

Brief Lives

The Case of Crispus

Life is too short to write long things

This self-reflexive aphorism may sound like a motto from Seneca. In fact, it comes from a parodic anthology of pocket wisdom by Polish satirist Stanisław Lec, first translated into English as *Unkempt Thoughts* in 1962.¹ Lec's words have worn well in the age of the meme, the tweet, and the soundbite. Do they bear inverting? Are *things* too short now to write long *lives*? Clearly not, if we think of the endless pileup of biographical doorstoppers. Yet short biography seems to be having its moment, too. A recent conference at the University of Bristol, "Flash Histories" (2019), included such papers as "The Long and Short of Writing History" and "Can a Short Life Be a Good Life? Brevity in Historical Biography" (the latter from a former employee of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, that monument of short life-writing described by its founder Sir Leslie Stephen as a "literary condensing machine").² These days, little biographies, even of inanimate objects, are far from modest in their sights. While eighteenth-century England boasted a subgenre of picaresque "little lives" or "it-lives" (the adventures of slippers, rupees, pincushions, and lapdogs), their modern equivalents have distinctly global aspirations.³ Titles like *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* and *Salt: A World History* have become publishing clichés.

Seen through a wider lens, though, the current trend for contracted lives, lives of subalterns, and lives of mute or inanimate things is not so much a flash in the pan as the latest manifestation of a centuries-old drive to expand the methods and subjects of life-writing and to embrace more individuals, more democratically, in less conventional ways.⁴ Its thrust is increasingly political: to reverse past inequalities and injustices for subjects who seem less than significant or whose traces are slight. The effects of its most recent surge have been both radical and widespread.

To repeat Tim Hitchcock's claim from my first chapter: "If today we have a public dialogue that gives voice to the traditionally excluded and silenced . . . it is in no small part because we now have beautiful histories of small things."⁵

Consider the spotlight recently cast on one anonymous Chinese farmer, who met his death in 1661, gunned down in the war with the Dutch over Taiwan.⁶ As miraculous biographical resuscitations go, this example is far less celebrated, far more sparsely documented, to be sure, than Menocchio, the sixteenth-century miller in Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980), or the nineteenth-century clog-maker in Alain Corbin's *Life of an Unknown* (2001). Indeed, it was a case of mistaken identity that caused the farmer's fatal run-in with history. His death "left a passing impression in the archives," according to historian Tonio Andrade, who recalls discovering him in a contemporary diary, "like a fly pressed between the pages of an old book."⁷ In 2010, Andrade gave him a new lease on life (at least in scholarship), using him to argue in the process for the potential interconnectedness of microhistory and global history.⁸ Yet in the shadows of this obscure personal tragedy lurks an even fainter trace: a scullery maid who lost her life thanks to the Chinese cannonball that ripped away her left leg while she was doing laundry on the beach below the fortress walls. Again, her death happens to be recorded in a diary from the time, leaving the tiniest hint of a life about which nothing more is known.⁹

Where antiquity is concerned, dredging up submerged individuals tends to be a tougher business. Epigraphic records can be fruitful—above all, the personal statements of Roman freedmen who emerged from obscurity to record their entry into mainstream public service.¹⁰ John Henderson has rebuilt the life of imperial senator Rutilius Gallicus from literary and epigraphic sources combined.¹¹ Where the lamentably underdocumented life of slaves is concerned, we have the painful speech of the pimp's slave boy (*puer*) introduced to fill a brief interlude in Plautus's *Pseudolus*. This blurted protest against "miseries large and small" hints at the sexual abuse of a defenseless minor (*paruuolus*) before it is abruptly suppressed (*sed comprimenda est mihi uox et oratio*, "but time for me to restrain my speech and end my words").¹²

Even more tantalizing is this two-line life, preserved in the *Prodigies* of Julius Obsequens:¹³

Seruus Q. Seruilij Caepionis Matri Ideae se praecidit, et trans mare exportatus ne umquam Romae reuerteretur.

A slave of Quintus Servilius Caepio castrated himself for the Mother of Ida and was shipped across the sea never to return to Rome.

In his exquisite meditation on these lines, Shane Butler has attempted to contextualize the mysterious third-person account against a backdrop of slave revolts and the cult of the Magna Mater. But it remains just a heart-stopping moment,

or in his words a *membrum disiectum*. “I knew,” he writes, “that it was useless to comb the beach from which the slave had departed for other fragments to flesh out the picture.”¹⁴ And later: “History’ may be more complete, but it can never offer such immediacy.”¹⁵

In the case of those who have been successfully singled out for posterity, the belief that it is the little things that resonate, not grand CVs, has deep classical roots. Plutarch, most famously, in his *Life of Alexander*, prioritized the slight or short event (*pragma brachu*) over important *res gestae* for nailing the true character of one’s subject:

For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, no, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles when thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. (Plut. *Alex.* 1.2; Loeb, trans. Perrin)

So it is that he preserves for us the anecdote about Diogenes telling Alexander to get out of his light, Philip telling his son that Macedonia is too small for him, how Alexander sliced through the Gordian knot, his dreams, dress, taste in food, and so on.

Plutarch’s priorities in turn inflect John Aubrey’s *Brief Lives* (first published in 1680), that radically experimental work of small-scale life-writing which combines brevity with “trivial” detail. Aubrey responded pugnaciously to the charge that he was “magotie-minded” and “too minute” by claiming that one day he would be properly appreciated:¹⁶

Pox take your Orators and poets, they spoile lives and histories. The Dr sayes that I am too Minute; but a hundred yeare hence that minuteness will be gratefull.

Aubrey’s *Brief Lives* is indeed revered now, and not just for the memorable details of the people its author chooses to record but also for the outlines of those he leaves behind. In the recesses of his life of Shakespeare, for example, is the intriguing outline of another butcher’s son from Stratford-upon-Avon, the same age as William Shakespeare and even known to him, and “held not at all inferior to him for a natural wit . . . but died young.”¹⁷ By “brief” Aubrey generally means short in the telling, not short in duration.¹⁸ But one of his subjects compresses both kinds of brevity almost into the vanishing-point of his minimizing experiment: William Saunderson, who had it said of him by Christopher Wren that “as he wrote not well so he wrote not ill,” and who, when he died, “went out like a spent candle” even before he could receive the sacrament.¹⁹

Looking back at antiquity in his “Life of Plutarch,” Aubrey’s contemporary John Dryden probed the classical origins of this mindset, how “there is withal, a descent into minute circumstances, and trivial passages of life, which are natural to this way of writing . . . you are led into the private Lodgings of the Heroe: you see him in his undress, and are made Familiar with his most private actions

and conversations.”²⁰ Aubrey justifies his own emphasis in the prefaces both to his longer *Life of Hobbes* and the first two editions of *Brief Lives* (1680, 1681), always repeating the same Latin quotation lifted from Francis Bacon:²¹

I humbly offer to the present Age and Posterity, tanquam Tabula naufragii [like planks from a shipwreck] & as plankes & lighter things swimme, and are preserved, where the more weighty sinke & are lost.

