2

THE INVASION OF THE STAGE: NERO *TRAGOEDUS*

About a century and a half after Nero's death, the Greek sophist Flavius Philostratus produced a fantastical hagiography on the life and wanderings of the mystic philosopher Apollonius of Tyana. Apollonius had survived Nero's reign despite a properly philosophical disdain of compromising himself to that end; certainly in the biography he proclaims his contempt for the emperor without much concession to the need for caution. And so the following scenario unfolds: one day during Nero's notorious tour of Greece, as the emperor was singing and acting his way through towns large and small and games mostly insignificant, the philosopher started to lecture his young follower Menippus on the implications to be drawn from this imperial infatuation with the stage. Suppose, he said, a real actor who had *played* a despot were to leave the theater and then tried to continue this role of ruler in the real world—wouldn't we say such a man was mad? What should one think, then, of an actual despot who wanted to become an actor, and tried to play imaginary rulers on the stage?

> Many are the tragic actors, Menippus, among whose ranks Nero has enrolled himself. Well, what if one of them, after playing Oenomaus or Cresphontes, upon leaving the theater were so imbued with his mask that he wished to rule others and to consider himself a tyrant—what would you say of him? Wouldn't you say he needed a dose of hellebore and a potion of medicine sufficient to clean out his mind? But if a man who is tyrant himself should live his life by the concerns of tragedians and musicians . . . what would you say of the wretched people living under this filth? Whom do you suppose the Greeks think he is, Menippus? Xerxes razing their city, or Nero singing? (Philost, *Vit. Apoll.* 5.7)

What if a tyrant wanted to be an actor? asks Apollonius, and the answer implied is unmistakable. Like the actor who wanted to be a tyrant, Nero would be engaging both in self-deception and in outright madness. Since Apollonius describes the suffering of the Greeks under Nero's rule and points out that for them, Nero is no singer-actor at all, but a Xerxes redivivus—a real-life despot despite his overlay of theatrical disguise—he hints that no more than an actor can make his thespian role of tyrant real in the offstage world can Nero make his real tyrant, himself, theatrical (that is, nonreal, purely representative and *acted*) in the onstage world, at least from the point of view of his audiences, for whom he remains a Xerxes all the same. And by observing that we would surely consider mad any actor who, by taking his role with him offstage, violated the boundary between theater and reality, and next asking what we are to think of a tyrant who tries to cross that divide in the other direction, Apollonius implies that Nero too is of questionable sanity: whether the line of travel is from stage to life or life to stage, real tyrants and fictive tyrants are separated by an inviolate boundary, and not to understand this indicates need of a good dose of hellebore, traditional restorer of errant wits.

Apollonius, then, tries to banish the specter of a two-way traverse between stage and reality, and to question the sanity of any who believe it possible. He is fudging his case, of course: while we might readily agree that an onstage Oenomaus so imbued with his mask that he believed himself a tyrant after the play was over would merit the diagnosis of dementia, a tyrannical emperor's role-playing on stage is not ipso facto proof of insanity. A transition that serves as a criterion of craziness in one direction (actor to tyrant) need not

retain its demonstrative power once the conditions are reversed (tyrant to actor), even if a certain symmetry between the two sides of the comparison lulls us into momentary acceptance of Apollonius' faulty equation because the actor's role (tyrant) and the real person's identity (tyrant) are the same.

And yet this link between stage tyrant and real tyrant, which Apollonius exploits to raise and then eliminate the possibility of an interplay between life and drama was invested with an entirely different significance by authors closer to Nero's own times. Whereas Philostratus' Apollonius emphasizes the existence and stability of the separation of stage and life, writers at Rome in the half-century after Nero's death and later successors to the historical tradition on his reign repeatedly remark on the opposite phenomenon altogether—the permeability, the vulnerability, of this divide. Emphasizing that Nero himself played *tyrants* onstage and so in a sense replicated his identity in the theater, they suggest that the actor-Nero did take his mask with him from stage to life and the emperor-Nero his real identity from life to stage. Long before Philostratus' Apollonius, that literary product of the third century, was to emphasize the distinction betwen the two sides of his comparison, writers on the epoch suggested that these sides had merged in Nero himself; in their discussions we see that the divide between role and reality, Apollonius' touchstone of delusion, is marked only in its absence.

I

Unspeakable truths often find expression on city walls, and ancient Rome was no exception. Suetonius and Dio both remark that Agrippina's murder in 59 A.D. set off an epidemic of urban graffiti identifying Nero as the guilty party. Prominent among these defamatory scribblings were reproductions of a Greek line in the meter of tragedy: "Nero, Orestes, Alcmeon: the matricides." Nero's mind-boggling murder of his mother had apparently set him on a par, in the popular imagination, with the famous matricides of Greek myth, or indeed, as Philostratus' Apollonius remarks, set him well beyond

them, for Orestes and Alcmeon at least had acted under mitigating circumstances.[1]

Of course, that Nero's contemporaries and subsequent writers should use characters from mythology as the basis for pregnant analogies with a living human being was nothing new: as cultural lexicon common to the entire society, myth provided a time-honored source for allusions and associations to ends both honorific and calumnious for figures in the public eye. But Dio and Suetonius do more than simply establish the similarity of the emperor's crimes to those of notorious offenders of mythology. They also offer selective information about those mythological roles which Nero actually performed onstage, and in so doing invite us to take the association of real life and fiction a step further. Expanding the analogy between Nero's crimes and those of legend by supplementing the mythological with the theatrical, these sources suggest that Nero's stage roles revealed to the emperor's public an uncanny similarity between what the emperor was doing onstage and what he had done off it; and in dwelling only on those roles that provide matter for such a comparison, they make sure that we too will appreciate this uncanny similarity. And so it is that the list of roles supplied for us as those Nero performed as a tragic actor include those mentioned in the graffiti and others whose crimes were similar. As I document below, the emperor apparently reenacted his already fictionalized life in the theater, performing the parts of Alcmeon, Orestes, Oedipus, Thyestes, and Hercules after replicating their crimes or attempted crimes offstage—matricide, incest, usurpation of the throne through a woman, murder of the members of one's household.[2] He thus made of the mythological comparisons ones instead in which he turned up, as it were, on both sides of the equation: offstage, Nero had behaved *like* Orestes and Alcmeon; then, mounting the stage, he played these characters to whom the popular imagination had already compared him, and others too whose crimes he had replicated in life: Oedipus, Thyestes, Hercules.[3] Tyrant portrayed tyrant in the theater, taking his warped identity from one realm to another, and the stage merely

put the distancing brackets of representation around a character who was the same in real life; or, as one of Suetonius' contemporaries would conceive it, Nero, "neglecting his own kingship, was content to play the kings of times past" (Dio Chrysostomus *Discourses* 3.134).

