Nero, Emperor and Tyrant, in the Medieval French Tradition

Glynnis M. Cropp

Nero ruled the Roman Empire from 54 to 68 CE, bringing to an end the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Perversely attractive and also thoroughly abhorrent, he evoked both positive and negative images. According to a popular saying, Nero fiddled while Rome burned; as Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio recorded, he is reputed to have watched the fire from a high tower, reciting, perhaps to a lyre accompaniment, his own composition about the fall of Troy. This diverting performance exemplifies his propensity for spectacle and theatricality, characteristic of his style of rule. The artistic achievements of the emperor, both as patron and promoter of the arts and as actor, musician, and charioteer — glorified in some of his last words, "Qualis artifex pereo!" (What an artist dies in me!)[1] — are, however, overshadowed by the image of Nero as the cruel tyrant who displayed extraordinary munificence, sought and needed flattery, indulged all his instincts unrestrainedly, and was deluded by his own acting in the imperial role, abusing the freedom of power he claimed. He wished to excel and, as Miriam T. Griffin notes, "he pursued the image of [. . .] the magnificent monarch, rather than that of the *civilis princeps*."[2] At least during his first quinquennium, 54-58 CE, when his advisers, Seneca and Burrus, had effective control, political order prevailed. By the time of the great fire of Rome, in 64 CE, for which, as history has shown,[3] Nero was not personally responsible, he had been involved in the death of the emperor Claudius, his step-father, whom he succeeded, had

1 Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 2, 176, 49.1.
2 Griffin, *Nero*, 205.
3 Griffin, *Nero*, 132-33.

Florilegium, vol. 24 (2007): 21-36.

ordered the deaths of his step-brother Britannicus, his mother Agrippina, and Octavia, his wife and step-sister, and had had senators and patricians put to death for their wealth or their potential threat to his unbridled power. In 65 CE, possibly to divert attention from his own unpopularity, he instigated the persecution of Christians in Rome. This led to the execution of the apostles Peter and Paul.

Nero acceded to the imperial throne at the age of 16 or 17; his ambitious mother Agrippina wanted to share the power, contrary to the wishes of Nero's advisers. Her murder in 59 CE removed an important check on his excesses, his revels, amours, and less respectable activities.[4] When in 62 CE he lost his advisers (Burrus died, and Seneca, who had been Nero's tutor from childhood, asked permission to retire in order to write, and offered Nero his accumulated wealth), it was a turning point, as their role had been crucial in maintaining good imperial government, but their restraint had become irksome to Nero. Thus he achieved full power, which he abused. Unpopularity, disaffection of the army, and conspiracies followed. After the Piso conspiracy in 65 CE, in which it was suspected Seneca was involved, Nero ordered him to choose how he would die. Calmly, he and his wife chose suicide; together they cut their veins. According to Tacitus, whose account is considered authoritative, Seneca's death was slow and agonizing; he also took poison, to no effect, was placed in a warm bath, and finally suffocated in a vapour bath.[5]

Nero's own ignominious death in 68 CE is related by Suetonius and Cassius Dio.[6] Conspiracies and rebellion in Gaul and Spain made Nero believe the whole army had deserted, and he fled in panic. When he heard that the Senate had declared him a public enemy, he stabbed himself with the help of a companion, Epaphroditus, as his pursuers approached. His failure to understand the realities and his lack of true courage show at the end of a life exemplifying the perversion of power — power gained for the wrong reasons and abused. To endure, tyrants maintain a constant state of fear through cruelty and violence, and tend to come to a worse end than that which they inflict on their victims — and no-one is there to help them. Notwithstanding, in Nero's case, the man beneath the tyrant was both emperor and artist.

Neither Tacitus nor Suetonius treats Nero as a tyrant.[7] Suetonius's life of Nero seems, however, infused with the classic portrait of a tyrant, first drawn by Plato: a ruler who,

4 Barrett, *Agrippina*, 41, 181-92, 238-40.

5 Tacitus, *Annals*, 4, 314-19, bk. XV, lxii-lxiv. Cf. *Dio's "Roman History,"* 8, 131, bk. LXII, 25.

6 Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 2, 176, 49; *Dio's "Roman History,"* 8, 187-195, bk. LXIII, 28-29. See also Bradley, *Suetonius' "Life of Nero,"* 277-79, who also treats Nero's crimes and cruelty, 194-228.

7 Writing after Nero's death, Juvenal refers to his "saeva crudaque tyrannide" (his tyranny so cruel and savage) in Satire VIII (*Juvenal and Persius*, 342, line 223).

having achieved sole power, continues to strengthen it, dispensing with those who disapprove so that no-one of worth is left, neither friend nor foe, and he is the most miserable of all.[8] In the Middle Ages, Aristotle's ideas also seem latent before Nicole Oresme's translation of the *Politics* with his glosses (1370). He there defines the tyrant as one who rules for his own profit and not for the public good, taking prerogatives beyond the law; his rule seldom lasts and is marked by cruelty, violence, and suppression of the will of the people.[9] In the *Policraticus*, which widely influenced political thought in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, John of Salisbury (*c.*1120-1180) illustrates his lengthy discussion of tyranny with multiple examples, including Nero. He defines the distinguishing traits of a tyrant: from pride stem ambition and greed, "potentiae scilicet cupiditas et honoris [. . .] tirannus est qui uiolenta dominatione populum premit";[10] and "origo tiranni iniquitas est."[11] John may have observed in certain actions of his king, Henry II of England, potentially tyrannical tendencies. His general advice is that princes must rule in accordance with God's law, and if they break that law, they will not escape with impunity. His doctrine of tyrannicide (book VIII, chap. xx-xxi) states God's way of punishing wicked tyrants.[12] Tyranny and tyrannicide are subject to vigorous debate in France in the fifteenth century, especially after the political assassination of Louis, duke of Orléans, in 1407, which the Franciscan Jean Petit, in a sermon in 1408, justified as acceptable tyrannicide. In the following years, Jean Gerson strenuously rejected this argument, his ideas, derived mainly from the *Policraticus* and already expressed in his sermon "Vivat Rex" (1405), influencing, for example, Christine de Pizan's political thinking on tyranny.[13]

