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FORESHADOWING AND FLASHBACK: CHILDHOOD ANECDOTES IN SUETONIUS' *CAESARS*[1]

Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* contain at least twenty discrete anecdotes about childhood (*pueritia*) and youth (*iuuenta* or *adulescentia*) spread across the *Lives*.[2] Some characterize the Caesars by looking forwards (foreshadowing) and others do so by looking backwards (flashbacks).[3] In both foreshadowing and flashback, the childhood anecdote shows continuity with the adult and creates the impression of lifelong consistency of character. The foreshadowing technique is also something other ancient biographers do; the flashback is something that appears to be unique to Suetonius. In this note I briefly consider the stories from childhood and youth that foreshadow character traits and themes of the rest of the *Life*, and then the flashbacks from the adulthood section of the *Life* that refer to childhood and youth in order to demonstrate vices of the grown adult.[4] I show that the use of foreshadowing and flashbacks contributes to the appearance of a fully formed character in the child that

[1] This paper was presented in various versions at seminars in the Australian National University, the University of Sydney and the University of Newcastle, and at the Australasian Society for Classical Studies Conference in Wellington. I thank the audience of those presentations, as well as Kristin Heineman, Paul Burton, Bronwen Neil and Camilla Smith for their suggestions and contributions. I also thank the journal's referees for their anonymous suggestions. This paper was written with the support of the Australian National University as a Visiting Fellow. I thank Hugh Lindsay, Jane Bellemore and Claire Jamset for supervision at various stages of the work. I use the 2016 Oxford Classical Text of Suetonius (R. Kaster, *C. Suetoni Tranquilli De uita Caesarum libri VIII et De grammaticis et rhetoribus liber* [Oxford, 2016]) and the translations are adapted from the Loeb of Rolfe/Hurley (J.C. Rolfe, *Suetonius*, revised by D. Hurley, 2 vols. [Cambridge, MA, 1997–8]).

[2] *Iul.* 71; *Aug.* 84; *Tib.* 6.1–4, 57; *Calig.* 11, 24.1; *Claud.* 2.1–2, 3.1, 3.2–4.7; *Ner.* 6.3, 6.4, 7.1, 22.1, 52; *Galb.* 4.1; *Otho* 2.1; *Vit.* 3–4; *Vesp.* 2; *Tit.* 3.1; *Dom.* 1.3, 12.3, 14.1. This is not including three references to reputations gained 'in youth', but these are on two out of three occasions mentioned only to be denied. Augustus (*Aug.* 68) and Titus (*Tit.* 6.2–7.1) attracted bad reputations but these turned out to be unfair; these 'reputations' explain any apparent inconsistency between youth and adulthood. Only Domitian's bad reputation (he was said to have been debauched by Nerva, *nec defuerunt qui affirmarent*, *Dom.* 1.1) is neither confirmed nor denied, though its prominent position at the beginning of the *Life* is probably meant to colour the reader's assessment. On Suetonius' inclusion of this sexual material in *Augustus*, see D. Wardle, *Suetonius: Life of Augustus* (Oxford, 2014), 436: 'The framing of the material on Aug.'s sexual relations with men makes it clear that Suet. attaches little credibility to it: firstly, the rubric talks only of a "bad reputation" (*infamia*); secondly Suet. records the source of each specific allegation so that the reader can discount the bias … and thirdly, the culminating item proves no more than widespread knowledge of the allegations.'

[3] The presence of both foreshadowing and flashbacks in Suetonius was briefly noted by C. Gill, 'The question of character development: Plutarch and Tacitus', *CQ* 33 (1983), 469–87, at 476–7.

[4] I have restricted my search to stories that explicitly refer to youth or childhood. I exclude a small group of childhood stories that do little for characterization, but rather serve as omens of future greatness, or background scene-setting: *Aug.* 94.7; *Tib.* 6.1–4; *Galb.* 4.1; *Vesp.* 2.

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will be consistent into adulthood, as well as facilitating the rubric system of arranging material by type rather than by time.

