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A Cultural Love Affair: The Impact of Philhellenism on Nero's Lasting Legacy

Emperor Nero, who ruled Rome from 64 to 68 CE, made an undeniable splash in the ancient world, with the accounts of ancient historians often appearing more like tabloid articles than historical texts. Known for the brutal killing of many members of his family, as well as for burning down Rome, the memory of Nero committing major atrocities has continued well into modernity. Immensely complicated, Nero often appears elusive in sources, holding a sense of fascination within the historical memory. Despite centuries of changing opinions and theories, Nero's reputation as a brutal tyrant has largely remained stagnant. My aim is not to portray Nero in a strictly positive or negative light, but rather view him through the lens of our present day understanding of cross-cultural relations, gender, and the arts in regards to how he is ultimately remembered. By looking at the ancient sources on Nero with this question in mind, it is revealed that his life and legacy depend less on his cruelty, and more on his love of Greek culture.

The legacy of Nero is undeniably prominent and lasting, though perhaps not for the reasons Nero himself would have wanted. Built upon the foundation of histories written by ancient historians, the image of Nero's reign is one of murder, tyranny, and the Great Fire of Rome. Through centuries of other historians building upon the works of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio, Nero's image has been rendered in the modern world as a criminal, madman, or even the antichrist. Despite his ruthless notoriety, modern historians rarely question the reasoning behind these assumptions. Often overshadowed by the more explosive elements of his

life, such as the murder of his mother Agrippina, Nero is simplified and distilled. In the common understanding of Nero, there is little room left for a nuanced discussion of who he was and why these tragedies occurred. However, a common thread exists in the murders of Nero's family and friends, his romantic relationships, and his political struggles: philhellenism. Nero's passion for the arts and athletics permeated nearly all aspects of his known life, despite the discouragement he faced from others. While on the surface it may seem that Nero's love of Greek culture made little impact on how he is viewed in the present day, ancient sources point to a different answer. Through Tacitus's *Annals*, Suetonius's *Life of Nero*, and Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, the negative perception which the Roman aristocracy had of Greek culture becomes apparent. Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio were unable to talk about Nero without mentioning his participation in the arts, just as it would be impossible to exclude the American Civil War when giving a history of Abraham Lincoln.

While modern historians often make the connections between Nero and philhellenism, as well as contextualize this in terms of how the Roman aristocracy reacted to Nero's love of Greek culture, there are vital pieces of Nero's life which have not yet found their place in his historical puzzle. What is lacking in modern historical studies is not the connection between Nero and Greek culture, but a consideration of the variety of ways in which his philhellenism affected Roman aristocracy's perception of him and his legacy. By exploring the myriad of Greek influences within Nero's life and reign, as well as how they were received by the different Roman classes, I argue that a better understanding of who Nero was as an individual can be achieved. Further, by blending the social and political factors in Nero's life, coupled with how ancient historians wrote about him, a more complete understanding of his legacy can be formed. The ancient historians' accounts of Nero combined with how modernity views him, both in the

general and historical sense, can help answer the question of why Nero remains one of the most infamous Roman leaders, perhaps only dwarfed by Julius Caesar.

Philhellenism within Rome is multilayered in itself, even without the incorporation of Nero's contributions. Cultural interactions between Greece and Rome often appear murky, as many emperors before Nero integrated aspects of Hellenistic culture in their own political image. However, certain facets of Greek culture seemed strictly off-limits, at least in public. Most notably, the value which was placed on the arts, athletics, and other forms of entertainment in Greek culture was not present within Roman culture during Nero's time. While it was socially acceptable for Roman aristocrats to occasionally indulge in watching a musical competition, gladiatorial show, or play, an adoption of these activities into the Roman way of life was not. Historian Albert Henrichs looks to ancient Roman historian Cato the Elder and poet Virgil to analyze the complex ways in which Rome adopted and rejected philhellenism. Cato's work, which Henrichs believes to have been meant for a wide Roman audience, argues that while aspects of Greek culture are respectable, Roman culture is far superior. However, even Cato, a traditionalist Roman senator, could not escape the impact of hellenistic culture in his own work. Cato quotes the *Odyssey* by Homer, as well as admits to visiting Athens. Further, Cato mirrors Greek historians when writing his history of Rome, *Origins*.¹ Regarding Virgil's work, Henrichs notes that he focuses more on the competitive nature of Greece and Rome, with Rome being better at political and military pursuits, while the arts should be left to Greece.²

The reasons for ancient Roman ambivalence towards Greek culture are multilayered as well. Historian Andrew Erskine argues that this may have been caused by many ancient Romans feeling the need to strengthen their individual cultural identity from that of Greece. From the

¹ Andrew Erskine, "Greek Gifts and Roman Suspicion," *Classics Ireland* 4 (1997): 39.

² Albert Henrichs, "Graecia Capta: Roman Views of Greek Culture," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 97 (1995): 256.

third century BCE, Greek culture was quickly integrated into Rome after the conquest of Greek territories in southern Italy, a shift from the slower cultural integration in centuries prior. Erskine describes this change as causing “incompatible values”, as Rome was both absorbing Greek culture at an accelerated rate while directly competing with them on a political and military scale. Erskine notes that during this period Rome had fully devoted itself to sustaining its militaristic focus, leading some Romans to argue that Greek culture distracted nobility from their military training.³ Ancient historian Tacitus, who provides a history of Nero in the *Annals*, similarly showed an imperialistic focus. Tacitus, along with many other Romans, felt that “long peace was undesirable because it made for effeminacy”.⁴ Historian Iiro Kajanto discusses the ways in which Tacitus expressed his support of military efforts in the *Annals*, apart from his discussion of Nero. Kajanto notes that when discussing the Roman attack on Boudicca, Tacitus does not show pity for the women and children which were killed, nor does he recognize the ill effects war can have on the Roman soldier.⁵ Tacitus’s feelings on militarism, as well as the broader feelings many Roman traditionalists had towards Roman imperialism, is a stark contrast to the way in which Nero chose to rule. Throughout Suetonius’s *Life of Nero* and Tacitus’s *Annals*, Nero is frequently associated with athletics and the arts, particularly following the Greek tradition, with the general Roman perception of him seemingly centered around these points. Historian Sam Van Overmeire takes this further, stating that unlike earlier emperors, such as Augustus, Nero drew more ostensibly from Hellenistic kings and Greek culture.⁶ While figures such as Alexander the Great were admired by Romans aristocracy and soldiers, drawing too much from Hellenistic culture came with considerable criticism. Many of the efforts Nero made

³ Andrew Erskine, “Greek Gifts and Roman Suspicion,” 43.

⁴ Iiro Kajanto, “Tacitus’ Attitude to War and the Soldier,” *Latomus* 29, no. 3 (1970): 701.

⁵ Iiro Kajanto, “Tacitus’ Attitude to War,” 703.

⁶ Sam Van Overmeire, “According to the Habit of Foreign Kings: Nero, Ruler Ideology and the Hellenistic Monarchs,” *Latomus* 71, no. 3 (2012): 764.

during his life, such as encouraging performance in athletics and the arts, would not only have been viewed as Greek, but also as non-Roman.

