

CALIGULA DISPLAYS CAESONIA (SUET. CALIG. 25.3)

Suetonius concludes his discussion of the three marriages which Caligula contracted during his reign with a description of his relationship with his fourth, and final, wife Milonia Caesonia, claiming that he loved her so much that he often displayed her riding by his side in armour to the soldiers, and even naked to his friends:

*Caesoniam neque facie insigni neque aetate integra matremque iam ex alio viro trium filiarum, sed luxuriae ac lasciuiae perditae, et ardentius et constantius amauit, ut saepe chlamyde peltaque et galea ornatam ac iuxta adequitantes militibus ostenderit, amicis uero etiam nudam.*¹

It would have been regarded as highly improper for Caligula to have displayed Caesonia to the troops in this way, not to mention presenting her naked to his friends.² The implication is that Caligula's willingness to display his wife in these ways was yet another symptom of his madness, a madness that she herself had caused by drugging him with a love potion, or so Suetonius subsequently alleges.³ However, as so often, Suetonius fails to provide a proper context for these fleeting allegations, and the suspicion arises that he, or his source, may have placed the worst possible interpretation on an event, or series of events, in accordance with widespread negative assumptions concerning Caligula's character and mental condition.⁴

1) Suet. Calig. 25.3. Ed. M. Ihm, C. Suetonius Tranquillus: Opera I, Leipzig 1933, 168–69. On Caligula's marriages, see D. Wardle, *Caligula and His Wives*, *Latomus* 57 (1998) 109–26.

2) For criticisms of female presence in military contexts, both as unseemly for the women themselves and detrimental to the discipline of the troops, see Tac. Ann. 2.55.6 and 3.33.3 (on the behaviour of Plancina in A. D. 18) and Tac. Hist. 1.48 and Dio 59.18.4 (on the behaviour of Cornelia c. A. D. 39).

3) On Caesonia's use of a love-potion on Caligula, see Suet. Calig. 50.2; Joseph. Ant. Jud. 19.193; Juvenal 6.614–17. On Caligula's alleged madness, see B. Sidwell, *Gaius Caligula's Mental Illness*, *CW* 103 (2009–10) 183–206, who concludes that “the final evaluation is that other avenues should rather be explored to explain Gaius' unusual behavior, and the madness solution is no longer an acceptable answer”.

4) See e.g. D. Woods, *Tiberius, Tiberius the Snake and Other Contextual Problems*, *Arctos* 41 (2007) 117–27; idem, *Caligula on Augustus' Alleged Incest with Julia*, *RhM* 152 (2009) 400–04.

It is worth pondering, therefore, why Caligula should have displayed Caesonia in the ways alleged, and whether one can discover any plausible explanation less harmful to either of their reputations in either case than that offered here, that he did so simply because of his mad love for her.

The first point to note is that Suetonius frequently generalizes on the basis of a single alleged example.⁵ The probability, given both the nature of the claims and his tendency in this matter, is that Suetonius is generalizing on the basis of sole examples in this instance also, both in the case of the claim that Caligula used to display his wife in armour to his soldiers and in the case of the claim that he used to display her naked to his friends. The question, therefore, is whether one can identify any occasions within Suetonius' larger account of his reign when Caligula might have behaved in either of these ways. Let us start with the first allegation, that he used to display her riding in armour to his soldiers. In this case, one clearly requires some occasion when Caligula was probably on horseback himself and was accompanied by a large number of troops. It has been suggested that Suetonius refers here to the occasion when Caligula presented his new-born child, Drusilla, to all the goddesses with temples in Rome, and that Caesonia dressed as either Minerva or the goddess Roma.⁶ However, it seems more probable that mother and child would have used a litter or carriage on such an occasion, not least because these were the normal means of travel for a noble lady, within or without the city.⁷ Furthermore, it remains to be explained why Caesonia should have dressed as Minerva, Roma, or any other goddess, in order to present the child then to each of these very goddesses.

A stronger candidate for the occasion in question may be found in the outward journey that Caligula made along the bridge of boats that he built across part of the bay of Baiae, from Bauli to Puteoli, in late A. D. 39.⁸ Suetonius and Dio preserve the two main

5) See e.g. D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula: A Commentary*, Brussels 1994, 66–67.

