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Nero Reconsidered

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Nero Reconsidered

We all know about Nero. Nero was emperor of Rome from 54 to 68. Nero murdered his mother, and Nero fiddled while Rome burned. Nero also slept with his mother. Nero married and executed one stepsister, executed his other stepsister, raped and murdered his stepbrother. Indeed, he executed or murdered most of his close relatives. He kicked his pregnant wife to death. He castrated and then married a freedman. He married another freedman, this time himself playing the bride. He raped a Vestal Virgin. He melted down the household gods of Rome for cash. After incinerating the city in 64, he built over much of downtown Rome with his own vast Xanadu, the Golden House. He fixed the blame for the Great Fire on the Christians, some of whom he hung up as human torches to light his gardens at night. He competed as poet, singer, actor, herald, and charioteer, and he won every contest, even when he fell out of his chariot at the Olympic Games. He alienated and persecuted much of the elite, neglected the army, and drained the treasury. At the age of thirty, surrounded by rebellions, one step ahead of the executioner, he killed himself, and he passed into legend as one of the great monsters of history.

But even monsters have their good side. As fate would have it, Nero attacked some of the elite of Rome and he punished some Christians, and these two groups largely controlled the writing of history for the next few centuries: for the senators, he became a benchmark, and an emperor they didn't like would be damned as "worse than Nero"; to the Christians within a generation of his death Nero became the Beast of Revelation, forerunner of the Antichrist, sometimes even the Antichrist himself. But a very different and equally powerful image of Nero competed for favor down through the centuries. Rumors flew from the moment he disappeared, that he was not in fact dead, that he had fled to the East, gone into hiding and was now biding his time. He would return in triumph, like Arthur or Charlemagne, to slaughter his enemies, free his oppressed people, and reign again: some three and a half centuries later, in *The City of God*, St. Augustine writes precisely of the living, popular belief that Nero would one day be revealed and restored to his kingdom. A Jewish legend has him converting and becoming the ancestor of one of the great figures of rabbinic Judaism; even Christian stories have him listening respectfully to the teachings of Christ; at least three False Neros appeared and attracted large followings in the East; one, we are told, almost caused a war between Rome and the rival empire, Parthia. To fill in this astonishing portrait of a "good"

Nero would take us too far off course into some curious byways of art, literature, and popular culture, but I do want to emphasize one aspect. Many years after his death, Dio of Prusa, no friend of Nero, claims flatly in one of his orations that the truth about Nero's death is unknown. *Everyone*, he adds even more startlingly, *everyone wants* him to come back, and *most people* believe that Nero is still alive. "Everyone wants him to come back." The truth is that outside of court circles and Christian congregations, Nero was vastly popular, both before and after his death. He was a popular monster.

From his own day until now, Nero's most infamous crimes have always been the two I mentioned first: he murdered the mother who bore him, and he sang and plucked his lyre while the capital of the world burned down around him. The first is undoubtedly true, and the second is possible—indeed, he probably started the Great Fire. But, as I say, there are many indications that Nero was a popular, even a beloved, ruler. What if our hostile tradition has simply misunderstood him, whether deliberately or not? What if his people applauded these "crimes" as the good deeds of a good emperor?

Whatever else he may have been, Nero was a *clever* man, and one who was much more attuned to the psychology of his people than were some disgruntled elitists or angry sectaries. The key to understanding Nero's actions, and to a large extent the actions of other leaders in the Roman world, lies in two important and much-studied phenomena of Roman public life.

The first is what may be called the power of myth. By this I mean the central significance of the universally familiar stories of gods and heroes in offering a symbolic language to bind together rulers and ruled. Everyone knew the old tales. By appropriating myths and legends to themselves, Roman politicians and emperors, and Hellenistic kings and dynasts before them, had long presented images of themselves laden with meanings which were quickly recognizable to a broad general public. Everywhere, from the coins in their purses to the grand decorative programs of their greatest public buildings, citizens could decipher with relative ease the claims of their leaders when they were couched artistically in mythical and legendary terms, claims which the literate could also read in contemporary writings. In short, Greek myths, the same stories that we ourselves continue to read, pervaded the culture, and great men identified themselves with selected myths. Thus would-be world-conquerors like Pompey the Great or Mark Antony turned naturally to the global exploits of Dionysus or Hercules, or to the Alexander the Great of legend, to represent their own deeds symbolically, even to the point of dressing like them or claiming them as ancestors. Mark Antony's rival, the future Augustus, began early in his career to adopt sometimes the symbols, sometimes the persona of Apollo, the god of peace and the arts, the bringer of the new Golden Age.

