

“One man in his time plays many parts”: the rôles of Nero

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EDWARD CHAMPLIN, *NERO* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2003). Pp. xii + 346, pls. 5, maps 5. ISBN 0-674-01192-9. \$29.95.

The choice of image on the dust-jacket of this book is as inspired as its contents: a graffito sketch bearing an uncanny resemblance to Nero (complete with nose-hairs) from a *taberna* excavated in the SW substructures of the Domus Tiberiana. Its reproduction has been stripped of the later scribbles that encroach on the neck and the back of the head; indeed, it is reproduced in splendid isolation, divorced from the hectic mass of scribbling that covered the entire wall with sketches of ships, portraits, stick-figures, animals, geometric designs, and masses and masses of writing. (n1) In a way, this can serve as a metaphor for the author's approach to his subject: E. Champlin strips Nero of the clutter that surrounded him — the business of empire — and distills for us the pure personality in all its rational delusion (Champlin insists on “rational”, right to the end).

The image on the cover typifies the book in another way too: with characteristic forethought, Champlin has replicated the graffito on the title-page, with the result that readers whose libraries have consigned the jacket to the recycling bin will not be cheated of the opportunity to enjoy it. This is a book that privileges the reader; its subject guarantees that it will capture a market beyond the narrow confines of academe, and its author has taken unobtrusive care to unpack arcane references (defining, for instance, the difference between *coronae murales* and *coronae vallares*, 218), gloss Latin phrases (“mural crowns”, “rampart crowns”), guide readers through the copious bibliographical references (some items earn accolades such as “fascinating”, “wide-ranging”, “invaluable”; some are cited neutrally; we are warned off those that are “to be used with caution”, “untenable”, even “wrong on every point”). The “Note on sources” (241-42) sets out with admirable clarity the confusion in the numeration of the books of Dio that is part of Boissvain's otherwise monumental legacy to classical scholarship. The maps, drawn by P. Laird, are lightly freighted with exactly what readers need to know. In short, this is a book on which enormous care has been lavished, and the result is an effortless and engrossing read.

Biographies often have sub-titles: *Cecil Rhodes: flawed colossus*, by B. Roberts (1987); *Nelson Mandela: from the shadow of death to the light of freedom*, by B. M. Sinha (1990); *Robert Mugabe: a life of power and violence*, by S. Chan (2003). Champlin's book is called simply *Nero*. As Champlin himself says in the Epilogue, readers will have learned little from this book about the events of Nero's reign (other than those that the emperor himself orchestrated). A brief glance at the chapter-headings of, say, the biography by M. Griffin (n3) points the difference between Champlin's approach and a more comprehensive survey; but for anyone who has read Champlin's book before making such a comparison, it will be clear that his approach, with its ostensibly limited focus, sheds light on many of the standard topics, even if it is by leaving them in virtually total darkness: how telling, for instance, that “The problem of finance” (chapt. 13 in Griffin) is scarcely perceptible in Champlin's treatment, except for brief glimpses such as mention of the ratio (a staggering 3 : 8) between the cost of Tiridates' spectacular visit to Rome and the overall budget (227). Champlin's aim is to find out what makes Nero's notoriety so fascinating, and the answer is: he staged his life as a mythological enactment to shock and amuse his people. The staging and the mythology are key to Champlin's interpretation of Nero's image; source-criticism and chronological reconstruction are key to his method.

The book starts at the end, three months before Nero's death. It is a gripping story, told with restraint and made vivid by details from Suetonius and Dio. Champlin's gift for narrative, displayed at intervals throughout the book, is supported by impeccable writing; favourite

items, however, tend to recur, sometimes at very brief intervals and in very similar language, for no detectable aesthetic or structural reason:

In one of the best-loved legends of ancient Rome, the pious plebeian Lucius Albinus ... fell in with the Vestal Virgins (188)

The Gallic occupation gave rise to some of the best-loved legends of Roman history: the story of the pious plebeian Lucius Albinus, saving the Vestal Virgins ... (195).