FORESHADOWING

References to childhood and youth occur in the pre-accession section of the *Lives*, in the chronological part of the narrative,[5] demonstrating character traits in the child that are also present in the adult. These childhood stories foreshadow aspects of the *Life* by mentioning an occurrence of a trait (or, in one case, a theme) in childhood that will be consistent with the adult.[6]

The single example of foreshadowing a theme with a childhood story comes from *Ner.* 6.4:

gratia quidem et potentia reuocatae restitutaeque matris usque eo floruit ut emanaret in uulgus missos a Messalina uxore Claudii qui eum meridiantem quasi Britannici aemulum strangularent, additum fabulae et eosdem dracone e puluino se proferente conterritos refugisse. quae fabula exorta est deprensis in lecto eius circum ceruicalia serpentis exuuiis, quas tamen aureae armillae ex uoluntate matris inclusas dextro brachio gestauit aliquamdiu ac taedio tandem maternae memoriae abiecit rursusque extremis suis rebus frustra requisiit.

When his mother was recalled from banishment and reinstated, he became so prominent through her influence that it leaked out that Messalina, wife of Claudius, had sent emissaries to strangle him as he was taking his noon-day nap, regarding him as a rival of Britannicus. An addition to this bit of gossip is that the would-be assassins were frightened away by a snake which darted out from under his pillow. The only foundation for this tale was that there was found in his bed near the pillow the slough of a serpent; but nevertheless at his mother's desire he had the skin enclosed in a golden bracelet, and wore it for a long time on his right arm. But when at last the memory of his mother grew hateful to him, he threw it away, and afterwards in the time of his extremity sought it again in vain.[7]

Although the threat of assassins demonstrates the perilous situation Nero lived in as a child, the event does not appear to influence his character, or show the continuity of his character traits from childhood to adulthood.[8] Instead, the story's significance lies in the bracelet. Mentioning the snake and the bracelet early in the *Life* foreshadows themes of Nero's adulthood, especially his fraught relationship with his mother (*Ner.* 34), and his panic and fickleness in his final days (*Ner.* 44–9).

Other anecdotes show specific traits in the child that also appear in the adult. Only Titus (*Tit.* 3.1) has his virtues foreshadowed. A story about Nero's childhood demonstrates his cruelty (*Ner.* 7.1), which foreshadows a longer set of anecdotes about Nero's cruelty later in the *Life* (*crudelitas*, 26.1; *saeuitia*, 36.1). In the early

[5] On the tripartite structure of many of the *Lives*, with a chronological section at either end 'sandwiching' a main section arranged by rubric, see D.W. Hurley, 'Suetonius' rubric sandwich', in T. Power and R. Gibson (edd.), *Suetonius the Biographer* (Oxford, 2014), 21–37.

[6] *Calig.* 11; *Claud.* 2.1–2, 3.1, 3.2–4.7; *Ner.* 6.3, 6.4, 7.1; *Vit.* 3–4; *Tit.* 3.1; *Dom.* 1.3.

[7] See also Dio Cass. 61.2–4, Tac. *Ann.* 11.11.6.

[8] The snake embellishment, suggesting some sort of divine protection, has the hallmarks of a legend created about his childhood once he was heir apparent or already ruler, especially as it is supposed to have occurred when Messalina was still alive. There are many stories about the childhoods of heroes and rulers involving serpents, but they are usually about a child defeating the snake. T.E.J. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (London, 1989) gives some examples. On this subject I thank Daniel Ogden for discussion.

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sections of the *Caligula*, a reference to vices in his youth foreshadows the same vices in his adulthood (*Calig*. 11):

naturam tamen saeuam atque probrosam ne tunc quidem inhibere poterat, quin et animaduersionibus {poenis} ad supplicium datorum cupidissime interesset et ganeas atque adulteria capillamento celatus et ueste longa noctibus obiret ac scaenicas saltandi canendique artes studiosissime appeteret, facile id sane Tiberio patiente, si per has mansuefieri posset ferum eius ingenium, quod sagacissimus senex ita prorsus perspexerat ut aliquotiens praedicaret exitio suo omniumque Gaium uiuere et se natricem {serpentis id genus} p. R., Phaethontem orbi terrarum educare.

