance (*aurea formoso descendunt saecula filo*).⁴⁰ Phoebus Apollo then enters, speaking of the new emperor with glowing praise:

Talis Caesar adest, talem iam Roma Neronem
Aspiciet. Flagrat nitidus fulgore remisso
Vultus, et adfuso cervix formosa capillo.
. . . Lachesis, quae et ipsa homini formosissimo faveret, fecit illud plena manu
et Neroni multos annos de suo donat.⁴¹

³⁹ Christopher Jones, "Nero Speaking," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 100 (2000): 455; *Annales* 13.11 and 14.11.

⁴⁰ Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* 4.2; 4.9.

⁴¹ *Apocolocyntosis* 4.30-34.

Such a Caesar is present, such a Nero Rome will now look upon. / His shining face blazes with gentle brilliance, and his beautiful neck with hair having been poured out. . . . Lachesis, who also herself was favoring the beautiful man, made it from a full hand and gives many years to Nero from her own (supply).

The *Apocolocyntosis*, therefore, legitimizes the reign of Nero after the death of Claudius and establishes a definitive Neronian connection not only to Augustus (via the *aurea saecula*) but also to Phoebus Apollo. Moreover, since the *Apocolocyntosis* was probably published soon after the death of Claudius (54 AD), and since portraits of Nero with long, flowing, Apollo-like hair do not appear until after the death of Agrippina (59 AD), Champlin argues that these passages were added to Seneca's original composition at least five or six years after the initial publication.⁴²

The Apollo connection was also reinforced by the poet Lucan, another writer in Nero's inner circle. Although Lucan, in the opening book of the *Pharsalia*, laments the calamitous civil warfare of the late Roman Republic, he is quick to explain that it eventually paved the way for the glorious reign of Nero (*quod si non aliam uenturo fata Neroni / inuenere uiam . . . iam nihil querimur*, but if the fates did not find another way for Nero, about to come . . . we do not complain).⁴³ Lucan also looks ahead to the apotheosis of Nero, when Nero will take the scepter away from Jupiter and ride in the sun chariot of Apollo himself (*seu scepra tenere / seu te flammigeros Phoebi conscendere currus*).⁴⁴ In addition to these flattering lines from the *Pharsalia*, Suetonius tells us that Lucan recited *Neronis laudibus* (praises of Nero) at the quinquennial Neronian Games in 60 AD.⁴⁵

⁴² Edward Champlin, "Nero, Apollo, and the Poets," *Phoenix* 57, no. 3-4 (2003): 280.

⁴³ Lucan, *De Bello Civili* 1.33-37.

⁴⁴ *De Bello Civili* 1.47-48.

⁴⁵ Suetonius, *Vita Lucani*. Champlin actually argues that the "praises of Nero" were recited directly from Book One of *De Bello Civili* (282), but other scholars disagree.

Lucan was certainly a very talented poet, and he seems to have been a woefully underutilized component of the Neronian propaganda machine, especially in comparison to Augustus' relationship with writers such as Horace, Vergil, and Livy. Tacitus explains that the relationship between Lucan and Nero soured due to the emperor's jealousy of *famam carminum eius* (the fame of Lucan's poems),⁴⁶ and though this may certainly be true, it seems to be a rather simplistic explanation.⁴⁷ Whatever the reason, however, the feud was definitely real. In 64 AD, Lucan was banned from reciting poetry in public, and then one year later, after he was implicated in the Pisonian Conspiracy, Lucan was forced to commit suicide,⁴⁸ and the relationship between the emperor and his greatest potential propaganda soldier was over.

Beyond the carefully-crafted architecture, coins, orations, and poetry, however, Nero's most creative propaganda technique involved his ability to mythologize himself (i.e., to link himself to mythological gods and heroes). As Champlin explains:

By appropriating the gods and heroes of myth and legendary history, if not as ancestors, then at least as exemplars, politicians could present images laden with meanings which were quickly recognizable to a broad public.⁴⁹

Augustus was the undisputed master of this, as he established a genealogical connection (via his adoptive father Julius Caesar) between himself, Venus, and Aeneas, and in the Forum of Augustus, he surrounded his own statue not only with images of Caesar, Venus, and Aeneas but also representations of Romulus, Mars, and Fortuna. Earlier in his career, moreover, before he had even been awarded the name *Augustus*, he adopted various symbols of Apollo: he took a

⁴⁶ *Annales* 15.49.

⁴⁷ Gerald K. Gresseth, "The Quarrel Between Lucan and Nero," *Classical Philology* 52, no. 1 (1957): 24-27.

⁴⁸ Susan H. Braund, *Lucan: Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xiv.

