1

THE EMPEROR'S AUDIENCE: NERO AND THE THEATRICAL PARADIGM

The atrocities of a Roman emperor corrupted by his power often found both audience and victim in the theatrical and gladiatorial games of the city, occasions on which the true show became the confrontation of people and ruler while the spectacle before their eyes ran its course unremarked. With their naturally dramatic setting these crises provided congenial material for the historians of the times: the watching populace in confused uproar, agitating for political concessions or cheering on rivals of the imperial favorite; the enraged despot retaliating from his place in the audience with abuse and violence, now sending his henchmen to drag off the offenders, now having his victims catapulted into the arena to suffer the unhappy fate of spectators turned spectacle.[1] Caligula, for one, was notorious for such behavior, and it is no surprise that a description of his games in 39 A.D. by the early third-century historian Dio Cassius enlists many of the common elements of imperial oppression at the theaters. Disgruntled by the lack of popular enthusiasm at the shows, by the audience's recalcitrance in clapping for his favorites, and by snide shouts of "*young* Augustus," Caligula refuses all the dispensations they demand, and as a result

> they too defied all his wishes, and you could have heard and seen the sort of things you would expect an angry emperor and a recalcitrant people to say and do under such circumstances. But the affair did not take place on equal terms, for the people could do

> nothing besides speak and make indications of sorts with their gestures, but Gaius to be sure kept dragging away many even while they were watching and arresting many even after they had quit the theaters—and would put them to death. (59.13.3–4)

Here the audience is vociferous in showing its hostility, apparently continuing even as the emperor retaliates. Alternatively—and as one might expect—the immediate executions of their fellows could have a dampening effect on the protesting spectators. In a similar passage in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*, the circus audience shouts all the louder when Caligula refuses to grant a reduction in taxes but then lapses into silence as it observes the shouters being dispatched on the spot, for the spectators could see (as the historian dryly remarks) that their request for tax relief was leading rather to their death (*A.J.* 19.25–26).

Such instances of confrontation between ruler and ruled at the games share several characteristics. They are confrontational in the first place because the audience speaks up. As our sources would have it, even when the stakes are high and anonymity in numbers is insufficient, popular opinions find expression, and at least a segment of the audience is openly rebellious. On one occasion the spectators may fall silent and on another not: the business of protest and control is a messy one. Nor does the spectacle itself appear of much consequence. Since both emperor and populace are located in the audience, they themselves become the object of each other's attention rather than the stage, and the theater or circus merely the site for their clash; the confrontation takes place under these circumstances rather than others because here alone the ruler acts as captive audience for the will of his gathered subjects.

During the reign of the emperor Nero, however, the conditions for the interaction of *princeps* and people at the site of the theater undergo changes that lend themselves to representations of an entirely different nature. Abandoning his position in the audience, Nero takes to the stage himself, there to recite his poetry, sing to the lyre, and interpret tragic roles, so that the mutual gaze of emperor and spectators now transpires across the dividing line of the seats and the stage, across the boundary that separates the real from the representational. And while the most prominent member of the audience has literally moved to the stage, the rest of the audience find themselves obliged, not to suppress their noisy petitions—when Nero performs, mentions of these are largely absent—but rather to display their response to the artistic performance of their own emperor. Given his status, this response could naturally enough no longer be based on purely aesthetic criteria; and what is more, as the visible barometer of an emperor's popularity it engaged the attention of the performing emperor himself. In short, as Nero mounts the stage, the situation at the theater slides into conditions ripe with possibility for a schematic reversal of the roles of actor and spectator. And this reversal in fact becomes the identifying theme of descriptions of Nero at the theater. In the *Annals* of Tacitus, in Suetonius' *Life of Nero*, and in the epitome of Dio Cassius, our three main historical sources for the period, we find portrayed an emperor in performance who both watches his audience and enlists others to do so for signs of a less than enthusiastic response, and an audience transformed into a gathering of the gagged: actors now themselves, they play the role of happy fans to save their lives in the seats that have become, in essence, the true stage. Moreover, for Tacitus this possibility for a new theatricality at the site of the theater was to cast its own peculiar tinge on that other business that took the stage at the theater and seemed suffused with theater when offstage as well—imperial politics.

I

Nero's name and its vilifying epithet *scaenicus* "stage-player," are linked early in the tradition on his reign,[2] and his penchant for the performing arts is a theme that recurs in all ancient accounts of his life and in many incidental assessments as well. Dio's disgusted comment on the emperor's tour of Greece in 66–67 A.D. is typical: Nero "talked of his mastery of the known world yet sang to the lyre, per-

formed a herald's duties, and played tragic roles" (63.14.4).[3] Yet, as the historical tradition would have it, for ten years after his accession in 54 A.D. the emperor abstained from performing in public, and his earliest appearance onstage, at the annual dramatic and musical festival he instituted under the name Juvenalia, took place in 59 A.D. within the palace grounds and in a private theater. At the first celebration of this festival, and possibly in subsequent years as well, the emperor participated by performing his own compositions for lyre and voice, while selected members of the Roman nobility were forced or chose voluntarily to act out dramatic roles in costume.[4] In public, however, Nero abstained from such self-abandonment. Although he instituted a public quinquennial festival in 60 A.D.—the Neronia, which included competitions in oratory, poetry, and singing to the lyre as well as athletics and horse racing—he did not take part at its first celebration.[5] His forbearance, we are told, did not deter the competitors from awarding him the crowns for Latin oratory and poetry.[6] Not until 64 A.D., then, do we find him displaying his lyric talents on the public stage at Naples;[7] but after this his downward spiral into what Suetonius, Dio, and Tacitus alike portray as a species of performative mania was rapid. At the second occurrence of the Neronia—in his own capital and before the public—he descended to the orchestra to recite his poetry and then stayed to compete as a *citharoedus,* a singer to his own lyre accompaniment.[8] This was the penultimate barrier, and once it had been breached he added dramatic selections from tragedy to his public repertoire. Nero's reign then ends in a blaze of thespian glory: for the period from this date until his suicide in 68 A.D. the sources suggest frequent performances both tragic and citharoedic, especially during his tour of the Greek games in 66–67 A.D.; a number of these games even had to be rescheduled to accommodate his itinerary.[9]

Nero's descent into theater comes accompanied, in the sources, with a similar swerve toward theatrical terminology in describing these imperial extravaganzas—but with special attention to the unhappy *audiences* of the performances. Dio for one selects this tour

of the Panhellenic games as the context for a remarkable description of what transpired in theaters across Greece as the emperor competed onstage as actor and *citharoedus.* Far from presenting Nero as cynosure, he describes instead an audience that has itself become the object of attention. As if the spectators were the performers here, their every gesture comes under scrutiny as Nero gauges their reactions—especially those of the hated senatorial class:

> The entrances and exits, the gestures, nods, and cheers of these men and of the others alike were always keenly observed, and those who were his constant companions and who listened earnestly and cried loud hurrahs were praised and honored, while the remainder were both disgraced and punished, with the result that certain who were unable to endure for long (for they were often subject to this ordeal from dawn right up until evening) pretended to faint away and were carried out of the theaters like corpses. (63.15.2–3)

Dio's portrayal of this audience under surveillance conveys even in its choice of words the impression that the normal roles of spectator and spectacle have been reversed; in describing the behaviors being observed, Dio employs terms characteristic of what usually takes place on the stage rather than amidst the seats. For while Nero is performing it is in part the "entrances and exits and gestures" of the spectators that become the spectacle, terms themselves associated with drama and used of choral entrances [*esodoi*] and exits [*exodoi*] and the gestures [*schēmata*] of the actors onstage.[10] But on the literal level as well as the lexical the members of this audience have become actors; not only are they obliged to put on a performance of fake enthusiasm, but when the exigencies of this effort become intolerable they resort to fakery of another kind and play possum to engineer their escape. This appearance of actors in the audience is reminiscent of the situation in Suetonius' similar description of Nero's Greek tour; here, as in Dio, the spectators resort to keeling over to escape the drudgery of attendance. Dio's dissimulators had pretended to

faint; Suetonius' version has the audience actually adopting mass *Scheintod*, but the need for pretense remains constant: "Certain women are said actually to have given birth at the shows and many other people, through boredom with listening and praising, to have jumped down from the theater wall (since the entry gates were shut) or to have been carried out for burial in simulated death" (*Nero* 23.2). As Suetonius would have it, the unwilling actors in Nero's audience have perforce a limited repertoire: to simulate appreciation, to simulate death, or to risk perhaps an all-too-real death in a fugitive leap.

