SUETONIUS ON VESPASIAN’S RISE TO POWER UNDER THE JULIO-CLAUDIANS

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ABSTRACT

In writing an account of the early career of Vespasian, an emperor who secured a good posthumous reputation, Suetonius had to deal with material that could present Vespasian in a poor light, e.g. as a sycophant and collaborator with the worst of the Julio-Claudians and as someone entangled in an embarrassing marriage. Suetonius does not whitewash Vespasian, but seems to follow versions which both distance Vespasian from negative aspects of the Julio-Claudians and emphasise the excellence of his actions. The virtues of the young Vespasian are fully in harmony with those of the later princeps.

Introduction

Suetonius begins the final book of his De vita Caesarum, in which were covered the lives of Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, with a ringing endorsement of the Flavian dynasty: the principates of Galba, Otho and Vitellius are characterised baldly with the very first word of the Book as rebellio, a negative assessment which is underlined by caedes. The consequence of their illegal usurpations was a prolonged period of insecurity for the empire, incertum diu et quasi vagum imperium, a powerful expression for the eighteen months between the death of Nero and the accession of Vespasian. The remedy was provided by the gens Flavia as a whole, which took on the empire and gave it

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1 Rebellio appears only twice in the Lives, here and earlier of what was presented at least by the official Julio-Claudian line, as the armed revolt of Gaetulicus (Cal. 51.3) - pace the interpretation of G.W. Mooney, C. Suetoni Tranquilli De Vita Caesarum Libri VII-VIII (London 1930) 372 and H.R. Graf, Kaiser Vespasian: Untersuchungen zu Suetons Vita Divi Vespasiani (Stuttgart 1937) 111 of ‘renewal of war’. Caedes is linked strongly with rebellio by J.C. Rolfe, Suetonius (Cambridge Mass. 1913)(‘the usurpation and violent death of three emperors’) and B.M. Levick, Vespasian (London 1999) 201 (‘three emperors had usurped power and been slaughtered’), but a wider reference to the loss of life across the empire is preferable (cf. Graf, op. cit. 2), as the connective et seems too weak and is postponed after trium principum.
stability, *imperium suscipit firmavitque*, the expression excluding unconstitu-
tionality and emphasising the positive consequence.\(^2\) In a somewhat awk-
ward continuation of a carefully constructed antithesis *illa quidem … sed tamen*
employed of the *gens Flavia*, Suetonius concludes the first period with a key
qualification, *constet licet Domitianum cupiditatis ac saevitiae merito poenas luiss*,
which distances the tyrannical vices of Domitian from Vespasian and Titus
and provides justification for the emperors who succeeded the Flavians:
Nerva, Trajan and Suetonius’ current master Hadrian were not usurpers in
that the death of Domitian was justified.\(^3\)

I shall examine Suetonius’ account of Vespasian’s rise from humble
origins to becoming a successful courtier and commander with an eye to the
historiographical and narrative problems faced by the biographer in com-
piling a *Life* of such an emperor that is in itself a work of literature.\(^4\) I shall
exclude consideration of the year AD 69 and the reign itself. Criticism of the
latter was relatively muted, as far as the surviving books of Tacitus’ *Histories*
and the relevant chapters of the Suetonian *Life* allow us to judge. Fewer

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\(^2\) *Imperium suscipere* appears elsewhere in Suetonius only twice (*O. 7.1; Dom. 13.3*), a
variant for *capere imperium* (*Cal. 16.4; Cl. 10.1*) seemingly without any difference in
meaning or connotation. Tacitus employs it (*e.g. Hist. 2.1.3*) as what Graf (note 1)
111 calls the *Normalterminus*.

\(^3\) The combination *constet licet* occurs only here in Suetonius, while the regular
combination is *satis constat* (9 times; *e.g. Ang. 10.4; Dom. 1.1*). *Constat* predominantly
appears as a main verb (11 times; the exception being *Tib. 1.1*), often positioned
prominently in the sentence to underline the weight of tradition. The opening period
of Book 8 seems overloaded by this final clause; editors might consider printing
*constet … luiss* within parentheses.

Graf (note 1) 6 probably goes too far in reading into the final words of the
*Domitian* the notion that Domitian’s successors were savours of the state and that
Suetonius has envisaged the Flavian dynasty as encompassing a ring structure ‘fall-
rise-acme-new fall’. K.H. Waters, ‘Juvenal and the reign of Trajan’, *Antichthon* 4
(1970) 62 n. 1, goes so far as to say that ‘Suetonius accepted and helped to crystallise
the convention of disparaging the previous dynasty studiously fostered by the
“Good Emperors”, Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian’, a view nuanced by E.S. Ramage,
‘Juvenal and the establishment: denigration of predecessor in the Satires’, in *ANRW*
II.33.1 (Berlin 1989) 659 n. 40: ‘he is thinking primarily of Domitian, but what he
says applies to the biographer’s treatment of the other emperors as well’. It is
impossible to uphold this for Suetonius’ *Vespasian* and *Titus*, see M. Wilson, ‘After
the silence: Tacitus, Suetonius and Juvenal’, in A.J. Boyle & W.J. Dominik (edd.),

