

# Fame and Infamy

*Essays for Christopher Pelling on  
Characterization in Greek and Roman  
Biography and Historiography*

Edited by

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OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

## Colour in Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*

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... he would say to you, 'I am like the purple stripe on a cloak (*οἶον ἐν ἱματίῳ πορφύρα*)—do not expect me to be similar to other men, nor criticize my nature that has made me stand out from other men.'

Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.1.23

- The word house in blue; minotaur and all ~~struck~~ passages in red.
- The only struck line in Chapter XXI appears in purple.

Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (2000), cover matter  
(‘A Note on This Edition: Full Colour’)

When reading ancient biography, colour ought to be useful to think with for a number of overlapping reasons. Stylistically, colour works well in ekphrastic description<sup>1</sup> as a mode which history-based narratives often embrace.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a chromatic characteristic may switch on assumptions about veracity vs falsehood, social decorum vs transgressive pageantry, and so forth. Recent studies of colour in antiquity have explored its impact across the ideological,

I am grateful to Rhiannon Ash and Judith Mossman for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. It is an honour to join in the festschrift for Chris Pelling.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Quint. 8.3.64–5, with Webb 2009: 107–10 and further remarks at 122–3 about the cultural formulae that sustain *ekphrasis*. On the rhetorical plenitude of colour in Philostratus' *Eikones*, see Dubel 2009.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Luc. *Hist. Scr.* 19; Q. Curt. 3.3.17–19; Ael. *VH* 9.3; already Hdt. 1.98, 9.22.

ethical, and cognitive dimensions;<sup>3</sup> in a nutshell, colour contributes to evaluative discourse—which is pursued (whether rudimentarily, semi-consciously, or committedly) by all biographical literature from the Greco-Roman world.<sup>4</sup> Plutarch's *Lives*, where ethico-political evaluation reigns supreme,<sup>5</sup> zoom in on colours for the sake of contextualizing and judging both individuals and polities. Thus, sizeable purple-dyed (ἀλουργής) fabrics are equated with luxury, ergo decadence and arrogance (*Lyc.* 13.6; *Philop.* 9.7; *Luc.* 40.1; *Alex.* 67.3; *Alc.* 16.1, 32.2; *Pomp.* 24.4; *Ant.* 26.1); a moralist Roman statesman makes a point of wearing a darker, less fashionable shade of purple (*Cato Min.* 6.3);<sup>6</sup> the citizens who dress up in festive white apparel for an unworthy honorand have clearly lost the plot (*Pomp.* 40.3–5, cf. *Cato Min.* 13); the Persians' white and soft bodies' translate into proof of their martial inferiority (*Ages.* 9.8); Alcibiades has a greater ability to assimilate himself to different *mores* than a chameleon (*Alc.* 23.4–5).<sup>7</sup>

It is, again, Plutarch's *Lives* which offer the strongest clues to the deep, architectonic connection between colour and the very idea of biography. When Plutarch juxtaposes his life-writing with portraiture (*Alex.* 1.3; *Cim.* 2.2–5)<sup>8</sup>, the poetics of biographical text implicitly falls back on the polychromy in ancient painting and, if we stretch the brackets of the Plutarchan analogy ever so slightly (cf. *Cim.* 2.1–2; *Per.* 2.1), sculpture.<sup>9</sup> Portrait sculpture to Plutarch is a valid enough medium for gauging a man's 'inscape';<sup>10</sup> notably, eye and skin colour, readable off polychromous statues, may become building blocks of

<sup>3</sup> The most multi-faceted and stimulating interpretation to date is Bradley 2009a. See also Bessone 1998; Jones 1999; Kasprzyk 2002; Duigan 2004; Rouveret 2006; Villard 2006; Naas 2006; Baj 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Averintsev 2002: 24–6. Let us not forget that a good handful of ancient names are colour-adjectives: Pyrrhus, Glaucus, Rufus, Flavius, and so on.

<sup>5</sup> Through subtle readerly-writerly stratagems: see e.g. Pelling 2002a: esp. 237–51, 349–63; Stadter 1996; Duff 1999; Zadorojnyi 2012.

<sup>6</sup> On this passage, see Reinhold 1970: 45; Bessone 1998: 174; Bradley 2009a: 197.

<sup>7</sup> Duff 1999: 235.

<sup>8</sup> Duff 1999: 16–17; Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 41–50; Kaesser 2004; Hägg 2012: 271–2.

<sup>9</sup> For use of colour in the Greek and Roman visual arts, see e.g. Reuterswärd 1960; Salvetti 1998; Brinkmann 2003 and 2008; Descamp-Lequime 2006; Østergaard 2008; Bradley 2009b; Manfrini 2009; various contributions in Tiverios and Tsiafakis 2002; Liverani et al. 2004; Descamps-Lequime 2007. Plutarch dwells on the indispensability of pigments for production of artwork in *De Def.* 436B–C.

