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FIDDLING WHILE ROME BURNS: THE AETIOLOGY OF A FAMILIAR ENGLISH EXPRESSION*

'Fiddling while Rome burns' is arguably the most familiar English saying inspired by classical antiquity. The image of Nero actually playing an instrument during the Great Fire is not, in fact, found in ancient sources: the first English reference belongs to Cooper's 1548 revision of Elyot's Latin–English *Dictionary*, where Nero is said to play a harp during the conflagration. In 1649 the royalist poet George Daniel applied the term 'fiddle', and the familiar modern form of the expression, as a byword for a leader's neglect, was apparently coined in a 1680 English parliamentary speech by Silius Titus.

In the latter part of July AD 64, while the city of Rome was being ravaged by the most disastrous fire in its history, the emperor Nero is said to have climbed to the top of a high tower. From there, we are told, he looked down upon the inferno and recited his great epic poem on the *Fall of Troy*, drawing parallels between the ancient and current disasters. All three chief literary sources for the Julio-Claudian period, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio, describe the incident, Tacitus soberly pointing out that it was only rumoured.[1] Rumoured or not, the story sowed the seeds of a discontent over

* I am grateful to Kathrin Pfister and Anne Toner for guidance in searching Early English Texts and to Peter Paul Schnierer for his observations on the texts of Shakespeare. I wish also to acknowledge the valuable insights and suggestions of the anonymous reader for *Greece & Rome*.

[1] Tac. *Ann.* 15.39.3: 'These were measures aimed at the people, but they proved a dismal failure. For the rumour had spread that, at the very time that the city was ablaze, Nero had appeared on his private stage and sung about the destruction of Troy, drawing a comparison between the sorrows of the present and the disasters of old.' Suet. *Nero* 38.2: 'Nero looked out over this conflagration from the tower of Maecenas, delighting in the "beauty of the flames", as he put it, and he sang "The Capture of Troy", dressed in his stage costume.' Cass. Dio 62.18.1: 'While the whole population was in this state of mind, many, crazed by the disaster, were leaping into the very flames. Not so Nero, who climbed to the highest point of his palace, from where most of the conflagration could best be seen, and, putting on his citharode's costume, sang what he called "The Destruction of Troy"', but what was actually perceived as being "The destruction of Rome".' Translations are taken from A. A. Barrett, J. C. Yardley, and E. Fantham, *The Emperor Nero. A Guide to the Ancient Sources* (Princeton, NJ, 2016), 156–7.

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Nero's conduct during and after the fire that would grow ever more acute and would arguably play a significant role in his eventual downfall and death.[2] Perhaps more surprisingly, the celebrated recitation also had a considerable impact on English popular culture. Of all the English expressions inspired by antiquity, 'fiddling while Rome burns' is surely the most familiar. The motif of Nero performing against the background of a city in flames has become a byword for the callous indifference of a ruler who cheerfully neglects the pressing needs of the time and focuses on trivial or personal preoccupations.

The purpose of this brief article is to trace the evolution of this English expression. The word 'English', in the strictly linguistic sense, is used advisedly: the phrase is not international, and is apparently unknown in other languages, except as a conscious cultural borrowing. It is, of course, virtually impossible to state categorically when any expression or idea might have first made its way into the public domain, since earlier occurrences might well lurk undetected. Thus there can be no way of proving definitively who first came up with the familiar comment about Nero fiddling. But the earliest instance that I have discovered appears in a speech delivered in the late seventeenth century to the English Parliament by the colourful and bigoted parliamentarian Silius (or Silas) Titus. That Titus personally coined the saying, and did not simply repeat someone else's, is highly likely, since he had something of a reputation for coming up with colourful phrases – he was almost certainly the originator of the expression 'a lion in the lobby'.[3] Moreover, the unpolished nature, if not clumsiness, of his phrasing, as recorded in the transcript of his speech, suggests that the remark had not at that point been refined by the passage of time.