\(^4\) Of modern work on the *Vespasian* only W. Steidle’s brief treatment *Sueton und die
antike Biographie* (Munich 1951) 102-04, deals coherently with the question of how
Suetonius constructed the *Life* and his particular image of Vespasian.
opportunities for appealing writing are offered by good than by evil, the fascination of which is ever alluring. Compounding this, Vespasian’s reign was arguably less challenging to write about than the rest of his life. Tacitus’ famous aphorism about Vespasian, *et ambigua de Vespasiano fama, solusque omnium ante se principum in melius mutatus est*, suggests that there was material from the earlier part of Vespasian’s life that needed careful evaluation: as with many who have come to prominence late in life after many struggles, there were skeletons in Vespasian’s cupboard. It is clear that the writers of annalistic histories who wrote under the Flavians and who were the main sources upon which Suetonius drew for the period of Vespasian’s pre-imperial life felt expected to laud the current dynasty and expose the failings of the Julio-Claudians and their transient successors; those writing after Domitian’s death, like Tacitus and Suetonius, had a freer hand, but were still restrained by the continued existence and influence of friends and beneficiaries of the Flavians. The following will illustrate some of the problems Suetonius faced and the means by which he dealt with them.

**Suetonius on Vespasian**

In a striking contrast to the Julian and Claudian *gentes*, whose histories were set out in the lost opening to *Divus Iulius* and at the beginning of the *Tiberius* respectively, the story of the *gens Flavia* was meagre: despite his research efforts, Suetonius can trace back no further than Vespasian’s paternal and maternal grandfathers, the former who rose only to the centurionate, the latter to become military tribune and *praefectus castrorum*. When writing about the *gens Octavia* at the start of the *Augustus*, Suetonius discovered that the first

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6 The loss of works by Pliny the Elder and Cluvius Rufus, for example, make the task of reconstruction via quotations in Tacitus and Plutarch, and via presumed patterns of readership, an uncertain business, but see D. Wardle, ‘Suetonius and Cluvius Rufus’, *Hermes* 120 (1992) 466-82, for an attempt. Josephus’ *Bellum Iudaicum* is the sole surviving example of such a work; comparison with other versions permits the degree of manipulation possible to be uncovered in some places. Pliny, *NH Praef.* 20 feared criticism for a pro-Flavian bias.
7 To the information provided by Suetonius an inscription (*AE* 1989 no. 201) adds that he was tribune and *praefectus castrorum* of *legio I* in Germany.
princeps had either inspired others to create, or had created himself, a highly dubious early history of the gens, whereas its history proper began only with Augustus’ great-grandfather who had served as a military tribune in the Second Punic War. Both Lives reveal how highly contested imperial ancestries could be: in the Augustus Suetonius provides names, specific allegations and even quotations from those who traduced Augustus’ parents; in the Vespasian he is content to refer to anonymous nonnulli and quidam (1.2, 4) who presented different versions of the military rank of Vespasian’s father and also of the origo of his great-grandfather. Later in the Vespasian Suetonius records the emperor’s open scorn for the unknown flatterers who attempted to provide the Flavians with a mythical ancestor who founded Reate and accompanied Hercules; he signals that Vespasian did not conceal his humble origins, but rather paraded them (Vesp. 10). Here, however, there is clear evidence of traducers of the Flavian gens in operation: those who alleged a Transpadane origo were suggesting at the least that the family was not from Italy and probably that the great-grandfather was not even born a Roman citizen. Suetonius declares that he could find no evidence at all to justify this story, although he had displayed due diligence in his investi-

8 Cf. Aug. 2.1-3. Suetonius explicitly records Augustus as evidence for the traditions he records, probably from his lost De vita sua. For a sound characterising of the early history, see R.E. Mitchell, Patricians and Plebeians (Ithaca 1990) 3 n. 4: ‘the garbled, patronizing account of the origins of the Octavian gens’. The most plausible incentive and context for its creation is the elevation of the gens to patrician status by Caesar in 45 BC; cf. P.-C. Ranouil, Recherches sur le patriciat (Paris 1975) 125-26; less likely is the context of Augustus’ marriage to the patrician Livia which may have necessitated an equally distinguished lineage; cf. I.M. Le M, DuQuesnay, ‘Horace and Maecenas: the propaganda value of Sermones I’, in A.J. Woodman & D. West (edd.), Poetry and Politics in the Age of Augustus (Cambridge 1984) 45, but by then Augustus already possessed patrician status.

9 Levick (note 1) 5 rightly notes that the alternatives of primipilae or ordinary centurion, both rejected by Suetonius, are apologetic and conjectures plausibly that one derives from Pliny the Elder. If Sabinus had held either rank, it advanced his acquisition of equestrian status and had positive consequences for his presumed wealth; B.W. Jones, Suetonius: Vespasian (London 2000) 12.

