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# TIBERIUS THE CAPRICIOUS*

*In Memoriam Ed. Champlin*

In this article, I argue that fictional stories about the Roman emperor are a fruitful avenue for excavating a multifaceted discourse about the sole ruler of the Roman world, who, in this case, is Tiberius. Edward Champlin, who worked on anecdotes about Tiberius in the last decade or so, attributes these negative impressions of the emperors to the pen of a single author (i.e. M. Servilius Nonianus). This argument, I argue, sells the wider meaning of these stories short. The anecdotes themselves are windows into a wider discourse about how the emperor seemed to his subjects. Fictitious or true, such stories inform imaginations about who Tiberius was seen to be, which make these the stories historically relevant. We must both embrace these stories as relevant historical evidence for how Roman emperors were scrutinized and criticized and recognize them as a crucial part of Roman understandings of who the emperor was.

**Keywords:** Tiberius, fiction, Suetonius, historiography, emperor, popular discourse

## Introduction: tales of emperors

In paucis diebus quam Capreas attigit piscatori, qui sibi secretum agenti grandem mullum inopinanter obtulerat, perfricari eodem pisce faciem iussit, territus quod is a tergo insulae per aspera et deuia erepsisset ad se; gratulanti autem inter poenam, quod non et lucustam, quam praegrandem ceperat, obtulisset, lucusta quoque lacerari os imperavit.[1]

A few days after he reached Capri and was by himself, a fisherman appeared unexpectedly and offered him a huge mullet; He (sc. Tiberius) ordered that the man's face be rubbed by the fish, terrified (as he was) that the fisherman had crept up from the back of the island towards him over rough and pathless rocks. And because in the midst of his torture, the

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[1] The Latin text comes from the recent OCT edition by R. A. Kaster.

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man thanked his lucky stars that he had not also given the emperor the enormous crab he had caught, Tiberius had his face torn with the crab, too. (Suet. *Tib*. 60.1)[2]

So goes the story of Tiberius and the mullet, which is connected to his time on Capri. Tiberius was made capricious not only by his changeable character but also his isolation on his island fortress in the Bay of Naples.[3] The story depicts a brooding emperor so frightened that he would torture a poor fisherman over a gift.[4] This anecdote of Tiberius is both gloomy and darkly comical due to the fisherman's frank and ironic expression of relief during his torture. It also is given prime place in Edward Champlin's 2008 article 'Tiberius the Wise', which highlights the fabulous quality of several anecdotes about Tiberius littered throughout Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio. Insights include their connection to world folk literature and the existence of more positive depictions of Tiberius as a sagacious old ruler with a quick wit and sound judgement in other texts.[5] Emphasizing these more positive depictions, Champlin confronts the negative image of Tiberius and suggests the existence of a more positive reception of Rome's second emperor.[6] His 2008 article was part of a broader effort[7] to expose the

[2] Translation from Rolfe's Loeb edition, adapted: Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars, Volume I: Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, Caligula*, trans. J. C. Rolfe. (Cambridge, MA, 1914).

[3] On Capri as a place of marvel, see P. Christoforou, '*qualem diem Tiberius induisset:* Tiberius' Absences on Capri as an Inspiration for Wonder and Uncertainty', in J. McNamara and V. E. Pagán (eds.), *Tacitus' Wonders: Empire and Paradox in Ancient Rome* (London, 2022), 197–220, with Tac. *Ann*. 4.57–67 and A. J. Woodman (ed.), *The Annals of Tacitus: Book 4* (Cambridge, 2018), esp. 304. Tiberius' perceived monstrousness comes out more openly during his seclusion on Capri. See also J. Gagé, 'Tibère à Capri: histoire, légende et thèmes astrologiques', *Revue des études Italiennes* 8 (1961), 5–43, and R. Edwards, 'Tacitus, Tiberius and Capri', *Latomus* 70 (2011), 1,047–57 for Tiberius' time and characterization on Capri.

[4] On the motif of matters pertaining to the sea and seafood, see N. Purcell, 'Eating Fish: The Paradoxes of Seafood', in J. Wilkins, D. Harvey, and M. Dobson (eds.), *Food in Antiquity* (Exeter, 1995), 132–50.

On the dichotomy of Tiberius' reign, and the importance of contemporary sources, see K. Christ, 'Velleius und Tiberius', *Historia* 50 (2001), 190. For a discussion on *perfrico faciem*, meaning 'shamelessness', see R. Ash, 'Tiberius in Space: Proxenics and the Portrayal of a Princeps', in C. Davenport and S. Malik (eds.), *Representing Rome's Emperors* (Oxford, 2024), 45–6 and 54–5, on the isolation of Capri.

[5] E. Champlin, 'Tiberius the Wise', *Historia* 57 (2008), 408–25. For examples of a more 'positive' tradition, see Phaedrus, 2.5; Phlegon, 14; Plut. *Mor*. 419 B–E. For more on popular and contrasting perceptions of the emperor, see P. Christoforou, *Imagining the Roman Emperor: Perceptions of Roman Rulers in the High Empire* (Cambridge, 2023).

[6] See Champlin (n. 5), 423–4, on Champlin's analysis of the fictive elements of the fisherman story.

[7] Cf. E. Champlin, *Tiberiana* 1: 'Tiberian Neologisms', *Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics Paper* No. 090601 (2006), Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=1426907 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1426907, accessed 11 March 2023.

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culprit behind the alleged smear campaign as a contemporary historian known to Tiberius. This effort has borne fruit over the past few years, which has now culminated in a book, *Tiberius and his Age: Myth, Sex, Luxury and Power* (Princeton, 2024), which is a collection of papers on Tiberius, collected and edited by Champlin's colleague R. A. Kaster. Unfortunately for Roman historians, illness prevented Champlin from fully realizing his project. We will not see his full analysis of the malicious fabulist behind Tiberius' negative tradition, which is a great loss to our study of early imperial Rome.[8]

Still, his thought-provoking suggestion deserves a response. Champlin's efforts raise the question of where the revelation of these two opposite and contradictory views of Tiberius leaves us. Does one tradition dismiss the validity of the other, and what criteria inform our attempt to posit them along the axis of truth and fiction, or perhaps to pit historiographical authority against disparate fabulous anecdotes?[9] Can the exposition of a single insidious author behind the scenes enable the discovery of a more pristine version of Tiberius' character?

To place my cards on the table early, though Champlin's approach has clearly exposed the fictionality at play in Tiberius' legacy and reception in these anecdotes, the overt elevation of more positive anecdotes seems to me to bring us too far towards the other end of the spectrum. Focusing on the positive vignettes of Tiberius' character to counteract the validity of negative slander risks obscuring a rich transcript of differing views of the emperor. We must ask what a fictional representation, both negative and positive, can tell us about the most powerful figure in the Roman world. In my view, what Tiberius' inconsistent character portrayal reveals is a wider phenomenon that has greater implications for the study of the Roman emperorship. Fictional and stylized stories of emperors existed as a way to understand and

[8] E. Champlin, 'The Richest Man in Spain', *ZPE* 196 (2015), 294: 'Here, as so often in their narratives and in the biography of Suetonius, we can discern behind our three major sources for the life of the second *princeps* the powerful vision of a brilliantly inventive historian whose work is now lost. The facts are as they may be, but his interpretation is clear. He knew and hated Tiberius, and much of what he tells us about him is malicious fiction.'