The grounds for this analogy are Nero's actual stage performances as Suetonius and Dio choose to describe them. I have mentioned some of the most common above: Alcmeon, Orestes, Oedipus, Thyestes, and Hercules. There are others, since these two writers who comment on Nero's stints as tragic actor during and subsequent to his tour of Greece provide different but overlapping rosters of the roles he performed on these occasions;[4] Suetonius records that the emperor sang the parts of (among others) "Canace in labor, Orestes the matricide, Oedipus blinded, Hercules insane" (*Nero* 21.3), while Dio waxes more rhetorical as he deplores Nero's exchange of an emperor's garb for an actor's: "In mounting on the half-boots of an actor he fell from power, and in putting on a mask he threw off the dignity of his rule; he would beg like a runaway slave, be led like a blind man, be pregnant, give birth, be mad, roam expatriate, most often acting the parts of Oedipus, Thyestes, Heracles, Alcmeon, and Orestes."[5] The selection of these figures as Nero's favorites out of the dozen or so we know him to have performed (not to mention out of the roles that never made it into the historical record) is no accident of transmission:[6] the sources mention them because Nero is rumored to have carried out their crimes offstage prior to enacting them in costume. Small wonder that Orestes and Oedipus are the two roles to appear most frequently: the matricidal Orestes and the incestuous Oedipus provide compelling parallels to the very Nero whom the tradition portrays, murderer of his mother and suspected harborer of a more than filial mother-love. And small wonder, too, that Suetonius himself supplies the biography *ad comparandum;* as Richard C. Lounsbury ([1991], 3755) points out, the roles he mentions seem masks of Nero himself in other sections of the *Life:* Nero being deflowered by Doryphorus (29), Nero murdering his mother (34.1–4), Nero attempting incest with her (28.2), Nero offing his kith and kin (35.2–3, 5).[7]

Indeed, some feeling that Nero's stage roles are modeled on his life is certainly the sentiment of Dio's C. Julius Vindex, legate of Gallia Lugdunensis, when he decides to revolt against Nero early in 68 A.D. Our historian equips Vindex with a speech claiming that the actor-Nero has become indistinguishable from the emperor and presenting this fact as a crucial reason for rebellion: Nero, as Vindex inveighs, has destroyed the Roman world, the senate, and his own mother, whom he violated and killed; worse still, he has mounted the stage and imitated there "all the stories of mythology": "Will anyone then call such a man Caesar and Emperor and Augustus? Not at all. Let no one insult those holy names, since they were held by Augustus and Claudius, but this wretch would more deservedly be called Thyestes and Oedipus, Alcmeon and Orestes. For these are the roles he performs, and he has adopted these names in place of the others" (Dio 63.22.5–6). Vindex claims that the emperor as actor has overcome the emperor as sovereign: role has prevailed over office, Orestes over Augustus. It would seem that Orestes and Alcmeon, notorious matricides, and Oedipus, another royal son with a notoriously misdirected libido, triumph over the emperor precisely because Nero (as Vindex has just pointed out) debauched and then murdered his mother—because he already resembles, in some sense, the characters he is wont to portray. And so it would seem, too, that we are meant to understand Vindex as selecting these roles precisely because Nero has already acted them, as it were, offstage.

And yet, as the sources portray it, Nero did not merely bring his life to the stage: the direction of travel from life to theater proved entirely reversible. Under Nero and his perversions the theater seemed to lose its character as a site merely for mimesis, whether of mythical plots or even the emperor's own crimes. Instead, we find a theater that spills over into the emperor's offstage life, and what transpires when Nero is on the stage supplies evidence to the stunned eyes of his public that not only does the actor-Nero imitate the emperor, but the emperor too reproduces, willy-nilly, his stage roles offstage. For one, Dio and Suetonius suggest that Nero himself began to lose sight of his identity, seeing himself as a new Orestes after the

murder of Agrippina and fearing the fate of his literary prototype: Suetonius describes how the emperor, unable to bear the weight of his conscience, "would often confide that he was being persecuted by his mother's ghost and the lashes and burning torches of the Furies" (*Nero* 34.4); and Dio comments that he avoided a visit to Athens during the tour of Greece "because of the story about the Furies" (63.14.3). Here, of course, the leakage between reality and representation is not necessarily from stage to life; Nero's madness may take its origin in mythology as readily as in any dramatic performance. But elsewhere the invasive reach of the stage and the reversal of reality and drama are clear to see.

In Suetonius' account, this reversal strikes the reader most obviously on the simple level of the text's progression itself. The biographer first lists a set of Nero's stage roles that includes Orestes and Oedipus (*Nero* 21.3), *then* the murder of his mother, for whom he felt an incongruous lust (34, 28.2), and last of all the graffiti commenting on the murder by linking Nero to two mythological matricides (39.2). Such an ordering of the narrative ensures that even before reaching the popular comparison of Nero to Orestes and Alcmeon, the reader has already been prepared to think of Nero's actions in terms of his stage acts. But Nero's murder of Agrippina, of course, in reality *preceded* his performance of "Orestes the matricide," listed among the other roles at *Nero* 21.3.[8] So the fact that we encounter Nero's roles first prepares us to see the events that follow in the biography through the distorting lens of his later performances, even as we recognize, with a moment's reflection, that this is entirely false. It is a perspective that encourages us to make the association between Nero and his roles that other aspects of the narrative and the ancient descriptions of this emperor in general so readily encourage, engaging in subtle and insidious distortions to that effect. Indeed, the graffiti themselves, if they did in historical fact appear on the walls of Rome, may even have been spurred by Nero's performances rather than by his crimes, in which case Dio's ascription of the graffiti to 59 A.D. would be an instance of deliberate backdating to

achieve an effect similar to that produced by Suetonius' reversal of information.[9]

