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Looking Back

11 **Historiographical Responses to Flavian Responses to Nero**

Verena Schulz

Abstract

This article focuses on the reception of the Flavian responses to Nero in post-Flavian historiography and biography. First, it analyses the passages in which Tacitus has the Neronian and the Flavian narrative interact in the *Annals*, the *Histories*, and the *Agricola*. Tacitus mainly represents the Flavian distance from Nero in the case of Vespasian (and Titus). Domitian, however, is not distanced from Nero. Second, the article shows how Suetonius presents a similar evaluation of the Flavian relationships with Nero in even clearer terms. Third, Cassius Dio is analysed as being interested in these emperors from the perspective of his contemporary history. Finally, the results drawn from the historiographical discourse are contrasted with Philostratus' *Vita Apollonii* and with early Jewish–Christian literature.

Keywords: Tacitus; Suetonius; Cassius Dio; Pliny; Philostratus

Imperial Questions and Responses

Nero's regime raised crucial questions about imperial behaviour, such as: Which forms of eccentric representation should be allowed for an emperor? Where are the boundaries of imperial behaviour if it contradicts traditional social, moral, and political norms? And how should one deal with Nero's memory? Especially after Nero's death, the answers to these questions were not at all clear.¹ The emperors of the year 68–69 CE experimented with both distance from and closeness to Nero. After the unsuccessful and

¹ The ambivalent reception of Nero through several centuries is well illustrated by Champlin (2003) 1–35.

short principates of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, Vespasian answered these questions mainly by dissociating himself from Nero, and his sons followed him in doing so.² The Flavian response, the distance to Nero, as expressed in several media, is a conscious and well-calculated construction of Flavian identity.³ It is highly probable that Flavian historiography, which has not come down to us, portrayed Nero in a critical and negative way, too.⁴

This article focuses on the reception of this Flavian construction in post-Flavian Roman historiography and biography, namely in Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio.⁵ These authors wrote in periods following changes of dynasty and under emperors who had to respond to previous regimes, as the Flavians had to do with regard to Nero and the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Nerva, Trajan, and Hadrian, under whom Tacitus and Suetonius wrote, reacted to Domitian and the Flavians.⁶ Septimius Severus and his successors, under whom Cassius Dio wrote, responded to Commodus and the Antonine dynasty. In portraying the Flavians, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio could not avoid engaging with the Flavian responses to Nero. To answer the question of how these historians and the biographer depicted this relationship of the Flavians and Nero, I shall look at direct and indirect comparisons of these emperors and at passages in which the Neronian and Flavian narratives interact or overlap. We will see that the most important relationship between Nero and the Flavians that the texts discuss is the one between Nero and Domitian.

First, we will analyse the passages in which Tacitus has the Neronian and the Flavian narratives interact in the *Annals*, the *Histories*, and the

2 See Gallia's contribution to this volume for the argument that the nature of the Flavian response to Nero was never one of absolute opposition.

3 See Leithoff (2014) 134–147 on Nero as a negative *exemplum* under the Flavians. Cf. Penwill (2003) 358–359; Gallia (2016); Tuck (2016). Nauta (2010), focusing on Domitian and Nero, points out that at least Domitianic literature was unmistakably negative about Nero, and that other media show no clear intention of recalling Nero. However, Nero's portrait was reused throughout the Flavian period; see Wood (2016) 132–133; cf. Nauta (2010) 247–248.

4 See Hose and Fuhrer (2014) 18 and Joseph. *AJ* 20.154155: 'On these matters, however, I forbear to write more. For many historians have written the story of Nero, of whom some, because they were well treated by him, have out of gratitude been careless of [the] truth, while others from hatred and enmity towards him have so shamelessly and recklessly revelled in falsehoods as to merit censure. Nor can I be surprised at those who have lied about Nero, since even when writing about his predecessors they have not kept to the facts of history' (trans. Feldman [1965]). For the *Historiae* of Fabius Rusticus and of Cluvius Rufus, see Peter, *HRRel.* II 112–115; Syme (1958) I: 289–303; Cornell (2013) 549–560, 568–572; Dewar (2016) 470–471.

5 See Ambühl's chapter in this volume for another discussion of post-Flavian constructions and deconstructions of a dichotomy between Flavian and Neronian.

6 On the interrelation of dynasty change and predecessor denigration, see Charles (2002), focusing on reactions to Domitian after his death.

Agricola. Tacitus mainly represents the Flavian distance from Nero in the case of Vespasian (and Titus). Domitian, however, is not distanced from Nero.⁷ Second, we will see how Suetonius presents a similar evaluation of the Flavian relationships with Nero in even clearer terms in the genre of imperial biography. Third, Cassius Dio, whose *Roman History* provides less material and fewer points of contact between Nero and the Flavians, will turn out to be interested in these emperors from the perspective of his contemporary history under the Severans. Finally, we will summarize the results drawn from the historiographical discourse and contrast them with Philostratus' *Vita Apollonii*, which presents Nero and Domitian as much closer to each other, and with early Jewish–Christian literature, which creates its own version of Neronian and Flavian history.

Early Senatorial Responses: Narrative Interactions in Tacitus

Tacitus was born in the first half of Nero's reign and was roughly ten years old when Nero died. It is well known that he started his career in Flavian times, continued it under Domitian,⁸ and later distanced himself from the regime that was by then regarded as tyrannical. Tacitus discusses Nero and the Flavians in his *Agricola* and in the extant parts of the *Histories* and the *Annals*. Domitian is to the fore in Tacitus' first work, the *Agricola*. The three Flavians were subject of Tacitus' *Histories*, finished around 110 CE. Only the first four books and roughly a quarter of the fifth book have come down to us, describing only the events from 69 CE to the beginning of the year 70 CE. Nonetheless, there are depictions of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian in these early books. Nero's reign is discussed in Tacitus' later major work, the *Annals*, starting with Book 13 and breaking off in Book 16.⁹ Since Tacitus' texts create a coherent representation of historical events, we can reconstruct Tacitus' narrative concerning these emperors by combining the relevant passages. I will study passages in Tacitus' works in which the Neronian and the Flavian

7 For the Flavian emperors' different (historical) responses to Nero in material culture, see the chapters by Wolsfeld (on visual imperial representation and iconographical choices made by the different Flavian emperors) and Cordes (on age encoding and, briefly, Neronian and Vespasianic portrait types) in this volume.

8 For Tacitus about his own career under the Flavians, see Tac. *Hist.* 1.1.3 (in general), *Ann.* 11.1 (about Tacitus and Domitian's secular games).

9 Nero's description in the *Annals* breaks off in 66 CE, so we miss the two last years of his reign, including e.g. Tiridates in Rome, Nero's journey to Greece, the rebellion of Vindex, and Nero's death.

narratives overlap (e.g. Vespasian's presence at one of Nero's performances), and in which there are direct and indirect comparisons between Nero, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. We will analyse whom among these four Tacitus distances from whom, and which figures he associates with one another. Tacitus depicts their distance or closeness with each other either directly or indirectly, for example, by describing their respective behaviour towards third persons such as Agricola or the Neronian *delatores*.

