

Dreams and incest in the Julio-Claudian *Lives* of Suetonius

The prominent role of imperial mothers in Suetonius accords with representations in other ancient sources and modern scholarship in respect to political power and domestic influence (e.g. Bradley 1985, Corbier 1995, Joshel 1997, L'Hoir 1994, Rutland 1978, Syme 1981). Their sexuality, whether as seducers or as mothers, is very much a part of this concern, but Suetonius presents a new focus on their sexual context *as* mothers. The role of sexualized imperial mothers is used both to provide structure that distinguishes the Julio-Claudian *Lives* and to comment on the characteristics and abilities of the various emperors and the position itself.

There is no doubt that women in the imperial family had political power under the Julio-Claudians, and recent scholarship continues to shed light on this fact. Furthermore, as Milnor has shown, it was not simply women but the domestic sphere as a whole that became politically significant; this was also true, accordingly, of imperial sexuality, whether chaste or depraved. Suetonius' *Lives* use the personal details of the emperors not simply as objects of prurient interest, but as signs of character and imperial effectiveness, and sexual anecdotes are thus doubly significant. In Suetonius, the political power of imperial mothers is combined with the motif of sexual power both in the striking image of Nero caressing his mother's dead body and in Julius Caesar's auspicious dream of maternal incest. This dream provides an important key to our understanding, and I will argue that imperial women can, in Suetonius, symbolically embody both Rome and *imperium*, thus serving as a significant object of an emperor's application of sexualized power.

Nero's murder of his mother is one of the most memorable events in Suetonius's *De Vita Caesarum*, but imperial mothers are woven throughout the stories of the Julio-Claudians and

beyond, into the tumultuous year between Nero's death and the establishment of the Flavians. Suetonius's explicit grouping of emperors into their respective dynasties makes the regular appearance of mothers unsurprising, but there are several points that are particularly notable, even in his matter-of-fact narration. First, mothers tend to be given a relatively prominent position in each life, and can clearly be politically powerful, whether as influences on the emperor, the means of political alliances, or as mothers of future emperors. This connects to scholarship on issues of the domesticity of imperial politics and the power available in sexual intimacy with an emperor (Milnor 2009, 2012; Vout 2007).

The second, and more surprising, element is the sexualization of mothers seen so strikingly in the *Life of Nero*. The incestuous motif also shows up elsewhere, and I argue that it should be read in this context as part of a larger image of an emperor expressing his imperial power in terms of sex. The first appearance of the motif, however, appears not in the person of a powerful female figure of the imperial family, but in Julius Caesar's auspicious dream of having intercourse with his mother (7.2). The framing of the Julio-Claudian *Lives* with these positive and negative extremes thus serves to underscore Nero's inversion of the auspicious beginnings of the dynasty.

In Suetonius, Caesar is reassured that the dream foretells dominion over the world. Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica* supports these unnamed interpreters (1.79) and agrees in another particular, for dreaming of maternal incest while abroad portends a return home. Artemidorus also, however, lists enough other variations on the theme to suggest that this was not an uncommon dream. Such attention given to a range of maternal incest dreams is notable, and I argue that their symbolism, as played out in Suetonius, encapsulates two fundamental concepts: 1) the symbolic equation of mother and *patria*, and 2) sex as a demonstration of *imperium*.

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