Small lives and small details, he implies, are the flotsam and jetsam of history: they make better swimmers, and are more likely to stay afloat until we arrive to comb the beach and piece together their stories. As for Aubrey’s own life, he signs it off with modest initials, JA, a mere add-on to his lives of great scientists and thinkers, a nothing that should be “interponed” like a “sheet of wast-paper only in the binding of a Booke.”²² Another fly pressed in the pages, perhaps, but one composed and preserved, even so.

The subject of this chapter is an equally brief *Roman* life, another virtual sheet of wastepaper. Disappointingly, it is not the life of a slave or subaltern—or at least it is that only in a metaphorical sense. Instead, it belongs to someone at the top, who always more or less kept afloat. Indeed, his survival strategies evoke Kathleen Stewart’s notion of modern life as akin to the precarious existence of a water bug: “living on the surface tension of some kind of liquid. Seduced by the sense of an incipient vitality lodged in things, but keeping oneself afloat too. And nimble, if you’re lucky.”²³ Yet in his own way the subject of this brief life is equally a nonperson, known less now for his conventional achievements, his oratory, and the events of his two consulships than for his imperial marriages and a few short but immortal quips (a word that comes from Latin *quippe*, an ironic “to be sure”). Nandini Pandey’s brief for the question of what to take from the burning house of antiquity juxtaposed small things—traces of forgotten people and what they made (Amy Richlin’s Pietrabbondante rooftile, for example)—with short sayings (like Dan-el Padilla Peralta’s Black Lives Matter slant on “Even good King Ancus closed his eyes to the light”). But the possibility of a deeper connection between the two—brief lives and brief sayings—is something Plutarch long ago embraced when he spoke of the phrase or joke that sticks firmer in the memory as a biographical device than any battle or siege does.

THE BRIEF LIFE OF CRISPUS

Thanks to the tricks of transmission, the life of C. Sallustius Passienus Crispus (from now on Crispus, for short) is preserved as an odd remnant of a much larger lost Suetonian corpus of lives of around a hundred illustrious men, *Viri illustres*.²⁴ Most of his fellow survivors are poets or grammarians. Crispus’s claim to be included, along with C. Calpurnius Piso, is his standing as an orator, though none of his speeches are extant.²⁵ He is far better known for his *bons mots*, uttered

on the sidelines of history by a spectator of events, not a maker of them. Crispus owes his survival to chance. The one-paragraph biography we have now exists only thanks to a scholion on Juvenal's fourth satire found in two manuscripts (P and S).²⁶ A shorter variant is preserved in Renaissance scholar Giorgio Valla's collection of Juvenalian scholia attributed to one "Probus."²⁷ The life comes attached to a sketch of one of Domitian's most impassive courtiers, who was summoned to deal with the unwanted gift of a huge turbot:

Amiable old Crispus also arrived, a gentle soul, with a character resembling his eloquence. Who would have been a more useful companion to the ruler of seas, lands, and peoples, had he only been allowed, under that plague and disaster, to condemn his cruelty and offer honourable advice? But what's more savage than a tyrant's ear? On his whim the fate of a friend simply intending to talk about the rain, or the heat, or the showery spring, hangs in the balance. So Crispus never swam against the flood [*ille igitur numquam derexit brachia contra | torrentem*]; he was not the kind of patriot who could speak his mind's thoughts freely and risk his life for the truth. That's how he managed to see many winters and his eightieth summer. He was protected by this armour even in that court [*sic multas hiemes atque octogensima uidit | solstitia, his armis illa quoque tutus in aula*] (Juv. 4.81–93; Loeb, trans. Braund)

As it happens, the scholiast had the wrong Crispus in mind. Juvenal was writing about Vibius Crispus of Vercellae, who lived under Nero and the Flavians (more on him later).

It is possible, then, that Suetonius's biography of our Crispus was somewhat longer in its original form. But short and sweet is how it has come down to us—and short and sweet is how it asks to be read:

Passienus Crispus, a townsman of Visellium, began his first speech in the senate with these words: "Conscript fathers and you, Caesar" [*patres conscripti et tu Caesar!*], and was as a result fulsomely commended by Tiberius, though not sincerely [*propter quod simulata oratione plenissime a Tiberio conlaudatus est*]. He voluntarily pleaded a number of cases in the court of the Hundred, and for that reason his statue was set up in the Basilica Julia. He was twice consul. He married twice: first Domitia and then Agrippina, respectively the aunt and mother of the emperor Nero. He possessed an estate of two hundred million sesterces. He tried to gain favour with all the emperors, but especially with Gaius Caesar, whom he attended on foot whenever the emperor made a journey. When asked by Nero [or: the same person] in a private conversation whether he had had intimate relations with his own sister, as the emperor had with his, he replied "Not yet" [*hic nullo audiente a Nerone (ab eodem) interrogatus, habere sic ut ipse cum sorore germana consuetudinem, "nondum" inquit*], a very fitting and cautious answer which neither accused the emperor by denying the allegation, nor disgraced himself with a lie by admitting it [*quantumuis decenter et caute, ne aut negando eum argueret aut adsentiendo semet mendacio dehonestaret*]. He died by the treachery of Agrippina, whom he had made his heir, and was buried with a public funeral. (Suet. *Vita Crispi*; Loeb, trans. Rolfe)

Like Crispus following his master Caligula on foot, this courtier's life tags along behind the far more complex and illustrious lives of the emperors. In its current state, it looks complete enough, racing through a lifespan from debut to death, via a bitty selection of details: a place of origin (Visellium, now unknown); a memorable first speech in the Senate; a statue to commemorate good service to oratory; two consulships; two wives; a hefty fortune; a hint that he was bumped off by wife number two; a will in which his property reverted to her, followed by a hollow-sounding public funeral.²⁸ Crispus's identity is shaped above all by his imperial marriages (in 33 CE and 41 CE) and his performance as a courtier, right from his first speech, where he invents a new form of address, one that Tiberius mirrors fulsomely (*plenissime*), with his own "simulated speech" (*simulata oratione*).