In his description of Nero in the *Annals*, Tacitus paints the famous picture of the artist-emperor, who lives out his role as poet, singer, actor, and charioteer more and more over time (see, e.g., Tac. *Ann.* 13.3.3, 14.14.1, 14.15.4, 14.16.1, 15.44.5, 16.4) and who gets everyone out of the way who challenges his way of ruling such as Agrippina, Burrus, and Thrasea Paetus (see *Ann.* 14.1–9, 14.51, 16.33–35). Nero is depicted as a *princeps* who identifies himself and his reign with his artistic achievements and who has no interest in the traditional imperial tasks and patterns of behaviour.¹⁰ There is only one reference to a Flavian emperor, namely to Vespasian, in the extant books. At the beginning of Book 16, Tacitus discusses the *Neronia* of 65 CE. According to Tacitus, Nero ordered his men to check who was there and how everyone reacted to Nero's performances. There were harsh forms of punishment, and some people stayed in the theatre day and night, fell sick and died. Among the spectators, so goes the story that Tacitus reports, was Vespasian:

ferebantque Vespasianum, tamquam somno coniveret, a Phoebo liberto increpitum aegreque meliorum precibus obtectum, mox imminentem perniciem maiore fato effugisse.

People said that Vespasian was berated by the freedman Phoebus for dozing with his eyes closed, and was only with difficulty protected by the pleas of decent people. Later, they say, he avoided his oncoming doom thanks to his greater destiny.¹¹ (*Ann.* 16.5.2–3)

This anecdote introduces Vespasian into the narrative as a potential opponent of Nero.¹² We could say that Vespasian here gives the general criticism of Nero a well-known face. This also ties in with Tacitus' overall positive

¹⁰ On Nero's (subversive) artistic interests, see Edwards (1994) 83–97 and Champlin (2003) 53–83.

¹¹ Translations of Tacitus' *Annals* are those of Yardley (2008).

¹² By contrast, when Vespasian and Nero are first mentioned in relation to each other in the *Histories*, Vespasian is characterized as Nero's general in Judaea (*Hist.* 1.10.3). Even during the era of Nero the focus was on Vespasian as a military leader.

attitude towards the first Flavian emperor in the *Histories*, in which Tacitus has Helvidius Priscus describe him as a friend of Thrasea, Soranus, and Sentius, all opponents and victims of Nero (*Hist.* 4.7.2).¹³ However, Vespasian's distance from Nero is not a prominent feature in the preserved parts of the *Histories*, which rather depict Vespasian's distance from his son Domitian. This is underlined by the closeness between Vespasian and his other son Titus (e.g. *Hist.* 4.51–52), who figures – despite his youthful debauchery¹⁴ – as a positive character in the *Histories* (*Hist.* 2.1.2, 2.5.2, 5.1.1). His conduct is used as a positive foil to the description of the young Domitian, who is depicted as not taking part in the fighting (*Hist.* 3.74.1, 4.85.2) and as timid (*Hist.* 3.59.3, 3.86.3), as indulging in licentious behaviour (*Hist.* 4.2.1, 4.68.1), as libidinous and bold (*Hist.* 4.39.2), as someone who needs to be controlled (*Hist.* 4.51.2, 4.68.3), and as capable of dissimulation (*Hist.* 4.86.2).¹⁵

This portrayal of the young Domitian in the *Histories* is consistent with the portrayal of Domitian the emperor in the *Agricola*, where the focus is on the last character trait mentioned, Domitian's art of dissimulation. His outward appearance differs from his thoughts and feelings (*Agr.* 39.1, 42.2, 43.3). Domitian's military achievements are presented as fake (*Agr.* 39.1), and we are invited to think that this is why the *princeps* envies the virtues of others (*infensus virtutibus princeps*, *Agr.* 41.1). Tacitus' Domitian gets angry easily, and the more he conceals his anger, the more irreconcilable he is (*Agr.* 42.3). He plans his actions against his enemies thoroughly and prefers solitude (*secreto suo satiat*, *Agr.* 39.3).

In this first work of Tacitus, which paints Domitian in the darkest colours, we can conceive of the figure of *Agricola* as a link between Domitian, Nero, and Vespasian. While the focus of the work is on *Agricola*'s conduct

13 In Tacitus, Vespasian's only vice is his greed (*avaritia*) (*Hist.* 2.5.1). Vespasian is also depicted positively in the *Agricola*, in which he figures as a successful military leader (*Agr.* 17.1) and in the *Dialogus* (with a dramatic date of 75 CE, so under Vespasian), in which Tacitus has Aper praise Vespasian twice: *Vespasianus, venerabilis senex et patientissimus veri*, 'Vespasian [...], our aged and venerable emperor, who never shuts his eyes to facts', *Dial.* 8.3; *sextam iam felicitis huius principatus stationem, qua Vespasianus rem publicam fovet*, 'now the sixth stage of this auspicious reign in which Vespasian is making the country happy', *Dial.* 17.3 (translated by Peterson and Winterbottom in Warmington [1970]).

14 See *Hist.* 2.2.1: *laetam voluptatibus adulescentiam egit, suo quam patris imperio moderator*, 'his youth was a time of happy self-indulgence, and he showed more restraint in his own reign than in his father's'. Cf. *Hist.* 5.11.2, where Titus is depicted as not averse to *opes voluptatesque*, 'wealth and pleasures'.

15 In addition to his intentional deceptions, he unintentionally misleads interpreters of the complexion on his face when he speaks: it is wrongly understood as modesty (*Hist.* 4.40.1). See also Tac. *Agr.* 45.2, cited below.

during Domitian's reign, we also learn about Agricola under Nero. Tacitus' father-in-law was in Britain under the last Julio-Claudian emperor, whose reign is characterized in terms that resemble Domitian's: *militaris gloriae cupido, ingrata temporibus quibus sinistra erga eminentes interpretatio nec minus periculum ex magna fama quam ex mala* ('a passion for military glory [...] – not welcome in those days, when distinction aroused unfavourable reactions and a great reputation was no less dangerous than a bad one', *Agr.* 5.3).¹⁶ This may be an allusion to Nero's general Corbulo, whose relationship with his emperor as depicted in the *Annals* shares some similarities with Agricola's relationship with Domitian¹⁷: both men show the virtues that the emperor is expected to exhibit himself, foremost military qualities, and loyal and modest behaviour towards an emperor who is depicted in each case as tyrannical and incapable of military commands and success.

Under Nero, Agricola consequently adapts his behaviour. He assesses and understands Nero's times correctly: he decides to spend the year between the quaestorship and the tribunate of the plebs, as well as the actual year as tribune, in quiet inactivity, which Tacitus evaluates as wise (*Agr.* 6.3). We briefly learn that later Vespasian and Agricola had a close relationship and that Vespasian promoted Agricola and marked him out for the consulship (*Agr.* 9.1), which contrasts sharply with the tense and dangerous relationship between Agricola and Domitian pervading the work. In the final passage of the work, Agricola is even congratulated for his early death (*Agr.* 44.5), which spared him from experiencing the last and worst years of Domitian's terror:

Nero tamen subtraxit oculos suos iussitque scelera, non spectavit: praecipua **sub Domitiano** miseriarum pars erat **videre et aspici**, cum suspiria nostra subscriberentur, cum denotandis tot hominum palloribus sufficeret saevus ille vultus et rubor, quo se contra pudorem muniebat. **Tu vero felix, Agricola**, non vitae tantum claritate, sed etiam opportunitate mortis.