When it comes to the details of Nero's life, ancient historians differ in their styles and presentation, therefore affecting how Nero's philhellenism is incorporated into his overall life's history. Suetonius's account of Nero is as dramatic as the emperor's reputation, boasting gossip presented as fact with a flare for scandal, such as his discussion of Nero's sexual endeavors. Suetonius writes that Nero "at last devised a kind of game, in which, covered with the skin of some wild animal, he was let loose from a cage and attacked the private parts of men and women, who were bound to stakes"⁷ While Suetonius may fail in giving the most accurate account of Nero's life, he nevertheless delves into the personal life of Nero more than other ancient historians, such as Tacitus or Cassius Dio. Tacitus is quick to deny rumors which circulated throughout Nero's lifetime, such as his incestuous relationship with his mother, though he frequently makes it known to the reader his personal opinions on the emperor's artistic and athletic activities.⁸ In contrast, Suetonius shows little restraint when exploring the romantic and sexual life of Nero, using language which implies possible taboos within many of Nero's relationships. In looking at Suetonius through a more critical eye, many of the rumors he wrote about, such as Nero's sexual games, may appear false, or dubious at the very least. However, I argue that both authors still provide the modern historian with a unique perspective into the social life of Roman aristocrats. Just as modern-day celebrity gossip can help contextualize what a certain culture thinks of those in the spotlight, and what we find intriguing, scandalous, and even punishable, the same can be said for the ancients.

⁷ Suetonius, "Life of Nero," *The Lives of the Caesars*, 29.1

⁸ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.2.1.

A comparison of Tacitus's and Suetonius's histories of Nero additionally allows for a comparison of how his artistic and athletic pursuits were viewed by Romans. Tacitus's *Annals* hint at the viewpoint of the lower-class, or the plebeian, such as when Tacitus describes the role of class in conjunction with theater, "at Rome, no one born in a respectable rank of life had condescended to the stage as a profession"⁹ However, the vast majority of Tacitus's writing is strictly from the perspective of the upper-class, with mentions of plebs usually pertaining to their insults towards Nero. Unlike Tacitus, Suetonius mentions plebs far more often, allowing for a better sense of what different classes thought of Nero, rather than purely the upper-class. For example, Suetonius notes the extravagant gifts that Nero gave to plebs, both in material wealth and in land, which helped to earn their favor.¹⁰ However, despite Suetonius's more frequent mentionings of the plebs compared to Tacitus, he still lacks a fully equal account of how all Roman classes reacted to Nero's actions. Overall, the sparse information on the opinions of plebs by both Tacitus and Suetonius poses problems when attempting to assess the difference between the expectations plebs and Roman elites had for their emperor. This further poses problems when considering how Nero interacted with these expectations, or in some cases, attempted to change them altogether. Although ancient historians such as Tacitus expressed their opposition to an adoption of Greek culture, he merely hints at the other side, or lower-class Roman's opinion on the matter. While my primary aim is not to explore how the plebs felt about Emperor Nero, their opinions still heavily affect how I and other modern historians contextualize Nero within the larger history of Roman-Greek cultural relations. Was Nero's public image as an artist and athlete deemed an embarrassing display of Roman aristocracy solely because such

⁹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.21.1.

¹⁰ Suetonius, *Nero*, 10.1 and 30.1.

activities were associated with the plebs, or did this merely add to the myriad of other possible reasons?

Historian Sigrid Mratschek discusses the relationship between philhellenism and the Roman class structure and how this may have affected Nero's reputation. As described by Mratschek, most Roman aristocrats, including Nero, received an education in Greek art, philosophy, and culture.¹¹ However, while forms of philhellenism were acceptable to engage with in private or without participation, active engagement in Greek culture in the public sphere was largely viewed as improper by Roman elites. For example, Roman elites were often seen at chariot races as spectators, though were almost never chariot-drivers themselves. The same can be said for plays and gladiatorial events, which Roman elites could watch during their free time, though did not participate in.¹² An adoption of Greek culture in all aspects of life was generally confined to slaves, freedmen, and foreigners, with Roman aristocracy restricting these activities to their personal time outside of political and military pursuits. Mratschek makes note that like Alexander the Great, whom many Romans viewed as a historical role model, Nero mastered the cithara, though took his hobby farther than most other aristocrats before him. Nero frequently presented himself as a citharode, notably for the first time in 59 CE during Nero's newly established Juvenilia festival soon after his mother's death.¹³ In regards to the festival, Tacitus quotes an unnamed individual who described the festival as,

‘imported licentiousness; the aim of which was that every production of every land, capable of either undergoing or engendering corruption, should be on view in the capital, and that our youth, under the influence of foreign tastes, should degenerate into votaries of the gymnasia...not content with conferring immunity upon vice, were applying compulsion, in order that Roman nobles should pollute themselves on the stage under

¹¹ Sigrid Mratschek, “Nero the Imperial Misfit: Philhellenism in a Rich Man’s World,” In *A Companion to the Neronian Age*, ed. Emma Buckley and Martin Dinter (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 46.; Tacitus, *Annals*, 13.3.1

¹² Sigrid Mratschek, “Nero the Imperial Misfit,” 45.

¹³ Sigrid Mratschek, “Nero the Imperial Misfit,” 50.

pretext of delivering an oration or a poem...they had lent an expert ear to emasculated music and dulcet voices...'14

Similarly, Cassius Dio writes that foreigners in the audience watched as members of the Roman aristocracy embarrassed themselves.¹⁵ Tacitus and Dio make it clear to their readers that entertainment and participation in athletics and the arts is non-Roman, as well as something which the Roman aristocracy and senatorial families found to be shameful. Tacitus's and Dio's close connection between participation in publicly foreign activities and the disgrace of Roman nobles goes far beyond the Juvenilia festival. Throughout his reign, Nero participated in more and more athletic and artistic competitions and performances, such as singing on stage, acting in plays, and even traveling to Greece in 66 CE to participate in the Olympic games. As Nero pushed his philhellenism farther into his public image, he received steadily increasing pushback from Roman aristocracy. Modern historian Matthew Leigh discusses this aspect of Nero's life as a performer, and how this heavily affected his relationship with the Senate and other Roman elites. Leigh argues that while Nero shared his desire to connect with the common people of Rome like former emperor Augustus, who was not hated by the Roman aristocracy, Nero coupled this with disgracing the upper-class.¹⁶

Tacitus's description of the embarrassment Roman aristocracy faced by participating in the arts and athletics in the public sphere is a complicated topic in itself. In Edward Champlin's article, "Nero Reconsidered," Champlin discusses the role of performance within Roman society, and how each of the class structures interacted with one another through these means. Champlin states that actors and musicians were almost always slaves or freedmen, as the entertainment of others was largely viewed as low-class. The same can be said for athletes, who also provided

¹⁴ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.20.1.

¹⁵ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 61.17.4–5.

