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*Scandal and image destruction in imperial Rome*

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# The Many Deaths of Domitian: Scandal and Image Destruction in Imperial Rome



Martijn Icks 

**Abstract** The Roman emperor Domitian (r. 81–96 CE) appears to have been a capable administrator, but he scandalized part of the senatorial aristocracy through his self-aggrandizement, his openly autocratic style of rule, and his lack of respect for the Senate. Even though the Caesars possessed unrivalled monarchical power, they had to take account of the norms and expectations of key interest groups, including the senators. Domitian’s controversial reign ended with his assassination, followed by a *damnatio memoriae*, an official condemnation of his memory by senatorial decree. Statues of the emperor were destroyed, mutilated, or recarved and his name was removed from inscriptions in an attempt at state-induced character assassination. However, a revolt of the Praetorian Guard makes it clear that his violent removal and condemnation were polarizing issues in some circles. When the political situation stabilized again under Trajan, politicians and poets who had supported and praised Domitian realigned their loyalties to the new regime, leading to polarization of a different kind. There was a concerted effort to create the impression that Domitian had been universally reviled by the upper classes, just as Trajan was allegedly universally loved. Some of the moral outrage surrounding the toppled ruler thus appears to have been constructed after the fact to complete his character assassination.

## 1 Introduction

Political polarization, partisanship, and a state of seemingly perpetual scandalization are often seen as typical features of present-day democracies, with their populist tendencies and inflammatory social media landscapes. However, that does not mean these phenomena were wholly unknown to historical societies, even those from a

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remote past. The Roman Empire was led by autocratic rulers and lacked a public sphere where citizens could engage in political debate. Overt criticism of the monarch was a delicate business and usually spelled trouble for the critic, quite possibly with fatal consequences. Nevertheless, our sources indicate that Roman emperors, too, could be highly polarizing figures and engender a lot of scandalization—especially among the senatorial aristocracy, which had a stake in government and produced most of the surviving literature. A well-known example is Nero, whose blatant disregard for senatorial standards and public performances as an “artist-emperor” earned him the hatred and scorn of at least part of the senatorial elite, but may well have increased his popularity with the plebs (Elsner & Masters, 1994; Champlin, 2003).

This article will focus on another emperor who has gone down in history as one of Rome’s canonical “evil tyrants”: Domitian, who ruled from 81 to 96 CE as the last member of the Flavian dynasty. In fact, according to a fourth-century text, the two reviled rulers were named in the same breath when the Senate denounced yet another “bad” emperor, Commodus, as “more savage than Domitian, more foul than Nero” in a joint acclamation (*Historia Augusta* Author, 2022, *Life of Commodus* 19.2).<sup>1</sup> According to the literary record, Domitian’s 15-year reign constituted a continuous violation of senatorial norms that antagonized the senators and ultimately led to his assassination in a palace coup. His physical death was followed by multiple symbolic deaths, enacted through the vandalization of his inscriptions and images, as well as through hostile speeches and historiographic texts, resulting in a character assassination that has determined his bad reputation to the present day. However, beneath this image of a hated tyrant getting his just desserts lurks a much more complex picture of a controversial monarch whose posthumous reputation was ambiguous and contested.

What can the case of Domitian tell us about political polarization and scandalization in imperial Rome? In order to answer this question, we will first briefly discuss the circumstances of the emperor’s reign and assassination. Then we will turn to the way his posthumous reputation was attacked through *damnatio memoriae*, and how this condemnation was in turn called into question by mutinying Praetorians. We will discuss how Domitian’s status as a “bad emperor” was confirmed in the reign of Trajan, focusing in particular on Pliny’s *Panegyricus* and how that text constructs Trajan and Domitian as polar opposites. Finally, we will touch on some positive assessments of Domitian which were published during his lifetime, and which show that his deeds and style of rulership could also elicit favorable responses, even if their sincerity may have been questionable.

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<sup>1</sup>All translations of Greek and Latin texts are taken from the Loeb Classical Library.