To suggest that Suetonius' text encourages in us a predisposition to consider Nero's life in terms of his roles must to some degree remain only a suggestion, and certainly the biographer's well-documented predilection for arranging his lives by organizational categories may introduce an element of uncertainty into any such argument.[10] But the depiction of the relationship between theater and life as one in which, for Nero, mimesis occurs in both directions also emerges far more directly from Suetonius' and Dio's peculiar interpretation of the events of the emperor's life. Dio, for example, chooses to repeat Vindex's move in questioning the distinction between the emperor's actions onstage and his behavior offstage, again via the useful evocation of the paradigmatic figures of matricides and beggars; but he does so in such a way as to give priority to the drama's impress upon Nero's life. In recounting the last moments of Nero's existence, Dio depicts him skulking in a reedbed, deserted by his bodyguards and lamenting in fear and retrospection all the crimes of his past:

> To himself he was bemoaning and bewailing his fate; for he kept considering, besides other things, how once he had been proud of his huge retinue but now was cowering with three freedmen. For such a drama did the divinity prepare for him then, that no longer should he act the roles of other matricides and beggars but now at last that of himself. And he then repented of all his outrageous acts, as if he could render any of them undone. So Nero played out this tragic part, and he kept thinking of that verse, "Wife and father bid me die pitifully" (63.28.3–5)[11]

Emphasizing his vision of Nero's behavior at this crisis as a continuation of his quondam performances as matricide and beggar, Dio couches the entire passage in a prolonged theatrical metaphor: this is Nero's final drama and his final role, the real-life one of *Nero*. After a life spent acting on the stage, the site of the performance has finally

been transferred from stage to life; now at last, Nero is acting out his old (and apparently, in this passage, most usual) roles of matricide and beggar in his own person and without the framework of the theater. So it is that the actor's fiction of "I am a matricide/beggar" makes the crossing from theater to life (here we nod meaningfully at Philostratus). And as we might expect after reading Vindex's diatribe, the emperor's thespian past and real-life present are here narrowed to these two role-types: showing at this crucial juncture no interest in Nero's other performances, Dio places the emphasis squarely on the matricides and beggars, so confirming the recasting of the emperor's offstage life in the mold of roles like Vindex's Orestes and Alcmeon, Oedipus and Thyestes. It is as characters such as these that the stage-Nero has left the boards and now lurks in the reeds, playing out a tragic part he has played before, but this time for real.

This instance of mimesis enacted in the wrong direction (at least by conventional standards) is bolstered by a second creative touch on Dio's part. The historian attributes to the unhappy ruler, as Nero's comment on his own situation, the tragic verse "wife and father bid me die pitifully." The sentiment seems best suited to an Oedipus, and could we only argue that it had come from Nero's participation in such a production, we might point out that the verse served to confirm and highlight the actor-Nero's departure from the stage still in character: even the *words* which he had perhaps once uttered in the theater ("that verse") invade his mind as an appropriate comment for the present débacle. Yet we do in fact have this information: we know that the verse had such a provenance, or at least that this information, correct or false, formed part of the historical tradition to which Dio had access. For the line occurs in Suetonius as well, where it is spoken by Nero himself in a stage performance of no other play than the *Oedipus*.

Suetonius, quoting the same line in a slightly different form, identifies it as such when he remarks on the rumors circulating at Rome as Nero's grip on power was faltering more and more. According to

his account, Nero while performing the role of Oedipus had sung a Greek verse that soon appeared strikingly applicable to his offstage situation: as his subjects had noted when the emperor's fall seemed imminent, "the most recent drama Nero had sung in public was that of *Oedipus the Exile*, and he had ended with this verse: 'Wife, mother, and father bid me die' " (*Nero* 46.3). This is Dio's verse, but restricted in Suetonius to the stage, and with a slight difference in content: Nero's mother appears as an additional member of the maleficent kin. It is not insignificant that Suetonius, for all his different use of the verse, puts it to the same end: popular opinion, he tells us, saw Nero's stage-role here as curiously proleptic of his real-life downfall, and actually remarked on this theatrical anticipation of Nero's death as punishment for his murders. So, according to Suetonius, the people of Nero's day themselves conceived the notion that the emperor replayed his life onstage: since Nero's role preceded and presaged the reality of his end, in their eyes the stage could act as a model for life, and life in its turn could be the mere reproduction.

As we have seen, however, Dio transfers the verse from the stage to the reedbed. In so doing he is himself reshaping Nero's life to follow drama, ignoring the distinction between onstage and off in proffering an interpretation of the emperor's downfall, and in this way providing a clear example of the ease with which the very transmitters of the tradition could manipulate the theater as material for claims about Nero's reign.[12] The distinction between stage and life is one whose absence Dio understands as definitive of the period, and to ensure that his readers so understand it as well, he attributes a verse from the *Oedipus*—and behavior reenacting prior roles—to Nero in his last moments. But Dio omits to identify the play even as he gives Nero the line, apparently because he wishes to imply that Nero is not just bringing off the stage an Oedipus ousted from his rule but other roles as well; as noted above, he frames the verse with the remark that the emperor is performing at last his own, real-life, role of *matricide* and beggar, so that Nero's wretched state in the reedbed is to be seen as the fugitive state of an Orestes as well as an

Oedipus. Dio's eagerness to insert the paradigmatic role of matricide into the number of those that shaped Nero's life offstage as well, and his suggestion that Nero's performance of stage matricides has led "now at last" to the emperor's role of "Nero the Matricide," makes little sense when we stop to think it out. The direction of such an interpretation inverts the actual state of affairs in the emperor's life: Nero of course carried out his matricide long before he performed one on the stage, and while at the moment of his death he may well have seemed Nero the beggar—since his imminent loss of the throne and state of disgrace recalled aspects of Oedipus' career—he was not "now at last" playing the real-life role of Nero the matricide; Agrippina after all had been dead for nine years. Dio in fact is not so much interested in making perfect sense as in suggesting to us, through his deployment of this verse and the whole emphasis on Nero's "last role" of matricide and beggar, that Nero's life is modeled on his acting.[13]