[9] Cf. M. Hammond, '*Res olim dissociabiles: principatus ac libertas*: Liberty under the Early Roman Empire', *HSCP* 67 (1963), 97 and 107–8, n. 26, for his opinions on the formation of Tiberius' legacy, and the modern historiographical attempt to rehabilitate Tiberius' conduct against the authority of the three main authors of his principate. Also relevant in this context are Syme's thoughts on the revisionism of Tacitus' Tiberius, in R. Syme, 'History or Biography: The Case of Tiberius Caesar', *Historia* 23 (1974), 482. On anecdotes and their utility, see R. P. Saller, 'Anecdotes as historical evidence for the principate', *G&R* 27 (1980), 69–83.

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explain one-man rule and its consequences, which were mediated through jokes, allusions, puns, and folkloric parallels.[10]

Below, I present a case study of Tiberius, particularly his depiction in Suetonius, to prove a broader point about the Roman emperor, namely that there existed a thought-world about the emperor's position, prompted by the enormity of his power and the ubiquity of his visible presence, both of which we can observe through numerous anecdotes.[11] Though not isolated to Suetonius, his genre and style of writing lend themselves to the elevation of the generalized anecdote as a discursive tool, as snapshots of wider trends of how to talk about emperors. On such an interpretation, anecdotal materials serve as a toolkit through which emperors can be conceived. What we have in Suetonius, therefore, is more than a random collection of stories about emperors, but rather a mode in which to criticize the emperor as a figure. This offers us a different view of the emperorship than what we get in other authors like Tacitus, who engage in anecdote and, through that, character appraisal, but not in as generically systematic a manner as Suetonius.

The discourse about who the emperor was and what he was expected to be was rich and multifaceted, and it was constantly being added to by the actions of emperors, who in turn were being scrutinized accordingly. However true, false or insidious such stories might have been, they all were part of a discussion about who the emperor seemed to be. His words and actions could be interpreted in a variety of ways, and interpretations drew upon rich mythological and literary traditions to enhance the picture. This fact should not detract from the historical relevance of stories: fashioning stories about political leaders is a historical phenomenon. Variety in the discourse about an emperor not only indicates that the latter could not fully control his image or memory, but also that we can observe differing thoughts and opinions about who the emperors were.[12] Ultimately, while we may not be able to reconstruct a 'true' picture of Tiberius or his character behind the murky façade of such anecdotes, these stories prove the existence of

[10] On hidden transcripts, see J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT; London, 1990), Christoforou (n. 5), 8–21. For the application of Scott's model, see L. Kurke, 'Gender, Politics and Subversion in the *Chreiai* of Machon', *CCJ* 48 (2002), 60–1. For one-man rule as a focus of Suetonius' biography and a comparative theme throughout his *Lives*, see D. Hurley, 'Suetonius' Rubric Sandwich', in T. Power and R. K. Gibson (eds.), *Suetonius, the Biographer: Studies in Roman Lives* (Oxford, 2014), 26. Cf. T. Power, 'Suetonius' Tacitus', *JRS* 104, 205–6.

[11] Cf. A. Makhlaiuk, 'Emperors' Nicknames and Roman Political Humour', *Klio* 102 (2020), 202–35, for nicknames of emperors and political humour, which is a related phenomenon.

[12] For more, see Christoforou (n. 5), 8–10.

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contradictory and polarized traditions of emperors such as Tiberius, which is historically significant in its own right. Rehabilitating Tiberius as an emperor and a person, then, becomes secondary to how he was *understood* by his subjects.[13]

Other than the fictional nature of these stories, there is the problem of source: who should be blamed for fabricating these negative vignettes of Tiberius connected to his time on Capri, vignettes that also appear in different authors?[14] In my opinion, it is difficult to prove that the negative tradition against Tiberius comes from a single author, which is a view that ultimately distracts us from exploring what such stories might be doing in political discourse. As Champlin has noted in his publications on Tiberius, M. Servilius Nonianus[15] may well be the originator of the scurrilous stories about Tiberius' escapades on Capri. Placing so much emphasis on the outlook and writings of a fragmentary historian, however, misses the point.[16] These stories leave marks in discourse that Suetonius, Dio, and Tacitus describe as believable and that were believed by audiences across the Roman Empire. Even if they were fabricated and fictional, the role of

[13] For rehabilitations of imperial figures, see E. Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, MA; London, 2003), J. F. Drinkwater, *Nero: Emperor and Court* (Cambridge, 2019), and the careful historical work of B. Levick, *Tiberius the Politician*, revised edition (London and New York, 1999). See also S. Malik, '*Cvcvta ab rationibvs neronis avgvsti*: a joke at Nero's expense', *Classical Quarterly* 69, 783–92, and S. Malik, *The Nero-Antichrist: Founding and Fashioning a Paradigm* (Cambridge, 2020).

[14] Capri has an important hinge point in Tacitus' narrative and as a location of wondrous speculation: see Christoforou (n. 3), 207–9. Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 4.67–9 and Dio 58.5.1.

[15] The argument for the identification of M. Servilius Nonianus is as follows. Nonianus was a former consul and a historian, whose work Suetonius cites as the source for the eyewitness account of the dinner party in Suet. *Tib.* 61.1 (see *FRHist* 79 for Nonianus). As Syme argued, he was a member of the Senate from the middle of Tiberius' reign and was privy to relevant information about court life. Indeed, the passage that receives focus in this article, 61.6, was used by Syme to argue that Nonianus was present on Capri. It is hard to know the nature of Nonianus' historiography, but there are certain hints. In his obituary in the *Annals*, Tacitus celebrates the quality of his career and writing, alongside mention of the pursuit of the finer things in life, with reference to his *elegantia vitae*. Accordingly, there is the incongruity between his talent and his behaviour. Moreover, as Syme suggests, he could be one of the authors accused by Tacitus of fear and hatred affecting their works (R. Syme, 'The Historian Servilius Nonianus', *Hermes* 92 (1964), 219, citing Tac. *Ann.* 1.1.4), meaning that Nonianus did not refrain from reporting scandal and anecdote. This is potentially bolstered by Quintilian's statement on Nonianus' eloquence, which was seemingly less concise than was appropriate for history (Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.102 = *FRHist* T 1: 'He (sc. Nonianus) who I heard myself, was a man of great intellect and thick with choice comments yet was less exact than the dignity of history demands' *qui et ipse a nobis auditus est, clari vir ingenii et sententiis creber, sed minus pressus quam historiae auctoritas postulat*). That he was not circumscribed as befitting a historian could suggest that he was the author in question, and perhaps a key originating component of the powerfully negative tradition of Tiberius that we observe in Suetonius. However, without the evidence from Nonianus' narrative itself, such an argument can only remain speculative.