I counted nearly a dozen such examples, although the *déjà vu* sensation, mildly disconcerting, hardly detracts from the immense pleasure of tracking Champlin's train of thought and subtlety of interpretation. Quite early on (52) he insists that "there is no need to whitewash Nero: he was a bad man and a bad ruler". This statement absolves the author of responsibility to pass moral judgment on the successive iniquities and outrages of his subject's behavior, and liberates him to explain it in terms of Nero's own invention of himself. Champlin eschews both apology and ridicule. Conjuring up, for instance, the difficulty and terror of racing a 10-horse chariot in the Olympic Games, he notes (59) what obsessive determination it must have taken for Nero to resume the race, stuffed back (*repositus*) into his chariot after an accident, even though he proved unable thereafter to stay the whole course. For the ancient sources (Suet., *Nero* 24.2; Dio 63.14.1), this incident simply points up the hypocrisy in the award of a crown to Nero for his failed performance; Champlin, however, thinks for himself every time.

The theme of this book is conveyed by the structure, each pithy chapter-heading in the Table of Contents progressively shorter than the last, other than the bump caused by the inflated dimensions of the Golden House (only slightly inflated, as Champlin will insist in chapt. 7); the focus narrows to the inevitable conclusion. From the account of Nero's theatrical end we are immediately plunged into the invention of a plethora of posthumous Neros, a fascinating farrago of the "big three" (Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio; Tacitus' sobriety stands out), the *Sibylline Oracles*, the *Book of Revelation*, the *City of God*, and other lesser Christian tracts. The *Leitmotif* of this introductory chapter ("The once and future king") is stated early on (9): "Nero had an afterlife that was unique in antiquity"; in the Epilogue, we discover that Champlin came to his subject by searching for a Roman figure to equal the *Nachleben* of Alexander the Great. Folk-motifs (culture heroes who do not die and are expected to return) have their arresting parallel in comparanda from the 13th c.: Baldwin IX, Count of Flanders († A.D. 1205) and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, Stupor Mundi († A.D. 1250); Jesus Christ is not mentioned.

Having gripped his readers with the opening narrative of Nero's death and afterlife, Champlin uses chapt. 2, "Stories and histories", to set them straight on the sources – including the sources' sources, the Elder Pliny, Fabius Rusticus, and Cluvius Rufus. By juxtaposing accounts of 4 standard entries in Nero's biography (the death of Claudius, the courtship of Poppaea, the "fiddling" to accompany the Fire, and the Famous Last Words), Champlin shows how evasive "facts" are, and how loaded the sources' explanations (especially in attributing motives to the protagonist); and he demonstrates that ancient and modern historians alike are prisoners of their preconceptions. The scholars among his readership know this in theory; but the practical demonstration in these case-studies is an object lesson in scepticism. We are reminded that Cluvius Rufus is the sober Flavian historian of D. Wardle rather than the unprincipled scandal-monger of G. Townend, and we are treated to a virtuoso performance of iconoclasm in the treatment of that notorious phrase, *qualis artifex pereo* (Suet., *Nero* 49.1 = Dio 63.29.2, ὁμοίως τεχνῆθω παραπῶllumai), "consistently misunderstood by modern readers" (51). *Artifex* here, Champlin argues, refers to the context, the digging of a Nero-sized pit as a makeshift tomb, so that it means "craftsman", "artisan", rather than "artist"; not "what an artist dies in me", but "what an artisan I am in my dying!". I, for one, will persist in my "misunderstanding": whether or not it makes a difference that Nero is supervising the preparations rather than performing them himself, the overtones of *artifex* are those of expert mastery rather than unskilled labor (*TLL* II 698.18-699.64 [Klotz]); it seems inconceivable that Nero could use this word of himself without hearing "artist", however grim his self-mockery.