The word *tyran* came into French with the meaning "a cruel and violent man" from fifth- and sixth-century Christian texts, where it was applied to the Antichrist. Used as a political term (1155), it designates a person possessing the supreme power who uses it absolutely, then one who has usurped sovereignty and exercises it arbitrarily.[14] This

8 Plato, *The Republic*, 2, bk. IX, 352-55, 576B-C; 360-61, 578B-C. Cf. Cicero's definition: "hominem dominandi cupidum aut imperii singularis, populo oppresso dominantem, non tyrannum potius?" (*De Re Publica*, 76-77, bk. I, xxxiii, 50.

9 *Maistre Nicole Oresme*, 373-74, 380; Babbitt, *Oresme's "Livre de Politiques,"* 73, 80-81.

10 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 2, bk. VII, chap. xvii, 161, ll. 17-18, 30-31.

11 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 2, bk. VIII, chap. xvii, 345, line 30. Furthermore, "luce clarius intuebitur omnes tirannos miseros esse" (chap. xxii, 396, ll. 9-10).

12 Rouse, "John of Salisbury and the Doctrine of Tyrannicide," 708-709.

13 Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*, 84-87; Richards, "Bartolo da Sassaferrato," 81-88.

14 Rey, *Dictionnaire historique*, 2, 2190-91; Godefroy, *Dictionnaire*, 10, 820; Tobler and Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, 10, 317-18 (with two quotations of Brunetto Latini reflecting Aristotle's ideas on a tyrant's rule for personal profit and cruelty).

acceptance is found in *Del Confortement de Philosofie* (*c.*1230), the earliest known French translation of Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae*, where the translator added to book II, meter vi (on Nero) the final comment "ce est, quant la poestez est donee non dreiturierement a felon tirant."[15]

Nero as an example in vernacular literature has already been studied, especially in the *Roman de la Rose* and Chaucer's "Monk's Tale," together with the sources employed.[16] Certain episodes of Nero's life have thus been covered: the violent deaths of Britannicus, Agrippina, and Octavia, his post-mortem inspection of his mother's womb, and his relationship with Seneca, whom he condemned to death. The present essay will focus on overall assessments of Nero and two other episodes: the execution of the apostles Peter and Paul, and Nero's own death. Suetonius's *Vita*, Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae*, John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*, and the *Legenda aurea* are significant sources. Literature studied includes the *Roman de la Rose*, French translations of Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae* and some of the Latin commentaries, works by Eustache Deschamps (1340-1404), Christine de Pizan (1364-*c.*1430), and Alain Chartier (1385-1430), and the mystery play *Le Martire Saint Pere et Saint Pol* (*c.*1450). The two episodes were connected in literature and art.

Nero is generally portrayed in terms of his vices and excesses. Some writers concede that he had early promise, although it does not redeem his reputation for misrule and perversity. In the *Roman de la Rose*, Jean de Meun (d. 1305) commends the first five years of Nero's reign: "nus princes que l'en seüst querre, / tant sembla vaillanz et piteus."[17] In a revised version of William of Conches's commentary on the *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Nero is described as "bonus et dignus" before assuming office, and thereafter as "malus et indignus,"[18] from which derives the statement in *Le Livre de Boece de Consolacion*: "Noiron l'emperiere, qui avant avoit esté dignes et vertueux, mais depuis qu'il ot acquis la dignité de Romme, il devint mauvais et cruel."[19] In Christine de Pizan's *La Cité des Dames*, Droiture cites as an example of the inconsistency of rulers Nero's swing from pleasing everyone to unbridled "luxure [. . .] rapine et cruauté" attested in his personal behaviour and crimes.[20] In the Middle Ages, John of Salisbury was almost alone in praising Nero's love

15 Bolton-Hall, ed., "*Del Confortement de Philosofie*," 45, ll. 13-14.

16 Minnis, "Aspects of the Medieval French and English Traditions of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*," 312-61; Raimondi, "*Lectio Boethiana*," 63-98.

17 *Roman de la Rose* 1, ll. 6440-41.

18 Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS 5039D, fol. 40rb.

19 *Le Livre de Boece de Consolacion*, 141, ll. 5-7 (gloss accompanying book II, meter vi). The translation dates from 1350-60, the glosses having been added *c.*1380.

