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The Art of History

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Pauline Duchêne

Suetonius' Construction of His Historiographical *auctoritas*¹

Abstract: This paper examines how Suetonius constructs his authorial *auctoritas* and *persona* throughout his *Lives of the XII Caesars*, in spite of the loss of his preface. It is thus quite close to Fournel's contribution on Plutarch, addressing the conceptual difference between history and biography and the attitude of ancient biographers in front of their material. The point of departure is Marincola 1997's analysis of the conditions, especially rhetorical, in which ancient historiography was written and the rehabilitation of Suetonius as a scholar. The method used is a study of all the 1st person singular occurrences, dealing with questions such as autopsy and the biographer's use of the documents at his disposal. As a consequence, themes addressed by other contributions in this volume are also taken into account: literary construction and liability (cf. Waddel); building on previous elements (cf. Low); relations with the predecessors (cf. Donelli).

When John Marincola published in 1997 his now classic *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography*, he pointed out that the influence of rhetoric on the historiographical genre was not limited to the way history was told: it also determined the way the authors presented themselves.² Like the orators, historians had to construct a *persona*, i. e. their own character as a narrator, in order to persuade the audience of the authority of their work. As a consequence, they were obliged to mention their experience, the efforts they deployed in their preparatory researches, and their impartiality.³

Marincola's book examines many ancient historians, mostly Greek, but it totally ignores Suetonius, the biographer of the *Lives of the XII Caesars*.⁴ In spite of

1 I would like to thank both organizers of the meeting, especially S. Farrington, who read and corrected this paper very carefully. Of course, any remaining error is mine.

2 Woodman (1988) anticipated this idea, by considering the historiographical attitude implied by the stylistic choices of particular historians.

3 Cf. Marincola 1997, 128–175. Other means were available within the narrative itself: see, for example, Wadell on Appian in this volume.

4 Suetonius is evoked once, p. 32 n. 158, in connection with a 4th century imitator. It is actually the whole biographical genre that is completely left out in this book, otherwise remarkable: Cornelius Nepos and Plutarch are never referred to for their biographies and Tacitus' *Life of Agricola* appears only incidentally.

his rehabilitation, begun with Wolf Steidle,⁵ this author, when he is not presented as a pure copyist lacking any kind of reflection, is still mainly considered a second or even a third rate historian. Another obstacle for studies on his authorial *persona* is the loss of his preface,⁶ a section that usually contained the necessary preliminary declarations. As a consequence, even dedicated works tend to focus on Suetonius' alleged political goal,⁷ his historical self⁸ or his historical method.⁹ But, if he had the same subject, goals and method as “regular” historians, does he also have a similar way of constructing his authorial *persona* and is the difference between history and biography as clear as it may seem?

The loss of his preface does not mean, in fact, that we have no clue about the way Suetonius wanted to appear in his work: the occurrences in the first person singular or plural all represent authorial interventions as a narrator.¹⁰ Following Michel Rambaud's terminology,¹¹ the extant *Lives of the XII Caesars* do not contain a “motionless” portrait of the author's *persona*, but a dynamic one determined by the *I* or *we*. This article aims at studying these types of occurrences: what dynamic *persona* is Suetonius displaying throughout his work? We will first examine the authorial interventions linked to the narrative organization of the text, then the references to his preparatory researches and, finally, his comments on his own material.

When describing the ways Suetonius can intervene in his text, Jacques Gascou¹² describes the first “level” of interventions, those that give information

5 Steidle 1951.

6 The loss happened between the 6th and 9th centuries: the oldest manuscript, the *Memmianus*, at the French National Library, was written in the 9th century and begins with an ornamented letter, so the loss had already happened at that time. On the other hand, the Suidas catalogue mentions Septicius Clarus, one of Hadrian's prefects of the Pretorian Guard, as the dedicatee. The beginning of the work was therefore still available for consultation when the catalogue was made, in the 6th century. The *Lives of the XII Caesars* now begin directly upon the death of Caesar's father, when the future dictator was 16.

7 Cf. Cizek 1977. This work is a brilliant, very careful study of all the positive and negative elements in each biography, but I am quite hesitant about the argument that the whole work was a *speculum Principis* for Hadrian and aimed at promoting the emperor's reliance on the equestrian class.

8 Cf. Wallace-Hadrill 1983.

9 Cf. Gascou 1984.

10 Cf. Fry 2003.

11 Rambaud 1970.

12 Gascou 1984, 242–249. Gascou does not examine the question of the authorial *persona*, but includes a descriptive appendix dedicated to the *I* of Suetonius. He distinguishes six “levels” of interventions: 1) allusion to a previous passage; 2) explanation of an expression; 3) choice between many elements and emphasis on the most significant; 4) presentation of the narrative

about the narrative organization, as “sans doute le moins signifiant et le plus banal”. This type of intervention was quite common in ancient historiography and is in fact the most frequent kind in the works of Suetonius' contemporary colleague, Tacitus.¹³ They correspond to what Gérard Genette,¹⁴ following George Blin,¹⁵ calls the “fonction de régie”, i.e., the visible organization of the narration.¹⁶ Although Suetonius chose, for the most part, to present his material arranged by categories and not in chronological order,¹⁷ like another contemporary biographer, Plutarch, he nevertheless also uses narrative indications to guide his reader through the text, as he does after stressing the massive influence of Claudius' wives and freedmen over all his decisions (Suet. *Cl.* 29.1):

His, ut dixi, uxoribusque addictus, non principem [se], sed ministrum egit, compendio cuiusque horum uel etiam studio aut libidine honores exercitus impunitates supplicia largitus est, et quidem insciens plerumque et ignarus.