Recorded violations of this repertoire are few for this period. It is a surprising feature of the passages which show us Nero's audience putting on a performance that only two specific individuals are ever named as negligent in their acting. These are the senators Vespasian and Thrasea Paetus, the former during the Greek tour, the latter already at the Juvenalia of 59 A.D. In both cases, their behavior contrasts with a larger backdrop of mass conformity, as if the audience had but one response, and that coerced, for their imperial entertainer. And in Vespasian's case, the report of his repeated failure to conceal his lack of interest hints darkly at the penalty he almost incurred for so rash an omission. Thrasea, as Dio tells us, simply refused to clap and cheer at Nero's performance at the Juvenalia—a single recalcitrant figure amid an audience of compliant senators and commoners (Dio 61.20.4; see below). But while this senator's defiance apparently went unpunished, Suetonius' passage documenting the fate of Vespasian emphasizes the risk he took in antagonizing the emperor: "As one of Nero's companions during the tour of Greece, he offended the emperor deeply by frequently leaving while he was singing, or by staying and falling asleep. He was excluded not only from Nero's close circle but even from paying his respects in public, and retreated to a small and distant state where he lay hidden and even in fear for his life until a province and an army were offered him" (*Vesp.* 4.4). Excluded from Nero's friendship for his failure to play a role, Suetonius' Vespasian seems nonetheless to overestimate the danger to his life. Tacitus' version, however, conveys still more

sinister a lesson on the danger involved for any who fail to fake their pleasure. In his account, the future emperor Vespasian is caught napping by the emperor's freedman Phoebus while Nero sings at the Neronia of 65 A.D. and subsequently escapes death only through his preordained destiny: "the story was that Vespasian was harangued by the freedman Phoebus for falling asleep and was with difficulty protected by the pleas of better men; he later eluded the ruin threatening him by his greater destiny" (*Ann.* 16.5.3).[11] Tacitus omits from the *Annals* the fact that Nero later selected Vespasian for a special command against the Jewish rebellion of 67 A.D.: the historian's intention, *apparently more than Nero's*, is to make of the senator an example of the dangers of not playing one's role in the audience.[12]

But Vespasian and Thrasea aside, Nero's audiences as our sources show them observe the injunction to praise. This consistency in their capitulation to the coercion of applause pivots in turn upon Nero's deployment throughout the audience of spies, soldiers, and claques; their task is to exert control over response, to exact the acclamations and praise of an aesthetic response that has been corrupted by fear. Eerily anonymous watchers figure in Tacitus' account of the second Neronia at Rome, the context for a detailed description of audience control and his account of Vespasian's faux pas—both events dated by Dio and Suetonius, presumably following a common source, to the Greek tour of 66–67 A.D. and not to the Neronia at all.[13] Here the surveillance extends explicitly to great and small alike, and although many fall sick from staying in their seats day and night, they opt to remain seated nonetheless, "for their fear of being absent from the show was the graver one, since many men were positioned in the open and even more in secret to observe the identities and expressions of those present, their enthusiasm and their resentment. As a result punishment was inflicted upon the insignificant at once; against the distinguished Nero's hatred was concealed for the moment and later exacted its price" (*Ann.* 16.5.2–3). In this sinister vision of spies in the audience, Tacitus not only changes the locale to Rome and thereby emphasizes the implication and oppression of

the Roman citizenry and upper classes in Nero's theatrical tyranny, but also suggests punitive measures against the audience on a scale unmatched elsewhere.[14] Dio and Suetonius, on the other hand, make no mention of spies. They attribute regulation and control of audience response to the imperial claque of *Augustiani,* a corps first assembled by Nero at the Juvenalia of 59 A.D. whose number was eventually increased to 5,000.[15] As professional clappers, their function was to lead and shape the applause during Nero's artistic performances. Suetonius represents this role as a largely ornamental one; the young men dress like dandies and exhibit three different styles of applause, the "bees," the "tiles," and the "potshards" (*Nero* 20.3). But in Dio they not only regulate but also enforce the applause, both determining the content of the crowd's acclamations and compelling the audience to imitate their own conduct. And the spectators at the Juvenalia become not only actors but mimes, simulating joy and repeating verbatim the words of the *Augustiani,* or *Augousteioi:*

> All the others besides Thrasea, even though they were unwilling, were compelled to shout cheers with [the claque] . . . these others, and especially men of high rank, gathered in haste and grief and bellowed out whatever the *Augustiani* did, as if they were actually rejoicing. And you could have heard them saying something like "Noble Caesar, Apollo, Augustus, the Pythian's Only Match! No one outdoes you, Caesar, we swear it by yourself." (61.20.3–5)

Given that the *Augustiani* had their precedent and model in the claques of pantomime and actors' troupes,[16] under normal circumstances their success in influencing the response of the crowd would have depended on their skill at avoiding detection: "If the efforts of the claque are too obvious, the rest of the audience will be indignant and resist, to the humiliation of the performer who is employing it and the frustration of its own efforts" (A. Cameron [1976], 234). Yet although the *Augustiani,* according to the sources, were a conspicuous element at the theater by their dress and behavior, their success in producing a positive result is curiously pervasive.[17] Represented

by Dio as dictating response rather than influencing it, the claque in this literary manifestation could only highlight the perversion of what now transpired at the theater, where, as our sources portray it, it was the very flagrancy of the corps's conduct and the very falsity of the audience's response that served as testimonial to the tyranny of a stage-struck emperor.[18]

In his own treatment of the *Augustiani,* Tacitus takes a different route. He documents the creation of the claque at the Juvenalia of 59 A.D., where they are loud in their applause and glorify the emperor's beauty and voice with divine epithets (*Ann.* 14.5.5). But the claque does not control or extort clapping at the performance and in fact disappears entirely after this token appearance. Instead, Nero turns to the military to enforce applause levels at the theater; at the second Neronia, soldiers are posted among the seats and clobber the country bumpkins who ruin the rhythmic clapping for lack of training and endurance. Their role, like that of Dio's *Augustiani,* is to make sure "that not a moment of time should pass with an ebb in the cheering or in a sluggish silence" (*Ann.* 16.5.1), and they work in conjunction with the anonymous noters of names. A far cry from a foppish troupe of clappers; and together with Tacitus' transfer of audience surveillance and the punishment of Vespasian, more often dated to Nero's Greek tour, to the Neronia at Rome,[19] their introduction where we would expect the *Augustiani* to be operative instead suggests his tendency to make of the theater the site of a role-playing that had implications beyond the merely theatrical for both ruler and ruled.