10 This would seem a reasonable assumption given the presumable date of his birth and the enfranchisement of the Transpadanes by Caesar only in 49 BC. Jones (note 9) 16 seems to consider the possibility that this tradition may not derive from anti-Flavian polemic but rather from attempts to distance the family from any good fortune enjoyed under the bad Julio-Claudians. Any such tradition, arising after AD 37, surely long postdates the great-grandfather’s death; if anything, lowering the family’s earlier status places more emphasis on the rise of Petro and Sabinus under the good Julio-Claudians.
gations, quamvis satis curiose inquirerem. In the Augustus all the defamatory material is deliberately and immediately overshadowed by a heavy emphasis on the divinity of Augustus,\textsuperscript{11} a theme that plays large throughout the Life. In the Vespasian, however, there is a deliberately contrasting emphasis on the simple humanity of Vespasian: the house of Augustus’ grandfather, where the future princeps was raised, became a place of religio to future generations, whereas the villa of Vespasian’s grandmother at Cosa was just a favoured travel destination for the emperor; and the characterful details that Suetonius supplies mark out Vespasian as a man of pietas.\textsuperscript{12} The different narrative strategies adopted by Suetonius reflect something of (his view of) the different personalities of the two principes and of the attitudes of their respective ages towards divinisation: for Augustus it was a goal long aspired to, long advertised, carefully prepared for, and above all vouched for by the gods through all the most important methods of divination;\textsuperscript{13} for Vespasian, a tradition of a humble but honourable Roman ancestry served well the ideological needs of his principate, both in distancing himself from Julio-Claudian excesses and in promoting the new ethos of ‘ostentatious modesty’, whereas a divine future was not of paramount importance.\textsuperscript{14}

For the most part, Vespasian’s passage through the cursus honorum is a straightforward progression marked by indisputable excellence or competence on his part, but the most intriguing part is Suetonius’ presentation of his career under Caligula. As we can see from Tacitus’ presentation of his own career at the start of the Histories,\textsuperscript{15} it was necessary to display sensitivity in dealing with advancement that had been secured under emperors whose posthumous reputation was bad and, we can well imagine, there was a general tendency to distance oneself from the un lamented. Suetonius, however, presents not just a Vespasian whose career prospers, but one who arguably indulges in utterly shameful adulatio. Vespasian failed to secure the aedileship at his first attempt, which is most plausibly dated in AD 36, but succeeded the following year and was aedile in AD 38.\textsuperscript{16} At this point in the narrative Suetonius suppresses Vespasian’s reprimand by Caligula for failing to keep the streets of Rome clean (\textit{Vesp.} 5.3), presumably because it would mar the impression of competence displayed by Vespasian and render puzzling his advancement to the next level of the cursus honorum which

\textsuperscript{12} Cf. Graf (note 1) 11.
\textsuperscript{13} Cf. esp. \textit{Aug.} 97.
\textsuperscript{14} Levick’s phrase (note 1) 65.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Hist.} 1.1.3., see esp. \textit{abnuerim}. Cf. Ash (note 5) 127.
\textsuperscript{16} For the best chronology, see Jones (note 9) 19-20, based largely on J. Nicols, \textit{Vespasian and the Partes Flavianae} (Stuttgart 1978).
Suetonius indicates followed rapidly (mox). Vespasian’s praetorship followed in AD 40, his election coming among the top candidates. Three examples of his conduct in office are given by Suetonius: (1) Vespasian requested special games to commemorate Caligula’s German victories; (2) he proposed that those convicted of conspiring against Caligula should, in addition to their other punishments, be denied burial; and (3) he thanked the emperor before the Senate for a dinner invitation.

How are we to understand Suetonius’ presentation of this episode? Suetonius’ precise words by which he characterises Vespasian’s actions are ne quo non genere demerre tur, a phrase I would translate as ‘in order to leave no stone unturned by which to lay the emperor under obligation to him’. Given that (in Suetonius’ usual fashion) there are no explicitly evaluative terms to guide the reader’s interpretation, it is impossible to be categorical in identifying his approach. It is readily understandable that a young man from humble origins, who needed imperial support to prosper in any public career, would have kept on the emperor’s good side, that he had a survival strategy, but are we meant to understand Vespasian’s actions as unduly sycophantic? Although Suetonius avoids adulatio or any of its cognates, in the light of the overwhelmingly negative evaluation of Caligula in the ancient sources, is it not plausible that the reader is being given cause to reflect more critically

17 Levick (note 1) 10-12 provides a plausible explanation for the failed canvass for the aedileship in the heightened competition for office which preceded the eagerly anticipated death of Tiberius. Vespasian’s praetorship, coming a mere six years after his quaestorship. Levick (note 1) 9 may owe something to the emperor’s personal support as his relations with the Senate deteriorated.

18 Although this material may derive ultimately from the acta senatus, it is unlikely that Suetonius himself unearthed it. Rather, its origins lie in one of the annalistic histories written under the Flavians, when, with the benefit of hindsight, the actions of a junior senator, who was to rise to the highest position, assumed greater significance. Cf. Graf (note 1) 13-14.

