

Introduction

For years, Neronian authors remained in the shadow of Augustan literature, with the works of Seneca, Petronius, Lucan, and Persius constantly being compared to those of Vergil, Ovid, and Horace. The outcome was almost always unfavorable, downplaying their artistic and literary value, until scholarship began to examine these works not only in comparison with the Augustan models, but also in their own right.¹ This renewed interest eventually led to the reappraisal of Neronian literature as the product of a period of different cultural, social, and political realities.² Topics and themes which the Augustan authors rejected as unsuitable for literary treatment, such as low-class life and religion, popular superstitions, witchcraft, crude sexual encounters, gruesome deaths, and torture, became central features in the literature of the post-Augustan era.

The Neronian authors' preoccupation with *superstitio*³ and its most extreme form, magic,⁴ exemplifies the pursuit of novel literary themes and a turn towards

1 The view of post-Augustan literature as the low-value product of a decadent period was put forward in Nisard 1834, and strongly persisted till the last decades of the twentieth century (see, for example, the assessments of Rose 1936, 348 and MacL. Currie 1985, vii). Even the term 'Silver', which characterizes collectively the era of the first century CE, implies a downgrade from the previous 'Golden' Age of Augustus (Dudley 1972, ix).

2 Cizek 1972, 289–290 notes that Neronian authors may have not used Vergil as a model, but they adopted certain stylistic features and the moralizing tendency underlying his works; in 291–292 he recognizes the novelty in the literature of the period. Morford 1973, and Dominik 1993 also argue for a shift rather than decline in the literary aesthetics. For a more recent discussion on the reassessment of Lucan, Seneca, and Petronius see Littlewood 2017, 79–92 and Dinter 2013, 6–12.

3 The Latin term '*superstitio*' has been notoriously difficult to define (see Martin 2004, 10–20; Gordon 2008, 72–73). Although customarily translated as "superstition", initially it bore no negative connotations (Martin 2004, 126; Gordon 2008, 77), but subsequently obtained a derogatory meaning (Martin 2004, 127), and began to be viewed as an opposite concept to *religio* (Scheid 2003, 22–23; Šterbenc Erker 2013, 126). The evolution of its meaning in Latin is discussed in detail in Martin 2004, 125–139, and Gordon 2008, 78–94. Special care should be applied when considering *superstitio* in philosophical discourse and, with regards to its meaning, scholars usually draw a neat distinction between its vernacular and philosophical use. Throughout the book *superstitio* and superstition are used interchangeably, and only with their pejorative meaning.

4 Some type of conceptual connection between magic and superstition was conceived at least since the time of Pliny (*HN* 30.6–7), who mentions that, according to legend, magic partially sprang from the *superstitio* of Orpheus. My own view is that superstition denotes one's beliefs in strange supernatural powers, which are different from a given epoch and culture's normative religion or from what an ancient author considers acceptable religious practice, while magic is the active expression of these beliefs by means of spells, incantations, and rituals. See also the discussion and the notes on pages 14–16, and 20.

the representation of everyday life. Magic had gained such popularity that it came to be regarded as one of the all-important cultural features of the period.⁵ The works of the authors of the Flavian and Trajanic/Hadrianic periods also reflect its prominence in their portrayals of Nero. These depictions may have been part of an effort to discredit the last Julio-Claudian emperor and, by extension, the whole dynasty in favor of the new ones.⁶

Nero, the superstitious emperor: the face of a whole period

Textual passages dealing with Nero's attitude toward superstition and magic are part of larger works, hostile to him, and marked by a distinctively negative tone. The observation that there is little substance to Pliny's as well as Suetonius' depiction of the emperor as an irreligious and tyrannical ruler is probably accurate since the evidence from official sources contradicts these authors' descriptions of Nero.⁷ Such negative portrayals appeared soon after his demise as, for example, in the anonymous play *Octavia*, where he is characterized as a *hostis deum* (240) and as someone who scorns the gods (89: *spernit superos*).⁸ In the general context of tragedy, such characterizations are expected, and serve to enhance the feelings of sympathy toward the protagonist — in this case Octavia, who suffers at the hands of a most cruel enemy.