Since he depended, as I said, upon these men and his wives, he did not behave as an emperor, but as a servant, and he generously assigned, according to the profit or even the favor or the desire of every one of them, honors, armies, tax exemptions, executions; and, most of the time, even without knowing or being conscious of it.¹⁸

The interpolated clause *ut dixi* brings to a close the presentation of the persons who had an influence on Claudius and alludes to the sentence¹⁹ that began the

scheme; 5) allusion to the preparatory researches; 6) introduction of some reasoning or study of the validity of one peculiar tradition. As some elements seem to be part of the same category (e.g. allusions to a previous passage, choice of giving only the most significant examples and presentation of the narrative scheme are all linked to the narrative organization), I decided to gather them under only three titles: narrative interventions; preparatory researches; comments on the material.

13 Almost half of the authorial interventions in the *Histories* and the *Annals*: cf. Duchêne 2014, 30–63. All interventions are listed in the Appendix I, 414–426 (Tacitus); 426–429 (Suetonius) of this earlier work.

14 Genette 1972, 26–262.

15 Blin 1954, 222.

16 This terminology has already been used for an ancient historian, namely Dionysus of Halicarnassus, by Fromentin 2010, 262–266.

17 Cf. Plutarch's *Galba* and *Otho*, which must have been part of a series of biographies of the first emperors, like the *XII Caesars*. Plutarch respects the chronological order so strictly that there is no rupture between the only two extant biographies: Otho's early life is presented in the *Galba* and his biography *stricto sensu* begins only when he becomes emperor and Galba is dead. For a recent analysis of the Suetonian organization, see Hurley 2014.

18 All translations are my own. The ancient texts are from Henri Ailloud's (1931–1932) edition of the *Lives of the XII Caesars* for the Collection des Universités de France.

19 Cf. Suet. *Cl.* 25.15.

portrait while denying him any credit for the good decisions he made. The circular construction is thus obvious to the reader.²⁰

The same passage also contains a type of narrative indication that is almost absent in Tacitus: Suetonius quite often selects his material, openly explaining to his reader that he will tell only the most representative examples of his point (Suet. *Cl.* 29.2):

Ac ne singillatim minora quoque enumerem, reuocatas liberalitates eius, iudicia rescissa, suppositos aut etiam palam immutatos datorum officiorum codicillos: Appium Silanum consocerum suum Iuliasque, alteram Drusi, alteram Germanici filiam, crimine incerto nec defensione ulla data occidit, item Cnaeum Pompeium maioris filiae uirum et Silanum minoris sponsum.

And so I do not have to enumerate one by one minor affairs, his donations revoked, his judgements cancelled, the forged or even openly changed letters giving charges: he had Appius Silanus, his son-in-law's father, and the two Julias, one being Drusus' daughter, the other Germanicus', executed without any formal charge or the possibility to defend themselves; he did the same to Cnaeus Pompeius, his elder daughter's husband, and Silanus, his younger daughter's fiancé.

Since every decision Claudius made was the product of his entourage's influence, the biographer will not recall them all (*ne singillatim enumerem*); he first uses general categories (*liberalitates*, *iudicia*, *codicillos*) and then gives the most shocking examples, i.e., the arbitrary executions of his close relatives.²¹ The evocation of these deaths is enough to convey the whole idea to the reader: if Claudius can be talked into executing members of the imperial family, the influence of his wives and freedmen is bound to be even stronger on other matters. The narration is not detailed, but it does not need to be.

Narrative interventions emphasizing how the narration was conceived represent about a third of those Suetonius makes,²² but they are not the majority. The vast remainder aim at depicting him as a historian, engaged in a process of finding and evaluating both sources and collected material.²³ The initial paragraphs

20 Such narrative echoes were quite frequent in ancient historiography: see the article by Low on Tacitus in this volume.

21 Actually, these executions only seem arbitrary because Suetonius gives no explanation for them. Claudius' (and his wives') strategy was in fact the elimination of every member that could threaten his or his heir's position: see Levick 1990, 56–63.

22 They amount to 42 out of 125.

23 This is not a peculiarity of Suetonius: Plutarch also confronts his sources, as demonstrated by Fournel's article in this volume. However, Suetonius is the only one who does it so openly and frequently everywhere in his biographies. The article by Donelli in this volume also shows that Herodotus had a similar attitude regarding Homer.

of the biographies, dealing with each emperor's ancestors, are good illustrations of Suetonius' historical skills. After presenting, for instance, Vespasian's family, he adds (Suet. *Ves.* 1.7–8):

Non negauerim iactatum a quibusdam Petronis patrem a regione Transpadana fuisse mancipem operarum, quae ex Umbria in Sabinos ad culturam agrorum quotannis commeari soleant ; subsedissem autem in oppido Reatino uxore ibidem ducta. Ipse ne uestigium quidem de hoc, quamuis satis curiose inquirerem, inueni.