As for Crispus's background, we know that his grandfather was Lucius Passienus Rufus, consul in 4 BCE; his father, another C. Sallustius Passienus Crispus, was adopted by his great-uncle, the historian Sallust—hence his name, along with associations with the pursuit of luxury and observation from the fringes. Crispus *père* receives his own short sketch in Tacitus (such small-scale sketches of unusual people, "paradoxical portraits," constitute an entire subgenre of brief lives in Roman historiography).²⁹ In achieving influence while avoiding the *cursus honorum*, the father shadowed Maecenas, the imperial archetype of unelected friend to a ruler:

Thus for him the path to great offices lay clear; but, choosing to emulate Maecenas [*Maecenatem aemulatus*], without holding senatorial rank he outstripped in influence many men who had won a triumph or the consulate, while in his elegance and refinements he diverged from the old Roman school, and in the ample and generous scale of his establishment he tended towards extravagance [*diuersus a ueterum instituto per cultum et munditias copiaque et affluentia luxu propior*]. Yet under it all lay a mental energy equal to important tasks, all the keener for the display he made of somnolence and apathy [*suberat tamen uigor animi ingentibus negotiis par, eo acrior quo somnum et inertiam magis ostentabat*]. So it was that next to Maecenas, while Maecenas kept his influence, and later in the top place, he carried the burden of imperial secrets. (Tac. *Ann.* 3.30; Loeb, trans. Moore and Jackson, adapted)

Both Crispus senior and Maecenas mixed business with pleasure; both their biographies are strung between minimizing the conventionally important and maximizing the conventionally trivial. Both also knew how to negotiate court life. As Seneca wrote, had Maecenas been Nero's contemporary, he too "would have been among the dissimulators."³⁰

Our Crispus, by contrast, whose career was far more conventionally driven than his father's, seems to have fully inhabited the dissimulator's role. By far the most memorable factoid in his life belongs to the penultimate sentence, which records for posterity his gloriously fence-sitting one-liner (or "one-worder"): the riposte

nondum, “Not yet,” suspended between two killer alternatives, yes and no—the best, briefest, and most tactful answer a courtier could ever give to such an awkward trap question as “Have you slept with your own sister?” The closest modern equivalent is of course the loaded question “Have you stopped beating your wife?” Except that that “informal fallacy” presumes something that has already happened; its possible “yes” and “no” answers are “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” Whereas “not yet” seems to offer a double way out.

As it happens, the wife-beating puzzle has ancient roots. When third-century BCE philosopher Menedemus was asked if he had stopped beating his father, he came up with this careful response: “I have not beaten him and I have not stopped.”³¹ Far too plodding for any smooth imperial courtier. For wily prevarication on Crispus’s level, we must turn to the BBC TV adaptation of Robert Graves’s *I, Claudius* and the courtier who gives this riposte to Augustus’s question, “Have you slept with my daughter Julia?”: “Not slept.” At which the emperor (memorably played by Brian Blessed) bellows: “Ah . . . ! Not *slept* . . . ! You mean it happened standing up, perhaps! Or in the street, or on a bench!”³² In fact, read along with Suetonius’s analysis (“he neither accused the emperor by denying the allegation, nor disgraced himself with a lie by admitting it”) and with Tacitus’s sketch of the elder Crispus in mind, our Crispus’s *nondum* starts to look positively Tacitean, in countering imperial power with an equivocal response nicely pitched between aggression and flattery.³³

THE POINT OF THE ANECDOTE

Brief quip and brief life converge here in an anecdote, a form identified by Joel Fineman in a well-known discussion as a “historeme, i.e. . . . the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact.”³⁴ Among mainstream historians, anecdotes still tend to have low status, dismissed as “no-account items.”³⁵ For Fineman, they punch above their weight, standing out from the larger accounts in which they are embedded through their ability (illusory, in his view) to create an effect of the real, often helped by the presence of material “stuff.”³⁶ Hence, as Dryden recognized, the charms of “a Scipio and a Lelius gathering Cockle-shells on the shore, Augustus playing at bounding stones with Boyes; and Agesilaus riding on a Hobby-horse among his Children.”³⁷ This suggests that play is another vitally revealing side-activity in otherwise “important” lives. Eccentricity, too. Helen Deutsch has discussed Samuel Johnson’s fetish for collecting and storing old pieces of orange peel while refusing to reveal their purpose as a kind of symbolic hoarding that haunts biographers, from Boswell on, with the limits of their condition: that their subjects can be intimately known, yet never fully known.³⁸

If some anecdotes, as in Plutarch’s *Lives*, are illuminating incidents in a larger narrative, others are self-contained and as often as not transferable. Anecdotes tend to transcend their surroundings, packing a universal or memorable truth into

the context of an everyday encounter and often acquiring a life independent of their original subjects as transferable memes or urban legends. Immanuel Kant is said to have said of the tales clustering around one celebrity: "It seems to me I recall similar anecdotes about other great figures. But that is to be expected. Great men are like high church towers: around both there is apt to be a great deal of wind."³⁹ Writing on the golden age of the anecdote, Enlightenment France, Lionel Gossman recalls Roland Barthes's thoughts on the self-contained type, known in French as a *fait divers*: "It contains all its knowledge within itself: consumption of a *fait divers* requires no knowledge of the world; it refers formally to nothing but itself; of course its content is not unrelated to the world: disasters, murders, abductions, robberies, and eccentricities all refer to human beings, their history, their condition of alienation, their fantasies." For Barthes, the *fait divers* belongs to the moment and is context-free: "sans durée et sans context."⁴⁰

Even so, there is enough fence-sitting here to keep us pondering about how an anecdote relates to its larger context. Fineman is adamant that the function of anecdotes is to perforate conventional historical narrative: "The anecdote is the literary form that uniquely *lets history happen* by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end."⁴¹ This is what gives the form its postmodern appeal, dislocated as it is from traditional chronicling (and, Fineman would claim, from historical truth). He resists the fetishization of anecdotes by New Historicists Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, who respond that such unruly eruptions offer special access to the past, in that they belong to the suppressed "history of things that did not happen."⁴² Writing about Tacitus in *Wit and the Writing of History*, Paul Plass would seem to agree: "Witty, anecdotal history is authentic even if not factually true, because in its incongruity it is history written at one of its most common denominators."⁴³

What connection, then, if any, does the *nondum* story have with what comes before and after it? If anecdotes are interruptions—if they owe their very survival to their success in puncturing an otherwise suppressed (because predictable) routine—something different seems to apply in this case.⁴⁴ *Nondum* functions, rather, as a signature or seal, an *imago vitae* (image of life), no less, in capturing some more universal trait of "not-yet-ness" in Crispus's life. I will have more to say about this later. For now, let us consider how *nondum* relates to other "not-words" in Roman historiography. Paul Plass identifies "nicely placed negatives" as a Tacitean speciality: reflecting the imperial "gridlock of contradictory forces" or even the "vacuum of forces, an absence of any effective claim, decision, action or policy," they feature in many of his more epigrammatic statements.⁴⁵ Emperor Otho, for example, is associated with *nondum* in one such quip: *Othoni nondum auctoritas inerat ad prohibendum scelus* (Otho did *not yet* have the authority to prohibit crime).⁴⁶ This is followed by a nicely placed *paraprosdokian* or sting in the tail: *iubere iam poterat* (but he *already* had the power to order it). Rather than the kind

of piety we might expect—for example, “but he already had the best intentions of prohibiting it.” Plass writes: “Tacitus’ language is not a neutral tool but reflects and . . . in a sense reproduces *in nuce* the substance of Roman politics, in this case a peculiarly self-defeating dialectic of terror.”⁴⁷ This allows us to start to make a larger claim for Crispus’s laconic *nondum*: that it speaks for all cautious imperial subjects and for the limited power of any courtier to suppress fear or to stave off corruption.