The second phenomenon might be called theatrical license. In the late Republic, the games at Rome—plays, gladiatorial combats, chariot races—began to take on an increasingly political aspect, as the people who gathered at them took advantage of large numbers and individual anonymity to urge their views about current issues and figures, loudly and directly, to their leaders. One aspect of this license is the prominence of the *double entendre* in plays, if we can stretch the phrase to include both speech and

actions. Roman audiences were astonishingly quick to hear the words spoken and to see the actions presented on stage as offering pointed comment on contemporary public life. Sometimes such allusions were intended by the actors or the producer, sometimes the audience saw allusions where none were intended; and very often the theater spilled over into real life, when dramatic gestures and apt quotations from plays and poetry by public figures were meant to be caught and interpreted and reacted to by their audience: the result was a sort of double-edged dramatic dialogue, whether in the theater or in the forum, between ruler and ruled.

Theatrical license meets and often merges with the power of myth, both onstage and off, in the conveyance of messages: most tragic and some comic drama portrayed the already familiar adventures of Greek gods and heroes. In short, the Roman people were accustomed to seeing their rulers everywhere represented as well-known figures of myth, and they were accustomed to dramatic performances on stage and off which commented directly on their own contemporary concerns.

Enter Nero, who went further than anybody in erasing the boundary between stage and life. It was the death of his mother in 59 which released the actor in him, as he took to performing on stage, first in private, then in public. Here, for example, are the observations of the historian Cassius Dio: “. . . in putting on the [actor’s] mask [he] threw off the dignity of his sovereignty to beg in the guise of a runaway slave, to be led about as a blind man, to be heavy with child, to be in labor, to be a madman, or to wander as an outcast, his favorite roles being those of Oedipus, Thyestes, Heracles, Alcmaeon, and Orestes[.] The masks he wore were sometimes made to resemble the characters he was portraying and sometimes his own likeness; but the women’s masks were all fashioned after the features of [his wife] Sabina, in order that, though dead, she might still take part in the spectacle. All the situations that ordinary actors simulate in their acting he, too, would portray in speech or action. . . . All this behavior . . . was witnessed, endured, and approved, not only by the crowd in general, but also by the soldiers.” When we read the hostile accounts of Nero’s stage performances we must remember the expectations of Roman audiences. In view of what we know about theatricality and the power of myth in public life at Rome, every person present must have realized that, when their emperor himself actually entered the theater to perform, he was identifying himself in some way with the character he played: he could not have avoided the association, and he could not have suggested it unthinkingly. In his most extravagantly theatrical gesture—one which seriously redefines ancient drama—Nero would in his last years wear a mask showing his own features. No one could doubt Nero *was* Orestes the matricide, Orestes was Nero; Nero *was* Oedipus, Oedipus was, for an hour, Nero. How are we to understand this?

Nero actually did have his mother killed, brutally, in her villa on the Bay of Naples, in March of 59—I refer you to Tacitus’ tense cinematic account of the affair at the beginning of *Annals* Book 14, a brilliant sustained narrative by Rome’s greatest historian: the calm starlit night, the late banquet, the fond farewell on the seashore between mother and son, the booby-trapped ship crossing the bay, the wounded Agrippina swimming for her life, saved by fishermen, her son’s nervewracked wait for news, the

murderers closing in on the empress, deserted in her seaside villa, her last stunning command to them: “Strike my belly.” Powerful stuff indeed—worthy, you might say, of Greek tragedy.