6) S. E. Wood, *Imperial Women: A Study in Public Images, 40 BC–AD 68*, Leiden 1999, 216. See Suet. Calig 25.4; Dio 59.28.7.

7) See e.g. Suet. Tib. 2.3; Dio 60.22.2; Tac. Ann. 12.42 (conveyance by *carpentum*); Suet. Aug. 94.4, Nero 28.2; Tac. Ann. 14.4 (conveyance by *lectica* or *sella*).

8) See D. Wardle, *Caligula's Bridge of Boats at Baiae – AD 39 or 40?*, *Historia* 56 (2007) 118–20.

accounts of this event, and their evidence makes it clear that the outwards journey across the bridge was intended as some form of military expedition, while the return journey back across the bridge was intended as some form of triumph.⁹ Suetonius is clear that Caligula rode a horse on the initial journey outwards, while both he and Dio agree that he rode in a chariot on the return journey. Dio also reveals that Caligula was accompanied by a large crowd of armed cavalry and infantry during the outward journey. Hence it would have been entirely in keeping with the context for Caesonia both to have ridden a horse and to have done so armed, if she had accompanied Caligula on this outwards journey. More importantly, however, there is a clear correspondence between how Caligula was dressed and armed as he rode across the bridge, and how she was supposed to have been dressed and armed when Caligula allegedly displayed her to the troops. Suetonius reports that Caligula wore a golden cloak (*chlamys*) with an oak-crown, and carried a light-shield (*caetra*) and a sword (*gladius*). Dio clarifies that the cloak (*chlamys*) was actually of purple silk adorned with gold and precious stones from India, and adds that he also wore a breastplate said to have belonged to Alexander the Great.¹⁰ Here one should note that the terms *caetra* and *pelta* were often treated as synonyms, so that the *caetratus*, a soldier armed with a *caetra*, was regarded as the equivalent of *peltasta*, a soldier armed with a *pelta*.¹¹ Therefore, Caligula and Caesonia are both described as wearing a *chlamys*, rather than any other type of cloak, and carrying a light-shield, rather than a *scutum* or *clipeus*. Such correspondence in their appearance reinforces the argument for identifying the occasion of Caligula's alleged display of her to his troops as his outwards journey across the bridge at Baiae. As to why Suetonius, or his source, should have chosen to use two different terms for their light-shields, the fact that *pelta* was the term commonly used to describe the light-shield borne by the Amazons may have encouraged him to prefer it to describe any light-shield borne by a

9) Suet. Calig. 19; Dio 59.17. See e.g. D. Woods, *Caligula, Pompey, and Alexander the Great*, *Eranos* 104 (2007) 120–33; S.J.V. Malloch, *Gaius' Bridge at Baiae and Alexander-Imitatio*, *CQ* 51 (2001) 206–17; M. Kleijwegt, *Caligula's 'Triumph' at Baiae*, *Mnemosyne* 47 (1994) 652–71.

10) In a section on his dress-sense, Suetonius claims that Caligula sometimes wore the breastplate of Alexander (Calig. 52).

11) Liv. 28.5.11, 31.36.1.

female, even if, strictly speaking, the term *caetra* would have been equally applicable.¹²

The question arises now as to why Caligula should have included Caesonia at his side in his outwards dash across the bridge at Baiae. What role, if any, did she play in this imitation military expedition? There are two broad possibilities, the first being that she played herself and performed what both she and Caligula considered part of her role as the wife of the commander-in-chief, the second that she acted symbolically and played the part of some goddess or other historical or mythical figure. Wardle interprets Caesonia's appearance riding in armour as proof that she was acting as a 'lady-general', and compares her appearance to that of Agrippina wearing a golden *paludamentum* next to Claudius when they presided at a naval spectacle in A. D. 52.¹³ However, there are important differences between the roles of the imperial couple in each case, between participating fully armed in some form of spectacle in one case and presiding over a spectacle in semi-military dress in the other. Caesonia's actual participation in a spectacle alongside Caligula broke more taboos and so deserves greater explanation than does Agrippina's mere accompaniment of Claudius to a spectacle. More importantly, there is no other firm evidence that Caesonia was treated as a 'lady-general'. It is particularly noteworthy that there is no evidence that she accompanied Caligula during his so-called northern expedition, whether to participate in his military activities on the Rhine or at the Channel coast.¹⁴ Indeed, the evidence that she participated in the preparations at Rome for Caligula's intended triumph upon his return there suggests that she had probably not accompanied him beyond Lyons, if she had accompanied him for any part of this trip at all.¹⁵ This suggests that

12) On the use of the *pelta* by the Amazons, see e. g. Verg. Aen. 1.490, 11.663; Sen. Phaed. 403, Ag. 218; Plin. HN 12.23; Suet. Nero 44.1.

