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**Identity Theft: Masquerades and Impersonations in the Contemporary  
Books of Cassius Dio**

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**ABSTRACT:** The contemporary books of Cassius Dio's *Roman History* are known (to the extent that they are read) for their anecdotal quality and lack of interpretive sophistication. This paper aims to recuperate another layer of meaning for Dio's anecdotes by examining episodes in his contemporary books that feature masquerades and impersonation. It suggests that these themes owe their prominence to political conditions in Dio's lifetime, particularly the revival, after a hundred-year lapse, of usurpation and *damnatio memoriae*, practices that rendered personal identity problematic. The central claim is that narratives in Dio's last books use masquerades and impersonation to explore paradoxes of personal identity and signification, issues made salient by abrupt changes of social position at the highest levels of imperial society.

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## Identity Theft: Doubles and Masquerades in Cassius Dio's Contemporary History\*

### *Disappearances and Anxieties*

Once upon a time there were two brothers, so devoted to each other that they were never parted in peace or war. They were renowned throughout the realm for their wisdom, their valor, their amity and wealth. But the greater their renown, the more the king feared them, for he was an evil man and jealous of all virtue. He gave command that they be killed, and as these brothers had ever lived together, so together they did die.

Now these two brothers had two sons. One was killed beside his father, but the other was not found; he had gone to seek his fortune far away. This lad was by nature quick-witted, and educated as befits a gentleman. When he heard that the king had sought to kill him too, he contrived to feign his own death. First he drank a measure of hare's blood, mounted his horse, and rode off but a little way. Then falling from the saddle (he did this by design), he vomited forth the hare's blood as if it were his own. His servants bore him, looking near to death, within the house. They soon bore out from thence a coffin to be burned. Few people knew that within this coffin there lay concealed not the body of their hunted master, but carcass of a ram. The hunted man himself had disappeared. Constantly changing his clothing and his gear, he wandered hither and yon. When the story got out, as such stories will, a great hue and cry was raised for him. Many people were mistaken for the fugitive and punished in his stead; many a severed head was brought to the palace by persons who claimed that they had found him. But no one ever knew whether he had met his end, or whether he had got clean away.

Time passed. The bad king died, and a good king took his place. Then, lo and behold, there appeared a man who claimed he was the fugitive, and sought to recover his wealth and rank. Many questions were put to him by many men, and he made clever answer. When, however, the new king queried him in Greek (a tongue with which the missing man had been since birth most perfectly familiar), this fellow was confounded, and could make no sense of the question. Thus, though in form he was by nature very like the fugitive, and had by practice come to resemble him in other ways, the impostor was unmasked because he proved unable to impersonate an educated man.

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This story evokes a scenario familiar from folk-tales.<sup>1</sup> A young hero --sometimes a pair of twins-- is persecuted by the king.<sup>2</sup> Narrowly escaping death, the persecuted youths survive in anonymity, nourished by an animal or the ministrations of humble men. This scenario creates the expectation that, long after their disappearance, the persecuted ones will return to vindicate their true identity and reclaim their inheritance, like Cyrus, or Oedipus, or the pairs of brothers Amphion and Zethos, Pelias and Neleus, Romulus and Remus. But despite its folktale features, our story is not fiction. It comes from the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio.<sup>3</sup> The “Bad King” was in fact Commodus; the persecuted brothers were the Quintilii, whose villa, confiscated by Commodus, still stands in ruins along the Appian Way. The “Good King” was Commodus’ successor Pertinax. In this tale of disguise, disappearance, and identity theft, the vanishing protagonist was a real person: Sextus Quintilius Condianus, cos. 180.<sup>4</sup>

History then, not fiction. And hardly what we expect to find in a respectable work of senatorial historiography. But as I discovered, the tale of the disappearing Sextus is not unique. The last books of Dio’s Roman history teem with miniature narratives, both personal anecdotes and popular rumors. At the end of his vast project, Dio was no longer working from written sources. He had to synthesize an original narrative from his own memories, his notes, and from stories told by people he knew. The prominence of miniature narratives in his later books must due in part to Dio’s dependence on hearsay and to his role as eyewitness raconteur. What caught my interest was the fact that so many of these narratives, like the story of Sextus, involve doubles, disguises, and disappearances—narrative tropes that explore the problematics of personal identity. Since Dio’s last books survive mostly in fragments and summaries,<sup>5</sup> perhaps the Byzantine

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<sup>1</sup> In Thompson 1955-58, stories of persecuted twins and singletons fall within category L111, “Reversals of Fortune/Unpromising Hero.”

