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Playing with Identity: Pseudo-Figures and Pseudonymity in the Ancient World—The Adventurous Afterlife of Some of Ancient Rome’s Most Famous People¹

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According to Mortimer Chambers, Ronald Syme said that the most important task of the Ancient Historian is to notice what is not there.² I guess to one degree or another that notion informs all the interests of those who study Classics and Ancient History. Thus, strange or unexpected (to us) reactions to death and those who had died among the peoples of the Classical World are a phenomenon whose meaning we are obligated to try to tease out. However my interest in ancient pseudo-figures has a more specific genesis.

I studied with Corey Brennan at Bryn Mawr College. I left graduate school to go work at Fresno State in the middle of California. Now, aside from switching coasts, it is easy to believe there is a diametric opposition in this move between elite (Bryn Mawr) and populist (California State University, Fresno) institutions. Like all generalizations, that would only be partly true. But it does lead to a funny story.

Victor Davis Hanson is a Classicist who was at CSUF for about twenty years (he is now at the Hoover Institution); he provided a book-length admonition to Classics Programs (and all PhD institutions) called *Who Killed Homer?*,³ in which he claimed classical research was getting so specific that most professionals in the discipline were missing the big picture (not to mention unable to teach or speak to the world). Corey Brennan is one of the most versatile Classicists of this generation. Nonetheless, his response to Hanson’s critique was that he was going to write a book named *Who Killed Pseudo-Scylax?*

If you do not even know who Scylax was, you are in the company of everyone who has not gone to graduate school in Classics, and many of those who did! He was a fifth-century writer, but the *periplus* (circumnavigation—a “sailing around” the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea) attributed

to him was written by someone in the fourth century...pseudo-Scylax. Thus Brennan's point is that, sure, we should encourage and increase the popular knowledge of Homer, Vergil, the lessons from the Ancient World, etc., but we cannot forget that we also, as the clerisy, need to understand the nuances.⁴

We must address the nuances of the idea of pseudo-figures: the prefix derives from the Greek adjective for "false" or "lying." There are those who simply claim to be Scylax, Aristotle, or St. Paul through attaching the name of the more famous author to their own work. This pseudepigraphy is both an homage to the famous predecessor and an attempt to claim their authority.⁵ Then there are the pseudo-figures who claim personal identity or relationship with a previous famous individual. I am primarily concerned here with the latter, even if my thoughts would likely appear in a work called *Who Killed Pseudo-Scylax?*; Dr. Hanson might accuse me of killing Homer again!⁶

There are of course many other examples of pseudonymity in the Ancient World. Though there probably never was an individual named Homer, his name is attached to epic poems, and the best Rhapsodes (performers of epic poetry) were called *Homeridai*. So that they could enter another societal order, the Patrician Claudii Pulchri of the late Roman Republic changed their name to Clodii and became Plebeian. In order to provide a sense of anonymity, Roman poets regularly used a metrical equivalent of the name of the object of their affection: thus Clodia in Catullus is Lesbia with the additional evocation of Lesbos, the famed island finishing school of Sappho. The famous Beat Generation author Jack Kerouac used this same idea when he renamed Gary Snyder Japhy Ryder and Neal Cassady Dean Moriarty, etc.

There are also many modern examples of the kind of pseudo-figures I am treating herein. Is L. Ron Hubbard (of Dianetics and Scientology) still alive in a yacht on the Mediterranean? Why is it that we keep seeing Elvis, or that we are fascinated by the scions of dynasties like the Kennedys? We live in a world in which the ancient commonplace of an individual's reappearance to a later generation cannot easily happen (a DNA test would solve the issue quickly!), but

there is a human desire still at work to see a way in which the great individual remains significant beyond the continuation of his influence.