Negative portrayals of Nero are also found in encyclopedic works and biographies. In his discussion concerning the history of magic, Pliny narrates an anecdotal story about Nero with the aim of illustrating the vanity of the *ars magica*. He

5 Castagna 2002, xv: “Il periodo neroniano è il tempo dell'innaturale e del sovrannaturale: è il tempo della magia e del vaticinio mostruoso”. A common assumption supported by material evidence, most notably the increasing number of *defixiones* (see the chronological index in Audollent 1904, 556) as well as “The very great number of magical gemstones ... from the first few centuries of the Christian era suggests that in some way magic had got a stronger hold upon people of those times than ever before” (Bonner 1950, 22). Literary sources also point to this direction with Pliny claiming that, during his own time, men began to wear rings engraved with the figure of Harpocrates and other Egyptian deities (*HN* 33.41), and that there is not even a single individual who is not afraid of being bound by a *defixio* (*HN* 28.19). For the opposite view, downplaying the prominence of magic in the early Imperial period see Meggitt 2013.

6 Edwards 2000, xx. On passages dealing with Nero's obsession with magic see Andrikopoulos 2009, 55–64.

7 Šterbenc Erker 2013, 118–126, providing evidence which aptly illustrates that traditional festivals and state rituals were held as usual under Nero. Champlin 2003, 132 also notes that Nero attended to his official religious duties, but Suetonius' description of the emperor as an individual with a tendency to superstition and one who scorned all *religiones* is probably accurate.

8 For the dating issue of the *Octavia*, see the discussion in Ferri 2003, 5–30, and Boyle 2008, xiii–xvi.

claims that even the emperor, who initially was a fervent supporter and a great enthusiast of the occult (his passion for magic matched his notorious obsession with the performing arts), eventually lost interest after he realized the falsity of such practices, even though the *magus* Tiridates had initiated Nero in the mysteries of the Persian *magoi* (*HN* 30.14–17). This passage represents Pliny's views as a member of the senatorial elite on the value and potency of magic as well as its alleged connection with the practices of the Persian priesthood.⁹

Suetonius' portrayal of Nero as an emperor indifferent to religious observances, sacrilegious as well as extremely superstitious, further serves as a discourse on magic in the Neronian period (*Ner.* 56):

Religionum usque quaque contemptor, praeter unius Deae Syriae, hanc mox ita spreuit ut urina contaminaret, alia superstitione captus, in qua sola pertinacissime haesit, siquidem imagunculam puellarem, cum quasi remedium insidiarum a plebeio quodam et ignoto muneri accepisset, detecta confestim coniuratione pro summo numine trinisque in die sacrificiis colere perseveravit volebatque credi monitione eius futura praenosceret.¹⁰

An incessant despiser of every cult, except only for that of the Syrian goddess; he soon scorned her so much to the point that he polluted her with his urine, having been captivated by another superstition to which he solely and constantly remained attached. Since indeed, after he had accepted a small effigy of a girl from an unknown plebeian as a protection against conspiracies, a plot was immediately uncovered, he kept venerating it as the supreme deity and thrice sacrificing to it each day, and wanted to impose the belief that he could foreknow the future through its admonitions.

Nero showed his contempt for any type of *religio* except for the cult of the *Dea Syria*, which Suetonius indirectly characterizes as superstition by referring to the emperor's subsequent interest as *alia superstitio*. Through the reference to the *Dea Syria*, Suetonius alludes to the un-Roman and exotic rituals of her worship, thus underlining another aspect of superstition and, by extension, magic: its foreign and exotic character.