<sup>10</sup> Wardman 1967, 1974: 140–3; Mossman 1991: 107–19, esp. 111; Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 114–15.

characterization (*Sulla* 2.1–2). Alongside such loosely physiognomical commentary,<sup>11</sup> Plutarch also employs colour (rather more vigorously in the *Moralia* than the *Lives*) as a point-blank ethical trope: there is a 'hue' (χρῶμα, χροιά) to virtuous characters and actions (*Phoc.* 3.8; *Arat.* 48.5; *Mul. Virt.* 243C), and vices can be mapped onto an elaborate palette too (*De sera* 565B–D).<sup>12</sup> It would be fair to say that for Plutarch, portraits, physiognomy, and chromatic symbolism tie in with each other—as well as with the motif of optic awareness that is key to advertising evaluative cogitation through (Plutarchan) narrative.<sup>13</sup> In Plutarch's programmatic proems, biography is likened to a mirror (*Aem.* 1.1),<sup>14</sup> while eyesight itself serves as comparandum and foil for the intellectual processing of values and ethical standards (*Per.* 1.3; *Demetr.* 1.1–4).<sup>15</sup> Saliently, his case rests on the premise that the primary and intrinsic purpose of vision is to perceive colours:<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Duff 1999: 166–7. For valuable, compact discussion of Plutarch's stance on physiognomics, see Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 111 and Boys-Stones 2007: 123, n. 239. Cf. Georgiadou 1992; Tatum 1996; Duff 1999: 93; Pelling 2011: 214–15; see also n. 28 below.

<sup>12</sup> 'Observe . . . the motley variety of the souls' colours here (τὰ ποικιλὰ ταῦτα καὶ παντοδαπὰ χρώματα τῶν ψυχῶν). This one, drab and dirty (ὄρφνιον καὶ ῥυπαρόν), is tainted with meanness and avarice; that one is bloody and flaming red (αἰμωπὸν καὶ διάπυρον) with cruelty and rancour. Where there is the blue-grey (γλαυκίον), some incontinence in regard to pleasures has been scarcely obliterated. Resentful envy, if present, exudes this sort of sick-green pus (τὸ ἰώδες καὶ ὑπουλον), like a squid's ink (τὸ μέλαν) . . . as the soul is swayed by passions and, in turn, sways the body, its wickedness generates the colours (ἡ κακία . . . τὰς χροίας ἀναδίδωσιν) . . .'. See Muñoz Gallarte 2012. The rare adjective γλαυκινός (also used about the dress of Phalaris' henchmen in *Praec. Reipub.* 821E) might mean not bluish-grey but yellow: Blanc 2002: 13–14; yet cf. Pollux, *Onomasticon* 4.117–18. It is worth stressing that for Plutarch, the step from the aesthetics of colour to moralism is a short one anyway: *Quaes. Rom.* 270E–F; *De Tranq. An.* 473F; esp. *De Aud. Poet.* 16B, with González Escudero 2001; Villard 2006: 45; Hunter and Russell 2011: 85–6.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Duff 1999: 41–3.

<sup>14</sup> Duff 1999: 30–4; Zadorojnyi 2010.

<sup>15</sup> In the *Pericles* passage, the mind is attracted by virtue in the same way as the eye is by 'propitious colour' (χρῶα πρόσφορος); see Stadter 1989: 55–6; Hägg 2012: 273–4. By contrast, in the *Life of Demetrius* sight and other senses rank below the 'skills' (τέχναι) that are rationally and philosophically competent; Duff 1999: 45–6, 2004: 272; Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 111–12; cf. *Per.* 1.2, with Duff 1999: 36 and 2004: 273; Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 105–8.

<sup>16</sup> This tends to be the axiomatic standpoint in Greek writing on sensory perception: Arist. *De Anima* 418a26–7; Gal. *PHP* 7.5 and 7.7 (V.625, 637 Kühn); Boudon 2002: 67, 71–2. Cf. Bradley 2009a: 63–4 and 2013: 132 with n. 14—the latter study, however, pleads for weighing the ancient experience of colour on synaesthetic terms.

ὡς γὰρ ὀφθαλμῷ χροῖα πρόσφορος, ἥς τὸ ἀθηρὸν ἄμα καὶ τερπνὸν ἀναζωπυρεῖ καὶ τρέφει τὴν ὄψιν...

Just as colour is propitious to the eye, when its bloom and joy rekindle and nourish the gaze...

(Per. 1.3)

ἡ μὲν γὰρ αἴσθησις οὐδὲν τι μᾶλλον ἐπὶ λευκῶν ἢ μελάνων διαγνώσει γέγονεν...

For our sense-perception is not better qualified for recognizing white rather than black entities...

(Demetr. 1.2)<sup>17</sup>

Plutarch thrives on the manifold conceptual linkage between colour and biography. Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, over and above other major differences from Plutarch's *Lives*,<sup>18</sup> apparently lack this chromatic verve. Thus, we do not hear Suetonius drawing parallels between biographical texts and portraiture. The preface to the series, where he *may* have resorted to such rhetoric, is sadly missing.<sup>19</sup> Suetonius is a poker-faced narrator,<sup>20</sup> whose opinions and agenda have to be unpacked from the narrative. Yet the Suetonian narrative does not disappoint; the overflowing, staccato anecdotes of the *Lives* add up to political and cultural messages.<sup>21</sup> Colour was certainly part of the aesthetical and ideological matrix of imperial Roman literature.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, it was under the Principate that the discourse of visuality acquired special relevance for the projection and assessment of power.<sup>23</sup> In what follows I attempt to construe colour in Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* as a diegetically embedded ingredient of both Suetonius' biographical strategy and the political intuition behind it.