⁴⁹ Champlin, *Nero* 93.

sphinx for his signet ring, he wore a laurel wreath in public, he attributed his victory over Antony and Cleopatra to Apollo's protection, and he built a Temple of Apollo on the Palatine Hill and connected it to his own house.⁵⁰ In fact, Augustus even asserted a biological link to Apollo: Suetonius reports that Atia, after a mysterious late-night encounter with a snake (the Python, of course, was another symbol of Apollo), became pregnant and gave birth to Augustus nine months later.⁵¹

As we have already seen with construction projects (the *Domus Aurea* and the Colossus) and artistic representations (radiate crown numismatic portraits, Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, and Lucan's *Pharsalia*), Nero also cultivated his connection to Apollo, and like Augustus, he claimed that the relationship started early in life: *Nero natus est . . . ex oriente sole . . . radiis prius quam terra contingeretur* (Nero was born with the sun rising, and he was touched by the rays of the sun sooner than by the earth).⁵² When he made his professional debut as a citharode in 64 AD, Nero performed a song about Niobe, a woman who had insulted Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis. Niobe then paid dearly when Apollo and Artemis, coming to exact revenge for the expression of hubris, killed Niobe's fourteen children in cold blood. As Champlin explains, Nero's decision to sing about Niobe was no coincidence: "to sing the woes of Niobe was to sing the fearsome power of Apollo."⁵³ In 66 AD, moreover, when Tiridates, the King of Armenia, came to Rome to commemorate a peace treaty, Nero marked the occasion by riding in a chariot, with golden stars gleaming all around him; the celebration would later come to be known as the "golden day."⁵⁴ Then in 67 AD, as Nero was celebrating a triumph for his victories in the Greek

⁵⁰ Champlin, 92-94.

⁵¹ *Augustus* 94.4.

⁵² *Nero* 6.1.

⁵³ Champlin, 116.

⁵⁴ Beacham, 243-244; Dio 63.6.

competitions, he rode into the Circus Maximus and dedicated his victory crowns to Apollo, reinforcing his association with the beauty, intelligence, and majesty of Roman divinity.⁵⁵

Even more than the Circus Maximus, though, Nero's favorite mythologization venue was probably the theatre. Since actors and musicians in Rome were usually subjects of social disgrace, the stage would have been an extremely controversial platform for the emperor to choose, and virtually all of the ancient sources condemn Nero's musical / theatrical performances.⁵⁶ Pliny the Younger scornfully refers to him as the *scaenici imperatoris* (theatrical emperor),⁵⁷ Suetonius says that spectators, forbidden to leave during the emperor's performances, would fake their own deaths so that they could be carried out (*morte simulata funere elati*),⁵⁸ and Tacitus writes that Nero's handlers, dismayed by his actions on stage but nevertheless compelled to support him, would grieve and applaud simultaneously (*maerens ac laudans*).⁵⁹ And yet, these writers report that even though Nero's performances were painfully devoid of artistic talent, he guaranteed himself a favorable reaction from the audience by planting thousands of *Augustiani* in the stands – young, enthusiastic, sycophantic supporters who had been carefully coached in the arts of cheering and applauding and whose leaders, according to Suetonius, had been paid 400,000 sesterces each.⁶⁰ Therefore, like a canned laugh track from a bad TV sitcom from the 1960s, the *Augustiani* provided specific cues to the other members of the audience and helped create the illusion of theatrical *gravitas*, thereby influencing the public perception of Nero's messages. And the messages were certainly the most important thing. For Nero, the theatre was a venue for persuasive political communication, “not a matter of art for

⁵⁵ Champlin, 118.

⁵⁶ Beacham, 215.

⁵⁷ *Panegyrics* 46.

⁵⁸ *Nero* 23.2.

⁵⁹ *Annales* 14.15.

⁶⁰ Beacham, 213; *Nero* 20.3.

art's sake. He used the stage . . . as a platform for his views, presented in mythological dress.”⁶¹

When Nero began acting on the tragic stage in 66 AD, one of his favorite mythological roles was Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra who kills his own mother in return for her betrayal and murder of his father. Superficially, at least, this would seem to be a very bizarre character selection, and it would be easy to dismiss this, in the pejorative tradition, as another example of Nero's lunacy. Why would someone who had arranged the murder of his own mother deliberately choose to play the role of a matricide on the public stage? The answer is that the murder of Clytemnestra was traditionally perceived to be a justifiable homicide. She had killed her husband and stolen her son's inheritance, the citizens of Mycenae were suffering under her leadership, and Apollo was clamoring for vengeance. By associating the murder of Agrippina with the murder of Clytemnestra, therefore, Nero mythologized himself into Orestes, a righteous, sympathetic character.⁶²

Nero also enjoyed performing the role of Oedipus, another arresting choice, considering the persistent rumors of imperial incest. As Champlin explains, however, it was straight out of the Julio-Claudian playbook:

Nero had to look no farther than his own family for precedent: the night before Julius Caesar crossed the river Rubicon to begin his domination of the Roman world, he was said to have dreamed that he slept with his mother. To conquer one's mother was to conquer the earth, mother of all.⁶³

Nero also often performed renditions of *Hercules Furens*, the story of Hercules' murder of his wife Megara. Again, the choice at first seems inexplicable, especially since Nero was rumored to have murdered his wife Poppaea Sabina by stomping her to death while she was pregnant

⁶¹ Champlin, 110.

