2014

**Suetonius the Ventriloquist**

Cynthia Damon  
*University of Pennsylvania, cdamon@sas.upenn.edu*

---

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers](https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers)

Part of the [Classics Commons](https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers)

---

**Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)**


---

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/55](https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/55)  
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Suetonius the Ventriloquist

Abstract
This chapter surveys Suetonius’ prose style, particularly his tendency to include the emperors’ own words in verbatim quotation. The metaphor of the ‘ventriloquist’ is apt for Suetonius, who frequently uses his biographical subject’s own language to display their character. This method is in direct contrast with the custom of Roman historians, especially Tacitus, who rewrites the original material in his sources, including speeches, to fit with the overall tone and texture of his own history. Suetonius permits the diction and rhythm of other writers to intrude in his biographies, but he does this for useful effect, and is not devoid of his own signatures of style and authorial voice. Suetonius’ prose is redeemed as more artful than in previous estimations, which have often found it to be plain and monotonous.

Keywords
Suetonius, style, prose rhythm, sentence structure, quotations

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Classics

This book chapter is available at ScholarlyCommons: https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/55
Suetonius the Ventriloquist

Cynthia Damon

For the students who persuaded me to give Suetonius another look

The scene: a public latrine. Seated: the poet Lucan, with consessores ('fellow-sitters'). Sound effects: a louder-than-usual fart (clarior . . . crepitu ventris), cueing the line 'underground thunder, you'd think' (Vita Luc. 16–19). In this memorable episode from Suetonius' Life of Lucan, one of the many noteworthy elements is the wit. Not that the utterance 'sub terris tonuisse putes' is itself particularly witty. Indeed, one might see it as a rather feeble attempt to make light of an embarrassing event. But it turns out, so Suetonius tells us, that the half-hexameter is not the poet's own, but Nero's; its original context must have been very different. (Ab)using it as he does, Suetonius' Lucan mocks his imperial master and poetic rival, making Nero's words serve Lucan's purposes. He conjures up the emperor, so to speak, and does so in a setting where an emperor is out of place. The effect is instantaneous: the latrine's other occupants flee (magna consessorum fuga, Vita Luc. 17–18), presumably alarmed by the blasphemy.

Any number of ideas and words in the preceding two paragraphs may have caused eyebrows to rise. The scatology of the latrine scene, of course, but also the implicit links between dissident poet and biographer, or comedian and biographer, and the expressions 'readable,' 'art form,' and especially 'good lines.' Those raised eyebrows are a legacy of generations of commentary on Suetonius' style. So before turning to the words that Suetonius puts in imperial mouths, I survey, in section 1, what we can glean about Suetonius' attitude to literary style from his career and surviving works. In section 2, there are critical assessments of Suetonius' own style, both the long-standing complaints about his stylistic deficiencies and more recent arguments for some stylistic niceties and even cunning. Suetonius the ventriloquist comes forward in section 3.

The analogy extends even to titulature: Edgar Bergen's act was called The Charlie McCarthy Show, just as Suetonius' biographies are referred to as the Caesars.
Pliny calls Suetonius a scholasticus (Ep. 1.24), the Suda categorizes him as a grammaticus (t 895), and John Lydus labels him a philologus (Mag. 1.34). Neither in absolute terms nor in context are these labels perspicuous. The first may indicate a person active in the declamation schools of the day—one thinks of the ‘huge crowd of schoolmen [scholasticorum]’ in the opening scene of the Satyricon, for example (Sat. 6.1). But Pliny tells us that a country estate would also be an appropriate setting for a scholasticus, at least for one who needed to ‘lift his head [presumably from his books] and refresh his eyes’ (Ep. 1.24.4); we are a long way from a schola here. Grammaticus can be narrowly construed as a professional label ('school teacher') or can refer more generally to a ‘man of letters’, or ‘scholar’. Suetonius' preferred model, Tibullus, however, favoured obscuration (exoletas... et reconditas uoces auctupanti, Aug. 86.2; adfectione et morositate nimmer obscurebat stilum, Tib. 70.1). Suetonius asserts the necessity of style even for boys in the first stage of their schooling. These, he says, benefit from exercises designed to develop their eloquence—set themes, paraphrases, addresses, statements of cause, and other things of this sort (Gramm. 4.5)—and schools in which students are not exposed to these preliminaries risk sending their graduates on with a style regretfully dry, even arid (sicci omnino atque aridi pueri, Gramm. 4.5). His own education, he tells us, persuaded him of the value of such compositions, and motivates his criticism of the lazy and inarticulate teachers at present who omit them from the elementary curriculum (Gramm. 4.6).