I would not deny that some people repeated that Petro's father was from the Transpadane region and worked as a contractor for the workers who are used to migrating every year from Umbria to the Sabine country for the cultivation of the fields; then he would have established himself in the fortified city of Reate, after having married there a woman. As for me, I did not find even a trace of this version, though I made researches with the utmost care.

Here, Suetonius acknowledges an alternate version of the biography of Vespasian's great-grandfather. Before this passage, he gives much detail about his grandfather and father: the first had been engaged in the Pompeian army, before leaving and working at auction sales; the second was never a soldier and worked as a tax collector in Asia.²⁴ At that point, the biographer refutes a competing version that presents the father as a former soldier, who was dismissed because of illness. Those details and the textual quotation of an honorific inscription in Asia are proofs of the *satis curiose* character of Suetonius' preparatory researches. They help convince the reader that Vespasian's father performed no military service and of the questionable credibility of the story that circulated about the great-grandfather. The reader is led to conclude that, since he has been so careful about what he affirms, he must tell the truth when he says one version is wrong or there is no proof of another. The assertion concerning the great-grandfather provides the climax of this persuasive strategy: the formulation of the introductory clause, *non negauerim*, with its double negation and its perfect subjunctive, gives the impression that the biographer is very reluctant and reserved; the use of *quibusdam* to indicate the source and the verb *iactari* have the same function. At the same time, he insists on his own seriousness: he personally made the researches (*ipse*), he did them with the utmost care (*satis curiose*) and he found not even a trace (*ne uestigium quidem*) of proof of this story. As a consequence, he sends the message to the reader that there is no reason to disbelieve him in any way.

²⁴ Cf. Suet. *Ves.* 1.2 for the grandfather and 1.3 for the father.

This type of authorial intervention is quite representative of what we may call Suetonius' "second-degree autopsy". The biographer's date of birth is estimated to be around 70 CE,²⁵ so he was a contemporary, though quite young, of the last part of his work, the Flavian book. It may explain why the only example of autopsy *stricto sensu* is about Domitian (Suet. *Dom.* 12.5–6):

Praeter ceteros Iudaicus fiscus acerbissime actus est; ad quem deferebantur, qui uel inproffessi Iudaicam uiuerent uitam uel dissimulata origine imposita genti tributa non pependissent. Interfuisse me adulescentulum memini, cum a procuratore frequentissimoque consilio inspiceretur nonagenarius senex an circumsectus esset.

Among other measures, the Jewish tax was collected very harshly; for under it were prosecuted both those who did not declare themselves but lived like Jews and those who had concealed their origin and not paid the tributes imposed to their people. I remember I witnessed, when I was a young boy, a procurator and a very numerous assembly inspecting a 90 year old man, in order to determine whether he had been circumcised or not.

The testimony presented here aims at confirming the harshness of the perception of the *fiscus Iudaicus*. It is convincing but the presence of the author himself to the scene is not heavily stressed. Though the clause *interfuisse me* is at the beginning of the sentence, what mostly strikes the reader is the precision of *nonagenarius senex*, not the authorial certification.

Suetonius' attitude is, however, quite different when he draws on a testimony which is not his own, but comes from a contemporary he interviewed. What his father told him about Otho's suicide is a good example of his way of dealing with witnesses (Suet. *Otho* 10.1–4):

Interfuit huic bello pater meus Suetonius Laetus, tertiae decimae legionis tribunus angusticlavius. Is mox referre crebro solebat Othonem etiam priuatum usque adeo detestatum ciuilia arma, ut memorante quodam inter epulas de Cassi Brutique exitu cohorrerit nec concursurum cum Galba fuisse, nisi confideret sine bello rem transigi posse; tunc ad despiciendam uitam exemplo manipularis militis concitatum, qui cum cladem exercitus nuntiaret nec cuiquam fidem faceret ac nunc mendaci nunc timoris, quasi fugisset ex acie, argueretur, gladio ante pedes eius incubuerit. Hoc uiso proclamasse eum aiebat non amplius se in periculum talis tamque bene meritos coniecturum.

My father, Suetonius Tranquillus, took part in this war as an angusticlavian tribune in the XIIIth legion. After that, he was constantly repeating that, even when he was a private individual, Otho hated civil wars to the point of being horrified as someone recalled during a

²⁵ He mentions being an *adulescentulus* under Domitian (cf. Suet. *Dom.* 12.6) and his *cognomen* is Tranquillus, which suggests a birth at a period of returned peace, i.e. around 70 CE; but it can also stem from a family tradition, since his father's was Laetus, another adjective of mood.

dinner the end of Cassius and Brutus; that he would not have competed with Galba, had he not been certain that the affair could be carried on without a war; and that, at that moment [scil. after the defeat of his army at Bedriacum], he had been caused to despise life by the example of a common soldier, who, having announced the disaster, being believed by none and accused either of lying or being a coward, as if he had fled from the battle, killed himself at Otho's feet by falling on his sword. According to my father, after having seen this, Otho proclaimed that he would not keep on endangering men of this quality and merit.