⁶² Champlin, 97.

⁶³ Champlin, 102.

because she fussed at him for coming home late from the circus.⁶⁴ Yet, *Hercules Furens* portrays Hercules as a truly innocent victim of fate, a man driven temporarily insane by circumstances beyond his control (i.e., the anger and jealousy of Hera). Mythologizing himself as Hercules, therefore, allowed Nero to exonerate himself for the murder of Poppaea Sabina, and performing the role on stage allowed him to communicate that message clearly and succinctly to a large public audience. Along the same lines, in fact, Nero also portrayed Poppaea herself on stage in *Canace Parturiens*, an obscure myth about the justifiable homicide of a faithless pregnant woman.⁶⁵

Nero often performed these roles on stage while wearing masks crafted in his own image,⁶⁶ which created serious interpretative challenges for the spectators in the audience. They were watching Nero on stage, portraying a mythological character represented as Nero himself, and it certainly would have been difficult to keep track of the ever-changing personal, political, and theatrical messages.⁶⁷ In fact, during one performance of *Hercules Furens*, a soldier standing guard in the theatre became especially confused:

In qua fabula fama est tirunculum militem positum ad custodiam aditus, cum eum ornari ac vinciri catenis, sicut argumentum postulabat, videret, accurrisse ferendae opis gratia.⁶⁸

In this story, there is a rumor that a newly-recruited soldier had been placed to guard the entrance of the theatre, and when he was seeing Nero decorated and tied up in chains, as the plot was demanding, he ran up on stage for the sake of offering help.

It would be easy to dismiss such an episode as further evidence of the reckless buffoonery of

⁶⁴ Suetonius, *Nero* 35.3.

⁶⁵ Champlin, 104-107

⁶⁶ For his role in *Canace Parturiens*, he actually wore a mask of Sabina herself (Dio 63.9).

⁶⁷ Mario Erasmo, "Nero: Emperor Scaenicus," in *Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality*, 118 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

⁶⁸ *Nero*, 21.3. Dio tells a similar story (63.9).

Nero's time in office. Slater, however, argues that the soldier's reaction to the illusion of the emperor in danger suggests that Nero's masks were not concomitant with Roman theatrical tradition.⁶⁹ Most Roman dramatic masks were *not* fashioned in the veristic tradition; they were usually very large with highly exaggerated features. As the soldier's reaction indicates, however, Nero's masks were starkly realistic.

Perhaps Nero wanted to portray himself as realistically as possible on stage so that he could clearly communicate his political agenda to the audience. Perhaps it was an expression of his narcissistic personality. Or perhaps, as Slater suggests, Nero simply knew that his end was imminent:

To wear a mask of oneself is to anticipate one's own death, the transition by which one becomes oneself an item in the ancestral portrait gallery. Nero's portrait masks then foreshadow his ultimate destruction and even his infamous exit line, *qualis artifex pereo* (what an artist dies in me).⁷⁰

As death was closing in, Nero repeated the *qualis artifex pereo* line over and over again (*identidem dictitans*).⁷¹ Connors argues that these famous last words were perhaps meant to harken back to famous closing lines from Horace's *Odes* (*exegi monumentum aere perennius, I have built a monument more lasting than bronze*) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*iamque opus exegi, and now I have completed the work*).⁷² By characterizing himself as a monument builder, "perhaps he ironically recapitulates a gesture of closure that is familiar from poetry in which

⁶⁹ Niall W. Slater, "Nero's Masks," *Classical World* 90, no. 1 (1996): 33-35.

⁷⁰ Slater, 40.

⁷¹ *Suetonius*, Nero 49.1.

⁷² Catherine Connors, "Famous Last Words: Authorship and Death in the *Satyricon* and Neronian Rome" in *Reflections of Nero*, ed. Jas Elsner and Jamie Masters, 230 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); *Odes* 3.30.1; *Metamorphoses* 15.871.

poets call their work a monument that will triumph over their mortality.”⁷³ Rather than a mere self-aggrandizing reminder of his artistic talent, then, *qualis artifex pereo* can be interpreted as a final declaration of divinity . . . and a final reminder of the breadth and sophistication of Neronian propaganda.

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⁷³ Connors, 230.

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