Nonetheless, Nero's attitude changed as soon as he became acquainted with another form of *superstitio*, that is, the use of magical objects. According to the passage, an unknown plebeian offered him a miniature figure or image of a girl (*imagunculam puellarem*) as a protective talisman against assassination plots.¹¹ Nero

⁹ Andrikopoulos 2009, 55–56.

¹⁰ The text of Suetonius is from Rolfe's 1950 Loeb edition. All translations are my own.

¹¹ Although the origin of such figurines for the purposes of bewitchment and protection can be traced back to native religious ideas of Egypt and the Near East (Wilburn 2012, 132–133, with relevant bibliography in the notes), private manufacture and use of protective talismans spread throughout the Mediterranean in the Imperial period as we infer from the existence of magical

became obsessed with the figurine, after a conspiracy was revealed, and began venerating the statuette as the supreme deity, offering daily prayers and sacrifices. His belief in the magical powers of amulets is the subject of another excerpt from his biography (*Ner.* 6):

quas tamen aureae armillae ex voluntate matris inclusas dextro brachio gestavit aliquamdiu ac taedio tandem maternae memoriae abiecit rursusque extremis suis rebus frustra requisivit.

However, after he enclosed these (sc. the slough of snakes) in a golden armlet at his mother's will, he wore it for some time on his right forearm and eventually got rid of it as he grew weary of his mother's memory, and sought it again unsuccessfully at his final moments.

When Messalina sent assassins to kill Nero, a snake darted out of his pillow scaring them away and saving his life. Soon it was noticed that the snake was nothing but a serpent's skin, and the emperor, following Agrippina's advice, placed the skin in an armlet, using it as an amulet. After he had his own mother murdered, he disposed of it, but sought it again when he felt that his life was coming to an end. In this excerpt, Suetonius projects upon his portrait of Nero the popular belief that certain artifacts possessed magical powers and afforded their owners control over the future.

The climax of Suetonius' description of Nero as an individual prone to the occult is central in an excerpt detailing his efforts to appease the soul of his murdered mother, Agrippina, through necromantic rituals: *quin et facto per magos sacro evocare manes et exorare temptavit* (Suet. *Ner.* 34.4). Brief, yet most imposing about Nero's sketching as a superstitious person, the story reflects, in a nutshell, the most important aspect of magic, that is, its alleged power to violate the natural order.

Why magic? Social, and cultural developments in the era of imperial globalization

Even though these anecdotal stories contain elements of hyperbole, they tend to exaggerate a personal trait of the last Julio-Claudian emperor, his tendency toward superstition.¹² The passages dealing with Nero's obsession with magic reflect developments in the religious life of the Empire that created the ideal environment for the 'blow-up' of witchcraft. In the first century CE, the Roman world extends to the furthest corners of the world, from the Middle East to Spain, and from Britain to

papyri which give instructions on how to produce and use these objects (Wilburn 2012, 134–139; Faraone 2018, 263–287).

¹² Champlin 2003, 132.

Egypt, incorporating diverse ethnic groups. People from different cultural backgrounds are now able to travel or immigrate more easily within the boundaries of a large area under the protection of the Roman Empire, facilitating the flow of, and access to, different ideas, customs, and habits.¹³ Thus, magic began to fascinate the Roman mind even more either as a mysterious and exotic practice for the curious, or as a means of achieving anything beyond human power for the naïve.¹⁴ At the same time, just like anything different and new, it provoked anxiety to supporters of tradition and the established order. This may also explain why the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* became a hot topic for debate in the Neronian period, and why certain aspects of it are treated in the works of Seneca, Persius, Lucan, and Petronius.¹⁵

The centrality of magic in literature was also made possible due to the changes in the institution of patronage which took place in the later Augustan period, when the authors passed under the emperor's control.¹⁶ The existence of multiple literary circles under the patronage of Nero, where leading figures such as Calpurnius Piso, Seneca, and Thræsea Paetus acted only as intermediaries, probably gave authors greater freedom, compared to the scrutiny Augustan patrons had exercised previously.¹⁷ Neronian literature was not completely subordinate to the demands of the imperial propaganda, but also drew inspiration from everyday life.¹⁸ To put it simply, the themes were not imposed from a political and literary elite; instead, they were chosen by the authors, and the patron-emperor gave his approval

13 Migration in the Roman world is admittedly a complex issue, touching upon multiple aspects of social, economic, and religious life. See, for instance, the following studies, which deal with several topics: Noy 2000; Tacoma 2016; Lo Cascio and Tacoma 2016.

