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Book Review by Barry Strauss

Palace Intrigues

The Lives of the Caesars, by Suetonius, translated by Tom Holland.
Penguin Classics, 432 pages, $35 (cloth), $20 (paper)

Imagine sitting near the apex of power in an empire and then being shown the door. You might want to write a tell-all book about it. If so, however, you would be advised to proceed with caution. Now, imagine what would barely be conceivable today: that you undertook to write your exposé while you were still in office. You would need all the finesse of a tightrope walker.

It's not clear which of those two scenarios fits the experience of Suetonius, whose marvelous, amusing, and often appalling biographies of Rome's imperial rulers are classics of the ancient world. Suetonius served in high office under the emperor Hadrian, who reigned A.D. 117-138 and was not a man to cross. He began his reign by ordering the execution of four opponents, each of them well known and distinguished among Rome's elite. No mere thug, Hadrian was highly educated and literate. He was brilliant and terrifying. Suetonius surely knew that his writing might be read, and read carefully, by the man who had the swords of 30 legions at his command. No wonder *The Lives of the Caesars* ends 21 years before Hadrian was proclaimed emperor, in A.D. 96, when the previous dynasty came to its end. The rest, Suetonius prudently concluded, was silence.

In *The Lives of the Caesars*, sometimes referred to today as *The Twelve Caesars*, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus wrote biographies of the first eleven emperors to rule Rome—from Augustus to Domitian—plus Julius Caesar, whose career marked the twilight of the republic that preceded Rome's imperial monarchy. The book includes such famous and infamous rulers as Tiberius, Gaius (better known as Caligula), Claudius, and Nero. The four men who vied in turn for the throne in the civil wars of 69, the so-called Year of the Four Emperors, are also there: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian, the last of whom came out on top and started a dynasty. His two sons, Titus and Domitian, round out the story.

Suetonius would not pass muster with many academic historians today. His subject is not vast, impersonal forces but individuals. He focuses on men. He says more about women than one might expect from an ancient biographer, but his treatment of them is neither equitable nor inclusive. He adores gossip. Across his pages stride the cunning, the clever, the courageous, the wicked, the monstrous, and the just plain perverted. There is no theory here, no footnotes to grace a tenure file. But readers find *The Lives of the Caesars* irresistible.

Suetonius was uniquely qualified to write his book. He combined ferocious literary talent with a fingertip feel for the reality of Roman power. He was a scribbler: his many books include volumes on the winds, on the Greek games, on kings, and on celebrated courtesans. None of these survive. All that's left are a few biographies from his collection *On Famous Men* (a book about literary figures) and the nearly complete *Lives of the Caesars*, which is now missing only the opening chapters of the life of Julius Caesar. When he was in office, Suetonius had access to the treasures of the imperial archives. It shows. The reader marvels at the documents that turn up on his pages, from Augustus' letters to a compromising document written in Domitian's own hand. This is the work of a lifelong insider.

He was born around the year 70 to a military officer of the equestrian order, a group of wealthy men second in importance only to the senators, the several hundred power brokers at the very top of the Roman tree. Young Suetonius knew how to play Rome's status games, which required the support of people near the pinnacle. By his 20s, he had obtained the backing of Pliny the Younger, a senator from a family prominent in imperial administration and in scholarship, best known for his polished, published correspondence with Hadrian's predecessor Trajan, who reigned A.D. 98-117. Pliny probably took Suetonius with him when he served Trajan as governor over the wealthy province of Bithynia (northwestern Turkey). He also arranged for Suetonius to enjoy the privileges awarded to fathers of three children, even though Suetonius and his wife were childless. Then as now, it helped to have friends in high places. Suetonius proceeded to win the support of an even more powerful official, Gaius Septicius Clarus, the praetorian prefect from 119 to 122. The prefect was commander of the Praetorian Guard, the only military force in the city of Rome, and a key advisor to the emperor. It was to none other than Septicius that Suetonius dedicated *The Lives of the Caesars*.

