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Cynthia Damon

University of Pennsylvania, cdamon@sas.upenn.edu

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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

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 (*clariore . . . crepitu uentris*), cueing the line 'underground thunder, you'd think' (*Vita Luc.* 16–19).¹ In this memorable episode from Suetonius' *Life of Lucan*, one of the many noteworthy elements is the wit.² 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.³ (Ab)using it as he does, Suetonius' Lucan mocks his imperial master and poetic rival, making Nero's words serve Lucan's purposes.⁴ 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.⁵ As a quotation, the

words have more impact than they would have had either as an extempore composition by Lucan, or as originally delivered by Nero. The power of other people's words is something that Suetonius exploits over and over again in the *Caesars*, only occasionally with benign intent. It is the argument of the present chapter that Suetonius' use of quotations helps explain on stylistic grounds why the *Caesars* is readable in a way that other works in comparable scholarly, antiquarian, or technical genres are not.

There are hundreds of quotations in the *Caesars*, and I limit myself here to Suetonius' quotations of the *Caesars* themselves. Ventriloquism suggests itself as an apt analogy for the effects he produces with them: an art form involving a multiplicity of voices issuing from a single source. Unlike *prosopopoeia*, which also involves the multiplication of voices, ventriloquism sits rather low on the scale of performance art—not drama or oratory, but 'showbiz'. For biography, the 'high art' comparandum is obviously historiography, and the treatment of 'other people's words' is one of the most salient distinctions between the two genres. As in the ventriloquist's show, so in a Suetonian biography, there are (at least) two voices, quite distinct. The contrast in one famous act between the rather bland ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his 'smart-aleck' dummy Charlie McCarthy has its counterpart in the *Caesars*: the emperors get all the good lines.⁶

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.

¹ See Rostagni (1944) 146–7 (ad loc.).

² For a recent discussion of the scene, see R. Cowan (2011), who also provides a bibliography.

³ Morford (1985) 2017 suggests that it referred to an earthquake.

⁴ Cf. R. Cowan (2011) 304, arguing that Suetonius' Lucan presents Nero's hemistich as 'overblown, unCallimachean epic' and 'of as little merit as Volusius' crap poetry'.

⁵ Cf. Rostagni (1944) 147 (ad loc.) on the incongruity of the term *consessores*: 'che comunemente indica coloro che seggono insieme in tribunale o in teatro o a banchetto.'

⁶ The analogy extends even to titlature: Edgar Bergen's act was called *The Charlie McCarthy Show*, just as Suetonius' biographies are referred to as the *Caesars*.

1. *STILO . . . NECESSARIO*

Pliny calls Suetonius a *scholasticus* (*Ep.* 1.24), the *Suda* categorizes him as a *grammaticus* (τ 895), and John Lydus labels him a *philologus* (*Mag.* 1.34). Neither in absolute terms nor in context are these labels perspicuous.⁷ 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).⁸ 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 an ‘educated man,’ ‘man of letters,’ or ‘scholar.’⁹ ‘*Philologus*’ Suetonius takes to be a mark of ‘manifold and wide-ranging erudition’ (*Gramm.* 10.4), and so, presumably, does Cicero, who includes himself among the *philologi*.¹⁰ As applied to Suetonius, we may take these labels, at a minimum, as indicating an engagement with literature that includes familiarity with the elements of style and clear stylistic preferences. Why would we not, when this familiarity and these preferences are manifest in Suetonius’ numerous comments on the literary productions of the men who figure in his biographies?

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 noscendis operam ullam aut stilo uel necessario dedit, Dom.* 20). 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 (*epistulas orationesque et edicta alieno formabat 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*, *poetarum interpres*, *litterator*, and *grammatista*.

⁸ For discussion, see Kaster (1995) 320 (on *Gramm.* 30.2, s.v. *scholasticus*).

⁹ Kaster (1995) xxii n. 1.