<sup>17</sup> Plutarch's choice of white and black as the representative, 'pukka' colours (add *De Virt. Mor.* 440F, 444D) might seem banal, but this dovetails with the Greek philosophical theories of colour (see esp. Arist. *De Sensu* 439b16–27, 442a12–13): cf. Gaiser 1965: 187, 195; Sassi 2009: 280–5. These theories are, in turn, backed up by the paramountcy of brightness and darkness, at the expense of hue, in the Greek chromatic imagination: e.g. Rowe 1974: 334–5, 337–8; Raina 2003: 25–6; Sassi 2004: 122, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Wardman 1974: 144–52 remains the most incisive broad-brush *synkrisis* of Plutarchan and Suetonian approaches to life-writing.

<sup>19</sup> For the scraps of extant data, see Baldwin 1983: 38–41; Gascou 1984: 254–5, n. 2 and 343–4.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Wallace-Hadrill 1995: 23–4; Dubuisson 2003.

<sup>21</sup> These are fruitfully reconstructed by modern scholars: see e.g. Konstan 2009; Power 2012; Gunderson 2014; Ash, forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> Bradley 2009a, *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> Hekster 2005; cf. Benton 2002: 41–5; generally Barton 2002: 220.

'Sueton schreibt farblos.' The verdict passed by Eduard Norden, in a footnote, on the quality of Suetonius' prose<sup>24</sup> oversimplifies Suetonian stylistic behaviour;<sup>25</sup> if taken literally, it is plainly incorrect. On many occasions across the *Lives of the Caesars*, colour constitutes the point of interest for the narrative.<sup>26</sup> By way of homage to Suetonius' method of organizing the text thematically (*Aug.* 9.1 *per species*), his use of colour terms can be grouped under four headings:<sup>27</sup>

- 1) Physical appearance of the Princes: *Jul.* 45.1; *Aug.* 79.2; *Tib.* 68.2; *Cal.* 50.1; *Nero* 51; *Galba* 21; *Vit.* 17.2; *Dom.* 18.1
- 2) Omens and portents signalling either ascendance to the Principate, or demise: *Aug.* 94.6; *Galba* 1.1, 8.2, 18.2
- 3) The Princes' kit (clothing, noteworthy artefacts, mount, attendant): *Jul.* 49.3, 84.1; *Cal.* 35.1, 37.2; 55.3; *Nero* 25.1, 30.3, 47.2, 48.1, 50; *Dom.* 2.2, 4.2, 4.4
- 4) Miscellaneous colour-related responses and operations by the Princes towards other people *qua* users of colour: *Jul.* 43.1, 79.1; *Aug.* 25.3, 40.5, 44.2, 65.3; *Cal.* 18.3, 35.1, 47, 55.2; *Claud.* 20.1; *Nero* 32.3; *Galba* 9.1; *Vit.* 14.3; *Dom.* 7.1, 12.3.

Each of these categories attests to specific strands within the semantic tradition of colour in Roman culture. Thus, the presence of colour is

<sup>24</sup> Norden 1915: i. 387–8, n. 1; cf. Wallace-Hadrill 1995: 19.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Cizek 1977: 18–25; Lounsbury 1991: 3761–78; Fry 2003 and 2009: 19–27; Hägg 2012: 230; Damon 2014: 42–8, 51–6; Hurley 2014; Power 2014; Ash, forthcoming.

<sup>26</sup> In what follows I concentrate primarily on 'non-metallic' colours. Gold, silver, and bronze glitter a great deal throughout the Suetonian *Lives*; for gold, see Lounsbury 1991: 3757–8. Normally the emphasis would be on the economic value and/or ostentation (e.g. *Jul.* 54.3; *Aug.* 25.3–4, 71.1; *Tib.* 6.3, 14.3; *Cal.* 42; *Claud.* 21.3; *Nero* 10.2; *Galba* 8.1; *Dom.* 13.2; gold as symbol of ethico-political goodness: *Dom.* 23.2). Yet at times the colour of the sheen is foregrounded too, e.g. as the uniform of a new Circus faction (*Dom.* 7.1), or Caligula's golden cloak and gold-besprinkled beard: *Cal.* 19.2 and 52, with Wardle 1994: 338. The chromatic effect of grey hair can be accented too (*Galba* 8.2).

<sup>27</sup> Priority has to be given to the clear-cut colour lexis, even though colour is of course implicit in any reference to the *toga praetexta* or the senatorial stripe (*latus clauus*), exotic garments (*Nero* 51 *synthesinam indutus*; *Cal.* 52), paintings (e.g. *Jul.* 47; *Tib.* 44.2; *Nero* 11.2), mosaics (*Jul.* 46)—the list could go on. Some episodes unmistakably induce the reader to visualize the scene in colour: e.g. the *ekphrasis* of the Domus Aurea (*Nero* 31.2), Augustus' visit to the sepulchre of Alexander the Great (*Aug.* 18.1 *corona aurea imposita ac floribus aspersis*), the suspicious stains (*liuores*) all over the corpse of Germanicus (*Cal.* 1.2), or Caligula splattering himself with blood of the flamingo he was sacrificing (*Cal.* 57.4), which turns him into 'a surrogate sacrifice' (Hurley 1993: 205).