Relations between mother and son had deteriorated almost from the moment the cold and domineering Agrippina had engineered her teenaged son’s accession as emperor in 54. A letter to the senate from Nero explained everything after her death: balked of sharing the emperor’s power, Agrippina had insulted the senate and the soldiers, endangered the leading men of state, and sent a freedman with a dagger to murder her son after that last banquet. For these, and many other crimes, her death had been for the common good. Nero professed that he had acted more in sorrow than in anger, he claimed that his sleep was now disturbed by horrifying dreams, and (to the bafflement of hostile historians) he showed amazing leniency towards anyone who dared criticize his deed in public. He did not try to hide the murder: he agreed that he was *guilty*, and he took to the stage in the role of Orestes.

The tale of Orestes is too familiar to need retelling in detail, how his father Agamemnon, returning from the Trojan War, was foully murdered by his mother and her lover, how the oracle of Apollo seemed to order Orestes to kill his father’s murderers, the bloody deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, the pursuit of Orestes by the Furies, his wanderings, his purifications, his great trial and acquittal at Athens. For Nero, the golden key to the story of Orestes was not that he was a matricide, but that he was a *justified* matricide. Indeed, there were two possible justifications which might redeem the horror of the deed. One was vengeance for the murdered father, and Agrippina had apparently claimed responsibility for the death of Nero’s adoptive father and predecessor, Claudius; but Nero ignored this, and concentrated on the other defense against the charge of matricide: Orestes had killed his mother not just because his father’s death cried out for vengeance, but because Clytemnestra had stolen his royal inheritance from him, and the people of Mycenae were suffering under the tyranny of a woman. This was the essence of the posthumous campaign against Agrippina, especially as recounted in the letter to the senate: that she had gone beyond her womanly role to aim at supreme power, undermining loyalties and even aiming to murder her son, as indeed Clytemnestra was said to have threatened the infant Orestes. Assuming this role accordingly implied that, just as Orestes’ great act had liberated Mycenae, so Nero’s great sacrifice had saved Rome.

Nero took his act off the stage and onto the road, complaining histrionically for the rest of his days that he was harried by his mother’s ghost and by the Furies with their scourges and their flaming torches, just as Orestes had been. Some years later, he first came into contact with Persian *magi*, through whom he tried to summon and appease his mother’s ghost. But he soon found that they were frauds and gave up magic altogether when the supposedly implacable spirit of his mother proved to be uncharacteristically shy. This identification with Orestes was further reinforced when Nero later deliberately added to his stage repertoire another favorite role, a virtual double, the *other* notorious matricide of Greek myth, but a far more obscure character to us, Alcmæon. The precise parallels with the story of Orestes make it clear why Alcmæon appealed to Nero: his story offered another perfidious mother who caused

the death of the father and threatened the safety of her son, another ambiguous oracle from Delphi, matricide, madness, and flight pursued by the Furies.

The central point is that it was Nero himself and not his enemies who chose to mythologize the murder of his mother. By deliberately presenting Orestes as one of his favorite roles on stage, by underscoring his point in also playing Alcmaeon, by dramatizing the torments of conscience in his life offstage, by performing a matricide on stage in a mask that might bear his own features, Nero framed the terms of the debate over his own guilt.

Unquestionably, he succeeded, for his ancient critics were compelled to react by seeking to demonstrate that he was *not* comparable with Orestes. One, for example—there are several—objected that Orestes (unlike Nero) had acted on the authority of the gods, and (unlike Nero) Orestes had never gone on to kill his sister or his wife, or poisoned his other relatives; another noted that Orestes' own father had been murdered by his mother, but that Nero himself was in fact adopted and therefore actually owed the empire to his mother. A contemporary graffito in verse parodied the heroic posturing of the official version, "Nero Orestes Alcmaeon, mother-killer," playing on his official three names, Nero Claudius Caesar; but the second verse focused attention on simple horror, "Or put it another way: Nero murdered his own mother."

The story of Oedipus must be considered with that of Orestes, the story of the Theban king who killed his father and married his mother. It is clear from scattered reports that Nero specialized in portraying Oedipus as he was after the gods had stricken him with the knowledge of murder and incest, when he wandered around in blind exile.