Apropos of literature more generally, Suetonius advocates breadth of appeal over narrowness. His rather unflattering picture of the eager-beaver eruditus who dedicated commentaries to Tibullus on his favourite obscure authors, Euphorion, Rhianus, and Parthenius (Tib. 70.1–3), is consonant with his criticism of Valerius Probus, a grammaticus who, instead of working on texts from which one might gain glory and profit, devoted himself to editing old and despised works of literature. When Suetonius says that Probus had few disciples and published 'a very few slight works on certain specific questions of limited scope' (Gramm. 24.1–4), these are hardly the sentiments of the bookworm that the former a studiis and a bibliothecis is sometimes taken to be. And Suetonius likes old and outlandish words no better than old and despised texts. He reproduces both Asinius Pollio's dictum that Sallust's historical works were 'sullied by an excessive affection of archaic diction' (Gramm. 10.2), and the sensible stylistic advice given to Pollio by a man who proudly, Suetonius tells us, took Philologus as a cognomen (Gramm. 10.6). Finally, he uses stylistic analysis as a professional tool, and attended to matters of expression on a large scale—condemning his unsatisfactory Ajax-tragedy to 'the sponge', for example—and in minute matters such as the spelling of ipsi (Aug. 85–8). (Indeed, the description of Augustus' style, with its scrupulous attention to clarity of expression and avoidance of 'the putrid odours of recherché words' ('reconditorum uerorum', ut ipse dixit, 'et torribus', Aug. 86.1) is often treated as a proxy for a programmatic statement about Suetonius' own style.)

Among Suetonius' many criticisms of Domitian, for example, is the fact that as a young man he neglected literary studies; he spent no effort on acquainting himself with histories and poems, none even on 'necessary style' (numquam tamen aut historiae carminibusque noscens dis operam ullam aut stilo vel necessario dedit, Dom. 70.1). As a result, in order to express his will to his subjects, Domitian was dependent on 'other men's talent' for his letters and speeches and edicts (epistolae orationesque et edicta alieno ingenio, Dom. 20). Even non-literary texts such as edicts and letters, that is, require a style, and Domitian—who restricted his reading to the commentarii and acta of Tiberius—failed to develop the appropriate one. Augustus, in this respect as in so many others, was exemplary, according to Suetonius.

7 Suetonius himself comments on the varied uses of terms such as these at Gramm. 4.1–3, where he discusses grammaticus, litteratus, poetae interpres, litterator, and grammaticus.
8 For discussion, see Kaster (1995) 320 (on Gramm. 30.2, s.v. scholasticus).
10 Here and elsewhere for Gramm., I use Kaster's translation, which usefully supplies nuances sometimes only implicit in the Latin. For Ciceró's use of philologus, see Q Fr. 2.9.3 and Att. 2.17.1.
11 See e.g. Macé (1900) 56–7 and Mooney (1930) 18, but also the warnings against making such an assumption at Baldwin (1983) 364–7 and Wardle (1998) 436.
2. NON TAM DISERTE QVAM VERE?

If one were to judge by mainstream commentary on Suetonius’ style, he plied the file even more vigorously in the *Caesars*, wearing his prose away to the point that absences predominate. The first such comment, an appraisal by his literary heir in the *Historia Augusta Life of Probus*, at least balances the absence of style with the presence of truth in stating that Suetonius wrote his biographies *non tam diserte quam vere* (‘not so much eloquently as truly’, Prob. 2.7; the question mark in the section heading will be discussed later). Subsequent critics have been less even-handed. Norden’s much-quoted verdict is the most succinct: ‘Suetonius schreibt farblos.’ 15 Wallace-Hadrill’s likewise influential view is more comprehensive:

He . . . has no poetry, no pathos, no persuasion . . . Stylistically he has no pretensions . . . His tone is nothing but didactic . . . He does not speak *in proproa persona*, except to comment on truth or falsehood. He offers no epigrams or *sententiae*. He does not even generally use value-laden adjectives to guide the reader towards approval or disapproval. 14


The colourlessness and reticence of Suetonius’ prose have been located in absences afflicting a wide range of stylistic categories, from diction and sentence structure to narrative devices and even emotion: ‘*uomo senza emozioni e senza sdegni*.’ 15