If we consider the combined tradition on Nero's reign, it is clear already that the sources for this period identify the theater and Nero's performances there as *citharoedus* and tragic actor not merely as the physical site of an emperor's acts of oppression against his subjects, but as the medium for those acts: the audience's response to the performance itself, not their protest against political measures or taxation, is now the criterion for their punishment;[20] and although they are spectators it is they who are watched, set as it were onstage them-

selves and compelled to play a role they do not feel. For Tacitus, Dio, and Suetonius, Nero's rule is the occasion for a transformation of the theater into the site of a reversal of actor-audience relations, and as an emperor onstage, Nero literally constrained his audience to be actors. Moreover, for Tacitus alone—as certain indications have already suggested and as becomes increasingly evident in what follows below—role-playing at the theater was only the most literal site for this acting: the interaction of emperor and audience in the theater provides, in his work, a dramatic parallel to the insidious relations obtaining between the emperor and his subjects when the stage was far from sight.

II

Generally unencumbered by diagnostic terminology for given ways of writing history, literature, and literary criticism,[21] the ancients devoted no special attention to describing the perspective on emperor-audience interaction that emerges from the texts considered above—a perspective, namely, that reverses the roles of spectator and spectacle, subject and ruler, and makes of the audience victims compelled to act. As a descriptive model, however, this perspective bears affinities to a broader set of modern interpretive approaches to social, historical, and political phenomena that have as their common denominator the idea that an unequal distribution of power between participants in any human interaction invariably introduces an element of acting into the behavior of at least one of the participants. Such frameworks for interpretation have diagnosed the behavior they identify as marked by "theatricality," and although the theater proper need not be, and in fact usually is not, a factor shaping the interaction in question, the notion of theatricality borrows from the theater its terms, its emphasis on role-playing, and its focus on the function of the gaze. As a descriptive model, "theatricality" makes actors out of human beings placed in situations in which they feel themselves watched, in which their performance is subject to the evaluation of a superior who must be watched in turn to gauge his reactions; and

in those contexts in which there exists a well-defined, self-conscious audience (as with Nero's stage performances—or modern metatheater), it entails a reversal of the normal one-way direction of the spectators' gaze, so that they know themselves watched by the object of their view and respond accordingly even as the categories of spectacle and spectator lose all stability.[22] In its most general role of providing an interpretive paradigm for any exchange between two unequal interlocutors—the dominant one watching for the subordinate's correct performance, the subordinate watching to make sure his performance is giving rise to the desired effect—theatricality serves particularly well when the dominant member is felt to have a stake in controlling the appearance, and so the public meaning, of the interaction. That is, if as a subject I claim that I serve my emperor willingly, we both have a stake in maintaining the apparent truth value of that claim.

Theatricality in this sense has provided a basis for J. C. Scott's recent observations on domination and dissimulation in power relations. In a work that analyzes how subordinates are forced to play roles in interacting with superiors, Scott emphasizes how much of the public life of subordinates is taken up in "command" performances put on for the benefit of their superiors. These performances involve careful self-regulation on the part of the "actors": "A convincing performance may require both the suppression or control of feelings that would spoil the performance and the simulation of emotions that are necessary to the performance . . . The performance . . . comprises not only speech acts but conformity in facial expression and gesture as well as practical obedience" ([1990], 28–29). On the other side of the interaction, the position of dominance means "not *having* to act, or, more accurately, the capacity to be more negligent and casual about any single performance"—a sharp contrast to the "attentive watchfulness and attuning of response to the mood and requirements of the powerholder" that powerlessness entails (p. 29). Scott therefore links power and acting in an inverse relationship; the luxury of being the spectator, of determining that an act has been

performed with enough attention to the details of authenticity that confirm the power of the more powerful participant precisely to compel them, lies with the superior.[23] This approach, then, with its precedents in the sociological studies of dramaturgy popular since the early 1970s, uses a model in which the appearance of some of the constraints of a theatrical event—the putting on of a performance and its interpretation by an assessing gaze—is symptomatic of an unequal distribution of power.[24]

Of course, theatricality so conceived (as a model for social and political performances rather than literally dramatic ones) is a perspective with only limited applicability to the narrowly defined conditions of the imperial performances on the Roman stage. But the concept of theatricality does present us with a way to describe Tacitus' representation of the workings of emperors and their audiences *beyond* the theater—so aptly so, in fact, that we might well insert Tacitus into the ranks of these theoreticians of theatricality. For whereas the notion of actors in the audience held a prominent position, in the tradition on Nero, as a way of describing Nero's onstage interaction with his spectators, in Tacitus this explicitly theatrical exchange is reproduced *offstage* as well as a model for interaction with the emperor in other realms of life. The reversal of roles at Nero's performances, where the phenomenon of a gaze bent back upon an audience compelled to act displays most vividly a theatricality skewed in favor of the ruler (who himself determines what shape the audience's "performance" will take) merely serves, for Tacitus, as a single dramatized aspect of the problem of response to an emperor on the part of *all* his "audiences." And so we find that the Nero of the *Annals* is defined in his interactions with senators and family by the same elements given explicit expression in his interactions with his theater audiences, and that once again, as there, their exchanges are patterned on the blueprint of theatricality: his victims play out their desperate roles before an assessing gaze as the emperor watches for the telltale signs of a crack in the façade—a slip in their suppression of what they feel or a lapse in emoting what he dictates.

Nero's first murder, according to the unanimous testimony of the

surviving sources, was that of his stepbrother Britannicus in 55 A.D.[25] The assassination was presumably motivated by political considerations; as the son by birth of the previous emperor (and Nero's adoptive father), Claudius, Britannicus presented a threat to Nero's hold on the throne that could only have caused the emperor increasing disquiet as Britannicus approached his assumption of manhood and as his support from Nero's ambitious mother, Agrippina, as Tacitus and Dio would have it, became more and more evident to the emperor's eyes.[26] Dio, who in his history of Rome devotes a single paragraph to the murder, offers little contextual information. Nero kills Britannicus by treachery and poison and smears his body with gypsum to conceal the discoloration worked by the poison. But rain washes off the gypsum as the body is carried away for burial, so that the outrage comes to light, as Dio notes wryly, not only through rumor but also through eyewitnesses (61.7.4). Suetonius shows more interest in the details of the preparations for murder, a crime that is spurred by Nero's fear of Britannicus' influence and birthright—and, here alone, by the emperor's jealousy of his stepbrother's singing voice: "No less through rivalry with Britannicus' voice, which was the sweeter one, than through fear lest at some point he should prevail in popular favor because of the memory of his father, Nero made an attempt on Britannicus with poison" (*Nero* 33.2). Nero's attempt becomes several: he tries to poison his stepbrother with the aid of the accomplished poisoner Locusta, but her potions are too weak and the effects are merely laxative. Finally he reaches such a pitch of frustration that he flogs her, obtains from her thus a truly lethal concoction, and administers it to the hapless boy in a drink at dinner; "and when Britannicus had collapsed at the first sip, Nero lied to the guests that he had had an epileptic seizure as usual, and on the next day had him carried out for a commoner's burial amidst very heavy rains" (*Nero* 33.3). So in Suetonius as in Dio, Britannicus dies by poison and is buried in the rain, although Suetonius' narrative provides details that the later historian omits about the poisoner Locusta, the dinner party, and Nero's lies concerning his brother's epilepsy.

Tacitus' rendition of this event shares enough of the details in

Suetonius and Dio to indicate a common source or sources.[27] It is precisely this fact that makes the peculiar emphases in his account of the murder, revealed the more clearly as an interpretive reworking of the available material, particularly striking. As if he were taking up the perception or rumor reproduced later in Suetonius that Nero was jealous of Britannicus' pleasant singing voice, and then transforming it into a story about the danger of an undissimulated response when the emperor is the audience, Tacitus' narrative about the last few days of Britannicus' life begins with the following strange scene.