¹⁶ Matthew Leigh, "Nero the Performer." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, ed. Bartsch, Shadi, Kirk Freudenburg, and Cedric Littlewood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 30.

entertainment for others. Furthermore, plays, athletic competitions, and gladiatorial events acted as a public gathering for all Romans, as various classes were able to attend the same event.¹⁷ In this sense, public arts and athletics held a political nature within Rome, even if Roman aristocracy did not place considerable value upon them. For example, historian Mary T. Boatwright discusses in her article the role of Roman theater and differing attitudes various classes had towards it. By the first century CE, privileged Romans, often senators, were given the seats closest to the stage, the next closest seats given to equestrians, and so on in this pattern, with the worst seats, which was simply room to stand, given to the lowest classes. Moreover, Boatwright argues that while Athenian theater was often seen as a celebration of democracy, with all classes involved in the production and enjoyment of plays, Roman aristocracy did not hold this same attitude.¹⁸ Unlike in Greek culture, athletics and the arts came second to politics and the military, despite the clear indications of Roman class structure which were displayed during such events. For the Roman aristocracy, the theater was a highly ambivalent topic, as in some periods of time the Roman aristocracy seemed to detest the theater, legally classifying actresses as prostitutes and barring performers from engaging in legal proceedings, while at other times they used it to celebrate victories of war or honor Gods.¹⁹ Like Mratschek, Champlin also marks fifty-nine as the year of Nero's emergence as a public supporter of the arts.²⁰ However, Nero went further than simply supporting theater in Rome, which could have been well accepted by the Roman aristocracy, or at least tolerated. Rather, Nero acted as a major contributor to the arts, both through his various constructions of amphitheaters and arenas, as well as participating in artistic and athletic events himself, rather than remaining a spectator. In doing so, Nero majorly

¹⁷ Edward Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," *New England Review* 19, no. 2 (1998): 98.

¹⁸ Mary T. Boatwright, "Theaters in the Roman Empire," *The Biblical Archeologist* 53, no. 4 (1990): 185.

¹⁹ Mary T. Boatwright, "Theaters in the Roman Empire," 187-189.

²⁰ Edward Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," 99.

increased the political aspect of Roman theater, as well as blurred the strict lines Roman aristocracy had between themselves and the performers.

John Mouratidis expands further on this point, arguing in his article that Nero's efforts towards expanding existing festivals, the creation of new competitions, and his own participation aligned Nero more with the lower-classes and the Greeks than with the Roman aristocracy. While Nero may have not been intentionally attempting to do this, Mouratidis claims that by publicly showing his support of the arts, Nero therefore distanced himself from the military and political focus of the Roman aristocracy.²¹ As discussed by Mratschek, it was seemingly acceptable for low-class Romans to publicly engage with Greek culture, just as in the modern day individuals seen as lower-class are able to deviate from the "ideal" of a given culture. Nero's image and presentation carried more weight than anyone in the empire, as the emperor was expected to act as the representative of Rome itself. In the eyes of Roman aristocracy, by openly encouraging and engaging with Greek culture, Nero shifted from the ideal towards the culture of the lower classes, creating an image of himself as an entertainer, as opposed to a military-focused emperor.²² Nero's artistic, rather than military-focused rule, comes to a larger culmination upon his return to Rome from his tour of Greece. Unlike his predecessors who returned to Rome from victories of war, Nero was welcomed home as a victor of the Olympics.

In *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius also describes the Juvenilia festival, as well as plays, gladiatorial shows, and the Circensian games. Like Tacitus, Suetonius claims that Nero encouraged all classes to participate, including senators and "aged matrons" Further, Suetonius writes that prized objects were thrown into the crowd, including items such as gold, silver, pearls, food, and slaves. Suetonius also writes that a lottery for ships, houses, and land

²¹ John Mouratidis, "Nero: The Artist, the Athlete and His Downfall," *Journal of Sport History* 12, (1985): 15.

²² Albert Henrichs, "Graecia Capta: Roman Views of Greek Culture," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 97 (1995): 256.

was conducted.²³ Nero's generosity towards plebs and struggling senators usually came after moments of great opposition, in this case after the murder of Agrippina. Van Overmeire states that while this angered many wealthy Rome elites, as well as Suetonius, Nero's gifts earned much support from plebs. Nero made similar donations after the Great Fire of Rome and Pisonian Conspiracy, in which members of the senate, as well as others, conspired to kill Nero in 65, though ultimately failed. However, such gifts put a monetary strain on the empire, particularly because they often came after events which already had a negative monetary impact on Rome, such as the mass destruction in need of repair after the Great Fire.²⁴

Suetonius's description of the Juvenilia and similar festivals differs greatly in tone from Tacitus, who wrote about them through a harsher and more critical eye. This continues throughout Suetonius's history of Nero's life, as he focuses more of his biography on Nero's social life, parties, and artistic pursuits compared to Tacitus. For example, Suetonius describes the efforts which Nero made to train his voice, such as lying on his back with a lead sheet on his chest, and refusing to eat fruit or any other food that affected the voice. Further, Suetonius depicts Nero's first performance as a singer, which took place in Naples. Suetonius claims, most likely falsely, that "he [Nero] did not cease singing until he had finished the number which he had begun, even though the theatre was shaken by a sudden earthquake shock".²⁵ In Suetonius's descriptions of Nero, while less upfront than Tacitus, he still indicates his distaste for Nero's artistic undertakings. Not only was Nero's performance seen widely as an embarrassment to Roman aristocracy, but his intense commitment to the arts only strengthened these feelings. While Suetonius does not directly make note of this, rather taking on a largely negative tone,

²³ Suetonius, *Nero* 11.1-2.

²⁴ Sam Van Overmeire, "Habit of Foreign Kings," 768.

²⁵ Suetonius, *Nero* 20.2.

Tactius's *Annals* provides his own and others harsh criticisms of Nero's artistically rooted goals which were shown through his repeated and grandiose efforts.

Nero's performances as an actor on stage are also multilayered in meaning, as other aspects besides class structure influenced how they were received by the public. In conjunction with class structure, Champlin also addresses the ways in which Nero seemingly used plays to express events within his own life while also taking inspiration from Greek tragedies as he navigated both political and personal struggles. In many of the plays in which Nero performed, the subject matter held considerable parallels to his own life and the rumors which surrounded him. Nero played both Orestes and Oedipus, both of which deal with rumors concerning Nero and his mother. Like Orestes, Nero was said to have murdered his mother, and like Oedipus, rumors circulated that Nero and Agrippina had an incestuous relationship soon before her death. Champlin argues that during all of Nero's performances, himself and the audience would have been aware that Nero was knowingly connecting himself to his roles, "In view of what we know about...the power of myth in public life at Rome, every person present must have realized that...he [Nero] was identifying himself in some way with the character he played: he could not have avoided the association"²⁶ Taking into account the importance of theater in Rome as previously discussed, Nero's choice to portray himself as two men on stage, one of who killed his mother and another which each engaged in incest, is as dramatic as it is intriguing. There are multiple ways to view Nero's performances as Orestes and Oedipus, with varying degrees of Nero's acknowledgment of the rumors concerning himself and Agrippina. Nero may have been identifying himself with the characters based on his own life experiences, or perhaps making a joke out of the rumor of incest circulating amongst Roman elites. In each scenario, Nero would have aligned himself heavily with not only the characters, but to the act of performing on stage

²⁶ Edward Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," 99.

itself. Through his stage performances, Nero placed himself beside the other actors of Rome, who were often stripped of their Roman citizenship and treated as degraded outsiders.²⁷

The rumor of incest between Nero and Agrippina remains unconfirmed, supported in various degrees by ancient historians. Tacitus suggests doubt in the rumor, though entertains its possibility when discussing Agrippina's death, which Tacitus fully believes was Nero's doing.²⁸ Suetonius only addresses a possible sexual relationship between Nero and Agrippina when discussing Nero's other deviant sexual behaviors, presenting it as further evidence of Nero's perversion.²⁹ The way in which the possible incestuous relationship is addressed by Tacitus and Suetonius is unsurprising, falling in line with each of their respective writing styles. By connecting a possible sexual relationship between Nero and Agrippina to her murder, Tacitus suggests a more political motivation. In contrast, Suetonius groups Nero and Agrippina's relationship primarily in conjunction with Nero's other relationships, taking a more socially focused stance. The role of theater in Rome, as discussed by Champlin and Boatwright, exhibits both social and political undertones in Rome, despite the lack of value Roman aristocracy placed upon performance. Acting as the merging point of Roman social life, class, and politics, Nero's on stage presentation as Orestes and Oedipus is reflective of not only how Nero viewed himself in his social life, but also how politics had shaped his outward image.