This passage is quite famous, for Jacques Gascou masterfully demonstrated²⁶ that Suetonius' father could not have been physically present at the scene he narrated. He most probably arrived some time after the suicide and repeated what he had been told at that moment; this may explain why Tacitus' narration is very similar to Suetonius', though he had no access to the elder Suetonius.²⁷ The biographer does not seem to have any doubt about this testimony. On the contrary, he insists on how often his father told this story, as if the frequency increased the reliability. The verb *solere* is reinforced by the adverb *crebro* and the two imperfect indicatives, *solebat* and *aiebat*, convey an idea of repetition. Then, the two perfect subjunctives *cohorruerit* and *incubuerit* emphasize the reality of the reported consequences.²⁸ The whole structure of the paragraph is conceived in order to persuade the reader that he is only presented with facts here, as if the biographer had personally witnessed the scene. Suetonius' attitude is thus quite different from Thucydides': the Greek seems conscious of the difficulties of interrogating witnesses;²⁹ the Roman uses his father's alleged presence as a proof of his own credibility.

Suetonius can insist on his own participation, but only in a very particular case. The question of the authorship of the verses attributed to Nero is a good example of what the biographer wants to put to the forefront of his historiographical strategy (Suet. *Nero* 52.3):

Venere in manus meas pugillares libellique cum quibusdam notissimis uersibus ipsius chirographo scriptis, ut facile appareret non tralatos aut dictante aliquo exceptos, sed plane

²⁶ Cf. Gascou 1984, 297–298.

²⁷ Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 2.46.1–49.4.

²⁸ The two elements introduced by these verbs are highly questionable: since Suetonius' father lied about being at the soldier's suicide and Otho's last hours, his story about the emperor's horror of bloodshed seems to be an invention, aimed at exonerating Otho of starting another civil war. The anecdote of the soldier also appears in Tac. *Hist.* 3.54.2–3, but about Vitellius after the second battle of Bedriacum, so it appears to be a 'floating' detail, associated with the civil wars of 68–69 CE, not with a particular battle.

²⁹ Cf. Woodman 1988, 15–22.

quasi a cogitante atque generante exaratos; ita multa et deleta et inducta et superscripta inerant.

I have had in my hands tablets and papers with some of his most famous verses written with his own handwriting, so that it easily appeared that they had not been transcribed or received under someone's dictation, but had been plainly drawn as if by someone reflecting and creating them; in fact, there were many deletions, additions and corrections.

Suetonius' personal consultation of Nero's writings is here the primary evidence of his argument that the emperor was the real author of the poems attributed to him: the handwriting is identified (*ipsius chirographo*), the editing is described in detail (*et deleta et inducta et superscripta*) and the conclusion is presented as obvious (*ut facile appareret* and *plane*). The biographer's attitude is very different here, compared to the passage where he relates what he personally saw under Domitian: at that moment, his actual presence at the scene was just mentioned in passing. It is true that his argument about Nero's authorship totally contradicts another tradition, denying it, of which the most famous supporter was Tacitus himself in the *Annals*.³⁰ But Tacitus speaks of Nero's style, not of his concrete way of writing: he thus may have not seen the documents Suetonius had access to, which explains the biographer's insistence on that point.³¹ This attitude is what we would call a "second-degree autopsy": what Suetonius saw are the documents and it appears to be as trustworthy a proof for him as if he had personally seen Nero writing the poems.

These passages show the importance Suetonius placed on his preparatory research and the emphasis he wanted it to have within the narrative. His attitude may explain why the most frequent function his scientific *persona* assumes is that of commenting or explaining alternative versions. He often evaluates his

30 Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 14.16.1 : *Ne tamen ludicrae tantum imperatoris artes notescerent, carminum quoque studium adfectavit, contractis quibus aliqua pangendi facultas necdum insignis erat. Hi cenati considerare simul et adlatos uel ibidem repertos uersus conectere atque ipsius uerba, quoquo modo prolata, supplere; quod species ipsa carminum docet, non impetu et instinctu nec tenore uno fluens.*"So that not only the theatrical skills of the emperor would be famous, he also simulated a taste for poetry, after having gathered those who had some talent in writing, but were not already known. These men sat together after dinner, assembled the verses he had brought or found there, and made up for his words, however they had been produced; this is demonstrated by the very aspect of his poems, the style of which has neither energy, inspiration or coherence in its flow."

31 For the material conditions of access to the archives, cf. Moatti 2003. For her, Suetonius may have been, thanks to his position at the Chancellery, the one who had the easiest access to all official and unofficial documents.

material from the narrative point of view;³² he also expresses his surprise or stresses some particular aspect.³³ This type of intervention is quite frequent, but it is by far outnumbered by those explaining or disproving particular elements, as in the following extract about the death of Drusus I, Tiberius' brother (Suet. *Cl.* 1.8–10):

Fuisse autem creditur non minus gloriosi quam ciuilis animi; nam ex hoste super uictorias opima quoque spolia captasse summoque saepius discrimine duces Germanorum tota acie insectatus, nec dissimulasse umquam pristinum se rei publicae statum, quandoque posset, restitutum. Vnde existimo nonnullos tradere ausos suspectum eum Augusto reuocatumque ex prouincia et, quia cunctaretur, interceptum ueneno. Quod equidem magis ne praetermitterem rettuli quam quia uerum aut ueri simile putem, cum Augustus tanto opere et uiuum dilexit ut...

On the other hand, he was thought to be attracted by glory no less than to behave as a simple citizen; indeed, besides the victories, he also tried to take the *spolia opima* from the enemy and, quite often with very much risk, he chased the German leaders with his whole army, and he never concealed that he intended to restore one day, as soon as he could, the previous political organization of the State. This is the reason, I assume, why some authors dared to say that he was suspicious to Augustus, called back from his province and, because he hesitated, killed by poisoning. But, as for me, I reported this more in order not to omit anything than because I would think it true or likely, since Augustus loved him so much even when he was alive that...

