CHAPTER TWENTY

READING POLITICS IN SUETONIUS

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Accounts of omens and portents make up a significant part of Suetonius’ *Lives*, as do astrological predictions (though they have received negligible consideration in the work of modern scholars)…

In the course of the emperor Titus’ brief reign, there occurred a threat to his throne. Titus had assumed the office of *pontifex maximus*, and he took the priesthood so seriously that he vowed to keep his hands clean of any defilement—indeed, Suetonius affirms that he accepted the role precisely to keep himself pure. From this moment on, he remained innocent of any person’s death, even in intention, declaring that he would rather die than kill another. And yet, he did not lack provocation. For two men of patrician rank were found guilty of aspiring to the imperial throne (in keeping with his spare style in the later *Vitae* of *De Vita Caesarum*, Suetonius does not name them). In this pass, he did nothing more than admonish them to desist, thereby teaching the lesson, Suetonius tells us, that *principatum fato dari* (“imperial power is granted by fate,” *Tit.* 9.1; cf. Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 10.3). If, however, they desired anything besides that, he promised that he would confer it upon them.

Titus’ magnanimity did not stop here. He immediately dispatched messengers to the mother of one of them, who was outside the city at the time, in order to relieve her anxiety by announcing that her son was safe, and went so far as to invite the two men to an intimate dinner and even, on the subsequent day, had them sit beside him at a gladiatorial contest. Moreover, when the fighters, as was the custom, presented Titus with their swords to confirm that they were sharp, he passed them to his companions so that they might examine them—a little like those scenes in western movies in which the hero submits to being shaved by his arch enemy, unmindful of the razor at his throat. Finally, it was said, according to Suetonius, that Titus informed himself of the horoscopes of the two men, and confirmed that they were

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indeed in danger, but at some future time and not at his hands. And so it proved to be (Tit. 9.1–2).

How should one read this episode? Clearly, it is intended as great praise of Titus. Many of the elements in it, nevertheless, are conventional. In the tracks of Julius Caesar, it was regular for emperors to assume the office of pontifex maximus (Augustus established the precedent in 12 BCE), though this did not necessarily mean that they took their duties in the pious spirit that Titus did. Julius was also the model of imperial clemency; indeed, in 44 BCE the senate elected to erect a temple in honor of clementia Caesaris (Plut. Caes. 57.4; App. BCiv. 106; Cass. Dio 44.6.4). Augustus, in turn, adopted it as a prime virtue of his own: it was inscribed as one of the four cardinal imperial virtues on the clupeus virtutum (“shield of virtues”) that the senate awarded to Augustus in the year 27 (Res Gestae 34). That no one was slain during Titus’ reign is exceptional, and no doubt due in part to its brevity; at all events, Dio Cassius (66.19.1) also records that Titus put no member of the senate to death, nor was anyone else killed during his rule, and the story is endorsed by Ausonius (De XII Caesaribus 9) and by Orosius (7.9.13), who affirm that no citizen blood was shed under Titus’ administration. Titus’ dramatic gesture of confidence in the two would-be assassins whom he has pardoned is paralleled, curiously enough, in stories concerning both Nerva and Trajan. According to Cassius Dio (68.3.2), Nerva seated Crassus and others who had conspired against him by his side during a spectacle, and gave them swords to test for sharpness, though they were unaware that their plot had been detected: such was his lack of fear of sudden death. Dio further reports (68.15.4–6) that Trajan, unaccompanied by a bodyguard, visited the home of Licinius Sura after he had been denounced for conspiring against him, and even entrusted himself to Sura’s doctor and barber. The following day Trajan is reported to have said: εἰ ἤθελέ με Σούρας ἀποκτεῖναι, χθῆς ἂν ἀπεκτόνει (“if Sura had wished to kill me, he would have done so yesterday,” 68.15.6).

Nevertheless, there are several elements that are unique to Suetonius’ account, and it is these that lend the passage its specific character. For

\[\text{2 It is not simply an encomium, however; cf. Steidle (1951) 106–7.}\]
\[\text{4 Cf. Fears (1981) 885–90.}\]
\[\text{5 See Mooney (1930) 498; Martinet (1981) 99. According to Cassius Dio (68.2), Nerva too refrained from killing any senator, despite plots against him.}\]