not at all surprising in the broadly physiognomic Suetonian close-ups of the emperors' heads (1):<sup>28</sup> Julius Caesar had black and energetic eyes (*Jul.* 45.1 *nigris uegetisque oculis*); Galba's eyes were blue (*Galba* 21 *oculis caeruleis*);<sup>29</sup> the hair of Augustus and Nero was light-blond (*Aug.* 79.2 *capillum . . . subflauum*; *Nero* 51 *subflauo capillo*);<sup>30</sup> the overall complexion (*color*) is noted as 'fair' for Julius (*Jul.* 45.1 *colore candido*) and Tiberius (*Tib.* 68.2), but 'very pale' for Caligula (*Cal.* 50.1 *colore expallido*), whereas Augustus was 'between dusky and fair' (*Aug.* 79.2 *colorem inter aquilum candidumque*); Domitian is ruddy-faced (*Dom.* 18.1 *uultu . . . ruborisque pleno*) by nature; the face of Vitellius was 'typically flushed' due to binge-drinking (*Vit.* 17.2 *facies rubida plerumque ex uinolentia*). Suetonius is attentive to facial colour, because it can readily yield psychological and ethical symptoms.<sup>31</sup> Under omens (2), the primordial polarity between the auspiciousness of bright/white (*Aug.* 94.6 'extraordinarily white' horses, *equis candore eximio*, in a dream; *Galba* 1.1 white hen, *gallinam albam*) and the unlucky dark/black (*Galba* 18.2 *atratumque . . . senem*) is brought into play.<sup>32</sup> Alternatively, the symbolism is inferred contextually: a youngster who has turned grey in an instant (*Galba* 8.2 *capillus repente toto capite canesceret*) portends that a young ruler (Nero) will be succeeded by an old man.

Finally, categories (3) and (4) have ample ethico-political potential at a micro-diegetic level. Purple, given its status of 'prestige cloth'

<sup>28</sup> Evans 1950: 277–82 and 1969: 56–9; Couissin 1953; more cautiously, Gascou 1984: 594–616; Stok 1995; Bérard 2007: 247–8; and Hägg 2012: 228–9. On the importance of body and eye colour in ancient physiognomics, see Elsner 2007: 218–21; further, Bradley 2009a: 135–50.

<sup>29</sup> On the Roman attitude to blue eyes, see Bradley 2009a: 11, with n. 53; cf. Polemo, *Phys.* (Leiden) A6.

<sup>30</sup> The *cognomen* of Nero's father is explained (*Nero* 1.1) from the red beards (*rutila barba*) that run in the family ever since their ancestor's beard was divinely changed from black to copper-coloured (*e nigro rutilum aeri que adsimilem capillum*); cf. Plut. *Aem.* 25.2–4.

<sup>31</sup> See esp. Lindsay 1993: 153 and Wardle 1994: 327 on Caligula's pallor, and Bradley 2004: 119–20 and 2009a: 156–8 on Domitian's blush; cf. generally Elsner 2007: 206.

<sup>32</sup> See too the Egyptians and Ethiopians performing scenes from the underworld for Caligula (*Cal.* 57.4 *argumenta inferorum per Aegyptios et Aethiopas explicarentur*) shortly before his death. An interestingly 'chromogenic' good omen is the rainbow-like circle around the sun during Octavian's arrival at Rome (*Aug.* 95 *circulus ad speciem caelestis arcus orbem solis ambiit*); this omen probably has to do with the link made by the Romans between the rainbow and the colour purple—see Bradley 2009a: 48–50.

(Bradley 2009a: 50) and entrenched associations with power,<sup>33</sup> is significant throughout the *Lives* in more than one way. The funerary display of Julius Caesar asserts his kingliness via the inclusion of purple (*Jul.* 84.1 *lectus eburneus auro ac purpura stratus*). There are attempts by emperors to restrict wearing of purple. Julius tightens up the rules on purple clothing (*Jul.* 43.1 *conchyliatae uestis*);<sup>34</sup> Nero engineers a cynical ploy, followed up with disturbingly drastic enforcement:

Having forbidden the use of amethystine or Tyrian purple dyes (*usum amethystini ac Tyrii coloris*), he secretly sent a man to sell a few ounces on a market day but shut down the shops of all the other dealers. It is even said that when he saw a matron in the audience at one of his recitals clad in the forbidden colour (*uetita purpura cultam*), he pointed her out to his agents, who dragged her out, and had her stripped on the spot not only of her garment, but also of her property.

(*Nero* 32.3, trans. J. C. Rolfe, modified)

King Ptolemy of Mauretania is 'suddenly' (*repente*) executed by Caligula for having worn an eye-catching purple robe in the amphitheatre (*Cal.* 35.1 *quod . . . conuertisse hominum oculos fulgore purpureae abollae*).<sup>35</sup> As a visual statement of the emperor's authority, purple can also undergo cultural transmogrification: Domitian presides at the Capitoline Games (*Dom.* 4.4) 'attired in a purple toga in the Greek fashion' (*purpureaque amictus toga Graecanica*), surrounded by similarly dressed (*pari habitu*) priests.<sup>36</sup> Often purple allows Suetonius to highlight the extravagant and outright scandalous luxury of a Princes' lifestyle. Caligula's favourite horse was provided, among other costly comforts, with purple blankets (*Cal.* 55.3 *purpurea tegumenta*). Nero indulged in fishing 'with a golden net drawn

<sup>33</sup> Even so, the ancient use of purple was not (even in the later Roman Empire) aligned *exclusively* with regal status: Reinhold 1970; Bessone 1998; Bradley 2009a: 197–209.

<sup>34</sup> Reinhold 1970: 45–6; Bessone 1998: 177.