13) Wardle (n. 5 above) 235. On Agrippina and Claudius, see Plin. HN 33.63; Tac. Ann. 12.56.3.

14) For the activities on the Rhine, see Suet. Calig. 43–45, 48, 51,2; Dio 59.22.2. For his activities on the Channel coast, see Suet. Calig. 46; Dio. 59.25.1–3. In general, see A. A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power*, London 1989, 125–39.

15) Persius 6.43–47. A. Winterling, *Caligula: A Biography*, Berkeley 2011, 123 goes so far as to suggest that Caesonia acted as a 'stand-in' at Rome while Caligula was absent in the North.

her appearance with Caligula in the incident under discussion should be treated as an isolated incident, a special occasion of some type, rather than as an example of some new understanding of the empress' role of more general application.

This brings us to the second possibility, that Caesonia acted symbolically, playing the part of a goddess or of some other historical or mythical figure. In support of this, one notes that Caligula was accused of frequently disguising himself as some god or goddess, and it is possible that Caesonia may have done so on occasion also.¹⁶ Here one needs to distinguish between two related questions concerning the identity of the figure whom she played and the reason why she did so. However, to convince in either case, one needs to be able to answer both. Following earlier suggestions, Hurley claims that she played the part of an Amazon, but admits that this 'seems to send an odd message', and can only explain it as a parody of some sort.¹⁷ The next temptation is to identify her with some goddess whose attributes normally include helmet and shield, such as Minerva or Roma. The obvious explanation for her being disguised in this way in the company of her husband and his troops is that she was intended to symbolise the martial goddess who fought on their side and whose protection they enjoyed. This makes good sense in the context of Caligula's outwards journey across the bridge at Baiae, but the question remains as to which goddess in particular she was playing. The answer to this question depends very much on the nature of the festivities on the bridge, and what character, if any, Caligula was himself playing. On the whole, the probability is that he intended these festivities to commemorate some historical Roman expedition and subsequent triumph, whether or not one wishes to believe that he was commemorating the 100th anniversary of Pompey's triumph in 61 B. C. in particular.¹⁸ Hence one must ask what goddesses, if any, did the great Roman conquerors of the past believe had most assisted them in their victories. The answer to this is Venus Victrix. All three of

16) Suet. Calig. 52; Dio 59.26.5–8; Joseph. Jud. Ant. 19.30. In general, see J. Bellemore, *Gaius the Pantomime*, *Antichthon* 28 (1994) 65–79.

17) D. W. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius' Life of C. Caligula*, Atlanta 1993, 105. See earlier, H. Willrich, *Caligula*, *Klio* 3 (1903) 296.

18) See Woods (n. 9 above) 128–30.

the greatest military figures of the first century B. C. – Sulla, Pompey, Julius Caesar – had credited victories to her assistance. Sulla claimed to have dreamed of Venus fighting in full armour on his side and sent a golden crown and an axe to her temple at Aphrodisias in Caria.¹⁹ Pompey included a major temple to Venus Victrix in his new stone theatre at Rome, and, on the night before the battle of Pharsalus, dreamed that he was adorning the same.²⁰ Finally, Caesar vowed to erect a temple to Venus Victrix if he were to win the battle of Pharsalus, and used her name as his watchword on the day of the battle itself.²¹

It may be objected at this point that when Roman goddesses were depicted journeying somewhere, it was normally in a biga or quadriga. Hence, to cite some better known examples from late Republican coinage, Luna, Minerva, Victory, and Juno had a biga or quadriga of horses, Diana a biga of stags, Ceres a biga of snakes, and Cybele a biga of lions.²² However, this was not always necessarily the case, so that Diana, for example, was sometimes depicted riding side-saddle upon a stag, or horse, or even astride it in the normal male manner.²³ As for Venus Victrix herself, she was normally depicted standing with a Victoriola (or later a helmet) in her outstretched right hand, a long sceptre in her left hand, and a large shield at her side.²⁴ However, several points need to be borne in mind here. First, it is not clear from the scanty evidence for Sulla's dream, how he saw Venus fighting at his side, whether on foot, from a chariot, or even from horseback. Second, and more importantly, Caligula was no great respecter of convention or tradition, as the very fact that he allowed a woman to ride alongside him in a

19) App. BCiv. 1.97.