<sup>2</sup> On the “Law of Twins” in folklore see Orlik 1965, 136 with n. 12. The younger Quintilii, though in fact only cousins, seem to function in the narrative as a fraternal pair. Their disparate fates exemplify Orlik’s “Law of Contrast”; as in the case of the Dioscuri and Romulus and Remus, only one survives.

<sup>3</sup> The story I print is a close paraphrase of Cassius Dio 73 (72) 5. 3-6. The general sense is, as Millar says (1964 p. 127), that the impostor “was shown up by his ignorance of Greek,” but the text is uncertain. The oldest mss. of Xiphilinus have ἐλληνικῶς (C) and ἐλληνικῶν (V). Boissevain, following the Suda’s version of this passage (s.v. Σέξτος, Χαίρωνεύς) prints the article: τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν, “Hellenic matters.”

<sup>4</sup> On these individuals and their names see H. Halfmann 1979, nos. 75, 76, 108, 119. Names in this family are confusing because the younger men were named after their respective uncles: see V. Nutton 1979, 213-14 and 1973 (Nutton improves on R. Hanslik in *RE* XXIV 1963 sv. Quintilius nos. 23, 24, 26, 27). The elder Quintilii were consuls in 151, Maximus was consul in 172, and his cousin Sextus Condianus was consul in 180. This Sextus, the future escape artist, attempted as a young man to conceal a relapse of his fever from the prying eyes of busybodies at the bedside, including the emperor’s son-in-law and chamberlain (Galen *On Prognosis* K 14. 652; *CMG* V 8. 1, 120). This episode well illustrates how members of prominent senatorial families were always on display, and subject to imperial scrutiny, even when indisposed.

<sup>5</sup> From books 73 (72) to 80 (79) describing events of Dio’s adult lifetime, only the last two, covering the years 217-8, survive relatively complete, in a single palimpsest. For

editors excerpted such episodes preferentially, but their presence in the original narrative still needs to be explained.<sup>6</sup>

While pondering this question, I encountered a catalogue of vandalized imperial images from Dio's lifetime.<sup>7</sup> Commodus, Lucilla, Plautilla, Geta, and Macrinus stared back at me from the pages. Their semi-obliterated faces were hauntingly incomplete: eyes battered and vacant, noses bashed away. Here was Marcus Aurelius in his chariot, a blankness beside him where Commodus should have been. Blankness again on a sacrificial relief where once stood Plautianus in sacerdotal regalia. The Severan family tondo, with twin boy figures: Caracalla intact, Geta's face gouged out. Geta's face erased from bas-reliefs, counter-struck from coins. Looking over these evocative images of the imperial "disappeared," I felt had my first clue. Might these mutilated faces might provide a context for the unstable identity stories in Dio's fragmentary text? A generally semiotic approach to culture encouraged this hunch by suggesting that *any* two slices of the same cultural pie (however defined) can be placed in mutually illuminating relationship.<sup>8</sup> This essay proposes to thicken our description of Dio's imaginative