¹⁰ Here and elsewhere for *Gramm.*, I use Kaster’s translation, which usefully supplies nuances sometimes only implicit in the Latin. For Cicero’s use of *philologus*, see *Q Fr.* 2.9.3 and *Att.* 2.17.1.

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 uerborum*, *ut ipse dixit, ‘fetoribus’ Aug.* 86.1) is often treated as a proxy for a programmatic statement about Suetonius’ own style.)¹¹ Domitian’s preferred model, Tiberius, however, favoured obfuscation (*exoletas . . . et reconditas uoces aucupanti, Aug.* 86.2; *adfectione et morositate nimia obscurabat 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 regrettably 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 *eruditi* who dedicated commentaries to Tiberius 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 affectation 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,

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.

rejecting as spurious some works circulating under Horace's name, for being commonplace in one case, and obscure in another, 'a failing of which [Horace] is very rarely guilty' (*Vita Hor.* 12).

The frequency of Suetonius' comments on the use of language by emperors and senators, scholars and schoolmen, students and the authors whom he and they study, even as briefly adduced here, creates a presumption that he believed style important. And the variety of the comments suggests that he was capable of stylistic discrimination, at least in the works of others. In subsequent sections, we will consider whether his belief and his taste manifest themselves in the *Caesars*. In his earlier work, the *De uiris illustribus*, at least, Pliny would have expected us to find polish (perhaps to excess), since he complains that Suetonius has been delaying publication unduly: 'The book is finished and complete. At this point it is not being polished by the file but worn away' (*perfectum opus absolutumque est, nec iam splendescit lima sed atteritur*, Plin. *Ep.* 5.10.3).¹²

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 uere* ('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'.¹³ 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 anything but didactic . . . He does not speak *in propria 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

¹² For this letter and its significance for Suetonius' literary career, see Power (2010).

¹³ Norden (1898) 387–8 n. 1. ¹⁴ Wallace-Hadrill (1983) 19 and 23–4.

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 Caesars 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 mitigé*' 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 *uariatio*. 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

¹⁵ Dalmasso (1905–6) 824. For Dalmasso's list of absences, see 814: '*cacozelia . . . ampollosità strampalata . . . sentenziosità . . . colorito poetico*'.

¹⁶ Fry (2009) 16–19 (quotations from 15 and 17).

¹⁷ Fry (2009) 22.

¹⁸ Fry (2009) 19, 22.

¹⁹ Fry (2009) 27.

²⁰ Sage (1979b). Verbs in general are in short supply: '*Er spart mit Worten, namentlich mit dem Verbum finitum. Die Fülle liegt bei ihm im Stoff, nicht in den Darstellungsmitteln*' (Bayer 2002: 85).

²¹ Sage (1979b) 19. On *per tempora* and *per species* rubrics, see Hurley, ch. 1 in this volume.

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 n'en être que le fidèle transcripteur'.²² The word 'affecte', used here by Gascou, 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, Suétone énumère des faits qui sont souvent en eux-mêmes d'une atrocité insoutenable: l'uniformité stylistique tend à anesthésier le lecteur'.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-Laprée) have been the subject of several detailed examinations.²⁵ The most thorough critic, Paola Ramondetti, attests the 'massiccia presenza' in the *Caesars* of sentences structured like the following: *quin etiam speciem libertatis quandam induxit conseruatis senatui ac magistratibus 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 similar to Suetonius' in the passage quoted just above, reverses the structure and puts the details in the main clause, and the 'appearance of freedom' idea in the ablative absolute *rallonge*: *intercessit Haterius Agrippa tribunus plebei increpatusque est Asinii Galli oratione, silente*

²² Gascou (1984) 683. The more extreme form of this idea, as maintained by D'Anna (1954: 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 Gascou (1984) 685 n. 29.

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

²⁴ Gascou (1984) 686.

²⁵ Bayer (2002) 75–85; Sage (1979a); Ramondetti (2002); Longrée (2003).