Drusus I is one of the Roman imperial figures credited with a longing for the Republican era and the restoration of the Republic;³⁴ this point was used as an argument in favor of his poisoning by Augustus. If one looks at all the occurrences of verbs of thought and belief like *credere* in Tacitus and Suetonius, they happen to be used in reference to well informed sources;³⁵ this tendency is confirmed in the biographer's intervention *existimo nonnullos tradere ausos*, for the same research shows *tradere* is associated with written sources.³⁶ As a consequence,

32 Cf. for instance Suet. *Nero* 13.1: *Non immerito inter spectacula ab eo edita et Tiridatis in urbem introitum rettulerim*, "Among the spectacles he gave, the arrival of Tiridates in Rome, to me, would be also worth the telling."

33 Cf. for instance Suet. *Jul.* 68.7, on the loyalty of Caesar's soldiers: *Nec mirum, si quis singulorum facta respiciat, uel Cassi Scaevae centurionis uel Gai Acti militis, ne de pluribus referam*, "This is no surprise, if one examines the actions of every one of them, either those of the centurion Cassius Scaeva or the soldier Gaius Actus, not to mention more."

34 So was his son, Germanicus (cf. Suet. *Cal.* 3.5 and Tac. *Ann.* 2.82.2), and, quite surprisingly, Otho (cf. Suet. *Otho* 12.5).

35 For a study of Suetonius' and Tacitus' vocabulary when mentioning their sources, see Duchêne 2014, 64–118.

36 Cf. Duchêne 2014, 71–75 (*credere*), 107–109 (verbs of thought), 67–71 (*tradere*).

we can assume that this story was found in books by people who were close to the inner imperial circle. This characteristic may explain why Suetonius mentions this version, in spite of not thinking it true, and the length of his refutation. The reason given is his desire not to omit anything, but he denies the story is likely and a strong demonstration of Augustus' affection for Drusus follows the extract. This sort of passage, therefore, has two functions within the narration: first, locally, it disproves the alternative story of Drusus' death, even though it was supported by written and probably well informed sources;³⁷ then, at a wider level, it helps to increase the reader's confidence in Suetonius' professional skills. If he mentions this alternative even to discredit it immediately after, we tend to believe him in passages like the one about Vespasian's ancestors, where he says he could find no corroborating sources, and, when he makes no comment at all, to still think he researched exhaustively. All these interventions, combined with the interventions that put his preparatory research on the stage, create a sort of 'trust capital' through which the whole narration benefits.³⁸

Do these refutations have a polemical dimension? Marincola presents the use of polemic as one of the most distinctive characteristics of ancient historiography; encouraged by rhetorical teaching, it was also a way to define one's self against the practice of previous authors.³⁹ He recognizes, however, that Roman historians do not really fit into this frame: those he evokes are from the earlier generation (Cato the Elder, Sempronius Asellio), writing at a moment when Greek influence was still strong, and their successors are presented as more careful to appear as heirs than rivals.⁴⁰ As a consequence, is it truly possible to extend what appears to be mainly a Greek characteristic to Roman writings? Suetonius' practice helps answer this question. In the passage about Drusus I's death, he does not adopt a polemical tone: he does not name the authors referred to and the refutation does not appear in the main clause of the sentence, but in a subordinate one (*quam quia... putem*). What is developed is the demonstration of Augustus' affection, presented as rather obvious by the consecutive construction (*Augustus tanto opere et uiuum dilexit ut...*): the most important part are the arguments in favor of genuine Augustan feelings, not the expression of Suetonius' disagreement. No blame is even perceptible: the phrase *unde existimo* implies that, given Drusus' political opinions, it was almost logical to imagine that

37 Belonging to the inner imperial circles does not mean not having political reasons to alter the truth and spread a malevolent version.

38 On how this cunning strategy can be used to mislead the reader, cf. Dubuisson 2003.

39 Marincola 1997, 218–236.

40 Marincola 1997, 236.

Augustus might have poisoned him, in order to preserve the new regime.⁴¹ Had he been Polybius, he would not have failed to deride the alternative version for absurdity. Similarly, in the famous passage on the authorship of Nero's poems, the biographer never violently attacks those affirming the contrary: he states his point by describing the tablets and implying that the conclusion is obvious. He thus gives the impression of refuting a global tradition, which includes Tacitus without naming him, rather than of refuting Tacitus himself.⁴² The similarity between this historiographical strategy and Marincola's remarks about the Roman historians is a sign that the difference between history and biography was not as clear as it may seem when reading Plutarch's declarations at the beginning of the *Alexander*.⁴³

Even when he names the authors he disproves, Suetonius adopts a neutral tone that is quite far from being polemical. His most famous argument is about Caligula's birthplace. Lentulus Gaetulicus said he was born in Tivoli. For Pliny the Elder, it was Coblenz, on the German frontier, where he found an inscription concerning Agrippina's delivery. Anonymous verses placed the emperor's birth in a legionary camp. According to Suetonius, the *acta publica* mentioned Antium, on the coast near Rome.⁴⁴ These divergences are introduced with a neutral tone, the biographer only declaring that the point is uncertain because of them.⁴⁵ But the reader quickly realizes that it is not quite true, for an argumentation with successive refutations immediately follows (Suet. *Cal.* 8.6):

Gaetulicum refellit Plinius quasi mentitum per adulationem, ut ad laudes iuuenis gloriosique principis aliquid etiam ex urbe Herculi sacra sumeret abusumque audentius mendacio, quod ante annum fere natus Germanico filius Tiburi fuerat, appellatus et ipse Caius Caesar, de cuius amabili pueritia immaturoque obitu supra diximus.