II

That Nero should play the role of himself is only the most extreme formulation of what Philostratus' Apollonius held as an impossibility, the dissolution of the differentiating framework of the theater. But it is a conceit that distorts and disables the very idea of representation: if to play a role is to represent a character such that there remains a distinction between the actor and the acted, to play the role of *oneself* produces a curious redundancy, since signifier and signified are no longer meaningful in the fixed distance of their relation, and performer and persona have become one and the same. If then we recall that in Roman usage the word *persona* referred both to the dramatic role an actor might play and to the mask such a role would entail, a peculiarity of Nero's performances as recorded in the historical tradition offers still further implications for the tenuousness of the distinction between reality and theater in this emperor's reign: according to both Suetonius and Dio, Nero had a penchant (as we shall see) for acting tragic roles while wearing a mask that reproduced his own features.[14] This detail recalls yet again the suggestions of the

historical tradition that Nero somehow was a ruler playing the role of himself; it also sets into still sharper focus the problem of the position of Nero's roles in a strange region between life and drama. More distinctly than before, the problem of Nero's appearances onstage becomes that of representation undermined. For, under the normal conditions of the theater, it was the function of the mask to point away from its present wearer to the absent character whose persona and role it represented iconically; a mask of Nero worn by Nero, however, could point only to its human wearer, whom it did not represent but rather replicated and whose role in the play as a fictional character it suggested falsely, since a supposed Orestes who looked like a Nero was after all not a Nero—but could only add to the confusion of Nero's strangely doubled status at this boundary line.

These masks which Nero had made in his own image and then wore during tragic performances attracted notices in Dio and Suetonius that show only slight variations in detail. In Dio, the emperor models the image on his masks after his deceased wife, and his usage of these real-life masks is only occasional; Dio remarks that the emperor "wore now masks modeled after himself, now masks modeled after the drama's male characters, but that all the masks of women showed the likeness of his dead wife, Poppaea Sabina" (63.9.5). In Suetonius, on the other hand, Nero's use of a mask of his own face extended to all his portrayals of male roles, while the female masks changed in accordance with his paramours. The implication of these comments is that Nero, who was already seen as reproducing his life on the stage, did so at an inescapably visual level as well and almost *inflicted* the equation of his persona with his tragic roles upon the audiences at these plays. This inference is confirmed by the fact that Suetonius' account actually includes the reaction of one such spectator, an apparent consequence of this strangely reflexive means of theatrical representation:

> he sang tragedies too, wearing the masks of heroes and gods, and likewise of heroines and goddesses, with the masks fashioned to

> look like his own face and that of whatever woman he was in love with then. Among other roles he sang that of Canace in labor, Orestes the matricide, Oedipus blinded, Hercules insane. And in this play, as the story goes, a newly drafted soldier who was posted to guard the entrance saw him being outfitted and bound with chains, as the plot demanded, and ran up to rescue him. (*Nero* 21.3)

Suetonius' narrative here presents sequentially certain crucial details that seem to suggest what happens when an emperor like Nero wears a mask of himself. Nero, says the biographer, sang tragedies about ancient heroes; in so doing he wore a mask of himself; these heroes included Orestes, Oedipus, and Hercules.[15] Already, then, this passage supplements the familiar conceit of Nero playing the role of Nero matricide and beggar offstage with the inverted parallel of Nero's performing Orestes and Oedipus onstage but wearing the mask of Nero—indeed, it is precisely the persistent focus of the tradition on such possibilities for reversal that suggests these variations on a common theme.

A further detail, however, also illustrates the effect on the audience of the nonrepresentative kind of representation generated by an emperor masked as himself. Suetonius tells us that a recent recruit at the performance who saw his emperor being bound with chains ran up to "rescue" him from this indignity. This response to the stage trussing of Nero-Hercules, in its proximity to the information that the emperor wore masks of himself for such roles, cannot appear to the reader as merely a function of his newness on the job, his rustic naïveté, or the impossiblity of yielding to dramatic illusion when an emperor is on the stage.[16] In reacting to the spectacle as if its nature as representation were in question the soldier here seems to react to the fact that "Hercules" looks like Nero: the mask the emperor is wearing, under ordinary circumstances a visible reminder and even effective agent of the alien frame of the drama, no longer has any referent but the emperor himself.[17] But what follows cannot

be understood as a simple engrossment by the "dramatic illusion," as if the recruit, absorbed in the fictional world set up by the play, had forgotten the parameters separating reality from what he saw onstage: for the point is not his empathy for Heracles but his shock that the *emperor's* person should be so abused.[18] Nor, however, can the soldier's response spring entirely from the alienating effect of his awareness that the Hercules figure is not an actor but the Roman emperor, a *Verfremdungseffekt* that makes of the drama an empty charade in which the performance could exert no pull over its audience: such alienation from the action of the stage would involve seeing Nero's bonds and chains too as the mere props they were meant to be.[19] Suetonius' interest in this incident seems rather to stem from the recruit's reaction to the spectacle precisely as the mark of an inability to remain wholly within one of two possible interpretive frames, the reality-frame or the theater-frame.[20] Instead, the man's understanding of what is transpiring onstage merges the two categories of representation and reality, as indeed Nero's mask itself does. Otherwise, the recruit's supposed behavior could (a) remain in the reality-frame, showing recognition that Nero himself was onstage but that the chains were theatrical props, or (b) yield to the conventions governing make-believe at the theater, accepting the reality of the chains but watching, not Nero, but Hercules being bound—a Hercules represented precisely by a *mask* of Hercules. But as it is, Nero's mask of himself serves as a catalyst of confusion, making it seemingly impossible for the spectator to apply either "representation" or "reality" as a consistent frame for viewing.