Nero at least averted his gaze: he ordered crimes to be committed but did not look on. A special torment **under Domitian** was **to watch and to be observed**, our very sighs being noted down against us, and all the while that savage gaze was able to mark down so many who had turned pale with shock, that flushed face that saved him from blushing with shame.

16 Translations of Tacitus' *Agricola* are those of Birley (1999), sometimes slightly adapted.

17 See Corbulo's active role in the events in Parthia and Armenia in Tac. *Ann.* 13.6–9, 13.34–41, 14.23–26, 15.1–17, 15.24–31. For Corbulo's characterization, see Tac. *Ann.* 13.8.1, 13.8.3, 13.9.2. For Agricola, see Tac. *Agr.* 5.1, 18.2, 19.2, 22.4.

You were indeed blessed, Agricola, not only in the brilliance of your life, but because of the moment of your death. (*Agr.* 45.2–3)

Here, we find one of the rare explicit, direct comparisons of Domitian and Nero: the last Flavian exceeds Nero in his cruelty. Nero had at least only ordered crimes, but did not watch them, whereas Domitian made people watch, and watched and observed them himself.

In the extant parts of the *Histories*, there is no such direct comparison between Nero and one of the Flavians, although Nero is always present and is mentioned several times. The straightforward comparison between Domitian and Nero in the *Agricola*, however, suggests that we might search out passages in the *Histories* in which Tacitus indirectly creates a closeness between Nero and Domitian, or a distance between Nero or Domitian and the first two Flavians. Scholarship has indeed already shown that the account of the first meeting of the Senate after the Flavian victory draws an indirect comparison between Nero and Domitian as well as between Vespasian and Trajan (*Hist.* 4.39–43). It discusses, among other things, Neronian *delatores*, informers who had spied on their contemporaries and reported them to the emperor. Since they were supported by Nero, the new regime, which distanced itself from the ‘tyrant’, had to decide how to treat them and their excuses for their former behaviour.¹⁸ As regards possible links between Domitian and Nero, in my view not only the first, but also the second meeting of the Senate (*Hist.* 4.44–45) is worth analysing:

Proximo senatu, inchoante Caesare de abolendo dolore iraque et priorum temporum necessitatibus, censuit Mucianus prolixè pro accusatoribus; simul eos qui coeptam, deinde omisam actionem repeterent, monuit sermone molli et tamquam rogaret. patres coeptatam libertatem, postquam obviam itum, omisere. Mucianus, ne sperni senatus iudicium et cunctis sub Nerone admissis data impunitas videretur, Octavium

¹⁸ See Nauta (2014) 34–35. At this first meeting of the senate after the Flavian victory, Domitian is *Caesar* and *praetor urbanus* and present in the senate. Curtius Montanus speaks against Aquilius Regulus, who was a successful *delator* under Nero. He argues against taking Nero as an excuse for everything a *delator* did during his reign (*Tac. Hist.* 4.42.3) and stands in for a strong decision against *delatores* (*Hist.* 4.42.6). Since Aquilius Regulus, as the reader of the *Histories* knows, was also a *delator* under Domitian and not punished afterwards, the subtext of this passage reminds the contemporary reader that Trajanic times face the same issue of how to deal with *delatores* of a past (namely Domitian's) regime as Vespasian's times did (with Neronian *delatores*).

Sagittam et Antistium Sosianum senatorii ordinis egressos exilium in easdem insulas redegit.

At the next sitting **Domitian opened** by recommending them to **forget their grievances** and grudges and the unavoidable exigencies of the recent past. Mucianus then at great length moved a motion **in favour of the prosecutors**, issuing a mild warning, almost in terms of entreaty, to those who wanted to revive actions which had been begun and dropped. **Seeing that their attempt at independence was being opposed, the Senate gave it up.** However, so that it would not **seem** as if the Senate's opinion was being flouted and **complete impunity granted for all crimes committed under Nero**, Mucianus forced Octavius Sagitta and Antistius Sosianus, men of senatorial rank who had returned from exile, to go back to the islands to which they had been confined.¹⁹ (*Hist.* 4.44.1–2)

The topic of this Senate meeting is still how to deal with the Neronian *delatores*. Tacitus describes how Domitian and Mucianus force through their milder attitude towards these *delatores* against the senators, who finally give up their *libertas*. What is shown here is an element of continuity among the senators in Neronian and Flavian times. The very same *delatores* under Nero are still there under Vespasian, and the *libertas* of the senators, a crucial aspect for Tacitus, is briefly reanimated, but immediately ceases to exist.²⁰ Interestingly, this meeting takes place under Vespasian's rule, but the focus is on Domitian, who is physically present, as *Caesar* and *praetor urbanus* at the time, and who actively influences the discussion.²¹ Hence Tacitus not only constructs a continuity of negative Neronian features in

19 Translations of Tacitus' *Histories* are those by Fyfe and Levene (1997).

20 On the loss of *libertas* in Vespasian's times as compared to Republican times, cf. Tac. *Dial.* 27.3: Maternus encourages Aper to use the freedom of speech (*libertas*) of ancient times when talking about ancient people, and adds that they themselves – in the times of Vespasian (the dramatic date of the *Dialogus* is 75 CE) – had degenerated from *libertas* even more than from eloquence (Tac. *Dial.* 27.3).

21 Domitian's role concerning his responsibilities shared with Mucianus is less prominent in the *Agricola*. Tacitus states there that at the beginning of Vespasian's reign Mucianus took care of political affairs in Rome (*statum urbis Mucianus regebat*) since Domitian was still young and took advantage of his father's position for his boldness only (*iuvne admodum Domitiano et ex paterna fortuna tantum licentiam usurpante*, Tac. *Agr.* 7.2). Tacitus hence uses Domitian's passivity in the passage in the *Agricola* to argue for his incapability of leadership and his activity in the scene in the *Histories* (Tac. *Hist.* 4.44–45) to show the negative results of Domitian engaging in politics.

Flavian times, his text also associates this with Domitian rather than with the actual ruling emperor at the time.

Tacitus complements this not exclusively positive picture of early Flavian times by pointing out the negotiations of Nero's memory. Of course, Nero is mainly represented as a negative figure, also in the *Histories* (e.g. *Hist.* 1.5.2, 1.20.1), but Tacitus acknowledges that Nero's memory in the years after his death was not completely one-sided. There are traces of positive Nero discourses, which illustrate that Nero still had his followers (*Hist.* 1.4.2, 1.51.5, 1.72.1), including the phenomenon of the *falsi Neronēs* (*Hist.* 1.2.1, 2.8–9), imposters who claimed to be Nero.²² Nero is also excused for some of his deeds, because these were supposed to be incited by the even worse Tigellinus (*Hist.* 1.72.1). Most of the time, the admiration or longing for Nero is marginalized, as his popularity is attributed to lower levels of society that are not appreciated by the aristocratic authors, such as the *plebs* or the *vulgus* (*Hist.* 1.4.3, 1.7.3, 1.78.2) and soldiers (1.8.2, 1.25.2), or to Nero's court, which resembled the emperor (1.13.4). However, the threat of an unsuccessful emperor making more and other people miss Nero in these years is presented as realistic. Tacitus has Galba point out in his famous adoption speech that evil people will always long for Nero, and that he and Piso have to take care that good people will not long for him too (*Nero a pessimo quoque semper desiderabitur: mihi ac tibi providendum est, ne etiam a bonis desideretur*, 'evil men will always miss Nero: you and I must ensure that good citizens do not miss him too', *Hist.* 1.16.3).²³