20) For the dedication of the temple, see Plin. HN 8.20; Tert. Spect. 10.16.5. For the dream, see Plut. Pomp. 68.2–3.

21) App. BCiv. 2.68,76.

22) See e.g. M. H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage* (RRC), Cambridge 1974, nos. 303/1 (Luna), 342/4–6 (Minerva), 352/1a–c (Victory), 379/1–22 (Juno), 400/1a–b (Diana), 449/3a–b (Ceres), 491/2 (Cybele).

23) See *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (LIMC) II.1, Zürich 1984, s.v. Artemis/Diana, nos. 157–59, 262–64 (on a stag), nos. 265 (on a griffin), 266–67 (on a horse).

24) See e.g. RRC nos. 480/3, 9–10, 12–13, 15–17 (with Victoriola); C. H. V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage I*, London ²1984, Augustus nos. 250a–b (with helmet).

military parade itself well illustrates, regardless of the precise identity of the goddess, or other figure, whom she was playing at the time. Third, it is possible that the traditional account of how the Dioscuri had fought on horseback on the Roman side at the battle of Lake Regillus c. 496 B.C. may have influenced if not Sulla's dream, then Caligula's re-interpretation of the same.²⁵ Next, it is artificially restrictive to argue that Caesonia could only have behaved in accordance with the conventional depictions of Venus Victrix when so little of the art of the late Republican or early imperial period has survived. Indeed, Caesonia may well have argued that she better played the part of the goddess by ignoring such conventions, because the real goddess would not have allowed herself to be bound by them either. Finally, and most importantly, there was a long history of depicting Aphrodite riding some animal, including a horse, so that it would not have been without precedent should a person playing Venus Victrix have dared to ride a horse also.²⁶

It is my suggestion, therefore, that when Suetonius describes how Caligula used to display Caesonia riding in armour by his side to the soldiers, he is generalizing on the basis of one incident only, when Caligula had disguised her as Venus Victrix in order to accompany him in his imitation military expedition across the bridge at Baiae in the same way that Venus Victrix was believed to have once accompanied the commander whose exploits he was commemorating. Part of the attraction for Caligula in this piece of theatre was probably that it seemed entirely fitting for his beloved wife to play the part of the goddess of love, even in her most warlike aspect. But why do none of our accounts of the activities on the bridge at Baiae include this detail? In the case of Suetonius, he omits this detail from his account of the activities on the bridge for the same reason that he also omits to note that Caligula wore the alleged breastplate of Alexander the Great as he made his outwards journey across it, because he has decided to include these particular details in separate thematic sections elsewhere, on Caligula's marriages and his dress-sense respectively. In the case of Dio, it is important to note that, even though his account is the longest and

25) Cic. ND 2.6; Dion. Hal. 6.13.1; Val. Max. 1.8.1.

26) See LIMC II.1, s.v. Aphrodite, nos. 899 (on a bull), 900–01 (on a horse), 902 (on a camel), 903–46 (on a goose or swan), 947–76 (on a goat), 977–86 (on a dolphin).

most informative on the whole, it nevertheless omits several details preserved only by Suetonius in his much shorter account, such as that earth was used to surface the bridge or that Caligula rode a horse wearing *phalerae* during his outwards journey across it. Finally, Josephus' brief account focuses solely on Caligula himself, with no hint that any others at all participated in his activities on the bridge.²⁷