A recent study of Suetonius’ language use by Carole Fry, for example, which opens with her remark ‘*juger le style des Caesares est une entreprise décourageante*’, argues against the proposition that Suetonius is a technical writer by asserting that he uses almost no technical jargon, and that the technical terms he does use are so much ‘*à la portée de son public*’ that they rarely require glossing. 16 She also looks for, and does not find, Gorgianic figures. 17 Like the author of the *Life of Probus*, she sees compensatory virtues in the text: agreeably rhythmic prose and a strategically effective focus on the topic at hand. 18 But her overall point is that Suetonius focuses on the content (‘*le signifié*’) at the expense of the form (‘*le signifiant*’). On balance, she describes his style as a ‘*prose d’art mitige*’ in which the mitigating elements and absences serve the overriding goal of clarity. 19

Absences are even more salient in a discussion of Suetonius’ ‘expression narrative’ by P. Sage: historical infinitives and historical presents are almost entirely absent in the *Caesars*, as are the other syntactic devices which historians use to inject excitement into their narratives: action verbs in initial position, *cum-inversum*, contrafactual conditions with indicative verbs in the apodosis, and so on. 20 Sage also misses the structural devices of parataxis and *variatio*. The reader’s niggling irritation with the underlying premise of this piece—that Suetonius’ aims are analogous to those of a historian—is somewhat allayed by the fact that Sage’s sample texts are all *per tempora* passages—that is, they are taken from sections with a chronological arrangement like that of a historical narrative. 21

Even on a more abstract plane where things are harder to count, critics notice absences in Suetonius, including that of the author himself: ‘notre auteur affecte souvent de s’effacer devant la réalité, et de ne rien être que le fidèle transscripteur’.22 The word ‘affecte’, used here by Gasco, suggests, of course, that this absence is not simply reticence (more on this later), but others have so taken it.23 Whatever its motivation, the absence of the author may entail an absence of emotion in both writer and reader. ‘Imperturbablement, Sueton énumère des faits qui sont souvent en eux-mêmes d’une atrocité insoutenable: l’uniformité stylistique tend à anesthésier le lector’.24

If we turn from missing elements of style to one that is unusually frequent, Suetonius’ stylistic achievement may still seem rather modest, particularly by comparison with that of Tacitus. His phrases à rallonge (to give them the label bestowed by Chausserie-Lapré) have been the subject of several detailed examinations.25 The most thorough critic, Paola Ramondetti, attests the ‘massiccia prezenza’ in the Caesars of sentences structured like the following: quin etiam speciem libertatis quandam induxit conservatis senatui ac magistralibus et maiestate pristina et potestate (‘Indeed he introduced the appearance of freedom, with the preservation of the senate’s and magistrates’ former dignity and power’, Tib. 30.1).26 Here, the concluding ablative absolute gives some of the specifics underlying the main clause’s general topic: ‘the appearance of freedom’. In Suetonius’ hands, as Ramondetti’s many examples show, such ‘extensions’ explain, support, illustrate, exemplify, or substantiate. They do not have the same unsettling effect as those of Tacitus, who, to make a point that may be illustrated by Suetonius’ statement that in relation to his freedmen and womenfolk, Claudius ‘behaved like a slave, not an emperor’ (non principem sed ministrum eget, Claud. 29.1); Tacitus presses this same charge against this emperor indirectly by blurring.

Tiberio, qui ea simulacra libertatis senatui praebebat (‘Haterius Agrippa vetoed this and was then berated in a speech by Asinius Gallus, to silence from Tiberius, who used to provide these semblances of freedom to the senate, Ann. 1.77.3’). Instead of undermining what precedes, as Tacitus’ ablative absolute here does, or introducing a striking rupture, Suetonius’ rallonges function in close rapport with the main clause. In Ramondetti’s view, they constitute un ‘construito sintattico che gli consente di guidare e di far soffermare il lettore nel background dei “fatti”’.27 The construction, she argues, creates a narrative pause in which the reader focuses on an important detail, as if looking through a magnifying glass.28

Here we come to the question mark in the section heading. Is eloquence really lacking in Suetonius? Readers will differ on how substantial a literary achievement Suetonius’ rallonges represent, but the virtue of Ramondetti’s study is that it offers a systematic argument for the literariness of the Caesars. Any representative collection of earlier, ‘sound-bite’-sized assessments of Suetonius’ style would tend to incoherence, as Lounsbury showed in his ‘Survey of Modern Scholarship’: the distance between ‘the beginning of barbarism’ and ‘a rather colourless epigone of the Classicist movement’ is considerable.29

Within this range, Lounsbury’s own preliminary summary statement on Suetonius’ style strikes a middle ground: ‘clear, concise, simple’.30 Simplicity is perhaps one area in which Suetonius surpasses Tacitus, a point that may be illustrated by Suetonius’ statement that in relation to his freedmen and womenfolk, Claudius ‘behaved like a slave, not an emperor’ (non principem sed ministrum eget, Claud. 29.1); Tacitus presses this same charge against this emperor indirectly by blurring.