[16] E. Champlin, 'Sex on Capri', *TAPA* 141 (2011), 320, n. 8: 'the source is clearly hostile, and most likely Servilius Nonianus'. He also obliquely mentions the historian in Champlin (n. 8), p. 294. For Nonianus on Capri, see O. Devillers, *Tacite et les sources des Annales: enquêtes sur la méthode historique* (Leuven, 2003), 15, n. 68, with Suet. *Tib.* 61.6.

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the promulgator in the rumour is decentred. To offer an example, the viewpoint in Tacitus' tale about Clemens, the impersonator of Agrippa Postumus, is that of the people of Italy and Rome: *vulgabatur interim per Italiam servatum munere deum Agrippam, credebatur Romae* . . . : 'It was spread about in the meantime through Italy that Agrippa had been saved as a gift of the gods, which was believed at Rome . . . .'[17] The impersonator is a former slave of Agrippa Postumus, the grandson of Augustus and the first casualty of Tiberius' principate (Tac. *Ann.* 1.6.1). Since Clemens was said to have resembled Agrippa, the rumour that Agrippa had returned for a reckoning with Tiberius gained credibility. Tacitus does not specify who spread the rumour, but rather that it was believed. That matters historically. Credulity is not a reason to doubt the truth-value of such an anecdote, which is confirmed by the appearance of impersonators throughout imperial history.[18] Such stories may indicate murmurings of discontent and suggest the existence of discourses on the legitimacy of Tiberius, which is a theme in Tacitus and a perennial topic of conversation about other emperors, too.[19] Any lack of truth in the stories themselves does not mean that they did not have historical impact, in this case, on the perception and legacy of Tiberius.

This article also serves as a response to Champlin's 'Mallonia', which focuses on an anecdote from Suetonius' *Tiberius* 45.[20] My chief argument is that the inconsistencies highlighted by Champlin of location, subversion of justice and sexual innuendo are tools Suetonius uses throughout his biography. While the story may be attributable to Nonianus (he was a frequent visitor to Capri), my focus remains firmly on the rich tapestry of talk about emperor Tiberius, and on how puns, anecdotes, and macabre jokes were part of a vernacular of criticism that had wide currency in the Roman world.

## Champlin's *Mallonia*

Champlin's 'Mallonia' explores an anecdote about Tiberius' lewd act against a certain Mallonia, who had refused the emperor's advances,

[17] Tac. *Ann.* 2.40.1.

[18] For this phenomenon, see G. Mitropoulos, Το πρότυπο του ηγεμόνα και η *imitatio imperatoris*: Διαλεκτικές επιρροής μεταξύ αυτοκρατόρων και υπηκόων στην ελληνορωμαϊκή Ανατολή (31 π.Χ.–235 μ.Χ.), (Athens, 2020).

[19] See Christoforou (n. 5).

[20] E. Champlin, 'Mallonia', *Histos* 9 (2015), 220–1.

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suffered litigation, and was forced to commit suicide. The passage in Suetonius is as follows:

feminarum quoque, et quidem illustrium, capitibus quanto opere solitus sit inludere, evidentissime apparuit Malloniae cuiusdam exitu, quam perductam nec quicquam amplius pati constantissime recusantem delatoribus obiecit ac ne ream quidem interpellare desiit, 'ecquid paeniteret', donec ea relicto iudicio domum se abripuit ferroque transegit, obscaenitate oris hirsuto atque olido seni clare exprobrata. Unde mira in Atellanico exhodio <vox> proximis ludis adsensu maximo excepta percrebruit, 'hircum uetulum capreis naturam ligurire'.

Just how much he was in the habit of insulting the heads of women as well, and highborn ones at that, could be seen very clearly in the death of a certain Mallonia, whom, when she was delivered to him and most resolutely refused to endure anything more, he threw to the informers. And even when she was on trial, he did not stop interrupting her, whether she was sorry, until, having left the court, she tore herself home and ran herself through with a sword, after loudly reproaching the shaggy and foul-smelling old man with the obscenity of his mouth. Hence a marvellous saying in the Atellan farce at the next games that met with great approval and circulated widely: 'the little old he-goat licks the private parts of she-goats'. (Suet. *Tib*. 45)[21]

Champlin's main aim is to isolate the blatantly fictional content of this account. He first explores its incongruity, mainly in terms of chronology and place. Puns concerning goats suggest that the alleged acts took place on Capri (*Capreis* means 'on Capri' in the locative, even though the scene of litigation and trial should place these scenes at Rome itself). Time and place, therefore, do not match up.[22] Champlin posits other sophisticated allusions throughout the passage, particularly in the use of words with suggestive meanings that carry coarse sexual meaning. One example is the phrase *feminarum capitibus inludere*, which is an aggressive way to describe fellatio,[23] and the reference to Mallonia's suicide evokes Lucretia and Virginia, two famous women of Roman mythology who were both rape victims and symbolic martyrs against tyranny.[24] Champlin's analysis culminates in the suggestion that the whole story is an elaborate fiction that serves to present Tiberius, jokingly, as a shaggy, smelly old man and to highlight his cruel sexual depravities and tyrannical tendencies. This suggestion is bolstered by the fact that

[21] The translation is from Champlin, adapted (n. 20), 220.
[22] Ibid., 222–3.
[23] Ibid., 224. Cf. J. L. Brandão, 'Othering the Emperor in Suetonius', in J. L. Brandão, C. Teixeira, A. Rodrigues (eds.), *Confronting Identities in the Roman Empire: Assumptions about the Other in Literary Evidence* (London, 2023), 308, for an overcharged libido as characteristic of tyrannical emperors.
[24] Champlin (n. 20), 226–7.