<sup>35</sup> One plausible rationale for this cruelty is the wish to monopolize purple within the visual protocol of Roman autocracy: Lindsay 1993: 127 and Wardle 1994: 271—*pace* Reinhold 1970: 50, n. 1 and Bessone 1998: 180. Cf. *Aug.* 60: at meetings with Augustus client kings would be wearing togas rather than their royal garb (*togati ac sine regio insigni*); yet see Bradley 2009a: 200 on the ideological complexities of purple in the Augustan era.

<sup>36</sup> Janssen 1919: 23; Jones 1996: 43–5; cf. Jones and Milns 2002: 131. Somewhat oddly, Bessone 1998: 183 believes here that Domitian is 'democratic as to costume' ('Democratico in fatto d'abbigliamento').

by cords woven by purple and scarlet threads' (*Nero* 30.3 *rete aurato et purpura coccoque funibus nexis*, trans. J. C. Rolfe).<sup>37</sup> Back in the days of the republic, Cicero seized upon the allegation that Julius Caesar had reclined in king Nicomedes' bedroom 'on a golden couch arrayed in purple' (*Jul.* 49.3 *in aureo lecto ueste purpurea decubuisse*, trans. J. C. Rolfe).

Suetonius' *Caligula* and *Nero* are, arguably, the most chromatically intense biographies of the whole series. References to the colour and style of Nero's dress form a kind of substructural axis in his life-story. At the finale of his quasi-triumphal<sup>38</sup> return from Greece in AD 68 he wears 'a [Greek] mantle emblazoned with golden stars, over a purple robe' (*Nero* 25.1 *in ueste purpurea distinctaque stellis aureis chlamyde*). As his downfall is gathering momentum, Nero considers the option of dressing in black and making a contrite appeal to the crowd (*Nero* 47.2 *an atratus prodiret in publicum*). Fleeing from Rome, he wraps himself in a 'faded cloak' (*Nero* 48.1 *paenulam obsoleti coloris superinduit*). Further humiliation ensues, of which Nero is poignantly self-aware (esp. *Nero* 48.3 *'haec est, inquit, 'Neronis decocta'*)—yet in death, dignity and chromatic gentility are restored to him: his body is laid out on the pyre 'in white gold-embroidered robes (*stragulis albis auro intextis*) which he had worn on 1st January' (*Nero* 50), and his ashes are put to rest in a tomb built of three varieties of expensive coloured marble (*Nero* 50).

Caligula, on the other hand, treats colour as a resource for staging flamboyant spectacles. In his *Life*, the arena of the Circus gets strewn (or, paved?) with cinnabar and malachite (*Cal.* 18.3 *minio et chryso-colla constrato Circo*)<sup>39</sup>—the club colours of the Red and the Green factions, respectively. His custom-built ships for luxurious cruising are furnished with multi-coloured sails (*Cal.* 37.2 *uersicoloribus uelis*).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> For a compatible, if more grotesque, instance of chromatic hedonism pushed beyond the item's practical utility, see Petr. *Sat.* 38.5, with Schmeling 2011: 143.

<sup>38</sup> Warmington 1977: 83; Gasco 1984: 491.

<sup>39</sup> Hurley 1993: 72–3; Wardle 1994: 188.

<sup>40</sup> More accurately, the sails (or maybe, awnings: Hurley 1993: 142; cf. esp. Plut. *Pomp.* 24.4) are 'colour-changing'; the adjective *uersicolor* implies sophisticated coloration with a shimmering, rainbow-like lustre: Culham 1986: 237, with n. 10; for a similar understanding of the Greek ποικίλος, see e.g. Manfrini 2009: 32. It is feasible that Caligula's pleasure fleet, like the navy of Alexander the Great (Pliny *Nat.* 19.22), was fitted out with expensive polychromous textiles. On a smaller scale, Civilis' rebels on the Rhine made 'not unseemly' sails out of 'multi-coloured officer cloaks' (Tac. *Hist.* 5.23.1 *captae luntres sagulis uersicoloribus haud indecore pro uelis iuuabantur*);

Perhaps the most outrageous exploitation of colour by Caligula is when he commands a select gang of Gauls to dye their hair red (*rutilare . . . comam*), so that they can pretend to be Germans in the emperor's triumphal parade after a campaign that never happened (*Cal.* 47). Mark Bradley rightly comments that this story, along with an analogous one about Domitian (Tac. *Agr.* 39.1), encapsulates the Roman élite's anxiety about the visual side of political experience under autocracy: 'Bad emperors could control and manipulate reality by controlling and manipulating vision' (2009a: 176). It is hard to disagree with Bradley here.<sup>41</sup> But the role of colour in the *Lives of the Caesars* exceeds, one should think, that of a test of political integrity. For while mentions of colour are not distributed evenly across the twelve biographies,<sup>42</sup> there seems to be no straightforward correlation between presence or absence of colour and the individual Princeps' profile. The narratives of Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, but also of Julius, Augustus, and Galba, are markedly richer in colour references than the *Lives* of Tiberius and Vitellius, whereas the *Lives* of Claudius, Otho, Vespasian, and Titus are virtually devoid of chromatic features. Indeed, it could be argued that there is no consistent colour-scheme as such for a Suetonian *Life*; just two out of twelve protagonists have their eye-colour explicitly identified.<sup>43</sup>

My contention is that, discrepancies and irregular rate of occurrence notwithstanding,<sup>44</sup> colour in the *Caesars* works out as a factor

the ships were snatched latterly from the Romans (*Hist.* 5.22), and presumably so were the cloaks—compare the cloak of Caecina in *Hist.* 2.20.