20 Curnow, "*La Cité des Dames* of Christine de Pizan," 3, 894, 203.

of music and his gift of a fine singing voice which he protected and trained, so that in Denis Foulechat's translation of the *Policraticus* (1372) Nero is called "le prince des maistres de la harpe," but notwithstanding he is "le plus ort et desordené non pas seulement des empereeurs mais de tous hommes le plus vil."[21] The translator has intensified the pejorative adjectives in rendering the Latin "non imperatorum sed hominum fedissimus" (the most perverse).[22]

Brunetto Latini (*c.*1220-1294) defined his name: "Noiron segnefie cruauté et folie," which he further qualifies "car a dire pericide et mericide segnefie grant cruauté et a Dieu et as homes."[23] In the *Roman de la Rose*, Jean de Meun (d. 1305) called him "cil desloial que je ci nome" (l. 6180), "le cruel home" (l. 6159), "li maufez" (l. 6185), "li despiteus" (l. 6442), whose downfall was due to "ses orguieuz, sa felonie" (l. 6452), characteristics of tyranny. Fortune "des mauvés eslut le pire / et seur touz homes le fist estre / de cest monde seigneur et mestre" (ll. 6316-18). Book III, meter iv of the *Consolatio Philosophiae* gave translators a chance to emphasize Nero's pride, vanity, and debauchery, especially Boethius's words "superbus . . . luxuriae Nero saeuientis,"[24] which Jean de Meun renders as "li orgueilleus o toute sa luxure forsenee."[25] The author of *Böece de Confort* (*c.*1380) expresses it more strongly: "Qui fu orgueilleux et felon, / Si mauvais c'on ne povoit pire, / [. . .] Ce Neron fu plain de la rage / Du tres vil pechié de luxure / Et combien qu'il fust plain d'ordure," condemning "si tres pute personne."[26] Despite his great wealth, greed motivated some of his crimes, but cruelty dominates in the minds of authors such as Deschamps — "En son regne fut cruelz hom"[27] — specifically when Nero condemns Seneca: "Que Noyron comme crueulx / De l'occire fut engrans; / Saignier le fist li tirans / Et mourir en baing tous seulx."[28] Christine de Pizan also applies the term "tyrant" to Nero.[29]

Overall these characteristics correspond to those given by John of Salisbury in his portrait of Nero as tyrant: "petulantiam libidinem luxuriam auaritiam crudelitatemque

21 Denis Foulechat, *Le Policratique de Jean de Salisbury (1372)*, bk. I, chap. vii, 118, 4-13. Cf. "le plus mal et felon de tous les hommes et le plus amerement retenant son yre" (bk. I, chap. vii, 118, 17). His musical talent is also mentioned *en passant* in the *Legenda aurea* and Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium.*

22 *Policraticus*, 1, bk. I, chap. 7, 44, line 27, and 45, line 1.

23 *Li Livres dou Tresor de Brunetto Latini*, 364, bk. III, liii, 11.

24 *Philosophiae Consolatio*, 44, ll. 1, 4.

25 Dedeck-Héry, "Boethius' *De Consolatione* by Jean de Meun," 212, line 1.

26 Noest, ed., "A Critical Edition of a Late Fourteenth-Century French Verse Translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*: The *Böece de Confort,*" 132, ll. 4600-01, 4610-12, 4616.

27 Deschamps, *Œuvres complètes*, 2, 165, no. 302, line 13.

28 Deschamps, *Œuvres complètes,* 2, 348, no. 314, ll. 115-18.

29 Christine de Pizan, *La Cité des Dames*, 3, 838, 165 ("le tyrant empereur Noiron").

scelere quouis exercuit,"[30] which he amplifies in a list of atrocities committed by this "crudelitatis autem rabie ita effrenatus,"[31] who thus lived up to Brunetto Latini's definition of his name.

Nero is a public tyrant who, pursuing his own ends and brooking no opposition or potential rivalry to his power, oppressed the state and the common good, and also the Church: "in Ecclesiam Dei cruentam manum extendat."[32] The culmination of this opposition to Christianity and the early Church is the execution of the apostles Peter and Paul. As John of Salisbury states, "Nam primus Romae Christianos suppliciis et mortibus affecit ac per omnes prouincias pari persecutione excruciari imperauit. Ipsumque nomen exstirpare conatus beatissimos Christi apostolos Petrum cruce Paulum gladio interfecit."[33] In the first century, Christians had no political objectives and few antisocial practices or habits, but they refused to recognize any other gods, which became a reason for their persecution.

Brunetto Latini twice records the executions — first, of Peter, "Mais a la fin l'empereour Noiron le fist crucefiier le chief desous et les piés contremont .xxxviii. ans aprés la passion Jhesucrist .ii. iors a l'issue du mois de jung; et fu ensevelis en Rome vers soleil levant," and then of Paul, "A la fin le fist l'empereour Noiron decoler, le jour que Sains Pieres fu crucefiiés." And of Saint Peter's authority and the martyrdom of the pair, he says, "et la fu il evesques et mestres de la crestiieneté .xxv. ans et .vii. mois et .viiii. jors, jusques au tans Noiron, ki lors estoit empereour; ki par sa grant cruauté le fist crucefiier, et fist decoler Saint Pol tout en .i. jor."[34] The narrative of the *Legenda aurea* describes how Peter and Paul, having warned Nero of the evil practices of the imposter Simon the magician and having accomplished conversions and miracles, were arrested and condemned to death. Peter as a foreigner, namely, a Jew, was crucified, and Paul, a Roman citizen, was beheaded. On the same day (although this has been disputed), "ilz aient souffert la sentence du tirant."[35]

In some commentaries on the *Consolatio Philosophiae* the executions were simply added to the list of Nero's crimes, without elaboration. For example, William of Aragon:

30 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 2, bk. VIII, chap. 18, 362, ll. 7-8.
31 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 363, line 9.
32 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 364, line 13.
33 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 363, ll. 15-19.
34 Brunetto Latini, *Tresor*, 62, I, lxxi, 3; 63, lxxii, 3; 67-68, lxxxvi, 4.
35 Jacques de Voragine, *La Légende dorée*, 578 (légende 84); see also 572-73, and 582-86 (légende 85). On the apocryphal stories, see Ohly, *Sage und Legende in der Kaiserchronik*, 84-88. I am grateful to Dr R. Fisher, University of Canterbury, for this reference.