For Nero, the central element of the tale was not the unconscious but intentional murder of the father; it was the unconscious and unintended incest with the mother, whereby the father is supplanted. Uncertain rumors abounded about incest between Agrippina and Nero and, whatever the truth, the common version appears to have been that Agrippina, fearful of losing her grip on power, had offered herself physically to Nero in 58 or 59, but was circumvented by her enemies; and that he himself did nothing either to repel her advances or to suppress the rumors. The connection between incest and power is central. Incest between mother and son, though rare in life and legend, had a clear symbolic significance for the ancient world, and stories about it share one characteristic: that the hero was or wished to be the conqueror of a homeland from which he was in some way excluded. Any great man who consulted a dreambook would be assured that mothers symbolized country, so that when he dreamt of lying with his mother he would either win power over his native land or at least die and be buried in it. Nero had to look no further than his own family for precedent: the night before Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon he was said to have dreamt that he slept with his mother. To conquer one's mother was to conquer the earth, mother of all.

Again, it was Nero himself and not his enemies who initiated the comparison with Oedipus. Offstage he chose to flaunt a concubine who looked like Agrippina: he would say when he was with her that he was sleeping with his mother. And it was he who chose to play the role of Oedipus in a Neronian mask before an audience notoriously

quick to pounce upon any contemporary parallel. Why? Because Oedipus conveyed a lesson which Orestes could not: he was guilty of incest, but it was *not* his fault, he had acted in *ignorance*.

The myth of Oedipus intersects with the myth of Orestes (and its double, that of Alcmaeon) in Nero's flamboyant self-image: both traced the close relationship between royal mother and royal son which led to or was revealed as a crime, both crimes required the death of a guilty mother, both crimes were intimately linked with the seizure of power by the legitimate heir. Sleeping with and killing one's mother are taboo for ordinary men, but both myths might be harnessed to show how the breaking of taboo by a prince could amount to, even be excused as, the legitimate seizing of power on behalf of the public. We can see the boldness and skill with which a twenty-one-year-old acted to mitigate the horror of killing his dangerous mother. He deliberately invited comparison with the most familiar of Greek heroes, and he acted out the parallels in his life and on the stage before an appreciative audience. By mythologizing himself and his crime he both distanced himself from the actuality of the crime and clothed himself in the aura of a hero. The goal was not to prove his innocence, but to accept guilt boldly, and to justify it.

There is another infamous tale about Nero which is closely tied with the murder of his mother, and that is the death of his second wife, the notorious Poppaea Sabina, in the summer of 65. The common version runs that Nero returned home late from chariot-racing, and Poppaea, pregnant and ill, reproached him; he lashed out in blind ferocity, causing her death with a blow of his heel. For the Middle Ages, this kicking his pregnant wife to death helped to define Nero the Monster. He mourned her extravagantly, embalming her body with spices and placing it in the Mausoleum of Augustus, eulogizing her in the Forum, and making her a goddess, Sabina Venus. But he went much, much further in preserving her memory. Eerily recalling his treatment of his mother, he sent for a woman who looked like Poppaea and kept her (presumably) as a concubine. The following year he discovered a young freedman who so uncannily resembled Poppaea that he castrated him, called him Sabina, married him, and dressed and treated him in all ways as his empress—but that is quite another story. Whenever he played a woman's part on stage, he wore a mask with the features of his dead wife, and again he chose his parts with care.

Nero's most demanding female role on stage was that of Canace in *Childbirth*—the joke went around, while Nero was on tour in Greece, that a soldier who asked, "What is the emperor doing?" received the reply, "He's in labor." Canace was the daughter of Aeolus, the king of the winds and friend of the gods, who lived with his wife and their six sons and six daughters in isolation on the Aeolian Islands. The essential elements of her story are that she bore a child to one of her brothers, and when their father discovered this he sent a sword to her, with which she killed herself, while he ordered that the baby be cast out to the wild beasts; later, too late, Aeolus regrets his rashness. In Ovid's version of the story, Canace begs her brother/lover to gather up the bits and pieces and bury them with her in one tomb. Wearing a mask with the features of Poppaea, Nero sang of a mother and her baby killed at the same time, and sharing the same grave, bitterly and eternally mourned by the child's father:

however farfetched the connection might seem, no Roman audience could miss the personal relevance of the tale.