<sup>41</sup> Yet Bradley's opposition between natural and artificial colour is complicated further by the fact that the western barbarians were known to dye their hair red too: Pliny *Nat.* 28.191, cf. Tac. *Hist.* 4.61, with Heubner 1976: 142.

<sup>42</sup> With the necessary provisos: see nn. 26–7 above.

<sup>43</sup> Baldwin 1983: 496–7.

<sup>44</sup> And it may not be entirely futile to ponder on the chromatically relevant scenarios that are *not* reported by Suetonius, e.g. the black-themed dinner organized by Domitian (Cass. Dio 67.9.1–3), Nero's emerald on the surface of which (rather than 'through': see Trinquier 2002: 108–9) he watched gladiatorial fights (Pliny *Nat.* 37.64 *Nero princeps gladiatorum pugnas spectabat in smaragdo*), Augustus' regulation on purple clothes (Cass. Dio 49.16.1) or Tiberius' example-setting preference of a grey cloak over a purple one (Cass. Dio 57.13.5). Nero's support for the Green faction (*prasini*) at the races is merely adumbrated by Suetonius (*Nero* 22.1), whereas Pliny (*Nat.* 33.90) tells that Nero had the arena strewn with malachite (*chryso-colla*) and charioteered himself, wearing a 'tunic of the same colour' (*concolori panno*).

of Suetonius' biographical design for the series<sup>45</sup>—a deep holistic principle for envisioning the generic emperor, so to speak. The reasons why colour is sprinkled (or not) onto each particular episode may vary, being more or less transparent and more or less ad hoc and *ad hominem*, but equally reflecting the overt or submerged Roman concerns about social and moral norms, identities, and perversions (e.g. Domitian's *rubor*). Yet if there is a single, overarching criterion of chromaticity in Suetonius, it reveals itself in the practice of clustering colour around the lead character.<sup>46</sup> To put it bluntly, in each *Life* the Princeps is the only figure who can own colour, interact with colour, and have a say, for better or worse, over matters of colour.

This might not immediately strike us as a consequential and fresh idea. After all, in the narrative economy of biography it is expected that the protagonist would receive the maximum share of descriptive details<sup>47</sup>—facial appearance, costume, and so on—which are likely to involve colour. Of the categories proposed above, (1), (2), and (3) represent the aspects which Suetonius as a life-writer cannot help addressing and, to some degree, painting in. Having said that, the same category (3) and especially the most action-packed category (4) look beyond the rudimentary requirements of biographical writing. The Suetonian emperors attire themselves in coloured fabrics,<sup>48</sup> unchallenged by their intra-diegetic environment—except Julius Caesar (*Jul.* 49.3), but the criticism must pre-date his dictatorship; Nero's

<sup>45</sup> For succinct survey of the debate on composition of the *Caesars*, see Bradley 1991: 3724, n. 102. My reading is pitched as fundamentally unitarian; cf. Hägg 2012: 219; Power 2014.

<sup>46</sup> The bulk of Plutarchan episodes that bring up colour (most frequently, of dyed textiles) are likewise centred on the *Life's* protagonist (e.g. *Thes.* 17.4–5; *Pel.* 21.1, 22.1–2; *Sert.* 11.3; *Ant.* 18.2, 44.3; *Alex.* 16.7; *Sulla* 29.9; *Py.* 3.7–8; *Pomp.* 68.4; *Crass.* 23.1; *Alc.* 32.2; *Rom.* 26.2; *Luc.* 39.5). Yet Plutarch may allocate colour to supporting and minor characters in a *Life* too (*Fab.* 15.1; *Aem.* 34.1; *Ant.* 80.4; *Cim.* 16.8, with Aristoph. *Lys.* 1138; *Phoc.* 28.5; *Aem.* 25.4), including the enemies the hero does battle against (*Aem.* 18.5; *Pyr.* 16.13; *Pomp.* 24.4; *Mar.* 11.5; *Artax.* 11.9), as well as to rituals and sites that commemorate the main events of the *Life* (*Arist.* 21.4; *Arat.* 53.6; *Them.* 8.4, 8.6). Farthest removed from the protagonist are colours broached by the narrator in digressive statements and similes: *Demetr.* 1.2, *Phoc.* 2.4 and esp. *Demosth.* 22.6, with Trinquier 2002: 115, n. 70.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. e.g. Hägg 2012: 102–4; Duff 1999: 124–6. Greco-Roman biography does not invariably deliver on such descriptive details, though: see e.g. Baldwin 1983: 497–8; Georgiadou 1992: 4617–18.

<sup>48</sup> In Suetonius' lost treatise *On the Names of Clothes and Footwear* (*Suda* T 895), colour was presumably given quite a bit of attention.

theatrical personality is aptly framed through the clothes he wears,<sup>49</sup> or thinks of wearing. A Princeps in Suetonius' text has colour at his disposal for publicity experiments. Domitian keeps a brightly clad freak conspicuously next to himself when he attends gladiatorial shows:

at his feet stood a small boy in scarlet (*ante pedes ei stabat puerulus coccinatus*)<sup>50</sup> with an abnormally small head, with whom he used to talk a great deal, sometimes seriously.