Hence, what seems to be the first recorded attestation of this famous saying belongs to 1680, when an anxious King Charles II requested Parliament to provide funds for the relief of the besieged English garrison in Tangier. The House of Commons proved to be much more concerned by the prospect of Charles being succeeded by his Catholic brother James (later James II). On Thursday, 17 November

[2] See A. A. Barrett, *Rome Is Burning. Nero and the Fire That Ended a Dynasty* (Princeton, NJ, 2020), 232–45.

[3] When Charles II suggested that, as a compromise, his Catholic brother, James, be allowed to succeed under certain conditions, Titus said that such a scheme was akin to allowing 'a lion in the lobby and then voting to secure ourselves by letting him in and chaining him, rather than by keeping him out': E. Calamy, *A Letter to Mr. Archdeacon Echard, upon Occasion of His History of England Wherein the True Principles of the Revolution Are Defended* (London, 1718), 34.

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1680,[4] Titus, vigorously pro-monarchist but virulently anti-Catholic, apparently introduced a new expression into the English language when he told the House that, if they wasted their time over Tangier at a moment when England was facing the prospect of a 'Popish king', there was a danger that 'we may be reflected on, as Nero was, for being playing [*sic*] on his fiddle while Rome was burning'.[5] Thus, in this unlikely context, one of the commonest sayings in the English language entered the public domain.

The phrase did not, of course, spring from nowhere. In fact it had gone through a lengthy evolution. It is often observed that the saying cannot reflect an actual ancient event, or even a reputed event, because of the apparent cheerful anachronism that the fiddle had not been invented in Nero's day, an observation frequently noted jocularly, as if somehow adding to the charm of the expression. This is a misapprehension. 'Fiddle' is admittedly now an informal everyday word for a violin, often used when we want to come across as folksy or unpretentious, and it is certainly true that viols as a general class of instruments did not appear until the eleventh century. But 'fiddle' *began* life in English not to describe a type of violin but as a very general term for almost any stringed instrument.[6] One of the Latin words for just such an instrument is *fides*, used regularly for either a cithara or a lyre.[7] A diminutive Latin form, *fidicula*, is also found. These Latin terms may be cognate with the Old English *fiðele*, but an etymological connection is far from certain. In any case, the meaning of the term by the late sixteenth century is nicely illustrated in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* (usually dated to about 1590–2), where Hortensio complains that, when he tried to teach Kate the lute and criticized her performance, she responded by smashing that same lute over his head and calling him a 'rascal fiddler and twangling Jack'.[8] Thus when Nero was depicted by Silius Titus as 'playing on his fiddle', he was not in fact limited to

[4] In 1680, 17 November fell on Sunday in the Gregorian calendar, but on Thursday in the Julian system still officially in use in England until 1752.

[5] *A Collection of Debates in the House of Commons, In the Year 1680. Relating to the Bill of Exclusion of the Then Duke of York* (London, 1725), 80.

[6] As pointed out by M. F. Gyles, 'Nero Fiddled While Rome Burned', *CJ* 42 (1946–7), 211–17.

[7] The cithara, which in some respects resembles a small harp, is constructed artificially, mainly from wood. The lyre, associated symbolically with Apollo, uses 'natural' components, a tortoise shell for the sound box, and horns for the instrument's arms. 'Lyre' tends to be used generically and casually for both instruments.

[8] *Taming of the Shrew* 2.1.165–6.

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performing on what later became the violin; he could have been thought of as playing any string instrument.

The image of Nero fiddling while Rome burned clearly has its origin in the famous incident related, as noted earlier, by Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio. But there is a curious irony here, in that the phrase places its focus on a specific aspect of Nero's activity that happens not to be mentioned by any of the ancient sources. All three agree that during the fire the emperor recited an epic on the destruction of Tory. Suetonius and Dio add the detail that he did this from a high tower with a good view of the conflagration (Tacitus places him on a private stage). Dio mentions that, before he began his performance, Nero took up the citharode's *skeue*, a vague term for equipment or apparel, usually taken here to mean 'costume',[9] clearly reflected in Suetonius' *suo scaenico habitu* ('dressed in his stage costume').[10] But none of the sources explicitly says that Nero was 'fiddling', in that none mentions the playing of a musical instrument during the performance.