Yet even at that time he could not control his natural cruelty and viciousness, but he was a most eager witness of the tortures and executions of those who suffered punishment, revelling at night in gluttony and adultery, disguised in a wig and a long robe, passionately devoted besides to the theatrical arts of dancing and singing, in which Tiberius very willingly indulged him, in the hope that through these his savage nature might be softened. This last was so clearly evident to the shrewd old man, that he used to say now and then that to allow Gaius to live would prove the ruin of himself and of all men, and that he was rearing a *natrix* ['a kind of snake'] for the Roman people and a Phaethon for the world.

This story both foreshadows and shows continuity. *Caligula* is emphatically divided into good and bad (*princeps* and *monstrum*) at *Calig*. 22.1. But structure imitates life: Caligula's cruelty intrudes upon the early section of the *Life*, as it does upon his childhood. This story plants the seeds of themes that will be enlarged in the *monstrum* section of the *Life* after section 22.

Even in the short *Lives* of the Caesars of 69 C.E., there is a strong thread of continuity from childhood through to adulthood. Vitellius' questionable sexual preferences, mentioned at the end of the *Life*, are foreshadowed in the early part of the *Life.* Vitellius spent his boyhood on Capri amongst Tiberius' *spintriae* (*Vit.* 3.2). This story seems likely to be the result of propaganda surrounding Vitellius' rise and fall in 69 C.E.;[9] similar things had been said about Julius Caesar and Augustus.[10] The inclusion here of sexual material foreshadows the dubious character traits Vitellius shows briefly at section 4 and in more detail in the section after 10.1, the transition from the good to the 'rest' of his conduct, which comes 'more from his nature and his prior lifestyle' (*magis ex natura et priore uita sua*) than from what would be fitting with his lofty position. The behaviour listed after the transition at *Vit.* 10.1 can be put down to 'nature' or 'his prior lifestyle' or perhaps both, foreshadowed earlier in the *Life*. The same can be said of Otho, who was extravagant and wild 'from earliest youth' (*a prima adulescentia*, *Otho* 2.1). Obviously, the implication is that he continued to be so.[11]

[9] C.L. Murison, *Suetonius: Galba, Otho, Vitellius* (London, 1992), 142 is right to note that it is unlikely that this actually happened.

[10] *Vit.* 3–4, looking forwards to 12. Cf. *Aug.* 68.1; *Iul.* 49. On sexual material as 'character assassination' in Suetonius, see J. Meister, 'Reports about the "sex life" of early Roman emperors: a case of character assassination?', in M. Icks and E. Shiraev (edd.), *Character Assassination throughout the Ages* (New York, 2014), 59–81, who considers Suetonius an antiquarian rather than an author (at 73 n. 43), with which I would vehemently disagree. On sexual practices in political invective in general, see A. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (New York, 1992), 81–104; W. Krenkel, *Naturalia non Turpia: Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Hildesheim, 2006), 233–63; R. Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, 2006), 348–63.

[11] This reference is neither a foreshadowing nor a flashback: the unusual structure of *Otho* means that childhood and adulthood are all one section. It does appear early in the *Life*, so it is more appropriate to call it foreshadowing than flashback.

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Suetonius' use of childhood stories to show continuity through foreshadowing seems to be roughly the same as in other ancient biography.[12] Timothy Duff has shown that Plutarch uses anecdotes about education in the *Lives* according to two models, the 'static' (showing consistency) and the 'analytical' (showing development of character).[13] According to the static model, Plutarch's comment that Themistocles showed certain characteristics even 'when still a boy' means that he also showed them later, as an adult.[14] I argue that in Suetonius, too, the implication of 'even when a child' is 'as well as later when he was an adult'. Of Plutarch's two models, Suetonius uses only the static.

However, Suetonius does something with childhood evidence that Plutarch does not: Suetonius also uses childhood stories later, in the adulthood section, demonstrating continuity by looking back.