(*Dom.* 4.2, trans. J.C. Rolfe, modified)

The aura of carnivalesque excess about Nero's and Caligula's style of transportation is enhanced with colour. Caligula's ships carry multi-coloured sails (*Cal.* 37.2); city-walls are pulled down before Nero, who arrives with white horses (*Nero* 25.1 *albis equis introit*). These are outré and objectionable performances by bad emperors, for sure, but the underlying message bears on imperial self-presentation in general: colour in Suetonius' biographies is, by default, a facet of power. The Principate (mal)functions as a centripetal regime both politically and chromatically—the man-in-charge, however problematic, is the chief stakeholder in colour. Hence the elimination of Ptolemy of Mauretania by Caligula (*Cal.* 35.1),<sup>51</sup> or Domitian's sensitivity to the chromatic etiquette at court:

He was vexed that the retinue of his brother's son-in-law were dressed in white—like his own (*generum fratris indigne ferens albatos et ipsum ministros habere*). He recited the line [*Il.* 2.204], 'Many lords is not good!'

(*Dom.* 12.3, trans. J. C. Rolfe, modified)<sup>52</sup>

Support for one of the colour-coded Circus factions<sup>53</sup> can be part of the emperor's identity. Vitellius executes several commoners for

<sup>49</sup> On the comparable evolution of the dress of Demetrius the Besieger in Plutarch's *Life* (esp. 41.7–8; 44.9), see Duff 1999: 125 and Mossman, in this volume (ch. 10); on the pronounced theatrical flavour of this *Life*, see De Lacy 1952: 168–71; Mastrocinque 1979: 269–76; Duff 2004: 283–4.

<sup>50</sup> For a forceful argument that *puerulus* here means 'dwarf', see Jones 1996: 38–9.

<sup>51</sup> See n. 35 above. Ptolemy's death in the Suetonian text is subsumed under the tyrannical crimes of Caligula (cf. *Cal.* 26.1)—leaving out the empire's realpolitik: Gascou 1984: 420–1 and 427.

<sup>52</sup> See Jones 1996: 106; cf. Jones and Milns 2002: 152.

<sup>53</sup> The Charioteer Papyrus is neither contemporary nor from Rome, yet decidedly apropos; see Turner 1973; for more on the Circus factions, see Cameron 1976: 45–73. Cf. Sidon. Apollin. *Carm.* 23.323–5.

having publicly maligned the Blues (*Vit.* 14.3 *quod Venetae factioni clare male dixerant, interemit*), which he takes personally (cf. 7.1); Caligula is extremely fond of the Greens (*Cal.* 55.2 *prasinæ factioni ita addictus et deditus*); Domitian set up two new factions, the Golds and the Purples (*Dom.* 7.1 *duas circensibus gregum factiones aurati purpureique panni . . . addidit*).<sup>54</sup>

Emperors are privileged users of colour within the Suetonian narrative. Moreover, the *Lives* showcase the autocratic capacity of a Princeps to act as the arbiter and controller of colour. The colour of other people's clothes is susceptible to the emperor's intervention, if it happens to be purple (*Jul.* 43.1; *Cal.* 35.1; *Nero* 32.3),<sup>55</sup> or deemed otherwise inappropriate for the Roman civic template:

He [Augustus] desired also to revive the ancient fashion of dress, and once when he saw in an assembly a throng of men in dark garments (*pullatorum turba*), he cried out indignantly, 'Behold them—Romans, lords of the world, the nation clad in toga' [*Aen.* 1.282], and he set the aediles the task not to allow ever again anyone to appear in the Forum . . . except in the toga and without a cloak. < . . . > and he decreed that no one in dark clothing (*sanxitque ne quis pullatorum*) could sit in the middle rows.

(*Aug.* 40.5 and 44.2, trans. J. C. Rolfe, modified)

Physiognomic *color*, too, may be liable to authorization by the Princeps; Augustus insists on personally vetting the complexion of every male going near his banished daughter Julia (*Aug.* 65.3 *ut certior fieret . . . quo colore*). Tampering with ethnic hair-colour in order to fake a triumph (*Cal.* 47) is comically odious, but by the same token, indicative of the chromatic hegemony the Suetonian emperors are licensed to exercise. In *Lives of the Caesars*, colour communicates power ceremonially but also exhibits it through hands-on rewards, acts of largesse or punishment. Augustus awards Agrippa a blue flag after the naval victory in Sicily (*Aug.* 25.3 *caeruleo uexillo donavit*);<sup>56</sup> Caligula strews the arena of the Circus with expensive red and green

<sup>54</sup> Jones 1996: 62–3.

<sup>55</sup> Note how Suetonius' syntax conveys the impression of direct, almost physical action by the Princeps: Julius Caesar 'took away' (*ademit*) the use of purple clothes (*Jul.* 43.1); Caligula 'suddenly smote' (*repente percussit*) Ptolemy of Mauritania (*Cal.* 35.1), Nero 'stripped' (*exiuit*) the matron of the 'forbidden purple' and her property alike (*Nero* 32.3); cf. Lounsbury 1991: 3752–3.