While Nero's performances as Orestes and Oedipus may give us insight into how he chose to respond to social and political accusations, questions still remain regarding the true nature of his and Agrippina's relationship. Tacitus and Suetonius alleged that Agrippina was attempting to rule through Nero, with Tacitus suggesting that she may have offered herself to her son in order to gain further political control over him. Further, Tacitus and Suetonius agree that

²⁷ Sigrid Mratchek, "Nero the Imperial Misfit," 45.

²⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* 14.8.1.

²⁹ Suetonius, *Nero* 28.2.

Nero was responsible for her murder, which was then followed by Nero's more outward embrace of the arts.³⁰ Nero and Agrippina's relationship is muddled further when Nero's romantic relationships are taken into account, such as his concubine who allegedly resembled his mother.³¹ This continues into a lifelong pattern of Nero's sexual partners presumably resembling one another, particularly his wife Poppaea Sabina and the partners who came after her death. Champlin discusses Nero's marriage to a freedman, Sporus, who was said to resemble Poppaea. Sporus was castrated and treated as Nero's wife and empress, taking on the name Sabina.³² Further, Nero married another freedman, Doryphorus, acting this time as the wife. Suetonius writes that on Nero and Doryphorus's wedding night, Nero was said to "imitate the cries and lamentations of a maiden being deflowered"³³ Suetonius states that others claimed Nero believed that no man was "chaste or pure", and that others simply hid their vices, while Nero would not. Nero additionally took these relationships to the stage, wearing masks depicting his late wife Poppaea and Agrippina when playing many of his female roles, as well as wearing masks of his own face. Nero's playing of female roles and marriages to two freedmen hold Hellenistic undertones, as both cause Nero to appear effeminate. As I discussed previously, Tacitus connects femininity with Greek culture, marking it as one of the reasons respectable Romans should refrain from participating in traditionally Greek activities. Tacitus stated that a lack of military activity would lead Roman men to become effeminate, referring to the increased priority Rome placed on militarism in order to create their own cultural identity.³⁴ Additionally, Tacitus quotes an individual describing the Juvenilia festival, who states that performing on stage is effeminate in a largely negative tone.³⁵ Along with Nero's acting in itself and forming close

³⁰ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.5.1-14.8.1.; Suetonius, *Nero* 11.1-12.1.

³¹ Suetonius, *Nero* 28.2.

³² Edward Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," 102.

³³ Suetonius, *Nero* 29.1.

³⁴ Iiro Kajanto, "Tacitus' Attitude to War," 701.

³⁵ Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.20.1.

personal relationships with freedmen, who were likely associated with Greek culture due to their class, these feminizing aspects only furthered Nero's Greek-oriented image.

In addition to the rumors surrounding Nero and Agrippina's relationship, Nero's zeal for murder is also displayed in his stage performances. As described in ancient sources, Nero's personal relationships and political actions seem more fitting for a Greek tragedy than a historical account. This dramatic display of Nero's life is present in both Suetonius's and Tacitus's work, despite their different approaches to history. Although Tacitus avoids many of the rumors which Suetonius delves into, he cannot escape the discussion of the parallels between Greek plays and the deaths of those close to the emperor. When discussing the death of Nero's tutor and advisor Seneca the Younger, who was made to commit suicide after the Pisonian conspiracy failed, Tacitus describes Seneca similarly to how Plato described Socrates on his death bed. Tacitus claims that Seneca remained stoic and offered these final words, "After a mother's and a brother's murder, nothing remains but to add the destruction of a guardian and a tutor"³⁶ Seneca's death is displayed not only dramatically, but also in a way which paints Seneca as the wise, moral Roman juxtaposed against Nero's cruelty. The same can be said for another conspirator, Epicharis, who remained loyal throughout her violent interrogation. Similarly to Seneca, Epicharis committed suicide, though was not ordered to do so by Nero. Instead of betraying her fellow conspirators, Epicharis remained silent throughout her torture, hanging herself on a chair with a piece of her clothing.³⁷ Tacitus displays Epicharis as a woman of virtue, using her willpower during torture as a way of condemning the conspirators who betrayed the other members.³⁸ Throughout his account of the Pisonian conspiracy, Tacitus garners support and sympathy for the conspirators, displaying the most committed members as ideal Romans.

³⁶ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.62.1.

³⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.57.1.

³⁸ Caitlin Gillespie, "Class and Gender in the Opposition of Nero," *Helios* 46, no. 2 (2019): 148.

Despite their differing motives, the conspirators all aimed to free Rome from its current emperor, who Tacitus has previously established as uncommitted to Rome's political and military centered goals.

Throughout his history of Nero, Tacitus criticizes Nero on his failure to lead Rome as well as his pursuit of athletic and artistic abilities, giving modern historians a clear sense of his overall negative perception of the former emperor. Further, Tacitus makes an account of the reasoning of the attempted assassination made by conspirator Subrius Flavus, who offered to stab Nero while he was singing on stage.³⁹ According to Tacitus, Subrius Flavus was questioned by Nero himself once the conspiracy had been made known, with Flavus stating, "I began to hate you when you turned into the murderer of your mother and wife—a chariot-driver, an actor, a fire-raiser".⁴⁰ Subrius Flavus's reasoning, as told by Tacitus, is striking when considering each of its individual elements. Subrius Flavus places Nero's acting and chariot-driving alongside the violent crimes of murder and the burning of Rome. It is unclear how reliable Tacitus's account of Subrius Flavus's justifications are, just as facts remains unclear regarding Seneca's death. However, the reliability of Tacitus's accounts does not affect how *Annals* went on to shape how future generations view Nero. In the very foundation of Tacitus's writing, Nero's artistic interests are portrayed as largely negative and non-Roman, with the tragic death of Seneca and later Nero's suicide as a fitting climax of his cruelty and cowardice.

Along with Seneca's forced suicide, the murders of Poppaea Sabina, Agrippina, and Nero's adopted son Rufrius Crispinus could have been a reenactment, at least in part, of Greek myths. Ancient historian Cassius Dio makes note that the first attempt to murder Agrippina, which used a ship with a trick door, may have been inspired by a prop in a play which Nero,

³⁹ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.50.1.

⁴⁰ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.67.1.

