

What a Site for Nero!

The Eloquence of Evil - or - Was Mama to Blame?

By Julian Scutts

In Acknowledgement of influences emanating from the writings of Suetonius, S. Freud and S. Plath - with a touch of "Heavy Metal"

The Tower of Maecenas.

Enter figure wearing tragedian's robes, face hidden by mask.

A man may confide in a friend, a god only in his own genius. The common folk have a saying: "After I die, may the world go up in flames".

I say: "Let me behold the spectacle

while yet I breathe". Beautiful, she burns. Look, look there! Ha! The temple of Vesta is cut off by those dancing, licking flames of fire. That'll teach the virgins what fire's about! And there, the Pantheon.

One might have thought that the ancient gods of Rome would bestir themselves in the defence of their shrines and fanes. And there, the senators on the Capitoline Hill deport themselves like a clucking brood of mindless chickens. Perhaps in this case, appearances do not deceive. 817 years after the founding of the city named after Romulus, the wolf-suckled son of Mars, do I behold thy end. Unto thy lamentable passing do I compose sweet elegies. My little flame has set the world ablaze. O Rome, where is thy glory now? Aye, perchance this is thy greatest hour.

"Ileum 'tis of thee I sing". Strange paradox! Ileum burns, yet is eternal, immaterial like the spirit of the moon as she appears in three phases. First she is the maid, coy and modest, second the nymph nubile and enticing, third she is Hecate the witch. Ileum ascends from splendour to splendour.

Burn her, and she rises from the very flames that would consume, Troy has perished, Rome perishes, and like the desert bird named Phoenix shall Neropolis arise from Rome's grey ash. The stones of Neropolis shall not be for burning. When Rome's tortuous alleys are no more, the broad and graceful highways of the third and last Ileum shall bear witness to the Aeneas that conceived them. Now is the month named after the divine Julius. No rebuilding shall take place until spring next year, when an innovation will raise a few eyebrows. I'll abolish April, he, he. July for Julius, August for Augustus, and Neronius for the greatest and cleverest of them all- ME (gleeful laugh) - NERO CLAUDIUS CAESAR. 'Tis the flames inspire me with these thoughts, my flames, the physical expression of a mind ablaze. (Discarding mask) You know all those nasty stories they tell about me. All true, if anything they err on the side of understatement. To the moralists I say: "There are things in your life, foul imaginings in your mind that you wouldn't want the neighbours to know about just as there are things in their lives and minds they wouldn't want you to know about. At least I'm honest about my depravities. (As in a state of nostalgic reverie) NERO, singer, opera star, god, matricide... (pausing and contorting facial expression) ..Matricide? Well, actually - yes...Earlier, when I recited the list of my distinctions I used to insert "matricide" somewhere near the beginning, say between "singer" and "opera star". If I mumbled the word, perhaps it wouldn't jar in any listener's ears, I thought. Now I give the word the prominence it deserves. You know the lampoons they write about me in disreputable places, on lavatory walls or on the stones of the Cloaca Maxima:

"Write 'NERO' in Greek and count the numerical values in the name of the man of sin. Their sum is the same as that of the letters 'He done his Mama in". (Slumping on the ground). Mama, why did you go and make me do it? You had it in for me from the start. You made me feel how small I was when I was a mere toddler, and when I was a grown man, Caesar and a god no less, you still made me feel what I had felt as a child - how I was a messy little puppy-dog. (Turning to the audience): You know the old taunt: "Nero rules Rome, but who rules Nero?" I had to put personal feelings aside, I tell you, and do my duty as defender of the state. Duty! Ha! Poppycock! Feelings? Talk of 'duty' reminds me of the divine Augustus and his incredible hypocrisy. He sent more souls to Hades on a Sunday afternoon than I have ever done in all my life, but no one calls him a demon or ravenous beast. When I play an actor's part, I wear an actor's robes and strut about the stage, but when I exercise political power, I exercise political power! (Looking pensive) I know the reason. You cannot easily rehabilitate a man who's killed his mother. Strange feeling...A matricide is a walking contradiction, for he

has destroyed the roots of the self-same tree of which he is a branch. Even the earth on which I walk seems to give way beneath my feet. Again Mother Earth, you see. That's why my element is fire, the element stolen from its home in the sky - which, when free to spread whither it will, consumes all before it on the face of the earth. (Looking into the distance) How's my fire coming on, by the way? Nicely, I see! No, I was not destined to be a human being in anything but outward form. A man who traded in amber in the far north once told me of a tribe whose word for 'dog', if written down and reflected in a looking-glass, made their word meaning 'god' appear. For me this was significant. We are constantly being told that the higher nature of Man tends heavenwards, his lower nature towards the bestial. What beast is more human than the dog? An ape may look more like a man, but between dogs and humans a strange kind of affinity exists. Thus, if a man no longer feels at home in human company, his refuge will be found in those regions that border the human realm - on the one side, the low wide plain where beasts roam, or on the other where high mountains touch the abode of the gods. If such an exile or outcast makes forays into the human realm, then it can only be as a ravenous beast seeking whom it may devour, or as a vengeful and implacable god. Agrippina, my loving mother, did more than just call me a messy little puppy-dog. She acted on that assumption.