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the rest, we are dependant on the epitome of Xiphilinus, who preserves first-person statements made by Dio, and on excerpts included in the encyclopedia compiled for the 10th century Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Bits of Dio appear under three different rubrics in this encyclopedia, a fact which limits the range of their content (on the problems of historiographical fragments and epitomes see Brunt 1980 and Potter 1999, 73-7). The Constantinian encyclopedia's excerpts on the topic of "Virtues and Vices" are also known to scholars as the *Excerpta Valesiana*; the excerpts on the topic of "Embassies to and from the Romans" are known as the *Excerpta Ursiniana*, while some items from the category "Remarkable Sayings" that is thought to derive from a sixth-century collection by Petrus Patricius, may not in fact be proper excerpts, but paraphrases. The standard edition of Dio is that of Boissevain; the only English translation is Cary's revision of H. B. Foster (*Loeb Classical Library* 1914-27). Boissevain developed a new numbering system, whose book numbers are usually one higher than the old system; he puts the old book numbers at the top of each right-hand page. Cary puts the old numbers in the left margin. (On p. 160 Cary mistakenly gives LXXV instead of LXXIV as the old book number). I cite Dio passages by the new book number first, followed by the old number in parentheses. For Dio's background and historiographical practice I am particularly indebted to Millar 1964, Gowing 1992 and 1997, Murison 1999, Potter 1999, and Swan 2004. The standard biography of Severus (Birley 1971, 1988) is particularly helpful on the careers of Severus and his associates. Its narrative presents a synthesis of Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta*. For my purposes, however, the fourth-century author of the *Historia Augusta* is too devious, and his use of earlier sources too opaque, to be of any use in reconstructing a contemporary perspective on events of Dio's lifetime.

<sup>6</sup> Xiphilinus' epitome of Dio's books on the principate, where we can compare it with Dio's full text, is only about a quarter the length of the original. Xiphilinus shows a preference for verbal quotation (including Dio's own first-person remarks, but omitting many formal speeches); he rarely omits an anecdote or *bon mot* (Brunt 1980: 489-91).

<sup>7</sup> Varner 2000; 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Geertz 1973.

universe by reading the contemporary books of his history against the contemporary practices of usurpation and *damnatio memoriae*.<sup>9</sup> In this reading, the disguises, disappearances, and hermeneutical puzzles in Dio's contemporary history constitute a response to the precariousness of social privilege and personal identity in Dio's period, an instability to which the mutilated portraits of the empire's most privileged individuals bear tangible witness.<sup>10</sup>

Dio came of age under Commodus, and from Commodus' accession his narrative draws on first-hand experience.<sup>11</sup> We cannot, however, be certain how long after the fact he wrote; there is not enough data, and no single chronology of composition commands universal assent.<sup>12</sup> What is certain is that when Dio as a young man began accompanying his father to meetings of the Roman senate, the tranquil tenor of senatorial life was about to change. For almost a hundred years, since the death of Domitian, the imperial

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<sup>9</sup> This is a convenient modern phrase for various forms of memory erasure practiced on the images and commemorative inscriptions of once-prominent Romans when officially disgraced.

<sup>10</sup> Natalie Davis has suggested that an analogous relationship obtained between the seventeenth century's interest in collections of imposter narratives and the political instability of the previous century, which featured, along with bloody contention about true and false religion, competing claimants to various European thrones, including imposter kings in Portugal, Russia, and England (Davis 1997: 12).

<sup>11</sup> 73 (72) 4. 2 λέγω δὲ ταῦτά τε καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ οὐκ ἐξ ἀλλοτρίας ἔτι παραδόσεως ἀλλ' ἐξ οἰκειίας ἤδη τῆρ ἴσεως. *I write these things and what follows no longer from material handed down by others, but at last from my own observation.* Dio witnessed Commodus' first speech in the senate, presumably as part of his *tirocinium fori*. (Millar 1964: 14).

<sup>12</sup> We cannot know for certain how long after the fact Dio wrote down his memories of Commodus and Severus. Dio himself says he spent ten years collecting material covering the beginnings of Rome to the death of Severus, and twelve years writing it up (73 [72] 23, 5). But it is not clear when these phases began. Barnes 1984 argued for a "late" chronology, with the collection of material starting around the time of Severus' death in 211 and the writing taking place between 220-231. Others prefer an "early" chronology with the collection of material beginning around 197 under Severus and the writing up between 207 and 219 (Millar 1964: 28-40). Swan 2004: 28-33 summarizes the controversy and opts for a relatively early chronology, a few years later than Millar's. The question remains open because there is not enough evidence. We also cannot be certain when Dio actually composed his bonus books on Caracalla, Macrinus and Elagabalus. He was inspired to extend his original plan by a dream-vision in which the recently-deceased Severus, enthroned on high, invited him to continue writing (79 [78] 10. 1-2).