There is no historical problem here. Nero was so intimately associated with performances on the cithara that the ancient authorities may just have felt that there was no need to spell out every detail of his recitation; the cithara's presence could simply be taken for granted. Moreover Dio could in fact be said at least to imply its use by assigning to Nero the citharode's apparel. And when, from the sixteenth century on, Nero was described as playing a cithara (or, more usually, a lyre, harp, or fiddle) during the fire, this does not mean that there was any real contradiction between these later references and their ancient sources.

How quickly writers had started to flesh out the ancient accounts with this one rather trivial detail is difficult to say. In the Middle Ages Nero and his performance are mentioned by a number of chroniclers, but their tendency was simply to paraphrase their sources, particularly Suetonius (often via Orosius), for the facts, and then sometimes to add their own purely moral observations. A brief survey of some of the more important chroniclers – people of the stature of John of Salisbury, Ranulf Higden, Otto Freising, and Matthew of Paris – has unearthed none who goes beyond his Greek and Latin sources by overtly placing a cithara in Nero's hands during the fire.

[9] R. Ash (ed.), *Tacitus. Annals, Book XV* (Cambridge, 2018), 186: 'stage clothing'.

[10] Orosius, *Pag.* 7.7.5 paraphrases Suetonius' *scaenico habitu* as *tragico habitu* (Orosius also assumes that Nero was reciting the *Iliad*).

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That is not, of course, to exclude the possibility that this did happen in some lesser-known text in the Middle Ages.[11] It would have been a relatively insignificant addition and one that would have attracted little, if any, attention.

Both in England and on the continent the image of Nero as 'fiddler' during the fire started to become familiar in the seventeenth century.[12] The foundations for this development in England specifically were laid in writings of the previous century. In 1538, the English diplomat and scholar Sir Thomas Elyot (1490–1546) published his landmark Latin–English *Dictionary*, a lexicon that included proper names.[13] The entry for 'Nero' is brief in the extreme, simply recording that this was 'the name of the emperor, of a monstrous and cruel nature'. In 1548, two years after Elyot's death, a revised and enlarged edition of this dictionary was published by Thomas Cooper (*c.* 1517–94), at that time the Bishop of Lincoln.[14] The entry on Nero was much expanded, with a potted version of the emperor's life, painted in the darkest tones, including the information that he 'made...the citee of Rome to be bourned, he in the meane time playing on a harpe, and syngynge the destruction of Troie'. This additional information about 'playing on a harpe' is repeated in 1565, when Cooper published the first edition of his own *Thesaurus linguae Latinae et Britannicae*, which went through several later editions down to 1584. In each edition, Cooper's amplified entries on Nero were lifted verbatim from his expanded edition of Elyot.

This is not necessarily to claim precedence for Cooper in adding this modest feature to the description of Nero's incendiary activities. He may well have picked up the detail from another source, either English or continental. But if so, I have not been able to trace it. More importantly, however, it is very likely that Cooper was at least the person who started to make the motif familiar in England, given

[11] C. J. Nederman (ed.), *John of Salisbury. Policraticus* (Cambridge, 2012), 204; J. R. Lumby (ed.), *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis* (London, 1872), iv.9.395; A. Hofmeister (ed.), *Ottonis episcopi Frisingensis chronica. Sive, Historia de duabus civitatibus* (Hanover, 1912), iii.158; H. R. Luard (ed.), *Matthaei Parisiensis, monachi Sancti Albani Chronica majora* (London, 1872), i.109.