In my early childhood, I was incontinent. Every time she found a puddle, she'd grab me by the scruff of the neck and rub my nose in my own water, saying, "Now then, that comes of being a dirty little puppy-dog!" Then I thought to myself: "So OK. Mama, I'm a dirty little puppy-dog, but what does that make you?" Faustulus, our neighbour, had a watch-dog - no puppy he but a fierce and terrifying beast. Cave canem was written \over the entrance of Faustulus's villa.- an understatement if ever there was one!

The beast knew three words of command: "Catch!" - "Hold!" - "Dispatch!" No blighter ever stood a chance. Faustulus had a wry sense of humour in calling him Cerberus. That dog was a friend to me, probably the only true friend I ever had. Every time I was ill-used or humiliated, I could always count on Cerberus for comfort. On seeing me, he would always wag his tail, romp over and lick me on the hands and neck. One day they found him dead, poisoned by a felon! I think that was the only time I truly mourned, and then I said to myself, "When I'm big, I'm gonna carry on from where Cerberus left off - and you Agrippina won't be in a position to start complaining! Who turned me into a puppy-dog in the first place?"

At one time I was subject to maudlin thoughts. Would I have turned out to be a different sort of guy if I had had a kind loving mother? Perhaps I would have become a nice guy like that milksop Britannicus. Funny, when I put an end to him, I also destroyed some part of me that hankered after something vaguely human. Hey, that doesn't fit! Britannicus had Messalina for a mother! Can it all be put down to family influences?

Nero the god! I had a dream. There I was at the foot of Mount Olympus. Mother was with me as usual. As we reached a cross-roads, Agrippina said: "Come Nero, here we turn left" But I said: "No, mama, we do not. I'm gonna turn right!"

And that's what I did. She shouted after me: "Become emperor, Nero, though you slay me". The path led upwards toward the snowy heights, past the lush vernal pastures of the lower slopes, past vineyards and groves of olive trees, through forests of oaks, birches, willows, elms, yews and poplars and all the holy trees, past the crags where the chamois chewed stunted grass, and the last brave wind-blasted pine tossed and raged in defiance of the elements, I ascended, till there was no other thing under heaven but burning, blinding snow, a conflagration no less fierce than that which now I see. I looked down at the world of men, and what should I see but -- ants!

The air was thin and pure - then the prize! The summit appeared from behind a cloud-rift. Treacherous thoughts welled up from within me: "High climbers play with death - death by freezing, death that lurks in the shadow of a measureless abyss." Was I not trespassing on holy ground?" Remember Icarus, remember Prometheus," sighed voices in the wind, but then a louder voice from within me bade me fear no counsel fit for the craven.

And so to the summit. And what should I see when reached the Olympian heights, other thanfierce Jupiter? Mighty Zeus? I'll tell you what I saw! There seated on an ivory throne, a frail old man, whose long white beard fluttered in the wind. His expression was more torpor than aught else. That was it! He looked rather like... some doddering old patriarch that was Consul before Caesar's time. As I approached, he tried to look grave and austere, pathetically shaking his hoary senile head. His trembling hand reached down - I saw a quiverful of arrows and a pile of thunderbolts at his side. Now was my chance! I seized him by the scruff of the neck, and flung him down the mountain-side. The last I saw of him was as he reeled head over heels into a ravine. Then I shouted in triumph to the four winds. "THE OLD GOD IS

DEAD.ow I'm Top Dog. I got de thunderbolts".

Only a dream? Perhaps. Dreams pass, but not what they portend.

(Face lights up) Nero the god! And what of the others? The divine Julius, the divine Augustus? The divine Claudius (There's a joke for you).

To Julius I say: "Suffering elevates and martyrdom is noble, unless one is clever enough to find more comfortable alternatives". To Augustus: "You were clever all right. You bamboozled the Senate by concealing from its members the true nature of imperial power under high-sounding, archaic titles such as Consul, Tribune of the People, what have you. You controlled the Plebeian mobs by judicious hand-outs of corn, by staging pageants, triumphal processions, carnivals and games. You provided work for idle hands and assured yourself the allegiance of the army by promising share-outs from pillaged goods and chattels and allowing the common man to wallow in blood and glory. To the veterans you conceded land for farming and a secure pension. With time the Principate no longer required such props and legitimations. Must Caesar, a divine being, justify himself to mortals, appealing to this or that precedent, some law passed by the corrupt senate of a moribund republic? Caesar's prerogative resides in himself - or in nothing! (Looking pensive) If any man kills his fellow out of hatred or whatever personal motive, is he not stigmatised as a murderer? Is it the act of killing itself that is deemed wrong? But a soldier - does he not kill in the pursuit of duty? Again, if any man is suddenly overtaken by misfortune, some aigue or contagion, do we indict Phoebus Apollo and take him to court?