Others of the emperor's roles were similarly pointed—for example, that of Hercules Gone Mad. In this story, the great hero is driven mad by Hera and slays his sons and their mother, his wife. In Euripides' version, the height of pathos is reached when the hero comes to his senses to discover that he is bound to a column, surrounded by the corpses and by his bow and arrows, and he realizes to his mounting horror that he himself is the murderer of his own family. This scene was certainly performed by Nero, we know, bound by chains of gold. The desired response is clear, though not explicit. Like Hercules, with whom he wished to be identified in other ways, Nero had destroyed the woman he loved and the child who was to succeed him, not because he was a murderer, but in a fit of divine madness. In short, he had killed his wife, as rumor had it, and he had slaughtered their unborn child, but like Hercules he was innocent.

The connection between Nero's wife Poppaea Sabina and his mother Agrippina also lies deep in the remembered past, not of myth but of legend, for it appears that in recreating his relations with these women Nero was self-consciously imitating Periander, a notorious Greek tyrant of Corinth in the sixth century B.C. Periander was the only other important figure of Greco-Roman history who was said to have slept with his mother (her name was Crateia: "Power"). Periander was said to have killed his wife with a kick when she was pregnant and to have mourned her extravagantly thereafter (and there are other striking parallels with Nero's treatment of Poppaea). Periander was said to be the first man to think of cutting a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth—an undoubted benefit to mankind but a clear trespass into the affairs of the gods—and Nero, a lover of grand engineering projects, was the first to try seriously to put the plan into action. (The next man who tried to do it was accused a century later of acting the tyrant in his native Athens and was charged by his brother-in-law with beating his wife to death in the eighth month of her pregnancy. . . .) To understand why Nero chose to present himself as a "tyrant," the new Periander, would take us too far into other matters. The point here is that the legend of Periander confirms the significance of the mythological roles Nero chose to play. What we are dealing with is less reality than it is the creation and manipulation of image. Nero probably neither slept with his mother nor killed his wife, but he took advantage of their deaths to rewrite their stories and his own on a heroic scale. In short, myth creates history.

With the Great Fire of Rome we encounter another complex of notorious legends. On the night of July 18/19, 64, the city began to burn and it burned fiercely, with one respite, for nine days: of the fourteen regions of Rome (we are told), four survived unscathed, seven were devastated, and three were destroyed utterly. As the fire raged, Nero returned to the city from Anzio and immediately took extensive, even heroic measures to relieve popular suffering and to resurrect the city on a much sounder basis, with a strict and sensible building code. As a good emperor should, he looked for religious relief as well: elaborate efforts were made to propitiate the gods, and the perpetrators were alleged to have been discovered among an aberrant Jewish sect which hated the human race and predicted that the earth would soon end in flames.

So far, so good; but unfortunate rumors began to circulate. One was that the disaster had been caused by Nero's own agents, so that he could have the glory of rebuilding Rome as "Neropolis," and dark tales were told of soldiers and other agents forbidding people to fight the fires, or fanning the flames themselves. And while his miserable people still huddled in temporary shelters, Nero callously began to build a vast palace, the notorious Golden House, in the center of Rome. Indeed, we are told that all of his good deeds were undermined by a rumor that as the city burned, the emperor appeared on a stage in his palace, perhaps even on the roof, for the best view, and there, in the robes of a lyre-player, delighted as he said by the beauty of the flame, he sang of the destruction of Troy. (The story about his fiddling while Rome burnt, by the way, goes back to an obscure English epic of the mid-seventeenth century, and it gives a quite erroneous impression of frivolous indifference.) The flames of Troy are the important element here: once again, Roman history begins as Greek myth.