19 Neither the Loeb’s ‘to lose no opportunity of winning the favour of Gaius’ nor Edwards’ ‘so as to lose no opportunity of gaining Gaius’ favour’ captures the key idea contained within the –mer of demereor, that Vespasian is rendering a service.

The overall attitude of Suetonius to Vespasian makes it unlikely that he described him as infensus senatui, which is the reading of the manuscripts. Although R.F. Rossi, ‘Tracce di lotta politica nel senato di Caligola’, RFIC 99 (1971) 169 n. 2, defends the manuscript reading, editors rightly prefer Lipsius’ emendation infensum which makes Caligula hostile to the Senate.
about Vespasian’s actions: was there a ‘German victory’ to celebrate, or was the suggestion of exacerbated penalties for victims of Caligula not repellent to normal sensibilities, or was the Senate an appropriate audience before which to thank the emperor for a trifling honour? It is difficult to decode Suetonius here, as he can present material in very different ways between Lives: for example, while his Caligula (44-45) may deny the emperor credit for any success in Germany or paint his activities as ludicrous, in his Galba (6.3) there were indeed serious exercises and a successful crushing of a German invasion. So here Vespasian could be either a willing participant in a piece of imperial deception or one who proposed recognition of a genuine military achievement.  

Although the refusal of burial to those convicted of treason or similar crimes had precedents, it was an extreme penalty, which smacked of saevitia and went beyond the poena legis, in this case the penalty prescribed by the lex Iulia de maiestate: after the conspirators had been found guilty, in the debate on what sentence should be imposed, Vespasian expressed his sententia, as was his right, but went beyond what was appropriate in normal times. While it was a high honour, even for a senator, to receive an invitation from the emperor to a private dinner, to make it a public matter by recording his formal thanks in the Senate, even by means of a passing reference in a speech, was the action of a crass arriviste. Graf, for one, argues that Vespasian is merely fulfilling his duty as a magistrate in items one and two and that the third too is ‘keinefalls adulatio um eine Nebensächlichkeit’. This goes too far towards exculpating Vespasian: ne quo non genere … is an indication of extreme, not normal, behaviour. Tacitus’ account of Tiberius’ reign and the Senatus consultum de Pisone patre reveal that the Senate’s praise

20 For this slipperiness of Suetonius’ treatment see in general B. Mouchová, Studie zu Kaiserbiographien Suetons (Prague 1968) esp. 65-78, and for Caligula in particular see D. Wardle, Suetonius’ Life of Caligula. A Commentary (Brussels 1994) 84-88. Tacitus apparently denies any credit to Caligula (Agr. 13.2; Germ. 37.4), but Dio’s record (60.8.7) indicates that there was serious and successful military activity conducted by Galba and P. Gabinius Secundus in AD 40.

21 Cf. Jones (note 9) 21: ‘part of the standard penalty for treason’, citing the precedent of Tib. Sempronius Gracchus (Val. Max. 4.7.7), although the charge was hardly maiestas, and the punishment was not the poena legis. R.A. Bauman, Crime and Punishment in Ancient Rome (London 1996) esp. 52-53, for the variation of penalties by the Senate. The allegation that Octavian refused a supplicant’s request to bury a victim of the triumvir’s anger (Aug. 13.2) presumes that such a refusal was objectionable. In Book 10 of his De vita sua Augustus seems to have responded to allegations that he had refused burial (Dig. 48.24.1: corpora eorum qui capite damnatur cognatis ipsorum neganda non sunt: et id se observasse etiam Divus Augustus libro decimo de vita sua scribit), suggesting that he too shared the prevailing sentiment.

22 Graf (note 1) 14.
could be hyperbolic, and perhaps needed to be, but that individuals could steer a laudable course between flattery and obstinence. As Levick rightly points out, Vespasian’s proposal for special victory games would have involved him in great personal expense and his dinner invitation was the emperor’s grateful response to Vespasian’s signal generosity. So, although there is no outright criticism of Vespasian here, his eagerness is not regarded as wholly praiseworthy.

Immediately following this material comes Suetonius’ information on the wife and concubine of Vespasian. The nature of this material suggests that both relationships were the subject of slanderous treatment, as indeed Suetonius’ heavy emphasis on the social status of each indicates: Flavia Domitilla, daughter of Flavius Liberalis, was the delicata of a provincial eques Statilius Capella, had once enjoyed Latin status but was then declared to be freeborn and a Roman citizen by the recuperatores, an essential precondition for Vespasian to have contracted a legal marriage with her. Allegations of servile origins or banausic activities were common elements of political and forensic polemic: M. Antonius and Cassius Parmensis alleged both against Augustus, probably without justification. For Vespasian’s wife, however, there was no easy escape from such allegations: although her father rose to the low equestrian status of a scriba quaestorius, one clearly looked down upon by Suetonius, as nec quicquam amplius reveals, her status was at one time that of a Junian Latin. The most likely scenarios are that Flavius Liberalis had married a Junian Latin, i.e. an ex-slave informally manumitted, or that Flavia Domitilla herself had been a slave but had been informally manumitted, the latter scenario seeming to require that she had been born free, but was left exposed and then raised as a slave before being freed and finally restored to free status on the evidence of her natural father. Even if her original status