Poppaea, and Seneca once saw.⁴¹ When this plan failed, Nero sent men to kill Agrippina, whose final words, “Smite my womb”, are equally as fitting for a Greek tragedy as Seneca's were, as both bravely accepted their deaths despite the Roman aristocracy's objection to their murders. After the death of Agrippina, Nero professed that he was plagued by nightmares, and like Orestes, was followed by his mother's ghost.⁴² Although Agrippina's final words may not have been as dramatic as Tacitus has written them, Nero's self-identification as Orestes and Oedipus act as a more reliable source of Nero's feelings. Orestes and Oedipus were each guilty of their crimes, though they also were involved in situations which the audience could empathize with. Orestes killed his mother for the greater good, and Oedipus had incestuous relations with his mother unknowingly. Through his performances as Orestes and Oedipus, Nero not only responded to the rumors, but also provided a glimpse into his own guilty conscience. Although it would seem unwise for Nero to address rumors which could cause his peers to turn against him, perhaps Nero wished others to know the murder of his mother had not come from a place of violent delight, but necessity.

The murder of Nero's adopted son Rufrius, who according to Suetonius was drowned while fishing, also has ties to Greek myth. Modern historian R.M. Frazer notes that this mirrors the Greek myth of Palamedes, who in some versions was drowned by Odysseus and Diomedes during a fishing expedition.⁴³ Suetonius also discusses the death of Poppaea Sabina, Nero's second wife, in conjunction with Nero's philhellenism. Suetonius states that Nero and the pregnant Poppaea had argued over Nero coming home late from the races. In a fit of rage, Suetonius claims Nero kicked Poppaea, killing both her and her unborn child.⁴⁴ Tacitus and

⁴¹ Cassius Dio, 61.12.2.

⁴² Edward Champlin, “Nero Reconsidered”: 102.

⁴³ R.M. Frazer, “Nero the Artist-Criminal,” *The Classical Journal* 62, no.2 (1966): 19.

⁴⁴ Suetonius, *Nero* 35.3.

Cassius Dio do not share the same version as Suetonius, with Tacitus arguing Nero acted simply as an outburst and Cassius Dio claiming Nero had fallen or pressed against her belly. Tacitus and Dio each make no assertion of Nero's guilt or innocence, leaving his true intentions open to interpretation. Although Suetonius is alone in claiming a connection between Poppaea's death and horse racing, the very existence of his version, especially coupled with Nero using Poppaea's face as a mask, places Nero's relationship with Poppaea directly in line with his athletic and artistic pursuits. It was not unusual for Romans to act as spectators at chariot-races, though its presence within Suetonius's account harkens back to the image Nero crafted for himself, especially later in his life when Nero would come to identify himself heavily with Apollo, Sol, and Augustus. Further, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio often group Nero's athletic ventures with his artistic, with Tacitus specifically referencing Nero's chariot-racing along with his music, stating, "It was an old desire of his to drive a chariot and team of four, and an equally repulsive ambition to sing to the lyre in the stage manner"⁴⁵ Although it may have not been negative for the Roman aristocracy and Emperors to attend horse races, Nero was already associated with the disgraceful act of participating in them, along with other Greek style performances, making any such association tainted. Moreover, the connection between Poppaea's death and horse races is more subtle than other connections made between the deaths of Nero's loved ones and his philhellenism, such as the death of Rufius Crispinus, it nevertheless shows the reader how far-reaching the taboo and non-Roman aspects of Nero's life affected how historians wrote about him.

Nero's display of his own life, relationships, and political struggles on stage is intriguing in more ways than one. By simply choosing to act on stage, Nero directly opposed Roman expectations of aristocracy, which were held the highest in regards to the emperor. This is only

⁴⁵ Tacitus, *Annals* 14.14.1.

further exemplified by his other acts of defiance, such as the Juvenilia festival, which were poorly accepted by the elite. Chiefly, while already angering Roman aristocracy by openly participating and encouraging philhellenism, Nero further aligned himself with taboo aspects of his life which were already affecting his political image. In this sense, Nero's stage performances combined his philhellenism with his volatile, and often bloody, personal life, codifying the many objections already made against him.

While Nero's encouragement of the arts, development of games, and display of his personal life on stage all held deep political ties, the most outwardly Greek political statement was Nero's connection to Apollo. As discussed by Champlin in his article "Nero, Apollo, and the Poets," Nero took on the image of Apollo, a lyre-player or citharode, only near the end of his reign.⁴⁶ During this time, Nero would also identify himself with Sol, a charioteer. Although more direct imagery connecting Nero to these Gods would come in the mid to late 60s CE, Nero's association with Apollo can be traced all the way back to the Juvenilia festival in 59, where he first publicly presented himself as a citharode. However, the most notable forms of philhellenism in relation to Apollo and Sol occurred with the construction of the *Domus Aurea* from 64 to 68 and Nero's return to Rome after his tour of Greece, each soon before his death.

The Great Fire of Rome is perhaps what Nero is most known for, not only because of the immense destruction of the city, but also due to the rumors which circulated concerning Nero's involvement. Tacitus suggests that Nero may have started the fire, though does not make a concrete claim.⁴⁷ Suetonius, however, claims that Nero was the sole cause of the fire, which came after a slew of brutal executions.⁴⁸ Modern historians have yet to come to a common answer to the question of whether Nero started the fire, though this has made little impact on the

⁴⁶ Edward Champlin, "Nero, Apollo, and the Poets," *Phoenix* 57, no. 3/4 (2003): 276.

⁴⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.38.1.

⁴⁸ Suetonius, *Nero* 38.1.

repercussions of the rumor. Both Tacitus and Suetonius write that as the fire was moving through Rome and near the Palatine house where Nero was located, Nero supposedly sang the “Sack of Ilium” on his private stage.⁴⁹ The image of Nero singing of the Fall of Troy during the Great Fire of Rome was only further solidified by the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, which came soon after the fire. The architecture of the *Domus Aurea* showed clear signs of Greek influence, featuring a large golden statue of Nero as Sol and murals depicting the Trojan War.⁵⁰ Tacitus describes the building of the *Domus Aurea*, which was located in a central part of Rome, as “vulgarized by luxury”, similarly to how he described Nero’s parties, banquets, and social life before the Great Fire, “Nero himself, defiled by every natural and unnatural lust had left no abomination in reserve with which to crown his vicious existence”⁵¹ The extravagance of the *Domus Aurea* itself, coupled with its Hellenistic imagery, reinforced the negative feelings Roman aristocracy already held for Nero. Like his stage performances, Nero’s *Domus Aurea* brought philhellenism to the juncture of his social and political life, which then solidified his image and message to both the Roman aristocracy and plebs. Just as Nero’s performances as Oresetes and Oedipus perpetuated gossip amongst the Roman elite, the construction of the *Domus Aurea* only led to increased criticism.

Nero’s return from his tour of Greece in 66, in which he competed in various athletic and artistic competitions such as the Olympics, also included imagery of Apollo and Sol, as well as the Roman triumph. Suetonius states that Nero came into Rome through a part of the wall which was opened, as was customary for winners of sacred games. Going on, he writes that Nero was accompanied by white horses, riding in the chariot which was used by Augustus, wearing a

⁴⁹ Suetonius, *Nero* 38.2.

⁵⁰ Edward Champlin, “Nero Reconsidered”: 106.