Whether Nero was responsible for the Fire is much debated, but arsonist or not, he took full advantage of it. The Christians were blamed for the crime, and although it has proved to be lethal to Nero's reputation for the last 1,900 years, a vigorous police action against an unpopular sect probably seemed like a good idea at the time. In one of the crucial non-Christian passages on the history of early Christianity, Tacitus explained to his readers who the members of this sect were ("a most mischievous superstition") and how they were punished. The punishment concerns us. "Mockeries were added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as nightly illumination, when daylight expired. Nero had offered his gardens for the spectacle, and he put on a show in the circus [there], while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood in a racing chariot." Punishment at Rome was always a very public act, but the Romans of the late Republic and early Empire distinguished themselves by transforming it into a public spectacle. In fact, the deaths of the Christians correspond to three common forms of execution: being thrown to the beasts, crucifixion, and being burnt alive (the penalty which the ancients regarded as appropriate for arson). But often a theatrical element was added. Executions could be presented as what have been called "fatal charades," tableaux or scenes from the more bloodcurdling myths being re-enacted, however crudely, for the edification of the spectators, with fatal consequences for the actor-criminals. The mass execution of the Christians was turned into just such a show and the "mockeries" added by Nero are central to understanding it. The executions were not mere mindless cruelty, they were flamboyantly theatrical depictions of certain myths which were meant to recall the damage done by the Fire: the punishments were conceived to fit the crimes.

Thus one source tells us that some Christian women were presented for punishment in the guise of Dirce, a wicked stepmother tied to and torn apart by a bull; others became the Danaids, the forty-nine daughters of Danaus who murdered their husbands on their wedding night. Connoisseurs of these fatal charades would appreciate the rebus-like references to great public buildings destroyed or damaged by the Christian fire: in the one case, the major amphitheater in Rome, named after its donor, Statilius Taurus, the bull; in the other, the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine, with its famous

portico lined with statues of the Danaids. Similarly, the dogs hunting human beasts look like a nod to Diana the huntress and the death of impious Actaeon, and the human torches have been seen as reference to the destruction of the Temple of Luna, Light of the Night, where a flame that burnt all night must have been extinguished: now the night was lit up again. These enactments of allusions may seem grotesque to us, but they were just the sort of messages Roman rulers were accustomed to send, significant myths presented in rough and bloody but self-consciously theatrical terms. The master of ceremonies was the emperor himself, familiarly mixing with the crowd, sometimes on foot, sometimes in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer. Why?

In 64, after (and very likely inspired by) the Great Fire, Nero inaugurated a new look, presenting himself as the Sun King: he became Sol or Helios, the god of the Sun, beautiful, all-seeing, all-nourishing, and he proclaimed the arrival of a new Golden Age, gold being the mineral of the Sun. From 64 onwards, the emperor appears on both provincial and imperial coins wearing a diadem with sharp rays rising from it; inscriptions call him things like “the new Helios, lighting the Greeks”; actual depictions of the Sun take on a chubby physiognomy, suspiciously like the face of Nero. The supreme example of the emperor portrayed as Sol, as much recent scholarship has shown beyond doubt, was the famous Colossus, which commanded all of Rome from the vestibule of Nero’s new Golden House as it rose from the ashes: this colossal statue, 120 feet tall, portrayed the emperor decked out as the Sun, with the radiate crown, his right hand holding (I believe) a whip (for reasons which will become clear), his outstretched left hand holding (probably) a globe. (From this “colossus” the nearby Colosseum later took its popular name; Hadrian moved the statue to stand next to the amphitheater, and its huge pedestal was visible there until it was dismantled by Mussolini in the 1930s.)

The main function of the god Sol was to drive the horses of the sun. He was first and foremost a charioteer, and Roman circuses, each elaborately conceived of as a cosmos in miniature, were dedicated to him. It was in 64 that Nero first scandalously raced chariots in public, and thereafter the solar charioteer becomes a leading public figure. Nero’s identification with the Sun god was secured the following year, when Sol saved his life: special thanks were rendered to the all-seeing Sun for revealing a vast conspiracy against the emperor, for it was in the ancient temple of the Sun in the Circus Maximus that the plotters had gathered. An awning stretched over the Theater of Pompey in 66 caused a sensation, when it showed Nero as the solar charioteer, surrounded by stars; and in 67 he dedicated his victory crowns from the games in Greece around the base of the obelisk of the Sun in the Circus Maximus—it now stands in the Piazza del Popolo—and then raced around the course. He was now, he proclaimed publicly, as good a charioteer as the Sun. Why the Sun, why 64? Because, of course, a new day was dawning.