FLASHBACKS

Flashbacks, childhood anecdotes that occur in the course of showing adult traits, bolster the evidence for such traits by stating that they had been discernible 'even in boyhood' or 'from youth'.[15] Part of the reason this works in Suetonius and does not occur in Plutarch is Suetonius' arrangement by rubric, which allows for—even requires—privileging theme above chronology. Plutarch's largely chronological arrangement still allows for the insertion of an anecdote out of order, accompanied by a statement such as 'but this happened later' or 'this had happened earlier' (for example *C. Gracch.* 10), but these Plutarchan anecdotes do not go back as far as childhood. When Suetonius collects material together under a subheading of a vice or virtue, the anecdotes that demonstrate it can be drawn from any part of the subject's life, even childhood. The rubric system works on the assumption that the subject is conceived of as a consistent character from birth to death.

Caligula's peculiar taste for incest is an item in a long catalogue of sexual vices (*Calig.* 36) that would be adequately demonstrated by adulthood anecdotes, but is reinforced by the salacious detail that his grandmother Antonia found him in bed with Drusilla when he was only a boy (*praetextatus*, *Calig.* 24.1).[16] This confirms that the trait was continuous from childhood to adulthood, and did not spring up later.[17] Continuity from childhood to adulthood, demonstrated by foreshadowing as well as by flashback, reinforces the idea that character traits are constant over the lifetime, perhaps even inherited at birth. Passages such as *Tib.* 68.3 (on Tiberius'

[12] E.g. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Cornelius Nepos (e.g. *Att.* 1.3) and the *Historia Augusta* (e.g. *Marc.* 2, 2.6, 4.10, 7.1; and *Comm.* 1.7–1.9, 10.1 but not Caracalla [*M. Ant.* 1.3–1.7], where there is a contrast between child and adult): Wiedemann (n. 8), 56, 61.

[13] T.E. Duff, 'Plutarch on the childhood of Alkibiades (*Alk.* 2–3)', *PCPhS* 49 (2003), 89–117; T.E. Duff, 'Models of education in Plutarch', *JHS* 128 (2008), 1–26.

[14] Duff (n. 13 [2008]), 4.

[15] *Iul.* 71, *Aug.* 84, *Tib.* 57, *Calig.* 24.1, *Ner.* 22.1, *Dom.* 12.3.

[16] But we know from *Calig.* 10 that Caligula was still *praetextatus* until he went to Capri in his nineteenth year.

[17] *cum omnibus sororibus suis consuetudinem stupri fecit plenoque conuiuio singulas infra se uicissim conlocabat uxore supra cubante. ex iis Drusillam uitiasse uirginem praetextatus adhuc creditur atque etiam in concubitu eius quondam deprehensus ab Antonia auia, apud quam simul educabantur* (*Calig.* 24.1).

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'arrogant' mannerisms) suggest that character traits can be natural, rather than intentional; and others such as *Calig.* 25.4 (on Caligula's paternity of his daughter) and *Ner.* 6.1 (on his father's prediction of Nero's character) suggest that character traits are dependent on those of the parents.[18] A model of consistent character over the lifetime allows Suetonius' rubric system to bring in evidence from any time of life, demonstrating a vice or virtue that then appears to be unchanging and perhaps unchangeable.

Suetonius, unlike Plutarch, does not exhibit much interest in education. Rare references to education (*Claud.* 2.2, *Ner.* 6.3) adduce the arrangements made for the young boys' education to demonstrate their unexpectedly low positions in society as children, more than they demonstrate character or aptitude. There are also two flashbacks, references to education that occur late in their respective *Lives* (*Tib.* 57.1, *Ner.* 52) and are more obviously characterizing of the subject himself. Tiberius' teacher of rhetoric said of Tiberius in his boyhood (*in puero*) that the boy was πηλὸν αἵματι πεφυραμένον *(id est lutum a sanguine maceratum)* ('mud kneaded with blood')—a reference Suetonius takes to be about his cruel and cold-blooded character (*saeua ac lenta natura*, *Tib.* 57.1), a prominent characteristic of his *Life*. Just as Tiberius saw the evil in Caligula (*Calig.* 11), so too Tiberius' own teacher had seen the evil in his (that is, Tiberius') nature. But, although the comment was made in boyhood, it is only mentioned at *Tib.* 57, beginning a list of other anecdotes demonstrating his cruelty. The presence of the trait *in puero* is not necessary, but it does strengthen the case that it was present in adulthood by adding evidence to an already large pile. Gathering together references from Tiberius' whole lifetime makes each vice appear more extreme and more innate.