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'Mallonia' is yet another pun, based on the Greek word μαλλός, or 'tuft of wool': Mallonia is a 'Woolly Female', the doe to Tiberius, the billy goat.[25] Champlin closes the article with the following statement, pointing to a sophisticated historian behind this particular insidious story about Tiberius: 'The tale of Mallonia is a fabrication from first to last, a stunningly elaborate fraud. Who invented this angry, witty, extravagant fiction? That question is left for another occasion.'[26]

Thus, another *ignotus* is added to our roster of ancient authors. Or so Champlin seems to imply in this sentence, even though he suggests Nonianus elsewhere.[27] The charge of fabrication, however, prompts further questions: why did Champlin single out this passage as being particularly fictitious? Who was this mysterious author of fiction, and why were his fabrications so evocative and popular? Different parts of Tiberius' *Life* contain analogous content and concerns, including the revelation of his cruel tendencies after his arrival on Capri (tendencies that had long remained hidden), the use of pun or sexual language, and other matters that occurred in the clandestine surroundings of his palace on the island.[28]

Before discussing some examples of these themes, let us briefly note the structure of the *Life*. It follows the pattern of many of the *Lives*, starting with Tiberius' ancestry, sections on his youth and life before becoming emperor, omens concerning his succession, a thematic section dealing with his conduct as emperor, and examples of his virtues and vices, which culminate in the description of his death and the omens that foretold it. Throughout the *Life*, however, there are tensions between contradictory depictions of his character. Suetonius contrasts Tiberius' hidden distrust, dissimulation, and character defects with

[25] For the pedigree of humour using goats to critique political figures, see C. Mallan, 'Tiberius the Goat: an addition to Champlin's "Mallonia"', *Histos* 10 (2016), 15. Cf. Catull. 69, which describes Rufus' stench as that of a goat, with J. D. Noonan, '*Mala bestia* in Catullus 69.7–8', *The Classical World* 73 (1979), 158, who notices the Greek comedy parallels, and C. Nappa, 'The goat, the gout, and the girl: Catullus 69, 71, and 77', *Mnemosyne* 52 (1999), 269. What we have here is a shared comic register of lampooning others for their goatish smell.

[26] Champlin (n. 20), 230. However, see H. Lindsay (ed.), *Suetonius*' Tiberius (London, 1995), 142, where he argues for a similar interpretation to that of Champlin, namely that Mallonia does not really exist and that it would be unhistorical. Also, there is some debate on the placement of the trial and the parties: cf. R. S. Rogers, *Criminal Trials and Criminal Legislation under Tiberius* (Middletown, CT, 1935), 170, who argues for Capri.

[27] Cf. Champlin (n. 16), p. 320, p. 7, n. 8 and n. 16 above.

[28] On the further subversion of the role of *Matronae* in Suetonius, see H. Morgan, 'Music, Sexuality, and Stagecraft in the Pseudo-Virgillian *Copa*', *GRMS* 5 (2017), 93–4, and especially on Suet. *Ner.* 27, for the illicit sexual acts and troupes of performers and prostitutes that are part of Nero's entourage. They provide interesting parallels to the activities on Capri as highlighted in Champlin (n. 16).

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effective praises of his conduct, interspersed throughout the *Life*.[29] This presentation seems purposely inconsistent, in both structure and content, and may be structured to mirror both the volatility of Tiberius' person and the unpredictability of his character.[30]

## Tiberius on Capri

Tiberius' stay on Capri, to which he retired in 27 until his death in 37, is an important moment in Suetonius' narrative for the revelation of the emperor's true character. The island likewise acts as a trigger point for Tacitus, who heightens the foreign and marvellous aspects of the island to indicate Tiberius' growing isolation from Rome, to which he never returns.[31]

Tiberius' seclusion is mirrored by the secluded nature of Capri itself.[32] Indeed, it is within this context that Suetonius organizes the more depraved descriptions of the emperor.[33] The incongruities and inconsistencies of time and place that Champlin observed in his reading of the 'Tale of Mallonia' are integral to this mystique. Rather than a dichotomous understanding of Tiberius becoming monstrous and scary from the minute he arrived on the island, it seems that Capri accentuates underlying traits that existed throughout his principate (as Tacitus

[29] Suet. *Tib*. 15, 19, and esp. 21. Similar to Tacitus' characterization, as argued by R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), 420–34, and Syme (n. 9), 482. See also Christ (n. 4).

[30] For Suetonius' artistry in organization along different rubrics, see P. Garrett, 'Structure and Persuasion in Suetonius' *de vita Caesarum*', *Ramus* 47 (2018), 198. For further reading on Suetonius' biographical organization and its inherent persuasiveness, see Hurley (n. 10), pp. 22–3.

[31] Tac. *Ann*. 4.67.2, with Woodman (n. 3), *ad loc*. Cf. Christoforou (n. 3) and B. L. H. ten Berge, '*Annals* Book 4', in S. Bartera and K. E. Shannon-Henderson (eds.), *Oxford Critical Guide to Tacitus* (Oxford, forthcoming); for more on Tiberius on Capri in Tacitus, cf. Dio 58.5.1, where Sejanus says that Tiberius seemed to be a *nesiarch* (island ruler) in contrast to Sejanus seeming like an emperor, which connects directly to Tiberius' perceived isolation on Capri. That said, Dio's Tiberius is itinerant, often threatens to return to Rome, and circles back to the mainland regularly (58.6.3–5; 10.2; 21.1; 24.1–2; 25.2). Suetonius, in contrast, only has Tiberius close to return twice after his retirement to Capri in 72.1. For Tiberius acting menacingly in orbit around Rome, how the emperor furtively avoided proximity to the city (Tac. *Ann*. 6.15.3), and how Tacitus (Tac. *Ann*. 6.1.1) deftly uses Capri to other Tiberius in his tour of Campania towards Rome in AD 32, see Ash (n. 4), 54–5. On Tiberius' court on Capri, see G. Houston, 'Tiberius on Capri', *Greece and Rome* 32 (1985), 180–95. For more on Capri and Tiberius, see B. ten Berge, *Writing Imperial History: Tacitus from Agricola to Annales* (Ann Arbor, 2023), 315–17.

[32] Suet. *Tib*. 40.

[33] See Hurley (n. 10), 33, for her analysis of Capri as a temporal and topical division in Suetonius' *Tiberius*. Capri is mentioned as a hinge in chapter 40 and, though location and time oscillate in the themes thereafter, Capri keeps coming through as that hinge in Tiberius' life (see, e.g. chapters. 41, 43, 60). See D. Wardle, *Suetonius: Life of Augustus: Translated with Introduction and Historical Commentary* (Oxford, 2015), 15–18, for how Suetonius structures his *Life of Augustus*.

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suggests in Book 4 of the *Annals*). It acts as a bridge between the early and later parts of his rule and, indeed, the mental space in which Tiberius' clandestine character ran free, whether it occurred at Rome or elsewhere. Tiberius' lasciviousness does not seem to be isolated to the 'Tale of Mallonia', but rather a theme that also appears in other parts of the *Life*. This recurrent theme can reveal the rich vein of tradition that cultivated these stories about Tiberius on Capri, and it shows how his isolation on that island proved immeasurably fruitful in the creation of tales, given its geographical and conceptual distance from the bustle of public duties and life in Rome itself.

What follows below is a discussion of other relevant passages of *Tiberius*, including speculations about puns, double meanings, and temporal inconsistencies. First is the context of the 'Tale of Mallonia'. Suetonius lays the groundwork in chapter 40, where he first mentions Capri as a desirable place for Tiberius' seclusion. This description made the pleasure island a forbidding place, which Tacitus' description also suggests:[34]

Peragrata Campania, cum Capuae Capitolium, Nolae templum Augusti, quam causam profectionis praetenderat, dedicasset, Capreas se contulit, praecipue delectatus insula, quod uno paruoque litore adiretur, saepta undique praeruptis immensae altitudinis rupibus et profundo mari.