²⁶ Ramondetti (2002) 415.

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 costrutto 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 egit, Claud.* 29.1); Tacitus presses this same charge against this emperor indirectly by blurring

²⁷ Ramondetti (2002) 402. Cf. Bayer (2002) 85 on sentences ending with an ablative absolute *rallonge*: 'Dem Leser öffnen sich Sätze dieser Art sehr leicht'. More generally, *phrases à rallonge* are sometimes thought to manifest a natural flow by contrast with the logical flow of the periodic type. See Chausserie-Laprée (1969) 289–90 and 335. But the obvious contrast between Suetonius and Tacitus encourages circumspection with generalizations.

²⁸ Bayer (2002) sees the construction as an aid to narrative flow: it avoids both the incoherence of a series of independent sentences and also the unwieldiness of highly subordinated sentences. Sage (1979a) 512 emphasizes its different effects in Tacitus and Suetonius: 'chez l'un [sc. Tacite], l'ordre des éléments est médité; chez l'autre [sc. Suétone], la construction est souvent organique, et la rallonge semble plutôt un fait qu'une technique proprement expressive'.

²⁹ Lounsbury (1987) 1–8; the comments, of Mackail (1895) 231 and Leeman (1963) 361 respectively, are both quoted at 8.

³⁰ Lounsbury (1987) 5.

the agency in some key events of his principate.³¹ 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.³²

After our survey of absences, Bayer's superlatives and the phrase '*stilistischen Hauptmittel*' are indeed, as he says, surprising. He himself gives a rather minimalist 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.³³

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 dixi, ut diximus*) and verbal quibbles (*uel dicam*).³⁴ 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

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.

³³ Bayer (2002) 11. ³⁴ Gascou (1984) 248–9; Longrée (1996).

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' flatterers and critics, if there weren't different accounts of the family even a little before his time' (*Vit.* 1.2).³⁵ In Fry's view, '*l'usage du "je" crée la relation dialogique la plus forte possible dans l'absence d'un "tu"*'.³⁶ 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*'.³⁷

There are, however, critics who find Suetonius neither engaging nor innocently proud. Granting that Suetonius used language effectively, they nevertheless criticize the effects achieved.³⁸ 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*'.³⁹ After touching on Suetonius' deliberate self-contradictions and the insinuations visible in his presentation of things that never happened—the consulship of Caligula's horse (*destinasse . . . traditur, Calig.* 55.3), for example, or the removal of Virgil's and Livy's works from libraries (*paulum afuit 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 Thrasyllus' prediction to Tiberius 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

³⁵ On Suetonius' use of the first person, see also Henderson, ch. 4 in this volume, esp. pp. 84–5, nn. 10–11. On his equally distinctive use of the third person, see Power's Introduction to this volume.

³⁶ Fry (2003) 339.

³⁷ Fry (2003) 340. Cf. his particularly fine distinction (339) between singular (preferred) and plural (rare) forms: '*Un chercheur qui cherche peut utiliser le "nous", mais Suétone se veut un chercheur qui trouve, il utilise le "je"*'. Dubuisson (2003) 253, in the same volume, takes a more jaundiced view: '*il est passé maître dans l'utilisation des signes extérieur de l'érudition*', including '*le truc du grand-père*' (256, apropos of *Calig.* 19.3—on which see later).

³⁸ Grimal (1973) xxv, who reproaches Suetonius with both incompetence and malice, is outside both camps.

³⁹ Dubuisson (2003) 252.

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 'Suetone 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

⁴⁰ Dubuisson (2003) 258 (original italics for *le*).

⁴¹ The quotation is from Fry (2003) 331. Gascou (1984) esp. 394–400, 414–36 also illustrates how Suetonius' erasure of historical context affects the interpretation of events.

⁴² Gascou (1984) 675–706.