The *Histories* thus show that after the death of an evil emperor the negotiation of his memory is still taking place and that the problem of how to deal with it is not immediately solved. Tacitus' Galba, Otho, and Vitellius find different, unsuccessful answers. Galba distances himself from Nero as much as possible, for example, in the adoption speech just mentioned. Otho, Nero's former friend and husband of Poppaea, is described as close to Nero and as Nero's follower, and he is perceived as such by the characters in the narrative (*Hist.* 1.13.2–4, 1.22.1, 1.30.1, 1.78.2, 2.11.1). He makes use of Nero's memory when it suits him (*Hist.* 1.23.1), but also distances himself when doing so seems the more fruitful strategy (*Hist.* 1.21.1). Vitellius is also depicted as an admirer of Nero (*Hist.* 2.71). Hence the *Histories* present a situation of negotiating imperial memory that shares some similarities

22 For the *falsi Neronēs*, see Champlin (2003) 10–12: we know of three *falsi Neronēs* appearing in March 69 CE in Greece, in 79–81 CE in Asia (Terentius Maximus) and in 88–89 CE.

23 For a similar antithesis referring to the reception of Vitellius' positive treatment of Nero's memory, see Tac. *Hist.* 2.95.1 (*foedissimo cuique versus apud bonos*).

with the times in which they were written when Hadrian and Trajan had to position themselves to the memory of Domitian.

To sum up, Tacitus constructs his own coherent narrative of the Flavian period. On the one hand, he creates continuity between the Neronian and Flavian periods, pointing to the ongoing lack of *libertas* in the Senate and to a positive memory of Nero among his former followers.²⁴ But this continuity is not presented as something that the Flavians aimed at. On the other hand, Tacitus responds to the dissociation from Nero for Vespasian and Titus, but not for Domitian, thus evaluating only the last Flavian as close to Nero and singling him out from his father and brother. We have seen that Tacitus' narrative represents the construction of distance from Nero, which all the three Flavians promoted, differently for each emperor: he confirms the distance in Vespasian's case and accepts and legitimizes it in Titus' case; but he deconstructs the distance with regard to Domitian. More precisely, Tacitus dissociates Vespasian, Nero's historical general, from Nero by pointing to his friendship with some of Nero's opponents and by including the episode in which Vespasian barely escaped the death penalty for not properly attending to one of Nero's performances. Titus is never directly compared to Nero. His tendency to licentious behaviour, which might have recalled Nero, is marginalized and confined to his years before the principate. Instead, Titus figures as a positive foil for the negative performance of his brother, Domitian, who is explicitly compared to Nero; Tacitus deems Domitian worse than Nero. By creating this contrast between Domitian and his brother, Titus, Tacitus indirectly distances Titus and Vespasian from Nero as well. Despite similarities in their behaviour, however, Nero and Domitian do not represent the same type of bad emperor according to Tacitus. They are very different figures: with Tacitus' Nero, what you see is what you get, an artist unsuitable for the role of *princeps*. Domitian, by contrast, is characterized by his technique of dissimulation (*simulatio*).

Domitian is also subtly associated with Nero in the *Panegyricus* of Tacitus' friend Pliny the Younger. Its central topic is the contrast between current Trajanic times and Domitian's past regime. Every possible motif is used to distinguish Trajan from Domitian with regard to their personalities, their social interactions, and their virtues and vices. Although the focus is on Trajan, the *optimus princeps*, against Domitian, the *pessimus princeps*, Pliny uses the antithetical terminology of *mali principes* versus *boni principes* – in the plural form – in his text. This is not only the first instance of this

24 This is in line with the *Agricola*, in which we learn that only Nerva has united *principatus* and *libertas*, two concepts that had been incompatible so far (*res olim dissociabiles*, *Agr.* 3.1).

antithesis in Latin literature and an important device to structure Pliny's text, but, as Ruurd Nauta has shown, the plural forms also construct two categories, good and bad emperors.²⁵ When talking about *mali principes* in the plural form, Pliny seems to think first and foremost of Domitian and Nero (*Pan.* 4.1, 53.2–4). He thus employs the terminology of the *mali principes* to put Domitian into the same category as Nero, the emperor from whom he tried to distinguish himself.²⁶

Early Biographical Responses: Structural Comparisons in Suetonius' *Lives*

At the same time as Tacitus was writing historiography, Suetonius wrote Roman imperial biography.²⁷ Although he does not write historiography in a strict sense, he gives a lot of historical information and is therefore usually included in studies of Roman historiographical writing.²⁸ But it cannot be pointed out clearly enough how much his purpose of writing and his literary style differ from Tacitus'. The main difference between Suetonius' biographical writing and that of the historian is that Suetonius is not pursuing a political or socio-philosophical agenda. Furthermore, instead of presenting all important historical events and figures, he rather presupposes his readers to have a good knowledge of these. In addition, Suetonius does not create one main narrative that follows a chronological order, his focus being rather on each emperor both as a ruler and as a personality. Finally, his literary framework is not senatorial politics, but the preservation and presentation of knowledge in a way similar to the encyclopaedic and miscellaneous literature of the second century and its aesthetic features.²⁹ After some general remarks on the structure

25 See Nauta (2014) 32–33. The specific reason for and context of creating this antithesis may be the attribution of the title *Optimus* to Trajan.

26 See also Nauta (2010) 243 on *Plin. Pan.* 53.3–4: the comparison of Domitian and Nero may well have been part of a hidden discourse under Domitian, but it could it be used in official discourse.

27 The exact chronology of their works is debated, see Townend (1967) 88–89; Wardle (1998) 431; Bowersock (1998) 206.

28 For historians' criticism on Suetonius see, e.g., Flach (1972); Gascou (1984); Dihle (1987).

29 Features that Suetonius shares with encyclopaedic and miscellaneous literature are techniques of ordering knowledge, the involvement of an active reader, and the combined purpose of information and entertainment; see Schulz (2019) 342–354. For Suetonius as partaking not only in the historiographical discourse, but also in other discourses typical of the second century, such as discourses of knowledge and erudition, see Pausch (2004) 237–275.

of Suetonius' *Lives*, we will go through the *Lives* of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, and analyse the passages in which Nero is mentioned.³⁰ Just as in our examination of Tacitus, we will ask whether Suetonius constructs distance or similarities between Nero and the Flavians, and among the Flavians themselves.