"iste etiam uero Petrum et Paulum interfecit et Senecam magistrum suum";[36] the revised William of Conches: "etiam Nero Claudius et iste memoratur hic occidisse Senecam, Petrum quoque et Paulum, apostolos, inter quos interfecit,"[37] whence in the *Livre de Boece*: "cestui Neron dit Claudius qui occist Senecque et les appostres saint Pierre et saint Pol, et depuis mourut il moult chetivement."[38] In *La Cité des Dames*, Christine de Pizan has Droiture include a brief, almost flippant, and erroneous understatement: "Il fist decoller a son disner saint Pierre et saint Pol et moult d'autres martirs."[39] But the serious, lasting implications were spelled out eloquently by Alain Chartier in his *Livre de l'Espérance* (*c.*1429-30), where Foy lists Nero among the emperors opposed to Christianity:

> Neron, Dyoclecien, Domicien et Maximien, qui tindrent la monarche du monde, s'efforcerent d'estraindre par force et par occision le nom crestien, et par simplesse et humilité de foy il fut essaucé. Car leurs glaives espandirent le sang innocent des martirs, ouquel fut destrempé le mortier du hault edifice de sainte Eglise. Or sont mors les tyrans en obprobre de renommee au monde, et en damnation pardurable. Mais les saintz vivent en eternité es cieulx, en louenge et en devotion en terre. [. . .] ou fut jadis le riche palais du cruel empereur Neron, est a present la devote eglise du tres debonnaire et humble pescheur saint Pierre.[40]

Persecution of the Christians served to exalt their faith and advance their cause, while damning the persecutors, as the fate of Nero shows.

Suetonius and Eusebius (*c.*265-340) are two main sources used for the history of Nero's death.[41] Suetonius narrates events from the arrival of news of the Gallic revolt to the burial of Nero's remains in the family tomb, followed by a final tribute. With the help of his freedman Epaphroditus, he stabbed himself in the throat and, before he died, asked those present not to let his head be cut off and to see that his whole body was burnt.[42] Like John of Salisbury in the *Policraticus*, Jean de Meun, in the *Roman de la Rose*, uses this account. After describing Nero's cold-blooded ruthlessness in bringing about the deaths of the two people closest to him all his life and to whom he owed his accession to power — his mother and Seneca, his tutor and adviser — and speculating

36 Terbille, "William of Aragon's Commentary," 2, 103 (gloss on II, m. vi).
37 Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS 5039D, fol. 53rb (gloss on III, 5, 10).
38 *Livre de Boece*, 163, ll. 49-51 (gloss on III, 5, 10).
39 Christine de Pizan, *La Cité des Dames*, 3, 896, 203a.
40 Chartier, *Le Livre de l'Espérance*, 32, VI, 62-76.
41 Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale*, bk. IX, chap. cxix.
42 Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 2, 178-79, 49. Epaphroditus was later executed by the emperor Domitian for complicity in Nero's death.

on the ways of Fortune, Jean relates Nero's self-destruction. Although he was "de tout le monde sires" (l. 6385), he was defenceless against Fortune. The poet dramatizes Nero's escape, pursued by opponents wanting to kill him. In fearful panic and despair Nero asks his remaining attendants to kill him or help him kill himself: "et quant il se vit en ce point / qu'il n'ot mes d'esperance point, / aus sers pria qu'il le tuassent / ou qu'a soi tuer li eidassent. / Si s'ocist." Whereas Seneca, the philosopher-statesman, calmly and courageously accepted death at imperial command, Nero the emperor takes his own life in despair. His solitude at the end is stressed by his vain appeals to friends for help. He asks attendants to ensure that no-one find his head, to identify him, and that his body be burnt (ll. 6415-24). Jean de Meun's account here differs slightly from that of Suetonius, but less so than certain other versions do.[43] Acknowledging his source, he condemns Suetonius's false anti-Christian stance (ll. 6428-32), as, in accordance with Christian doctrine, Jean de Meun would have thought of suicide as mortal sin, punishable in hell. He adds the comment "que en Neron fu definee / des Cesariens la lignee" (ll. 6433-34), borrowed perhaps from John of Salisbury who combines with Suetonius's few words denoting the act — "ferrum adegit iugulo" — the remark "in eoque consumpta est omnis familia Caesarum," derived from Eusebius.[44]

Other writers and commentators are succinct. After a brief summary of the revolt against Nero, William of Aragon states, "se ipsum interfecit ense supposito."[45] In the versions of their commentaries available, William of Conches and Nicholas Trevet omit mention of Nero's death. Suetonius and John of Salisbury mention an ancient style of punishment, beating with rods, used on those declared public enemies by the senate, as Nero had been.[46] He fled in panic and avoided this ordeal. But in the *Livre de Boece*, probably as a result of a mistaken reading of a source, this punishment is included: "car les senateurs de Romme se rebellerent contre lui [. . .] et le firent batre de verges de fer; et ne pot trouver en la fin amy ne ennemy, amy qui lui voulsist aidier, ennemy qui le voulsist tost faire mourir pour eschever les paines qu'il souffroit, et en la fin s'occist de sa main."[47] Even in

43 In Chaucer's "Monk's Tale," Nero's request is for his head to be cut off, to save his body from shame and mutilation.

44 Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale*, IX, chap. cxix, 365; John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 2, bk. VIII, chap. xix, 367, ll. 12-13.