⁴³ Gascou (1984) 713; for the political programme, see 717–73.

examples) such as *quidam putant* ('some people say'), *opinio est* ('the supposition is'), or *alii 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 *Zitierweise* but *Zitierkunst*.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 adluxit, 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 legionary legates

⁴⁴ Müller (1972) 95. ⁴⁵ For other series, see *Iul.* 30.2–7, 50.3.

⁴⁶ Müller's quick survey (1972: 98) of verse citations in the *Diuus Augustus* shows the same pattern, with the exception of the Greek verses in *Aug.* 98.

⁴⁷ Müller (1972) 104. Gascou (1984) 548, by contrast, denies Suetonius' citations the status of rhetorical ornaments: instead, they have 'un valeur "fonctionnelle", démonstrative'. So when Suetonius cites material from untrustworthy sources such as pamphlets, says Gascou, he is giving in to temptation and indeed to a 'joie suspecte' (551).

⁴⁸ For Quintilian on *sententiae* and epigrams, see *Inst.* 8.5. His favourite metaphors for the figure involve light: *lumina . . . praecipueque in clausulis posita* ('lights . . . especially at clause-end', 8.5.2, cf. 28, 34), *nitere* ('to shine', 19), *scintillae* ('sparks', 29), *oculos eloquentiae* ('the "eyes" of eloquence', 34), and *clarescit* ('brighten', 19). Hence 'sequins'.

⁴⁹ For discussion of the quotation that punctuates the death scene in the *Galba*, see Power (2009b).

Caecina and especially Valens, who bullies Vitellius into accepting the proclamation. Tacitus ends the scene with an epigram about Vitellius, not a quip by him: 'his sluggish nature was moved by [Valens'] words more to desire than to expectation' (*quatiebatur his segne ingenium ut 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 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 Iulius* 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 uerba 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 *Iul.* 34.2: *ire se ad exercitum sine duce et inde reuersurum ad duces 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 dictional range of Suetonius' text, taking it down to the smuttiness of Antony's 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, dicing, etc.) and imperial ideogloss (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 *inconcinntas* ('clumsiness'), but that may be changing. Fry (2003) 331, for example, suggests that Suetonius' systematically applied *inconcinntas* is a '*principe unificateur*' and '*trait stylistique distinctif*.'

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

⁵⁴ The assessment by Gascou (1984) 565 is only a starting point: '*Il n'y a pas là de l'érudition gratuite, mais la volonté de restituer de la façon la plus vivante l'esprit de l'invective, les haines, les passions, qui, à un moment ou à l'autre, agitent les soldats ou le peuple, auxquels Suétone cède pour ainsi dire la parole.*'

latrine scene of Suetonius' *Life of Lucan*: the representational power of quotations. By quoting Nero's words, Lucan makes Nero present in the latrine, present enough to scare everyone else out.

The startling effect of a voice speaking words not its own was familiar to the ancients, from contexts as imposing as the oracle at Delphi, where the Pythia served as the προφήτις or 'spokesperson' of Apollo, and as dubious as the performances of 'belly-talkers' (ἐγγαστριμῦθοι).⁵⁵ Ancient sources see *engastrimythia* as a form of (sometimes spurious) communication from otherworldly figures: belly-talkers are prophets or diviners who make spirit voices emerge from other people's bellies.⁵⁶ An ἐγγαστριμῦθος named Eurycles attracted the attention of Aristophanes, Plato, and Plutarch in turn. In *Wasps*, Aristophanes uses Eurycles' ventriloquism as an analogy for his own procedure with earlier plays, which he had had produced by other poets: 'imitating Eurycles' divinatory device', he says, he 'poured much comic material into other men's bellies' (1019–20). Eurycles' vocal 'device' (δίαυοι) is also at issue in Plato's *Sophist*, where the Stranger uses Eurycles' 'speaking from within' as a damning analogy for self-refuting philosophers (*Soph.* 252c); one infers that Eurycles' two voices argued with one another. In neither passage is the otherworldly dimension of ventriloquism important, and Plutarch dismisses the idea that a god has entered 'people like Eurycles' as 'simpleminded and utterly childish' (*Mor.* 414e). Then, as now, ventriloquism was a 'device'.