If any element of the “Life” is obviously connected to *nondum*, it is the matching opening anecdote about Crispus’s first senatorial speech—the difference being that there it is the senator who speaks first and the emperor who responds disingenuously. It is hard to judge the tone of this exchange, or guess why it is singled out, which shows just how successfully Tiberius concealed his inner response, or how insensitive we are to the nuances of Crispus’s address. Before the late second century CE, *patres conscripti* alone was the usual senatorial address, even if the emperor was present—in Pliny the Younger’s *Panegyricus*, for example, predictably with an egalitarian emperor like Trajan.⁴⁸ To supplement it with *et tu Caesar* could be construed either as flattering, because it makes the emperor equal to the senators (which is as much as Tiberius may have wanted, on the surface), or as inept, even insulting, because it puts the emperor in second place.⁴⁹ But the heavy emphasis Suetonius puts on the faked quality of Tiberius’s response suggests that he was overcompensating for a formula that was uncomfortably misjudged—or uncomfortably prescient. This is only a guess when both parties have, as it were, kept their options open. At least Crispus can see double, has his finger perfectly on the pulse of an ambiguously hybrid and still evolving constitution, as does Tiberius.⁵⁰

FAMILY AFFAIRS

In the case of the *nondum* anecdote itself, the nagging textual or historical problem remains that it is Caligula, not Nero, who is the obvious Julio-Claudian emperor to provoke a question about sleeping with one’s sister (Crispus was already dead when Nero succeeded). For that reason, Tristan Power, most recently, has supported emending the text from *Nerone* to *illo* or *imperatore* or something similarly multipurpose.⁵¹ He argues that it is because the life was excerpted and transmitted by the Juvenalian scholiast that it might in the interim have triggered memories of Nero and his more famous incest with his mother, so prompting the scholiast to interfere and pin the story to him.⁵² This all makes good sense in the immediate context because of peculiarities in the Julio-Claudian family tree: Agrippina was both Nero’s mother and Crispus’s second wife, which made parallels between the two men the more plausible to contemplate. Yet she was also Caligula’s sister, so there is a ready parallel there, too.

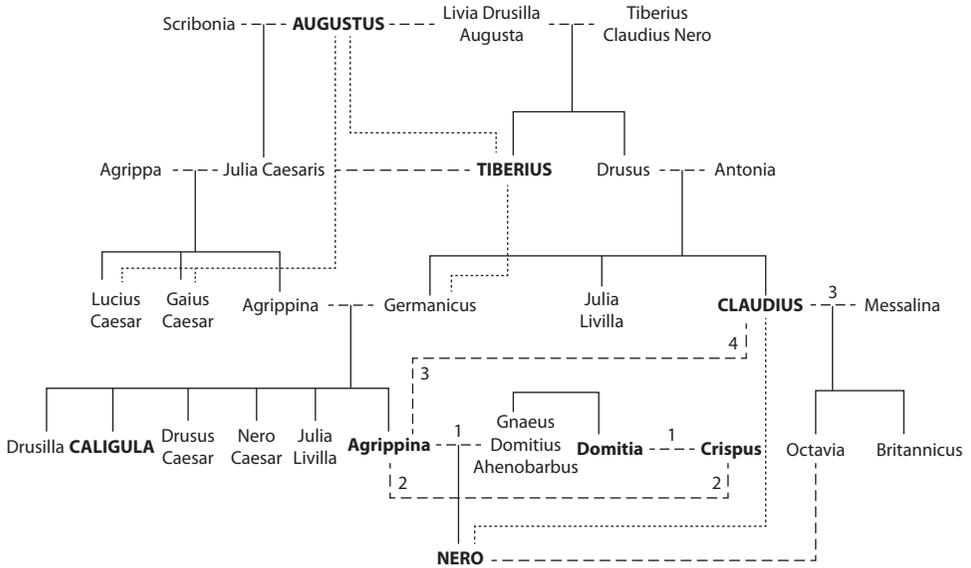


FIGURE 19. Julio-Claudian family tree.

A further complicating factor pointed out by Power is that Agrippina, via her repellent first husband Domitius Ahenobarbus (brother to Crispus's first wife, Domitia, and father to Nero), was already Crispus's sister-in-law. And since in-laws (*adfines*, "border people," literally) counted as inside Roman families, rather than outside them, Agrippina was a "sister" in the broadest sense, one Crispus was about to sleep with, in a marriage that, thanks to his earlier marriage to her aunt Domitia, was technically incestuous. As Power says, "this irony in Passienus' reply has been missed by critics."⁵³ In that case, there is another relevant fact to add: Agrippina is not the only sister in the picture. If she is Crispus's "sister" as well as his wife, then retrospectively that makes his first wife, Domitia, Agrippina's sister-in-law through her brother Domitius, Crispus's "sister," too. In other words: not only had Crispus *not yet* slept with his "sister" Agrippina: he had *already* slept with his "sister" Domitia! Which makes him a trendsetter in the kinds of imperial relationships that would become routine *consuetudines*—literally "habits" ("familiar affairs," we might translate it)—making the bon mot not just an evasion but possibly even a lie, from the man who thought he was avoiding lies. This will be only the first instance of our joker being hoist with his own petard.

As Power admits in passing, though, the emperor's precise question is: "Have you slept with your *own* sister?" (*cum sorore germana*). Agrippina could not have counted as a *sorore germana*, since this refers exclusively to a biological relationship, such as Gaius had with the sisters (Drusilla, Livilla, and Agrippina) he was

rumored to have taken to bed. On the other hand, there is a problem with chronology if we think this is Gaius referring obliquely to *his* sister Agrippina: it was only in 41 CE, when her first husband, Nero's father Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, died, that Gaius's successor Claudius had the bright idea of making Crispus marry her. No such neat insinuation about Agrippina could realistically have been in Gaius's mind.