---

22 Gasco (1984) 683. The more extreme form of this idea, as maintained by D’Anna (1994: 208), for one, is that Suetonius transmits the style of his sources, and that this is responsible for the stylistic unevenness of the Caesars. For comment, see Gasco (1984) 685 n. 29.

23 E.g. most recently, Ramondetti (2002) 380: ‘i fatti che costituiscono temporaneo e specie nelle Vite dei Cesari devono apparire nel loro nuda evidenza, fusi e amalgamati in un tutto in cui non sia perceptibile alcuna cucitura . . . di indebito intervento da parte dell’Autore’.


the agency in some key events of his principate. But simplicity—in any case, a trait whose literariness is disputable—is hard to square with the stylistic niceties scholars have also found in Suetonius.

Niceties of word order and sentence structure, for example, are helpfully catalogued by Karl Bayer in a long list that includes such things as hyperbaton. For one illustration of the stylistic impact of hyperbaton, consider Suetonius' paraphrase of a protest by the army in Upper Germany against the stingy Galba: *fraudari se praemis nauatae aduersus Gallos et Vindicem operae* ("They were [they said] being cheated of the rewards for their successful exertions against the Gauls and Vindex," *Galb.* 16.2). The gap between *nauatae* and *operae* here puts 'successful' in high relief. This, combined with the word's juxtaposition with the immediately preceding 'cheated of the rewards,' captures well the army's sense of being deprived of a due reward. In Bayer’s view, Sueton macht von den Hyperbata der verschiedensten Strukturen den reichsten Gebrauch. Man kann sagen, sie sind eines seiner stilistischen Hauptmittel. Das überrascht an sich; denn die Beurteiler seines Stils sind sich einig, daß dieser notizenhaft, denkbar nüchtern und unkompliziert sei. After our survey of absences, Bayer's superlatives and the phrase 'stillistischen Hauptmittel' are indeed, as he says, surprising. He himself gives a rather minimalistic account of the function of Suetonius' hyperbata—"as a contribution to brevity—but his tally of stylistic devices would be a good starting point for an investigation of Suetonius' artful prose.

A quite different and more linguistically informed approach to Suetonian rhetoric is on offer in Fry's paper on the use of first-person pronouns. Revising frameworks proposed by Gascou and (for Tacitus) Longrée, Fry teases out a Suetonian ego who does more than provide helpful cross-references (*ut dixit, ut diximus*) and verbal quibbles (*ut dicam*). Fry’s Suetonius has the greatest impact on his readers when he engages in historical argument by using expressions such as *arbitror* ('in my view'), *equidem mirer* ('I myself am inclined to marvel'), or, as in his comment on the contradictory evidence about the distinction of Vitellius’ family, *opinarer,* "I would have supposed [opinarer] that this arose from the emperor Vitellius' flatters and critics, if there weren't different accounts of the family even a little before his time' (Vit. 1.2).

In Fry’s view, *l'usage du "je" crée la relation dialogique la plus forte possible dans l'absence d'un "tu".* The missing ‘tu’ is the reader for whose benefit Suetonius has undertaken his laborious researches, according to Fry, and the author engages with this reader not for the purpose of persuasion, but rather to manifest his ‘fierté de chercheur.’

