

Horace's *Epistles* (c. 20 B.C.), which included influential literary criticism (especially in the *Ars Poetica*, an epistle on the art of poetry), revealed a kindly, tolerant, humane, realistic, and self-deprecating man. Against the literary critics who favored only archaic verse he argued: "Suppose the Greeks had resented newness as much as we do, what would now be old? And what would the people have to read and thumb with enjoyment, each man to his taste?" He defined a literary critic as "a grindstone which sharpens steel but has no part in the cutting."

Horace was buried next to Maecenas, his friend and patron, on Esquiline Hill in Rome. His poems, like Virgil's, held an honored place in Roman education within less than a century and influenced countless generations of poets.

The Patronage of Livy

Augustus also encouraged Livy (Titus Livius; 59 B.C.–A.D. 17), one of the greatest of the Roman historians. Livy wrote the *History of Rome* over a period of about thirty years, beginning in 26 B.C. A prose epic of 142 "books" (a classical "book" was roughly equivalent to one of our chapters), only 35 of which survive, the *History* charted the Roman past from the foundation of Rome to 9 B.C.

Livy's *History* was extremely patriotic. As R. H. Barrow put it: "[In Livy] Rome is the heroine inspiring Romans to heroic deeds to fulfill her destiny. Virgil and Livy perfected the language for showing the Roman at his noblest in action and character." Livy boasted: "If any nation deserves the privilege of claiming a divine ancestry that nation is our own." Indeed, Livy attributed Rome's success to its traditional values. He wrote: "I hope my passion for Rome's past has not impaired my judgment; for I do honestly believe that no country has ever been greater or purer than ours or richer in good citizens and noble deeds; none has been free for so many centuries from the vices of avarice and luxury; nowhere have thrift and plain living been for so long held in such esteem."

Although those parts of the *History* that concern Livy's own time have been lost, he made it clear in other passages that, although he admired the republican age above all, he was grateful to Augustus for restoring peace and order. (In Augustan Rome praise for the republic was not only permissible but encouraged, since Augustus claimed to have restored it.) Livy also echoed Augustus's fear of a moral decline. Livy wrote: "The might of an imperial people is beginning to work its own ruin. . . . Of late years wealth has made us greedy, and self-indulgence has brought us, through every form of sensual excess, to be, if I may so put it, in love with death both individual and collective." (In modern times, Pope John Paul II has referred to the prosperous, modern West as a society "in love with

death." Did he borrow the phrase from Livy?) Livy referred to "the sinking of the foundations of morality as the old teaching was allowed to lapse, then the final collapse of the whole edifice, and the dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices nor face the remedies needed to cure them." He added: "The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings, fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid."

Livy wrote with astonishing skill and charm, in a style famously fluent and colorful. Yet most modern historians have judged Livy's work solid and dependable—aside from Livy's first ten books, which began with Aeneas and which were more mythological than historical.

THE FAILURES OF AUGUSTUS

The Loss of Varus's Legions

Aside from the exile of his own daughter, Augustus's greatest source of sorrow was the loss of three Roman legions under Publius Quinctilius Varus in the Teutoburger Wald in A.D. 9. The Romans were on the verge of conquering Germany when a group of Germanic tribes, led by Hermann, chief of the Cherusci, ambushed and slaughtered Varus's army. Hermann had served in the Roman army as an auxiliary, under the name of Arminius, and had even been awarded Roman citizenship and equestrian rank for his services. Varus was marching to suppress a fictitious revolt reported by German conspirators when his legions were ambushed. He committed suicide when the battle was lost. Augustus made the anniversary a national day of mourning. He once beat his head on a door and shouted, "Quinctilius Varus, give me back my legions!" The Roman failure to conquer the Germanic tribes allowed these tribes to conquer Rome four centuries later.

Tiberius (A.D. 14–37)

But perhaps Augustus's very success as a ruler constitutes his greatest failure. At best, his reign was a mixed blessing for Rome: by making the Roman people content to live under an emperor, Augustus paved the way for the likes of Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero.