14 The role of magic in humanity's efforts to sway the events which were out of its control was noted by Tylor 1871, 104, and Frazer 1925, 11. For the different suggestions on the development of the concept of magic in the Roman world see Garosi 1976, 33–74, Graf 1997a, 56–60, and Dickie 2001, 120–136.

15 Šterbenc Erker 2013, 126–131 recognizes this dichotomy in the religious life of the period and its influence on the literary production.

16 Morford 1973, 211; Morford 1985, 2005–2006 notes that this significant change took place under Augustus' reign after the death of Maecenas.

17 Besides, the wealth of Seneca, Lucan, Persius, and (perhaps) Petronius meant that these authors did not depend on the economic support of a patron to keep up with their literary activities (Morford 1985, 2012). For a detailed discussion on the major literary circles of the Neronian period, their members and activities see Cizek 1972, 291–297 (Seneca), 349–358 (Cornutus), 366–369 (Probus), 369–371 (*Calpurnii*), and 381–387 (Thræsea Paetus). Morford 1985, 2011–2012 rejects the schema of literary patronage proposed by Cizek.

18 Griffin 1984, 149: “The flattery of the ‘court poets’ does not reveal any literary direction from the throne”; referring to the poet Lucilius, Seneca's protégé, on the same page: “His epigrams as a whole reflect the Greek milieu of Rome — its astrologers, doctors, grammarians and athletes”.

afterwards.¹⁹ This view is further supported by evidence from Suetonius (*Ner.* 42) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.16), whose narratives point to the existence of literary circles where Nero's literary acquaintances would put their compositions up for the emperor to amend or criticize.²⁰

These changes provided new opportunities which explain the interest in magic and *superstitio* in Neronian literature. The choice and manner of treatment, however, was a more complex process, informed by the authors' orientation towards the topic: as modes of religious thought and ritual, *superstitio* and magic challenged norms, and transgressed natural, social, and religious boundaries defined by the official state religion.²¹ Its atypical characteristics rendered the topic of witchcraft the ideal means for negotiating anew aesthetic norms and earlier literary models. Seneca, Lucan, and Petronius test and expand the traditional aesthetic boundaries delineated in Augustan literature by writing about a topic which was considered, in and of itself, transgressive.

Magic in imperial literature: before and during Nero

Literary descriptions of magic do occur in Augustan literature, but they are generic and do not offer accurate depictions of actual witchcraft rituals. They are typically limited to general observations about the powers and impious activities of witches and sorcerers as well as the effects of magic on nature.²² For example, in *Aeneid* 7.750–760, Vergil describes the powers of the Marsic priest Umbro, who has the ability to hypnotize snakes with spells (*cantu*) and alleviate the effects of their bite with his skills (*arte*). In *Epode* 5, Horace describes the impious rite of the witches Canidia and Sagana, who have captured a boy and are about to starve him to death in order to use his liver in the concoction of a love potion. These two witches also appear in *Satire* 1.8, where they perform a magic ritual before an effigy of Priapus scares them away with his fart. In *Fasti* 6.141–145, Ovid describes how old women transform into the bird *strix* and attack Proca in his cradle, sucking out his blood. Even Vergil's *Eclogue* 8, which includes the first extant description of sympathetic love magic in Latin literature, and Ovid's extensive narrative of Medea's spell to rejuvenate

¹⁹ In addition, Persius 1.30–36 shows the poet's disdain toward the practice of offering recitative performances during banquets, where the participants would give their approval afterwards (*adsensere viri*). See also Castagna 2002, ix.