45 Terbille, "William of Aragon's Commentary," 2, 103.

46 Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 2, 176-77, 49.2; John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 2, bk. VIII, chap. xix, 367, ll. 2-4.

47 *Livre de Boece*, 163, ll. 51-57 (gloss on III, 5, 10). Cf. Jacques de Voragine, *La Légende dorée*, 574 (légende 84): "Et Noiron ne demoura pas impugni, mais pour ceste mauvaistié et autres que il avoit fait, il se occist de sa propre main."

this small sample of texts, disparities of detail appear: flogging with rods, the questions of assistance and of Nero's head. Among apocryphal material in the *Legenda aurea*, it is related that Nero sharpened a stake with his teeth and impaled himself.[48]

Deschamps describes Nero's cruelty to others culminating in the cruelty of his own death. In the ballade "Il est dangereux de manquer de sens," on the futile deaths of several eminent leaders from Antiquity, whom he little more than names, he devotes six lines (ll. 9-14) to summarizing Nero's cruelty to his mother, the dishonouring of his sister, the fire of Rome, and his suicide, for "Plus desloyaux ne ceigny onc espée; / Mais en la fin de mort desesperée / Son corps occist, crueux, de mort crueuse" (ll. 12-14).[49] The wickedness and cruelty characteristic of a tyrant made him kill himself in despair.

This summary of wickedness prepares for the ballade "De la tyrannie du mauvais Noyron, empereur de Romme, et de sa mauvaise fin,"[50] with its refrain line "Tyrannie ne fut onc en saison." The poem has the form of an intimate conversation between the poet and Nero, whom he addresses as "tu"[51] and "crueulx Noiron." He questions Nero about why he had Seneca put to death, how he dared to have his mother's body cut open to see the womb where he was conceived, and how he had the courage to commit incest with his sister. He then recounts in thirteen lines out of thirty a thoroughly repulsive incident: how Nero wished to conceive and give birth to a child himself, and threatened to kill his doctors if they did not change the course of nature to let him satisfy this unnatural urge. They saved their lives by making him ingest a frog (ll. 13-26). Finally the poet recalls how Nero set fire to Rome and was beheaded: "Ton chief te fis en fin par ton serf traire: / Tyrannie ne fut onc en saison" (ll. 29-30). In the first strophe, Deschamps states, "C'est grant horreur de ta vie retraire" (l. 9), and clearly selects his facts accordingly, revealing more fascination with Nero's depravity than with his political oppression. Apart from the reference to incest, up to mention of Nero's death (l. 29) he seems to have followed the sequence of events given in the *Legenda aurea*, most of which are said to be from an "histoire apocryphe," especially the story of the false conception and the frog.[52] However, the mode of Nero's death is different: he

48 Jacques de Voragine, *La Légende dorée*, 576 (légende 84).

49 Deschamps, *Œuvres complètes*, 3, 147, no. 383.

50 Deschamps, *Œuvres complètes,* 6, 145-46, no. 1188.

51 Transposed from Antiquity, this use of "tu" belongs to the didactic tradition of the master-disciple relationship, renewed in the medieval *miroirs du prince*; see Van Hemelryck, "Christine de Pizan et la Paix," 675-76.

52 *La Légende dorée*, 575 (légende 84). Nero's association with a frog is ancient, and attributed by Plutarch to his fine singing voice (*Moralia*, 7, 296-99, 567, 32).

is beheaded by an attendant, which means it is murder, not suicide. In two other places Deschamps similarly shifts the responsibility: "Orgueil jadis fist perir Absalon, / Et Lucifer de paradis getter, / Saul mourir, decapiter Noiron,"[53] and, quoting the authority of Pliny, "fut occis de ses sergens."[54] Was he mistaken about the facts? Or was he reluctant to depict suicide? The envoi of the ballade states the lesson: govern justly and fear God, for the good gain lasting reward and others will eventually be destroyed; tyrants die badly: "Et les tyrans meurent mauvaisement" (l. 35).[55] Nero, who ignored Seneca's advice to "gouverner et vivre saigement / Comme empereur" (ll. 5-6), illustrates the precept. He died badly, making another party the agent of his death by assassination.

For most writers, Nero's end was brutal and justified by his ignominious behaviour. It sufficed to record the fact, as Christine de Pizan does in *La Cité des Dames*: the Romans rebelled and Nero "se desespera et luy mesmes se occist."[56] However, in the *Livre de Charles V*, considering him an example of pride and perversity, she recalls that Nero's body was not buried but thrown in a filthy trench.[57] In contrast, in Chartier's *Espérance*, Desespérance speaks with some eloquence of Nero's self-inflicted death: "Et le glaive tourna Neron contre soy, a l'effusion de son propre sang, pour prevenir les glaives de Virginius et de Galba, qui a mort le persecutoient."[58]

The fates of the apostles Peter and Paul become entwined with that of Nero in some literary and other art forms. In the *chansons de geste*, a popular literary tradition appears occasionally, associating Nero with Pilate as allies of the devil,[59] or making Nero a servant in hell.[60] More frequently his name occurs in two set expressions. In the first, it is part of the place name *le pré Noiron*, most often used as an oath in combination with the name of Saint Peter: "Mais foy que doy Saint Pierre, c'on kiert en Pré Noiron,"[61] "Par cel apostre qu'on quiert en pré Neiron."[62] The reference is to Nero's circus, the *Ager Vaticanus*, near the gardens where in Nero's reign Christians were martyred and Saint Peter suffered, near the pagan cemetery where he was initially buried. It was thought that

53 Deschamps, *Œuvres complètes*, 3, 160, no. 389, ll. 33-35.
54 Deschamps, *Œuvres complètes*, 7, 195, no. 1361. Pliny's history of the principate has not survived.
55 Cf. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 2, bk. VIII, chap. 21, 396, ll. 9-10.
56 Christine de Pizan, *La Cité des Dames*, 3, 896, 203a.
57 Christine de Pizan, *Livre de Charles V*, 89, I, xxvii.
58 Chartier, *Livre de l'Espérance*, 19, IV, 53-55.
59 *Gaydon*, ll. 10099-10102.
60 *Le Couronnement de Louis*, ll. 986-87.
61 *Le Bâtard de Bouillon*, line 4345.
62 *Le Couronnement de Louis*, line 1797. See Moisan, *Répertoire des noms propres*, 1, 735.