Since the Ancient Romans did not have tape-recorded material, photographs, or DNA tests, a purported Marius could appear after the death of C. Marius himself, the great military reformer from around 100 B.C., and even Marius Junior could appear after his death; Nero could reappear after the infamous emperor's death. As A. E. Pappano puts it, providing context for the appearance of pseudo-Marius:

On MAY 18, 45 B.C., as Cicero was resting at his Tusculan villa shortly after a visit from his friend Atticus, several men, apparently from the byways of the metropolis, brought him a letter bearing the superscription "C. Marius, C.f., C.n." The writer, who claimed to be a grandson of the great Marius, seven times consul, begged Cicero, (" . . . per cognationem quae mihi [Cicero] secum esset, per eum Marium quem scripsissem, per eloquentiam L. Crassi, avi sui, ut se defenderem..."⁷) and appended a statement of the facts of his case. The relationship to Cicero which he mentioned was, to say the least, not close. M. Marius, a brother of the old general, had adopted a nephew of Cicero's grandmother, Gratidia [first cousin once removed!]. For the rest, Cicero had written a youthful poem on the elder Marius, and had admired the eloquence of the orator Crassus. The fellow was pretty clearly a fraud. He claimed to be a son of the younger C. Marius, who had met his death at Praeneste in 82 B.C. [return of Sulla], and Licinia, the daughter of L. Crassus. But there is no record of a son born to this couple, and Cicero, who was in a position to know the facts, handled him, though diplomatically out of long habit, with evident distrust. The canny old barrister sat down immediately and answered that in his opinion Marius needed no attorney. Let him apply to his cousin Caesar (Caesar's aunt Julia had been the wife of C. Marius the elder), who was then all-powerful in state matters, and who would surely let a relative sustain no damage. Cicero assured him of his best wishes and sent the letter off. The real name of Cicero's correspondent is given variously...probably C. Amatius.⁸

I love articles from the first half of the twentieth century; they tell stories in a way scholarly articles now rarely do. We too are concerned with covering ourselves for any possible objection. There are obviously numerous reasons one would impersonate a deceased person or his relative, and personal gain is far from the bottom of the list. We certainly know about relatives coming out of the woodwork when a rich person dies or someone hits the lottery! Amatius would continue to press his claim, even appearing for an audience with Caesar.

Caesar found a very graceful way to deal with the impostor—since Amatius was popular, he permitted him to do anything he wanted to...abroad. Remember, Caesar was a genius. Amatius' ability to rabble-rouse got to be a major problem after Caesar's death, though, and Antony had to have him killed; when Amatius started setting up an altar at Caesar's pyre, things looked dangerous for the establishment! The compliant senate went along with the plan.

The phenomenon of the pseudo-figures' appearance continued, however, producing (from the pages of the Silver-Age Roman Historian Tacitus) a pseudo-Agrippa Postumus and pseudo-Drusus. It is easy to see why people would rally to the idea of the survival of Agrippa Postumus, the grandson of Augustus.⁹ It was the start of the reign of an emperor who was not Augustus, and Tiberius was relatively old (55) and tired. Tacitus calls Postumus' murder "the first crime of the new Principate." (Tacitus *Annales* 1.6)

Agrippa Postumus almost certainly was killed by an emissary when Tiberius came to power. Postumus had a slave called Clemens, who claimed (A.D. 16) that he really was Postumus, and gained a number of followers (a term that has a more sinister meaning since the new Kevin Bacon series "The Following" started); he was captured by Tiberius. When Clemens appeared before the emperor, he is said to have been asked, "How did you become Agrippa?" and Clemens replied, "The same way you became Caesar" (Tacitus *Annales* 2.40). Tiberius was not high on Augustus' succession list, and deceitful and nefarious means are often assumed! Clemens was of course executed by Tiberius.

Robert Graves, in the wonderful I, *Claudius* (I do not think I got the broad picture of the early empire until I read it—now I am shaped by a Majorcan

recluse!),¹⁰ makes the creative suggestion that the person said to have actually been Clemens really was Postumus. The BBC I, *Claudius* series seems to have thought this suggestion but made the episode too complex by trying to work it in, and Postumus is seen to be killed in exile on television. Graves' idea of Postumus' survival is possible, since we are told by Tacitus that the visit to kill him was quite surreptitious. Thus, the Ancient World's lack of sources creates the possibility of pseudo-pseudo-figures. Mark Knopfler's eloquent phrase, "Two men say they're Jesus, one of them must be wrong"¹¹ is even more knotty in the early Empire—the guy who says he is not may be!