When Augustus died in 14, there was no question as to his successor. All but one of his male relatives had passed away, some rather mysteriously,

and a reluctant Augustus had been forced to adopt his stepson Tiberius, the son of his third wife Livia Drusilla by a previous marriage, as his own son and successor. Indeed, Tacitus speculated that Livia had engaged in a long sequence of poisonings designed to secure the succession of her son. Among the heirs of Augustus who died unexpectedly were his nephew Marcellus (23 B.C.), his favorite general and son-in-law Marcus Agrippa (12 B.C.), and his grandsons Lucius (A.D. 2) and Gaius (A.D. 4). Tacitus even hinted that Livia poisoned Augustus himself, in order to prevent a reconciliation between the emperor and Agrippa Postumus, his last remaining grandson, whom Augustus had exiled, a reconciliation that might have thwarted Tiberius's succession. (If Livia did use poison to secure the throne for her son, it did her little good. After Tiberius became emperor, complaining that his mother was trying to rule as coemperor, he nullified titles the Senate conferred on her, absented himself from her funeral, and vetoed her deification.)

Fifty-five years old on assuming the throne, Tiberius had distinguished himself both as a general and as an administrator while serving in the Middle East, Germany, and the Balkans. He began as a mild and capable ruler, much like Augustus. He appointed efficient governors for the provinces and balanced the budget. Whenever he received a New Year's gift, he made it a practice to reciprocate with a present four times its value—until his house was flooded with gifts, at which point he discontinued the practice.

But Tiberius was dour, melancholy, and insecure. Plagued by a skin disease that covered his face with sores, he became increasingly paranoid concerning plots against himself. In fact, Tiberius once declared that occupying the position of emperor was like "holding a wolf by the ears"—it was neither safe to hold it nor to let it go (a phrase Thomas Jefferson later employed regarding American slavery).

Tiberius's paranoia grew so great that he spent the last eleven years of his reign on Capraea (Capri), an island that had only one landing beach, the rest of the coast being sheer cliffs surrounded by deep water. One day a proud fisherman, hoping to win the emperor's favor, scaled a cliff in order to present the emperor with the giant mullet he had caught that day. When the fisherman emerged up the cliff and strode toward Tiberius, the emperor panicked, and then, in anger, ordered his guards to rub the fisherman's face with the mullet, which skinned it raw. When the man shouted in agony, "Thank heaven I did not bring Caesar that huge crab I also caught!" Tiberius sent for the crab and had it applied in the same way.

While Tiberius was hiding from potential assassins (and molesting little boys, by one account) on Capraea, his administration languished under the cruel and arrogant direction of Lucius Aelius Sejanus, prefect of the Praetorian Guard. Sejanus concentrated the guardsmen, whom Au-

gustus had wisely dispersed around various Italian towns, in a single base in Rome.

In 31, when Tiberius became suspicious of Sejanus (who was, indeed, plotting against the emperor), he ordered Macro, one of Sejanus's subordinates, to arrest him for treason. Sejanus was strangled to death in prison, his body was torn to pieces by a mob, and Macro assumed his post. Sejanus's family and supporters were put to death as well.

His paranoia now heightened by Sejanus's plot, Tiberius executed other citizens, including children. Since Roman tradition prohibited the strangling of virgins, executioners violated little girls before killing them. Informers were rewarded with one-quarter of the confiscated estates of the persons on whom they informed, and an informer's word was almost always believed. Many victims committed suicide rather than go through the charade of one of Tiberius's show trials. No one was allowed to mourn for the victims (an old lady was executed for grieving publicly for her son), and victims were denied decent burials, their corpses dragged down to the Tiber by hooks and tossed into the river. Two minor poets were executed for their attacks on Tiberius. One historian was executed for calling Brutus and Cassius "the last of the Romans," a reference Tiberius interpreted as an invitation to regicide, and his history was publicly burned.

Some Romans remarked that Tiberius's cruelty continued even after his death. On the day that Tiberius passed away, in 37, certain individuals were scheduled to be executed. Even after the news of Tiberius's death had arrived, none of his timid and terrified officials dared take the responsibility for revoking the orders of execution. Hence the executions went forward. The people were so furious they attempted to seize the emperor's body and hurl it into the river, shouting, "Tiberius to the Tiber!" But the Praetorian Guard protected his body, which was cremated and given the proper honors.

Caligula (37–41)

Romans rejoiced when Tiberius's grandnephew and adopted son, Gaius, succeeded him. Gaius's biological father (Tiberius's nephew) Germanicus, a handsome, courageous, kind-hearted, and pious general, had been the most beloved man in Rome. It was Germanicus's soldiers who had given little Gaius his nickname Caligula (Little Boot), since, as a small boy traveling with his father and the army, Gaius had worn a miniature version of the Roman soldier's uniform. (Unfortunately, the soldiers spoiled the child rotten, perhaps contributing to his egomania.) The Roman people were overjoyed at the prospect of being ruled by "a son of Germanicus."