Gaetulicus was refuted by Pliny, on the grounds that he lied due to adulation, so, in order to praise a young prince attracted by glory, he supplied even an element from the city dedi-

41 Levick (1976, 65) uses the same kind of argument in favor of Augustus' planning of Agrippa Postumus' execution upon his own death.

42 Koestermann (1965), commenting the corresponding Tacitean passage, alludes to Suetonius' work and says that his remark was "*vielleicht mit bewußter Kritik an Tacitus*" (the italics are mine), which shows that the interpretation of this passage as an indirect attack to Tacitus lacks solidity. On the problem of whether Suetonius had or had not read Tacitus' *opera maiora*, cf. Syme 1958, appendix 77, 781–782.

43 Plu. *Alex.* 1.1–3, commented by Fournel in this volume. Power 2014 also acknowledges the difficulty of declaring once and for all that Suetonius is a biographer or a historian, in spite of the title of the volume he directed.

44 Suet. *Cal.* 8.2–5.

45 Suet. *Cal.* 8.2: *Ubi natus sit, incertum diuersitas tradentium facit*, "His birthplace is made uncertain by the divergences between those who report it."

cated to Hercules, and on the grounds that he made full use of this lie quite impudently, because, a year before, a son had been born to Germanicus at Tivoli, who was also called Gaius Caesar and whose adorable childhood and untimely death I mentioned above.

The Tivoli proposition was discredited by Pliny, who accused Gaetulicus of flattery and intentionally confusing the two sons of Germanicus who were called Gaius. The expressions Suetonius uses in this passage, *quasi mentitum per adulationem* and *abusumque audentius mendacio*, imply that Pliny's tone is likely to have been violent against Gaetulicus. On the contrary, there is no trace of aggression when the biographer disproves Pliny's Coblenz proposition (Suet. *Cal.* 10.7–10):

Plinium arguit ratio temporum. Nam qui res Augusti memoriae mandarunt, Germanicum exacto consulatu in Galliam missum consentiunt iam nato Gaio. Nec Plini opinionem inscriptio arae quicquam adiuuerit, cum Agrippina bis in ea regione filias enixa sit et qualiscumque partus sine ullo sexus discrimine puerperium uocetur, quod antiqui etiam puellas pueras, sicut et pueros pueros dicitarent. Extat et Augusti epistula, ante paucos quam obiret menses ad Agrippinam neptem ita scripta de Gaio hoc (neque enim quisquam iam alius infans nomine pari tunc supererat): "(...)" Abunde parere arbitror non potuisse ibi nasci Gaium, quo prope bimulus demum perductus ab urbe sit.

The chronology argues against Pliny. Indeed, those who entrusted the actions of Augustus to the memory of posterity agree on the fact that Germanicus was sent to Gaul after the completion of his consulate, when Gaius had been already born. The inscription on the altar does not help on any point Pliny's conjecture, for Agrippina gave birth twice to a girl in this region and whatever type of delivery is called *puerperium*, making no distinction of sex, since the Ancients also frequently called young girls *puerae*, as they called young boys *puelli* too. A letter by Augustus also exists, that was written a few months before he died, to his grandchild Agrippina, about the Gaius we are talking about (for indeed no other child with a similar name survived at that time): "(...)" It is abundantly clear, I think, that Gaius could not have been born in Coblenz, where he was brought from the city when he was not quite two months old.

Suetonius' strategy of refutation is here very far from a direct and *ad hominem* accusation. He first appeals to the chronological consensus between historians of Augustus' reign (*qui res Augusti memoriae mandarunt... consentiunt*) and, during the presentation of his own arguments, he is not the subject of the verbs, but *ratio temporum*, *inscriptio* and *lettera*. These subjects are also proofs of his grammatical erudition and great familiarity with Augustus' correspondence. Both arguments could very well be used nowadays by a modern scholar. Even when Suetonius clearly appears in the text, with the verb *existimo*, he then employs the impersonal phrases *parere* and *non potuisse ibi nasci Gaium*; the adverb *abunde*, stressed by its place at the very beginning of the sentence, presents the whole conclusion as an obvious deduction, not a personal opinion. The general narra-

tive strategy here aims at giving the impression that Suetonius was not by any means personally involved in the refutation.