> On the holiday of the Saturnalia a group of his age-mates was playing, among other games, at being king by dice-roll, and this lot had fallen to Nero. And so he assigned to others various tasks that would not embarrass them, but Britannicus he bade rise and advance to the center to sing a song—expecting that mockery of the boy would follow, since he was unaccustomed to sober parties, let alone drunken ones. But Britannicus with equanimity began a song in which he alluded to his own exclusion from his home and fatherland and throne. The result was a rather too obvious pity, for night and revelry had done away with dissimulation. And Nero understood the ill will against him and intensified his hatred. (*Ann.* 13.15.2–3)

Nero is not the performer here; he is, however, the observer of the audience's response. And the producers of that response, in Tacitus' version, have made a mistake with fatal consequences: forgetting both the presence of the imperial eye and the necessity of playing a role, they make (in the terms of the sociologist Erving Goffman) a "naïve move," a move that lacks insight into the observer's own play-acting. Violating the first tenet of a world lived by the rules of theatricality, they respond with pity for the young Britannicus—who, at this appropriately Saturnalian moment, has enacted his own short-lived power reversal. *And through this violation,* they spark the sequence of events leading to Britannicus' death.

Until the fatal climax, the events themselves are as in Suetonius. Armed with rekindled hatred and a sense of urgency, Nero now has recourse to the talents of Locusta, and after the same initial lack of success extorts a satisfactory potion. This is mixed with cold water and brought into the dining room of the imperial palace where Britannicus and other children of the nobility dine. He drinks the poison and dies instantaneously; but here in Tacitus, as he falls, he sets into play an elaborate drama of fear and concealment among the other diners. It is a scene that has as its sole audience the emperor Nero himself:[28]

> A commotion arose among those sitting around him and the imprudent fled; but those who were possessed of a deeper understanding sat rooted there staring at Nero. But Nero reclined just as he was, as if he knew nothing, and said that this was a normal occurrence of the epilepsy with which Britannicus had been afflicted from his earliest infancy, and that his sight and senses would return little by little. So great, however, were the fear and mental confusion evident from Agrippina's face, although she tried to suppress them, that it is generally agreed that she was as much in the dark as Octavia, Britannicus' sister: for she was coming to understand that her last refuge had been snatched from her and a precedent supplied for the murder of family members. Octavia too, though of tender years, had learned to conceal pain and love and every emotion. And so after a brief silence the festivities resumed. (*Ann.* 13.16.3–4)

In Tacitus' version it is only the imprudent who flee, leaving us to imagine what disaster might later befall them for this undissimulated response; but those who understand the dangers of authenticity stay to play their part, and the party continues. Murder is contextualized by the spectators' effort to control their response when the emperor is the audience: Agrippina does not entirely succeed, Octavia does, but both know all too well why they need to dissemble at all, and the others too sit there with full knowledge somehow of the facts

that underlie the public script Nero offers for them to follow ("be calm and nonchalant, for Britannicus' collapse was merely an epileptic seizure"). Indeed, it is this knowledge that Nero has murdered his brother which impresses upon them the importance of performing the role proffered. For why would he stop at his brother, given that he has the ability to redefine murder to be whatever he wishes? Much as in the analysis of power provided not only by J. C. Scott but also by Stephen Greenblatt in his much-cited essay "At the Table of the Great," Nero's own power literally appears here as "the ability to impose [his] own fictions upon the world," and "the point is not that anyone is deceived by the charade, but that everyone is forced either to participate in it or to watch it silently."[29] Such at least is the situation as Tacitus offers it, both explicitly and with the kind of allusiveness that convinces readers of the truth of what they infer from it.[30]

Descriptions of Nero's murderous acts elsewhere in Tacitus give the same significance to the role of the response faked before the emperor's watchful eye, serving to validate the fictions of power yet actually originating in a secret grasp of the true situation. A case in point is the unhappy fate of Julius Montanus, a senator who had the misfortune *not* to understand what was going on when he bumped into Nero early in his reign on a night in 56 A.D.: Julius' is the fate of a man who failed to grasp first the truth, then the necessity of playing a role to conceal that knowledge. As with Britannicus' murder, this episode is recounted in all three extant accounts of Nero's life; as with Britannicus' murder, too, the particular deviations found in Tacitus make of the senator's fate an application of the subject-observer model in which the penalty for an unsatisfactory act on the part of the emperor's audience—an act not oriented to the assessment of the observer—is death.

Nero, as we know from our three sources and a reference in the elder Pliny (*N.H.* 13.126), had a bad case of *nostalgie de la boue*, or at least a violent variant of it. When night fell, the emperor would snatch up a wig or a freedman's felt cap, put on a slave's clothing or

some other unusual outfit, and make the rounds of the urban alleys, byways, and brothels.[31] So disguised, he apparently found relief from the responsibilities of empire by robbing stores and beating up and stabbing passersby—then submerging them in sewers, in Suetonius' coup de grâce (*Nero* 26.1).[32] The problem with this behavior, of course, was the danger of violent reprisals from victims who had no idea who he was, which is just what Suetonius goes on to describe: "And he often ran the risk of losing his eyes or his life in brawls of that sort and was beaten almost to death by a certain man of senatorial rank whose wife he had molested. As a result of this he never subsequently went out in public at that hour without tribunes following him secretly and at a distance" (*Nero* 26.2). Suetonius, however, never tells us what happened to the assailant, and, more important, he leaves untouched the question of whether the man knew Nero's identity: the issue holds no interest for him, although the natural assumption from this passage would be that the "certain senator" trounced Nero and went on his way in ignorance.

This unnamed senator was Julius Montanus, as the accounts of Dio and Tacitus make clear. But Dio's version differs from Suetonius' in that Julius knows all too well what he has done. In both authors, Nero's nocturnal forays (further sullied in Dio 61.8.1 by an emphasis on his debauchery of women and young men alike) result in a sadly battered emperor. But Dio goes on to draw a careful distinction between Nero's *belief* in his anonymity and the true state of affairs in those dark Roman streets; in Dio's telling of the story, the emperor "thought somehow that his identity was a secret (for he used variegated outfits and wigs, different ones on different occasions); but he was apprehended through both his retinue and his actions. For no one else would have dared to carry out so many crimes of such magnitude, and so fearlessly" (61.9.2). It is Nero then who is the dupe of his own disguise, which he thinks puts him in the privileged position of the one controlling the play; in fact he knows less than his audience. And Dio goes straight on to the fate of Julius Montanus:[33]

> And so a certain Julius Montanus, a senator, taking offense on his wife's behalf, attacked the emperor and dealt him many blows, so that Nero stayed in hiding for many days because of his black eyes. And Julius would have endured no punishment for this (for Nero thought he had merely been roughed up by a chance occurrence and felt no anger) if he had not written to Nero asking for his pardon; but Nero read the letter and commented, "So he knew he was hitting Nero," upon which Julius killed himself. (16.9.3)

Dio's Julius seems to know his assailant's identity, and it is the *emperor* who is in the dark, thinking that his disguise is effective when in fact the whole city has seen through it. Deluded by this false sense of anonymity, Nero has no intention of punishing the senator until Julius lets the cat out of the bag by asking for his pardon, thereby rupturing his illusions. Julius, then, commits suicide when he hears of Nero's reaction because he understands that this reaction marks the end of a scenario in which the emperor had been taken in by his own script: by his letter, Julius reveals that Nero exposed his own naïveté in overlooking Julius' assault, and also that he, Julius, struck Nero with full knowledge of his identity. Julius' safety relied on Nero's ignorance of Julius' knowledge, which Julius himself put an end to—and died for.