After traversing Campania and dedicating the Capitolium at Capua and a temple to Augustus at Nola, which was the pretext he had given for his journey, he went to Capreae, being especially drawn to that island, since it was only approachable by one small beach, and cut off from all directions by sheer cliffs of immense height and the depths of the sea. (Suet. *Tib*. 40).[35]

Tiberius' seclusion is then accentuated in chapter 41, where Suetonius mentions the neglect of state affairs due to the emperor's isolation on Capri, which is then confirmed in chapters 42–5, where Tiberius' proclivities for dining, drinking, and sex are outlined.

Chapter 42 starts with the famous pun on Tiberius' name, namely *Biberius Caldius Mero*,[36] which can be rendered as Drink-Lover Hot with Wine. This nickname is followed by examples of Tiberius' notorious

[34] Cf. Christoforou (n. 3), 208–9, with Tac. *Ann.* 4.67.1–3 See nn. 3 and 31 above for further discussion.

[35] Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 4.67.2 and 6.1.1.

[36] Cited in *Epitome de Caesaribus* 2.2: 'He was called "Caldius Biberius Mero" cleverly by the jokesters due to his love of wine', *eleganter a iocularibus Caldius Biberius Mero ob vinolentiam nominatus est*.

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drinking parties, including one with Pomponius Flaccus and Lucius Piso (The Pontifex), who benefited greatly from these convivial meetings to gain ascendancy at Rome. However, there are problems of chronology with Suetonius' narrative. As Syme argues, the timings do not match up:[37] Piso's prefecture was dated to AD 13 (Tac. *Ann.* 6.11.3; cf. *PIR*$^2$ C 289) and Flaccus' governorship was in 33 (Tac. *Ann.* 6.27.3). Indeed, Pliny the Elder in the *Natural History* gives a strikingly similar anecdote, but he only mentions Piso (*HN* 14.145). Since, according to Pliny, Tiberius is 'already emperor' (*iam princeps*), this is incongruous with the date of AD 13, the year before Augustus' death. Suetonius' narrative is a complex tapestry of alternate chronologies, which indicate the wavering temporality of Tiberius' vices that give him a sense of timelessness and haziness, brought out throughout his life at (in)appropriate times and places (such as Capri).[38]

At *Tib.* 42.2, the parties continue, and Suetonius now focuses on sexual depravity, mentioning nude girls attending them at dinner, and Cestius Gallus being a *libidinosus ac prodigus senex*.[39] The depravities then crescendo in the following chapters, which reveal similar themes across the various anecdotes. Again, Capri is mentioned as the important trigger for Tiberius' secret lusts. These chapters are marked by certain wordplays, including the word *sellaria*, which suggests a sitting-room from the word *sella*, meaning seat or chair (and evoking the magisterial chairs as well).[40] As Suetonius explains, Capri was a 'place of

[37] R. Syme, 'Diet on Capri', *Athenaeum* 77 (1989), 267; R. Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1986), 329, 345. Cf. R. Syme, 'Some Pisones in Tacitus', *JRS* 46 (1956), 21 and 'Some Governors dying in Syria', *ZPE* 41 (1981), 129–31; cf. Lindsay (n. 26), 139, to see the discussion of this story, particularly citing R. Seager, *Tiberius* (Malden, MA; Oxford, 1972), 228, n. 2, who argued for the Tiberian dating of Piso's praefecture; this still does not solve the main issue that Piso dies in 31 before Flaccus' tenure in Syria, and the causality of gaining either office due to the drinking party cannot follow given the vast gap between them. See Woodman (n. 3), *ad loc.*, esp. 201–2 for further discussion.

[38] The worlds of politics and pleasure collide in this chapter as Suetonius mentions obscure figures, such as Titus Caesonius Priscus, who is appointed to a new 'office' of imperial pleasures (*novum … officium … a uoluptatibus*), mocked up like offices in the imperial court that Suetonius himself held (*ab epistulis*) (*PIR*$^2$ C 21). The only mention of Priscus is in this *Life*, apposite for the topsy turvy world of court politics on Capri.

[39] Suetonius also mentions a most 'obscure man who was a candidate for the quaestorship (*ignotissimum quaesturae candidatum*), who Syme argues was Torquatus Novellius Atticus, (*ILS* 950), a *novus homo* (Syme (n. 37), 268. He also appears in Plin. *HN* 14.144, seemingly getting to the quaestorship (speculative on Syme's part) before Tiberius left for Campania in 26. He argues that it was when Tiberius was already *senex*, which Syme places in 19, after his sixtieth birthday. Temporal games abound here.

[40] On this reading, and the confusion that it has created for translation and understanding, see Champlin (n. 16), 318–22, who argues for the word to be a place name of a certain area on Capri, and that it has a sexual, rather than scatological, meaning, against the readings of previous translations and entries in Latin dictionaries.

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secret pleasures' (*sedem arcanarum libidinum*), perhaps another pun given that *sedes* is another word for 'seat'. This is corroborated by Tacitus' description:

> tuncque primum ignota antea uocabula reperta sunt sellariorum et spintriarum ex foeditate loci ac multiplici patientia.
>
> And that was the first time that the previously unknown designations of 'sellarii' and 'spintriae' were devised, respectively from the foulness of their place and their multifarious passivity. (Tac. *Ann.* 6.1.2)[41]

*Sellaria* is subverted into a place for sexual licentiousness, while *spintria* is derived from the Greek word σφιγκτήρ (sphincter), which needs no further explanation. As Champlin has argued, however, *spintria* also brings to mind the Latin noun *spinter* ('bracelet'), from which he argues for the existence of performative prostitutes 'noted for multiple submission in group sex acts'.[42] This theme is shared in Suetonius' account through some quite problematic Latin,[43] here referring to youths and young women, experts in monstrous acts, polluting themselves (see *incestarent*) for the pleasure of the ageing emperor.[44] It is also important to note the explicit mention of the pun on the name of the garden, 'Caprineum' both referring to the island itself and meaning 'Goat', which is mirrored again at the end of chapter 45 in the Tale of Mallonia.

Suetonius' emphasis on Tiberius' sexual lasciviousness continues in chapter 44, in which young boys are trained to nibble on his *femina* (the upper part of his thighs). The verb *institueret*, which typically refers to the instruction, training, and education of boys, here is subverted to have sexual connotations, enhanced by the description of them 'playing with their tongues and bites' (*luderent lingua morsuque*). This description contains similar imagery to the Tale of Mallonia, including descriptions of improper oral sex and the use of the cognate verbs *ludo* and *inludere*, which both have meanings of play and mocking, with sexual undertones.[45]

[41] Tac. *Ann.* 6.1.2, translation from Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, translated, with commentary and notes A. J. Woodman (Indianapolis, IN, 2004). Cf. Ash (n. 4), 54–5.
[42] Champlin (n. 7), 17, and Champlin (n. 16), 322–4.
[43] Cf. Champlin (n. 7), 6–10.
[44] See below, pp. 19–20, on *incestum*, the crime of unchastity.
[45] Cf. Champlin (n. 20), 224, in which *inludere* is a much stronger and aggressive word. The word *pisculos* requires comment as well, being perhaps another allusion to a troupe. Cf. *CIL* 4.4447: a sexually suggestive graffito mentioning a *Fonticulus* and a *Pisciculus*.