Saint Peter here judged souls seeking admission to heaven.[63] The second expression, "la geste Noiron,"[64] "del lignage Noiron,"[65] was used to designate the Saracens, pagan enemies, based, it is suggested, on a fiction that Charlemagne freed Rome of the Saracens who had conquered the city.[66]

In the mystery play *Le Martire saint Pere et saint Pol*,[67] Nero declares that as the two apostles do not respect Roman religion and have disturbed divine power and royal majesty, divided families, and undermined imperial authority in their teaching, he will put to death "les .ii. grans ruffïens, / Capitaines des crestïens" (ll. 1773-74). Arrested and questioned by Nero, they make long declarations of their faith. Paul warns "tirant Neron" (l. 1847) that he will see them joyful after their death. Blindfolded, Paul is beheaded; Peter is crucified "a rebours." The bourgeois, who arrange their burial, question the action of "ce malvaiz tirant Neron" (l. 1992), and one, Marcel, condemns him thoroughly, because "Il confont droit et equité; / En ly est toute iniquité" (ll. 2052-53) and might put them all to death, thus shaming the empire. He must be punished. Whereas angels accompany Peter and Paul to paradise, Nero, warned of an imminent uprising, sharpens a stake, impales himself, and falls dead. Chanting his misdeeds, including impregnation with a frog (l. 2104), devils carry him away to boil in hell, for Lucifer to punish him "sans fin et sans redempcïon" (l. 2122). The play owes some of its facts to the apocryphal stories in the *Legenda aurea* but is not without humour and irony at Nero's expense.

Medieval iconography also made visible the martyrdom of the two apostles, to illustrate, on the one hand, saintly opposition to wickedness and persecution, and, on the other, the downfall of pride and tyranny. Stained glass windows in the cathedrals of Bourges, Chartres, Sens, Troyes, and Tours represent together, in the same window, the lives of the two saints: incidents in Rome, their attempts to overcome Simon the magician, their execution.[68] In Poitiers cathedral, dedicated to Saint Peter, is the twelfth-century "vitrail de la Crucifixion," in the end wall of the apse, in which, below the Crucifixion scene, stands the figure of Saint Peter in the centre, with Saint Paul to the right,

63 Rossiter, *Blue Guide: Rome and Environs*, 239, 259, 268-89. In 1099 Pope Paschal II built the first church of Santa Maria del Popolo over the Domitians' family tombs, which in popular belief were haunted by demons because Nero was buried there.

64 *Le Bâtard de Bouillon*, ll. 6524-26.

65 *La Chanson d'Aspremont*, ll. 6372-74.

66 Chambers, *Proper Names in the Lyrics of the Troubadours*, 195. See also Bédier, *Les Légendes épiques*, 2, 252-55.

67 *Le Cycle de Mystères des Premiers Martyrs*, 122-61.

68 Mâle, *The Gothic Image*, 295-98.

witnesses of Christ's crucifixion, counterbalancing the medallion on the left depicting "l'empereur" who is being counselled, supposedly on sentencing the apostles.[69] Hence, the window expresses anticipation of their martyrdom. Elsewhere Nero is represented as the enemy. For example, on the reverse of the seal of Saint Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury (1198-99), the apostles Peter and Paul sit on a long arcaded bench or throne. In the central arched compartment under the throne is a huddled, crouching figure inscribed with the name "Nero."[70] On the left of the central portal, south transept of Chartres cathedral, Saint Peter, apostle and martyr, stands on a corbel representing Simon the magician with a money-bag around his neck. On the right, symmetrically opposite Saint Peter, Saint Paul stands on a corbel above the crowned figure of Nero.[71] In the thirteenth-century manuscript of the *Vie de Saint Denys* (Paris, BNF n. acq. fr. 1098, fol. 34), in the upper register of the illustration, Nero's downfall is depicted vividly and dramatically as the fall of the ungodly man from a horse, walking over a gaping hell-mouth. One devil catches Nero's heel, while two others emerge from hell. Peter and Paul are included in small roundels at left and right at the top of the page, outside the margin; in the centre, an angel offers them martyrs' crowns.[72] This selection of examples shows how the story, apocryphal in certain aspects, inspired artists in their representation of the folly of pride, the abuse of power, the promotion of resistance to wickedness, and the significance of martyrdom.

Nero entered medieval iconography and popular tradition alongside the apostles Peter and Paul. In the texts studied, he serves as an example of a bad ruler who, in fear and despair, died badly, a timely warning for princes to heed the common good, not their own profit. Deschamps and Christine de Pizan especially, who were close to the royal court of Charles VI, observed its instability and the vacuum of government of which the royal princes were taking advantage for their own political ends. The writing continually retells a few incidents, not necessarily authentic but stereotyped to illustrate Nero's wickedness and its public consequences.