In the early decades of the 2nd century, Suetonius held three important imperial positions under Trajan and Hadrian. He oversaw the imperial libraries, the archives, and, most important, the emperor's personal correspondence. He is thought to have traveled with Hadrian on an official visit to Gaul, Germany, and Britain. It seemed he had made it—then it all came crashing down. Suetonius was fired, as was his powerful friend Septicius, in a sweeping purge that included many others as well. Their alleged sin was excessive informality in their behavior toward Hadrian's wife, a detail that may be too delicious to be true.

One wonders if Suetonius' scandalmongering enemies made it up after his fall to give him a taste of his own medicine. In any case, as far as we know, neither he nor anyone else lost his head, only his office. Still, a man couldn't be too careful.

Suetonius *was* careful—you could even call him politically correct. If most of the emperors he writes about get mixed reviews at best, it is only to contrast them with Hadrian. Compared to most of the predecessors one encounters in Suetonius' pages, Hadrian looks like the perfect picture of a gentle knight. It is a long way, for example, from Nero's Golden House—the monument to his ego that he built on the ruins of the Great Fire of Rome—to the Pantheon, the temple to all the gods that Hadrian erected, arguably the most noble edifice to survive from the classical age. Nor is there any comparison between the four executions that Hadrian ordered at the outset of his rule and the drawn-out reigns of terror conducted by Tiberius, Caligula, or Nero.

It was also surely no coincidence that Augustus, who gets the longest biography in Suetonius' book, was also Hadrian's favorite emperor and his role model. Although Caesar is the subject of the first chapter, he was more the gravedigger of the republic than the founder of the monarchy known today as the empire. It took Augustus to put the new regime on a stable footing, after a years-long process of trial and error. Augustus is for Suetonius the very image of public service, while Caesar gets the back of his hand. Suetonius concludes on balance that, although the latter had his good points, he so abused his power that he deserved to be assassinated. Nostalgia for the republic was fashionable among Rome's elite. Not that many Romans seriously wanted to restore the old regime; almost everyone had too much at stake in the new imperial order for that. But longing for the good old days was harmless if one refrained from acting on it. Even Augustus had joked that his court historian Livy, with whom he enjoyed close ties, was really a supporter of Caesar's rival Pompey in the civil wars. It didn't damage the relationship between the two men one bit. Tut-tutting at Caesar was almost *de rigueur* by Suetonius' day.

It's a bold move to undertake a new English translation of Suetonius. The British historian Catharine Edwards did a fine one, with introduction and notes, in 2000. The novelist Robert Graves published a translation in 1957. As one might expect from the author of *I, Claudius* (1934), Graves's Suetonius is sprightly but very free in its adaptation of the original. Scholar and popularizer Michael Grant revised the translation and added notes and a new introduction in 1979. All worthy books, but there was room for a new version to bring the language up to date. It is hard to think of anyone better suited for the job than Tom Holland. He is a spirited writer and an excellent scholar with a knack for penning best-sellers, including *Rubicon* (2003), about the fall of the Roman republic; *Dynasty* (2015), about the Julio-Claudian emperors; and *Pax* (2023), about the history of Rome from Nero to Hadrian. In short, he is an ideal translator of Suetonius. Holland's text is learned, lively, and engaging. It is a pleasure to read. It includes an excellent introduction, maps, endnotes, and other aids to the reader.

Holland writes in his trademark style, which combines scholarly references and pop culture. The introduction, for example, moves smartly from Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* (circa A.D. 825) to the BBC's adaptation of *I, Claudius* (1970s), ABC's *Dynasty* (1980s), and HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999–2007). Few readers of Suetonius would doubt that his narrative often reads like *Pax Soprana*, as one of the episodes of the series is called. And any of Suetonius' emperors might have read one of his underlings the riot act just as Tony Soprano did to one of his: "You don't have to love me, but you will respect me!" No doubt it would sound better in the original Latin, a little like Caesar's statement in his account of the civil war that his *dignitas*—not dignity so much as rank, prestige, or honor—was dearer to him than life itself: *Sibi semper primam fuisse dignitatem vitaque potiorem*.