The use of other people's words is one of Suetonius' most distinctive biographical techniques, and is the subject of the remaining discussion. Taking my lead from the latrine scene, I focus on the words of the Caesars themselves, not the words said to or about the Caesars (fascinating though these too are). I leave the question of the words' authenticity entirely to the side, the better to understand the literary effect of their quotation.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ For the Pythia as προφήτις of Apollo see Eur. *Ion* 321 and 1322, and Pl. *Phdr.* 244b, with Flower (2008) 211: 'the voice was hers, but the words were his'. For the ancient context more generally, see Connor (2000) 3–43. I am grateful to my colleagues Ralph Rosen and Peter Struck for timely guidance on these topics.

⁵⁶ See MacDowell's (1971: 264) helpful note on *Wasps* 1019.

⁵⁷ The question of authenticity is addressed by Gascou (1984) 545–67, in his discussion of Suetonius' citations. He concludes that '*il ne sacrifie jamais l'exactitude à la recherche d'un effet artistique*' (566). His argument in favour of the authenticity of excerpts from speeches in particular rests on the non-Suetonian vocabulary of the quotations and their brevity by comparison with the full-blown speeches invented by historians.

The effect of the quotation by Suetonius' Lucan is (at least) twofold. Lucan himself is favourably characterized as both witty and irreverent, 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-master pulling strings, but in the *Caesars*, he is more like a ventriloquist 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', exclaimed, 'Give me a hundred thousand and throw me in the Tiber if you want!' (*interrogatis palam procuratoribus, quanti funus et pompa constaret, ut audit sestertium centiens, exclamavit, centum sibi sestertia darent ac se uel in Tiberim proicerent, Vesp. 19.2*).⁵⁸ Suetonius also illustrates the more objectionable form of ventriloquism whereby the emperors put words into their subjects' mouths. Domitian, for example, had his procurators start their letters with the titles he favoured: 'Our lord and god orders this to be done' (*dominus et deus noster hoc fieri iubet, Dom. 13.2*). Caligula imposed language on oaths and on the consuls' addresses to the senate (*Calig. 15.3*). And Nero made the ex-consul and historian Cluvius Rufus speak for him to an audience in Greece: 'Nero announced, through the agency of Cluvius Rufus, a former consul, that he would perform *Niobe*' (*Niobam se cantaturum per Cluuium Rufum consularem pronuntiauit, Ner. 21.2*).⁵⁹ In this last passage, Suetonius may even be trying to create an impression of impersonation where there was none in reality: presumably all Cluvius Rufus had to do was say, 'Nero will perform *Niobe*.'

⁵⁸ Metaphors are rare in Suetonius, but one he does use several times is *mimus* (*Calig. 45.2, Otho 3.2*; cf. *scaena* at *Calig. 15.1*), which Augustus used before him (*amicos percontatus ecquid iis uideretur mi[ni]mum uitae commode transegisse*, 'he asked his friends whether he seemed to them to have handled life's farce suitably', *Aug. 99.1*).

⁵⁹ Cf. the practice of having an emperor's letters to the senate read by the *quaestor Augusti* (e.g. *Aug. 65.2*, on the occasion of Julia's disgrace).

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 laudatam uocem*), issued spontaneously, it seems, when after dinner Titus realized he had given no gifts that day: 'Friends, I have wasted a day' (*amici, diem perdidit, Tit. 8.1*). Suetonius' editorializing comment makes the point of this quotation particularly clear. A paragraph later, on the subject of refraining from bloodshed, Suetonius 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 amobus periculum adfirmasse, uerum quandoque et ab alio, Tit. 9.2*). Suetonius' comment here is simply 'which is how things turned out' (*sicut euenit*). 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.⁶⁰

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

⁶⁰ Cf. the conclusion to Baldwin's chapter on 'Techniques, Style, and Language' (1983: 467–518; quotation from 516): 'What may be claimed for him is the ability to leave potent and affecting impressions.' Baldwin does not devote specific attention to quotations.