Spectacle, and Nero's taste for it as both sponsor and participant, is broached in chapt. 3, "Portrait of the artist": the Greek games-circuit, the Roman *ludi*; the *Ludi Maximi* of A.D. 59 are skillfully presented as a celebration of Nero's escape from the murderous intent of his mother. Chronology shapes a trajectory of taste: no acting in public until after mother's death; no tragedies until 66; no pantomime until 68 (the end). Chapter 4 ("The power of myth") follows swiftly, reading Nero's choice of dramatic rôles as a trick with mirrors to shape his own *résumé*, from acknowledgement of his responsibility for Agrippina's murder (played out in the rôles of Orestes, Alcmaeon, Oedipus) to his claim to have murdered Poppaea (mirrored in further rôles: Canace, Hercules *furans*). Following the lead of R. Mayer and others, the legend that grew up around the figure of the historical Periander is suggested as Nero's model: a man who slept with his mother, attempted to murder her (she pre-empted him by committing suicide), and finally killed his pregnant wife in a fit of rage, either by hurling a footstool at her or by landing her a lethal kick. Nero's devotion to Poppaea's memory is mapped onto Periander's obsession with his dead wife; and Periander can be seen to have blazed a further trail for Nero in harbouring an ambition to cut a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth, a feat that Nero himself would attempt. Today, myth is so neatly separated from reality that it takes a leap of faith to enter the fantastical world of Nero's mind, where the two may have merged in an indistinguishable blend, his self-presentation as a mythical hero raising him above the "level of ordinary action and responsibility" (111). But Nero was a child of his time; Champlin's acute observation that Nero did not employ a model from Roman history, nor from Greek history unless it was shrouded in a thick veil of mythologizing, squares precisely with the Roman *mentalité* writ large in (for instance) contemporary aquatic displays.

"Shining Apollo" (chapt. 5) explores Nero's assimilation of his chariot-driving self to the Sun and of his cithara-playing self to Apollo. Champlin demonstrates that the equation with Apollo can be neatly dated to that watershed year 59 (so long as the Apolline passage in the *Apocolocyntosis* is treated as an interpolation of the 60s); the emphasis on the Sun emerges in 64. By a complex argument, the *ad hoc* persecution of the Christians in Nero's gardens in Trastevere is shown to bring light to the darkness of night and thereby avenge the crime against Diana, goddess of the moon, whom Actaeon had surprised in her bath (Actaeon became the victim of his own hounds; Nero despatched some of the Christians by dressing them in animal-skins and setting dogs upon them). There is no mythological enactment with which Nero is associated that Champlin cannot fit into a logical scheme: the charade involving the Danaids and the punishment of Dirce is connected with the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine (where sculptures of the Danaids were displayed) and with the amphitheatre of Taurus on the Campus Martius (Mr. Bull's arena being a fit place for an enactment involving the eponymous species). The greatest sleight of hand is reserved for Nero's rôle as a new Phaethon (134-35), recalling Ovid's epitaph in the *Metamorphoses* (2.327-28): *HIC SITVS EST PHAETHON CVRRVS AVRIGA PATERNI / QVEM SI NON TENVIT MAGNIS TAMEN EXCIDIT AVSIS*. Granted, it was an act of great daring; but Phaethon failed, and died. Yet Champlin is ready for that argument with a passage from Lucan to hand (1.45-58): Nero will be a new Phaethon, who will succeed. Champlin is then able to connect the legend of Phaethon's sisters, weeping tears of amber in their grief, with Nero's predilection for that coveted substance, which he acquired in the Baltic for one of his gladiatorial shows and which constituted his preferred simile for the colour of Poppaea's hair. Nero's assimilation to Hercules emerges in 66; the connection with Apollo is sustained, and exploited for its Augustan overtones (so too the solar crown, reminiscent of the posthumous iconography of Augustus).

Much of what Nero is alleged to have done is at odds with accepted codes of decent behaviour (even Roman behaviour). But at Rome there is an "out": "Saturnalia" (chapt. 6). Saturnalian license accommodates the paradoxical, reverses norms, suspends acknowledged hierarchies; in Champlin's Roman world, it allows the emperor to double as a thug, turn Sporus into a woman, bring licentious Baiae into the heart of Rome. In a breathtaking sleight of hand, measures to impose law and order that are explicitly said to be caused by Nero's unruly behaviour are phrased in the passive voice: "So successful was the young emperor at rousing

the rabble that ... actors were banished from Italy and soldiers were assigned to maintain order in the theater" (152). Champlin goes on to question whether Nero's youthful thuggery pre-58 necessarily appalled everyone, apart from the inevitably scandalized "genteel observers". He vividly evokes the allure of Tigellinus' shipboard banquet of 64 which, in a series of striking reversals, catered to every fantasy of flouted norms: the meal was taken on water instead of on land; the floating venue was a colossal raft instead of ordinary boats; wild animals were on display in the centre of Rome (not all that unusual, actually, given the institution of *venationes*); marine creatures appeared in fresh water (just as they had already done, we might note, in Nero's amphitheatre: Dio 61.9.5); brothels were staffed by upper-class women; night, illuminated, was turned into day.