Mere mortals cannot question the sovereign overruling of a god.

When a veteran finally takes possession of that long-promised farm, and if a flood come and sweep his habitation, his livestock and the fruit of his fields all away, leaving him nothing, will he sue Jupiter Pluvius or Neptune for damages and theft? Let there be no doubt of this: Only a subject is bound by the law. Mortals, even kings, are not above it. But gods?

When the Plebeians sought to establish a new order, raising their banner of freedom on the Aventine hill and proclaiming a new legal code inscribed on twelve stone tablets, from whom did they receive this law, if not from the gods? But gods are not subject to the laws they impose on mortals. Jupiter chastens the adulterer, but is Jove chaste? He's chased a good few nymphs in his time, that's true.

If I am a god, to whom am I answerable for my deeds but to myself? Morality is for mortals. An all-powerful god has only to inquire within himself, to consult his own counsels, to execute his own will. A god is free. If one being is absolutely free, then all others must be bound.

(Contorting his facial features) Why then am I assailed by doubts and strange questionings, by shadows and ghosts? Why am I not yet free? Have I not broken the manacles in which Agrippina, moralists, philosophers, senators and pedagogues have sought to fetter me? Seneca, my venerable tutor, filled my youthful spirit with notions of logic, reason, equity and other trash, Seneca, I'll have your Spanish guts for garters soon enough. You'll join the rest of them in Hades - Agrippina, Britannicus, Octavia... Seneca drooled on interminably about the "gentle light of reason". Fool! What good is a candle to a traveller lost in a quagmire on a stormy night? Shall not the tempest extinguish his feeble light that he with his next step plunge into the loathsome mire - never to rise again? So much for reason!

Seneca taught me the art of rhetoric, but if you truly wish to know my mind as to morality, philosophy, reason and tradition, then let tongues more eloquent than mine speak for me - the tongues of flame that far outdo any spectacle put on by Aurora or the dying sun. Those flames declared what Nero thinks not only of tradition but of the past and all it holds, my childhood in the dog-house! (As though startled) Britannicus! Still you lour at me with those baleful callow eyes. Do not question a god's prerogative. Was it so terrible a thing to die? I made it easy on you, no slow lingering death for you, so potent was the venom in your table-water. And then that sister of yours! Octavia, how I 'ated her. Complained she wasn't happy with me! I ask you. I'd married her, hadn't I? But she wanted to own me, she wanted me to feel an obligation towards her. She wanted me to apologize for abusing her. That's it. She wanted me to feel guilty, bad inside. She was Agrippina all over again, dressed up in another guise. They couldn't extract any confession from her, any conclusive evidence to back up my charge of adultery. Pah! The torturers these days! But what mortals' skill avails against witchcraft? I

could see into her mind and heart. What's in the heart counts more than "evidence". I could read from her face her prurient thoughts any time a comely slave passed by. Not that I'm averse to a Ganymede now and then, speaking as a god, of course. In any case, I did the world a service in ridding it of those brats, the breed of that vixen Messalina and Claudius, my adoptive sugar-daddy. Britannicus, don't look at me like that - the three of you, stop it! Why do you haunt me at night? Why do you plague me with strange dreams and sensations, as when I once dreamed that a cloud of flying ants swarmed over me? I tried to evade them, but they entered my nostrils, my hair, my ears and mouth. I ran from the Tiber's banks, across the Field of Mars, when suddenly I saw the portal of the great mausoleum of Augustus loom out of the darkness - and a voice from within its inner gloom beckoned: "Enter. Nero, enter." Even as a ghost, Agrippina, you're the ringleader. Were you ever a woman of flesh and bone, or were you the harpy that drove Orestes to distraction and death? Orestes, my brother, in deed! You were the the guiding force behind every conspiracy against me. On the anniversary of your death, your spirit is abroad in the Forum, in the streets, in the taverns and bawdy-houses - spreading rumours, hatching plots, inciting the common folk to sedition. Robbing me of my sleep, is one thing, Agrippina, but sowing the seeds of rebellion is quite another. Pretorian guards! I charge that ghost with high treason. Arrest that ghost. Take that ghost away.

(Sipping from a flask of wine) Why should a god have to worry about this kind of thing? Gods have their troubles, too, eh Dionysus?

Four years ago a comet appeared in the night sky. That gave me the wind-up. This year another has appeared. Comets, always the portent of the fall of a great figure, the beginning of a new age.