Perhaps Holland had Tony's dictum in mind when he translated a statement that Suetonius claims Caesar made in the full flush of his arrogance: *Debere homines consideratius iam loqui secum*. The Loeb Classical Library translates it cautiously: Caesar said that "men ought now to be more circumspect in addressing him." But Holland takes a less literal approach, writing that Caesar said "men were obliged now never to show him disrespect when they spoke to him." It's a free translation, but true both to Suetonius and to what Suetonius tells us about Caesar's character. Besides, Holland's version makes for a memorable English phrase.

Another place where Holland hits the mark is in his rendering of Vespasian's *bon mot* at the onset of what would be his final illness. The Latin reads *"Vae," inquit, "puto deus fio."* "Poor me," Holland quotes the emperor as saying, "I think I am becom-

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ing a god." Graves-Grant made it "Dear me!" which sounds like something out of *Downton Abbey*. Edwards rendered it "Alas!" which strikes a Shakespearean note. "Poor me" sounds appropriately dry and ironic to a reader in 2025.

Latin's compactness is a wit's delight but a translator's headache. It achieves a brevity that is hard to match in English. Occasionally one succeeds, as in Caesar's famous, if perhaps apocryphal remark on crossing the Rubicon: *Iacta alea est*, "the die is cast." More often, pithiness like that is untranslatable. Take, for example, Suetonius' description of a difficult decision by Titus when he donned the purple in the year 79 and became emperor. At the time, he lived in Rome with his long-term mistress, Queen Berenice, a great granddaughter of Herod the Great. Titus reportedly promised to marry her, but that match was triply insulting to Roman elite opinion. Berenice was a queen and an easterner, which stoked unhappy memories of Cleopatra. Worst of all, from the Roman point of view, she was a Jew.

Nine years after suppressing that revolt, Romans still smarted at the pain inflicted on them by the rebels. I discuss Berenice and the revolt in detail in my new book, *Jews vs. Rome: Two Centuries of Rebellion Against the World's Mightiest Empire*. Never mind that Berenice had stood in Jerusalem to oppose the uprising and defend Rome publicly, at no small risk to herself. All the same, she, like all Jews, was suspect in the eyes of many Romans. But not in the eyes of Titus, apparently. Suetonius describes his emotions and hers upon his decision to dismiss her:

> *Berenicen statim ab urbe dimisit invitus invitam.*
> "He immediately sent away Berenice from the city, against his will and hers."

It takes twice as many words in English as in Latin to express the same idea. The Latin emphasizes Berenice by making her name, in the accusative case, the first word in the sentence. To get the same effect in English, one would have to start with the wordy "As for Berenice, he...." The sting in the sentence comes at the end in the juxtaposition of the two Latin words *invitus invitam*, "he unwilling her unwilling." To relay it exactly would be bad English. Holland writes:

> He sent Berenice away from Rome the moment he became emperor: something that caused him no less pain than it did her.

It's an apt rendering. The Romans used "the city" to mean Rome the way some Americans do with New York. Holland's "him" and "her" nicely recall *invitus invitam*.

Nobody reads Suetonius in search of moral exemplars. From Caligula's alleged plan to make his horse a consul; to Claudius' indecorous coronation (he was cowering behind a curtain when a soldier found him, dragged him out, and hailed him as emperor); to Domitian's habit of whiling away the hours alone in his room, catching flies and stabbing them with a sharp pen, the emperors paint a sordid picture. But we do read Suetonius to remind us that we are human beings and not machines. His pages fortify us against the suffocating embrace of technology that wraps ever tighter around our lives. To the assertion that it's all about the algorithms, to the steamroller effect of technobabble that turns the language of Shakespeare into the herky-jerky of the machine, to the great maw of artificial intelligence that swallows up seas of information and spits it out in a geyser of curated half-truths, biography says a resounding *no*. Few of Suetonius' emperors are heroes, but they are all characters. They are individuals who make a difference, for better or worse. Tom Holland has done a great service by making them accessible to a new generation of readers.

Barry Strauss is the Corliss Page Dean Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, the Bryce and Edith M. Bowmar Professor in Humanistic Studies Emeritus at Cornell University, and the author, most recently, of Jews vs. Rome: Two Centuries of Rebellion Against the World's Mightiest Empire *(Simon & Schuster).*

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