There are, however, critics who find Suetonius neither engaging nor innocently proud. Granting that Suetonius used language effectively, they nevertheless criticize the effects achieved. Indeed, Michel Dubuisson credits him, so to speak, with *'une technique de déformation historique bien plus subtile encore que celle de César ou même de Tacite'* After touching on Suetonius' deliberate self-contradictions and the insinuations visible in his presentation of things that never happened—the consulsip of Caligula's horse (destinasse . . . traditur, Calig. 55.3), for example, or the removal of Virgil's and Livy's works from libraries (paullum auit quin . . . , Calig. 34.2)—Dubuisson looks in more detail at Suetonius' use of erudition itself as a weapon, one that enables him to exploit a detail to make the worst possible impression, usually by depriving it of its proper historical context. Was Caligula’s 'highway' over the Bay of Naples really a response to Thrasylus’ prediction to Tibertius that Caligula would not become emperor 'any more than horses would ride across the bay', as Suetonius’ grandfather said? (Calig. 19.3). Or was it rather, as Dubuisson asserts, a boast addressed to Parthian religious scruples about crossing water, one of Caligula’s attempts to make himself look superhuman? Suetonius at

---

31 For example, at Ann. 11.30.1, Tacitus leaves it unclear whether Calpurnia (an imperial concubine) or Claudius summons Narcissus to set the condemnation of Mes­salina in motion. And at 11.35.3 it is impossible to determine whether Narcissus (an imperial freedman) or Claudius gives the order to execute the empress.
32 Bayer (2002) 5–6; for the catalogue, see 5–85.
least, as 'le spécialiste des Parthes à Rome', ought to have recognized the symbolism, Dubuisson argues, but preferred to construct an elaborate rhetorical structure supporting a cheap psychological explanation that contributed to the picture of a paranoid Tiberius.40

Dubuisson's list of procedures depicting Suetonius 'en styliste qui avance masqué' can be supplemented from Jacques Gascou's massive study of Suetonius' contribution to historiography.41 As we saw earlier, in Gascou's view, Suetonius only gives the impression of ('affecte') authorial absence. In a chapter entitled 'Suétone et la vérité historique', Gascou considers a variety of techniques used by Suetonius to massage the truth.42 Some are primarily content-related, but he also shows how Suetonius' tone of scientific detachment and even imperturbability allows the shocking facts, as selected and arranged by the author, to rouse outrage by themselves. The long section on the monstrous behaviour of Caligula, for example, contains relatively few editorializing comments; there is no need for them when his material includes men sawn in half (Calig. 27.5), the retaliatory excision of a tongue (27.5), and heaps of human limbs and entrails (28.2). Suetonius, in Gascou's view, uses stylistic means to produce 'une objectivité . . . illusoire', and does so in aid of a moral and political programme.43

Now that we have some sense of the range of approaches that have yielded evidence of style—for better or worse—in Suetonius' writings, I shall turn to his use of quotations.

3. ALIENO . . . INGENIO

Suetonius' citation style in the Diuus Iulius was the subject, forty years ago, of an article by Werner Müller. To counter the idea that Suetonius' procedure was a 'kritikloses Abschreiben seines Zettelkataloges', Müller postulated a hierarchy of impact, with verse citations at the top (eight examples), followed by quotations (twenty examples), indirect statement (insignificant), and impersonal expressions (thirty-eight examples) such as quidam putant ('some people say'), opinio est ('the supposition is'), or alli dicunt ('others say'). Müller argued that if Suetonius is artful in arranging his citations, they will reflect this hierarchy; if Suetonius is indifferent to impact, they won't.44 The demonstration is neat and convincing—even if the notion of the mechanical file-card copyist is something of a straw man—particularly where, as at Iul. 49.3–4, Müller can show a series of citations arranged from least striking to most: indirect statement and direct statements by Cicero on Caesar's alleged dalliance with Nicomedes, followed by a three-line ditty sung at the Gallic triumph.45 It emerges clearly from this survey that verse citations and direct quotations, in particular, regularly function in the Diuus Iulius as the high point and/or conclusion to a rubric.46 This is not just Zitierungsehe but Zitieraufklarung.47

Müller's study suggests one possible riposte to Wallace-Hadrill's observation that Suetonius 'offers no epigrams or sententiae'. Such verbal sequins, so beloved of his contemporaries, may be absent from the Caesars, but many of his quotations appear just where sententiae do in texts that have them, namely, at the end of episodes or rubrics.48 And they have the same strong punctuating effect, as can be seen in parallel versions of Vitellius' proclamation scene.49 In Suetonius' account, the circumstances of the proclamation were chaotic: Vitellius was snatched from a dining room and saluted by his troops, whereupon the ceremony was interrupted by an outbreak of fire in the abandoned dining room. People naturally took this as a bad omen, until Vitellius quipped, 'Take heart! This is a light for us' (bono . . . animo estote! nobis adluctis, Vit. 8.2). The scene ends there, and Suetonius moves on to the situation in Upper Germany. In Tacitus' Histories, Vitellius' proclamation is less chaotic, because Tacitus focuses on its stage-management by the legionarylegates

48 For Quintilian on sententiae and epigrams, see Inst. 8.5. His favourite metaphors for the figure involve light: lumina . . . praecipue in clausebus posta ('lights . . . especially at clause-end'; 8.5.2, cf. 28, 34), netire ('to shine': 19), scientiae (Sparke, 29), oculos eloquentiae ('the "eyes" of eloquence', 34), and clarescit ('brightens': 19). Hence 'sequins'.