⁵¹ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.42.1 and 15.37.1.

purple robe and Greek cloak adorned with gold stars, as well as an Olympic crown.⁵² Here, Nero not only draws directly from Greek culture, which was exemplified by his return directly from Greece, but also from the deities which he aligned himself with. However, what was the most infuriating for the Roman elite was not simply Nero's involvement in the Olympics or his image as Apollo, but his self-awarded triumph. A Roman triumph was a parade through the city after the Roman military was victorious in battle. Mary Beard discusses the Roman triumph at length in her book, writing that it was "the most outstanding honor a Roman general could hope for"⁵³ During Roman triumphs, generals rode in chariots accompanied by their soldiers, bearing the wealth they gathered while abroad. Triumphs also held a religious significance in Rome, as the parades led to temples where sacrifices to the Gods were then made. While earlier emperors, such as Augustus, also identified themselves with Apollo when returning from war, Nero's use of a triumph is entirely different. Nero openly identified himself with Apollo the lyre-player and Sol the charioteer due to his "triumph" over the arts, not in war, bringing back the wealth of his prizes won in the Olympics, and not through pillaging. Moreover, Nero places himself in the role of a general during his triumph, though Nero never *was* a general, and had never been to war. Rather, in doing so, Nero shows both the Roman aristocracy and plebs that he views himself in the same way Romans view victorious generals, and that he believes he is deserving of the same praise, despite never earning any military accomplishments.⁵⁴ Upon his return from Greece, Nero can be viewed as attempting to begin a cultural transition or transformation, where victors in the Greek tradition match victors in the Roman. Nero left Rome, where he had already created festivals, games, and events in the Greek model, to fully immerse himself in the Greek

⁵² Suetonius, *Nero* 25.1.

⁵³ Mary Beard, "The Question of Triumph," *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1–2.

⁵⁴ Mary Beard, "The Boundaries of the Ritual," *The Roman Triumph*, 269.

culture of athletics and the arts. Upon his return, Nero wears the Olympic crown as a symbol of his triumph over athletics and the arts, the highest honor one could earn, equalled in his presentation as a general. Moreover, by riding in the same chariot which Augustus rode during his triumph, Nero shows that the value of war is equal to the value of art and athletics. In this presentation of himself, Nero appears less Roman than he does Greek, or perhaps less an emperor than a God.

Nero's use of Apollo and Sol can be viewed similarly to Nero's stage performances, both in their connection to Nero's life and their larger impact on his legacy. Like his use of the masks and choice of roles, Nero's decision to depict himself as Apollo and Sol reveal aspects of his inner life which cannot be found in the writing of ancient historians. While Sol acts as the God of the sun in Roman mythology, Apollo holds significant meaning in Greek mythology. Like Sol, Apollo is also the God of the sun, with the addition of music and poetry. Further, Apollo represented the ideal masculine form: a young and athletic male, which tied Apollo to Greek athletic culture as well. The further Nero moved from traditional Roman values towards philhellenism, the more he carefully crafted his public image. Before the Great Fire of Rome and the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, Nero participated in and encouraged the arts, though did not present himself as a direct representation of such values. However, after the fire and construction of the *Domus Aurea*, Nero places himself as the center of Roman art and athleticism, acting as the patron of these values. This is exhibited most clearly during Nero's return from Greece, in which he brings back all that he had gathered during his time away, just as Apollo acts as the giver of the arts.

The murder of Agrippina, Poppaea, Rufrius Crispinus, and Seneca the Younger, as well as the Great Fire of Rome, and ultimately Nero's suicide have each added to Nero's infamy.

However, modern historians are unable to confirm Nero's involvement in the Great Fire, the death of Poppaea, or the incestuous relationship with his mother. With so much of Nero's life shrouded in doubt, how did his legacy become what it is today? The answer is complex, as Nero likely *did* commit many of the crimes which he was accused of. However, what sets Nero apart from other Roman emperors is not his violent actions, but the negative perception Roman aristocracy had of him. It is fitting that Nero is beside Julius Caesar as one of the most well known Roman leaders, as each was the target of conspiracies by the senate, and in Nero's case, the Roman military as well. Unlike Caesar, Nero did not anger the senate over his accumulated power, but rather his open contribution to Hellenistic culture in Rome and a lack of attention towards traditional Roman values, such as the military and imperialism. Even in his death, Nero could not escape the association between himself and his love of art, with Suetonius writing Nero's final words were supposedly "What an artist the world is losing!"⁵⁵ Further, the events which spurred Nero's suicide are telling of Nero's inadequate attention to Rome's military ventures. Suetonius writes that even after the news that Galba and the Spanish provinces had rebelled against him, any good news was celebrated with lavish feasts and performances.⁵⁶ Nero's troops had turned against him, only after the Pisonian conspiracy had failed years prior. Nearing the end of his reign, from 65 to 68, Nero faced opposition from both the Senate and the military, two of the most vital pillars of Roman culture. Moreover, the writings of ancient historians give an incomplete picture of who Nero was as an individual, as well as an emperor. However, it is possible to view these histories collectively, with an attempt to read inbetween the lines. Philhellenism defined Nero's life in many ways, both through how he chose to rule, and how ancient historians portrayed him in their histories. In each of his atrocities, such as the

⁵⁵ Suetonius, *Nero* 49.1.

⁵⁶ Suetonius, *Nero* 42.1.

murder of Agrippina or the Great Fire of Rome, sits an underlying theme of Nero's lacking Roman attitude.

William B. Gwyn discusses the formation of Nero the "tyrant" in the Middle Ages, which helped solidify Nero as the prime example of a bad ruler. Gwyn writes that the idea of the tyrant was introduced to Romans through Greek dramas in the middle of the third century BCE, evolving into a series of identifiable traits by the Late Republic and Early Empire. Traits such as cruelty, lust, and violence were heavily associated with a tyrant, and still are today. However, Gwyn stresses that Roman historians did not judge simply by one's actions, but the overall character of a given ruler.⁵⁷ Viewing Nero not through a modern, evidence-based account of his life, but through the opinions and judgments made by Roman aristocracy and ancient historians, Nero appears far worse than nearly all other Roman emperors. Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Suetonius all focus much of their histories on Nero's poor moral character. However, the judgements made by Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio may, in our modern understanding, hold much less weight than we currently allow them to. As I discussed previously, Tacitus strongly supported Rome's militarism and imperialism, through which he reveals some of his personal opinions on morals and vice. Although Tacitus condemned the vices of brutality and greed, which he claimed were common amongst soldiers, he argued they were above "effeminacy and degeneracy of the city populace", which were more morally objectionable.⁵⁸ It is no coincidence that Tacitus, who wanted Rome to be successful in a militaristic sense, would give the vices commonly found in soldiers more leeway than ones that he believed would negatively affect the war effort. In these ancient histories, Nero's artistic and athletic actions, which seem morally neutral by modern standards, are paired with a negative judgment of overall character. Nero's

⁵⁷ William B. Gwyn, "Cruel Nero: The Concept of the Tyrant and the Image of Nero in Western Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* 12, no. 3 (1991): 426–27.

⁵⁸ Iiro Kajanto, "Tacitus' Attitude to War," 715.

poor character in regards to his enjoyment of athletics and the arts relies solely on these ancient standards. Without digging into the details of Nero's life and the standards to which he was held, the modern opinion on Nero takes on the opinions of ancient writers blindly and without criticism.