PUNCHLINES

If the various dynastic relationships have seemed exhausting to disentangle, that is hardly surprising—and must surely be part of the joke. Crispus was truly intertwined with the imperial family, every which way. Just as the full potential of the *nondum* joke lies in the dual or even triple relational identities of the protagonists and their female associates, some of them operating on a subterranean level, so the brilliance of the reply lies in its ambidextrous, dual-purpose nature. The number *two* is already all over the short biography: two consulships; two marriages; two times one hundred *centumviri* equals a fortune of two hundred million sesterces. Does this all imply short measure, in some sense? That Crispus never made it to “three” of anything? Dogged by nonfulfillment and proxyness; brushed out of the way to allow Claudius to marry Agrippina; no children of his own (according to Suetonius, anyway); only a suffect consul the first time (27 CE), and only an ordinary consul the second time (44 CE), expected to relinquish office within just a few days.

The double-headed quality of jokes was observed long ago by Freud, who noted how they give pleasure both in their original conception and in the ricochet of amusement back from the listener who appreciates them. He distinguishes “The Janus-like [in the original: *double face*], two-way-facing character [of jokes], which protects their original yield of pleasure from the attacks of critical reason, and the mechanism of fore-pleasure” from “the further complication of the technique,” which “takes place out of regard for the joke's third person.”⁵⁴ Later, he adds: “Nothing distinguishes jokes more clearly from all other psychical structures than this double-sidedness and this duplicity in speech.”⁵⁵ Freud's favourite joke, at least according to Iris Murdoch in *The Sea, The Sea*, was an old chestnut that goes back to Roman times and requires similar reflection on the false symmetries of familial relationships:⁵⁶

The king meets his double and says, “Did your mother work in the palace?,” and the double says, “No, but my father did.”

In Crispus's case, we are told nothing about the emperor's response, whether he was tickled or silenced by the courtier's clever reply, or how the pleasure flowed, if it did. But the joke keeps on giving—not only to its getter, who thinks he is

hedging his bets against all eventualities, but also to its wider audience, who can see how it ties its speaker in knots with its double bind.

What, then, are we to make of the detail that there were no witnesses to the exchange (*nullo audiente*)? If the audience was a private one, then who leaked the joke: the emperor or the smug courtier? Some fly on the wall?⁵⁷ Was the emperor amused, despite being beaten at his own game? Or do we really need to care at all about historical realism, as regards either the anecdote's publication or its timing? Rather, it asks to be read across the *longue durée* of Crispus's life, *as if* Gaius, or whichever emperor is speaking, already knew the outcome: two imperial marriages, with many attendant complications. So it is that, like so many other anecdotes, this one takes on the flavor of an urban myth or teaching *exemplum*, one adaptable to any immoral overlord and any evasive courtier. For a recent incarnation, we need look no further than Christopher Nolan's 2020 sci-fi thriller *Tenet* and the scene where the "Protagonist" (played by John David Washington) is put on the spot by Russian oligarch Sator (Kenneth Branagh): "Just tell me if you've slept with my wife yet." The reply, after a moment's hesitation: "Er no, not yet."⁵⁸ Incidentally, the Protagonist's answer to Sator's follow-up question, "How would you like to die?"—"Old"—is more in the spirit of the self-preserving Vibius Crispus, who saw out his eightieth winter, or the courtier in Seneca's *De ira* who, when asked how he had achieved old age ("that thing most rare in a palace"), replied: "By accepting wrongs and giving thanks."⁵⁹

CRISPUS AT LARGE

Let us hold onto the word *nondum* now and allow it to guide us through some other traces of Crispus in the surviving literary record: four more anecdotes that add up less to a rounded portrait of an individual than a kind of mini joke-book, something like the sour apophthegms of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg or the anticommunist one-liners of Stanislaw Lec. Themes of duplicity, twinning, evasion, inversion, and incest will magically reappear, as if generated by some central algorithm or algorithms. Together, these anecdotes offer a virtual commentary on the imperial condition from a courtier-observer of the emperors' antics: they are history and not-history, biography and not-biography at the same time.

My first passage is a charming story in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, from a section on remarkable trees:

In the territory around the suburbs of Tusculum, on a hill known by the name of Corne, there is a grove consecrated to Diana by the people of Latium from time immemorial; it is formed of beeches, the foliage of which has all the appearance of being trimmed by art [*uelut arte tonsili coma fagei nemoris*]. Passienus Crispus, the orator, who in our time was twice consul, and afterwards became still more famous as having Nero for his step-son, on marrying his mother Agrippina, was passionately

attached to a fine tree that grew in this grove [*in hos arborem eximiam aetate nostra amauit*]: not only would he lie down beneath it and moisten its roots with wine but he would even kiss and embrace it [*osculari conplectique eam solitus, non modo cubare sub ea uinumque illi adfundere*]. Near this grove is a holm-oak, also very renowned [*nobilis*], the trunk of which is no less than thirty-four feet in circumference; giving birth to ten other trees of remarkable size, it forms of itself a whole forest. (Plin. *HN* 16.242)

As in Suetonius, Crispus is introduced as an orator who was twice consul. But Pliny immediately corrects himself: what later made Crispus more famous (*clarior postea*) was his close family relationship to Nero and his mother. Celebrity is then extended to trees as well as humans. A giant ilex that sprouts ten other huge trees is called *nobilis*, “noble, renowned,” playing on a long tradition of parallels between human and tree pedigrees.⁶⁰ Even so, Crispus’s inflated social credentials pale next to the ignoble eccentricity given center stage: his passionate adoration of a prominent beech tree, expressed through kisses, hugs, and offerings of wine. There is evidence enough of tree worship in Rome, but this level of response has been judged overamorous—less dutifully religious than mindlessly perverted.⁶¹ Wine pouring, again, was a known practice (wine was considered good plant fertilizer), but *adfundere* suggests a maudlin outpouring of emotion as well as liquid. The precious orator Hortensius once walked out of a court case because he so badly needed to irrigate his prize plane trees with wine.⁶²

In fact, the closest parallel for Crispus—a good example of the kind of portable meme mentioned earlier—is Aelian’s critique of Persian potentate Xerxes, who once “honored” a plane tree by draping it with ornaments and even giving it a bodyguard:

In Lydia, they say, he saw a large specimen of a plane tree, and stopped for that day without any need. He made the wilderness around the tree his camp, and attached to it expensive ornaments, paying homage to the branches with necklaces and bracelets. He left a caretaker for it, like a guard to provide security, as if it were a woman he loved. (Ael. *VH* 2.14; Loeb, trans. Wilson)

Aelian supplies the analysis we need to understand Crispus’s behavior. He claims that Xerxes “was enslaved to the plane” and showered it with pointless offerings “as though it were a woman he loved.” Apply this to Crispus and it becomes clear that his extravagant expression of erotic love (*amauit*) for a tree diverts him from unproductive involvement with the imperial family (Nero is called his *priuignus*, stepson, not his son). The tree crush is even troped on the futility of an extramarital relationship. Not only does the beech grove grow with the apparent artificiality of topiary (*uelut arte tonsili coma fagei nemoris*)—which is then reflected in the artificiality of Crispus’s rhetoric—but the clipped quality of its foliage is already “naturally” expressed in humanoid terms (via *tonsilis* “shaven”

and *coma* “hair”), anticipating the ornamental beauty of a tree that somewhat resembles an elegiac mistress. If the verb *cubare* (lie) most obviously channels incubation in a god’s temple, it is also the root of *concupere* / *concupare*, the origin of our “concubine”: thus Crispus “lies with” as well as “under” his exceptional (*eximiam*) tree.