## 2 Domitian's Reign and Assassination

As one scholar has aptly remarked, “in many ways, Domitian remains an enigma” (Jones, 1992, p. 198). Due to the hostile and at points contradictory literary record, assessing the man’s character as a ruler and a person can only be a tentative exercise. We know that Titus Flavius Domitianus, as was his full name, was born in Rome in 51 CE as the younger son of Vespasian and Domitilla. His father, a man of senatorial rank who held prestigious administrative and military posts under several rulers, seized the imperial throne in a civil war in 69 CE, the so-called “Year of the Four Emperors.” In 79 CE he was succeeded by his elder son Titus, while Domitian was side-lined as the proverbial “spare.” However, 2 years later the younger son unexpectedly gained the imperial purple after all, since Titus died of an illness without leaving an heir.

During his years on the throne, Domitian proved himself a dedicated ruler who took an active interest in affairs of state. Lacking the battlefield experience of his father and brother, he tried to gain military prestige by launching several campaigns, with varying success. He also gave the soldiers a significant pay rise to make military service more attractive. The emperor was an avid builder who engaged in many infrastructure projects throughout the provinces, but especially left his mark on Rome. Among other things, he constructed the grand racing track on the Campus Martius that is now the Piazza Navona and initiated the construction of the forum that would come to bear the name of his successor, Nerva. The lavish palace he built on the Palatine hill would remain the dwelling of emperors for centuries to come. According to the contemporary poet Martial, its grandeur put even the pyramids to shame. “The god of day looks upon nothing in the whole world more splendid,” he assured Domitian in one of his epigrams (Martial, 1993, 8.36; see also Zanker, 2002). Both the grand scale of the palace and this superlative rhetorical style bespeak a shift in the nature of emperorship in the years 81–96 CE; whereas more traditional rulers such as Augustus and Vespasian had mostly avoided the trappings of monarchy and had acted as though they were no more than the first among their senatorial peers, Domitian took his rule in a decidedly more autocratic direction. He let himself be addressed as *dominus et deus*, “Lord and God,” emphasizing the distance between himself and the senators. Rather than ruling in accord with the Senate and showing this body the customary deference, he relied on a small circle of confidants, including men of equestrian rank (lower than senators) and even freedmen. He also grew increasingly paranoid and executed a fair number of senators and courtiers, including at least eleven men of consular rank (Jones, 1992; Southern, 1997; Galimberti, 2016).

From the historiographic and biographic sources, which are inclined to take a senatorial, or at least an elite perspective, a picture emerges of a reign riddled with scandals and atrocities. Allegedly, Domitian celebrated sham triumphs for victories he had never gained, dressing up purchased slaves as war captives and displaying booty that actually consisted of imperial furniture (Tacitus, 1914, *Agricola* 39.1; Cassius Dio, 1925, *Roman History* 67.7.4). In his arrogance, he renamed the months

September and October after himself and erected so many victory monuments throughout Rome that an exasperated contemporary wrote the words “It is enough” on one of them (Suetonius, 1914, *Life of Domitian* 13.2–3). The emperor is also said to have received so many honors “that almost the whole world (so far as it was under his dominion) was filled with his images and statues constructed of both silver and gold” (Cassius Dio, 1925, *Roman History* 67.8.1). Domitian’s cruelty was equally boundless, with sudden death sentences following upon misleading displays of affection and bogus professions of leniency (Suetonius, 1914, *Life of Domitian* 11.1–3). Particularly chilling is the story that the capricious ruler once invited several prominent senators and knights to dinner in a pitch-black room, where naked black-painted servants brought them black food in black dishes, the kind of meal that would usually be offered to departed spirits, while he terrified them with talk about “topics relating to death and slaughter” (Cassius Dio, 1925, *Roman History* 9.1–5). Some of the stories on record may well be more credible than others, but the works of these authors are all pervaded by a tone of moral outrage and horror.

The conspiracy that ended Domitian’s life is hard to reconstruct, especially given the secretive nature of such endeavors, but it seems clear that it originated with the palace staff, among whose number the emperor’s paranoia had also claimed many victims. On September 18, 96 CE, around noon, Domitian was told by his chamberlain, Parthenius, that a man was waiting for him in his bedroom to discuss urgent business. However, this turned out to be a trap. The man in question, a former slave called Stephanus, had a dagger concealed in the bandage he was wearing on his arm. When he stabbed Domitian, a desperate struggle ensued, until other conspirators rushed into the room to finish the job. Some senators and other prominent men were certainly or probably also in on the plan; Nerva, the elderly senator who would become the next emperor, and who was already in the palace when the coup took place; but also the consul Fronto and the commanders of the Praetorian Guard, who were needed to keep the troops stationed in the capital in check. How many others were involved, or at least knew of the plan, is impossible to say with certainty. Even the emperor’s wife, Domitia Longina, has been implicated by a later source, although it seems unlikely that she had an active hand in her husband’s demise (Grainger, 2003, pp. 1–27; Collins, 2009).