An example of Nero's poor moral character and misplaced values, according to the standards of ancient Roman elites, can be found through an account of Nero regarding his actions taken during a military conflict in 68. While training his voice in Naples, Nero was given news of a revolt occurring in Gallia Lugdunensis led by its governor, Julius Vindex. Suetonius claims that Nero took little action for eight days, choosing instead to indulge in his artistic and athletic training. However, when Nero begins receiving insulting proclamations from Vindex, he only takes action when one taunts that he is a poor lyre-player.⁵⁹ Nero soon returned to Rome, where he gathered his consuls to the *Domus Aurea*, though not for political or military discussions. Rather, Nero performed for them the water organ, later summoning senators in the night to show his skills.⁶⁰ Like his love of the theater, Nero's fixation on art as opposed to politics does not strike the modern reader as particularly immoral. Though, like the blurry truth of the many rumors Suetonius writes of, modern opinion does little to affect Nero's overall legacy, which was crafted in the ancient world, even before his death.

Nero's legacy is only further complicated when it comes to assessing the types of sources that are available to us in the present day. Although Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio all wrote history differently and interpreted Nero from different perspectives, the plebs point of view is almost entirely unknown. When writing about the aftermath of Nero's death, Suetonius does not mention the plebs specifically, though hints at their reaction. Suetonius writes that there

⁵⁹ Suetonius, *Nero* 40.4–41.1

⁶⁰ Harry Morgan, "Nero's Experiments with the Water-Organ," *The Classical Quarterly* 72, no.1 (2022).

were some Romans who continued to decorate Nero's tomb, make statues of him, or even some who believed that he was not truly dead and would one day return.⁶¹ While Suetonius does not mention the classes of the individuals which continued to praise Nero, it is reasonable to deduct that they were likely not a part of the senatorial families, or were Roman elites. Throughout Nero's life, Roman aristocracy showed extreme displeasure with Nero's interests, goals, and public image. However, in the sources available to us, it appears as though plebs did not despise Nero as the aristocracy did. The final two years of Nero's reign in Tacitus's *Annals* are lost, though another telling of Nero's death can be found in Cassius Dio's work. While Dio does not mention the plebs, he does share similarities with how Suetonius described Nero's final days. Nearly identical to Suetonius, Dio writes that Nero's final words were "Jupiter, what an artist parishes in me!"⁶² Further, after Nero's death, Dio writes of some of Nero's failings while emperor, which include his constant granting of gifts, frequent visits to the theater, his granting of citizenship to foreigners, and making grand yet impossible promises. Dio argues that even though he went to great lengths, Nero was unable to form allies with others within the Roman aristocracy, keeping only a few favorites that were "like himself", such as Sporus.⁶³

By citing Nero's love of the arts and athletics as the reason behind the political turmoil which surrounded his reign, Dio suggests that these were the amongst worst of his traits, or at least equal to his other crimes. Although he may have acted cruelly, murdering various members of his family as well as killing Roman elites, Dio still makes note of Nero as an artist. Further, Dio continues on to write of Nero's military and political shortcomings, which Dio argues was the catalyst for his ultimate demise.⁶⁴ The way in which Dio lays out Nero's crimes, beginning

⁶¹ Suetonius, *Nero* 57.1.

⁶² Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 63.29.1

⁶³ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 64.8.2.

⁶⁴ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 64.9.2.

with his philhellenism and ending with his political and military crimes, is similar to Subrius Flavus's account as written by Tacitus, "I began to hate you when you turned into the murderer of your mother and wife— a chariot-driver, an actor, a fire-raiser".⁶⁵ Nestled between Nero's murder and alleged role in the Great Fire of Rome is his love of art, or rather love of Greek culture and values. To mention his acting in conjunction with murder, as was done by both Cassius Dio and Tacitus, shows that acting, or philhellenism, was a crime in and of itself.

With this in mind, it is reasonable to question which crimes pushed Nero from an unlikeable emperor to an infamous tyrant. Because his philhellenism and cruelty are often grouped together by ancient historians, it remains unclear which of Nero's actions tipped the scales. However, unlike Julius Caesar, Nero was given his power by the Roman government through Claudius's adoption of him as a child.⁶⁶ Further, the Pisonian conspiracy in 65 and the political unrest in 68 were not directly caused by a fear of Nero's power. Although some of the conspirators in the Pisonian conspiracy wished to rid Rome of an emperor all together, their goals differed from person to person, with a general distaste for Nero as their only unifying motive. Looking at Nero through these two events, the Pisonian conspiracy and the military struggles in Galba and the Spanish provinces, Nero does not necessarily fit the description that he is so often associated with. While the Pisonian conspiracy and political unrest in 68 point to Nero as an ineffective emperor, they do not lead to a unifying opinion of his cruelty.

Many modern historians, such as Frazer, Champlin, and myself have drawn the connection between the rumors of Nero's life and his artistic pursuits. It seems logical to make these connections, as ancient historians Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio have already laid their foundations. However, none of the ancient historians who wrote about Nero did so when Nero

⁶⁵ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.67.1.

⁶⁶ Suetonius, *Nero* 6.4.; Tacitus, *Annals* 12.41.1-69.1.

was alive, posing an interesting question to the modern reader. While Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio all wrote about the scandalous and taboo aspects of Nero's life in conjunction with his art, it remains unknown if this was truly the case. I propose a version of Nero's life in which many of the rumors concerning Nero, such as his incestuous relationship with Agrippina, may have been strengthened or made entirely *after* Nero's death. While the Roman aristocracy's dislike for Nero is likely not merely a rumor made after Nero's death, as the Pisonian conspiracy and Nero's suicide hinges on his poor relationship with the elite, other aspects of his legacy could have been developed much later. Once Nero had ended his life in such a dramatic fashion, seemingly a fitting finale to the flair which sparked throughout his reign, it is reasonable to concur that rumors would begin flying within the social sphere of the Roman aristocracy. While I have previously followed the more general avenues of discussion, beginning with the rumors and then showing their appearance within Nero's performances and actions, it may have gone the other way. I argue it is equally as plausible that after Nero's death, Romans looked at the murder of Agrippina and Nero's performances a Orestes and Oedipus and concluded there could have been an incestuous relationship, rather than the rumors of incest beginning while Nero was alive. The same could be said for many other rumors, such as Nero's singing the "Sack of Ilium" during the Great Fire of Rome or the resemblance Sprou had to the late Poppaea.⁶⁷

In order to contextualize this theory in the wider scope of Nero's life, as well as in his legacy, I propose a new timeline of Nero's life. I will be focusing on the events that run alongside the most prominent rumors or assumptions within Nero's life, as well as those which connect to his artistic pursuits and philhellenism. Beginning with the murder of Agrippina in 59, the events which can be reasonably proven to have happened are as follows: Nero murders his mother Agrippina in 59, creates the Juvenilia festival in the same year, and later acts in Orestes

⁶⁷ Suetonius, *Nero* 38.2.; Edward Champlin, "Nero Reconsidered," 102.

and Oedipus. Events or rumors which are far more murky, though connected to Agrippina's murder, include: a possible incestuous relationship, Nero's crippling guilt and his belief that his mother's ghost is haunting him, and Nero's concubine(s) which resembled Agrippina. The rumors, rather than the more reasonable facts, all concern Nero's philhellenism to some degree. Generally, the incestuous relationship between Nero and Agrippina is backed by his role as Oedipus, which as previously discussed would have been a connection all Roman classes would have made. Additionally, Nero's role as Orestes, who murdered his mother, shows that Nero made connections to his personal life with the roles he played. However, through the accounts of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio, it is clear that Nero's judgment may have been clouded at times by his love of the arts. While it can be said that Nero must have known the connotations the audience would have made between himself and Oedipus, Nero was also not one for acting in the manner which was expected of him. Just as Nero did not have the foresight to know that acting in plays would anger the Roman aristocracy, or perhaps ignored this, Nero may have ignored the likelihood of rumors circulating due to his roles on stage.