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 magna, sed etiam callidae inopinatae saevitiae*, '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 fuerit ipsa cognoscere, 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.'

Suetonius also deploys quotations to develop themes in individual *Lives* independently of the rubrics. The *Life of Vitellius*, which at eighteen chapters is one of the shortest, has a relatively paltry seven utterances by Vitellius himself—in the twenty-five-chapter *Life* of his successor, Vespasian speaks seventeen times—but six of them concern food and drink. To show Vitellius' inclination to murder, Suetonius has him say he 'wants to provide fodder for his eyes' (*uelle se . . . pascere oculos, Vit.* 14.2). Violence and food are less gruesomely connected in the name he gives to a large platter, 'the shield of city-protecting Minerva' (13.2), and banquets are the setting for two other quotations (8.2 (already quoted) and 11.2). His opening quip, quoted to show his *comitas* ('amiability') and addressed to mule-drivers and travellers, is: 'have you had breakfast yet?' (*mane singulos iamne iantassent sciscitaretur, 7.3*). Finally, there is the *detestabilis uox* ('abhorrent utterance') from the tour of the corpse-littered battlefield at Bedriacum. After claiming that 'a dead enemy smells wonderful, a dead citizen better', Vitellius imbibed copious amounts of wine to make the stench less troublesome (*optime olere occisum hostem et melius ciuem, 10.3*). This is an unusually concentrated group of quotations, but there are also thematic sets centred on Claudius' obtuseness and Nero's musicality, among other qualities.

Finally, irony. Irony? In Suetonius? Well, what else is one to make of the following quotations in the *Life of Augustus*, which come one after the other? The first is a letter quoted to illustrate the strict control Augustus exercised over his daughter and granddaughters. They were taught to spin, to weave, and to censor their talk, and on top of that, Augustus prevented them from having contact with strangers (*coetu extraneorum*). The letter's addressee, Lucius Vinicius, was an *extraneus* who tried to contact Julia, and he heard directly from Augustus 'that he acted presumptuously in paying a call on [Augustus'] daughter at Baiae' (*Aug.* 64.2). Can Suetonius' combination of *coetus* and Baiae be innocent? Perhaps so. But the next thing we hear from Augustus' mouth is: 'I would rather have been Phoebe's father' (*Aug.* 65.2)—Phoebe being one of Julia's freedwomen and having the merit, in Augustus' eyes, of having hanged herself, unlike his scandalous daughter. That is, in case the reader doesn't remember how Augustus' household management practices played out, Suetonius takes the first opportunity to remind him, using Augustus' own words to highlight both his intention and the fact that his intention was thwarted. Some other examples may strengthen the case. Augustus' grandfatherly advice to

Agrippina was that she should be careful not to write or speak ‘in a troublesome manner’ (*molestē*, *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 *ἔτι μοι μένος ἐμπεδόν ἐστιν* (‘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. *Il.* 5.254, *Od.* 21.426).⁶³ Irony is hard to prove . . . but fun to look for.

⁶² Dangerous reading, according to the SHA: Commodus, who had the same birthday as Caligula, sent a reader of Suetonius’ *Caligula* to the lions (*Comm.* 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.

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 Eurycles’ 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.

⁶⁴ Seneca must be writing either loosely or facetiously when he pronounces a comparable fart-analogy ‘elegant’ (*Ep.* 91.19): *elegantē Demetrius noster solet dicere eodem loco sibi esse uoces inperatorum quo uentre redditos crepitus*. ‘*Quid enim*’, inquit, ‘*mea, susum isti an deosum sonent?*’ (‘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*’.