Whereas in ancient Rome suicide was not usually considered shameful, in the medieval Christian world it was a mortal sin leading to hell. It was a secret and private act, considered too terrible to mention. Villon's reference to the state of a "povre viellart"

69 A nineteenth-century copy of the lower half of the window can be viewed closely in the *chauffoir*, at the abbey of Fontevraud. The donors, Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II of England, are represented below the apostles. I am grateful to Joëlle Ernoul, Keeper of Documents at the Abbey, for clarification of details.

70 Henderson, "The Damnation of Nero and Related Themes," 39 and pl. 4.1 and 4.2.

71 Henderson, "The Damnation of Nero and Related Themes," 41.

72 Henderson, "The Damnation of Nero and Related Themes," 45-46 and pl. 4.5. Cf. Psalm 33.

is therefore a rare allusion: "Se, souvent, n'estoit Dieu qu'il craint, / Il feroit ung orrible fait; / Et advient qu'en ce Dieu enfraint / Et que luy mesmes se desfait."[73]

Despair of the present usually provided the necessary emotional impulse for a deliberate act of self-elimination. The terms used to express the act are based on Latin euphemisms (*sua manu cadere*, *manum sibi inferre*, *mortem sibi consciscere*),[74] hence the expression found in several French texts: "s'occist de sa main." The absence of a specific term reflects the silence surrounding the act. The Latin *suicida* appears, however, in one twelfth-century manuscript, denoting the person committing suicide and used alongside *fratricida*, by analogy with which the author intentionally formed the word *suicida*. But, in this context, the three examples cited are from Antiquity: Nero, Socrates, and Cato, of whom Nero is the most recent.[75] If medieval writers mentioned Nero's death briefly, or omitted it, or seemed uncertain about details in their source material, or converted it into an execution, they were probably inhibited by prevailing ethical and theological doctrine concerning suicide.

As Suetonius states, Nero craved immortality and undying fame.[76] During the Middle Ages infamy was his lot. Medieval writers do not recall his achievements, such as rebuilding much of the city of Rome and liberating Greece, which, ironically, classicists now spotlight as they search for factors other than Nero's viciousness to explain the fall of the dynasty. In the Middle Ages, Nero is condemned as an impious emperor who cruelly and tyrannically persecuted Christians and others, and, finally powerless, took his own life in despair.

Massey University, Palmerston North

73 Villon, *Le Testament*, XLIV, ll. 433-36.

74 Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, 1:34-38; on despair, see 2:374-86.

75 "iste quidem fratricida sed peior suicida [. . .] putasne cum Nerone et Socrate et Catone suicidis receptus sit in celo?" (Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, 1:38-40 and pl. 1). The term *suicide* is first attested in English and French in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively.

76 Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 2, 184-85, 55.

Bibliography

Aspremont. La Chanson d'Aspremont: Chanson de geste du XII^e siècle. Edited by Louis Brandon. 2 vols. 2nd ed. Paris: Champion, 1970.

Babbitt, Susan M. *Oresme's "Livre de Politiques" and the France of Charles V*. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 75.1. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1985.

Barrett, Anthony A. *Agrippina: Mother of Nero*. London: Batsford, 1996.

Bâtard de Bouillon (Le). Chanson de geste. Ed. Robert Francis Cook. Geneva: Droz, 1972.

Bédier, Joseph. *Les Légendes épiques. Recherches sur la formation des chansons de geste*. 4 vols. 3rd ed. Paris: Champion, 1926-29.

Boethius. *Philosophiae Consolatio*. Edited by Ludovicus Bieler. Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 94. Turnhout: Brepols, 1957.

Bolton-Hall, Margaret, ed. "*Del Confortement de Philosofie*: A Critical Edition of the Medieval French Prose Translation and Commentary of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* of Boethius Contained in MS 2642 of the National Library of Austria, Vienna." *Carmina Philosophiae: Journal of the International Boethius Society* 5-6 (1996/1997).

Bradley, Keith R. *Suetonius' "Life of Nero": An Historical Commentary.* Brussels: Latomus, 1978.

Brunetto Latini. *Li Livres dou Tresor de Brunetto Latini.* Edited by Francis J. Carmody. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1948.

Chambers, Frank M. *Proper Names in the Lyrics of the Troubadours*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1971.

Chartier, Alain. *Le Livre de l'Espérance*. Ed. François Rouy. Paris: Champion, 1989.

Christine de Pizan. *La Cité des Dames*. See Curnow below.

———. *Le Livre des faits et bonnes mœurs du roi Charles V le Sage*. Translated by Eric Hicks and Thérèse Moreau. Paris: Stock, 1997.

Cicero. *De Re Publica*. Translated by Clinton Walker Keyes. London & Cambridge, Mass.: Heinemann & Harvard Univ. Press, 1966.

Couronnement de Louis (*Le*), *chanson de geste du XII^e siècle*. Ed. Ernest Langlois. 2nd ed. Paris: Champion, 1961.

Curnow, Maureen C. "*La Cité des Dames*" of Christine de Pizan: A Critical Edition." 4 vols. PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1975; Ann Arbor Microfilms 1991.

Cycle de Mystères des Premiers Martyrs du manuscrit 1131 de la Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève (*Le*). Ed. Graham A. Runnalls. Geneva: Droz, 1976.

Dedeck-Héry, V. L., ed. "Boethius' *De Consolatione* by Jean de Meun." *Mediaeval Studies* 14 (1952): 165-275.