²⁰ Sullivan 1968b, 454–455.

²¹ See the observations about magic in Gordon 1987b, 60.

²² However, scholars have also argued for the influence of contemporary reality on the narratives of magic in Augustan authors. See, for example, Eitrem 1941, 63, Tupet 1976, xiii, and Luck 1999, 123.

Aeson (*Met.* 7.179–293), need not be attributed to their respective author’s empirical knowledge or hearsay. Although single details that allude to real magic rituals of the *PGM* can be found in both texts, it is generally accepted that these accounts were strongly influenced by earlier literary models.²³ Finally, it is worth noting that descriptions of magic, some of which appear as more realistic, are more prevalent in the works of Ovid than in those of other Augustan authors, thus suggesting a change in literary aesthetics from the late Augustan years onwards.²⁴ In other words, Ovid can be viewed as the precursor or, rather, a transition point in the process of transformation of the literary aesthetics of Neronian authors.²⁵

Neronian representations of witchcraft draw material from earlier accounts, including those of the Augustan authors, but further exhibit a degree of realism which has no precedent in Latin literature. This becomes clear through the comparison of witchcraft scenes with the text of the *PGM* and the *defixiones*, bringing to light verbal similarities as well as structural and conceptual connections, direct or implicit. Of course, contemporary popular views about magic such as those attested in Pliny’s *Natural History* were also broadly exploited by Neronian authors with the aim of making the scenes they describe appear more realistic. The change in literary aesthetic, by comparison, reveals a sharper and lively criticism of magic, its practitioners as well as those who believe in its power, and is expressed in diverse forms and through different techniques employed by each author.

Scope of the book

Even though scholars have analyzed the magic rituals in Seneca’s *Medea*, Lucan’s book six, and Petronius’ *Satyrica*, a systematic cross-genre examination of the motif of witchcraft in Neronian literature is lacking.²⁶ This book aspires to fill this gap and explores the topic of superstition and magic in these three representative works. The study corroborates that realism emerges as the salient trait of Neronian

²³ Gordon 2009, 210–211, contra Eitrem 1941, 63 argues that Augustan descriptions of magic do not reflect their respective authors’ real-life experiences, but they were shaped under the influence of earlier literary works, such as Varro Atacinus’ translation of the *Argonautica*, Catullus’ emulation of Theocritus’ second *Idyll*, and Ennius’ *Medea*, all of which drew upon Classical and Hellenistic sources.

²⁴ The account of Medea’s magic in *Met.* 7.179–293, and his curse poetry *Ibis* are the most conspicuous examples.

²⁵ Williams 1978, 52; Castagna 2002, xv.

²⁶ The most detailed treatment of the witchcraft scenes in Lucan and Seneca’s *Medea* is Reif 2016; Schmeling and Setaioli 2011 discuss several links between magic and the rituals of Oenothea, Proseleptos as well as the tales in *Satyrica* 62 and 63, in the relevant pages of their commentary.

witchcraft scenes on the basis of a thorough comparison with the text of the *PGM* and the *defixiones* as well as the *quasi*-magical recipes found in Pliny the Elder. The imprint of realism in representations of magic rituals, moreover, affords us the opportunity to observe how authors in the Neronian period renegotiated earlier aesthetic boundaries. They did so by deconstructing the ‘sterilized’ descriptions of the Augustan authors, replacing them with depictions of creative gruesomeness or hilarious sexualization.