A final example of detail on educational arrangements comes late in *Nero*, looking backwards, with particular reference to his mother and his tutor. At *Ner.* 52, as part of the post-death summary and within a section on his interests and hobbies, Suetonius comments that Nero's mother deliberately prevented him from learning philosophy, as she apparently thought it to be unsuitable subject-matter for a future *princeps*.[19] In addition, Seneca prevented him from reading the early orators (*Ner.* 52):

liberalis disciplinas omnis fere puer attigit, sed a philosophia eum mater auertit, monens imperaturo contrariam esse, a cognitione ueterum oratorum Seneca praeceptor, quo diutius in admiratione sui detineret.

When a boy he took up almost all the liberal arts; but his mother turned him from philosophy, warning him that it was a drawback to one who was going to rule, while Seneca kept him from reading the early orators, to make his admiration for his teacher endure the longer.

This is all about what Nero was *prevented* from learning. This might have appeared earlier in the *Life* with the information about Nero's unsuitable tutors, the dancer and the barber (*Ner.* 6.3), but instead comes in the summary of his interests and habits. With *mater* and Seneca as subjects, it seems that here Suetonius is demonstrating

[18] The frequent use of ancestral character traits to foreshadow the same traits in the subject also contributes to this impression of character traits coming from parents and ancestors, particularly on the paternal side.

[19] On a similar theme, but with different implications, Agricola's mother also discouraged her son's interest in philosophy (Tac. *Agr.* 4.3).

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something that is as much about the characters of Agrippina and Seneca as it is about the experience of Nero, pulled between these two forceful personalities.

These flashbacks appear in the adulthood section of the *Lives*, looking back to childhood to demonstrate a trait of the grown adult. Elsewhere, shorter references in adulthood sections make it clear that the presence of a trait is confirmed by its being visible early: Domitian was contrary 'from youth' (*Dom.* 12.3) and by implication he continued to be so; Nero's love of horses 'from his earliest years' (*Ner.* 22.1) continued unabated into adulthood. Rare positive traits, in both cases presented as flashbacks, appear in Augustus and in Julius Caesar from youth and do not wane.[20]

A final example of an event from youth (in this case *adulescentulo*) is the explanation for Domitian's paranoia. Domitian was told *when he was a young man* (*adulescentulo*, *Dom.* 14.1) of the manner of his death (*Dom.* 14.1), which is relevant as an omen but also explains why he was always afraid (*quare pauidus semper atque anxius*, *Dom.* 14.2). Like the childhood illness of Claudius (*Claud.* 2.2), this prediction *explains* Domitian's behaviour (but does not necessarily change his character). However, the story of Claudius foreshadows, and this information about Domitian comes close to the end of the *Life*, a flashback just before the event to which it pertains, the long description of Domitian's paranoia and assassination. The biographer looks back to *adulescentia* to explain behaviour that is presumably consistent from then on.

These examples make it clear that a story from childhood is just as valid a proof of a trait as one from adulthood. For this to work, character must already be fully formed in the child. Suetonius' perception of character as constant over the lifetime allows him to use the rubric system—or perhaps it is the rubric system that requires the character to be constant over the lifetime. Structure affects meaning and meaning affects structure.

By looking back from adulthood into childhood to draw examples of behaviour, Suetonius is doing something that other ancient biographers do not appear to do. Foreshadowing and flashbacks contribute to the rounded picture of a consistent character from birth to death, a model of character that allows Suetonius to build a portrait vice by vice, selecting a suitable anecdote from any period of his Caesars' lives.

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[20] Augustus' devotion to his studies, *Aug.* 84; Julius Caesar's loyalty, *Iul.* 71.

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