Tacitus transforms the basic elements of this story into a sequence that makes weaker narrative sense but implements a crucial change of perspective. As befits a view in which power goes hand in hand with control over theatrical effects, Nero's status as dupe loses emphasis while Julius is robbed of his privileged knowledge and transformed into a victim of ignorance. In Tacitus alone, Julius does not know who Nero is and then only when it is too late understands the truth that he had needed in order to play his part in someone else's play. The error is not Nero's, as a victim of his own fantasy, but Julius', as *an uninformed actor in Nero's.* The first aspects of the story are familiar: Nero wanders the streets dressed in costume, an actor let loose upon the city; and initially, as elsewhere, his identity

is unknown and he shows the cost of anonymity by the conspicuous bruises on his face. But then, says Tacitus, the truth about the emperor becomes widely known:

> Then, when it became common knowledge that it was the emperor who was the hoodlum and the violence against distinguished men and women kept increasing, and, now that this lawlessness had once and for all been allowed, certain people were engaging in the same practice with their own gangs and using Nero's name to avoid retaliation, the night was passed as if Rome were a captured city. And Julius Montanus, a man of the senatorial order but who had not yet held office, ran into the emperor by chance in the dark and was attacked by him; and because Julius beat him back fiercely, then recognized him and begged his pardon, he was forced to commit suicide on the grounds that his apology was really meant as a reproach. (*Ann.* 13.25.2)

Tacitus' story, unlike Dio's, suggests that if Julius had known the identity of the man wearing the costume of a slave or hoodlum who attacked him in the dark (the wife has gone the usual way of an inconvenient element), he would have known better than to defend himself, since it was the use of Nero's name that was enabling other nocturnal footpads to get off scot-free. Nor would he have revealed this knowledge; the end of the anecdote makes clear the risks of that course of action. Julius, however, had no idea against whom he was defending himself, and Tacitus (unlike Dio) suggests that it was his *undissimulated response,* based on a misunderstanding of what was going on and a consequent failure to play his role both when he fought back and when he apologized, that meant his death.[34] Tacitus' Nero is no victim of his own script; it is not his nave belief in the success of his false identity that is important here. All he requires is the correct performance, while he appears uninterested in what Julius might have thought or known. The emphasis here is on Julius' fate for acting *in innocence* of Nero's script, not on Nero's for being fooled by public dissimulation, and Julius is punished for violating Nero's

script, not for deliberately hitting an emperor: the site of knowledge has shifted. Tacitus' story even clashes slightly with itself at this point, since he first claims that Nero's identity had become common knowledge, then introduces the ignorant senator, creating by the insertion of this idiosyncratic element a seam in the narrative fabric.[35]

Julius, then, forgot that he lived in a world, or rather a work, in which theatricality ruled. If it is a defining principle of such a world that the individual is to imagine the response of his superior to his own action, after which he "modifies his action so that it now incorporates that which he calculates will usefully modify the other's generated response," and in this way "adapts to the other's response before it has been called forth, and adapts to it in such a way that it never does have to be made" (Goffman [1969], 47), Julius has quite simply omitted the necessary modification. And the conclusion to be drawn from a comparison of his behavior with that of those present when Britannicus was murdered is that when an emperor's audience fails to decode the spectacle before their eyes into reality and then to recode their own response back into the feigned and theatrical, the outcome is death. The absence of acting when Nero is the audience, the failure to pretend innocence after seeing through the illusion, the inability to realize that a fiction is being imposed upon you and your safety depends on accepting it—these, in Tacitus, are fatal oversights. The audience to Britannicus' death knew the truth and played their role based on it; Julius did not and paid the penalty.[36]

Tacitus puts the same insight into the mouth of Nero's most famous victim, his mother. Agrippina's death is another exercise in theater, a débacle in which Nero first tries to drown the woman by sending her home from the resort town of Bauli in a boat designed to collapse once out at sea. The plot misfires; Agrippina survives both the accident and the attempts of those aboard to dispatch her with oars (they mistakenly kill her maid), and swims to land.[37] But the drama begins in earnest when Agrippina struggles ashore. Drawing the correct conclusions about Nero's intent from the disintegration of the ship and the death of her maid, Agrippina realizes, in Tacitus'

words, that "her only hope of surviving the plot is to pretend not to have understood it" (*Ann.* 14.6.1). Henceforth she enters the theater of the observed. Sending her freedman Agerinus to announce to Nero the ostensible good news of her survival, she dresses her wounds with "simulated lightheartedness." But on this occasion, unfortunately for Agrippina, her adherence to what she imagines will be Nero's script, based on her knowledge of the true situation, is not enough: Nero is busy writing a different one. When Agerinus is shown in to Nero's presence, the emperor takes the initiative: "of his own accord, he prepares the stage-setting *(scaena)* for a crime" and drops a sword on the floor. Then Nero has the freedman arrested for attempted murder so that he can disseminate the fiction that his mother was caught plotting against his life and committed suicide in shame (14.7.6). In furtherance of this script, soldiers are sent to kill her and arrive at Agrippina's home where she waits in trepidation; even as they close in on her she clings in desperate belief to a performance via which she professes belief in Nero's innocence, a performance that has its basis in her actual knowledge of his guilt: "If you have come to commit a crime," she cries, "I don't believe my son responsible; he didn't order his mother's murder" (14.8.4).[38] Only as they deliver the first blows does she abandon this useless libretto to her murder and bid them stab her womb. There is no longer any point to dissimulating her knowledge that her son is a matricide.[39]

The principle Agrippina had voiced earlier as the only way an audience to an emperor's crime could live—namely, that the only hope of survival lies in pretending not to have understood—remains true, but in Agrippina's own case it is worthless, given that she has become the object of that crime at any cost.[40] Another audience remains, however: The Roman senate and the officials of the praetorian guard. And since they understand the truth, they dissimulate for all they are worth. Tacitus makes it clear that none of them believes in the script Nero offers for public adherence (in the form of a letter to the senate), and yet the centurions and tribunes congratulate him "on escaping the unexpected emergency and his moth-

er's crime" (*Ann.* 14.10.2), and the senators compete in proposing thanksgivings, games, and statues (14.12.1).[41] Only Thrasea Paetus refuses to participate, thus (as Tacitus would have us believe) endangering his life. Nero meanwhile has been pretending to mourn his mother, ostensibly depressed at the conditions of his survival—a show, of course, that no one believes but that all pretend to. But whereas the human beings around him *can alter their expressions* to mimic sympathy and joy, the scene of the crime, as Tacitus remarks pointedly, meets the emperor's eye unchanged and causes him the greatest discomfort.[42] Shores and seas do not play roles (*non, ut hominum vultus, ita locorum facies mutantur,* 14.10.3).[43]

Tacitus' Nero thus emerges as a man whose power is characterized by his ability to decide what truth in the public realm will be; in a very real sense, his audience is compelled to follow a script over which the emperor has total control.[44] For us to draw a distinction between this false but public script and the reality behind appearances, we must be made privy to the (putative) unspoken truth that Nero is perverting into his (putative) lies for public consumption. And to bring us to an understanding of this uncorrupted and unspoken truth at the very base of things is Tacitus' self-imposed mission as author and historian. Tacitus' version of the past, in unveiling the distortions worked by power, offers apparent access to the reality underlying the surface of a given situation: granted admission into the thoughts and fears of Nero's victims as they hastily slip on their masks before the emperor, we are led time and again to accept Tacitus' version of such interactions as an accurate representation of the theatricalized overlay on truth, so persuasive is Tacitus' cynical and apparently clear-eyed vision of the workings of power, so intuitively familiar his co-optation of theatricality as a paradigm for human behavior under an absolutist régime.[45] But for all its persuasive power, this is a peculiarly Tacitean view, and although Tacitus may implicitly present himself as revealing of a state of affairs to which no one at the time dared give voice, his is not the only understanding of how Nero wielded his power onstage and off.