49 For discussion of the quotation that punctuates the death scene in the Galba, see Power (2009b).
Cæcina and especially Valens, who bullies Vitellius into accepting the proclamation. Tacitus ends the scene with an epigram about Vitellius, Caecina and especially Valens, who bullies Vitellius into accepting the concupisceret magis quam ut speraret, Hist. 1.52.4. Then Tacitus too moves on to events in Upper Germany. In effect, Suetonius' quotation and Tacitus' epigram do the same stylistic work. The Suetonius passage comes in a per tempora section of the Life rather than a per species section, but we will see many examples further on of a quotation concluding with a rubric—serving, that is, as a structural component that bears as much weight as the topical words that introduce the rubric.50

The structural function identified by Müller for the quotations in the Diuus Julius does not exhaust the interpretative possibilities of Suetonius' quotations. One might look at more Lives, of course. So doing would immediately bring one face to face with the long quotations in the Diuus Augustus, which have no real equivalent in the earlier Life.51 These obviously have a different structural function than the brief quips considered by Müller, and also offer generous helpings of colourful, non-Suetonian language.52 One might also look at the verse quotations and the concomitant issue of the presence of substantial amounts of Greek in a Latin text.53 Or at what is said about emperors by individuals—perhaps especially former emperors—or by collective contemporaries.54 But I return to an idea introduced in the

50 Cf. the two versions of the aftermath of Rubellius Plautus' assassination in Asia Minor (his head was brought back to Rome, where Nero mocked it): both Suetonius (Ner. 35.4: Inquit: 'he said') and Tacitus (Ann. 15.49.4: ipsa principis senba referam, 'I shall report the emperor's very words') mark the moment with Nero's own words. And some quotations are themselves sententiae, as for example Caesar's words at Jul. 34.2: ire se ad exercitum sine duce et inde reuersurum ad ducem sine exercitu ('he was going to face an army without a leader and would return thence to face a leader without an army').

51 See Henderson, ch. 4 in this volume on the anomalous quality of the Diuus Iulius.

52 As indeed do the shorter quotations, which greatly increase the dictionary range of Suetonius' text, taking it down to the smuttiness of Antonius' rude letter to Octavian (Aug. 69.2), and up to the lofty tones in which Vindex invites Galba to accept the throne (Galb. 9.2) and along many byways of specialist vocabulary (spectacles, diceing, etc.) and imperial idiosyncrasies (Domitian's 'bed-wrestling', to mention just one: Dom. 22). In the past, of course, this variety was treated as a stylistic flaw, a form of inconnu (clumsiness), but that may be changing. Fry (2003) 331, for example, suggests that Suetonius systematically applied inconnu as a 'prince gradeur' and 'trait stylistique distinctif'.

53 On Suetonius' Greek quotations, see Hurvitz (1996).

54 The assessment by Gascou (1984) 365 is only a starting point: 'Il n'y a pas là de l'irritation gratuite, mais la volonté de restituer de la façon la plus vivante l'esprit de l'événement, les harems, les passions, qui, à un moment ou à l'autre, agitèrent les soldats ou le peuple, auxquels Suetonius cède pour ainsi dire la parole.'
Lucan himself is favourably characterized as both witty and irreverent, fieri iubet, Dom.
and also as tallying a notch in his poetic rivalry with Nero, which is the context for this scene. Nero, by contrast, loses face: his own words are turned against him. In this passage, Suetonius is an unseen puppet-making a dummy speak. His text runs along from rubric to rubric, and every once in a while he makes a Caesar interject an appropriate comment. 'Every once in a while' is perhaps too modest: Suetonius does this more than 250 times in the course of the twelve Lives. And 'appropriate' is perhaps too neutral: in well over half of these quotations, Suetonius incriminates the Caesars with their own words.

