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HADRIAN'S DISMISSAL OF SUETONIUS: A REASONED RESPONSE

It was not my intention ever to put pen to paper again on this matter. However, a recent article has so grossly misrepresented my published views that a brief restatement of the indisputable problems and possible solutions is called for.

The sole source for this business is the *Historia Augusta*, a dismal state of affairs:

Septicio Claro praefecto praetorii et Suetonio Tranquillo epistularum magistro multisque aliis, quod apud Sabinam uxorem iniussu eius familiaris se tunc egerant, quam reverentia domus aulicae postulabat, successores dedit, uxorem etiam ut morosam et asperam dimissurus, ut ipse dicebat, si privatus fuisset (Hadr. 11. 3).

Some twenty years ago, I drew attention to the difficulties of content and language posed by this passage.¹ Now, Hugh Lindsay refers to this in the following terms: 'Another view has seen the entire incident as the fabrication of an inventive biographer. The latter is an extreme position, and not worthy of detailed consideration.'² Lindsay's judgement is itself derivative. When he writes 'extreme position,' he is twisting (albeit without formal acknowledgement) the reaction of Syme: 'extreme scepticism.'³ And when Lindsay goes on to concede that 'stories about Hadrian's relationship with Sabina are notoriously suspect,' he is again in thrall to Syme's *authoritas*: 'No mention of Sabina in the *Vita* can evade suspicion.' Syme's own view of the passage was that it 'is dubious in more ways than one, even when the scene and the date is established.' Quite. That was precisely my own position, though no one would deduce it from Lindsay's travesty. Furthermore, since I went on to propose a way by which we might *accept* the story, his claim that I rejected the whole thing as a fabrication may fairly be seen in its own turn as a masterpiece of fiction.

As I emphasised, the tale itself is not incredible, conforming as it does to the picture of Hadrian developed by the *Historia Augusta*. Dio's account of the emperor is also consonant. But there is a lot in the *HA* that cannot be taken on unsupported trust, and this item is vulnerable.⁴

For one thing, the story could have been concocted out of Suetonius' own writings. The latter has a very similar story about the grammarian Q. Caecilius Epirota: *cum filiam patroni nuptam M. Agrippae doceret, suspectus in ea et ob hoc remotus (De gramm. 16)*. While it is quite possible that both tales are separate and true, it is equally possible that 'Spartianus' would have been tempted to rework one of Suetonius' anecdotes against him.

Then there is the phraseology. It has often been observed that the title *magister epistularum* is an anachronism. *Reverentia domus aulicae* also sounds like a later formula. It recurs in the biography of Marcus Aurelius (*MA* 5. 7). Observe further that the expression *successorem dare* is a favourite of the *HA*:⁵ it may be significant that it was employed to describe the elevation of Septicius. The anecdote, then, is a patchwork of recurrent phrases and motifs.

There is a textual matter as well. *Iniussu eius* is a correction of *uniussu eius*. Some editors

1 'Suetonius: Birth, Disgrace and Death,' *Acta Classica* 18 (1975) 61-70.

2 'Suetonius as *ab epistulis* to Hadrian,' *Historia* 43 (1994) 454-69.

3 R. Syme, 'The Travels of Suetonius Tranquillus,' *Hermes* 109 (1981) 105-17, esp. 122.

4 I am here concentrating on the anecdote, not giving space to the cognate issue of chronology, for which see my previous article, 67.

5 See the examples assembled by C. Lessing, *Scriptorum Historiae Augustae Lexicon*, Leipzig 1906.

have preferred *in usu eius*.⁶ It makes a difference. And in either case, to whom does the *eius* refer?

This is not an idle question. It tends to be assumed that it was Hadrian who was upset at the liberties taken by his officials.⁷ At the same time, surprise is expressed that Hadrian, of all people, should be so concerned with the niceties of court etiquette. The image hardly suits an emperor who was *in conloquiis etiam humillimorum civilissimus* (*Hadr.* 20.1).

Hadrian was certainly a fractious personality, often at odds with men of letters. To this extent, the story rings true. But the anecdote seems illogical. For if Hadrian was upset at his officials taking liberties with Sabina, why did he want to get rid of her at the same time?