The major contribution of the book, however, is to consider realism in the context of each author’s purpose. Influenced by Gordon’s theory on the different forms of the critique of magic in Graeco-Roman thought and literature,²⁷ my approach further explains how Neronian authors subordinate such high-degree realism to their own worldview, and foregrounds their intensive engagement with the ills and trickery of magic. More specifically, I show that, on the one hand, the realism of the witchcraft scenes creates an unbreakable bond between reader, real-life, and text that encourages more active participation on the part of the reader. On the other hand, this very realism becomes an indispensable tool which affects the reader’s response toward contemporary magic. Realism, in effect, substantiates the criticism of magic. Images of destruction, the horrific, and the ridiculous further serve as the necessary stimuli which facilitate a recognition process on the part of the reader. Casting magic in such a negative light shapes the reader’s moral interpretation and, by extension, elicits their critical response to witchcraft.

Chapter I argues that, in the context of Seneca’s philosophical drama, his *Medea* can be read as a play illustrating the havoc magic wreaks upon the world with the intent to avert the reader from such practices. My analysis of the heroine’s soliloquy in the prologue highlights the passage’s affiliation with ‘borderline *defixiones*,’²⁸ which betrays the play’s preoccupation with the occult, while also illustrating the anti-Stoic and subversive character of magic. The conceptual clash between Medea’s utterance and the chorus’ subsequent prayer not only underscores the absurdity of magic and its opposition to normative religion, but also foreshadows the eventual dominance of the former over the latter. The feeling of fear and the tension which the prologue arouses in the reader run throughout the play and culminate in the description of Medea’s poison concoction. The central scene, with its obsessive focus on the heroine’s witchcraft as well as the horror it causes, points up the play’s substantive differences from earlier treatments of the myth and further highlights its didactic value. The realistic details in the depiction of Medea’s ritual bridge the gap between the mythological witch and reality and accentuate her

²⁷ Gordon 1987b.

²⁸ A term coined in Versnel 1991, 63.

negative traits as *pharmakos*. Seneca's emphasis on the horrific aspect of Medea's art further enhances the 'apotropaic' role of the drama that criticizes magic as a force that brings utter destruction to the social, political, and religious order.

Chapter II examines Erichtho's necromancy scene as Lucan's tool of criticism against magic, also turning against its practitioners, and recipients alike. His attacks are first directed toward Sextus, who is sketched as an anti-Stoic and anti-Roman character, and whose passions lead him to resort to magical divination. In the prelude to the witch's appearance, Lucan predisposes the reader about what will follow: his presentation of Thessalian witchcraft invites the reader to view it, at times, as a force that contradicts the tenets of Stoicism and subverts the natural order, and, at other times, as charlatanry. In the central scene, he shows magic to be a malign, yet ineffective force. The sketching of Erichtho as a witch surpassing all her Thessalian sisters, combined with the high-degree realism of her ritual, creates high expectations in the reader. When Sextus, however, does not procure the information he seeks, the reader is stunned at the failure of this iconic witch and begins to question the effectiveness of magic and the power of its practitioners.

Finally, chapter III provides a lucid discussion on superstitious beliefs and magic rituals in the *Satyricon* as a parody of the dominant role of magic not only in the literature of the period, but also in Neronian life. The inset tales of the werewolf and the *strigae*, narrated in the *Cena Trimalchionis*, are examined as Petronius' new creations, a pastiche of earlier traditions of human-wolf transformations and popular beliefs, respectively, which cause the intranarrative audience's chills and fear. These stories, however, have a different impact on Petronius' educated reader, who cannot but mock the credulity and reactions of the intranarrative audience and, by extension, the claims of magic. The tension between the attitude of Petronius' low-life characters and that of the reader persists, albeit in a different form, throughout the Proselenos and the Oenothea episodes. Encolpius' credulity leads him to endure abuse and pain during the priapic rituals in hope of curing his impotence. For the reader, by contrast, the two priapic priestesses are mere caricatures of the witch-figure, with the result that the rites performed, which resemble *quasi*-magical recipes of popular medicine, are nothing more than a pretext for the women to sexually exploit the protagonist. The ridiculous and highly sexualized character of the rites can only cause the reader's laughter, while their eventual failure underscores magic as charlatanry.