[12] As a continental example, in 1625 Lope de Vega, the great playwright of the Spanish Golden Age, printed his *Roma abrasada* (*Rome Burned*). It contains an animated description of Nero watching the fire, in this case not from a tower but from the Tarpeian rock, reciting his poetry and playing a lyre: *mira el incendio Romano / cantando al son de una lyra, / que alegre vista!* (758–62).

[13] T. Eliot, *The Dictionary of Syr Thomas Eliot, Knyght* (London, 1538).

[14] T. Eliot, *Bibliotheca Eliotae*, augmented by T. Cooper (London, 1548).

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that his *Thesaurus* was so influential there. Nor can I say with any certainty when Cooper's supplementary information first made its way from the dictionary to an expository text: the earliest instance I have located belongs to 1585. In that year, the distinguished theologian William Perkins used the musical incident (similarly referring to the instrument as a harp) to give a lesson on the difference between cause and contingent circumstance: 'for in those thinges which happe(n) together, the one is not the cause of the other: when nero played vpon his harpe, rome was on fire: yet neroes playing on the harpe was no cause of the burning of rome'.[15] Perkins' exploitation of the incident for didactic purposes does in fact suggest that it was already a familiar one – at least in casual discourse, if not necessarily in printed texts – at the time he wrote, forty years after its first appearance in Cooper's work.

Perkins may have beaten Shakespeare by a few years in publishing the detail in a medium other than a dictionary. In *Henry VI Part 1*, written probably in 1591, Shakespeare is generally thought to allude to Nero giving a musical performance during the fire (on a lute this time), which would be the earliest extant instance of this notion voiced on the English public stage. In Act 1, in the text of the play in common use today, Talbot apparently declares that he will, 'like thee, Nero, play on the lute, beholding the towns burn'.[16] Since there is broad agreement among scholars that Shakespeare elsewhere made use of Cooper's *Thesaurus* it might seem very possible that he could have taken this image also from Cooper. But we run into a frustrating problem. The line of *Henry VI Part 1* as quoted above is not in fact known from any seventeenth-century text. In the folio edition of Shakespeare the text reads 'like thee too' rather than 'like thee Nero'. It is not until the end of the eighteenth century that Nero the lutist appears in *Henry VI* – as an emendation proposed in 1790 by the great Irish editor Edmond Malone. It is an inspired suggestion, which may well be correct, and is the reading used routinely now in productions of the play, but, as with virtually all textual emendations, we can never be totally sure.[17]

In any case, whether used by Shakespeare or not, by the end of the sixteenth century the notion of Nero performing musically while Rome

[15] W. Perkins, *Foure Great Lyers, Striuing Who Shall Win the Siluer Whetstone* (London, 1585).
[16] *Henry VI Part 1*, 1.4.95–6; see Gyles (n. 6), 215.
[17] I owe the observation on the text of *Henry VI* to Professor Schnierer.

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was burning had taken a firm hold. It could even be summoned to issue a stinging rebuke. In 1594 the dyspeptic Cambridge scholar and theologian Hugh Broughton addressed a brief tract to the officials of Oxford to berate the students who had criticized his work: 'also i founde your Studentes enemies to Gods trueth, as before: and bitter, because i liken them to Nero, harping at their owne cities flames'.[18]

In the seventeenth century Nero became a popular fixture in drama and poetry generally, and his behaviour during the fire of Rome was a favourite topic.[19] Accounts of his performances in this period generally involve lutes, lyres, or harps. In 1624, in a play that sadly is anonymous, *The Tragedy of Nero*, a major step in the evolution of our expression was taken when Seneca, as a character in the play, became the first individual on record to refer to Nero actually 'fiddling':

> *Nay, even end here, for I have heard enough;*
> *I have a fiddler heard him* [*sc.* Nero], *let me not*
> *See him a player...*[20]