Absolutism has its discontents, and historically they have not been without their own weapons. Even apparent acts of submission can be undermined from within, and flattery is often as much the tool of the flatterer as the mark of a ruler's ability to force approval.[46] As J. C. Scott has remarked in a caution against too ready a credence in the pure rhetoric of theatricality, "We get the wrong impression . . . if we visualize actors perpetually wearing fake smiles and moving with the reluctance of a chain gang. To do so is to see the performance as totally determined from above and to miss the agency of the actor in appropriating the performance for his own ends. What may look from above like the extraction of a required performance can easily look from below like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends" ([1990], 34). And when a performance is not being turned to the advantage of the performer, it can still be delivered in such a way that nuances of expression or language destabilize the content of what is being said, without however being so obvious that the dominant party feels secure in taking offense.[47] While such nuances seldom make so great an impact on those not directly involved that they reappear in the literary and historical accounts, they are nonetheless as vividly available to interpreters of a given event as Octavia's frozen features when Britannicus falls to the floor. But Tacitus shows little interest in the power of praisers or the double-edged language of those who deliver command performances (on this topic, see Chapter 4). His view of imperial history under Nero comprises in the main only two elements: the public script that all are forced to endorse and the private truth that goes unspoken, occasionally flaring up into public view in rare acts of rebellion such as the Pisonian conspiracy. And yet we might suspect, with J. C. Scott, that as a general principle "a view of politics focused either on what may be command performances of consent or open rebellion represents a far too narrow concept of political life—especially under conditions of tyranny or near-tyranny," and that "conformity is far too tame a word for the active manipulation of rituals of subordination to turn them to good personal advantage; it is an

art form in which one can take some pride at having successfully misrepresented oneself" ([1990], 20, 33).[48]

Such an awareness of the other side of the theatrical curtain is not limited to modern understanding, and indeed we find even Nero, in writers other than Tacitus, spoken of in terms that present him as the victim rather than the dictator of his audience's acting or as the unavenging addressee of oddly nuanced performances. Even his stage performances, outside Tacitus, become genuine; Nero is recast as the emperor who truly wished to be a competent *artiste,* feared his judges, and strove for recognition. And the responses of his audience, especially in Suetonius, are described in oddly inconsistent terms, sometimes as forced performances, at other times as the spontaneous demonstrations of a thrilled populace. Such alternate interpretations set into relief the consistently restricted focus of Tacitus' own view.

Among them is Plutarch's essay *How to Tell a Flatterer From a Friend,* the work of a near-contemporary of Nero's who had been an adolescent in Athens at the time of the emperor's tour of Greece and later spent time teaching at Rome. This little treatise on flattery serves by itself to demonstrate the possibility of vastly different glosses on Nero's relationship with those who praised his artistic ability, even among the writers of his own time. Here it is the emperor who is the victim of those who turn their skill at flattery to their own advantage; all through the essay, in fact, Plutarch warns against the flatterer as a cunning actor and recounts examples of how the recipients of such a man's honeyed words, even if kings, draw no benefit from their own credulity (see, for example, 56E–F; 58A, E–F). The only antidote, advises the author, is to become a dissimulator oneself, voicing the most absurd of opinions to see if one's interlocutor still agrees with them: "This sort of negative praise, which requires a more wily precaution, must be detected by deliberately fashioning silly counsels and suggestions and making absurd corrections" (58A). If your interlocutor continues to offer assent, then all too clearly he has been faking his approval from the start and is unveiled as a pure dissimulator. As for Nero, he represents nothing but a sad example of the power of this actor-audience to set even a king upon the stage: as Plutarch expresses it, "What constructed a tragic stage for Nero and put upon him masks and buskins? Was it not the praise of flatterers?" (56F). No longer, here, is Nero's mounting of the stage the prior act that induces the unwilling praise of his audience; rather, it is that very praise that induces the emperor to mount the stage. Naturally such a reversal is as schematic as its opposite, an equal distortion of the complex interrelation of cause and effect. But what is crucial for our purposes is that it could have been formulated in this way at all.[49]

Dio's description of the aftermath of Agrippina's murder suggests a similar possibility that those who in Tacitus are the fearful actors of a Neronian script actually *exert control* over the emperor's picture of reality. Once he has dispatched his mother, Nero seems to turn to his audience for an interpretation of the crime he himself carried out; no longer a cynical manipulator of the public script, he derives his view of his own actions from those around him and accepts their version as truth: "Nero, inasmuch as he heard nothing true from anyone and saw everyone praising what he had done, thought he had not been detected in his actions, or that they had actually been carried out rightly. As a result he became much worse in other respects as well. For he thought that everything it was possible for him to do was noble and paid attention to those addressing him in fear or in flattery as if they were telling the absolute truth" (61.11).[50] Showing a gullibility that he lacks in Tacitus, Nero believes the statements of those influenced by fear *or by flattery;* and here Dio's disjunctive "or" introduces as an alternative to the more Tacitean view a theatricality converted to the advantage of those who are elsewhere helpless players in Neronian scenes.[51] Such, moreover, is the persuasive power of these praisers that the emperor actually thinks the murder has gone unnoticed *or*—here again the suggestion that he draws his understanding of events from a script not his own—was the morally correct thing to do.[52]

Another counter, in Dio, to Tacitus' theatrical interpretation is the

breakdown, in the public realm itself, of the version of the murder Nero would most like disseminated. Away from Nero's presence, flatterers and the fearful alike lose interest in maintaining the script that would most bring profit to themselves or reassurance to Nero, and one act of veiled protest follows another, rich with the hint of a shared knowledge and falling into neither the category of "performances of consent" nor the category of "open rebellion." Dio describes, for example, how numerous individuals turn in their fellows on the charge of having accused Nero of his mother's murder; in the historian's interpretation, this becomes more than anything else a devious way of letting the truth be spoken. As he tells it, "it was possible actually to hear people saying this very thing, that Nero had done away with his mother. For many laid information that certain men had said this, not so much in order to destroy the talkers as to slander Nero" (61.16.2–3). Here we have a response to the murder that ostensibly conforms to its official sanitization, since the informers treat the accusations of Nero as *lèse majesté;* but it is a response that manipulates the rules for maintaining appearances so as to express safely what in any other mode would be open subversion. Alternately, theatricality breaks down when anonymous pranks carried out in public spaces demonstrate a refusal to play any role. Dio tells us that some hung a leather bag on Nero's statues by night to indicate he should be thrown into one and drowned (the traditional penalty for parricides), and that others cast into the Forum a baby with a tag attached to the effect that his mother feared to raise him lest he kill her (61.16.1–2). For "people were cozening up to Nero in public . . . but in private at least, where some could safely indulge in free speech, they thoroughly ripped him to bits" (61.16.1).

Finally, the discourse of an apparently command performance can be undermined by the use of language that contains meanings other than the one required by the powerholder. This likewise has no place in Tacitus' theatrical or subject-observer model of Nero's interaction with his subordinates, but we find it in an anecdote by Suetonius about a meeting of the senate during the revolt of Vindex

in 68 A.D. "While a passage from a speech Nero had composed against Vindex was being read out in the senate, the gist of which was that the guilty would pay the penalty and soon encounter the death they deserved, the entire body cried out: 'It is you who will do it, Caesar!' " (*Nero* 46.3).[53]

Dio and Suetonius, as if to match other details to their portrayal of a Nero who is not the all-powerful playwright of his political world, consistently forcing his fictions upon others and doing away with those who fumble their lines, also make of the emperor a man whose ambitions for himself as actor and *citharoedus* were genuine—specific to the stage and without bearing upon politics—and whose desire to master his craft was all-consuming to the point of making him vulnerable to the judgments of his assessors. It is striking that whereas all three of the main sources devote attention to Nero's meticulous preparations for performance and his careful observation of the rules,[54] Suetonius and Dio comment on the emperor's real nervousness during performances and his fear of the judges, while Tacitus takes this onstage trepidation and transforms it into a "pretense of fear" so that even when performing, Nero is only *playing the role* of an actor or *citharoedus:* During his tour of the Greek games, the Nero portrayed by Dio "glowered at his rivals . . . and feared the game officials and the whip-wielders" (62.9.2); Suetonius notes similarly: "How nervously and anxiously he competed, with what jealousy of his rivals, what fear of the judges, can scarcely be believed" (*Nero* 23.3).[55] But Tacitus' Nero, performing at the Neronia, awaits the verdict of the judges with merely a "faked fear" (*Ann.* 16.4.4). After all, his singing involves not aesthetics but power, and about the quality of the latter he has little to fear.[56]