<sup>56</sup> Carter 1982: 119.

mineral substances (*Cal.* 18.3); the Claudian aqueduct supplies Rome with high-quality water from springs near Tibur, one of which is called 'Blue' (*Claud.* 20.1 *gelidos et uberes fontes quorum alteri Caeruleo . . . nomen est*).<sup>57</sup> When a crucified criminal invokes his Roman citizenship, Galba (still governor of Spain) commands that the man is moved to a higher cross painted white (*Galba* 9.1 *multoque praeter ceteras altiore et dealbatam statui crucem iussit*). Julius Caesar disciplines two tribunes of the people who protested against a laurel wreath with a white band (*coronam lauream candida fascia*) placed on his statue (*Jul.* 79.1).<sup>58</sup> Last but not least (considering Suetonius' philological *savoir-faire!*), it is curious how the Princeps' prerogative to do things with colour extends to vocabulary and diction: Augustus habitually used the adjective 'darkish' instead of 'dark' (*Aug.* 87.2 *propullo*<sup>59</sup> *pulleiaceum*); Domitian came up with a simile for greying red hair (*caput uarietate capilli subrutulum et incanum*), calling it 'a splash of mead on snow' (*Dom.* 20 *perfusam niuem mulso*).<sup>60</sup>

Use of colour in Suetonius' mosaic narrative bespeaks the strongly monocentric nature of each *Life* as a module of ethico-political reportage,<sup>61</sup> behind which there looms a unified pattern. The pervasive subtext of Suetonian biography, at the end of the day, is that the Principate hinges on the emperor's persona-cum-authority.<sup>62</sup> References to colour are a tactic for negotiating this ideological algorithm by dint of anecdotes and descriptive observation. While Suetonius is beholden to a plurality of established—but obviously dynamic—Roman and Hellenistic discursive frameworks for tackling colour (e.g. clothes as chromatic markers of social status, moralistic misgivings about colourful profligacy, physiognomic reading of character), colour's most basic function in the *Lives of the Caesars* is to connote the exclusive political and diegetic standing of the Princeps.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Hurley 2001: 145.

<sup>58</sup> Comparison with other versions of the story: Butler, Cary, and Townend 1982: 142; see also Pelling 2011: 455–6.

<sup>59</sup> The *lectio difficilior* is *apud pullum*.

<sup>60</sup> Colour was certainly on the radar of erudite Roman wordsmiths in the second century AD: see esp. Gell. *NA* 2.26, with Romano 2003: 41–4 and Bradley 2009a: 229–33.

<sup>61</sup> Lounsbury 1991: 3750; Wallace-Hadrill 1995: 122–31, 139, 149–50, 157–74.

<sup>62</sup> See Roller 2001: 6, 8; Dominik, Garthwaite, and Roche 2009: 20.

<sup>63</sup> This tendency in imperial historiography is lucidly summed up by Kraus 2005: 249–50: 'what changes with the Principate is that, as the person of the emperor arrogates to himself the gaze of reader and writer alike, as history essentially shifts



A Suetonian emperor is programmed to be the chromatic linchpin of his own biography. Effectively, the narrative illustrates and reinforces the notion that colour in the top-down imperial system is, first and foremost, an affordance of power.<sup>64</sup> Colour may be an external stimulus for the emperor's action, but crucially, it submits to and colludes with his demands all the same; only Caligula is, perhaps, momentarily disempowered as a fan of the Green faction (*Cal.* 55.2 *prasinæ factioni ita addictus et deditus*)—here colour somehow gains mastery over the master of Rome.<sup>65</sup> It is yet more telling that the only ruler in the series whose entanglement with coloured objects triggers open hostility towards him among the cast of his narrative seems to be Julius Caesar (purple robe: *Jul.* 49.3; white band attached to the crown: *Jul.* 79.1–2), that is, a forerunner of the Principate but not a full-fledged Princeps.<sup>66</sup> Otherwise, no Suetonian emperor is really criticized on chromatic grounds by the insiders of his own story (the disparagement of Vitellius in *Vit.* 14.3 is at best oblique). Colour remains firmly harnessed to one-man rule in the political aesthetics of *Lives of the Caesars*. Suetonius' chromatic philosophy as biographer of emperors is therefore simple yet smart: colour punctuates the text so as to intensify and drive home the metanarrative of autocracy. Suetonius, unlike Plutarch, does not metaphoricalize his biographical project in the idiom of visibility.<sup>67</sup> The Suetonian *Lives* are instead 'watermarked' with tiny specks of colour that on close reading combine into a historical signature of the Principate.

from the *res gestae populi Romani* to the *res gestae diui Augusti* . . .'. Cf. Pelling 1997b on Cassius Dio's propensity for 'biostructuring' his narrative around the emperors.

<sup>64</sup> It is tempting to compare the deep-running acknowledgement of the emperor's exceptional clout with regard to gift-exchange or sexuality. See, respectively, Roller 2001: 173–6, 192–212 and Vout 2007: 1–9, 19–21, 29–33—although the thrust of Vout's argument is that literary and visual images of the Princeps as lover destabilize the paradigm of domination (21–3, 113, 241).

<sup>65</sup> Consider also the passive *respersus est* . . . *sanguine* when a sacrifice goes ominously wrong for Caligula (*Cal.* 57.4) on the eve of his assassination. See n. 27 above; Hurley 2014: 150; Ash (forthcoming), text to n. 25.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Baldwin 1983: 217, 338. Famously, Suetonius leans towards the view that Julius Caesar was 'legitimately slain' (*Jul.* 76.1 *iure caesus*); Baldwin 1983: 220–1; Pelling 2006d: 10, 22–3; Wardle 2012: 308; further, Henderson 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Yet see now Hulls 2014; cf. also Calhoon 2010: 281–3 on dye and poison as ethico-political metaphors.