After the Great Fire came a new Golden Age. A wild rumor circulated that the treasure of Queen Dido had been discovered in North Africa, containing a vast quantity of unworked gold. This gave panegyrists a theme in 65: the earth, they proclaimed, teemed with new fertility and the gods brought forth pure gold, not gold alloyed with other metals as before. In late May of 66, Rome witnessed the extraordinary Golden

Day. That was the day on which the emperor crowned Tiridates King of Armenia at fabulous expense. The day received its name, significantly, from the excited people of Rome themselves, because of a stunning embellishment of the Theater of Pompey: the stage of the theater, the walls, everything portable, were all in some way gilded, painted with gold. Pliny the Elder, who was in Rome at the time, says simply that Nero covered the theater with gold for that one day. It would have been blinding had the crowd not been protected from the sun by the awning at the center of which Nero was depicted driving the chariot of the Sun. In this way, the New Sun protected his people from his own commanding glory.

Earlier on this Golden Day, the emperor had received the homage of King Tiridates in the Forum, and he crowned him there before a vast crowd. The coronation ceremony was timed to begin at dawn, and our source remarks particularly on the white clothes of the civilians who crowded everywhere, even on the rooftops, and the shining armor of the soldiers in their ranks, with their weapons flashing like lightning. The theatrical effect when the rising sun first hit the Forum must indeed have been dazzling. And it was a consciously theatrical effect meant to dazzle, one that was deliberately planned: an earlier day for the ceremony had been set by edict, but it had been postponed once because of clouds. The intent could not be more clear: in the forum as in the gilded theater, where Nero repeated the coronation under his solar awning, the Golden Day was also to be the Day of the Sun. Louis XIV himself, the other Sun King, could not have produced a more elaborate or symbolically loaded pageant.

The architectural centerpiece of this new era was the notorious Golden House, which was begun before the ashes of the Fire had cooled. It was meant to be perceived, as Seneca resentfully suggests, as the Palace of the Sun. Not so much a house as a huge country mansion, it overlooked a great park, a bowl of open countryside (roughly around where the Colosseum is today, though we have to imagine a deeper valley) dotted with woods, pastures, fields, animals, and different buildings, all scattered around an artificial lake: it was a suburban villa set down in the heart of the city. The palace itself had a tremendous two-story façade over 360 meters long, gilt and inlaid with jewels, and carefully oriented east–west—the only public building in Rome to be so oriented and at a tremendous cost in engineering. The effect of sunlight hitting such a façade from dawn till dusk would be blinding: it might indeed be taken for the palace of the Sun. This Golden House looked down from the periphery onto a world in miniature with, we are told, an artificial sea, artificial cities, and artificial countryside of all kinds, stocked with tame and wild animals. It was in fact intended as a microcosm of the world: looking down on one side was the house of the Sun, while high above its entrance stood the statue of its master, Nero, as the charioteer Sol, holding the world in his hand. The Golden House was an enormous conceit, meant to blind, to overwhelm the mortal viewer.

The Golden House aroused a lot of criticism both in Nero's life and after his death, for its perceived indifference to the suffering of the citizens, and particularly for its swallowing up of much prime real estate. But its size was wildly exaggerated by hostile contemporaries, and they have been followed in this by modern historians and archaeologists—an anonymous graffito said that one house was taking over the city.

When the Flavian dynasty arrived they ostentatiously returned the ground and buildings to various public uses, and suggested that Nero's palace was an outrageous private playground in the midst of public suffering, a judgment again accepted by modern scholars. But two respected British scholars have asserted that in fact Nero's Golden House and its park had always been essentially open to the public. I think that this is right, for all sorts of reasons. When the graffiti said that one house was taking over Rome, it was merely distorting something Nero himself had proclaimed just before the Fire: he meant to treat the whole city as his house and the citizens as his closest friends—that is, the intention was to include, not exclude, everyone. To the annoyance of the aristocracy, Nero was in fact positioning himself as the great patron and friend of his people, offering them banquets all over the city and grand public spectacles in the theater, in the circus, in the forum, and now in his own home. The Sun King shone down everywhere on Rome.