At first, their confidence seemed justified. Not yet twenty-five when he took the throne, Caligula released Tiberius's political prisoners and gave financial aid to those whose houses had been damaged by fire.

But then, perhaps as the result of a severe fever six months into his reign, Caligula appears to have gone insane. He began to insist that Romans worship him as a god. (The Senate had formally recognized Caesar and Augustus as gods, but only after their deaths.) Caligula was heard conversing loudly with Jupiter, the greatest of the Roman gods, and even ordering him about. He decapitated all of the statues of the gods and goddesses in Rome and replaced their heads with his own. He married one sister and had incestuous relations with all three at parties. At such gatherings he also examined every man's wife carefully and selected one for sex, returning afterwards to comment in detail on her performance. He made top officials run for miles, dressed in their togas, alongside his chariot. For his amusement he pitted decrepit old men against equally decrepit wild animals, or people with disabilities against one another, at gladiatorial contests. When butcher meat for the wild animals proved too expensive, he fed them criminals. When a crowd at the races cheered for the team he opposed, he cried, "I wish all you Romans had only one neck!" Once, at a banquet, he suddenly erupted in peals of laughter. When the two consuls seated beside him asked politely if he would share the joke, he replied, "It occurred to me that I have only to give one nod and both your throats will be cut on the spot!" He gave his favorite horse a jeweled collar, a furnished house, slaves, a marble stable that outshone the nearby Senate building, and troops to maintain absolute silence around the stable while the horse slept. He even planned to make the horse a consul. A balding man, he became enraged at the sight of handsome men with full heads of hair and would often order the backs of their scalps shaved. He often dressed as a woman (sometimes as Venus) and practiced horrible grimaces before a mirror. He once summoned three senators, half-dead with fear, to the palace at midnight. They were escorted to a stage, where Caligula suddenly burst out, dressed in an unusual outfit, began to sing and dance to the accompaniment of flutes, and then departed, leaving the senators more baffled and appalled than when they had arrived. He once prepared to invade Britain in order to accomplish what Julius Caesar had not, but lacking the courage required in a military operation, he halted the soldiers on the French coast and ordered them to gather seashells, which he then returned to Rome as "plunder from the ocean."

Disdaining the long hours of administrative work his office required, work he considered beneath a god, Caligula devoted his time to lavish entertainment. Having exhausted the vast treasury left by the frugal Tiberius on palaces and other grand (often ludicrous) projects, Caligula forced many aristocrats to declare him their heir and then killed them. He pressured others into bidding ridiculous amounts they could not afford at palace furniture auctions. Everyone and everything was taxed. Caligula

also established a state brothel at which even boys and married women were required to work.

Some Romans began to suspect that Tiberius had been killed by Macro, prefect of the Praetorian Guard, with Caligula's approval. According to one account, after Tiberius fainted, Caligula falsely assumed he was dead. Caligula then removed the imperial ring from Tiberius's finger and accepted the congratulations of a group of senatorial sycophants. When someone announced that the emperor had revived, the sycophants scattered in panic and Caligula stood paralyzed with fear. At this point, Macro saved the day for Caligula by smothering Tiberius with a pillow. By this act, Macro won Caligula's gratitude, though no one ever possessed it long; Caligula later ordered Macro's execution. If this account of Tiberius's death is accurate, the manner of his demise may have constituted poetic justice, since the bitter Tiberius had allegedly made Caligula his heir as a kind of cruel joke on the Rome he had grown to hate, sneering, "I am nursing a viper for the Roman people."

In 41, officers of Caligula's own Praetorian Guard killed him. In an off-hand remark, he had accused two of its commanders of plotting against him. Fearful, the commanders had begun to plot in earnest. One of the officers (ironically, a descendant of Cassius, Caesar's assassin) was all the more anxious to kill the emperor because Caligula had repeatedly humiliated him by giving him passwords that made him look ridiculous. The commanders and their fellow assassins killed Caligula as he left the Palatine Games at about noon. They stabbed him thirty-one times, eight more wounds than Caesar had received. Arriving late, Caligula's guards killed several assassins and a few innocent senators. Searching the palace, they then found Claudius, Caligula's fifty-year-old uncle (Germanicus's brother) and one of the few surviving members of the imperial family, trembling behind drapes. They proclaimed him emperor.