In life I have learned to be wary of three manner of men: moralising philosophers, Gauls and senators. Moralising philosophers turn men moody and indecisive, skeptical of authority and religion. You can't do without religion, you know, in some form or other. Call it charisma, call it mystique, call it what you will. You've got to have religion. Principles, statutes and institutions decay and crumble, and no amount of brass-polishing or propping-up saves them in the end. To quote two lines from my own poetic flowers:

"Each edifice, however grand / but founded is on shifting sand".

Hannibal did more to shore up the Republic than a legion of philosophers and lawyers. Men aren't moved much by abstract precepts and theories. They want a man like themselves - however hideous or perverse he may appear to the moralists - to be their leader, one to whom they can look up and relinquish personal responsibility. If I didn't exist, moralists and philosophers would have to invent me. In the year that I was born, six and twenty years ago, Sirius the dog-star, did shine exceeding bright. It would be a long hard winter, the Magi foretold. Again to quote my works:

If Erebus was not my sire, nor the night my dam, Humankind must ponder well.
Whence truly then I am.

People rarely ask questions when they fear unflattering answers.

As for the Gauls, while he still had a tongue in his mouth, a madman claiming to be prophet declared than in Gaul, the forces destined to bring about my overthrow would be unleashed. The Gauls are dogs then, not chickens! Was it not the Gauls who set fire to Rome some four and a half centuries ago? Far be it from me to pass judgement on that!

And senators, they frown whenever I refuse to kiss them on the hand - or anywhere else, come to that! I'd sooner kick them up the Alpine than kiss their hands.

No, in Neropolis, there'll be no room for senators, Gauls or moralising philosophers.

(Making sweeping gestures) Let's ring the changes! The comon folk need spectacles, circuses, distractions. It'll take their minds off the fire. Let preparations be made for festivities, public and private. Restock the cellars with wine! Tell the farmers to fatten their kine, the slaughters to whet their knives. The festivities shall usher in the dawning of a new age, the age of Nero. On the Ides of August we shall hold a big open-air event. The men shall wear silk all the way from China - the Julian law on silk wearing shall be abolished. Strumpets and concubines, deck yourselves in your gaudiest scarlet robes. Night shall be as day. We'll be needing torches.

Enter: Sextus

Sextus:

Hail, noble Caesar! There are reports of unrest in the city. There are murmurings and rumours.

Nero:

Rumours, what rumours?

Sextus:

Some say the fire is no accident.

Nero:

How perspicacious of them! And who do they say has done this thing, has instigated this lamentable conflagration?

Sextus:

Some, O divine Emperor sir, of the lower sort, even senators, have suggested ..er um

Nero:

I don't mean the likes of them. Surely there are some other - more interesting - conjectures.

Sextus:

Indeed, noble emperor. Some say it was the Jews, some a band of slaves that uphold the memory of Spartacus, while yet others claim it was the Christians.

Nero:

O yes, these "Christians", that strange Jewish heresy. Interesting. (After pausing) Spread it abroad that it is indeed these Christians who are to blame for this fire. Round them up. They'll make excellent scapegoats. They are to receive the death penalty for sedition and arson.

Sextus:

Any special way, o noble and divine Emperor?

Nero:

Hm...We shall be needing torches. Sextus, what do you know about this insidious sect of Christians?

Sextus:

I'm hardly an expert on such matters, sir, but I have heard it said that their leader was called Christus and was crucified in Jerusalem back in the reign of Tiberius. They claim their leader was "the light of the world".

Nero:

We shall be needing ...

Sextus:

And the way, noble Caesar.

Nero:

Rather slow, today, Sextus. I thought I said we should be needing torches ..

Sextus:

Forgive me, my lord. Your wish is my command.

Exit Sextus

Nero:

Oh yes, it's coming back to me now. One of their leaders - Paulus wasn't it? - kept on pestering me with pleas for a hearing concerning the charges against him. I've heard suggestions that Seneca is mixed up with it too. This Christus had the audacity to claim that the highest God was his father, and he a Jew from one of Rome's more turbulent colonial back-waters! I'll suffer no competition from the likes of him, or anyone else, come to that, in the divinity stakes. These Jews! Well did Antiochus Epiphanes recognize the rebellious and proud nature of a people who believed that theirs' was the only true God, invisible and pure, one that demanded unquestioning obedience to a changeless law. Antiochus, in his youth one of Rome's involuntary guests, well understood that this people and their religion stood as an obstacle in the path of imperial power. He defiled their temple in Jerusalem. What was the story? The temple lamp burned for eight days though there was only oil enough only for one. Pah! Superstition! Britannicus, don't lour at me like that.
(Turning to the scene of the fire) What a beautiful, beautiful site --- (pause) for my Neropolis, so aesthetically pleasing.