The question of the date of composition for any part of Dio's history is separate from the date of its "publication," since it would have been politically necessary to withhold from circulation material that was critical of the current emperor and his ancestors. (How likely is it that Dio would have circulated his narrative of Severus during the reign of his son Caracalla?). It is also uncertain how much Dio may have edited previously composed passages in the light of subsequent events.

succession had been orderly, and senatorial life had in consequence been relatively safe.<sup>13</sup> Senators under the Antonines came increasingly from the provincial aristocracy, and were less inclined than their counterparts under previous dynasties to torment themselves with memories of lost Republican glory, or hopes of imperial power.<sup>14</sup> But in Dio's lifetime, after a century of relative calm, the imperial system became radically unstable at the top. Dio and his fellow-senators witnessed an unprecedented number of usurpations, both successful and unsuccessful, and an unprecedented number of *damnationes memoriae*, some of them reversed. Commodus was deposed and killed. So too was his successor Pertinax, the "Good King" of our introductory tale. Pertinax's short-lived successor Julianus fared no better. Then Septimius Severus usurped imperial power, ruthlessly eliminating his rivals in two civil wars. Severus transmitted the throne to his sons, but Caracalla soon eliminated his brother. Caracalla was deposed by Macrinus, who was himself deposed in turn. Even during the years when Severus was firmly in control, instability dogged the careers of the emperor's family, his enemies, and his friends. Senators found that their rank brought them prominence, but little security. Civil war and paranoid autocrats cost many their lives.<sup>15</sup> We may imagine the collective shock when, after a century of calm, imperial usurpations, political executions, and mushroom promotions made senatorial life unpredictable, undignified, even dangerous, once again.<sup>16</sup>

The revival of usurpation and *damnatio memoriae* during Dio's lifetime dramatized, in extreme fashion, the instability and constructedness of the imperial role. Images of the emperor and his family were ubiquitous in the urban environment of the Empire. What survives today is mostly grand public statuary, but perishable small-scale images adorned shop-fronts and doorways in the humblest neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>13</sup> Although Hadrian seriously damaged his reputation with the senate by countenancing the execution of four consulars around the time of his accession, and by ordering two more executions near the end of his reign, Dio's epitome states that he "ruled most mildly" and there are no indications that Dio considered Hadrian's era a reign of terror (69. 2. 5, Xiphilinus). Dio also emphasizes Marcus Aurelius' reluctance to execute senators, and the mildness of his response to the revolt of Avidius Cassius (72. 28-30).

<sup>14</sup> Hopkins 1983: 120-200 demonstrates the high rate of turnover in the imperial senate, and infers that many sons of senators did not seek office themselves; cf. Eck 2000: 217-18.

<sup>15</sup> For a catalogue of senators executed in Dio's day see Leunissen 1989: 399-403.

<sup>16</sup> Mushroom promotions: the practice of adlecting non-senators directly to consular rank was an innovation of Commodus and the Severans (Leunissen 1989: 66-8). In this essay I take no stand on the question of whether, during Dio's lifetime, the entire empire actually was "in crisis," a state defined less by objective criteria than by the observer's point of view. Alföldy 1974 builds a picture of "consciousness of crisis" from the rhetoric of third-century Christians. Molin 2006 offers a catalogue of passages to show that Dio thought he was living in an age of crisis. Hose 2007 describes Dio's era as "a time of persistent crisis" for emperors who feared assassination and senators who feared execution and speaks of "ein Atmosphäre der Angst" in Dio's account of this period (Hose 1994: 406).

<sup>17</sup> On the ubiquity of imperial image: Fronto *ad M. Caes.* 4. 12. 4. *Scis ut in omnibus argentariis mensulis pergulis tabernis protectis vestibulis fenestris usquequaque ubique imagines vestrae sint volgo propositae...* "You know how your images are everywhere, in

ubiquitous replication of the imperial image expressed concretely an empire-wide consensus as to the identity of the emperor and the legitimacy of his rule. Because the Roman imperial system of status-derived identity was so hierarchical, the legitimacy of the emperor at the top implicitly authenticated the multi-tiered cascade of lesser identities below. Whenever imperial images were systematically vandalized or suddenly replaced, all Dio's contemporaries, whether literate or not, experienced a visual jolt to their assumptions about the permanence of social status and personal identity. I suggest that Dio's contemporary books feature stories of doubles and masquerades because such stories readily function as thought experiments about these assumptions.