However, Seneca's comment is made before the fire has even broken out and alludes to another phenomenon entirely: Nero's participation in artistic competitions. We need to move a little later to award the honour for penning the first certain application of the word 'fiddle' to Nero's activity specifically during the fire, and that honour goes to a relatively obscure cavalier poet, George Daniel of Beswick (1616–57). The concept of Nero the arsonist was much exploited by both sides in the quarrels between Charles I and Parliament in the first half of the seventeenth century.[21] Daniel, an ardent Royalist, who left his beard untrimmed after 30 January 1649, in memory of the king's execution, retired to his Yorkshire estates after the end of the Civil War to write verbose and mannered poetry. He was a man convinced of his own poetic immortality (and equally convinced of Shakespeare's

[18] H. Broughton, 'To the worshypfull and learned, the Vicechauncelour, and others the gouernours of learning-houses in the Vniuersitie of Oxeforde', in *To the most high and mightie prince Elizabet...* ([London], 1594), sig. A2.

[19] The first extant work devoted entirely to the emperor since Suetonius' *Life* was Matthew Gwinne's play *Nero*, performed in Oxford in 1603. The most celebrated of such dramas was Nathaniel Lee's *Tragedy of Nero*, staged in London in 1674/5. Among poets, the prolific Thomas Heywood (1570s–1641) published his *Troia Britannica* in seventeen cantos in 1609, in which he proclaims: 'Now did Nero sing, / Upon a hill Troyes burning to his lyre / Having before set stately Rome a-fire' (lines 360–2).

[20] *The Tragedy of Nero, A Collection of Old English Plays* (London, 1624), 3.3.

[21] W. B. Gwyn, 'Cruel Nero: The Concept of the Tyrant and the Image of Nero in Western Political Thought', *History of Political Thought* 12 (1991), 421–55.

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mediocrity), but gained little recognition, and complains in one poem of a listener who fell asleep during one of his recitations (for which Daniel found solace in tobacco). Nevertheless, he was certainly enthusiastic, and prolific.

In one of his longest – and least successful – compositions, the *Trinarchodia*, finished in 1649, Daniel chronicles the restoration of the kingship by Henry V, a story of the decline and rise of three Plantagenet kings and the struggle to find meaning in a time of upheaval. It is a quasi-philosophical tract by someone who is a zealous monarchist trying to come to terms with the monarchy's destruction (he died before the Stuart restoration in 1660). In this unpromising context Daniel makes a major contribution to one of the most familiar motifs drawn from antiquity, Nero 'fiddling' during his city's destruction:

> *Let Nero fiddle out Rome's obsequies*
> *and force the farre-spent world with tyrranies.*[22]

Daniel's image went through its final metamorphosis when, just over thirty years later, Silius Titus gave the idea its familiar wording of fiddling while Rome is burning in the English House of Commons, in 1680. Interestingly, however, it seems that Titus' expression, used specifically to suggest the neglect of important responsibilities at a time of crisis, did not immediately catch on.[23] The image of the fiddler certainly does persist after him, but it conveys a whole range of sentiments. Hence, in 1714 Francis Hewerdine used it to illustrate the tragedy of wasted talents.[24] For James Arbuckle in 1726, it symbolized unseemly pleasure.[25] To Edward Young in 1755, heaping

[22] G. Daniel, *Trinarchodia. The Several Reigns of Richard II, of Henry IV and of Henry V* (London, 1649), 3.133, lines 163–4; R. A. Anselment, *Loyalist Reserve. Patient Fortitude in the English Civil War* (Newark, 1988), 94.

[23] The sentiment, if not the precise wording, may have influenced Aphra Behn. In her epistolary novel *Love-Letters between a Noble-Man and His Sister*, published in 1684, claimed by some to be the first novel written in English, the philanderer Philander writes to his sister-in-law Silvia that 'were the Nation sinking, the great Senate of the world confounded, our Glorious Designs betray'd and ruin'd, and the vast City all in flame; like Nero unconcern'd I'd sing my everlasting Song of Love to Silvia': A. Behn, *Love-Letters between a Noble-Man and His Sister* (London, 1684), 35.