### 3 Damnatio Memoriae

The news of Domitian’s assassination soon hit the streets of Rome. According to the biographer Suetonius, who chronicled the event about two decades later, responses varied widely: “The people received the news of his death with indifference, but the soldiers were greatly grieved and at once attempted to call him the Deified Domitian; while they were prepared also to avenge him, had they not lacked leaders. (. . .) The senators on the contrary were so overjoyed, that they raced to fill the House, where they did not refrain from assailing the dead emperor with the most insulting and stinging kind of outcries. They even had ladders brought and his shields and images

torn down before their eyes and dashed upon the ground; finally they passed a decree that his inscriptions should everywhere be erased, and all record of him obliterated” (Suetonius, 1914, *Life of Domitian* 23.1).

Judging from this account, Domitian must have been a polarizing figure, as beloved by some as he was hated by others. The soldiers’ wish to have him deified was certainly not unprecedented: several emperors had posthumously been placed among the gods, including Vespasian and Titus. However, others such as Nero had suffered *damnatio memoriae*, which meant that their memory was cursed, their images were vandalized, and their name was removed from public monuments. Sometimes such actions were undertaken spontaneously, but in other cases, they were sanctioned by an official decree of the Senate (Varner, 2004; Krüpe, 2011; Scholz et al., 2014). In Domitian’s case, the Senate voted for a *damnatio* despite the soldiers’ protests, trying to impose its own negative view of the deceased ruler on public memory. Like Suetonius, the senator Pliny the Younger described the assaults on Domitian’s images as a cathartic experience. In a famous speech in praise of the emperor Trajan in 100 CE, he recalls that “it was our delight to dash those proud faces to the ground, to smite them with the sword and savage them with the axe, as if blood and agony could follow from every blow” (Pliny the Younger, 1969, *Panegyricus* 52.4–5). The graphic and bloodthirsty language the orator uses to describe these assaults almost makes it seem as if they are not just aimed against marble or bronze, but against Domitian’s actual corpse (although that had been smuggled from the palace and cremated by a loyal nurse). We are reminded of the posthumous mutilations of other deposed Roman emperors, such as Vitellius and Elagabalus—or, more recently, of the lynching and mistreating of the corpse of the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi when he fell into the hands of rebel soldiers in 2011.

A *damnatio memoriae* can be seen as a form of character assassination, since it deliberately aims to destroy a (deceased) person’s positive reputation (Icks & Shirayev, 2014; Samoilenko et al., 2020). At first glance, it would appear to be a form of erasing: removing someone’s presence from the public sphere and/or collective memory. In effect, though, the name and face of a condemned ruler were never completely obliterated. Sometimes imperial statues were left standing for a while with damaged eyes, ears, and mouths, or a conspicuous gap was left where a name had been removed from an inscription on a public monument. Such measures can best be seen as forms of disgracing, since they served as a very public renouncement of the honor and status that the deposed ruler had once possessed (Varner, 2004, pp. 2–3). But regardless of their exact aim, these and other “memory sanctions,” as they have been dubbed by Harriet Flower, clearly indicate the great worth that the ancient Romans attached to *memoria*, the commemoration of their culture’s outstanding persons and achievements. Low life expectancy and low literacy rates doomed most men and women to posthumous oblivion, so that only the best and brightest could hope to live on favorably in public memory. A deified emperor would be honored and cherished for generations, while a condemned one would live on in infamy, or might in time be mostly forgotten (Flower, 2006, pp. 1–13).