The creative process that Suetonius adopts is nicely exemplified in the Life of Vespasian. At Vespasian's funeral, a mime-actor named Favour performed the traditional impersonation of the defunct. In character as the penny-pinching Vespasian, he asked 'his' agents how much the funeral cost and, at the answer 'ten million sesterces: ex-centurem sui, exclamavit, centum sibi sestertia darent ac se uel in Tiberim proicerent, Vesp.

The effect of the quotation by Suetonius' Lucan is (at least) twofold. As a consequence of the punctuating function already discussed, many of these quotations provide a kind of QED affirmation in topical rubrics, and since the rubrics themselves have a strong moral orientation, such quotations often encapsulate an imperial virtue—or, more often, vice. The biography of Titus, who is introduced as 'humanity's darling' (amor ac deliciae generis humani, Tit. 1.1), has a number of the former type, and the Life of his brother Domitian teems with the latter.

To conclude the rubric about Titus' generosity, for example, Suetonius quotes a 'memorable and duly lauded utterance' (memorabilem... meritoque laudatum vocem), issued spontaneously, it seems, when after dinner Titus realized he had given no gifts that day: 'Friends, I have wasted a day' (amicis, diem perdidi, Tit. 8.1). Suetonius' editorializing comment makes the point of this quotation particularly clear. A paragraph later, on the subject of refraining from bloodshed, Titus tells a rather elaborate story about a failed conspiracy against Titus, the convicted protagonists of which Titus not only allowed to live, but even invited to appear in public with him at the games. The episode concludes with a scene and a quotation from earlier in the response to the conspiracy, when Titus was shown the conspirators' horoscopes and remarked, 'Danger threatens both men, but on another occasion and from another source' (imminere ambobus periculum ad-firmasse, serum quandoque et ab alio, Tit. 9.2). Suetonius' comment here is simply 'which is how things turned out' (sicut esset). Both syntactically and rhetorically, the connection between the quotation and the rubric is indirect; the reader has to work harder to see that Titus' lack of bloodthirstiness manifests itself in his indirect-statement refusal to take the horoscopes—or rather, the horoscope-mongers'—implicit invitation to kill these men. But the reader who has made the connection will remember the whole passage.

Registering disapproval elicits a wider range of techniques, as one would expect, given the amount of disapproval to be registered in these Lives. In addition to quotations supporting direct and indirect criticism, Suetonius uses 'before-and-after' and extended quotations to blacken Domitian. Both techniques are found in his presentation of Domitian's saeuitia ('brutality'), for example. To the young
Domitian, he gives a *Georgics* verse that aligns him with his exemplary brother. 'Early on Domitian was so opposed to any slaughter that . . . , recollecting [recordatus] Virgil's line "before an impious nation feasted on slaughtered bullocks", he intended to issue an edict banning bovine sacrifice' (*Dom. 9.1; the Virgil line is G. 2.538*). (The 'speech' in the passage is perhaps only in Domitian's head, unless Suetonius wants us to imagine him giving voice to his intention and so allowing it to enter the historical record.) This chapter on Domitian's youthful freedom from brutality (and greed) likewise concludes with a quotation, the famous quip that 'the emperor who doesn't punish delatores encourages them' (*princeps qui delatores non castigat, irritat, Dom. 9.3*). But chapter 9 simply prepares the way for two long chapters on the brutality that ensued, which manifested itself in murder (ch. 10) and in murder made worse by verbal games (ch. 11; cf. 11.1: *non solum magnae, sed etiam callidae inopinatae saeuitiae, 'of brutality not only great but even clever and unexpected'). Chapter 11 ends with an extended and direct quotation of words imbued with a deviousness worthy of treatment by Tacitus. Suetonius, however, simply invites you to study them: 'for it is not, in my view, inopportune to know his very words' (*neque enim ab re inopim ant a nostrum hostem et melius ciuem, irritat, Dom. 11.3*). Domitian's words, which are too long to quote here, make Suetonius' point for him.