This brings us to the second allegation, that Caligula used to display Caesonia naked to his friends. One is reminded of the allegation that he used to invite noblewomen to dinner with him, along with their husbands, then inspect the women one by one before leaving the room and sending for the one who had pleased him best, after which he would return to discuss her performance with her husband.²⁸ However, it is one thing for a ruler to treat other men's wives in this way, and another thing entirely for him to allow his own wife to be subjected to an even more humiliating inspection.²⁹ Furthermore, there is no good evidence that Caligula ever mistreated Caesonia in any way. His alleged threat to torture her to find out why he loved her so much is best not taken literally, but as a humorous statement of his own amazement at the depth of his love for her, that he was metaphorically under her spell, even if the humour seems rather cruel when taken out of context.³⁰ Hence it is difficult to believe that he would ever have humiliated her by exposing her naked even to his friends. The obvious suggestion is that Suetonius, or his source, has misunderstood his source-material. One possibility is that Caligula may have shown a naked portrait or statue of Caesonia to his friends instead, but

27) Joseph. Ant. Jud. 19.6.

28) Suet. Calig. 36.2. Cf. Suet. Aug. 69.1 on the claim by Mark Antony that Octavian's friends used to strip women naked in order to inspect them for his use.

29) The story of King Candaules of Lydia who contrived to show his wife naked to his best friend Gyges is the exception that proves the rule. See Hdt. 1.8–12. One doubts that Caligula would have wanted to risk following Candaules' fatal behaviour.

30) Suet. Calig. 33. It has sometimes been argued that this proves that Caligula felt literally under her spell. See T. D. Benediktson, *Caligula's Madness: Madness or Interictal Temporal Lobe Epilepsy?*, CW 82 (1989) 370–75, at 374. However, this is far too literal an interpretation which pays insufficient attention to the fact that he did not actually do this, despite his normal ruthlessness towards even friends and relatives. Wardle (n. 1 above) 126 rightly recognises this as an example of Caligula's sense of humour.

even this would have been regarded as humiliating for her.³¹ A better explanation may probably be found in the ambiguity of the adjective which Suetonius uses to describe Caesonia – *nudus*. It has several different meanings, including both ‘nude’ in the modern English sense and ‘having no armour or weapons, unarmed’.³² It is clear from Suetonius’ sentence that Caligula’s alleged display of his wife ‘nude’ to his friends was intended as the climax of his impropriety, and that Suetonius at least intended this adjective to be understood in the modern English sense. However, it does not necessarily follow that his ultimate source had used it in the same way. Since it would not have made sense to describe Caesonia as *nuda* ‘unarmed’ except in a context where she had just been described as wearing arms, the key to understanding what is really being described lies in identifying such a context, as we have just done.

It is arguable, therefore, that Suetonius’ description of how Caligula used to display Caesonia naked to his friends is another generalization, but one resting this time on the misinterpretation of a text originally describing how, after she had discarded the weapons and armour which she had worn while playing the part of Venus Victrix in the imitation military expedition, she had then accompanied her husband to meet his friends. Since Suetonius and Dio reveal that Caligula’s friends followed him by chariot in his imitation triumph back over the bridge, they had certainly joined him sometime during his stay at Puteoli. It was probably there that Caligula had allegedly displayed Caesonia ‘nude’ to them. Strictly speaking, he was probably equally ‘nude’ at the time of his alleged display of her to them, but Suetonius does not mention this. Indeed, if the ultimate source had described Caesonia and Caligula as both equally ‘nude’ upon their meeting with his friends, then this term would probably not have been misunderstood in the way that it arguably has. However, this source seems to have focused solely upon the condition of Caesonia at her meeting with Caligula’s friends, precisely because it was her condition that had caused so

31) By the late first century A. D., matrons were often depicted in the form of nude statues, but only after their deaths, and with the physique of the goddess Venus. See E. d’Ambra, *The Calculus of Venus: Nude Portraits of Roman Matrons*, in: N. B. Kampen (ed.), *Sexuality in Ancient Art*, Cambridge 1996, 219–32.

32) OLD, s.v. *nudus* 1200. In the sense ‘unarmed’, see e.g. Caes. BGall. 1.25.4; Liv. 23.19.6; Sen. Contr. 9.6.2.

much scandal earlier. In its full form, one might have detected a sigh of relief in the ultimate source at this point that even though Caesonia had paraded armed before the soldiers beforehand, she had at least stripped off her arms before joining the emperor's friends. However, a hostile tradition, ever ready to believe the worse of Caligula, seems to have misinterpreted the description of Caesonia's final 'nude' state as an even greater outrage to polite sensibilities than her earlier appearance armed before the soldiers.

Cork

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