The Senate's decree condemning Domitian's memory, then, was not a measure to be taken lightly. However, we should not simply see it as an expression of moral outrage against a ruler whose autocratic style and numerous executions of high-ranking men had scandalized the senators. The *damnatio memoriae* of an emperor was always about politics as well as emotion. Moreover, it did not only serve the interests of the Senate, but also (and perhaps more importantly) those of the new monarch. Domitian's *damnatio* confirmed that his murder had been in the public interest and smoothed the transition of power, justifying Nerva's rise to the throne even though he was not a member of the Flavian dynasty. Why the choice fell on this man is not entirely clear, seeing that he had little experience with provincial government or the command of armies. However, he had deftly negotiated decades of court politics and may well have been seen as someone who could protect the interests of the other conspirators. His advanced age and the fact that he was childless may also have been points in his favor, ensuring he would be a transitory figure, without potential to grow into another autocrat (Jones, 1992, pp. 194–195; Grainger, 2003, pp. 28–31; Collins, 2009, pp. 92–97).

Domitian's *damnatio* left a clear impact on the material record, especially in Rome itself. According to Eric Varner, Nerva engaged in "rampant visual cannibalism," with no less than fourteen portraits of Domitian recarved to represent his successor. These included one of the Cancellaria reliefs depicting the emperor surrounded by gods and allegorical figures, a colossal seated statue of the emperor as Jupiter, and a bronze equestrian statue from the Bay of Naples. Other Domitianic portraits were recarved to resemble Nerva's successor, Trajan. The Equus Domitiani, a colossal bronze statue of Domitian on horseback that domineered the Forum Romanum, was molten down and is only known from literary sources. Evidently, a considerable effort was made to remove the emperor's presence from the public sphere, although that goal was certainly not achieved completely. Throughout the empire, some images of Domitian were left standing, including a togate statue from the theatre of Aphrodisias in modern-day Turkey (Varner, 2004, pp. 111–135). Inscriptions show an even more haphazard picture. In Rome, where we would expect the *damnatio* to hit hardest, only nine out of the 50 extant inscriptions which originally bore Domitian's name have been vandalized, while in the nearby regions of Latium and Campania this was only one out of twenty. The ratio is higher in some other regions, such as the Iberian Peninsula (16 out of 26) and Western Turkey (44 out of 70), but even here, many inscriptions displaying the name Domitian were left untouched (Grainger, 2003, pp. 49–51).

Unlike Stalinist Russia, the Roman Empire was not a totalitarian state where the authorities had near-complete control over textual and visual media. While the Senate could issue damning decrees, it was up to officials and elites throughout Rome and the provinces to follow up on these. Apparently, not all of them felt the urgent need to vandalize or erase Domitian's name or face. This indicates that the new regime did not have a firm grip on things and was only partially successful in its attempt to portray Domitian as an evil tyrant who had been justly removed.

## 4 Mutiny of the Praetorians

How volatile Nerva's position as emperor really was became clear in the summer of 97 CE, when a mutiny by soldiers of the Praetorian Guard plunged the government into crisis. If many senators had been outraged by Domitian's autocratic reign, the Praetorians were outraged by his murder and the fact that the culprits had not been punished for their heinous deed. As the imperial bodyguard, they were the most formidable military force in Rome and their discontent posed a serious threat to the emperor and his supporters. While Nerva had dismissed one or perhaps both commanders of the Guard upon his accession for failing in their duty to protect the sovereign, this had not been enough to appease the rank and file, who still held Domitian in high regard. Now, under the leadership of a new commander, Casperius Aelianus, they surrounded the emperor in his palace and demanded that he handed over Domitian's murderers for punishment. Nerva eventually gave in. Two men were sacrificed to the disgruntled Praetorians: Petronius Secundus, the dismissed commander who had quite possibly been in on the conspiracy, and the chamberlain Parthenius, who had sent Domitian to meet his doom in his bedroom. The former was immediately executed, while the latter was horribly tortured before he finally met his end (Grainger, 2003, pp. 94–94).