Bringing seaside pleasures to Rome is a theme that Champlin will take up again in his interpretation of the "Golden House", the House of the Sun-God combined with the Villa of the People (209). But the Saturnalian theme is not yet exhausted: it will be evoked to explain the "marriage" with Pythagoras, in Champlin's view the only real aberration in Nero's sex-life (the liaison with Sporus [= "Seed", Nero's own name for him] has already been interpreted as a "joke for the Saturnalia" and explained as a dramatization of Nero's unassuaged passion for the now deceased Poppaea: 145-50). Champlin tackles the theory of W. Allen, (n2) that the "marriage" with Pythagoras is to be interpreted as part of Nero's initiation into the cult of Mithras; if so, Champlin points out (167), it must be taken as a spoof, like the "bizarre pantomime" (169) in which Nero, dressed in animal skins, attacked the private parts of victims of both sexes before being polished off by "the freedman Doryphorus" as if by a real *venator* (i.e., Pythagoras, according to Suet., *Nero* 29); this is another story that Champlin deems good enough to tell twice (165; 169). Nor are all Nero's rôle-models figures from mythology or the legendary past; Champlin draws analogies with Nero's own great-grandfather, Mark Antony, that failed hero of the Second Triumvirate. In an acute closing observation, he notes that Nero's own staging of his life as a play acted in the topsy-turvy world of the Saturnalia was so understood by his associates: even as Nero *in extremis* was planning to dance the rôle of Turnus (if he were to escape with his life), one of his officers, abandoning the fantasist, quoted Turnus at *Aen.* 12.646: *usque adeone mori miserum est?* Reality caught up with the actor at the end.

One of Champlin's most remarkable acts of subversion (in chapt. 7, "One house") is to defend the tradition that Nero started the Fire. After listing all the cogent reasons why he could not have done so (183-85), Champlin performs a Saturnalian rôle-reversal, citing the charge of the conspirator Subrius Flavius in 65, whose *verba ipsa* addressed to Nero are quoted by Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.67.3): *auriga et histrio et incendiarius extitisti*; Champlin concedes that this accusation "might be explained away by those who would prefer to believe in Nero's innocence, as just the sort of thing a conspirator would say" (186), thereby managing to imply that anyone who were to question Subrius' veracity would be taking the easy way out. He bases the rest of his case for Nero's culpability on the fact that, in the months before the Fire, Nero twice abandoned long-planned journeys, first to Greece, then to Alexandria, and chose instead to return to – or, on the second occasion, to remain in – Rome. In the first instance, when he had got at least as far as Beneventum, his reasons for aborting the journey are described as *causae in incerto* (Tac., *Ann.* 15.36.1). On the second occasion, allegedly citing *amor patriae* as the reason (*Ann.* 15.36.2), Nero abandoned his plans before he even left the city, *turbatus religione simul ac periculo* (Suet., *Nero* 19.1): in the Temple of Vesta (guardian of the sacred flame!) he could not get up because his robe got caught, and impenetrable darkness suddenly descended.

Champlin finds Nero's obedience to Vesta's apparent omen very suspicious, since he "was otherwise said to have contempt for all cults"; but is this a matter of cult or of superstition? Suetonius notes Nero's alarm at the appearance of a comet (*Nero* 36.1), his readiness to interpret a sculpture of a defeated Gaul as an omen that Vindex could not harm him (41.2), his susceptibility to inauspicious dreams after the death of his mother and to a variety of omens thereafter (46), and his panic-stricken reaction to the earth-tremor and bolt of lightning that accompanied his ignominious flight from Rome (48.2). Nero was not one of the travelling