Claudius (41–54)

Because of a speech impediment, a tendency to drool, a facial tic, and a limp, Claudius had long been considered an idiot. (Like many other peoples, the Romans equated physical disabilities with mental incompetence and associated both with a divine curse. The Romans greatly valued physical toughness in males.) Even the kindly old Augustus would not sit next to Claudius at the games. Caligula had kept his Uncle Claudius around the palace to serve as the butt of his jokes and had once ordered him thrown into the Rhine fully clothed. Ironically, the widespread perception of Claudius as an idiot may have saved him from the numerous executions and assassinations that had claimed the rest of the Julio-Claudian males, thereby allowing him to become emperor by default.

After Caligula's assassination, the Praetorian Guard proclaimed Claudius emperor against the wishes of many senators, who wanted to restore the republic. Evidently, the senators were willing to be ruled by a madman but not by an idiot. The soldiers of the Praetorian Guard, who preferred their lucrative and comfortable lifestyle protecting emperors in Rome to fighting barbarians on the frontier, required an emperor to guard. The average guardsman received three times the pay of the common soldier.

Nero (54–68)

Claudius's fairly competent administration of the empire, which included the conquest of southern Britain, ended when his fourth wife, Agrippina the Younger—who was also his niece, the daughter of Germanicus—poisoned his mushrooms in 54, so that Nero, her son by a previous marriage, would become emperor. Nero was Agrippina's son by Gnaeus Ahenobarbus. Ahenobarbus was allegedly so cruel he once deliberately whipped his horses and ran over and killed a boy while passing through a village. He also gouged out the eye of an equestrian who criticized him in the Forum. But at least he was shrewd and honest: he once declared that any child born to himself and Agrippina was bound to have a detestable nature and become a public menace.

Claudius had adopted Nero, thereby placing him ahead of his own son Britannicus, who was almost four years younger, in the imperial succession. Like most emperors who did not murder an inordinate number of people, Claudius was later deified, prompting Nero to joke that mushrooms were "the food of the gods."

Only sixteen when he took the throne (is there anything more frightening than a teenage emperor?), Nero poisoned Britannicus within a year and buried him without ceremony. (There is probably no substance to the legend that when Nero first became emperor he was so softhearted he wept on having to sign a death warrant, saying, "I wish I had never learned to write.") Nero then tried to poison his overbearing mother three times, supposedly in retaliation for her opposition to his second marriage, but each time Agrippina learned of the attempt and took the antidote beforehand. Nero then rigged her bedroom ceiling to collapse, but she learned of that plot as well. He then had the ship aboard which she was cruising the Adriatic sabotaged so that it would fall apart at sea. The crew drowned, but she swam ashore. Not realizing that the disaster was the result of a murder plot, one of Agrippina's panic-stricken friends cried out, "Help me! I'm Agrippina, mother of the emperor!" Hearing this, several sailors involved in the plot began to smash the woman in the head with a pole and with anything else immediately available, thereby killing her.

Finally, in 59, Nero took the direct approach with his mother. He accused her of treason and had her killed by two soldiers. One clubbed her in the head. When the other moved to stab her with a sword, she cried, "Here," pointing to the womb that had borne so ungrateful a son. Nero's only comment on seeing his dead mother was that she had a nice figure. Some Romans believed that there had been incest between the two, initiated by Agrippina for the purpose of maintaining power over her growing son.

Nero also killed his aunt for her money, had his first wife executed on a false charge of adultery, kicked his second wife to death while she was pregnant for complaining when he came home late from the races, and killed his third wife's husband in order to marry her. He even drowned his stepson, a mere boy, for playing at being emperor.

But Nero was perhaps hated and feared most for his notorious concerts, at which he played the lyre and sang. Attendance at these concerts was mandatory, and no one was allowed to leave them for any reason before they were finished, though Nero sometimes sang for hours. At his first concert, Nero even disregarded an earthquake that shook the whole theater, singing to the bitter end. Women gave birth in the concert halls at some of Nero's performances. Others feigned death in order to be carried out. Some men even jumped down from the rear walls, risking disability or death in their desperation to escape Nero's caterwauling. Not surprisingly, he was showered with all sorts of undeserved musical awards, yet remained so envious of all previous award winners he had their statues taken down and hurled into public lavatories, no doubt surprising those using the facilities. In Nero's defense, he did make one contribution to the arts that more than compensated for his crimes against music: he expelled all of the mimes from Rome.