With these sacrifices, a worse crisis was averted. The Praetorians did not demand any further victims, nor did they insist that Domitian should be rehabilitated. Nevertheless, the death sentence they exacted on Secundus and Parthenius implied that Domitian's demise was to be regretted rather than celebrated, which undermined the legitimacy of the *damnatio memoriae*. Clearly, then, the question whether the last Flavian had been a "good" or a "bad" emperor was far from settled in 97 CE. Pro-Domitianic sentiments still lingered—not just among the Praetorians, but also among the legions stationed in the provinces. Moreover, the fact that Nerva had been forced to give in to the demands of the soldiers was an irredeemable loss of face. Even before the mutiny, the consul Fronto had already lamented his weak rule, remarking that "it was bad to have an emperor under whom nobody was permitted to do anything, but worse to have one under whom everybody was permitted to do everything" (Cassius Dio, 1925, *Roman History* 68.1.3). Earlier that year, a senatorial conspiracy to dethrone the elderly ruler had been thwarted. In short, the regime was decidedly wobbly and firm measures were necessary to ensure its survival. In October 97, 2 or 3 months after the mutiny, Nerva announced the adoption of Trajan as his son and successor. It seems likely that the emperor did not have a free hand in the matter, but had to take the preferences of the powerful generals stationed at the northern frontier into account. Trajan was one of these, commanding the legions of the province Germania Superior (comprising parts of Switzerland, France, and Germany). Apart from his military backing, several points spoke in his favor: he was relatively young (in his mid-forties), his father had been a consular, and he had a good political network (Grainger, 2003, pp. 89–102; see also Eck, 2002).

When Nerva died just a few months later, in early 98 CE, Trajan's accession to the throne finally brought stability to the imperial government. Unsullied by



involvement with the conspiracy against Domitian, his status as a battle-hardened general appealed to the soldiers, while his willingness to respect and cooperate with the Senate earned him the goodwill of the senatorial aristocracy. The rifts in Roman society could finally begin to heal. However, now that the peaceful transition from the Domitianic past had been completed, Domitian's posthumous fate was sealed.

## 5 Pliny's *Panegyricus* as Character Assassination

We have already caught some glimpses of the hostile portrayal of Domitian in historiographic and biographic sources. This negative treatment is typical for emperors who suffered *damnatio memoriae* and can be seen as a direct equivalent of the destruction and mutilation of imperial images (Varner, 2004, p. 7). Historians and biographers, too, were out to commit character assassination, ensuring that the toppled ruler would live on in infamy as a "bad" emperor. They did not do this on the instigation of the new regime, but followed their own agenda, which was mainly concerned with upholding senatorial/elite standards of "proper" imperial behavior and, in some cases, distancing themselves from "bad" regimes in which they had been complicit. The historiographic discourse discrediting notorious rulers like Nero and Domitian was often a response to the favorable accounts that were composed when they were still in the saddle, turning positive features into their negative counterpoints. However, each author also had his personal interests and came up with his own take on the disgraced monarch, presenting us with variations on the same theme (Schulz, 2019).

Historiography and biography were certainly not the only literary genres used for this purpose. Arguably the best example of Domitian's literary character assassination is Pliny's *Panegyricus*. This speech in praise of Trajan was delivered in the Senate on September 1, 100 CE, on the occasion of Pliny's assumption of a suffect consulship. It has come down to us in the expanded version that the orator later published, but the gist will have been the same in the original: Trajan is praised at length as the best emperor Rome has ever seen and is favorably contrasted to most of his predecessors—in particular to Domitian, who is smeared with every possible crime and vice (especially arrogance and cruelty). The speech thus serves to boost the prestige of the current ruler at the expense of the toppled tyrant, presenting Trajan and the Senate with models for "good" and "bad" emperorship from a senatorial point of view. At the same time, Pliny used the occasion to project his own good character as a distinguished aristocrat moving in the highest circles. He made a strong effort to dissociate himself from Domitian's reign, though his political career had flourished then, and to attach his star to Trajan's (Noreña, 2011). As he remarks, rather disingenuously, "I had advanced in my career under that most treacherous of emperors before he admitted his hatred for honest men, but was halted in it once he

did so,<sup>2</sup> preferring a longer route when I saw what the short cuts were which opened the way to office; in bad times I was one of those who lived with grief and fear, and can be counted among the serene and happy now that better days have come” (Pliny the Younger, 1969, *Panegyricus* 95.3–4). In fact, as Karl Strobel has pointed out, the orator was a “careerist” and “opportunist” who had served as a loyal representative of the regime—regardless of the personal reservations he may have had (Strobel, 2003, p. 304).