A disputed passage in Juvenal's eighth *Satire* may provide a witty elaboration of this conceit, and certainly derives its ironic point from a similar play on the dramatic possibilites opened up by the idea of Nero as modern-day Orestes who has taken to the stage. Damning Nero's outrageous acts of murder, Juvenal compares him to Orestes by writing the emperor's crimes into the *Oresteia* and presenting Orestes' career as it would have progressed had Orestes been as depraved as his worse and later counterpart. At least, comments

Juvenal, the old Orestes of myth and drama did not kill his sister and his wife as well as his mother, or dispatch his other relatives with poison, or—play Orestes on the stage:

> His crime matched Agamemnon's son's, but the motive made the case
> different. For the latter, backed by the gods, avenged
> a father slain over his wine, but he did not
> pollute himself with the murder of Electra or the blood
> of his Spartan wife; for no relatives did he mix
> poison, never did he sing the *Orestes* on stage [*in scaena numquam cantavit Oresten*],
> a *Troica* he did not write. (*Sat.* 8.215–221)

The point of course hinges on the reading "Oresten" (the alternative is "Orestes," which makes Orestes the subject).[21] If this reading is correct, Juvenal effectively praises Orestes for not stooping to playing *himself* on the stage. Orestes thus avoids two signal peculiarities of Nero's theatrical experience: playing Orestes on the stage and playing himself, both in the sense suggested by the stories about his mask and as Dio later chose to describe it.[22] But even if we are to read "Orestes" and translate, "Orestes never sang upon the stage," the Juvenal passage at least confirms the prevailing association of Nero with Orestes and provides evidence, through its comic insertion of Nero into the mythological past, of the same mentality as that of the "Nero, Orestes, Alemeon: the matricides" graffiti. An Orestes offstage and an Orestes onstage, the emperor Nero supplied rich material for an era whose appetite for such paradoxes was finding expression in other forms as well.

III

It is intriguing to find the same confusion of representation and reality functioning as the defining characteristic of another kind of drama that was becoming increasingly popular in the second half of the first century A.D., the reenactment of mythological stories in the amphitheater with condemned criminals as the actors and their death

as the dénouement. At these "fatal charades," as K. M. Coleman has recently termed them,[23] the ends of entertainment went hand in hand with the working of the penal system in inflicting capital punishment on the condemned. These performances were thus distinct from those of the theater proper in that the expendability of the participants removed all use for representation as a means of conveying the suffering or death of the characters; suffer and die they really did, hung on a cross after a career as a bandit, or cremated alive for robbery, with the moment of death coming as the irreversible finale to a brief stint in the spotlight as an unwilling Hercules or Orpheus; or a Mucius Scaevola might escape with the lesser punishment of a burnt hand.[24] It is this violation of the theatrical by the actual, or rather this conflation of the two, that seems to have lent their attraction to these displays, adding a certain frisson to the experience of the spectators.[25] As Roland Auguet has put it: "The principle of these mythological dramas lay in the search for an ambiguity between the imaginary and the real. This is shown in startling fashion by the trait which consists in making the actor whose very essence is to *represent* perish in flesh and blood. What is found here, not represented but 'reified,' namely, transformed onstage into a thing, is what belongs essentially to the domain of the imaginary: mythological legends or fabulous history" ([1.72], 103). Since the protagonist really died, the action represented and the action meant to represent it became one and the same. Or, as Florence Dupont would put it, the arena becomes a site at which the image and its referent lose the distance that lets the one signify, but not be, the other: "The arena, in contrast to the theater, is not the mirror that renders to the public its own image for discovery; it is the place where the distance between image and referent disappears, where man and mirror blend, where the imaginary loses its function of figuration to become a producer of reality" ([1980], 398). Such a confusion between image and referent is a function of the same peculiar reflexiveness that is provided by a mask which represents its wearer: in much the same manner as a Nero masked as Nero, or an actor playing the role of himself, these fatal charades do not point away to a reality ultimately distinct from

and other than the action of the stage or arena. Instead, they are the site of their own reality, signs identical with their content: they do not represent, but replicate.

The banishing of this distinction between the dramatic representation of a death and its brutal replication before an audience would have been most sharply felt in the case of that fatal charade which, if we judge by its recurrence as a topic in the literature, held special appeal as a particularly paradoxical example of the metamorphosis of the theatrical that featured in such performances. This was the story of Laureolus, unusually enough not a figure from Greek mythology but a Roman bandit-chief whose career, capture, and death were transformed into the subject of a mime under Caligula and later transformed back again into a fatally realistic rendition in the amphitheater of Titus' day. In this way Laureolus' punishment ran the gamut from the historical to the theatrical to both, and the condemned criminal dying on a cross in the fatal charade that was his punishment made the play come true, while the play itself—in which an actor-criminal acted the criminal—had recently been not drama but history. Indeed, for Martial, who describes the performance in the amphitheater, it is precisely the fact that Laureolus' story had been represented in mime that constitutes the paradoxical point to the reenactment of his fate in the amphitheater. The mime put on in Caligula's day appears to have been an exercise in gruesome special effects—Suetonius' description has the protagonist and his understudies competing in vomiting stage blood as testimony of their thespian virtuosity[26]—but the gore remained after all fake, and the actor alive.[27] When the mime was recreated in the amphitheater with a criminal in the title role, however, death and drama united at the climax.

In an epigram on the event, Martial specifically makes of this final merger the epigrammatic point of his poem.[28] The epigram, which begins with a mythological simile and thus maintains, through the idea of comparison, the essential difference between mythological character and ill-starred convict, ends with the observation that for the latter-day "Laureolus" theater has merged into punishment:

> As Prometheus, bound on a Scythian peak
> fed much of his chest to a bird's greedy beak,
> Laureolus hanging on cross not fallacious [*non falsa*]
> served exposed insides to a bear too rapacious.
> Mangled limbs twitched on the man's dripping frame,
> on all his carcass little carcass remained!
> He at last paid the price for spilling the life
> of his father[29] or master, the knave, with a knife,
> for stripping a temple of well-hidden wealth,
> or for burning you, Rome, with nefarious stealth.
> The wretch had outdone rumored crimes of past age:
> 'twas curtains for a man once portrayed on the stage
> [*in quo, quae fuerat fabula, poena fuit*]. (*Lib. Spect.* 7)