Nero often prowled the streets of Rome at night, in disguise, attacking people and committing robberies. While in disguise, he was once almost beaten to death by a senator whose wife he had molested on one of these adventures. He once raped a Vestal Virgin. He had a youth castrated and took him for his bride at a marriage ceremony, prompting Romans to joke that the world would have been a better place had Nero's father taken such a bride. Nero never wore the same clothes twice and traveled with a vast train of carriages pulled by mules shod with silver.

In 64, two-thirds of Rome burned in a fire that lasted six days. Contrary to popular myth, Nero could not have been playing the fiddle while Rome burned, since that instrument was not invented until many centuries later. This legend probably arose from the equally dubious, contemporary rumor that he had been watching the flames from the Tower of Macenas while singing his own wretched poem, "The Sack of Troy." In truth, Nero was at Antium when the fire started. Rushing back to Rome, he provided

temporary housing and low-cost food to victims of the fire. But Nero also falsely charged that Christians had started the fire and executed them in a grisly fashion.

Discontented with Augustus's modest abode, Nero then constructed a vast and gaudy palace called the *Domus Aurea* (Golden House). Adjoined by lakes and filled with gold, precious gems, and ivory, the palace featured a 120-foot statue of Nero as the sun god, hidden perfume sprinklers, and a revolving dome that showered flowers on diners below. When the gigantic palace was completed, Nero deadpanned: "Good, at last I can begin to live like a human being!"

The ostentatious palace fueled rumors that Nero himself had ordered Rome burned so that he could rebuild it to his own glory and rename it "Neropolis." Some Romans alleged that on the night of the fire, men who claimed to be acting on orders had been seen throwing torches and preventing others from extinguishing the fire.

The extravagance of Nero and his friends led to higher taxes, the devaluation of the coinage, and the quasi-judicial fleecing of rich victims. Nero told one magistrate: "You know my needs! Let us see to it that nobody is left with anything." He even stripped temples and melted down their images.

When Nero began to hint that he intended to kill all the senators, their fear finally got the better of their cowardice. By 65, the Senate, the Praetorian Guard, some military leaders, and perhaps even Nero's former tutor, the Stoic philosopher Seneca, were all conspiring against the emperor. Discovering the plot, Nero forced many of the conspirators, including Seneca, to commit suicide. Nero frequently added insult to injury by ridiculing the faces of his victims when their heads were brought to him. While holding the head of one victim in his hands and staring into his face, he said, "How could I have been afraid of a man with such a long nose?" Free speech was in such short supply during Nero's reign that Pliny the Elder decided to assemble a dictionary, since it was the only type of literary work he could think of that would not get him executed.

In 67, Nero put aside his toy chariots, made of ivory, and decided to enter the Olympic chariot race, despite the fact that he was no athlete but an effeminate man with carefully coifed blond hair and sideburns. The Olympic Games were not scheduled for that year but they were held anyway, so that the emperor could compete. Although Nero fell from his chariot and never finished the race, the judges wisely awarded him the victory. For their unorthodox interpretation of the race rules, the judges were rewarded with Roman citizenship and hard cash. Indeed, Nero won 1,808 first prizes at the Olympics that year, including several for competitions in which he did not compete.

By 68, Roman armies in Gaul, Spain, Armenia, Britain, and Judea were in revolt. (On hearing of the initial revolt in Gaul, Nero was upset only

that the rebellious commander had called him a bad lyre player.) A multitude of troops now marched on Rome. Nero tried to recruit a loyal army, but no volunteers came forward. His maids even absconded with his bed linen. On one of the emperor's statues someone scrawled a reference to his phony victories in a host of musical and athletic contests: "This is a real contest for once, and you are going to lose!" After the Senate condemned Nero to death by flogging, he sighed, "What a great artist the world is losing!" and stabbed himself in the throat.

THE LEGACY OF AUGUSTUS

While it is true that the mild and capable administration of Augustus proved crucial to Roman acceptance of the imperial system of government, thereby making possible the reigns of Caligula and Nero, it is also true that Greco-Roman civilization might have been exterminated by a further succession of civil wars if not for Augustus. The peace, prosperity, and order he restored to Rome, a civilization that had been thoroughly exhausted and demoralized by a full century of chaos and violence, were vital to the survival of that civilization and, hence, to the eventual shape of Western civilization.