Structurally, Suetonius' biographies can be characterized as a mixture of more chronological passages on the one hand, presenting in particular the time before the ascent to the principate and the last days and death, and rubrics (*species*) on the other hand, illustrating the virtues, vices, and elements of representation of each emperor. The text offers two ways of reading: a continuous way of reading and a selective way of reading. Firstly, each *Life* or book of *Lives*, or the entire work, can be read on its own as one entity.³¹ Secondly, text passages that entail a specific piece of information the recipient is interested in can be selected for reading: for instance, the vices of Caligula (Suet. *Calig.* 22–49), Galba's eating habits (Suet. *Galb.* 22), or Vespasian's humour (Suet. *Vesp.* 22–23). In such a selective reading process, the rubric system allows the reader to compare parallel pieces of information in several *Lives*. These features of Suetonius' work prompt other strategies for presenting similarities or differences between emperors than those of Tacitus' writings. We can detect some direct points of contact, the most prominent of which is the comparison of Claudius and Nero with the Flavians, presented as a dream of Vespasian at the end of his *Life* (*Vesp.* 25). The comparison refers to the same amount of time that both dynasties were in power, and implicitly points to Domitian and Nero 'as the agents of dynastic extinction'.³² But most importantly, the text sets up intertextual relations by inviting the reader to compare the rubrics for each emperor and the structure of their biographies.

With these general remarks in mind, we will take a closer look at the Flavian *Lives* and their references to Nero. The emperor's relationship to Nero is an important element in the biographies of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. As such, Suetonius testifies to the negotiation of Nero's memory that takes place during their principates (*Galb.* 10.1, 15.1, *Otho* 7.1, *Vit.* 11.2). Among these three emperors, Suetonius' Vitellius in particular shows many parallels with

30 There are no references to the Flavians in Suetonius' *Life of Nero*.

31 The *Lives* of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius form Book 7, and the *Lives* of Vespasian, Domitian, and Titus form Book 8. Cf. the new edition of Kaster (2016), whose arrangement of the text of the last six *Lives* mirrors this book structure.

32 Wilson (2003) 532.

and sympathy for Nero (*Vit.* 4.1, 12). By contrast, in the *Life of Vespasian*, Vespasian himself is distanced from Nero directly and indirectly in several passages.³³ Just as in Tacitus, there is an anecdote about Vespasian's risky behaviour in the theatre:

Peregrinatione Achaica inter comites Neronis, cum cantantem eo aut discederet saepius aut praesens obdormisceret gravissimam contraxit offensam prohibitusque non contubernio modo sed etiam publica salutatione secessit in parvam ac deviam civitatem, quoad latenti etiamque extrema metuenti provincia cum exercitu oblata est.

Travelling through Greece in Nero's entourage, when the emperor was singing he would usually leave or, if he did stay, would fall asleep. Having thereby fallen into the deepest disfavour and been banished, not only from the emperor's inner circle but even from his public receptions, Vespasian retired to a small and out-of-the-way town where he hid, fearing even the worst, until he was offered a province with an army.³⁴ (*Vesp.* 4.4)

We can see that Suetonius' version differs from Tacitus' in some interesting details: it takes place in Greece during Nero's grand artistic journey (and not in Rome during the *Neronia*); Vespasian leaves Nero's performances or falls asleep (instead of just dozing), and this happens several times (instead of only once); and finally, Suetonius' Vespasian is not berated by one of Nero's men and protected by others, but falls into the deepest disfavour, is banished, and hides away in a small town, fearing the worst. Suetonius' scene thus seems more dramatic for Vespasian than it does in Tacitus' narrative. On the one hand, the distance between Vespasian and Nero is hence greater in Suetonius, which is in line with Suetonius' focus on Vespasian in this passage, and not on Nero, as is the case in Tacitus' *Annales*. On the other hand, the same scene indirectly implies a closer relationship between Vespasian and Nero than Tacitus' version. The fact that Vespasian accompanies Nero to Greece *inter comites* indicates a rather intimate relationship, as does the fact that Nero offers him – after the alleged fall from grace – the military command of a province. There is a certain tension between Vespasian's connection to and his distance from

33 Cf. Luke (2009–2010) 515–516, 522–523, 535, 537 and his analysis of Vespasian's humour: Suetonius uses the depiction of Vespasian's humour to contrast him with Nero (and Caligula).

34 Translations of Suetonius are those of Edwards (2000), sometimes slightly adapted.

Nero in the text,³⁵ and such an ambivalence is typical of the biographer, who integrates different perspectives into his work.³⁶

The difference between Nero and Vespasian is also pointed out in the passage about Vespasian's *civilitas* and *clementia* (*Vesp.* 12–15), where his banishment from Nero's court and his fear are mentioned again (*Vesp.* 14), and where he is exculpated from the murder of Helvidius Priscus (*Vesp.* 15). Both emperors' death scenes (*Ner.* 40–49, *Vesp.* 24) differ enormously as well. Nero's long and delayed death, which shows him engaging more and more in his role as artist and dying as an artist (*Ner.* 40.2, 41.1–2, 43.2, 49.1), as he himself puts it, contrasts sharply with the quick death of Vespasian, who thinks that an emperor has to die standing on his feet (*Vesp.* 24).

Vespasian's son Titus was Suetonius' ideal *princeps*, and he is introduced as the 'love and pleasure of all mankind' (*Tit.* 1.1). This praise contradicts the image of him as another Nero:

denique propalam **alium Neronem** et opinabantur et praedicabant. at illi ea fama pro bono cessit conversaque est in maximas laudes neque vitio ullo reperto et contra virtutibus summis.

To sum up, people thought of him and even publicly spoke of him as **another Nero**. Yet this reputation turned out to be to his advantage for, when he was found to have no vices but instead the greatest virtues, it was succeeded by the greatest praise. (*Tit.* 7.1)

The text deploys two strategies to refute this idea of Titus the Neronian *princeps*. First, although Titus' *vitia*, his *saevitia* ('cruelty'), *luxuria* ('riotous living'), *libido* ('wantonness'), and *rapacitas* ('greediness') are acknowledged and mentioned (*Tit.* 7.1), they are confined to Titus' behaviour before he became *princeps*; at the start of his principate, these vices are even turned into virtues (*Tit.* 7.1). This *divisio* directly follows the reproach of Titus being an *alius Nero*, which is thus modelled as the peak of Titus' *vitia* but which is also immediately refuted. The second strategy that distances Titus from

35 For Vespasian's relationships with Caligula, which is not depicted in a one-sided way either, cf. Suet. *Vesp.* 2.3–5.3.

36 Scholarship has explained this by the influence of rhetorical thinking (see Lewis [1991] 3653, 3669) and by the influence of the philosophy of the New Academy (see Cizek [1977] 159–165).