As a consequence, in this passage, as in all passages in which he disproves some particular alternative version, there is no trace of polemical intent. It is the documents that refute the erroneous conjectures, not an author trying to increase his own *auctoritas* by discrediting his predecessors. Only the anonymous verses are quickly put aside, precisely because they do not have a known author.⁴⁶ This could be a Suetonian characteristic, were it not for Tacitus, who does not employ a polemical tone either. The death of Drusus II, Tiberius' son this time, is a good example of how the historian can discredit a story he considers absurd. After having written that Drusus II was poisoned by Sejanus, he presents another version of his death, affirming that Tiberius himself gave him the poison because his counselor drove him into suspecting his son. He then comments (Tac. *Ann.* 4.11.1–3):

Haec uulgo iactata, super id quod nullo auctore certo firmantur, prompte refutaueris. Quis enim mediocri prudentia, nedum Tiberius, tantis rebus exercitus, inaudito filio exitium offerret, idque sua manu et nullo ad paenitendum regressu? Quin potius ministrum ueneni excruciet, auctorem exquiret, insita denique etiam in extraneos cunctatione et mora aduersum unicum et nullius ante flagitii compertum uteretur? Sed quia Seianus facinorum omnium repertor habebatur, ex nimia caritate in eum Caesaris et ceterorum in utrumque odio quamuis fabulosa et immania credebantur, atrocior semper fama erga dominantium exitus. Ordo aliqui sceleris, per Apicatam Seiani proditus, tormentis Eudemi ac Lygdi patefactus est. Neque quisquam scriptor tam infensus exstitit ut Tiberio obiectaret, cum omnia alia conquirent intenderentque. Mihi tradendi arguendique rumoris causa fuit ut claro sub exemplo falsas auditiones depellerem peteremque ab iis quorum in manus cura nostra uenerit <ne> diuulgata atque incredibilia auide accepta ueris neque in miraculum corruptis antehabeant.⁴⁷

These commonly repeated rumors, beside the fact that they are confirmed by no known author, can be promptly refuted. Indeed, would anyone have such limited intelligence, much less Tiberius, who had experience in such important matters, to offer a deadly cup to his son without listening to him and do it with his own hands and without any possibility to reverse course because of remorse? Wouldn't he rather torture the one who administered the poison, ask him who gave the order, eventually use the caution and prudence he had even for strangers in the case of his only child, who had never been convicted of any infamy before? But, because Sejanus was considered the inventor of every crime, as a consequence of Caesar's excessive affection for him and the hate everybody felt for both of them, these stories were believed, even though they were horrifying tales, the public fame being always more terrible about the end of those who rule. Besides, the planning of

⁴⁶ Suet. *Cal.* 8.11.

⁴⁷ This text is from Wuilleumier's (1975) edition of Tacitus' *Annals* IV–VI for the Collection des Universités de France. The translation is mine.

the crime was revealed through Apicata, Sejanus' wife, and made clear by the revelations under torture of Eudemus and Lygdus. And no writer appears so hostile to reproach Tiberius with this, whereas they investigated and exaggerated all the rest. My reason for reporting and refuting this rumor was to repel false hearsay with a clear example and to ask those who will have my work in their hands that they not prefer incredible rumors eagerly received to real facts that were not corrupted in order to provoke stupefaction.

This passage has much in common with those of Suetonius above. The first argument given in order to discredit the story of Tiberius, poisoning his own son is exactly the same the biographer invoked for the anonymous verses about Caligula's birthplace:⁴⁸ they have no known author, so they cannot benefit from anybody's *auctoritas*.⁴⁹ Tacitus is also very likely alluding to documents when he evokes the revelations of Sejanus' wife and two freedmen: Dio said that Apicata wrote a letter after her husband's death, trying to avenge their executed children with revelations on Drusus II's murder;⁵⁰ on the other hand, the mention of the confessions under torture of Eudimus and Lygdus may be based on a report to the Senate.⁵¹ The historian also feels obliged to explain why he mentioned the whole tale though he considers it highly improbable: he wanted to show his reader that being shocking is no proof that a story is true, especially when simply reasoning about coherence reveals it to be very unlikely.

This is the main difference between Tacitus' and Suetonius' ways of discrediting alternate versions. The biographer uses documents in order to demonstrate that the alternate version contradicts reality: Augustus' letters prove that he liked Drusus I so much that he could not have suspected him of anything, much less have poisoned him; these same letters show that Caligula had already been born when Germanicus left Rome for the German frontier and they correspond on that

48 Suet. *Cal.* 8.11: *Versiculorum quoque fidem eadem haec eleuant et eo facilius, quod sine auctore sunt*, "The reliability of the verses is also diminished by these same elements, all the more easily because they do not have an author." The diminutive *versiculi* for *versus* is also pejorative and shows from the beginning their lack of value to Suetonius' eyes.

49 Koestermann (1965, *ad loc.*) thinks that this version comes from Agrippina II's memoirs, so the author would actually be very well known and have an *auctoritas* of her own because she was a member of the imperial family. That may be the reason why Martin / Woodman (1989, *ad loc.*) record that "Tacitus' stated reason for the excursus is the enhancement of his historiographical credibility through the rejection of improbabilities and fantasies. This motif is as old as Hecataeus and indicates that the excursus should not be read, as it is often by modern scholars, as an example of 'source criticism'." Tacitus achieves the same goal as Suetonius, though by different means.

50 D.C. 58.11.6.

51 On Tacitus' main use of the *acta Senatus* in *Annals* I–VI, see Syme 1958, 278–286.

point with the *acta*.⁵² Tacitus must also have based his narrative on documents, but does not emphasize this in his text. He alludes to the content, not the container, as if the latter had not been of much interest. What is put forward, on the contrary, is the incoherence and the unlikeliness of the alternative story of Drusus II's murder: no one would kill his own son, who had not previously been guilty of anything, without at least giving him the chance to defend himself or explain his actions; this was all the more improbable as Tiberius was an expert on this sort of matters. The confusion between the hypothetical person evoked and the precise case of Tiberius is so strong in the two rhetorical questions, that grammatically it is impossible to determine whether the pronoun *quis* or the noun *Tiberius* are subject of the verbs *excruciet*, *exquiret* and *uteretur*. A few sentences below, unlikeliness is invoked again, about the previous authors Tacitus read: they were all hostile to Tiberius and tried as much as possible to accuse him of any crime, but they did not mention a poisoning of his own son, though they likely would have, had it been believable.