Doubles are look-alikes that are similar on the phenomenal level, but not necessarily the product of intention. Doubles problematize the uniqueness of personal identity. To what extent are people interchangeable? This a question of particular urgency in a society that sorted people into formal status categories. Masquerade or impersonation, on the other hand, is a form of intentional doubling in which phenomenal resemblance is deliberately cultivated for some further end. Masquerades and disguises raise problems of deception and authenticity. In a social context in which everyone is practicing impression-management, how can we sort out appearance from reality, *Sein* from *Schein*?<sup>18</sup> Stories about doubles and masquerades gain piquancy from the way they render tensions between appearance and reality concrete; they explore objective questions about identification and deception (who is this person, and how can we know?). They may also raise questions about more subjective aspects of personal identity: whether, in his own eyes or in the eyes of others, a particular individual is worthy of the social position he claims. Viewing this aspect of personal identity externally, we might call it status adequacy. Viewed from the point of view of the individual himself, we might call it integrity.

To return to the themes of doubles, disguise and mis-identification as they appear in our opening story: on the literal level, Sextus Quintilius had to disguise himself because his family relationships and senatorial rank, instead of guaranteeing him a privileged place in the social order, became a deadly liability. This situation is a nightmare inversion of elite distinction. On the typological level, Sextus' story develops a series of doubles that problematizes the uniqueness of personal identity. The story starts with two brothers, who are, in effect, doubled again in their two sons, each named for his uncle. No sooner is the symmetry of these two pairs destroyed by Commodus, than the surviving son doubles himself: Sextus' *Scheintod* scheme involves an animal double, which is concealed in a coffin.<sup>19</sup> When the animal double disappears in the flames of a

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*banks and vendors' stands and shop fronts and eaves and entryways and windows...."*  
See discussion in Pekáry 1985: 42-65.

<sup>18</sup> Doubles challenge our ability to categorize two things as the same or different, a basic cognitive process that is essential for navigating the phenomenal world, while masquerades, since they involve sorting appearance from reality, challenge a cognitive process that is essential for making sense of the social world Doniger 2000: 6.

<sup>19</sup> Another story about a person who escapes the wrath of Commodus by means of an animal substitute appears in the *Historia Augusta*. When Commodus was twelve, he found his bath too cold, and ordered that the bathman be thrown into the furnace. His

fake funeral pyre, the human original disappears as well. This disappearance does not so much obliterate Sextus' identity as efface it through multiplication. A constantly shifting series of disguises creates a fog of uncertainty around the unseen fugitive, who no sooner disappears than he multiplies again—but in the negative, as men deemed to resemble him are rubbed out seriatim. The disappearance of these multiple doubles does nothing to solve the identity crisis, into which, as into a signification-vacuum, streams a succession of severed heads, each claimed by a bounty-hunter to be the real thing, but in their very multiplicity indeterminate. Functionally, these heads represent the zero-grade of personal identity, all that remains when a tyrant has stripped his victim of his life and property.<sup>20</sup> Severed heads are especially uncanny when used as free-floating signs, metonymies cut off from context. As such they embody anxieties about the reductive power of representation: the head can become a token that definitively identifies the individual, but only by dis-integrating the body and thus destroying what it is supposed to represent.