Nero is his depiction as a close relation to Britannicus, Nero's brother, rival, and victim³⁷:

Educatus in aula **cum Britannico** simul ac paribus disciplinis et apud eosdem magistros institutus. quo quidem tempore aiunt metoposcopum a Narcisso Claudi liberto adhibitum ut Britannicum inspiceret constantissime affirmasse illum quidem nullo modo, ceterum Titum, qui tunc prope astabat, utique imperaturum. erant autem **adeo familiares ut de potione qua Britannicus hausta periit Titus quoque iuxta cubans gustasse credatur gravique morbo adflictatus diu. quorum omnium mox memor statum ei auream in Palatio posuit et alteram ex ebore equestrem, quae circensi pompa hodieque praefertur, dedicavit prosecutusque est.**

He was brought up and educated at court **alongside Britannicus** in the same subjects and by the same teachers. They say that at that time a fortune teller had been summoned by Narcissus, Claudius' freedman, to inspect Britannicus and that he persistently asserted that it could not possibly be he but rather Titus, who was standing nearby, who would be emperor. Yet the boys were **so intimate that Titus, too, who was reclining beside him, is believed to have tasted the same drink which Britannicus finished off and then died, and to have been very ill for a long time. Later on, in recognition of all this**, he set up a golden statue to Britannicus on the Palatine and dedicated another one of him on horseback, made of ivory, which even now is carried at the head of the circus procession, himself attending it on its first appearance. (*Tit.* 2)

Titus' shared an education with Britannicus, their shared consumption of the same deadly drink, the private and public remembrance of all this, and finally the setting up of a golden statue for Britannicus, closely associates Nero's brother with Domitian's brother. This strategy raises the expectation that Suetonius will compare and draw parallels between the two pairs of brothers, Britannicus and Nero, and Titus and Domitian. This is not the case, however, as no direct comparisons or explicitly marked connections are made between Nero and Domitian.³⁸

³⁷ For Britannicus as Nero's rival, see Suet. *Ner.* 6.4, 7.1, 33.2–3; see also Suet. *Claud.* 27.1–2, 43.

³⁸ An exception is the episode about Nero's Epaphroditus (*Dom.* 14.4): Suetonius reports that Domitian kept Epaphroditus as a secretary and condemned him to death, because he was thought to have helped Nero in killing himself (*Dom.* 14.4). According to Suetonius, however, this has nothing to do with Nero: Domitian wanted to convince his household that they should

There are, however, two implicit ways in which Domitian is associated with Nero. The first is the lack of strategies that distance Domitian from Nero. Especially when we read Domitian's *Life* after the *Lives* of his father and brother, it is striking that Domitian is not contrasted to Nero in the way that Vespasian and Titus were in their respective *Lives*. Secondly, there are structural parallels with the *Life of Nero*.³⁹ Family background is one of them, and is important in both *Lives*, because it underlines the bad character of each emperor in the narrative even before their birth and upbringing are described.⁴⁰ Another structural parallel is presented by the clearly stated divisions into virtues and vices. The *divisio* in *Dom.* 3.2 (cf. *Dom.* 10.1) recalls the *divisio* in the *Life of Nero* (*Ner.* 19.3) as well as the one in the *Life of Caligula* (*Calig.* 22.1). All these three emperors are depicted as overall bad emperors in Suetonius, with Caligula being the worst. But the descriptions of their lives still include passages about virtues and positive actions, and in these sections we can see that Nero and Domitian did not share only negative features. In fact, their virtues are described by Suetonius in quite similar terms, as Suetonius discusses the *spectacula*, the institution of new games,⁴¹ the building programme, and the administration of both emperors.

Additionally, we can see structural similarities in the passages about their vices. When we compare the negative rubrics in both *Lives*, it becomes apparent that for both emperors Suetonius includes both their common tyrannical vices and their more characteristic, typical vices at a striking position, as shown in Table 11.1.

Nero has his very own, Neronian *probra* (*Ner.* 20–25), pertaining to his artistic or performance endeavours. After these, his vices of *petulantia* ('impudence'), *libido* ('wantonness'), *luxuria* ('riotous living'), *avaritia* ('greediness'), and *crudelitas* ('cruelty') are dealt with (*Ner.* 26–38) in crescendo style. The main part of the passage about Domitian's vices is about

under no circumstances try to kill their patron. For the same story interpreted as Domitian's revenge for Nero, see Plin. *Pan.* 53.4 with Nauta (2010) 243.

39 Cf. Nauta (2010) 245 for similarities in their physical description (except for their hairstyle), which suggest that Suetonius wanted the reader to recall Nero when reading the description of Domitian.

40 This effect of underlining the bad character in the context of family history is achieved differently in the *Lives* of Nero and Domitian. Nero's family history (*Ner.* 1–5), presented in detail because the *gens Domitia* has not been mentioned before, serves as a direct explanation for his own vices (*Ner.* 1.2). By contrast, the Flavian family history provides a contrasting foil to Domitian, who is the negative exception in the family (*Vesp.* 1.1).

41 Cf. Nauta (2010) 251 on the repeated phrase of *instituit et quinquennale certamen* ('he established a quinquennial contest') both in *Ner.* 12.3 and in *Dom.* 4.4, which draws a parallel between both accounts.

Table 11.1. Nero's and Domitian's vices in Suetonius' *Lives*

Nero	Domitian
20–25: <i>probra</i> (typical of Nero)	10–11: <i>saevitia</i>
26–29: <i>petulantia</i> , <i>libido</i>	12.1–2: <i>cupiditas</i>
30–32: <i>luxuria</i> , <i>avaritia</i>	
33–38: <i>crudelitas</i>	12.3–13: <i>arrogantia</i> (typical of Domitian)

his *saevitia* (*Dom.* 10–11), which corresponds to Nero's *crudelitas*. Then his *cupiditas* is treated (*Dom.* 12.1–2), which corresponds to Nero's *avaritia*, and finally his *arrogantia* (*Dom.* 12.3–13). So both emperors are characterized by two shared features that are typical of tyrants, i.e. *crudelitas/saevitia* and *cupiditas/avaritia*,⁴² and by one element that is typical of their respective personalities, namely Nero's artistic and Domitian's arrogant forms of self-representation, which are placed at the beginning and end of the respective passages dealing with their vices.

Led on by these structural correspondences, the reader is encouraged to consider Domitian as closer to Nero than to Vespasian and Titus. But it would be difficult to argue that closely associating Domitian with Nero is the paramount purpose of the text. As we have seen, there are some parallels, but there are also differences. The reactions to their deaths, for example, differ a lot in Suetonius' account: whereas Nero, despite the joy about his death, was favourably remembered by several individuals as well as by the Parthians, Suetonius' Domitian is missed only by the soldiers (*Ner.* 57, *Dom.* 23.1). Furthermore, there are direct references to other emperors as well, for instance, when Domitian is said to have repeatedly read only Tiberius' notebooks and records (*Dom.* 20). Suetonius' text more clearly deconstructs Domitian's relationship to Vespasian and Titus than that it constructs a link with Nero.⁴³ It reacts more clearly to the continuity exhibited by the historical Domitian with his Flavian predecessors than to his constructed distance from Nero. In the case of Vespasian and – even more – of Titus, however, Suetonius does confirm the Flavian construction of distance from Nero.

42 See also, for instance, Suet. *Tib.* 60–62, *Calig.* 32–34, *Galb.* 12, *Vit.* 13–14. On Suetonian *virtutes* and *vitia*, cf. Wallace-Hadrill (1983) 142–174; on the topics of rubrics and virtues and vices, see e.g. Lambrecht (1995) 512–513.

43 Important passages for this deconstruction are *Vesp.* 1.1, *Tit.* 9.3, *Dom.* 1.3–2.1, 2.3. Furthermore, the structure of the *Life of Titus* is in a diametrically different order compared to the *Life of Domitian*: whereas in Titus' *Life* vices are mentioned first and are confined to the time before he became emperor (see the *divisio* in *Tit.* 7.1), Domitian's *Life* proceeds from a mixture of virtues and vices in his early reign to vices only (see the *divisio* in *Dom.* 3.2).