Postumus Agrippa was loved because of both his parents: the elder Julia, daughter of Augustus, and Vipsanius Agrippa, Augustus' general. The idea of a well-loved figure reappearing in the early empire would occur again. Drusus, son of the very popular Germanicus and Agrippina, was said to have to have returned after imprisonment (Tacitus *Annales* 5.10):

About the same time Asia and Achaia were alarmed by a prevalent but short-lived rumor that Drusus, the son of Germanicus, had been seen in the Cyclades and subsequently on the mainland. There was indeed a young man of much the same age, whom some of the emperor's freedmen pretended to recognize, and to whom they attached themselves with a treacherous intent. The renown of the name attracted the ignorant, and the Greek mind eagerly fastens on what is new and marvelous. [The matter-of-fact Romans would never be guilty of such a thing!] The story indeed, which they no sooner invented than believed, was that Drusus had escaped from custody, and was on his way to the armies of his father, with the design of invading Egypt or Syria. And he was now drawing to himself a multitude of young men and much popular enthusiasm, enjoying the present and cherishing idle hopes of the future, when Poppaeus Sabinus heard of the affair. At the time he was chiefly occupied with Macedonia, but he also had the charge of Achaia. So, to forestall the danger, let the story be true or false, he hurried by

the bays of Torone and Thermae, then passed on to Euboea, an island of the Aegean, to Piraeus, on the coast of Attica, thence to the shores of Corinth and the narrow Isthmus, and having arrived by the other sea at Nicopolis, a Roman colony, he there at last ascertained that the man, when skillfully questioned, had said that he was the son of Marcus Silanus, and that, after the dispersion of a number of his followers, he had embarked on a vessel, intending, it seemed, to go to Italy. Sabinus sent this account to Tiberius, and of the origin and issue of the affair nothing more is known to me.¹²

We can guess what happened! The real Drusus died in jail (A.D. 33), said to have been forced to eat the stuffing of his mattress when he was starving (Tacitus *Annales* 6.23)! The people's admiration for imperial darlings such as Germanicus, and later the emperors Caligula and Titus, is perhaps a precursor of John-John Kennedy.

And of course there were reappearances of Nero. After he committed suicide near the villa of his freedman Phaon in June of A.D. 68 (to be followed by the disastrous Year of the Four Emperors), various Nero impostors appeared between the fall of AD 69 and the mid-reign of the emperor Domitian (*incipit* AD 81). Not only were there several pseudo-Neros, but Saint Augustine wrote in the *City of God* of the popularity of the belief that Nero would return in the late empire: the "Nero Redivivus" (or "Nero Reborn" "Nero Alive Again") legend (20.19.3). In addition to the documented Pseudo-Neros, Suetonius refers to imperial edicts said to have been promulgated in Nero's name, encouraging his followers, and promising vengeance on Nero's enemies (Suetonius *Nero* 57). Pseudo-historical works are no less common now! Whether "genuinely" falsified (*Report from Iron Mountain; Howard Hughes' "authorized autobiography"*) or assumed by some to be (Obama's Birth Certificate). There is also a modern category of falsified biography: Rigoberta Menchu and James Frey have come under criticism for including composites in what they said were personal accounts. Whatever judgment we make today, the ancients would have

applauded them for something they would have perceived as more true than the facts.

The Pseudo-Nero(ne)s that are best attested are found in Achaia (Greece) the year following his death (Nero loved the Olympics—of course he won), and then near Parthia under Titus and Domitian. Belief in Nero's survival may be attributed in part to the remote location of his death (just as must be the case for Aemelia Ehrhart—a major search for her plane is underway again and appears to be getting close to uncovering the mystery). However, according to Suetonius, Galba's, who would be the first emperor of the Year of the Four Emperors, freedman Icelus saw the dead emperor and related the fact to the future emperor—he *would*; thus, the way was clear for Galba. Nero was also denied the lavish burial that was customary for most previous emperors and many members of the imperial family, which may have left those of the *vulgus* (common people) who loved the popular figure upset and suspicious. Even Suetonius gives him credit for a *quinquennium aureum* (a “golden” first five years of his reign); however, he was not buried in the Mausoleum of Augustus with the other Julio-Claudian emperors, but in a tomb on the Pincian Hill with the family of the Domitii Ahenobarbi, where his humblest citizen admirers were said to have left flowers.