The criminal playing Laureolus appears to be worthy of epigrammatic notice exactly because he is a figure "in quo, quae fuerat fabula, poena fuit" (literally, "for whom what had been a play was the execution of his punishment"). The paradoxical point rests in the transition from the representational to the real: once only mock-punished in a mime, the character Laureolus here really does die; his cross is "non falsa" because the suffering it inflicts is not theatrical.[30] Since Laureolus was unique in being a near-contemporary figure before his reincarnation in the fatal charade of the amphitheater,[31] it was apparently the unusual circumstance that his story had in the meantime been made into mime and performed in the theater that made his fatal charade of interest.[32] As a simple reenactment, in the amphitheater, of the real Laureolus' recent crucifixion, the death would presumably have lost its point: these overturnings of the idea of representation held much of their fascination for being exactly that. And indeed, the other dramatized punishments or executions in the amphitheater for which we have literary evidence all involved topics already typical of the mime or theater and thus already in the realm of the representational: Pasiphae has sex with a bull (*Lib. Spect.* 5); Daedalus is killed by a bear (*Lib. Spect.* 8), and Orpheus likewise, even as trees, cliffs, and beasts move toward him in accordance with

the myth (*Lib. Spect.* 21A)—both their deaths here are a variation on the usual story, *par' historiam;* Mucius Scaevola loses his hand in the fire (Martial *Epig.* 8.30 and 10.25); one Meniscus, "like Hercules before him," dies through being cremated alive after stealing, again with Herculean precedent, three golden apples (Lucillius *Anth. Pal.* 11.184)—all in the amphitheater.[33]

In her recent article on these fatal charades, Coleman notes, significantly enough for our purposes, that "our earliest evidence comes from the reign of Nero, our latest from the Severan age; most of it clusters under Nero and Titus." One factor in their emergence and popularity, she hypothesizes, may have been the technological advances making possible unprecedented realistic effects: for example, the forest that rose from the *hypogaeum* of Nero's new wooden amphitheater of 57 A.D. and (if we accept the first-century dating) elicited the admiration of Calpurnius Siculus' poetic persona.[34] But Coleman also points out that "highly stylized literary genres that purport to treat matters of verifiable fact are accorded a somewhat ambiguous status by historians" and questions the distorting effect of the epigrammatic point itself, which, as we have seen, highlights the blend of *poena* and *fabula* or elsewhere observes that "the ancient myth came true" ("accepit fabula prisca fidem," *Lib. Spect.* 5.2).[35] It is precisely this emphasis, however, regardless of the difficult question of whether it results in a distortion of the main features of the performance, that forces the conclusion that the epigrammatists and their audience in the second half of the first century found the idea that theater and death could merge in the amphitheater a singularly congenial topic and chose to conceive of what took place on these occasions in those terms.

This was, of course, an understanding that may have shaped thinking about theater and violence outside the amphitheater as well, although attempting to extract the threads of a cause-and-effect relationship would be an impossible task, and perhaps a misguided one: to ask whether such a use of the amphitheater reflects or inspires its environment imposes only two alternatives on a problem already too

complex for the scope of this book. In searching, however, for testimony to a widespread societal interest in the combination of theatrical representation with real effects, and more specifically, in the meeting of drama and real death, we do encounter the curious fact that the literary and historical evidence seems to peak in, and continue from, the reign of Nero, whose own forays into acting provided the inspiration for the flights of biographical fantasy we have seen above.[36] From his time on, interest in the confusion of frames inherent in the linking of *fabula* and *poena* not only found expression in the production and popularity of fatal charades in the amphitheater, but also resurfaced as literary descriptions of real deaths during theatrical performances and deaths in some way theatricalized in the offstage world of the empire; often the events selected for such a portrayal are dated to Nero's reign.

Even Tacitus, in whom melodrama usually comes clad in subtle understatement, offers material for such an analysis. His treatment of the fall of Vitellius in 69 A.D. (*Hist.* 3.83–85) has attracted some notice as a perspective that renders death theater even as it purports to represent historical fact. For as Tacitus tells it, not in Nero's reign but a year later, during the fighting in the streets that ended in Vitellius' public assassination, "the populace was present as spectator, and, as if at the circus games, favored in turn one side and another with shouts and clapping" (*Hist.* 3.83.1). Malissard coins for this passage the phrase "death staged" ("la mort mise en scène") to describe how the historian stages Vitellius' public death as "a fatal game to be classed among the *munera*" ([1990], 219);[37] as such the murder, with its audience, takes on the tint of death as spectacle, death in the amphitheater; if in the case of Laureolus theater is represented as merging with death, so here death is represented as merging with theater. It is a tendency found elsewhere too for moments of violence and bloodshed. Tacitus writes that the masses demand Otho's death "as if they were demanding some show in the circus or the theater" (*Hist.* 1.32.1).[38] And Plutarch, writing at approximately the same time, characterizes Galba's death as one that its audience regarded as a

theatrical show: they run to the porticoes and elevated areas of the forum to watch it "like a spectacle" (*Galba* 26.4). Perhaps already in the tradition used by these two authors there was a tendency to see the brutal public assassinations of the year 69 as theatricalized death; alternatively such a dramatizing perspective may have been common to both Tacitus and Plutarch—products of an era in which a death, thanks to the amphitheaters, smacked of spectacle even when it was not a question of a fatal charade.[39]