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Another cruel anecdote relates a story about an assistant in a religious ceremony carrying incense, who was taken to be violated (*consturparet*), along with his brother the *tibicen* (flute player). They consequently had their legs broken after they shamed Tiberius for the act. Not only does this anecdote mirror the cruelty in the 'Tale of Mallonia', but it similarly subverts morality. This subversion is brought into greater focus with the musical and theatrical allusions, here highlighted by the appearance of the *tibicen*, which is comparable to the mention of the performing groups on Capri, and to the Atellan farce context of the 'Tale of Mallonia'.[46] In this sense, sex work and theatre work are conceptually linked, which is a theme in contemporary Latin literature. Morgan, in an article on the Pseudo-Vergilian *Copa*, looks at the troupe of dancing girls from Syria known as *ambulaiae*, famous for their dancing routines set to the music of pipes. The appearance of the *tibicen*, therefore, places the above scene within the context of anxieties about sexual promiscuity and Eastern influences.[47] Such connections and connotations allow us to think of these separated anecdotes in Suetonius' narrative as being thematically linked as part of a palimpsestic and pointed discourse about the emperor's proclivities. Not only that, but the way also that this salacious story is disseminated matters, too, since the sexually ludic story of Tiberius and Mallonia is spread abroad widely (*percrebruit*) through actors playing up the story at the games (*proximis ludis*). Whatever the story's truth value, the process of dissemination is clear: a rumour or joke is heard, spreads, and is made fun of in public spaces and at public congregations. The reason to put weight on this story as part of a wider discourse is based on the spaces in which salacious stories might be spread, which underline their historical significance.[48] These spaces include the theatre, the games, and other public events where interactions between plebs and princeps often percolate, and Tiberius is a fruitful case study of an emperor's acrimonious interactions with the Roman people, which might fuel negative responses to the sitting emperor.[49]

[46] Champlin (n. 16), 322–4.

[47] Morgan (n. 28), 93–5, for this argument and references to interesting parallels. Cf. Juv. *Sat.* 3.62–4, for a succinct example, cited in Morgan (n. 28,) 95, n. 49.

[48] I owe this point to Timothy Smith.

[49] Cf. the episode of the Lysippus Apoxyomenos statue, when Tiberius removed the statue to his bedroom, only to have the people complain at the theatre for its return (Plin. *HN*. 34.62). See C. Courrier, 'Le peuple de Rome et les *ornamenta* de la Ville: usages et normes. Le cas de la confiscation de l'Apoxyomène de Lysippe par Tibère (Pline, *HN*, 34.62)', in T. Itgenshorst and

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A similar pattern is observable later in the narrative, particularly in the description of Tiberius' cruelty. In chapter 60, Capri is used again to signal a revelation of his character. Suetonius thus uses Capri as a hinge in his narrative to accentuate Tiberius' depravities, which have come out more openly on the secluded island, away from the duties and pressures of Rome and the emperorship. The stress on location is a critique in and of itself: the sheer inaccessibility of Tiberius on Capri makes imaginations run wild and subjects his principate to rumour and hearsay. It may not be coincidental that the story of the fisherman comes first in Suetonius, which stresses the issue of (in)accessibility and prompts the outlining of different aspects of Tiberius' cruelty at various stages of his life. Chapter 61 – which is a concatenation of various examples of Tiberius' cruelty to do with the miscarriage of justice; the proliferation of accusations about nothing more than words in poetry and history; and the ubiquity of capital punishment – repays close attention. I focus on 61.5 and 61.6, which record executions and an anecdote of an accusation of *maiestas* (treason) at a dinner party.[50]

The first passage is explicit in terms of sexual themes and the depravity of the times: it involves the capital punishment of virgins who were raped before being strangled to death. The verb *vitio* here has an obvious sexual aggressiveness, with a specific meaning of defiling or violating a virgin woman.[51] Such imagery evokes an infamous set of examples of capital punishment undertaken in times of crisis at Rome: that of Vestal Virgins being buried alive near the Colline Gate in Rome for the crime of *incestum*.[52] These prominent Roman priestesses guarded the sacred fire in the Temple of Vesta and were connected to the permanence and safety of Rome itself.[53] Times of crisis and war

P. Le Doze (eds.), *La norme sous la république et le haut-empire romains. Élaboration, diffusion et contournements* (Bordeaux, 2017), 410–14, for analysis. The shared location of critique is fundamental. For Tiberius' negative relationship with the theatre and as a place to air complaints, see Tac. *Ann.* 4.14.3, 6.13.2 and Dio 57.21.3. Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 3.4.1.

[50] Of particular interest is the mention of Cremutius Cordus at 61.3 (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 4.34) and the poet who composed a tragedy on Agamemnon.

[51] J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1990), 199, for the use of the word in conjunction with *virgo* in other texts, including comparisons of cognates. Cf. Champlin (n. 20), 224, on the aggressive sexual vocabulary in Suet. *Tib.* 45, and the citation of L. Holford-Strevens, 'Capreae', *Exemplaria Classica* 8 (2004), 73, n. 17 'women as bearers of social and legal status, not merely as bodies'.

[52] For evidence and discussion, see T. Cornell 'Some observations on the «crimen incesti»', *Publications de l'École française de Rome* 48 (1981), 27–37; cf. A. B Gallia, 'Vestal virgins and their families', *Classical Antiquity* 34 (2015), 104–6; M. Beard, 'The sexual status of Vestal Virgins', *JRS* 70 (1980), 16.

[53] For a general discussion on the Vestal Virgins, see M. Beard, J. North, and S. R. F. Price, *Religions of Rome*: *Vol. 1: A History* (Cambridge, 1998), 51–4.

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coincide with accusations of *incestum* of Vestals when the Romans decided they had no choice but to execute them by live burial at the Colline gate in order to safeguard the city.[54] The executions of virgins thus have a clear register of crisis and anxiety at Rome, which would make the perverse inversion of the accusation of incest and its subsequent punishment, such as we see in this case (even though it is not that of a Vestal Virgin), all the more shocking and damning.