As a consequence, the historian's main arguments are not documents, but coherence and likeliness. His tone is no more polemical than Suetonius', though. He does not even blame Tiberian writers for inventing horrible stories and not respecting any obligation of objectivity. Suetonius' neutrality in this respect is thus not one of his characteristics, nor a peculiarity of the genre he chose. What is unique to Suetonius are his scientific refutations. Tacitus puts forward likeliness, even when he could have insisted on documents; Suetonius puts forward documents, even when he could have stressed only unlikeliness. But saying Augustus loved Drusus I too much to poison him was apparently not enough: it had to be confirmed by letters. In this perspective, the biographer's whole scientific *persona* does not appear to be only a trick to convince the reader of his most controversial affirmations or to give *auctoritas* to information we moderns would think totally out of place, like all the names of Caesar's mistresses.⁵³ It is a constituent feature not only of what he wanted to look like, but also of his conception of what his writing and his role as an author and a narrator should be. The loss of his scholarly works is therefore a pity all the more: they would have provided us with examples of how he worked when not in the context of historiography, and allowed us to see if what we observe here derives from his habits as a scholar.⁵⁴

⁵² Cf. also Syme 1958, 782, about Suetonius and Tacitus on the authorship of Nero's verses: "documents against the stylistic criteria".

⁵³ Suet. *Jul.* 50.1–52.6.

⁵⁴ The Suidas catalogue actually shows that the majority of his works were scholarly, not historical; thus the title of Wallace-Hadrill 1983.

The way Suetonius constructs his historiographical *auctoritas* is thus more than a set of narrative actions aiming at producing certain effects: it is linked to his whole *persona*, which is built very carefully. For he apparently does not wish to appear as a narrator, guiding his reader through the narration. He is a researcher, using documents to prove or disprove, evaluating sources and versions, motivating his judgements and choices. He is so sure of his material that he almost presents it as equivalent to personally assisting at the scene; not a hint of doubt is perceptible about his father's testimony on the death of Otho and the description of the tablets inscribed with Nero's poems has the same value as seeing Nero writing, erasing and editing.

Why did he privilege this scientific dimension? His scholarly habits have already been mentioned, but motives inherent to writing historical works can also explain this peculiarity. Suetonius decided to present his material, for the most part, not chronologically, but by categories, choosing thus quite a different path than Cornelius Nepos, Tacitus in the *Life of Agricola* or Plutarch. Did he feel that the disruption of the traditional chronology needed to be accompanied by more "scientificity"? His three colleagues sometimes introduce authorial interventions in their narrative, but not as much as he does. The use of categories in order to describe someone was not totally new in Latin literature: rhetorical treatises advised them in the case of a eulogy, for instance.⁵⁵ But if Suetonius was the first to resort to them in a historiographical work, he may have thought it necessary to emphasize his thorough research even more.

Another possible reason cannot be omitted, given Rome's social organization. Politically, one's *auctoritas* was conferred by his social position, i.e. his ancestors, family, relations, fortune and the result of his previous occupations. Unlike Tacitus, Suetonius was not a senator, but a member of the equestrian order. He never took part in politics, nor had military commands; we know from the Younger Pliny that he tried his hand at the courts, but he does not seem to have been very good at it,⁵⁶ and the inscription found in Hippone mainly records administrative offices.⁵⁷ As a consequence, his personal *auctoritas* would not have been very strong, and he may have tried to counterbalance this disadvantage, with the scientific authority of his work. This would imply a difference in the way senatorial and equestrian authors wrote, which is still to be proved.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Cf. for instance Cic. *De Orat.* 2.342–348.

⁵⁶ Plin., *Ep.* 1.18.

⁵⁷ *AE* 1953, 73.

⁵⁸ For instance, Livy did not have more social titles than Suetonius and he does not display such a scientific *persona*; but it is true that he was also a member of the close imperial circle

Whatever the reasons, this choice also interrogates the distinction between ancient biography and history, at least in Rome. For Suetonius' attitude is much closer to that of a historian than to that of an author only interested in the peculiar facts of one man's life.⁵⁹ He has a real "scientific" historical method, which he uses in order to display the *persona* of a proper historian. In this perspective, Gasco's title, *Suétone historien*, does not seem that polemical anymore.⁶⁰ It would thus be very profitable if Marincola's criteria of analyzing the composition of history in Antiquity were applied to biographical texts like those of Suetonius, in order to better understand the differences between all historiographical genres.

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(whereas Suetonius was a sort of high civil servant), which may have been a compensation in itself.

⁵⁹ Plu. *Alex.* 1.2 speaks of πράγμα βραχύ... καὶ ῥῆμα καὶ παιδία.

⁶⁰ The recent volume directed by T. Power and R.K. Gibson, though entitled *Suetonius the Biographer*, does not address this question, except at the beginning of the introduction by T. Power, quoted in this article.

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