The Great Fire of Rome, which is perhaps what Nero is most known for, is equally steeped in rumor and hearsay as Nero's relationship with Agrippina. While modern historians widely agree that Rome did burn in 64, the question of Nero's involvement has not been answered, and likely will remain in this state. As done with Agrippina's murder, I will lay out what historians generally agree upon in regards to the Great Fire: the fire occurred in 64, Nero placed all responsibility for the fire on Christians, and soon after Nero began the construction of the *Domus Aurea*, or Nero's Golden House. The larger question remains unanswered: did Nero start the fire, and/or did he sing the "Sack of Ilium" as it burned? While it is possible that these rumors are true, they still follow the trend of ancient historians discussing rumors which are

closely associated with Nero's philhellenism. Although the burning of Rome concerns Nero's overall cruelty, which Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio all claim was part of his overall character, the singing of the "Sack of Ilium" and the architecture of the *Domus Aurea* have Hellenistic origins. I propose that it is likely that after the fire and construction of the *Domus Aurea*, which featured iconography, architecture, and art in the Greek tradition, Nero's signing of the "Sack of Ilium" was born. Further, Nero angered many Romans, both the aristocracy and plebs alike, in his building of the *Domus Aurea*, which cost the Empire vast amounts of money while also taking up prime real estate which was once the location of many homes. According to Suetonius, various notes were circulated throughout Rome during this time, one of which stated, "Nero, Orestes, Alceon their mothers slew" and another which stated, "While our ruler his lyre doth twang and the Parthian his bowstrong, Paeon-singer our prince shall be, and Far-darter our foe", making reference to his previous controversies.⁶⁸ However, Suetonius also states that Nero did not address these notes or attempt to locate their writers, which falls in line with other rumors throughout Nero's life. Nero, like the rumor of his incestuous relationship with Agrippina, did not attempt to punish those who circulated it, despite the ancient historian's assertions that he was violent and cruel by nature. I argue that this may be due to the fact that these rumors may have occurred after Nero's death, as Nero's dramatic ending surely must have sparked heated discussions amongst plebs and Roman elites alike, perhaps even causing the production of the notes which Suetonius references. When looking back on Nero's reign, which continuously angered the Roman aristocracy, it is reasonable to concur that the rumor of Nero burning down Rome, then singing of the Fall of Troy, may have been created and circulated near the end of his reign or after his death, thus finding its way into ancient historian's writings.

⁶⁸ Suetonius, *Nero* 39.2.

I argue it is equally as likely to imagine Roman elites gossiping about Nero's life, coming up with rumors of him murdering Poppaea, especially due to his public execution of his wife Octavia, who Suetonius asserts he divorced twelve days before marrying Poppaea.⁶⁹ Further, the assumption that Sporus held a resemblance to Poppaea can also be questioned, as the discussion of Nero's sexual life is prevalent within Tacitus's, Dio's, and most notably Suetonius's writings. Because Nero's relationships were so closely connected to his philhellenism, particularly in regards to his on stage performances, the reliability of the available ancient sources must come into question. This is only strengthened by the way in which many aspects of Nero's life are portrayed by ancient historians, such as the death of Agrippina, Seneca, Epicharis, and Nero, which are highly dramatized. Nero himself tied his legacy to his philhellenism, such as his use of a Roman triumph, modeled after Augustus, to display his victory in the Greek games.⁷⁰ There is an irony to the way in which Nero's life was written about after his death. Nero himself, involved in the arts and Greek traditions, would ultimately be portrayed in the same tragic and dramatic way. While there is no doubt that Nero likely murdered many people, even those closest to him, as well as committed many atrocities, there still remains questions concerning the validity of his most infamous acts.

Was Nero the most tyrannical amongst all Roman emperors, or the most tyrannical ruler in history? This is a matter of opinion and speculation which our ancient sources cannot answer, though this does not ensure that modern historians, such as myself, will not wonder. While a definitive answer cannot be contrived, there is still a value to be found in the questioning of why we think of Nero the way we do. As I have discussed, I propose that Nero's open and unapologetic love of Greek culture and values has much to do with his modern reputation. From

⁶⁹ Suetonius, *Nero* 35.3.

⁷⁰ Suetonius, *Nero* 25.1.

the early years of his reign, Nero acted in ways which angered the Roman aristocracy, precisely the people who would come to write his history. What matters most in our modern understanding of Nero is not what he *actually* did in his life, but how his actions were received by the people who had the power and education to carry on his memory. This does not negate the undoubtedly evil actions Nero likely did commit, nor does it aim to erase all our modern beliefs about who he was as a person. Rather, it attempts to sift through the boundless rumors, gossip, and hearsay in order to contextualize Nero not only within his own lifetime, but centuries after.

From this line of thinking, I conclude that modern historians, as well as the general public, may not know as much about Nero as we have come to believe. Certainly there is ample truth in the writings of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio, though I argue there are also ample mistakes or misinterpretations. Due to the lack of primary sources written by Nero himself, one cannot say for certain that he slept with his mother, burnt down Rome, or bellowed before his death “What an artist the world is losing!” However, what is known about Nero is still intriguing, especially when coupled with these rumors. Nero was unlike any emperor before him, encouraging athletics, the arts, and a pursuit of Greek culture which followed him long after his death, continuing to anger Roman elites, such as Tacitus, for generations. Nero has long outgrown a simple historical memory, having been made into an exemplary tyrant, a madman amongst the mighty Romans, and an embarrassment to one of the world's most powerful empires. However, ancient historians may have been willing to overlook Nero’s murderous tendencies, just as they have done for so many other Roman emperors, had it not been for his lyre-playing, horse-racing, and masked performances on a public stage. Nero’s mistake was not in the songs he sung or the roles he played, but that he ever took the arts past the walls of his

palace. Perhaps if Nero had murdered a thousand barbarians or conquered foreign lands, riding his chariot through Rome with the spoils of war, we would hardly know of Agrippina's untimely death or Nero's love of Greek culture.

Nero's infamy, as I have been aiming to prove, lies within his philhellenism and not necessarily within his proven actions. So much of Nero is lost within Tacitus's, Suetonius's, and Dio's descriptions of his life, as the very details which make Nero so fascinating are the ones which remain in perpetual question. Despite these factors, it can be known that Nero's philhellenism made a much larger impact on his life and on his legacy than is often given credit. Just as its effects ruled his life, philhellenism has governed the world's continued memory and understanding of Nero, both as an individual and as a figure within the greater history of Rome.

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