CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

NATURE’S MONSTER:
CALIGULA AS EXEMPLUM IN SENECAS DIALOGUES

AMANDA WILCOX

Vice (ἡ κακία) is peculiarly distinguished from dreadful accidents, for even taken in itself it does in a sense come about in accordance with the reason of nature and, if I may put it so, its genesis is not useless in relation to the universe as a whole, since otherwise the good would not exist either.


1. Introduction

When Gaius Caesar, popularly known as Caligula, succeeded his uncle Tiberius in 37 CE, the initial reaction of the Roman senate and people seems to have been relief. Cassius Dio records that (59.6.1):

[H]e at first showed great deference to the senators on an occasion when knights and also some of the populace were present at their meeting. He promised to share his power with them and to do whatever would please them, calling himself their son and ward.¹

πρῶτον μὲν τοὺς βουλευτάς, παρόντων ἐν τῷ συνεδρίῳ καὶ ἱππέων τοῦ τε δῆμου τινῶν, πολλὰ ἐκδιάλεξεν, τὴν τε γὰρ ἀφεὴν κοινώσειν αφίς καὶ πάνθ᾽ ὑστερὰν ἀν καὶ ἐκείνος ἀφέσῃ ποιήσειν ὑπέσχετο, καὶ υἱὸς καὶ τρόφιμος αὐτῶν λέγον ἑιναι.

But within seven months of his accession, Gaius fell ill. According to Philo, he emerged from convalescence permanently transformed, or perhaps revealed for what he really already was (Legatio ad Gaium 22):

¹ Translations of Seneca are my own. Translations of other ancient authors are
Within a short time Gaius, who had been regarded as a savior and benefactor ... began to play his master card, as the saying is, changing to brutality, or rather, openly displaying the savagery which he had concealed under a cloak of hypocrisy.

Suetonius divides his *Life* of Gaius into two parts. As transition from the first of these to the second, he writes (22.1): ‘So much for the princeps, the rest of this history must tell about a monster’ (*hactenus quasi de principe, reliqua ut de monstro narranda sunt*). It appears that from promising beginnings, Gaius’ reign quickly deteriorated. An alarming cycle of assassinations, spending sprees, and bizarre religious innovations requiring ever more extravagant spending began. Expensive adventures such as a military campaign to Britain that were taken up and abruptly abandoned led to ever more dire fiscal straits. Inconsistency and uncertainty were hallmarks of Gaius’ reign. In January of 41, having alienated the senate and offended the praetorian guard, he was assassinated. Ancient sources for his rule are uniformly hostile. Consequently, a negative depiction of Gaius in the post-Gaian works of Seneca the Younger, who entered the senate late in Tiberius’ reign, comes as no surprise. Yet the sheer frequency with which Gaius appears in these works is noteworthy: he features in eight of Seneca’s twelve *Dialogi* as an exemplar of vice.

Miriam Griffin has observed that Seneca had a good reason for his frequent recourse to Gaius, as ‘[he] was a flamboyant Princeps who met a satisfactorily violent end, thus an ideal subject for a moralist’ (1976, 214). It is true that Gaius’ biography is a rich repository of anecdotes for both entertainers and moralists; the outrageous actions and sayings attributed to him make for vivid, memorable reading. In this chapter, I offer a more detailed assessment of the use to which Seneca puts Gaius in his dialogues than has been previously attempted. I do so, first, to show that Gaius’ badness matters for our evaluation of Senecan philosophy. I contend that Seneca’s representation of Gaius

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from the Loeb series, with the exception of Philo, who is quoted from the translation by E.M. Smallwood.

2 Clarke 1965 provides an overview of the Roman historical sources about Seneca under Caligula, including Dio’s report that Gaius, jealous of Seneca’s oratorical prowess, ordered Seneca to kill himself (59.19.7–8). For the date and circumstances of Seneca’s entry into the senate, see Griffin 1976, 43–50.