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23 Levick (note 1) 11-12.
25 Aug. 2.3; 4.2. For such insults, see I. Opelt, Die lateinischen Schimpfwörter und verwandte sprachliche Erscheinungen (Heidelberg 1965) 149-51.
26 Most apparitores were freedmen even if some rose to equestrian rank; the ordo scribarum tended to exclude freedmen and produce more equestrians. Suetonius’ sneer looks down on a social climber who ascended only to the bottom of the equestrian order. See N. Purcell, ‘The Apparitores: a study in social mobility’, PBSR 51(1983) 136-37, 154-55.
27 A.A. Barrett, ‘Vespasian’s wife’, Latomus 64 (2005) 388. See also Levick (note 1) 12. D.H. Henry, ‘A note on Suetonius Vespasian, 3’, Nigeria and the Classics 21 (2005) 79, suggests that the extant text provides too much information about Domitilla’s lover and that ex Africa should be deleted as a gloss on Sabratensis. Perhaps, however,
as a free woman was restored, the wife of the future emperor had served as
the sexual plaything of Statilius Capella, as the *delicata* of Suetonius’ best
manuscript most naturally carries this meaning rather than that of ‘pet’ or
‘ward’; *delegata*, the reading of other manuscripts, offers no easy meaning that
fits the syntax.28 This woman with her chequered past married Vespasian
early in his life. Some argue that this occurred before he began the *cursus
honorum* and before she would have been a social embarrassment,29 an
interpretation that requires Suetonius’ *inter haec*, the opening words of this
chapter, to relate to the whole of Vespasian’s early career rather than to
Caligula’s reign. The way that Suetonius uses this chronological marker
elsewhere in the *Lives* suggests that it refers to a clearly defined period most
recently identified in the *Lýfe*,30 so here most naturally to the latter part of
Caligula’s reign.31 If this was the case, Vespasian’s choice is somewhat
incongruous, but Levick plausibly conjectures that she was a relative and that
the marriage was conceived to keep property within the broad family.32
Barrett’s conclusion is sound: ‘there is no literary evidence that Vespasian as
emperor ever made an allusion, public or private, to his wife. The silence
suggests strongly that it was a match to which he did not wish to draw

the two elements both add material which might reflect poorly on Domitilla:
*Sabratensis* shows that her lover came from a community which did not enjoy the
status of a *municipium* at the time and *ex Africa* underlines a potential slur of ‘non-
Italian’. Denis Saddington (by correspondence) has suggested that the local detail is
evidence of Suetonius’ own researches during his time in Africa, but whether
Suetonius, who had definite connections with Hippo Regius, ever visited Sabratha
must remain conjectural.

28 See Barrett (note 27) 390-91. For the common sexual implication of *delicata* by
comparison with the masculine form *puer delicatus*, see W.J. Slater, ‘*Pueri, turba
minuta*’, *BICS* 21 (1974) 133-41; P. Watson, ‘*Erotion: puella delicata*’, *CQ* 42 (1992), esp. 259-
63; and J. Pollini, ‘Slave-boys for sexual and religious service: images of pleasure and
devotion’, in Boyle & Dominik (note 3) 149-66, although H.S. Nielsen, ‘*Delicia* in
Roman literature and in the urban inscriptions’, *Analecta Romana Instituti Danici* 19
(1990) 79 argues for ‘something between a jester and a pet’.

29 Barrett (note 27) 391.

30 *Tib.* 8: to 23-22 BC; 63.1: to the period of Tiberius’ exacerbated *saevitia* that began
with the death of Drusus; *Cal.* 45.3: to Caligula’s campaign in the North; N 39.1: to
the early 60s AD; see K.R. Bradley, *A Commentary on Suetonius’ Life of Nero* (Brussels
1978) 238; and *Tit.* 10.1: to Titus’ reign.

31 Cf. Graf (note 1) 16 who dates the marriage to early AD 39 and Jones (note 9) 21.
For the difficulty in deciding on what Vespasian’s motives were, see M.B. Charles &
E. Anagnostou-Laoutides, ‘Suetonius *Vespasian* 3: the status of Flavia Domitilla’, in
this volume.

32 Levick (note 1) 12-13.
attention’.33 Suetonius’ treatment of Flavia Domitilla should not be taken necessarily as undercutting the Flavian dynasty, since Titus did not shirk from public acknowledgement of her on two *sesterces* from AD 80-81: the image of a *carpentum* with legends *MEMORIAE DOMITILLAE S.P.Q.R.* and *DOMITILLAE IMP. CAES. VESP. AVG. S.P.Q.R.* suggests that her image was paraded in the *pompa circensis*, a limited recognition at least.34 Although Flavia Domitilla’s death, probably sometime in the 50s after the birth of her third child, meant that she never became empress, her lowly origins set her apart from all other imperial spouses up to Suetonius’ day – her contemporaries and his were likely to have used her status as something with which to besmirch or attack Vespasian: Suetonius does his best with the stories about her; he could not omit her name because he had, at some point in the *LIFE*, to explain who Vespasian’s children were and who was their mother.