The Roman Emperors were extremely attuned to astrology, and it was believed that Nero would regain his dominion in the East—perhaps that belief drove the impostors and their ability to get traction. The later contemporary Tacitus seems to suggest that belief in these ideas at least contributed to rumors of survival (Tacitus *Historiae* 2.8). In *Revelation* we meet the Beast, a creature that recovers from mortal wounds. The number of the beast is either 616 or 666, and those are the possibilities of the numerical value of the letters of Nero(n)'s name. Nero is found also in the Ascension of *Isaiah* and the *Sybilline Oracles*. The Nero story is an excellent reminder of how different the perception of the elite and the common person can be. I thought David Brooks summarized it best when he said that for those who vacation in the Hamptons or on Martha's Vineyard, Branson, Missouri, is only a place on the map.¹³

We should not be too quick to wonder how these ancient folks were taken in: we have our own share of Nigerian princes and Central African barristers taking advantage of human nature, not to mention the clot of scammers adopting pseudo-identity in disasters and requesting help through email in supposed emergencies (How many of us have received the “I’m stuck in London” request from a hacked account?). And a note on my earlier comment about photographic evidence: Professor Nathan Orgill has shown me how artfully Stalin took those who had fallen out of favor also out of photographs—and of course we have all looked at photoshopped UFO and 9/11 videos. There is currently a shocking one about the Newtown massacre. Only watch if you can do it as an academic exercise! These are some misguided people.

I am working with a number of colleagues on a Festschrift for the Mennonite Brethren thinker Delbert Wiens, who brilliantly uses metaphor to explain the Church’s development and the city/country divide—he sees these matters in terms of old wine in new wineskins, or village attitudes coming in contact with urban ones through the dichotomy of concrete and abstract. We are a pattern-making species: what do the patterns and synchronicities of our world mean to us? Of course we all need the Kennedys and Camelot in our national mythology, and some need L. Ron Hubbard. The Romans needed Marius and the Augustan ideal, and even Nero the hero. As the Grateful Dead say, “Believe it if you need it, if you don’t just pass it on.”¹⁴ We all create and live in the strength of our mythologies, and we live off things that are not perhaps strictly, factually true. I was well into my thirties before I found out why we did not talk about certain parts of Uncle Joel’s life.

NOTES

- ¹ A form of this article was a presentation delivered at the *Phi Alpha Theta* conference, “Dead People are Cool Symposium,” (Georgia Gwinnett College, April 5, 2013).
- ² Chambers included this comment in the preamble to a presentation on early Christianity given to the graduate students at CSU-Fresno in 2003.
- ³ Victor Hanson, John Heath, *Who Killed Homer?* (Jackson, TN 2001).
- ⁴ Since students arranged the *Dead People Are Cool Symposium*, I adduced a related lesson for them: I told them they should master their area of research, but be willing to speak to society on historical and educational issues. As our friend Alice Donohue said, “Are we really going

to let people claim the Sphinx is 10,000 years old?" (cf. M. Shermer, S. J. Gould, *Why People Believe Weird Things* [New York: MJK Books, 1997]).

- ⁵ My wife and fellow Classicist Pam Johnston played a wonderful April Fool's joke on our advisor, the afore-mentioned Corey Brennan, when she invented a fictitious work by Pseudo-Frontinus. She even invented scholarship on the apocryphal figure. I have also been the victim of her April Fool's jokes, so I feel for Corey.
- ⁶ Another student note: obviously the tenets of what is plagiarism have changed dramatically! You will not get away with saying that your friend's name appearing as author on your paper was an homage!
- ⁷ "C. (Gaius) Marius, son of Marius, grandson of Marius [asks that] I (Cicero) defend him, because we are relatives, I wrote a *Marius*, and I admire Crassus' eloquence."
- ⁸ A.E. Pappano, "The Pseudo-Marius," *CPh* 30.1, (1935): 58.
- ⁹ He was called Agrippa Postumus because his father had died in 12 B.C. before his birth.
- ¹⁰ London 1934; TV Series BBC 1976.
- ¹¹ Dire Straits, "Industrial Disease", *Love Over Gold*, Vertigo, 1982.
- ¹² Translation by A.J.Church and W.J.Brodribb.
- ¹³ This has been a theme of Brooks—the earliest I could find it was in "People Like Us", *The Atlantic*, September 2003.
- ¹⁴ P. Lesh, R. Hunter, "*Box of Rain*," *American Beauty*, Warner Brothers, 1970.