emperors. Indeed, his idea of travel-preparation before confronting Vindex indicates that he was a most impractical traveller, obsessing about packing his musical instruments and getting his concubines kitted out with pelta-shields, axes, and Amazon haircuts (44.1) – a conflation of myth with reality that is typical of Neronian logic, since they were going North and there was bound to be fighting. If such a mercurial character balked at the prospect of a trip abroad not once but twice, does that prove that he was planning to commit arson, let alone that in so doing he was playing the rôle of Caecilius Metellus in 241 B.C., struck blind in the act of saving the *sacra* when the Temple of Vesta burned down (191)? The analogy with the temporary darkness into which Nero was plunged in the same temple before his journey to Alexandria, and with his choice of her temple as the only damaged building to be depicted on subsequent coin-issues, is, to my mind, manifestly lacking in rigour. But intertextual allusions are harnessed too: Champlin ascribes to Nero a keener ear for literary reminiscence than even such a singular devotee of the humanities may have possessed, detecting in Tacitus' account of the Fire, which broke out in 64 on July 19, echoes of Livy's treatment of the sack of Rome by the Gauls, which coincidentally occurred on July 19, 390 B.C.; but does the literary *topos* of the destruction of the city (n4) prove that Nero exploited the connection himself, as Champlin asserts (197)?

The book began with the narrative of Nero's ignominious fate; it ends with a chapter entitled "Triumph". Champlin notes the paradox that, although Nero was the least military of emperors, militarism and triumphalism were the hallmarks of his life in Rome. In the process, the triumphal ritual and its accessories were devalued; even the quashing of the Pisonian conspiracy was treated as a military triumph. Champlin identifies three "triumphs" celebrated during Nero's reign: his return to Rome in 59 after he had been "saved" from his mother (by murdering her); the crowning of Tiridates in 66 (a winning combination of Persian submission-ritual, the parade of the "wise barbarian", and Roman triumphal hype); and his return in 67 from his "athletic conquest of Greece", featuring a triumphal entry into Naples, Antium, Alba, and Rome, complete with a breach of the walls in the first and last case and merging the triumphal with the spectacular in an arresting and artful combination. Rome was Nero's theater, and his own life constituted the performance. The Epilogue recapitulates the theme: Nero, interpreting his life in mythological terms, played to an audience to the end.

Champlin is not shy of polemic, and shows a predilection for iconoclasm; indeed, much of the brilliance of this book consists in the Neronian glee with which he overturns received opinion. But sometimes his impatience with the *communis opinio* verges on hubris, most notably his insistence that Nero's reputation did not suffer what scholars call *damnatio memoriae*, as is "repeated endlessly in modern literature" (29). Champlin's (correct) assertion that Nero suffered none of the legal sanctions dishonouring the memory of condemned criminals is a spring-board to discussion of the recarving of his statues, attributed here to a superfluity of mass-produced items ready for purchase in masons' yards. But, with the benefit of a new study not available to Champlin, (n5) we now have easier access to an impressive array of evidence suggesting that the statues that were subsequently recarved had already been on public display, and were hastily withdrawn and stored in warehouses upon Nero's death – a theory that is supported by coins from his reign that were countermarked or upon which his portrait was defaced. The complex treatment of Nero's image is well exemplified by a series of relief panels from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias: one was removed and used face-down as a paving-slab; a second was left in place with the image intact, although the distinctive element in Nero's official nomen-clature was erased from the accompanying inscription; a third panel remained *in situ*, possibly accompanied by alterations to its (lost) inscription; the existence of a fourth panel (now missing) can be conjectured on the basis of a further inscription from which Nero's name has again been eliminated. (n6) Champlin concedes that Nero's name "might be, and sometimes was, erased from monuments", interpreting this as "outbursts of private zeal"; and it is true that his concern is to demonstrate the degree to which Nero's reputation was subsequently rehabilitated, by Otho and others. But the question nags: why is the name of Nero erased from such a record as *dipinti* advertising gladiatorial spectacles sponsored by luminaries of municipal Italy like the D. Lucretii Satri Valentis of Pompeii, father and son (*CIL* IV 7992, 7995)? The

absence of senatorial mandates condemning Nero's memory surely lends even greater significance to those instances where citizens in diverse parts of the empire went to great lengths to expunge his presence from the record; on this issue Champlin, usually so deft, is perceptibly tipping the scale.