Vespasian’s relationship with Antonia Caenis was similarly remarkable for Suetonius’ emperors:35 she was a freedwoman of Antonia (Caligula’s grandmother), probably older than Vespasian, with good connections to the Julio-Claudian family that may have served Vespasian well during the reigns of Caligula and Claudius.36 Although she is often referred to, with some justification, as Vespasian’s concubine, Suetonius is careful not to employ that designation here, but to label the relationship as *contubernium*, an arrangement of which Treggiari says ‘in many ways *contubernium* imitates *matrimonium iustum*’.37 Under the terms of the *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* Vespasian as a senator could not contract a legal marriage with a freedwoman. Although such a sexual relationship would not have fallen under the ambit of the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis*, Suetonius carefully places Vespasian’s sexual activities with her before and after the marriage to Domitilla, to remove any question of anything of doubtful taste or legality: only bad emperors slept with concubines during their marriage, e.g. Nero.38 Dio’s obituary of Caenis,

33 Barrett (note 27) 391.
34 RIC II Titus 153, 154. See Barrett (note 27) 392-93.
35 For a list of imperial concubines, see R. Friedl, *Der Konkubinat im kaiserlichen Rom* (Stuttgart 1996) 170-76. Vespasian’s ‘monogamous concubinage’ provided an example to be followed by Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Both, however, entered into such a relationship only after the death of their wives.
36 See PIR² A 888 and N. Kokkinos, *Antonia Augusta. Portrait of a Great Lady* (London 1992) 57-58, for *testimonia*. For her putative role in Vespasian’s early career, see Levick (note 1) 11 and Jones (note 9) 24-25.
37 At Dom. 12.3 Caenis is described as Vespasian’s *concubina*. For *contubernium* as a term for the relationship, see Friedl (note 35) 75-85 and S. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage. Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford 1991) 54.
38 Cf. N. 28.1: Nero and the freedwoman Acte. Cf. N. 28.2; 44.1; Dom. 22.
recorded by his excerptor Xiphilinus under AD 73, concentrates on the influence that she wielded during Vespasian’s reign and on her role in the buying and selling of citizenship and offices, as well as making plain Vespasian’s love for her, but nothing of this kind emerges in Suetonius, either here or later in the chapters on the reign itself. Suetonius’ version is difficult to accept, in that we have to imagine that Vespasian broke off his relationship with Caenis when he married Domitilla, even before he began his public career, yet still benefited from her connections for around twenty years before resuming the relationship where they had broken off. On top of that we have to swallow the idea that the relationship had no political or non-personal dimension. Suetonius’ presentation of Caenis is as positive as it is possible to make it.

Although the career of any senator from an undistinguished background, whatever his talents, needed assistance to prosper, it was important that such assistance came from suitable sources: Levick makes a case for influential connections with Vespasian among the Vitellii and Plautii, who flourished in the first half of Claudius’ reign, but Suetonius highlights the role of Narcissus in securing for Vespasian command of Legio II Augusta, stationed at Argentorate (Strasbourg in Upper Germany), in AD 42:39 the formulation Claudio principe Narcissi gratia demonstrates sharply where the real power lay. While on one level it is interesting to see one ab epistulis comment on the influence of a predecessor in that office, Narcissus was hardly an uncontroversial patron: Suetonius is aware of the power exercised and the corrupt self-enrichment achieved by this freedman of Claudius’.40 Those hostile to the later emperor may have made much of this avenue of advancement that suggested, if not that actual money had changed hands, that dubious influence had been brought to bear. Perhaps Suetonius chooses not to suppress the detail because of the role it could play in showing how Vespasian’s career had been retarded by Agrippina who undermined and eventually eliminated Narcissus for his preference of Aelia Paetina over herself as Claudius’ wife.

Vespasian’s triumphant role commanding Legio II Augusta in Claudius’ invasion of Britain and his subsequent honours, culminating in his consulship held suo anno in November and December AD 51 with the emperor

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39 Vesp. 4.1. Levick (note 1) 15-16.
40 Cl. 28. Narcissus’ appearance in four Lives (Cl. 37.2; Vi. 2.5; Vesp. 4.1-2; Tit. 2) makes him the most prominent ab epistulis. His last appearance reveals him as shrewdly aware of the imperial destiny of Titus and perhaps, for that reason, well disposed to Vespasian.
Claudius, occupy the bulk of chapter 4, all unquestionably positive. What then needs to be explained is the gap of around twelve years in Vespasian’s career before his proconsulship, probably in AD 63. For this Suetonius invokes the hostility of Agrippina, Claudius’ wife since early AD 49, for Narcissus and his friends, an explanation which is either ignorant of or deliberately conceals Agrippina’s justifiable hatred against the man who in early AD 40 had proposed that her lover’s ashes not be granted burial. It is clearly an element of Suetonian (or earlier pro-Flavian) spin that Vespasian himself was in no way responsible for the hiatus in his own career.