But there is more to Suetonius' quotations than simple black-and-white didacticism. Lively realism sometimes seems to be an end unto itself. For example, when, in the rubric on Augustus' *ciuitas* ('civilian-like behaviour'), Suetonius lets us hear Augustus tease a plebeian petitioner for behaving 'like [someone offering] an elephant a penny' (*quasi elephanto stipem, Aug. 53.2*), we see Augustus acknowledging that he really is the elephant in the room of imperial society. The evocation is more vivid than strictly pro or con. And sometimes a quotation is simply too good to pass up, regardless of its moral lesson. Wit features prominently in this category, which includes Tiberius' 'I've got a wolf by the ears' when describing the drawn-out succession process, and Caligula's characterization of Livia as 'Ulysses in skirts' and Seneca's style as 'sand without lime' (*Tib. 25.1, Calig. 23.2, 53.2*). 61

---

61 Cf. Wallace-Hadrill (1983) 202: 'One of the strengths of the *Caesars* is that [Suetonius] sees his subjects as men of culture, not simply as men of power.'
Cynthia Damon

Agrippina was that she should be careful not to write or speak 'in a troublesome manner' (moleste, Aug. 86.3), but when we next meet her, she is being chastised by Tiberius for making troublesome complaints, and the menace of the Greek verse quoted at her by Tiberius suggests how dangerous her failure to follow Augustus' advice would prove (Tib. 53.1).

The misfit between Augustus' words and historical outcomes in these two instances yields a rather melancholy irony, but with other emperors, Suetonius seems to wield a sharper edge. Thus, given that a poet and a historian are the first victims of Tiberius' cruelty mentioned by Suetonius in two long chapters on that topic (Tib. 61-2), the fact that he earlier had Tiberius state that 'in a free state speech and thought ought to be free' may suggest that the quotation does not simply indicate Tiberius' dislike of flattery, as it purports to do (Tib. 28), but also sets him up for a subsequent charge of hypocrisy.

Similarly, Suetonius makes Caligula give permission for the distribution of books banned under Tiberius (including those of Cremutius Cordus, the historian alluded to at Tib. 61.3) on the grounds that 'it was greatly in his own interest that every deed be transmitted to posterity' (Calig. 16.1), then spends thirty-four chapters cataloguing Caligula's monstrous deeds for posterity.62 In the next Life, Suetonius' Claudius declares to the praetorians that, since his marriages haven't turned out well, he'll remain a bachelor, and if he doesn't, they can kill him (Claud. 26.2)—but everyone knows that Claudius did marry again, and did get killed, if not by the praetorians. Young Nero, when asked to sign a death warrant, sighed, 'How I wish I was illiterate' (quam uellem .. nescire litteras, Ner. 10.2), a sentiment that might have been echoed by those who later had to indulge Nero's penchant for things literary. The Homeric boast ἐκ μου μένος ξυμφένειν ἐτέραν ('strength is in me still') that Suetonius puts in Galba's mouth at 20.2 is, one might think, an ironic conclusion to a paragraph that begins with iugulatus est ('his throat was slit') and is followed by one about the disposal of Galba's remains (Galb. 21, cf. II. 5.254, Od. 21.426).63 Irony is hard to prove . . . but fun to look for.

Suetonius the Ventriloquist

4. MIMVM VITAE

It would be crass to suggest that Suetonius intended us to see the 'louder-than-usual fart' (clariore ... crepitu uentris) as a debased form of ventriloquism, but it does seem to me, as to Aristophanes, that Eu­cycles' device is a useful analogy for some forms of authorship.64 It could have been used, for example, to fault emperors such as Nero and Domitian for using other men's talent to produce speeches that they themselves delivered. But I hope I have shown that it can also be used to praise our biographer. In the Caesars, Suetonius neatly turns the tables on Caesars who need Senecas; the scholar and, yes, writer Suetonius puts words into the emperors' mouths.65 The Caesars are Suetonius' dummies, and what makes his act so very clever is that he puts their own words there.

62 Dangerous reading, according to the SHA: Commodus, who had the same birthday as Caligula, sent a reader of Suetonius' Caligula to the lions (Comme. 10.2).

63 See Power (2009b) for a discussion of this quotation, and id. (2011) on Claudius quoting Homer and creating, at Suetonius' hands, a joke at his own expense.

64 Seneca must be writing either loosely or facetiously when he pronounces a comparable fart-analogy 'elegant' (Ep. 91.19): eleganter Demetrius noster solet dicere eodem loco sibi esse voces imperitorum quo uentre redditus crepitis. 'Quid enim', inquit, 'mea, sussum isti an desseu somnem? 'Our friend Demetrius spoke elegantly in that saying of his that the utterances of the uneducated came from the same place, as far as he was concerned, as the belly's farts. 'For what's it to me if those fellows give voice from above or below?).

65 Cf. Funaioli (1927) 25 = (1947) 178-9: 'ma un vero scrittore non è.'