Senatorial Responses under the Severans: Typological Relationships in Cassius Dio

More than a hundred years after Tacitus and Suetonius, in Severan times, the senator Cassius Dio wrote his 80 books of Roman history, covering the years from the earliest beginnings of Rome up to the reign of Severus Alexander. The depiction of his contemporary history is important to understand the whole work, and it also explains Dio's interest in Nero and Domitian, in particular.⁴⁴ The later books, from Claudius' reign onwards, including the reigns of Nero and the Flavians, have not come down to us directly; we only possess their *epitomai*, the most important of which were written by Byzantine monks in the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE. Cassius Dio provides us with fewer text passages and study points of contact between Nero and the Flavians. This may be partly due to the transmission of the text, but it can also be explained by a different interest in imperial history in the early third century.

As in Tacitus and Suetonius, the three *principes* after Nero are characterized not least by the way in which they fashion Nero's memory. Dio's Galba aims to distance himself from his predecessor (63[64].3.4¹), whereas Otho and Vitellius are described as even worse than Nero (63[64].8.2¹–3, 63[64].9.1, 64[65].4.1). With this and the appearance of the *falsi Nerones* under Otho (63[64].9.3) and Titus (66.19.3^b), Dio testifies to the ongoing negotiations of Nero's memory. The surviving epitomized text shows some, but not too many, efforts to distinguish Vespasian and Titus,⁴⁵ two emperors considered as overall good by Dio, from Nero.⁴⁶ Vespasian, for

44 See Gowing (1992) 293–294; Hose (2007) 465–467.

45 Dio defends the relationship between Titus and Vespasian as good when he exculpates Titus from the reproach that he is to blame for Vespasian's death (Cass. Dio 66.17.1). According to Dio, Titus gets much better when he is *princeps* (66.18.1), but his reign may only be satisfactory due to the fact that he did not rule long enough (66.18.4–5).

46 The anecdote about Vespasian's offensive behaviour during one of Nero's performances is presented twice by Dio, but has a different purpose than distancing Vespasian from Nero. According to Xiphilinos, our source for Dio's account of Vespasian's reign, Vespasian is said to have 'frowned when he saw the emperor behaving himself in unseemly fashion' (65[66].11.2), after which a certain Phoebus angrily bids Vespasian to leave. The story is introduced to illustrate Vespasian's mildness at a later meeting with Phoebus at which Vespasian, now emperor, does him no harm (65[66].11.2). Almost the same episode is told in the context of Nero's journey to Greece, in an excerpt from Petrus Patricius, but Vespasian's name is not mentioned. Nero, we are told, 'conceived a dislike for a certain man because, while he was speaking, the man frowned and was not over-lavish in his praises' (62[63].10.1^a). Assisted by the same Phoebus, Nero sent the man away and would not let him come near him. In this context, dealing with Nero, it is apparently not important, at least to the excerptor, that the man in question was allegedly Vespasian.

example, rescinds 'a disfranchisement of those who had been condemned by Nero and succeeding rulers for acts of *maiestas*' (65[66].9.1).⁴⁷ Vespasian's way of dealing with finances is also completely different from Nero's (65[66].10.3) and, just as Suetonius, Dio exculpates Vespasian from the death of Helvidius Priscus, who is criticized and thus cast in a more negative light than Thrasea Paetus, who was forced to die by suicide under Nero (65[66].12.1–3).

Other passages, however, seem to emphasize continuity between Nero and Vespasian: there are two complementary dreams, by Vespasian and Nero, respectively, about Vespasian as Nero's successor. But they focus on the continuity of the principate, not on an association of Vespasian with Nero:

καὶ παρ' ὀνείρατος ἔμαθεν ὅτι, ὅταν ὁ Καῖσαρ Νέρων ὀδόντα ἀποβάλλῃ, αὐταρχήσῃ· καὶ τοῦτό τε τὸ κατὰ τὸν ὀδόντα τῇ ἐπιούσῃ ἡμέρᾳ συνηνέχθη, καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Νέρων ἔδοξε ποτε ἐν τοῖς ὕπνοις τὸν τοῦ Διὸς ὄχον ἐς τὴν τοῦ Οὐεσπασιανοῦ οἰκίαν ἐσαγαγεῖν.

From a dream he [Vespasian] learned that when **Nero Caesar** should lose a tooth, he himself should be emperor. This prophecy about the tooth became a reality on the following day; **and Nero himself** in his dreams once thought that he had brought the car of Jupiter to Vespasian's house. (65[66].1.3)

Dio also evokes continuity between Nero and Titus. He mentions that there were different opinions concerning the Colossus set up in 75 CE and the question whether it displayed the features of Nero or of Titus:

φασὶ δὲ αὐτὸν τό τε ὕψος ἑκατὸν ποδῶν καὶ τὸ εἶδος οἱ μὲν τὸ τοῦ Νέρωνος οἱ δὲ τὸ τοῦ Τίτου ἔχειν.

This statue is said to have been one hundred feet in height and **to have borne the features of Nero, according to some, or those of Titus, according to others.** (65[66].15.1)

The interpretation of the Colossus as picturing Titus' features is supported by the fact that even Titus' official portraits showed clear traces of Nero's.⁴⁸

47 Translations of Cassius Dio are those of Cary (1925).

48 See Wood (2016) 133 on Flavian public images.

Dio could have excluded a statement about the interpretation of the Colossus' features if he had had an interest in dissociating Titus from Nero as much as possible. We have seen that Suetonius, by contrast, applies several strategies to dissociate Titus, the alleged *alius Nero*, from Nero.

The only dissociation that Dio really promotes is the one between Domitian and his father and brother.⁴⁹ But Dio does not investigate the relationship of Domitian and Nero, although there would have been opportunities. When Dio refers to acquaintances of both Nero and Domitian, for instance, he does not make use of this link to connect the two emperors. That Domitian married Domitia, the daughter of Corbulo, Nero's general and eventual victim (65[66].3.4), is not exploited. Dio also does not associate Domitian with Nero when he mentions that he killed Nero's Epaphroditos in order to terrify his own freedmen to prevent them from killing him (67.14.4). This action is rather used as an example of his suspicion of all mankind, which was a consequence of his own cruelty.

We can conclude that Dio, at least in the remaining *epitomai*, is less concerned with the question of how to evaluate the Flavian relationship with Nero than Tacitus and Suetonius were. The debate about this relationship seems to have been more relevant in Hadrian's and Trajan's times, in which there were still contemporaries who had lived under Nero and the Flavians. Rather, Dio is interested in Nero and Domitian as types of a bad emperor that resemble his contemporary *principes*, a focal point that we find neither in Tacitus nor in Suetonius. Dio does not connect Nero and Domitian directly. What relates them to each other is their potential to be a prefiguration of a contemporary bad emperor. Nero and Domitian (as well as Tiberius and Caligula) are presented in similar terms to Commodus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus. The reader recognizes patterns of behaviour that resemble each other, or is made aware of connections between earlier and contemporary emperors.⁵⁰ Nero foreshadows Commodus, who, for instance, also stages his own performances by directing his audience (73[72].20.2). Under Commodus, the murders committed with poisoned needles, which happened under Domitian, reappear, as Dio explicitly states (73[72].14.4). Caracalla is similar to Nero in that he performs as charioteer (78[77].10.1), reveres the cithara player Mesomedes (78[77].12.7), and learns to dance (78[77].21.2). Caracalla recalls Domitian in their common enmity towards their brothers and especially in their character trait of simulation (e.g. 78[77].12.6, 78[77].11.5). Under Elagabalus, a certain Aurelius, who is known

49 See Cass. Dio 65[66].2.3, 65[66].10.1, 65[66].12.1^a, 66.20.3, 66.26.2–4, 67.2.1–4.

50 For more examples, see Schulz (2014) 427–430.

for his large genitals, is brought to the emperor and receives an escort larger than that of Abgar under Severus or Tiridates under Nero (80[79].16.2). The similarity of Nero and Domitian to contemporary emperors is hence much more important for Dio than the similarity between the two of them.