These themes appear again, with particular starkness, in the late dialogue *Nero,* a work of unknown authorship assigned to Lucian's corpus.[40] In an undoubtedly apocryphal anecdote set in the mouth of the interlocutor Musonius Rufus, a Stoic philosopher exiled by Nero, the idea of a play ending in the death of its actor has been taken to its absolute extreme: an element familiar from the fatal charades, it recurs here in distorted form and in a purely theatrical context, with Nero playing a pivotal role in the violation of boundaries. According to "Musonius," while Nero was participating in the tragic competition at the Isthmus, a fellow competitor from Epirus showed some resistance to giving up the crown he was convinced his talents would win. Nero was naturally enough enraged by such a show of defiance and during the Epirote's performance "sent his own actors onstage as if they belonged to his act" (*Nero* 9). These supernumerary performers then dispatched the emperor's rival actually on the stage by smashing his throat in with their writing tablets. Here we have the familiar ingredient of an onstage death before the audience, not to mention an emperor who brings the murderous business of his real life to the stage, but all on a starkly literal level that both repeats and contrasts with the subtler accounts of the earlier sources; here the dénouement is representated as a violation of the drama, a symbol of the tyrant's taste for the display of unbridled violence and the flaunting of his immunity; in accounts closer to Nero's reign or more derivative from the Roman historical tradition, it is the sustaining of the plot line up to and including the moment of death that is emphasized, providing the topic with its paradoxical confusion of

frames, and thus, perhaps, its appeal—at least, if David Wiles is right about "the delight which any audience takes in its double awareness of actor and role," theatrical pleasure thus being generated by "the actor's power to be simultaneously himself . . . [and] a fictional sufferer" ([1991], 14).[41]

This fascination with the confusion of frames is still apparent in Suetonius' descriptions of shows during Nero's reign in which *fabula* and *poena* coincided, now as a result of accident. The question of whether or not this feature of the performance was part of a plan or a deviation from it apparently had little effect on the appeal of this odd perspective for writer and (presumably) audience alike. The biographer recounts that in a pyrrhic performance depicting Icarus' fall, the dancer acting the role of Icarus "crashed on his first attempt at flight next to Nero's amphitheater box and splattered the emperor with blood" (*Nero* 12.2). "Icarus," as a performer in a *pyrricha* and not a criminal in a fatal charade, was certainly not supposed to die this bloody death;[42] Suetonius' interest here is precisely the transformation of a myth into reality *despite* the intentions of all involved with the production. Since the mythical Icarus had met a similar end, for all the accidental quality of this incident it was not at any rate, like Orpheus' death, "contrary to the story" (*par' historian*). In the same paragraph Suetonius also describes the performance of another pyrrhic plot, this one patterned on the story of Pasiphae and the bull: "a bull had sex, or so many of the spectators believed, with a 'Pasiphae' who was hidden in a fake wooden heifer" (*Nero* 12.2). Here, in contrast, the spectators had apparently been conditioned to expect reality of their theater and believed, albeit without evidence to this effect, in the presence of a real woman inside the wooden bull.[43] Suetonius makes clear his skepticism about the actual presence of any such woman, but describes the audience's response as shaped by this curious perspective. Thus he juxtaposes in one passage two examples of *poenae* merged with *fabulae,* the one outcome due to the unreliability of projects involving human flight, the other a result of the audience's perspective alone. He even includes an example in

which it is not the play that becomes the punishment but the punishment that turns out to be play: Nero himself would dress up in the pelts of wild animals and, in a charade of what often transpired in the arena, attack the genitals of men and women tied to stakes. He was then "finished off," still in beast form, by his freedman Doryphorus (*Nero* 29.1).[44]

Conversely, the epigrammatist Lucillius, writing in the time of Nero, expresses the wish that an unnamed actor *had* been finished off onstage, as the plot of the pantomime "Canace" demanded:

> You danced everything like the story, but you overlooked
> the most important thing, and annoyed us greatly.
> For when you danced Niobe, you stood like a stone
> and again, as Capaneus, you fell down on the spot.
> But for Canace, what lack of skill; for though you had a sword
> you walked offstage still living: this violated the story.
>
> (*Anth. Pal.* 11.254)

Nero was the most famous performer of at least two of the three roles named here; but whether Lucillius is making an allusive jab at the actor-emperor or merely spoofing a portayer of similar roles,[45] the point of his lament is that the actor walked offstage still alive, and hence that his stage-death by sword was a representation rather than real.[46] This of course was the nature of pantomime, so that Lucillius' epigrammatic point comes from a complaint over plot violation ("this part was *par' historian*")[47] that itself violates the conventions of pantomime and suggests the speaker's willful confusion of categories in his wish to see this actor done in for good; it is this willful confusion that constitutes the joke. Here, then, death and theater, merging at the finale, would render the pantomime no pantomime, but the *story* "true"—a fatal charade, as it were, on the stage.[48]

It is worth noting that Lucillius presents the moment at which the performer violated the story as that of his merely acted death; in leaving the stage alive he failed to replicate Canace's actual suicide.

Such an emphasis on the moment of (failed) death is of course on one level just a clever way of saying "Do us a favor and die." On the other hand, it also directs a not entirely reasonable focus on the final moment alone, for strictly speaking what preceded was as much a violation of the story as the performer's ultimate survival: if acted death was "contrary to the story," why not acted metamorphosis into a stone, acted collapse, acted sex with one's brother? Although the performer would have crossed over into the real only at the moment of his suicide and although his failure to do so *continued* rather than contradicted the theatrical nature of what had preceded, it is as if, for Lucillius, death constituted the main criterion for viewing a particular performance as "the story come true."[49] Lucillius thus joins what appears to be something of a general tendency in the case of fatal charades; as we have seen, the death (less often, the mutilation or sexual degradation) of criminals in the theatrical punishments of the amphitheater tends to provide the focus of comments about the "realization" of the "play," and it was this death that, for the spectators, altered the imaginary nature of what had preceded. In the fatal charades of the amphitheater, as R. Auguet has commented, "It is clear that every effort was made to imbue the imaginary with a power that would make it one with reality in the minds of the spectators . . . It was the death of the actor which fulfilled this very precise function . . . the death of the actor was intended to give all this papier maché the cachet of authenticity which alone could suspend the spectator's disbelief . . . By a mechanism analogous to that of 'transference' the agony of the actor confers on what was false a sort of *reality in the second degree,* the mystery of which excites the mind" ([1972], 103–104; original emphasis). For the criminals of the amphitheater, of course, death was in fact the usual penalty. Hence the focus on violent demise as the point at which theater and reality merged had a basis in practical considerations arising from the requirements of the penal code: only such a dénouement effected simultaneously the fate to which these "actors" had been sentenced and the requirements of the plot. But we can see how this notion of violent death

as the site where theater and reality most naturally would meet seems to contain, in kernel, the consciousness of a whole epoch. It was a consciousness that found its richest material in Nero, whose murder of his mother allowed him to be described as an "Orestes," his rumored lust for her as an "Oedipus," and whose own death was interpreted as the moment *fabula* became *poena* for the emperor himself or for his subjects. After all, in Dio Nero too, though not in the amphitheater, quotes a line from the *Oedipus* that is a comment on his own fate and thus plays a role that was real only at the moment of his death.[50]