Yet for all the generous sprinkling of liquid fertilizer, the union does not result in offspring. The adjacent ilex with its multiple side-growths seems to taunt Crispus with his ineffectual contribution to the imperial stemma, indeed reproaches the entire Julio-Claudian house for the contortions and ramifications with which they disguised their biological deficiency.⁶³ This was partly screened by the imposingly propagandistic *nemus Caesarum*, a grove of laurel trees located on the Via Flaminia and grown from a sprig that a chicken once dropped into Empress Livia’s lap, each of which bore the name of an emperor and withered when he died, a grove that has been called “a living genealogy of the *triumphatores* of the *gens Iulia*.”⁶⁴

On the other hand, Crispus’s hugs and kisses could be read as courtly gestures as much as amatory ones, palace fawning adapted to smothering a safely static, unreactive object. Two of the key players named here, Nero and Agrippina, were known for their ambiguous mutual embraces:

Already lascivious kisses, and endearments that were the harbingers of guilt, had been observed by their nearest and dearest. (Tac. *Ann.* 14.2; Loeb, trans. Moore and Jackson)

Nero ... escorted her on her way, clinging more closely than usual to her breast and kissing her eyes; possibly as a final touch of hypocrisy, or possibly the last look upon his doomed mother gave pause even to that brutal spirit. (Tac. *Ann.* 14.4; Loeb, trans. Moore and Jackson)

Similar charades took place between courtiers and emperors—for example, after Seneca fails to be granted retirement by Nero:

Nero followed his words with an embrace and kisses—nature had fashioned him and use [*consuetudo*] had trained him to veil his hatred under insidious caresses [*fallacibus blanditiis*]. Seneca—such is the end of all dialogues with an autocrat [*qui finis omnium cum dominante sermonum*—expressed his gratitude [*grates agit*]. (Tac. *Ann.* 14.56; Loeb, trans. Moore and Jackson)

For all this, Crispus’s adoration of his tree is not just eccentric: it borders on transgressive. The human incest to which his imperial marriages make him so susceptible is displaced only temporarily here onto whatever one calls the plant equivalent of bestiality.⁶⁵ Innocent as it looks, the anecdote indirectly seems to confirm not only Crispus’s infertility but also the fact that it is only a matter of time before the firmest prohibition of all is overturned: *nondum*, again.

Another of Crispus's sayings is recorded with approval in the preface to Seneca, *Natural Questions* 4. Here, the theme is flattery:

I never knew a man more subtle in every matter than Crispus Passienus, especially in distinguishing and curing faults of character. He often used to say that we only put-to the door against flattery, and do not shut it [*saepe dicebat adulationi nos non claudere ostium sed operire*], much in the same way as in the face of a mistress [*amicae*]. If she gives it a shove, we are pleased, still more pleased if she smashes it down [*quae, si impulit, grata est; gratior, si effregit*]. (Sen. *QNat.* 4 praef. 6)

Crispus is credited with the diagnostic and curative powers of a shrewd observer of character and faults ("especially in distinguishing and curing faults of character"), like some post-Aristotelian Theophrastus or other ethically concerned comedic observer. His advice about resisting flattery gently to let it flow even more may be specifically directed to the emperors, objects of his own courtly approaches, as he cynically advises them to hide their desire to be pursued by their subjects (recall his flattering—or inept or insulting (?)—senatorial debut, to which Tiberius responded in characteristically hypocritical fashion).

The mistress figure (*amica*) has already appeared as a metaphor in the tree story, but the striking door image here puts her to different work. Doors are usually emblems for the barriers presented by patronage, or thwarted love, or both at once; for example, in Ovid's *Tristia* 1.1, where the supreme patron, the emperor, is cast in the image of an imperious unreceptive *domina*. In this scenario, the situation is inverted. Far from the lover being excluded from the mistress's house, usually by a stubborn door or doorkeeper, now the mistress is the one forcing an entry, either by pushing the door open or—more gratifying still—by smashing it down. This image of a passionate, assertive *amica* switches the agency from lover to beloved, or, as in the tree story, credits a normally stationary object of adoration with agency and desire. At the same time, it offers a fantasy of power to those on the inside who do not have to lift a finger.

As Isidore would explain in his survey of Latin door terminology, reversibility is a quality intrinsic to the inner doors of a Roman house:

Now this [*ianua*] is the first entrance of a house; others, inside the front door, are generally called doorways [*ostia*]. A door-way (*ostium*) is that by which we are prevented from any entrance, so called from impeding (*ostare*, i.e. *obstare*) [or it is doorway (*ostium*) because it discloses (*ostendere*) something within]. Others say doorway is so called because it detains an enemy (*ostis*, i.e. *hostis*), for there we set ourselves against our adversaries—hence also the name of the town Ostia at the mouth of the Tiber, because it is set there to oppose the enemy . . . 'Door panels' [*foris*] or leaves [*valva*] are also elements of a door, but the former are so called because they swing out (*foras*), the latter swing (*revolvere*) inward, and they can be folded double [*duplices complicabilesque sunt*]—but usage has generally corrupted those terms. Barriers (*claustrum*) are so called because they are closed (*claudere*). (Isid. *Etym.* 15.7.4–5; trans. Barney et al. 2009, 311)

Among these inner doors is the *ostium* referred to by Crispus. Isidore's etymologies variously convey its bidirectional quality: it is called *ostium* either because it stands in the way (*ostando*) of anyone coming in, or because it is a defense against an external enemy (*(h)ostem*), or because it reveals (*ostendit*) something further inside (*intus*). As for other inner doors, *fores* turn outward (*foras*) and *ualuae* turn inward (*intus*), but both are classed as "double and folding" (*duplices complicabilesque*), or, translated differently, "duplicitous and complicated." The double valence of these adjectives (when Isidore not a door?) recalls the doors and windows that provide such apt material backdrops to the machinations of lover and beloved in the first book of Ovid's *Amores*: the slatted window that frames Corinna's gradually yielding striptease (*pars adaperata fuit, pars altera clausa fenestrae*, "half the window was open, the other half closed"); the folding doors in which the eavesdropper hides to learn female duplicity (*me duplices occulere fores*, "the double doors hid me"); or the tiny slit in a housedoor (*ianua*) that is all the emaciated lover needs to gain admission (*aditu fac ianua paruo | obliquum capiat semiadaperata latus*, "make the door, half-ajar, contain me sideways-on in its slender opening").⁶⁶