The challenge to Suetonius in describing Vespasian’s career under Nero is to negotiate a path between the Flavian version of events which sought to distance Vespasian from the bad emperor (emphasising his sufferings while still recording his excellent performance) and the anti-Flavian version(s) which played up his harshness, corruption and unpopularity. The first battleground lay in Vespasian’s proconsulate in Africa. Although the normal means of allocating the governorships of Africa and Asia was by the lot, Suetonius’ prominent placement of sortitus emphasises to the reader that the office was not due to the personal intervention of Nero. Integerrime and nec sine magna dignatione, an emphatic combination of a superlative adverb and a litotes, then leave the reader in no doubt as to Suetonius’ positive assessment

41 Although Suetonius notably avoids the excesses of flattery produced during the Flavian period (e.g. Jos. Bif. 3.5-6; Val. Flacc. 1.7-11; Sil. Ital. 3.597-98), Levick (note 1) 19-20, argues plausibly that Vespasian may have expected the consulship earlier on the basis of his military achievements, but that the eclipse of Narcissus explains the delay. Overall, however, for Vespasian to have secured a consulship suo anno was a great success.

42 The most detailed study of the interval between consulship and proconsular governorship of Africa or Asia under Nero, U. Vogel-Weidemann, Die Statthalter von Africa und Asia in den Jahren 14-68 n. Chr (Bonn 1982) summarised p. 506, shows that the mean average interval where all the termini are definite was 9.88 years, encompassing a range between 8 and 11 years; when all cases where only one terminus is definite are included, the mean rises to 10.7 and the range widens to between 8 and 15. Vespasian’s interval, on the assumption that he governed Africa in AD 63 as the successor to Ser. Cornelius Orfitus (cos. 51), is only slightly above the mean, not indubitable evidence of a malicious delay. This is now accepted by B.E. Thomasson, Fasti Africani. Senatorische und ritterliche Amtsträger in den Provinzen Nordafrikas von Augustus bis Diokletien (Stockholm 1996) 40. For a conspectus of scholarship on the date of the governorship, see Levick (note 1) 215.

43 The expression potentem adhuc apud filium (Vesp. 4.2) suggests that Suetonius believed Claudius’ influence protected Vespasian until his death and that Agrippina’s malice took effect only when Nero was in power.

44 4.3. Cf. G. 7.1: Africam … optimuit extra sortem electus ad ordinandum provinciam.
of Vespasian’s governorship as a whole.\textsuperscript{45} He includes, however, one negative incident in which the inhabitants of Hadrumetum pelted the governor with turnips. This featured prominently in the anti-Flavian versions which emphasised Vespasian’s parsimony, severity and peculation, but this display of popular hostility has been plausibly explained as the consequence of Nero reducing the quantity of corn available to the provincials of Africa in order to make up for what had been lost in the destruction of three hundred grain ships bound for Rome in the previous sailing season.\textsuperscript{46} Suetonius does not, however, excuse Vespasian, and does not peddle a version that advertised Vespasian’s \textit{parsimonia} or \textit{disciplina}, virtues tarnished by Galba’s recent manifestations of them, but reserves the main thrust of his treatment for proving that Vespasian did not return from Africa greatly enriched. The biographer’s implicit purpose here in juxtaposing these two notes is to deny that gubernatorial extortion lay behind the provincials’ demonstration against Vespasian. Indeed, the precise formulation \textit{rediit certe nihilo opulentior} seems devised to counter the kind of charge that, even if he did not solve all his financial problems during his governorship, he nonetheless secured some profit at the cost of the provincials.\textsuperscript{47} The means by which Suetonius urges his verdict is not, however, impressive: a state of poverty after the governorship, even if generally acknowledged, does not prove that no enrichment had taken place during the governorship. Moreover, the stories quoted are not unimpeachable: Tacitus reports merely as a rumour that Vespasian had mortgaged his estates to his brother and that bad relations ensued; mule-trading, a branch of ordinary commerce, was demeaning to one of senatorial status, but hardly damning, and nothing proves that this was a new venture, operated only after AD 63.\textsuperscript{48} The culminating item is that Vespasian extorted

\textsuperscript{45} Graf’s notion (note 1) 20, that the litotes ‘so abgeschwächt sie ist’, misunderstands Suetonius here.

\textsuperscript{46} Levick (note 1) 23-24.

\textsuperscript{47} Tacitus’ comparison of the governorships of Vitellius and Vespasian (Hist. 2.97.2), in which Vespasian’s rule was \textit{famosus} and \textit{invisus}, reveals that there was a strong anti-Vespasianic tradition, one that might find some support if Tacitus’ other description of unpopularity in the province (Hist. 4.49.1) is credible. See R. Ash, \textit{Tacitus: Histories Book II} (Cambridge 2007) 371.