In other ways too, Dio and especially Suetonius conceive of Nero as an emperor as much obsessed with his stage performances as with his stage audiences: a true aspiring actor and singer, he grants his career priority over all else. In Suetonius, for example, Nero sings through an earthquake at Naples (*Nero* 20.2), performs to an unreasonable hour during the second Neronia (21.2), is jealous of all who

have emotional impact on the audience (33.1), puts the actor Paris to death as a rival (54), and vows to give a variegated performance on water-organ, flute, and bagpipes if his throne is saved (54).[57] In both authors Nero confronts the possibility of his fall from power with the observation that at least his art will support him.[58] And likewise in both Nero expresses in the last moments of his existence the famous lament with which he sums up the meaning of his life: "What a performer dies in me!"[59] As we have remarked, Suetonius notoriously interprets even Britannicus' murder as a crime in which musical rivalry plays no lesser part than political considerations: Nero killed his brother "no less through jealousy of his voice" than through fear of his possible influence on popular favor (*Nero* 33.2).[60]

Nero's interaction with his audience at the theater itself, the site where a literal theatricality most consistently provides the sources with a model for description—since it is at the theater, according to Dio, Suetonius, and Tacitus alike, that the spectators are themselves watched—is a final area in which the theatrical paradigm is undermined, here by a strange and self-contradictory equivocality in the depiction of audience reaction. This feature is particularly prevalent in Suetonius, perhaps because he alone of the three takes a comparatively uncensorious view of the emperor's institution of Hellenic games and the participation of the nobility.[61] And so Nero's recitation of his poetry in the theater is accompanied by "such joy on everyone's part that a thanksgiving was decreed on account of the recitation and that part of his poetry was dedicated to Capitoline Jupiter in golden lettering" (*Nero* 10.2). Likewise Vitellius is said to have won Nero's friendship at the second Neronia by encouraging him when he desperately wanted to compete as *citharoedus* but had misgivings "although everyone was clamoring for him" (Suet. *Vitellius* 4); in another description of the same festival Vitellius disappears from the account but Nero is again induced to sing by the crowd's (apparently uncoerced) response: as "all clamor for his divine voice," he promises to comply in his private gardens, but when a picket of soldiers joins the pleas of the crowd he happily yields to their demands (*Nero* 21.1).

Rather suspicious, this military outcry—yet not a word in the text about forced applause.[62] Even Tacitus himself slips and on one occasion in the *Annals* suggests that the audience's response may be genuinely enthusiastic; at the second Neronia, he reports, Nero began by reciting his poetry onstage; but then, "as the crowd clamored for him to display all his talents (these were the very words they used), he entered the theater, observing all the rules for cithara-playing . . . And the common people of the city, who were accustomed to applauding the gestures even of actors, resounded with rhythmic aplause in set patterns. You would think they were actually happy—and perhaps they were, in their disregard of the public disgrace" (*Ann.* 16.4.3–5).

Is this popular response genuine or coerced? Tacitus seems to want to have it both ways; on the one hand the crowd's applause is described as rhythmic (a hint at the intervention of the *Augustiani?*) and only *appears* to be a demonstration of real pleasure; on the other, the outcry that persuaded Nero to sing at all is left unqualified, and the audience response (as he explicitly allows) was perhaps genuine after all, given the disreputable nature of the urban plebs.[63] Outside the *Annals*, interestingly enough, he shows less concern to undermine the authenticity of their favorable response and their support of the emperor, although this behavior remains a proof of their depravity; Nero's death is mourned specifically by "the base herd that frequents the circus and theater, along with the worst of the slaves or those who earned a living by Nero's disgraceful conduct once their property had been dissipated" (*Hist.* 1.4.3).[64] Tacitus here is at pains to denigrate the status and morality of all who responded with genuine pleasure; elsewhere they merely blend into the audience as a whole, and the applause of all alike is spurred by the goad of fear.[65] Indeed, it is immediately after the passage in which he has suggested the delight of the listening plebs at the second Neronia that Tacitus pictures soldiers posted in the same audience to beat the uncoordinated and watchers to report the names of even the most insignificant (*Ann.* 16.5.1–3). A certain tension thus arises between Tacitus' manipulation

of theatricality as a model, with its components of audience coercion and spectators who are the spectacle, and his endorsement of the traditionally upper-class and moralizing view which condemned all pleasure deriving from the theater as corrupt, and which identified with that pleasure the lower classes in particular.

Some clue to our sources' biases in the representation of audience response may come from the particular situation of the senators in the audience, especially given that the tradition on Nero's reign had its genesis in writers of this class. For the senators, reserved seating in the orchestra of the theater had been a prerogative since 194 B.C., and their occupation of this prominent position before the stage was both a privilege and an obligation of rank.[66] However, once the emperor himself began to display his talents in the theater, the senators' proximity to the stage exposed them to his scrutiny at the moment when their response would have had the greatest potential for offense—both in fact and in their fears.[67] And included in this group of spectators, as participants in and observers of their interaction with the emperor, were those responsible for the origins of the historical tradition on Nero. The outcome on that tradition of such a situation is to some degree illustrated by the cases of Vespasian and Thrasea Paetus: the fact that the only two recorded instances of a specific failure to applaude involve senators provides evidence both for the class under the greatest scrutiny and for the selective interest of that class in the fate of its peers.[68] If other concrete instances of audience protest and punishment—despite Tacitus' insinuations—are few, the mass acquiescence that the sources pointedly attribute to the efficacy of an audience surveillance (which these writers may have borne the brunt of) could simply conceal the fact that the great mass of the common people enjoyed and encouraged the imperial performances.[69] As we have noted, even the senator Vespasian, the only individual whose fall from favor was directly linked to his behavior at the theater, did not fall very far, although Tacitus carefully omits his reinstatement from the *Annals* to hint instead that Vespasian avoided death through his preordained destiny of

becoming emperor himself one day (*Ann.* 16.5.3). Nor, finally, does the evidence allow us to conclude that the upper classes were uniformly hostile to the imperial performances.[70]

The use of theatricality as a descriptive model for Nero's reign thus reveals itself as tendentious and schematic even at the site of its origin, the theater, where it occurs most consistently in our sources. Yet Tacitus chose to extend it into the political realm as well, using the idea of actors in the audience as a paradigm for imperial politics from Tiberius on in general, and particularly so under Nero. In the recent words of Alain Malissard, who unerringly identifies this process even as he adopts the Tacitean "truth" about Nero's audiences at the theater: "Nero's project puts the emperor himself on stage and transforms the Roman people into the forced spectators of his own decline. The position held by the theater in history is not, therefore, extensive, but it is specific: what takes place in it is in effect characteristic of the evolution of the people of Rome in their relationship with a power that ends up by demanding at the same time their presence and their passive approval" ([1990], 215). For Tacitus, the theater was literally and figuratively a microcosm for the workings of power:[71] taking over the received view of Nero's reign that made of the emperor's subjects, in the words of one of Tacitus' own contemporaries, "the spectator and applauder of a stage-playing emperor" (Pliny *Paneg.* 46.4), he transformed this formulation into his own vision of a people forced to watch—and applaud—what transpired on a stage far broader than the theater's.