The *HA*, of course, is not famous for its logic. The difficulty could be met by assuming that the professed reason for the dismissal of Suetonius and the others was not the real one. If it is the case that Hadrian was too much in awe of Sabina to dismiss her, it would be feasible that he had to wait and cast around for an excuse to get rid of a praetorian prefect and an imperial secretary.

The sources are discrepant concerning the ultimate fate of Sabina. The *HA* (*Hadr.* 23. 9) has her deceasing amid rumours of poisoning by her imperial husband. The later *Epitome* has Hadrian openly drive her to suicide, *prope servilibus iniuriis*.⁸ This settles nothing, but may further weaken belief in 'Spartianus.'

The theme of Hadrian's fickle nature and his constant rounding upon those whom he had raised to high office is later (*Hadr.* 15. 3) resumed. Three names are given as examples: Attianus, Nepos, and Septicius Clarus. The reference here to Attianus is not easy to reconcile with previous comments (*Hadr.* 8. 7; 9. 4) on his relationship with Hadrian. The illustrious career of Platorius Nepos under Trajan and in the early years of Hadrian is familiar. Septicius Clarus is a little out of place in such company, perhaps another small reason for wondering about this tale of social impropriety to an empress and consequent dismissals.

If we wish to believe in the story, accept the reading *iniussu eius*, and acquit 'Spartianus' of illogicality, there is one remedy. This is to take *eius* as referring to Sabina, not Hadrian. The situation would then be that he dismissed the errant officials under pressure from her. This interpretation better explains why Sabina is *uxorem morosam et asperam*, why Hadrian would have liked to send her packing at the same time, and why their own relationship ultimately collapsed. It also removes the seeming peculiarity of Hadrian's anger at a breach of court etiquette.

Why should Hadrian go in such awe of Sabina? The answer resides with other relevant imperial ladies. Matidia, his mother-in-law, had been consecrated and laden with honours upon her death in 119. The formidable and awkward Pompeia Plotina was on the scene up to 122 or 123; it was she who had urged the wedding of Hadrian and Sabina. Plotina was too dangerous for Hadrian to offend, because of the enduring scandals about her role in Hadrian's adoption by Trajan. Plotina was a dowager to be placated – or poisoned.

The imperial women stuck together out of mutual interest, if not affection, for Hadrian was neither uxorious nor specially fond of the opposite sex. True, Matidia and Plotina are honoured, and Sabina would long persist. But amidst all the commemorations of the youth Antinous, what men recalled most was that Hadrian had failed to honour his own sister, Domitia Paulina, at her death (Dio 69. 11. 4). To sum up, if Plotina was still alive in that period

6 Peter, after Petschenig. Hohl's Teubner, as revised by Samberger and Seyfarth, Leipzig 1971, prints in *[i]us[s]u*.

7 E.g., Magie's Loeb translation takes *eius* as alluding to Hadrian. In the Penguin version of A. R. Birley, 'their association with her' must assume the reading *in usu eius*.

of the year 122 when Sabina made her complaint, the emperor will naturally have felt he must give way to his shrewish and morose consort. Especially if he had left them all in Italy, free to stir up trouble, while he was off in Britain.

This interpretation of the *HA*'s tale leads to some drastic rethinking of the relationship between Hadrian and Suetonius after 122. It could no longer be assumed that the biographer had no further access to the imperial archives; a discreetly sympathetic emperor might well have allowed him continued use of them. Thus, theories about which of the lives are pre-122 and which post-122 lose much of their meaning.⁹

The above is the gist of what I wrote in 1975. I leave it to readers to decide how it can be reconciled with Lindsay's description of it as an extreme statement of disbelief.

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8 *Epit.* 14. 8; cf. W. den Boer, *Some Minor Roman Historians*, Leiden 1972, 61.

9 Continuation of good terms between Hadrian and Suetonius may be needed to account for the statuette of the young Augustus that Suetonius gave to the emperor. He writes (*Aug.* 7. 1): *quae dono a me principi data inter cubiculi lares conditur*. The present tense is striking. If Hadrian is the emperor, and if there was a breach in 122, why is the reference left in, or at least not amended from the present tense *conditur*? Should the emperor be taken as Trajan, that would import some very obvious consequences for the chronology of Suetonius' career and the composition of his biographies.