Throughout the *Panegyricus*, Trajan and Domitian function as polar opposites whose character traits and actions reflect on each other. Pliny expresses relief and gratitude that Rome is no longer subject to the sway of a haughty autocrat, but enjoys an emperor who acts as a *princeps*, or first among equals: “Nowhere should we flatter him as a divinity and a god; we are talking of a fellow-citizen, not a tyrant, one who is our father not our over-lord” (2.3). When Trajan first entered the city, we are told, he did not do so lifted up on human shoulders, as Domitian had presumably done, but went on foot. “You towered above us only because of your own splendid physique; your triumph did not rest on our humiliation, won as it was over imperial arrogance” (22.1–2). Likewise, Trajan receives praise because he always greets his subjects graciously, instead of requiring them to grovel at his feet (24.2), and because he goes out of his way to make the senators feel welcome during the morning greetings at the palace, so that they “stay behind to linger on as if in a home we share, though this is the place where recently that fearful monster built his defenses with untold terrors, where lurking in his den he licked up the blood of his murdered relatives, or emerged to plot the massacre and destruction of his most distinguished subjects” (48.1–4). Previous emperors, even the better ones, had been a mixed bag of virtues and flaws, the orator alleges, but that is no longer the case: “Contrast our prince, in whose person all the merits which win our admiration are found in complete and happy harmony” (4.6). Domitian, on the other hand, got what he deserved when the assassins came for him: “Nothing availed him then—not his divinity, nor those secret chambers, those cruel haunts whither he was driven by his fear and pride and hatred of mankind. How much safer is that same dwelling today, and how much happier, now that its master finds protection in popularity instead of cruelty, and seeks the thronging crowds of his subjects instead of solitude behind locked doors” (49.1–2).

In praising Trajan and condemning Domitian, Pliny faced a tough challenge. As Shadi Bartsch has pointed out, the same language which was now employed to elevate the former had previously been used to elevate the latter (Bartsch, 1994, pp. 148–147). Pliny was well aware of this conundrum, touching on it more than once in the course of his speech. When in the past orators praised Domitian’s virtues, he suggests, they were really drawing attention to his vices. For those capable of reading between the lines, there was a “hidden transcript” whose meaning undermined the “public transcript” of praise. But of course, this did not apply to

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<sup>2</sup>In his *Life of Domitian*, Suetonius likewise makes a distinction between the good start of the emperor’s reign and his later descent into tyranny (from 10.1 onwards).

the “good” emperor Trajan, who could be lauded with sincerity: “There is no danger that in my references to his humanity he will see a reproach for arrogance; that he will suppose I mean extravagance by modest expenditure, and cruelty by forbearance; that I think him covetous and capricious when I call him generous and kind, profligate and idle instead of self-controlled and active, or that I judge him a coward when I speak of him as a brave man” (Pliny the Younger, 1969, *Panegyricus* 3.4). The obvious problem with this line of reasoning is that the emperor and the attending senators could only take Pliny’s word for it, even though both the Domitianic precedent and the nature of the genre of panegyric itself put his sincerity into question. Therefore, Bartsch explains, Pliny’s speech lays bare how hollow Rome’s moralistic language had become after more than a century of imperial propaganda and flattery by subjects. As in any autocratic regime, sincere and insincere discourses had become so blurred that they could no longer be distinguished from each other.

## 6 Celebrating Domitian

Pliny was far from the only contemporary facing such problems. Lots of senators, knights, and courtiers must have faced the dilemma of how to disentangle themselves from a disgraced regime with which they had been intimately acquainted, and had profited from. The poet Martial, who had composed many works in praise of Domitian, now dismissed these as insincere, expressing relief that such toadying was no longer necessary: “Flatteries, you come to me in vain, you poor creatures with your shameless lips. I am not about to speak of ‘Lord and God.’ There is no place for you any more in this city,” he rejoices (Martial, 1993, *Epigrams* 10.72). When Domitian still ruled, he had struck a very different tone, unabashedly lauding the emperor as “the Lord and God of the world” and ensuring him that, even though his grand palace, “whose summit touches the stars,” rivaled heaven itself, the building was “not so great as its lord” (8.2; 8.36). Other poets from Domitian’s reign had addressed their sovereign in a similar manner—especially Statius, who like Martial appears to have courted imperial favor through high-handed praise (Leberl, 2004). At the start of his epic *Thebaid*, the poet addresses Domitian as “you, glory added to Latium’s fame, whom, as you take on your aged father’s enterprises anew, Rome wishes hers for eternity,” expressing the hope that the exalted monarch will not aspire to co-rule the heavens with Jupiter, but will “remain content with the governance of mankind, potent over sea and land, and waive the stars” (Statius, 2004, *Thebaid* 1.22–31). Another of Statius’s poems sings the praises of the great bronze statue of Domitian on horseback that the Senate and people of Rome had erected on the Forum Romanum—that same *Equus Domitiani* that would be molten down after his death: “You yourself shine above the temples, your lofty head surrounded by the pure air” (Statius, 2015, *Silvae* 1.1). Yet another contemporary poet, Silius Italicus,