It provides an interesting epilogue to this chapter to note that certain modern critics, extrapolating from information in the sources to a point beyond what these sources present as Nero's actual intentions, have suggested that the emperor modeled almost all his murders and acts of violence on drama and mythology, as if the founding principle of the fatal charade—to theatricalize death—had become the organizing principle of his own view of the world and gave form to his political executions.[51] For example, Miriam T. Griffin draws attention in her recent biography of the emperor to a passage in Dio in which Nero and Seneca are said to have been inspired to build the collapsible boat designed to get rid of Agrippina after seeing another boat come apart "in the theater" to discharge beasts and then to become watertight again (Dio 61.12.2). Griffin comments on this that "there had always been a tendency for the theater to invade his life, as when a collapsible boat used on stage showed him how to murder his mother" ([1984], 164). But not only is Dio our only source for this suggestion (and it is one that may tell us more about Dio's literary intentions than Nero's homicidal ones); Griffin is too eager to put to use as "theater" a word which must refer in fact to a *naumachia* or *venatio* (a sea-battle or beast-hunt: must this involve representation?) in the amphitheater,[52] in this way making possible the suggestion that already by 59 A.D. Nero was guided by "theater" to dispose of his kin.[53]

Other scholars reconstruct more genuinely theatrical sources as

the models on which Nero consciously patterned the murders of his mother and his stepson Rufrius Crispus.[54] Most notably, R. M. Frazer argues that Nero was an "artist-criminal," a man who dramatized his crimes to match those of the stage and who "sometimes thought of himself as an actor off stage as well as on" ([1966], 18). Frazer cites as evidence Nero's firing of Rome in emulation of Priam, his murder of Agrippina and subsequent performances as Orestes, and his nocturnal wanderings in disguise. He even hypothesizes on the basis of Isidorus' taunt to Nero in Suetonius (Nero "sang well the ills of Nauplius," *Nero* 39.3) that Nero's murder of his stepson Rufrius Crispinus, in about 66 A.D., was modeled on the murder of Nauplius' son in myth; and he offers as further evidence the fact that Nero performed this role too, so that "another mythological pattern, by his contriving, is fulfilled in him. Just as in the burning of Rome he suffers the woes of Priam, so here he suffers the woes of Nauplius" (pp. 19–20).[55] To offer such a suggestion, I hold, is to follow the sources themselves in using drama to reshape an imperial life, a tempting but pernicious lure. Frazer does waver at the end, allowing the possibility that the source of this dramatization might be "popular rumor" reflected in the sources rather than truth. Barry Baldwin (1979) likewise argues that Nero himself modeled his behavior over Agrippina's corpse after that of Agave over the dead Pentheus; he was supposedly influenced in this theatrical depravity by this preparation for the lyre-performance of the *Attis or the Bacchantes* that he gave soon after this at the first Juvenalia (Dio 62.20.2). Such an argument not only accepts the sources' description of Nero's necrophiliac traits as being absolutely accurate and disregards the possibility that their own perspective was influenced by Nero's roles, but even adduces a theatrical or mythological model for Nero's actions where the sources themselves do not.[56]

For these interpreters of Nero's reign—in fact for interpreters ancient and modern alike—the power of Nero's role-playing on the stage has exerted a retroactive effect on his life: the actor even when offstage commits crimes redolent of his roles, and if the roles postdate

the crimes, they function as it were only as a confirmation of the theatrical impulse that spurred crimes of this nature in the first place. The modern confusion about Nero's relation to the theater follows the ancient one: the source of the dramatization of the crowning moments of his reign is variously identified as Nero himself, as Nero's contemporary audience at Rome, as the ancient sources by some modern ones, as some modern ones by others, or as differing combinations thereof. The suggestive power of these roles upon the tradition to the present day, it seems, has had the effect of realizing Apollonius' impossible vision: in his world, theater and reality give shape to each other in their mutual opposition and opposability, but for the Neros we have seen, the performer whom Apollonius described has in fact left the stage and, imbued with his mask, continues with his theatrical outrages.

3

OPPOSITIONAL INNUENDO: PERFORMANCE, ALLUSION, AND THE AUDIENCE

Pliny the Younger, early in the first book of his *Letters,* relates a story about the trap set for him in the days of Domitian's rule by M. Aquilius Regulus, a man notorious for his stint as informer under Nero and still active in the ruin of prominent senators. During Pliny's defense of one Arrionilla at the centumviral court, he had occasion to cite an earlier legal judgment passed by Mettius Modestus, the senator and former legate in Lycia; Mettius, however, had since been banished by Domitian, probably for treason, and was still in exile at the time of the trial.[1] The opposing counsel, none other than Regulus himself, seized on this opportunity to impugn Pliny's loyalty to the emperor in front of the gathering at the court, and Pliny emphasizes in his account the impossibility he felt of using either the truth or outright prevarication when pressed by Regulus to give his opinion on the exiled man: "So here's Regulus: 'I'd like to know, Pliny,' he said, 'what you think of Modestus.' You can see the risk, if I had answered 'I think highly of him,' and the disgrace, if I had said 'poorly' " (*Epist.* 1.5.5). In this unhappy situation Pliny tries to elude his tormentor by protesting that it is not Modestus on whom the court is passing judgment, and, when Regulus repeats his question, by remarking that questions should concern those on trial, not those already convicted. But Regulus attacks a third time: " 'I ask you then not what you think of Modestus but what you think of his loyalty' " (*Epist.* 1.5.6). And now Pliny (as he tells it) comes up with the perfect rebuttal: " 'You ask me what I think,' I said; 'but for my part I don't

ACTORS IN THE AUDIENCE

THEATRICALITY AND DOUBLESPEAK FROM NERO TO HADRIAN

SHADI BARTSCH

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