

## Plutarch's Participation in Post-Domitian Trauma Literature

This paper aims to situate Plutarch's writings within the broader corpus of "trauma literature," that emerges in the years following Domitian's assassination. In this period, the (elite) Roman literary culture became obsessed with Domitian's legacy of cruelty and excess. In both prose and verse, authors of the post-Domitian period (Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Juvenal) would relive, revisit, and recontextualize the experiences of others, or even their own, under Domitian. In analyzing Pliny's *Epistles* through the lens of this literary theme, Kirk Freudenburg concludes that "often [his letters] introduce matters of topical relevance only as a handy means of referring us back to the recent 'traumatic' past, to dwell on that trauma in luscious detail" (Freudenburg, 2001). But these authors are all Romans who write in Latin; Plutarch, who writes in Greek, is not yet counted among trauma literati. And yet, as this paper hopes to show, Plutarch also participates in this literary movement of the early second-century CE.

Plutarch reflects upon the traumatic past in works that belong to several different genres, thus exploring the theme from different perspectives. Unlike his contemporaries, furthermore, Plutarch does not revisit this trauma explicitly, but in a reserved and oblique manner, with allusions that require the active reader to follow the cues and to evoke Domitian's rule. In the *Lives*, six allusions to Domitian occur: one in *Numa* (19.4), three in *Publicola* (15.3, 15.5, 15.6), and two in *Aemilius Paullus* (25.5-6); in the non-biographical works, the *Moralia*, three occur: *Aetia Romana et Graeca* 273E, *De Curiositate* 522E, and in the *Praecepta Gerendae Reipublicae* 815D. When we recontextualize these allusions within the corpus of "trauma literature," they provide a valuable insight into Plutarch's authorial maneuvering, as an

intellectual who writes in Greek yet has strong connections with the Roman elite, in a field dominated by Romans who write in Latin.

To demonstrate Plutarch's oblique criticisms of Domitian, this paper will limit itself to the *Numa* and the *Publicola* as salient and representative texts. In the *Publicola* (15.5), Plutarch slightly drops the mask of allusion and allows himself to denounce the (dead) emperor directly for his diseased desire to build more and more. This direct vituperation of Domitian's building program recalls the exhausted coffers that Suetonius reports in his *Lives* (12.1). Furthermore, Plutarch alludes to the burial of Cornelia under Domitian, a staple of "trauma literature," (cf. Pliny *Epistle* 53; Suetonius' *Life of Domitian* 8.4) in the *Numa* (10.6-7), when the eponymous king institutes the punishment for unchaste Vestal Virgins: vivisepture.

After demonstrating Plutarch's method of criticism, this paper will then recategorize a relatively understudied work of Plutarch, *De Sera Numinis Vindicta* (*DSNV*), as his lengthiest allusive criticism of Domitian. *DSNV* ostensibly is an apology for the long delay in punishment for the wicked and it ends with a lengthy depiction of Nero's soul and its reincarnation in the underworld. Marcus Folch has interpreted Nero in this work as "the central problem...Nero's life—the pleasures he enjoyed, the pains he inflicted—[is] what makes a defense of providence necessary in the first place" (Folch, 2018). By building on Folch's work, this paper argues for viewing Nero in *DSNV* as a substitute for Domitian.

Indeed, linking Domitian and Nero, much like the story of the unchaste Cornelia, is one of the most recurrent features of "trauma literature" in the Roman authors who write in Latin. Juvenal in *Satire* 4 insults Domitian as a "bald Nero" (4.38); Suetonius likens Domitian's financial woes to Nero's because they were both results of extravagant building programs (12.1).

By exploring Plutarch's underappreciated contribution to "trauma literature," this paper aims to further out understanding of Plutarch's writings and also enrich our view of second-century literature with the knowledge that ideas transcend the artificial boundaries of language and genre.

#### Works Cited

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