In Crispus's case, the half-open *ostium* suggests affinities with his various double roles.⁶⁷ First, as a prominent courtier, he is the doorkeeper who mediates between emperor and world, at once the object and the subject of flattery. Secondly, as an *adfinis*, an in-law on the margins of a family, he is neither in nor out. Isidore writes elsewhere that the wives of two brothers call each other *ianetrix* "as if the term were 'frequenting the doors' [*ianua + terere*] or through the same 'door' having 'entry' [*ianua + iter*]."⁶⁸ Crispus's *ostium* (a passage, or, correctly etymologized, a kind of mouth) gives material form to his *nondum*, that swing-word that offers two convenient exits. When the philosopher Menedemus was told he really needed to answer "yes" or "no" about whether he had stopped beating his father, he replied: "It would be crazy to comply with your rules when I can stop you at the gates."⁶⁹

Every comic needs a fall guy, and in Crispus's case that role goes to his first, older wife Domitia. Usually cast as mean and spiteful, she appears in a more innocent light in one Suetonian anecdote about a fatal encounter with her nephew Nero:

To matricide he added the murder of his aunt. When he once visited her as she was confined to her bed from constipation, and she, as old ladies will, stroking his downy beard (for he was already well grown) happened to say fondly, "As soon as I receive this, I shall gladly die," he turned to those with him and said as if in jest: "I'll take it off at once." Then he bade the doctors purge the sick woman too aggressively and seized her property before she was cold, suppressing her will, that nothing might escape him. (Suet. *Nero* 34.5; Loeb, trans. Rolfe, adapted)

This is a story about hurried transmission down the generations, not to say opening the sluice gates of inheritance. Nero distorts the natural time of aging and

succession by fastforwarding Domitia's death and his own puberty simultaneously, seizing her property while she is *not yet* dead (*necdum defunctae*)—a case of *nondum* unnaturally sped up.

By contrast, the anecdote that links Domitia with Crispus involves a horizontal relationship. It is Quintilian who records it, as an example of the courtier's supreme tactfulness in the law courts, as in the imperial court:

There are also milder kinds of summing-up [*leniores epilogi*] in which we do justice to our opponent, if he is the sort of person who deserves respect, or when we give him friendly advice and encourage him towards a settlement. This method was admirably adopted by Crispus Passienus when he pleaded in a suit brought by his wife Domitia against her brother Ahenobarbus for the recovery of a sum of money: he said a great deal about the relationship [*necessitudo*] between the two parties and then, referring to their wealth, which was in both cases abundant, added, "There is nothing either of you needs less than the subject of this dispute" [*nihil uobis minus deest quam de quo contenditis*"]. (Quint. *Inst.* 6.1.50)

The algorithm that generates this story is Crispus's evenhanded mildness (witness *leniores, amice, concordiam*); his "handling" (*tractatum*) of legal conventions is as exceptional (*egregie*) as his handling of the two rivals. Once again, the quip hinges on family relationships, specifically sibling ones. Hard though it is to capture in an English translation, it looks as if Crispus is compressing all his understanding of the situation—a rich brother and sister, neither of whom needs the sum over which they are quarreling—into a neat pun on *necessitudo*, either "need," "necessity," or, as used here, "family relationship."⁷⁰ Brother and sister are united twice over, once through blood ties and once through abundant wealth; the combination of an actual *necessitudo*, a family tie, with a spurious one, poverty, makes their legal conflict doubly absurd (the required phrase *non necesse est*, "it is not necessary," is paraphrased in *nihil uobis minus deest*, "there is nothing either of you needs less").

The scenario also reads as a variant on the *nondum* anecdote, with its double bind. Crispus pinpoints the relationship between a wealthy brother and sister that makes their resort to litigation inappropriately antagonistic—a civil war that reveals the hatred that is the usual underside of all sibling love but that in the imperial family tended to erupt without restraint into divorce, murder, prosecution, and expropriation. By contrast, in the *nondum* story Crispus successfully bats away, via semi-denial, an emperor's aggressively familiar enquiry about his own putative sibling relationships. If Crispus concedes that incest runs in the imperial family—is the new normal, *consuetudo*—he does at least disclaim any urgency in his own needs. But if he now says "much," *multa*, about the *necessitudo* of sister Domitia and brother Domitius, it sounds as if he already knows about the twists that his own future marriage to Agrippina, Caligula's sister and Domitius's widow, will give to any simple brother-sister bond. Incidentally, Crispus's gentle reprimand pales next to a much funnier joke involving Domitia: the riposte thought

up by Junius Bassus, which Quintilian calls “more biting” (*mordacius*). When Domitia complained that he was attacking her by accusing her of selling old shoes, Bassus retorted: “I never said anything of the sort. I said you *bought* old shoes.”⁷¹

Finally, Crispus makes a short appearance in Tacitus’s *Annals*, where he is wheeled on to make a typically Tacitean assessment of two emperors. And here comes a rival contestant for his most famous quip. As the original context makes clear, Crispus is referring to the future emperor Gaius (Caligula) and his grandfather, Tiberius:

About the same time, Gaius Caesar, who had accompanied his grandfather on the retreat to Capri, received in marriage Claudia, the daughter of Marcus Silanus. His monstrous character was masked by a hypocritical modesty [*immanem animum subdola modestia tegens*]: not a word escaped him at the sentencing of his mother or the deaths of his brothers; whatever mood Tiberius assumed each day, his grandson adopted the same attitude, and his words were not very different [*qualem diem Tiberius induisset, pari habitu, haud multum distantibus uerbis*]. For that reason, in due course, the orator Passienus invented a bon mot that was often repeated: that there had never been a better slave nor a worse master [*neque meliorem unquam seruum neque deteriozem dominum fuisse*]. (Tac. *Ann.* 6.20; Loeb, trans. Moore and Jackson, adapted)

Gaius comes across here as a perfectly trained dissimulator, a man who clothed (*tegens*) natural cruelty with modesty, who in mood and words shadowed Grandpa Tiberius, the man who put on (*induisset*) a different face every day. Unsympathetic Gaius may be; his surface behavior, however, is akin to the stoic endurance of all those subjects, from Herodotus’s Harpagus to Seneca’s Pastor, who suck up in silence the royal feasts for which their relatives supply the food (“not a word escaped him at the sentencing of his mother or the deaths of his brothers”).⁷² The vague temporal marker *mox* suggests that Crispus’s bon mot was uttered after both reigns—which is hardly surprising.