III

Here, however, we come to a twist in the argument. Pliny's disparaging reference to the population of Nero's Rome as the spectators and applauders of their stage-crazed emperor presents them, in an unambiguous affirmation of other authors' scattered hints, as enthusiastic participants in Nero's performances and condemns their happy complicity in what was a disgrace to ruler and ruled alike. It is a topic meant to provide the backdrop for a flattering contrast to

the present Rome, reformed by Trajan's sanitizing touch: "and so that same populace, once the spectator and applauder of a stage-playing emperor, now even shuns pantomime-players, and condemns effeminate arts and enthusiasms inappropriate to our age" (*Paneg.* 46.4). So great a transformation has the population undergone, it appears, that they know better now than to praise the emperor for his voice: "The Roman people too observes the distinction between emperors . . . and those cries with which it once praised the stage-gestures and voice of that other ruler, it now uses to praise the piety, self-control, and clemency of this one" (*Paneg.* 2.6). Most unlike Tacitus, Pliny pictures the urban populace of Nero's day as showing spontaneous zeal in their praise of an actor-emperor; in this rhetorical reformulation of the contrast between past and present, gone are the sinister watchers noting names and faces.

The Nero who oppressed his audience, however, does not vanish without a substitute. If Pliny characterizes the theater audiences during Nero's reign as all too willing to abuse their freedom of response by praising his performances, he paints a far grimmer picture of audience constraint and fear under the searching gaze of the recently murdered Domitian. Praising Trajan for letting the spectators respond as they wish to the gladiatorial shows of the amphitheater, Pliny contrasts in vivid detail the behavior of the hated emperor who watched and punished the audience for their reactions to the performance:

> How open now are the enthusiasms of the spectators, how carefree their applause! No one is charged with treason for hating a gladiator, as used to happen; no one is transformed from spectator into spectacle and atones for his wretched pleasures with hook and flames. Domitian was a madman and ignorant of true honor, who gathered charges of treason in the arena and thought he was being looked down on and despised unless we venerated his gladiators too. (*Paneg.* 33.3–4)

Seated in the imperial box and not, like Nero, actually on the stage, Domitian nonetheless watches the audience not for signs of political disaffection but for the wrong responses to the show in the arena, and these spectators simulate enthusiasms they do not feel—or literally become the spectacle themselves. And Pliny follows his comments on Domitian's oppression of the audience with another contrast to Trajan, who, in the circus, lets himself be watched *back:* "And so your citizens will be allowed to watch you in turn; it will be possible to see, not the emperor's box, but the emperor himself in public view" (*Paneg.* 51.4).

Nor is Domitian's oppressive gaze confined to the public shows.[72] It reappears in Tacitus' *Agricola* in an apparently autobiographical passage that is not without relevance for the iconography of tyranny in the *Annals.* Like Pliny, Tacitus had been a high official in Domitian's régime: quaestor in 81 or 82 A.D., he rose through the *cursus honorum* to be praetor and quindecimvir in 88 and thereafter probably held a provincial legateship until his return to Rome after 93 A.D.; he may have been nominated by Domitian to his suffect consulship of 97 before that emperor's death. In any case his offices had certainly necessitated interaction with Domitian on a personal level. His record of the nature of such interaction for himself and his peers during a period of imperial crackdown in 93 A.D. is presented as that of a man who has experienced at first hand the role-playing that absolute power imposes on its subjects. The locale is no longer Pliny's amphitheater but the senate itself, and yet Domitian figures still as an observer who forces his audience to act against their will and who watches for their inadvertent betrayal of their true feelings:

> Next our own hands led Helvidius to prison; it was we whom the glances of Mauricus and Rusticus and the innocent blood of Senecio stained. Nero after all withdrew his eyes and ordered crimes but did not watch them; it was an especial part of our sufferings under Domitian to see him and be watched by him, since our sighs would be noted down, since that savage face and ruddy complexion—with which he fortified himself against the blush of shame—was adept at taking note of the blanchings of so many men. (*Agricola* 45.1–2)

Astonishingly enough, Tacitus *denies* to Nero in this passage the very theatricality of the emperor's interaction with his victims that he so often uses as an interpretive model in the *Annals*. Tacitus' description of the senate's behavior here is the most explicit reproduction anywhere in his writings of an interaction conforming to what we have called the subject-observer model that he employs for Nero, and yet it is made in conjunction with the observation that Nero at least refrained from the sinister surveillance of his victims that was characteristic of Domitian.[73] By the time of Tacitus' composition of the *Annals* some ten years later, these traits—to watch one's audience and be watched back, to note down their reactions, to scrutinize their faces for changes of expression—have become those of the emperor to whom they were earlier denied, perhaps most strikingly so in the historian's description of Britannicus' murder, where it can hardly be said of the emperor that he "withdrew his eyes and ordered crimes but did not watch them."

Tacitus' description of Domitian's oppressive hold on power in the *Agricola*, in its claim to unveil a past in which senate and emperor engaged in a disingenuous masque of the observer and the observed, goes some way in stripping from Tacitus' unique picture of a Neronian theatricality its persuasive patina of being the hidden truth elucidated and laid bare. As an interpretation of the nature of tyranny that is reproduced elsewhere in much the same terms, such a passage helps us to reconceive the historian's version of an earlier emperor precisely as a version, one that exploits for its effectiveness the descriptive model of theatricality. Of course, the question then arises: are we to understand Tacitus' depiction of senatorial interaction with Domitian as in some sense the truth and the autobiographical basis for historical distortion? The *Agricola* after all precedes the *Annals*. But Tacitus, it appears, may not even have been in Rome at the time of the political murders and exiles in which he so emphatically and eloquently claims an eyewitness' complicity.[74] If this should be the case, his firsthand testimony in this passage comes to hover between possibilites for interpretation that are widely divergent: a damning

rhetorical reformulation of the reign of one emperor composed under the next; a focused expression of a sense of unease felt by all senators under all emperors; the self-flagellating account of a man wracked by guilt; a bitter indictment, in the guise of a confession, of the senators' habitual hypocrisy and cowardice; a brilliant smear campaign against an emperor whom the senate found offensive;[75] a veiled comment on Nerva's toleration of Domitianic informers (*delatores*). Only the characterization of the emperor himself retains the same significance: it is Tacitus' representation of what is quintessential to the abuse of power.

Tacitus' defining characteristic as a writer and historian is the forceful sense his view of the past conveys of having stripped off the masks of men, of revealing the corruption of human interaction by the distorting effects of power. In his description of Nero, this distorting effect emanates from the powerholder himself, the scriptwriter of the political truths he has invented and imposed upon the unwilling participants of his plays. It is a compelling vision—and yet the theatrical paradigm, with its figuration of the ruler as source of a truth which his subjects had no choice but to accept, was not one adopted by several authors we would most expect to have felt its effects, writers who lived under the *scaenicus imperator* himself, and who produced, as the following chapter goes on to consider, other versions of the role of theater in this man's reign and other representations of the relationship between Nero's stints onstage and offstage. A half-century after Nero's death, Tacitus himself was writing in the midst of and against an increasingly widespread sense that life and theater were beginning to approximate each other and that it was no longer so simple a matter to uncover the reality behind the distortions imposed by power. Under Nero and subsequent to his death, Roman literary culture was increasingly fascinated by the idea that under his reign the boundaries between the reality of the audience and the fiction of the stage had been not only elusive but even nonexistent. Tacitus reacted to this with his version of the truth; others would produce very different ones.

ACTORS IN THE AUDIENCE

THEATRICALITY AND DOUBLESPEAK

FROM NERO TO HADRIAN

SHADI BARTSCH

HOBART & WM. SMITH COLLEGES
WARREN H. SMITH LIBRARY

SEP 10 1997

GENEVA, N.Y. 14456

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

LONDON, ENGLAND

1994