To us, Nero remains a household word as a monster, and yet he continues to fascinate. He committed monstrous crimes and has been condemned for them for almost two millennia. Much of our image of the emperor, though, derives not just from the judgments of those who hated and feared him, but, beyond them and paradoxically, from Nero himself, from his deliberate fabrication of his own ambiguous image. What fascinated his critics was his imagination—what we read in them is, time and again, a reaction, not to what he did, but to how he presented his deeds. In presenting those deeds, he was unusual only in the extravagant creativity which he brought to the conception of his own image. Behind him stretched a rich history of Roman Caesars and noblemen, and Hellenistic kings and dynasts, practiced in presenting elaborate public displays, both monumental and ceremonial, and of avid popular appreciation of such displays. After him, significantly, we find emperors from Hadrian to Constantine following in his footsteps with barely a murmur of public protest. The more we study the Romans, the more we seek to decipher their complex code of references to abstract virtues, to past personalities and events, and above all to the gods and heroes of mythology, the richer do the shared messages which passed between the governed and the governors at Rome appear.

In that world, we are told repeatedly that Nero was popular, only to have that popularity dismissed or explained away by his ancient critics. Tacitus tells us, for instance, how news of Nero's death hit Rome: the senators were delighted, so were the leading knights; so, he sniffs, were the respectable part of the population and the clients of the great families. But the sordid *plebs* were not happy, the scum of the city, frequenters of the circus and the theater, the most worthless of slaves and wastrels. That is to say, at least 90 percent of the population of Rome was evidently *not* pleased at Nero's death—and it is this very popularity with the people who ate his banquets and joined enthusiastically in his performances that grated on his aristocratic detractors. The best analogy in more recent times for this phenomenon may lie with the spectacular character of Ivan the Terrible. In Russian folklore up to the present day, Ivan is a popular figure, the good Tsar who protects his people against the boyars (read: Roman aristocracy), one given to the company of bandits and cossacks and to mingling incognito

with the poor (as Nero and other folk heroes do). He cuts a very human figure—impatient, hotheaded, prone to overhasty and sometimes fatal misjudgments which he later deeply regrets (cf. the death of Poppaea). But his cruelty, the terror he inflicts, are the just deserts of traitors. When the innocent (including his own son) suffer at his hand, he has been misled by false witnesses or by his own zeal (like Periander, who was misled by his concubines into attacking his wife). As M. Perrie sums up the situation in her study *The Image of Ivan the Terrible in Russian Folklore* (Cambridge University Press, 1987): “Because the terror is directed against enemies and traitors, real and imaginary, it is not seen as an expression of Ivan’s personal viciousness and savagery, but as an indication of his strength and his resolution to pursue the interests of the state, and to avenge injustice against the people.” This goes far toward explaining Nero’s popularity, both in his own lifetime and for some five or six centuries after his death, a popularity that was firmly founded in his manipulation of myth and legend.

In 1936 the popular German author Lion Feuchtwanger published a novel called *The False Nero*, in which he brilliantly explores the psyche of the people who want Nero back. In that work, we are presented with the thoughts of a rogue senator who is the mastermind behind one of the False Neros who sprang up twenty years after the emperor’s death. The senator is talking here with Nero’s old mistress, and his observations may serve us by way of conclusion:

Can you remember, Acte . . . how much easier our belief in Nero made life for us in the old days? And can you remember the paralysis, the numbness that seized the whole world when Nero died? Didn’t you feel as if the world had grown bare and colorless all of a sudden? Those people on the Palatine have tried to steal our Nero from us, from you and me. Isn’t it splendid to think that we can show them they haven’t succeeded? They have smashed his statues into splinters, erased his name from all the inscriptions; they even replaced his head on that huge statue in Rome with the peasant head of old Vespasian. Isn’t it fine to teach them that all that hasn’t been of the slightest use? Granted that they have been successful for a few years. For a few years they have actually managed to banish all imagination from the world, all enthusiasm, extravagance, everything that makes life worth living. But now, with our Nero, all these things are back again.