[24] F. Hewerdine, *The Danger and Folly of Evil Courses. Being a Practical Discourse, Shewing the Base and Vile Nature of Sin, and the Dreadful Consequences of It* (London, 1714), 88–9: 'It's a scandalous thing for him who / God has fitted for great and weighty affairs, like Nero, to spend his time fiddling.'

[25] J. Arbuckle, *A Collection of Letters and Essays on Several Subjects, Lately Publish'd in the Dublin Journal* (London, 1729), ii.111 (16 July 1726): 'barbarous pleasure which Nero took in seeing the capital of his empire in flames and imperially fiddling over the conflagration'.

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indiscriminate praise on a writer was like admiring the evil Nero's skill on the fiddle.[26]

It is in fact not until as late as 1773 that I can find a record of the phrase being used once more to denounce irresponsibility, when Joseph Cradock bemoans the neglectful sovereign who cares nothing for the state 'but like Nero fiddles while Rome is burning'.[27] From then on we frequently come across this now familiar use of the expression, applied to figures as diverse as rebellious American colonists or particularly ineffective members of the House of Lords.[28] We do have excellent evidence that by at least the end of the century the expression was firmly established as part of English-speaking culture. Arthur Browne, the distinguished Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, noted in 1798 that Suetonius' version of the Great Fire was, undeservedly in his opinion, more influential than Tacitus' and that, as a consequence, 'few traditions have been more firmly believed, or sayings more frequently applied, than that Nero fiddled while Rome was burning'.[29] By late in the following century, as an indication that the expression had become a household one, James Fenimore Cooper could simply omit Nero's name in his last novel, *The Ways of the Hour*, in 1871, defining gossip as a tyrant 'as ruthless and injurious in its way, as he who fiddled while Rome was in flames'.[30]

The expression has never lost popularity. When, in the November 2006 American elections, Republicans lost control of both the Senate and the House and George W. Bush persisted in ignoring the apparent popular concern by sending more troops to Iraq, the *New Yorker* magazine for 22 January 2007 carried on its cover a now iconic caricature of Bush in a Roman emperor's garb playing the lyre while the flames rise up behind him. And in March 2020, when the coronavirus became a serious issue in the USA, a popular meme began to circulate of Donald Trump fiddling during the crisis. Whether or not these

[26] E. Young, *The Centaur Not Fabulous. In Five Letters to a Friend, on the Life in Vogue* (London, 1755), 374: praising a writer 'is like admiring Nero for his fiddle, when, through his own frenzy, his glorious Capital was in flames'.

[27] J. Cradock, *The Life of John Wilkes, Esq; in the Manner of Plutarch. Being a Specimen of a Larger Work* (London, 1773), 31.

[28] For the Lords, see *The Noble Cricketers: A Poetical and Familiar Epistle, Address'd to Two of the Idlest Lords in His Majesty's Three Kingdoms* (London, 1778), preface: 'May it produce an amendment. That Nero fiddled while Rome burned.' For rebellious colonists, see *Plan of Re-Union between Great Britain and Her Colonies* (London, 1778), 100: 'were its proud cities on fire, they could stand like Nero and fiddle over the conflagration'.

[29] A. Browne, *Miscellaneous Sketches. Or, Hints for Essays* (London, 1798), i.158.

[30] J. F. Cooper, *The Ways of the Hour. A Tale* (New York, 1871), 313.

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caricatures are fair, they do illustrate the resilience of the image.[31] It comes as no surprise to learn that, according to one study, Nero fiddling is the most widely known 'fact' about the emperor among American students![32]

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[31] Bush and Trump are not being singled out: a quick perusal of 'Nero fiddling' in Google Images will reveal the same motif, embracing every president from Clinton on, fiddling while the flames of some political disaster blaze in the background. And it is not only in America: the *New Statesman* for 29 July 2019 carried the headline '[Boris] Johnson accused of "fiddling while Rome burns"'.

[32] Gwyn (n. 21), 454–5. And no doubt among English-speaking students everywhere.

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