composed an epic set in the distant past, but nevertheless saw fit to include a passage in which Jupiter prophesies the coming of a great emperor, “Conqueror of Germany,” who will outdo the military achievements of his father and his brother, and will eventually, after a long and glorious reign on earth, ascend to heaven to assume his rightful throne (Silius Italicus, 1934, *Punica* 3.594–629). From the context, it is evident that this predestined ruler is meant to be Domitian.

Following Pliny and Martial, we could dismiss such bloated expressions of praise and loyalty as nothing but empty rhetoric, meant to disguise the hostility lurking underneath. Opportunism will certainly have played its part, but there is no reason to suppose this would have been any different when those same authors later sang the praises of Trajan. As long as Domitian ruled, it seems that many poets had no qualms to address him in the elevated terms he desired, just as many senators had no qualms to attend his lavish banquets and to erect statues and monuments to his glory. In other words, they were prepared to play by his rules. This raises the question how far the moral outrage against Domitian’s “arrogance” and autocratic style of display actually went, and how much of it we should attribute to later exaggeration. After all, only a small number of courtiers and senators were involved in the conspiracy against the emperor, and they may have been driven more by a sense of self-preservation than by ideological motives. If Domitian would have continued to rule for another 30 years, and would have been followed by a successor of his own blood or choice, the history of his reign might well have been written by more sympathetic pens. In that case, it would certainly not appear as the catalogue of scandals and atrocities it is now. We could even speculate that, far from being seen as scandalous, Domitian’s superhuman pretensions and self-aggrandizing displays would have been celebrated as the hallmarks of a “good” and strong emperor, instead of the modest *princeps* image cultivated by Trajan. But if this was ever a feasible route for history to take, it was cut off once he was toppled and a new regime was founded on the rejection of the old.

## 7 Conclusion

To some of his subjects, at least, the emperor Domitian must have been a polarizing figure. Both the Senate’s fervor in issuing a *damnatio memoriae* after his assassination and the later mutiny by the Praetorian Guard indicate a ruler who could inspire strong emotions of hatred and loyalty. At the same time, as far as we can tell, the populace of Rome and the provinces were relatively indifferent about Domitian and were not much affected by his violent removal. To most outside the capital, he must have been a distant figure, perhaps little more than a name and a face on a coin. Since the large majority of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were excluded from the political process and lacked the means to directly witness, let alone interact with, their sovereign, the potential for political polarization and scandalization was low.

The story is different for the elite, especially the Rome-based senatorial class, but the autocratic nature of imperial rule severely limited their options to express discontent. On the contrary, as the transition from Domitian's reign to Trajan's shows, the need to realign one's loyalties to the new regime led to polarization of a different kind. Despite hints indicating otherwise, there was a concerted effort to create the impression that Domitian had been universally reviled, at least by the upper classes, just as Trajan was allegedly universally loved.

These dynamics of posthumous character assassination pose a serious challenge to historians, since they cloud our view of Domitian's reign. Each time a statue was defaced, a name was erased from an inscription, or a negative account was penned down, the emperor suffered yet another symbolic death. Some of the moral outrage expressed by Pliny, Suetonius, and other contemporaries was probably genuine—but some of it may also have been constructed after the fact, as an overt rejection of a leader and a style of leadership that had now been discredited. The scandalization concerning the emperor's actions in the literary sources, then, cannot be taken at face value. Like the vandalization of his statues, it was above all a political instrument to signal that one stood on the “good” side—and to make the other side look as “bad” as possible.

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