Conclusion: Beyond the Historiographical Discourse

Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio largely represent the distance from Nero that Vespasian and Titus sought to exhibit. They do not try to undermine it. In the case of Domitian, however, Tacitus and Suetonius, and to a lesser extent Cassius Dio, establish connections and similarities with Nero. They deconstruct Domitian's policy of distancing himself from Nero. Even more important in all three corpora, however, is the construction of an intra-Flavian distance between Domitian on the one hand and his father and brother on the other hand. Maybe the strategy to make Domitian recall Nero can even be considered a sub-strategy to distinguish Vespasian and Titus from both their successor and their predecessor. Direct comparisons or explicit drawing parallels between Nero and Domitian are rare.

In their details, however, the accounts of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio differ because they look at the emperors from different points of view, with different interests. Tacitus, writing in a time that had to deal with the memory of Domitian, depicts early Flavian times as still negotiating the memory of Nero. Suetonius, with his focus on the emperors as personalities, make a greater effort to distance Vespasian and Titus from Nero and to associate Nero and Domitian than Tacitus does in the remaining books of the *Annals* and the *Histories*. About a hundred years later, Cassius Dio does not seem to be concerned with the question of how distinct the Flavians were from Nero. Rather, he is interested in Nero and Domitian as tyrannical types that foreshadow his contemporary emperors of the third century.

In the direct comparison of Nero and Domitian in Tacitus' *Agricola* and in the concept of *mali principes* in Pliny's *Panegyricus* we find the two clearest associations of Nero and Domitian in texts that do not belong to the historiographical discourse in the strict sense. There is one other work that closely associates these two emperors and that is also not historiographical, namely Philostratus' fictitious *Vita Apollonii*. There, both Nero and Domitian are explicitly termed 'tyrants' (e.g. Philostratus, *VA* 7.1, 7.14.4). Their most important common feature in this text is their enmity towards philosophers, and towards Apollonius of Tyana in particular, a philosopher who knew both tyrants. Philostratus' Apollonius clearly approves of Vespasian and

Titus, but not of Domitian or Nero. When Vespasian asks Apollonius for his opinion of Nero (VA 5.28), the philosopher paints a negative picture of him. Apollonius is said to have behaved the same way towards the tyrants Nero and Domitian (VA 7.3). More explicit parallels between the two emperors can also be found. Both Nero and Domitian are, for example, said to kill their enemies with the same kind of fish, the seahare (VA 6.32.2). When Nero is directly compared to Domitian in a discussion about tyrants and philosophers that takes place under a plane tree in Cicero's villa, Domitian is even considered worse than Nero, whose musical activities are alluded to:

νυνὶ δὲ τίνι μὲν εὐφωνίᾳ, τίνι δὲ κιθάρᾳ θύσομεν; ἄμουσα γὰρ καὶ μεστὰ χολῆς
πάντα, καὶ οὐτ' ἂν ὑφ' ἑαυτοῦ ὅδε οὐτ' ἂν ὑφ' ἑτέρων θελχθείη.

But now what *bel canto*, what lyre shall we sacrifice to? Everything is unmusical and full of malice, **and the present ruler can be soothed neither by himself nor by others.**⁵¹ (VA 7.12.4)

As far as I can see, only some early Christian and Jewish texts associate Domitian, and even all three Flavian emperors, with Nero more openly than Philostratus. This illustrates that Nero and the Flavians could be represented in terms completely different from the historiographical discourse. In the *Fifth Sibylline Oracle*, Nero, the emperor under whom the apostles Peter and Paul were killed, becomes the destroyer of the temple in Jerusalem, although he had already been dead for two years when this happened (5Sib 150–154).⁵² The *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Book of Revelation* depict Nero as the Antichrist, or rather as a forerunner of the Antichrist.⁵³ The *Fifth Sibylline Oracle* depicts Vespasian as the murderer of all good people (5Sib 36) and Titus as the murderer of his own father (5Sib 38–39).⁵⁴ Contrary to their depiction in Roman historiography, the first two Flavians here appear as bad emperors. They are not distanced from Nero. By contrast, Domitian is depicted as a rather dreary figure who does not incite apocalyptic imagination in the *Fifth Sibylline Oracle* and in the *Gospel of Luke*, which is also quite unlike his image in Roman historiography.⁵⁵ The

51 Translations of Philostratus, VA are those of Henderson (2005).

52 See Champlin (2003) 14; Backhaus (2014) 384. Positive traits of Nero are, however, also emphasized in these texts: see Champlin (2003) 15 for the *Fifth Sibylline Oracle* and Backhaus (2014) 392 for the rabbinic *Babylonian Talmud*, *Gittin*.

53 See Champlin (2003) 17–19.

54 See Backhaus (2014) 390.

55 See Backhaus (2014) 390.

Twelfth *Sibylline Oracle* even depicts him in extremely positive terms (12Sib 124–142), contrary to Nero (12Sib 78–94). This strikingly positive image can be interpreted in the specific Jewish context of the Twelfth *Sibylline Oracle*: from a Jewish perspective, Vespasian and Titus, as well as Trajan and Hadrian, are much more connected with the Jewish–Roman wars and tensions than Domitian, whose reign in between these emperors seems relatively peaceful.⁵⁶

The Christian *Book of Revelation*, by contrast, which can be dated to Domitian's reign or shortly thereafter, closely associates Domitian with Nero, demonizing the emperor as a *Nero redivivus* and as the second persecutor of Christians.⁵⁷ In the context of the *Book of Revelation*, the Nero-like Domitian forms part of a strategy to support Christian group identity by defining enemies and persecutors and distancing the group from them.⁵⁸

Evidently, Domitian is made to recall Nero when they are both used as a foil to praise someone else – as in the case of Agricola and Apollonius, as well as Trajan in Pliny's *Panegyricus* – or when they are presented as comparable persecutors, in early Christian literature. Compared to these discourses, post-Flavian historiography in the proper sense exhibits a relatively small endeavour to make Domitian recall Nero and to deconstruct the distance that the last Flavian, just as his predecessors, tried to establish to the last Julio-Claudian emperor.

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⁵⁶ See Backhaus (2014) 392.

⁵⁷ For an in-depth analysis, see Backhaus (2014) 379, 395, who points out that the *Book of Revelation* should be read as documenting the perception of crisis of a certain group, but not as a typical document for the province of Asia under Domitian. See also Mucha (2015) 360–361 for Nero-Domitian analogies in the *Book of Revelation*.

⁵⁸ See Backhaus (2014) 379, 397–399.

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