If Nero's life was a work of art, so is this book. The type-setting is impeccable. Errors of detail are both very few and very trivial. For instance, Statilius Taurus built his amphitheatre in 29 B.C., not 26 (125), and it was not the "main arena" in Rome before the construction of the Colosseum (61); ever since its inception it had been passed over from time to time – even by Augustus, one of whose generals had built it – and was considerably eclipsed by Nero's wooden amphitheatre (indeed, Taurus' may itself have had a wooden superstructure, with stone restricted to its footings). Occasionally the argument is bolstered by an undocumented assertion: supplication to Ceres after the Great Fire, explained as a ceremony at the *mundus Cereris* rather than the Temple of Ceres, is associated with the rôle of Ceres as "the goddess of punishment" (193), hardly the most obvious description of her realm of competence. Greek, relegated to the notes, is quoted in translation in the text. A curiously ponderous instance coincidentally illustrates the tendency to repetition noted above, the line from Homer that Nero is said to have quoted as he stabbed himself (Suet., *Nero* 49.3 = *Il.* 10.535): *ppvn m' »kupÖdvn émfi; ktËpow ołata bällai*. It surely cannot be to emulate poetic word-order that Champlin translates this as "The thunder is beating against my ears of fast-running horses" (6; 50). The bibliography and the notes, dense and useful, make absorbing reading (beware: not everything cited in the latter appears in the former). To offer a random example of the scope of the notes, the chronological problems created by Suetonius' topical arrangement are set forth with admirable clarity (288-89 n.62). Nuggets of vivifying detail are there to be mined, such as the posterity guaranteed to Poppaea by having a face-cream named after her (297 n.46).

The plates include 3 busts of Nero corresponding to 3 of the 4 phases into which art-historians divide his portraiture (the first phase, pre-dating his accession, is irrelevant to Champlin's purposes). What matters to Champlin is how the portrait-types dovetail with the key chronological stages that he emphasizes in the reign, the watershed moments being the murder of Agrippina in 59 and the Fire in 64, and how representative the portraits are of the reception of his image; hence the inflexible template for the captions: "Copy of Nero's official portrait, A.D. 55-59" (87), "Copy of Nero's official portrait, A.D. 59-64" (115), "Copy of Nero's official portrait, A.D. 64-68" (148). With the cartoon on the title-page, and the cameo from Nancy illustrating an eagle stoutly bearing Nero to heaven (33), these decorous portraits are the sum total of Nero's pictorial image in this book: no heroic nude to correspond to the salacious aspects of the story, not a single decadent Renaissance canvas. This discrimination and restraint is a telling acknowledgement of the power of images as a tool of persuasion. Diagrams are confined to Laird's maps, although readers confused by the Julio-Claudians might fairly have hoped for a family-tree.

This book is a *tour de force*; but, one asks oneself (unfashionably), is it true? After trying to unravel the meaning of the iconography of the Danaids on the Temple of Palatine Apollo (302 n.34), Champlin concludes: "the programmatic purpose remains unclear: even in the hands of a master like Octavian, not all propaganda is uniformly successful or readily intelligible". The same frank admission might apply to the characterization of Nero, both that of his ancient biographers and Nero's own self-invention. Champlin weaves a stunningly cohesive picture of a man of unlimited power confined only by the theatrical capacity of his imagination; but among the multiplicity of rôles that Nero played, is there no room for contradiction or inconsistency? Nero and Champlin share the same dexterity in persuading their audience of the logic of their vision; their dual act will be very hard for the next biographer of Nero to follow.

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Notes

- 1 For a reproduction of the whole wall, see M. Langner, *Antike Graffitizeichnungen* (Wiesbaden 2001) 126.
- 2 M. T. Griffin, *Nero: the end of a dynasty* (London 1984).
- 3 W. Allen, "Nero's eccentricities before the Fire," *Numen* 9 (1962) 99-109.
- 4 Now keenly analyzed by A. Rossi, *Contexts of war: manipulation of genre in Virgilian battle narrative* (Ann Arbor, MI 2004) 17-53.
- 5 E. Varner, *Mutilation and transformation: damnatio memoriae and Roman imperial portraiture* (Leiden 2004).
- 6 Varner *ibid.* 73-75.