Suetonius' passage is comparable to Tacitus' and Dio's account of the death of Sejanus' daughter, Junilla, who is described as having died by strangulation.[55] However, finding the truth and legality behind such executions misses the point. The scene represents an absurd subversion of justice. Suetonius' point that 'by ancient custom it was criminal to strangle maidens' (*quia more tradito nefas esset virgines strangulari*) underlines the subversion of traditional morality, which is made more explicit by the fact that the deed is carried out by a *carnifex*, a figure of ill-repute.[56] The shocking execution of virgins suggests a world turned upside down, which reflects badly on society as a whole. The register here, therefore, is one of deep crisis in Rome, similar to times of crisis in Rome's history when Vestals were executed. Such is the tone of this chapter on the excesses of Tiberius' principate and of the portrayal of his tyrannical tendencies, which are seen to subvert moral law through the violation of Roman women.[57]

[54] See Cornell (n. 52), 28, on Plut. *Num*. 10.4–10 and Livy 8.15.7 on the vestal Minucia who was buried at the Colline gate). Cf. R. A. Bauman, *Crime and Punishment in Ancient Rome* (London and New York, 1996), 18, who mentions it only in passing, and similarly does not comment on any precedent; cf. however, his discussion on 92–9 on the punishment of Vestals.

[55] Tac. *Ann*. 5.9.2; Dio 58.11.5. On Sejanus' conspiracy, see E. Champlin (2012), 'Seianus Augustus', *Chiron* 42 (2012), 361–88. For the historical background of executions on the Gemonian stairs, and the evidence for Sejanus' conspiracy, see Y. Rivière, *Le cachot et les fers: détention et coercition à Rome* (Paris, 2004), 77–80, with *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.188–9 (*Fasti Ostienses*), which inscribes that Junilla was thrown on the Gemonian stairs.

[56] Cf. Tac. *Ann*. 5.9.2: 'because it had been unheard of that a virgin be capitally executed (i.e. by the *triumviri capitales*) *quia triumvirali supplicio adfici virginem inauditum habebatur*. Dio 58.11.5: 'that it is forbidden for a virgin to be executed in prison' ὡς οὐχ ὅσιον ὂν παρθενευομένην τινὰ ἐν τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ διολέσθαι. On the word *carnifex*, see *OLD* s.v. *carnifex* for its negative connotations. The cruelty of the *triumviri capitales* are thus underlined, here; those minor magistrates who had charge over the prison and assisted in executions (see *Dig*. 1.2.2.30), though our knowledge is shaky on their duties. If justice is grossly miscarried, it follows that such gruesome and ultimately illegal executions were described as carried out by a *carnifex*, even if underpinned by the power of the emperor. Cf. Rivière (n. 55), 60–1.

[57] The example of another stock tyrannical emperor is instructive. Domitian violated his virgin niece and sentenced the Vestal Cornelia to death as Pontifex Maximus (Plin. *Ep*. 4.11.6–7). This story functions as a synecdoche of Domitian's tyranny and cruelty (*ut qui inlustrari saeculum suum eiusmodi exemplis arbitraretur*) and thus connects to the lurid story in Suetonius discussed here. Such negative exemplarity becomes a way to critique emperors.

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But there is more. The word 'Carnulus' might also be a pun.[58] Two inscriptions, in Rome and Belgium, mention a 'Carnus'.[59] The word could be playing on the meaning 'flesh' or 'meat', which would give us a potential translation of 'meaty' or 'cutlet'. As Champlin argues in his work on Tiberian neologisms, this story is comparable with both the Mallonia scene and a verse in chapter 59 of the *Life*:

Fastidit vinum, quia iam sitit iste cruorem;
Tam bibit hunc avide, quam bibit ante merum.

That man hates wine, because now he craves blood;
He drinks blook as voraciously as he drank unmixed wine before. (Suet. *Tib*. 59.1)

The appearance of words such as *carnulus* and *carnificina* gives the scene a crude feeling of torture and bloodiness and, thus, morbid connotations.[60] Either way, the implication is negative, with the emphasis placed, again, on Tiberius' cruelty, which is heightened even more by his saying that *Carnulus* had escaped him.[61]

The final, longer anecdote about Paconius and the dwarf reveals important criticisms of Tiberius and his court. A dwarf as an apparatus of court life, here within the context of a banquet, is a theme throughout imperial history. Emperors were seen and portrayed as collectors of *mirabilia*, i.e. oddities of nature and humanity from across the empire and beyond.[62] The closeness of monstrosities accentuated the oddity that was the emperor himself and his position in society.[63] That a dwarf is a reminder of a delayed *maiestas* trial contrasts his societal position with that of the accused, M. Paconius, a senator: the world, again, appears topsy turvy, with parasites of the imperial court having a greater say in treason trials and capital punishment than the law itself.[64] The impropriety elevates the injustice of the situation and also the (absurd) decline of Tiberius' court.

[58] Champlin has already picked up on *Carnulus*/*Carnus*, see Champlin (n. 7), 32–3.
[59] *CIL* VI 10268 = *ILS* 8127; *CIL* XIII 10027.
[60] Cf. *OLD* s.v. *caro 2* 1.b for morbid meaning in medical terms: cf. Suet. *Galb*. 21.
[61] Compare with Suet. *Iul*. 74.1, in which Caesar was scarcely able to evade Cornelius Phagitas' advances through bribery.
[62] R. Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (London, 1995), 49–50, on the evidence for the unusual *prodigia* kept close to the emperor, and Christoforou (n. 3), 149–59.
[63] Garland (n. 62), 45.
[64] *PIR*$^2$ P 26: see Tac. *Ann*. 3.67.1 for his offices in provincial government and ibid., 16.28.1, 29.2, on his son Paconius Agrippinus, who inherited his father's hatred for emperors, and allows Tacitus to mention Paconius' demise under Tiberius in the Neronian *Annals*. For more on Paconius and Nonianus, see Devillers (n. 16), 266–7.

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Returning now to the parallels from earlier in the *Life*, and in particular the references to the 'goat island' of Capri, the name of the garden *caprineum*, and the she-goats of the Mallonia Tale, there may also be a pun with respect to the word *copreas*, which would be attractive in a world of punning and the fashioning of new words. The word *copreas* refers to an elusive group of jesters, of which the dwarf in the passage is a member. These jesters appear a couple of times in the literary tradition as participants in the court life of the Roman palace.[65] Importantly, in terms of neologisms, the only instance of the word that (depending on the source) might predate its apperance in this Tiberian context is Dio's use of the word in the young Caesar's speech at Actium when speaking of Anthony's court (50.28.5). Other than this example, and another in Dio that discusses them as wealthy parasites at the emperor Commodus' court (Dio 74.6.2), the word appears after Tiberius only with respect to Claudius in Suetonius (Suet. *Claud*. 8.1). Therefore, it is very possible that it was a play on words: the term itself derives from the Greek κοπρίαι ('dunghill' or 'manure'), which seems to be consistent with the jesters' lower origin and sense of humour.[66] There is no doubt that this is the primary meaning of the word. However, *copreas* and *capreas* sound too close to be coincidental, which means that the term may allude to the island and its association with goats.[67] Put plainly, smelly goats and manure are images that stick to Tiberius and his character, which not only are direct critiques of him but also connect directly to the goat island that is Capri. This probable play on words is typical of the passage, connecting the jesters and this scene to Capri and Tiberius' court, which, as we have seen, is susceptible to jokes of this kind.[68] In the end, the impression is of Tiberius on Capri engaging in the unbelievable, an impression increased by the inconsistent chronology, suggestive word play, and the depiction of the absurd and gruesome miscarriage of justice. In a real sense, these scenes reflect how bad the principate could get in people's imagination, and how Suetonius' eye for such pointed anecdotal material exhibits a tradition of negative stories about the emperor, enriched by rumour and joke.