Once again, the plot thickens unintentionally. Tacitus’s formula, “Whatever the mood Tiberius assumed each day, his grandson adopted the same attitude, and his words were not very different,” sounds suspiciously like a prescription not just for the ideal imperial heir but more generally for the ideal courtier—as revealed in Horace’s *Epistles* 1, for example. Gaius escorting Tiberius on his retreat to Capri (*discedenti Capreas auo comes*) reminds us that Crispus, too, will be remembered for currying favor with the emperors, with Gaius above all (Suet. *Crispus: omnium principum gratiam adpetiuit, sed praecipue C. Caesaris*), and specifically for following his travels on foot (*quem iter facientem secutus est pedibus*). In short, it takes one to know one. “His words were not very different” (*haud multum distantibus uerbis*) again recalls the flexible *nondum*: the best response to changeable Tiberius is a courtier’s approximative reply.

In his preface to *The Joke*, Freud quotes two predecessors in the study of humor. One is Theodor Lipps, who wrote, “A joke says what it has to say, not always in a

few words, but in too few words—that is, in words that are insufficient by strict logic or by common modes of thought and speech. It may even actually say what it has to say by not saying it.”⁷³ The other is Kuno Fischer, who made the additional suggestion that jokes “must bring forward something that is concealed or hidden.”⁷⁴ Both formulations are helpful for dissecting the joke here, though both authors assume that a joker is in full control of his double meanings. Like Gaius’s modesty, Crispus’s bon mot is already *subdolos*, freighted with subterranean treachery, in suggesting an identification of slave and master even as it seems to polarize them. How so? Because in due course Gaius will turn from being the best slave into being the worst master, a worse one even than Tiberius—in another instance of dual identity. This is confirmed by the evolving history of another piece of tyrannical shorthand. Tiberius is said to have subtly modified the stage tyrant’s quip, *Oderint dum metuant* (“Let them hate me so long as they fear me”) to *Oderint dum probent* (“Let them hate me so long as they approve of me”). Gaius was not shy of using the bleak original.⁷⁵

Yet for all that Crispus intends his targets—Gaius and Tiberius—to be specific and limited, any extrapolation further down the pyramid makes him the victim of his own joke. Not only will his witticism go viral (*percrebuit*), so will the imperial *habitus*: ever-adaptable Crispus will in turn become the best possible slave to Gaius, even to the point of following his carriage on foot. Thinking about both parties to a joke, the begetter and the receiver, Freud concludes: “A joke is thus a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once.”⁷⁶ The full truth of Crispus’s witticism will only be revealed sometime in the future. It’s not that we’ve *never* seen a better slave and a worse master—it’s just that we *haven’t* seen them *yet!*

Looking back to Suetonius’s biography, one might conclude that Crispus’s *nondum* is actually farsighted, in correctly predicting a future era of full-blown Julio-Claudian incest. And if Domitia counts as his sister, loosely speaking, Crispus could even be regarded as a pioneer in this area. In other ways, his career, as suggested earlier, could be summed up as a case of “not yet” or “not quite”: curtailed consulships and backfiring marriages made him a shadow and stooge—a follower, not a leader. Or is it that imperial Rome tout court was a case of “not yet” or “not quite,” a slippery slope into repression and decline gradually licensed by earlier precedents? As Seneca, for example, writes in *De beneficiis*: “In Augustus’ reign, men’s words were not yet [*nondum*] able to ruin them, yet they already caused them problems [*iam molesta*].”⁷⁷ Or does “not yet” speak of the uneasy two-way contract between ruler and courtier?⁷⁸ “I haven’t finished giving you presents yet,” says Nero, when he resists Seneca’s pleas to retire:

which is why I am embarrassed that though you are foremost in my affections you do not yet outstrip all others in good fortune [*nondum omnes fortuna antecellis*] (Tac. *Ann.* 14.55)

Like Suetonius's *nondum* anecdote, the scenario freeze-frames the ruler-courtier relationship for all time.

FLIES ON THE WALL

“Indeed, the most intense point of a life [*le point le plus intense des vies*], the point where its energy is concentrated, is where it comes up against power, struggles with it, attempts to use its forces and to evade its traps.” These are the words of Michel Foucault, not surprisingly, in his “Lives of Infamous Men,” an essay originally published in 1977 that resurrects the experience of individuals expunged by disgrace from traditional biography but traceable in prison archives.⁷⁹ His words explain why Crispus's short life is bookended by two such encounters with power, each with its own searing *punctum*, before he is virtually submerged by history. Commenting on a famous detail in Pieter Brueghel's *Fall of Icarus*, art historian Georges Didi-Huberman notes that Icarus's legs have *not quite* been swallowed up by the sea: “A *not quite* is necessary here in order to make visible the signified.”⁸⁰

Let us end by renewing our acquaintance with the other Crispus, Vibius Crispus, Domitian's sluggish courtier in Juvenal's fourth satire, the one to whom Valla's “Probus” mistakenly ascribes the Suetonian biography. For he, too, is credited with some memorable quips.⁸¹ In his *Life of Domitian*, for example, Suetonius tells us that when he was alone and had nothing better to do, the emperor used to like to stab flies with a very sharp pen:

At the beginning of his reign he used to spend hours in seclusion every day, doing nothing but catching flies and stabbing them with a keenly sharpened stylus [*stilo praeacuto configere*]. Consequently, when someone once asked whether anyone was in there with Caesar, Vibius Crispus made the witty reply: “Not even a fly” [*ne muscam quidem*]. (Suet. *Dom.* 3; Loeb, trans. Rolfe, adapted)

Barely longer than *nondum*, and also framed as a negative, the riposte clearly comes from the same stable as our Crispus's quip, though this time the joke hinges on the topical significance of a normally insignificant insect. What it suggests is that there was a whole stage family of Crispuses, each one ready to pop up with a specimen of generic courtly wit, some “very sharp pointer” to nail the current climate whenever the relevant emperor provoked it. Their exuberant buzzes and stings punctuate and puncture larger imperial narratives. As for the jokers themselves, these fly-on-the-wall informers, witnesses to imperial depravity (how did they get in?), end up squashed “like flies between the pages of old books.” For all their fleeting moments in the limelight, their identity takes a battering from its sheer replicability; ultimately, the price they pay is self-effacement. By contrast, centuries after Crispus's statue, speeches, and all his other achievements have evaporated, the trail of his dazzling wit remains unextinguished.⁸²

The brief and strident words that went back and forth between power and the most inessential existences doubtless constitute, for the latter, the only monument they have ever been granted: it is what gives them, for the passage through time, the bit of brilliance, the brief flash that carries them to us. (Foucault [1977] 2020, 162)



FIGURE 20. Roman bronze ring with insect intaglio.
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