Deschamps, Eustache. *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. le marquis de Queux de Saint-Hilaire and Gaston Raynaud. 11 vols. Paris: Firmin Didot, 1878-1903. Rpt. New York: Johnson, 1966.

Dio, Cassius. *Dio's "Roman History."* Translated by Herbert Baldwin Foster and Earnest Cary. London & Cambridge, Mass.: Heinemann & Harvard Univ. Press, 1961.

Forhan, Kate Langdon. *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002.

Foulechat, Denis. *Le Policratique de Jean de Salisbury (1372). Livres I-III*. Ed. Charles Brucker. Geneva: Droz, 1994.

Gaydon, chanson de geste. Ed. F. Guessard and S. Luce. Paris: A. Franck, 1862.

Godefroy, Frédéric. *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française du IX^e^ au XV^e^ siècles*. 10 vols. Paris: F. Vieweg, 1880-1902. Rpt. New York: Kraus, 1961.

Griffin, Miriam T. *Nero: The End of a Dynasty.* London: Batsford, 1984.

Henderson, George. "The Damnation of Nero and Related Themes." In *The Vanishing Past: Studies of Medieval Art, Liturgy and Metrology Presented to Christopher Hohler*, edited by Alan Borg and Andrew Martindale, 39-51 and pl. 4.1-4.5. Oxford: BAR International Series III, 1981.

Jacques de Voragine. *La Légende dorée: Edition critique, dans la révision de 1476 par Jean Batallier, d'après la traduction de Jean de Vignay (1333-1348) de la "Legenda aurea" (c.1261-1266)*. Ed. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau. Paris: Champion, 1997.

John of Salisbury. *Ioannis Saresberiensis Episcopi Carnotensis Policratici sive De Nugis Curialium et Vestigiis Philosophorum Libri VIII*. Ed. Clemens C. I. Webb. 2 vols. Oxford, 1909. Rpt. Frankfurt a. M.: Minerva, 1965.

Juvenal. *Juvenal and Persius*. Translated by Susanna Morton Braund. Cambridge, Mass., & London: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004.

Livre de Boece de Consolacion (*Le*). Ed. Glynnis M. Cropp. Geneva: Droz, 2006.

Mâle, Emile. *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*. Translated by Dora Nussey. New York: Harper, 1958.

Minnis, Alastair J. "Aspects of the Medieval French and English Traditions of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*." In *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, edited by Margaret Gibson, 312-61. Oxford: Blackwell, 1981.

Moisan, André. *Répertoire des noms propres de personnes et de lieux cités dans les chansons de geste françaises et les œuvres étrangères dérivées*. 5 vols. Geneva: Droz, 1986.

Murray, Alexander. *Suicide in the Middle Ages*. 2 vols. Oxford & New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998, 2000.

Nicole Oresme. *Maistre Nicole Oresme. Le Livre de Politiques d'Aristote*. Ed. Albert Douglas Menut. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 60.6. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1970.

Noest, Marcel, ed. "A Critical Edition of a Late Fourteenth-Century French Verse Translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*: The *Böece de Confort*." *Carmina Philosophiae: Journal of the International Boethius Society* 8-9 (1999-2000).

Ohly, Ernst F. *Sage und Legende in der Kaiserchronik: Untersuchungen über Quellen und Aufbau der Dichtung.* Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1940. Rpt. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968.

Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Paul Shorey. 2 vols. London & Cambridge, Mass.: Heinemann & Harvard Univ. Press, 1963.

Plutarch. *Plutarch's Moralia*, Vol. 7, "On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance." Translated by Phillip H. de Lacy and Benedict Einarson. Cambridge, Mass., & London: Harvard Univ. Press & Heinemann, 1959.

Raimondi, Gianmario. "*Lectio Boethiana:* L'*Exemple* di Nerone e Seneca nel *Roman de la Rose*." *Romania* 120 (2002): 63-98.

Rey, Alain, et al. *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*. 2 vols. Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1992.

Richards, Earl Jeffrey. "Bartolo da Sassaferrato as a Possible Source for Christine de Pizan's *Livre de Paix*." In *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, edited by Karen Green and Constant J. Mews, 81-97. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005.

Roman de la Rose (*Le*). Edited by Félix Lecoy. 3 vols. Paris: Champion, 1965-1970.

Rossiter, Stuart. *Blue Guide: Rome and Environs*. Edited by A. Macadam. London: Benn, 1975.

Rouse, Richard H., and Mary A. Rouse. "John of Salisbury and the Doctrine of Tyrannicide." *Speculum* 42 (1967): 693-709.

Suetonius. *The Lives of the Caesars*. Translated by John C. Wolfe. 2 vols. London & New York: Heinemann & G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920.

Tacitus. *The Histories, The Annals*. Translated by John Jackson. 4 vols. London & Cambridge, Mass.: Heinemann & Harvard Univ. Press, 1962.

Terbille, Charles I. "William of Aragon's Commentary on Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*." PhD diss., Univ. of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1972.

Tobler, Adolf, and Erhard Lommatzsch. *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*. 11 vols. Tübingen, Wiesbaden, & Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1925-2002.

Van Hemelryck, Tania. "Christine de Pizan et la Paix: La rhétorique et les mots pour le dire." In *Au champ des escriptures: III^e Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan*, edited by Eric Hicks, 664-89. Paris: Champion, 2000.

Villon, François. *Œuvres*. Ed. Auguste Longnon. 4th ed. Paris: Champion, 1968.

Vincent of Beauvais. *Bibliotheca Mundi, sev Speculi maioris . . . tomus quartus. Speculum Historiale.* Douai: B. Belleri, 1624. Rpt. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt,1965.