\textsuperscript{48} Given Reate’s reputation for mules, it is plausible that Vespasian profited from supplying mules to Nero’s court, as Nicols (note 16) 10 suggests, but most likely to the army in the logistics of which they played a crucial role. A plausible and appropriately salacious edge is given to Suetonius’ highly rhetorical formulation \textit{ad mangonicos quaestus sustinendae dignitatis causa descenderit} by the suggestion of A.B. Bosworth, ‘Vespasian and the slave trade’, \textit{CQ} 52 (2002) 350-57 that Vespasian was engaged in the production of human mules, i.e. eunuchs, a particularly objectionable aspect of the trade.
a bribe of 200,000 HS from a young man for whom he had secured a grant of the *latus clavus*. Graf rightly suggests that the material Suetonius employs here derives from propaganda against the social upstart or even from pamphlets, but it is interesting to note that he employs it to defend Vespasian.\(^49\) Its introduction by a distancing *dicitur* is ‘odd’ for what appears to be presented as an incident of judicial conviction.\(^50\) Suetonius’ line of thought seems to be that Vespasian had to have been broke to commit the kind of embarrassing extortion-cum-blackmail that this incident supposes.

Tales of narrow escape from death at the hands of bad emperors are a common feature of Roman historiography, a useful device by which to play down previous collaboration with or benefiting from the hateful regime. For example, the governor of Judaea under Caligula, P. Petronius, barely escaped a death sentence for not pressing on with the emperor’s plan to desecrate the temple at Jerusalem.\(^51\) Suetonius’ version of Vespasian’s offence to Nero and his subsequent banishment from the imperial court is a clear example of this genre and bears all the signs of being an extreme version, the historical credibility of which becomes suspect on investigation. At least two versions were in circulation, differing in key aspects such as the precise nature of the offence, where and when it took place. For Tacitus the offence was falling asleep during a performance by Nero at the Quinquennial games in Rome in AD 65, whereas for Suetonius apparently repeated offences of either falling asleep or leaving during imperial performances occurred during Nero’s visit to Greece which began in September AD 66. Dio apparently combines detail from Tacitus with the setting in Suetonius, but specifying another offence, that of frowning at Nero’s behaviour.\(^52\) Modern scholarship debates which, if any, of these stories is (the more) plausible: it is Suetonius’ version that involves the greatest problems – Nero’s Greek sojourn did not begin before the second half of AD 66, perhaps as late as September, and Vespasian received his command of Judaea before the end of the year, leaving soon by land for Antioch.\(^53\) If *saepius* is evidence for repeated offences in Greece, as

\(^{49}\) Graf (note 1) 20.

\(^{50}\) See Jones (note 9) 31-32. Tac. *Hist.* 3.65.1 for the loan from Sabinus. Nicols (note 16) 11 accepts the extortion story because it fits Tacitus’ views on Vespasian’s avarice.

\(^{51}\) See e.g. Jos. *AJ* 18.308-09.

\(^{52}\) Tac. *Ann.* 16.5.3; Suet. *Vesp.* 4.4; Dio 66.11.2.

\(^{53}\) A.W. Braithwaite, *C. Suetoni Tranquilli Divus Vespasianus* (Oxford 1927) 30, giving weight to Suetonius’ *saepius*, and Jones (note 9) 34 accept a double offence in Italy and then in Greece; the majority (e.g. *RE* 6.2629) only one. K.R. Bradley, ‘The chronology of Nero’s visit to Greece A.D. 66/67’, *Latomus* 37 (1978) 64-65, argues that Nero left Italy in August AD 66 and participated in the Actian and Pythian
its position after *peregrinatione Achaica* requires, and if we downplay the uncertainty that *aut ... aut* brings to the explanation, the timescale for offence, retirement and reconciliation is very compressed, and thus Jones’s conclusion that ‘there remains the distinct impression that both the seriousness and the effect of Vespasian’s “offence” have been grossly exaggerated’ is attractive. The impression that Suetonius generates is that the appointment which changed Vespasian’s life, elevating him to the principate, came at a time of despair and trepidation: just as he became the unexpected emperor who did nothing to engineer his own elevation, the turning-point came to him unexpectedly and unsought, in literary terms a heightened *peripateia* such as Cicero thought appropriate for an appealing history.

**Conclusion**

Suetonius’ treatment of Vespasian’s early career reveals the kind of problems faced by a biographer in presenting an imperial subject whose rise to power was remarkable. While taking an overall positive view of Vespasian, Suetonius does not conceal the problems caused retrospectively by Vespasian’s rise to power in connection to his behaviour under Caligula and the marriage contracted with Flavia Domitilla. On the other hand, the closer Vespasian came to power, the more evident is the acute contestation of his actions in the historical tradition; Suetonius seems to follow versions which both distance Vespasian from negative aspects of the Julio-Claudians and emphasise the excellence of his actions. The virtues of the young Vespasian are fully in harmony with those of the later *princeps*.

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games in September of that year, either of which would be a suitable occasion for Vespasian’s offence. For the date of Vespasian’s appointment, see Nicols (note 16) 11-12.

54 Jones (note 9) 35.

55 Graf (note 1) 21 suspects Pliny as the origin of this pro-Flavian version of events. Suetonius describes Vespasian as *inopinatus princeps* (*Vesp. 7.3*) and follows the Flavian line which puts the initiative for his seizure of power with the troops (*Vesp. 7.1*). For Cicero and *peripateia*, see *Fam. 5.12.6*.
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