[65] On the evidence of the *copreae*, see M. Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Oakland, CA, 2014), 143–4.

[66] Indeed, the word *inter copreas* could have a scatological meaning that is not rendered in the translation.

[67] In the recent OCT edition of the text, Robert Kaster's new reading of the manuscript tradition shows that *capreas* appeared in a couple of editions. This is not to suggest a preferred reading of the text, but rather an indication on how easy it could be to confuse and conflate.

[68] See above, 5–13.

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## Conclusion: the problem with talking about emperors

In conclusion, it is worth discussing a passage of Dio that encapsulates the challenge of writing history under the principate and the problems of truth and fiction that Champlin's analysis has highlighted:

ἐκ δὲ δὴ τοῦ χρόνου ἐκείνου τὰ μὲν πλείω κρύφα καὶ δι᾽ ἀπορρήτων γίγνεσθαι ἤρξατο, εἰ δέ πού τινα καὶ δημοσιευθείη, ἀλλὰ ἀνεξέλεγκτά γε ὄντα ἀπιστεῖται· καὶ γὰρ λέγεσθαι καὶ πράττεσθαι πάντα πρὸς τὰ τῶν ἀεὶ κρατούντων τῶν τε παραδυναστευόντων σφίσι βουλήματα ὑποπτεύεται. καὶ κατὰ τοῦτο πολλὰ μὲν οὐ γιγνόμενα θρυλεῖται, πολλὰ δὲ καὶ πάνυ συμβαίνοντα ἀγνοεῖται, πάντα δὲ ὡς εἰπεῖν ἄλλως πως ἢ ὡς πράττεται διαθροεῖται. καὶ μέντοι καὶ τὸ τῆς ἀρχῆς μέγεθος τό τε τῶν πραγμάτων πλῆθος δυσχερεστάτην τὴν ἀκρίβειαν αὐτῶν παρέχεται.

But after this time most things that happened began to be kept secret and forbidden, and even though some things might perhaps be made public, they are not believed just because they are irrefutable; for it is suspected that everything is said and done in line with the wishes of the rulers of the time and of their associates in power. For this reason, much that never happens is murmured about, and much that does happen beyond a doubt is unknown, and in the case of nearly every event a version gains currency that is different from the way it really happened. Furthermore, the very magnitude of the empire and the multitude of things that occur render accuracy regarding them most difficult. (Dio 53.19.3–4).[69]

Dio's claims are corroborated by the fragmentary and epitomized versions of his narrative from his own times, which are full of stories marked by hazy relationships between truth and fiction, and by traits and tropes common in fairy tales or masquerades.[70] But discourse about emperors is always hazy, which makes the difficulty of delineating truth and fiction part of how people talk about emperors. Imperial history and biography are littered with stories of varying degrees of believability. Indeed, part of a historian's job is to detect potential falsehoods and embellishments, but not to discount the potential historical implications of such material. Crucial questions are: why did people talk about Tiberius in this manner? To what extent do fears and anxieties of arbitrary rule fuel people's imagination? The anecdotal and fictional discourse about Roman emperors gives us a window into *how* people discussed their rulers: through joke, innuendo, sly remarks, and plausible deniability. Such modes of communication could be fashioned

[69] Dio 53.19.3–4 (adapted from Cary's Loeb translation: Dio Cassius, *Roman History, Volume VI: Books 51–55*, translated by E. Cary (Cambridge, MA; 1917)).

[70] M. Gleason, 'Identity Theft: Doubles and Masquerades in Cassius Dio's Contemporary History', *Cl. Ant.* 30 (2011), 33–86, is illuminating on the fictionality of imperial discourse.

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through talk, spread in the streets and theatres, and transmitted into our record and refashioned at appropriate thematic or temporal points in the writings of our main guides to this world, including Suetonius. However scurrilous or fictive, this discourse forms an essential part of life in the Roman world. It remains crucial to detect potential falsehoods and embellishments, but not to discount the potential historical implications of such material.

What is our next step? Is it sufficient to leave it here, satisfied with getting the joke or the potential hidden transcript behind the words of our ancient texts? I contend we can say more. First, the stories discussed above point to a rich thought-world of discourse about Tiberius, and indeed Roman emperors in general. It should be illuminating that this is how emperors were criticized. Second, the idea that peeling back one veneer can somehow expose a more true or representative picture of a certain figure, in this case Tiberius, is a chimera. The nature of our evidence does not fully allow for a concise and truly accurate depiction of an emperor like Tiberius. No doubt there are completely true or false stories about Tiberius, but a lack of complete evidence makes an effective taxonomy elusive. To be sure, this does *not* mean that falsehoods should not be flagged up, but rather that they exist as historical phenomena in their own right. Such stories point to a wider discourse of criticism of emperors that does in fact transcend time. These same stories, however, give us a transcript of various criticisms levelled against Tiberius that allow us to assess where the emperor sat on the spectrum between positive and negative one-man rule.

The focus on Tiberius is useful, too, in revealing a discourse where imagination had run wild due to his seclusion on Capri. In contradistinction to the ideology of the principate, where *moderatio*, consensus, and legal and political processes were declared publicly,[71] Tiberius' early retirement to Capri marked him out as a focus of negative stories, which were enriched by sly jokes, innuendo, and pun fit for a tyrant who lived on a liminal 'goat island'. We stand on the cusp of a rich thought-world of perception: a transcript of numerous stories

[71] One needs only to look at the presentation of the politics and law in Tiberius' principate that we can observe on the *Senatus Consultum de Pisone Patre*, the *Tabula Siarensis,* and *Tabula Hebana*. These documents emphasized openness and public procedure. See J. B. Lott, *Death and Dynasty in Early Imperial Rome: Key Sources, with Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Cambridge, 2012) for these inscriptions, and A. Caballos Rufino, 'Un Senadoconsulto del Año14 d. C. en un epígrafe Bético', *ZPE* 219 (2021), 313–14, for a new document from Spain concerning Tiberius' accession. The point seems to be one of transparency in government, which is the opposite of the impression we receive in Suetonius and Tacitus, particularly after Tiberius' departure to Capri.

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about Roman emperors that gives us snapshots of what people thought the Roman emperor was feared to be. With Tiberius, we have a marvellous case of an emperor whose actions fuelled speculation. By interpreting him through such stories, Suetonius places Tiberius on the spectrum of positive and negative examples of the emperorship.

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