In this tale of a doubling protagonist, the emperor doubles too. Commodus, the bad emperor who forces Sextus to conceal his identity, and Pertinax, the good emperor who unmasks the impostor trying to steal it, form a contrasting pair. Commodus, striving in vain to authenticate Sextus' death by examining a succession of severed heads, tries to make an identification by physical resemblance, but undermines his own status adequacy, proving himself unworthy of his father, who had refused even to look at the severed head of Avidius Cassius.<sup>21</sup> Pertinax, by contrast, does not use any physical peculiarities to assess the Sextus look-alike. Instead, he dis-authenticates the impostor by a *paideia*-test. Thus Pertinax (who had in fact been a grammarian) performs in this story as a good emperor should; he protects the senatorial class from upstarts by endorsing *paideia* as the definitive hallmark of aristocratic identity.<sup>22</sup>

This story explores the paradoxes and limitations of unspoken assumptions about personal identity. What is it that makes Sextus Sextus, and not somebody else? Dio's contemporaries had to conduct their daily lives in a society that teemed with travelers and

tutor saved the bathman by tossing in a sheepskin instead *ut fidem poenae de foetore nidoris impleret* (*H.A. Commodus* 1. 9)

<sup>20</sup> The “appendage aesthetic” in Roman art, in which the head plays the determinative role in establishing the identity of a generic body, must have intensified this effect (Brilliant 1963: 10, 26-31); Hallett 2005: 289-95 discusses the way the head metonymically represented the person in Roman culture. Voisin 1984 provocatively attempts to look at the Romans as if they were headhunters. Jervis 2001 discusses how the practice of decapitating elite Roman citizens originated in the late Republic.

<sup>21</sup> Dio 72 (71) 28.1, an exemplary anecdote preserved by the excerptor of *de virtutibus et vitiis*. Contrast Dio's Antony, who insisted on viewing the heads of those killed in the proscriptions, even during dinner. Dio's Fulvia goes one step further, taking Cicero's head on her lap and piercing his tongue with hairpins (47. 8. 2-4). Thus Dio's Antony plays the tyrant in more extreme and macabre form than Plutarch's or Appian's (in Appian's account, Antony's dinnertime attentions are confined to the head of Cicero [4. 20], while in Plutarch Antony gloats over Cicero's head, but not over dinner [20]).

<sup>22</sup> Thus Pertinax earns Dio's accolade as a decent gentleman (καλὸς κάγαθός) Dio 74 (73) 1. 1, despite the fact that he was a freedman's son and had been a grammarian πατὴρ οὐκ εὐγενούς, γράμματα ὅσον ἀποζῆν ἐξ αὐτῶν ἡσκημένος Dio 74 (73) 1.1; 3. 1.

parvenus, yet lacked standardized systems of portable identification for civilians (the military diplomas issued to retiring *peregrini* appear to have been a special case). Once someone passed beyond the social circle that could authenticate his birth by personal acquaintance, imposture became an ever-present possibility.<sup>23</sup> Whenever you met a stranger, the first thing you had to figure out about him was where he stood in the Empire's formal system of social categorizations, whose chief variables were citizenship, liberty, property and office. A magistrate, for example, would begin his interrogation with the question, "What is your rank?" (*qualis condicio?*). In casual encounters, this unspoken question was often answered by a person's manner of speech, and by external criteria such as official insignia and clothing, which were easier to fake.<sup>24</sup> Caracalla, for example, fulminated in an edict about low-born Egyptian peasants impersonating legitimate craftsmen to obtain residency in Alexandria. He hoped that their fraud might be detected by their speech and manners, despite their attempts to falsify their appearance and their gear (ὄψεις τε καὶ σχῆμα).<sup>25</sup> Sextus in Dio's story keeps changing his gear and clothing (σχῆμα καὶ τὴν ἐσθῆτα) while on the run. In geometry, σχῆμα refers to the shape or outline of a figure.<sup>26</sup> Applied to humans, σχῆμα originally referred to external identity-features, be they physiognomical (face, physique, and demeanor), or material (the equestrian's gold ring, the Cynic's wallet). This usage assumes that external features have classificatory power.

But to the same extent that identity can be stylized, it can also be falsified. Props can be changed, and deportment too, since humans deliberately modify their exterior appearance in order to assume a status to which they are not entitled or to project inner qualities they may not possess.<sup>27</sup> Hence the word σχῆμα is frequently associated with deception. Dio uses the word both abstractly to describe deception in politics ("the *schema* of liberty"). He also uses the word concretely to describe the characteristic accoutrements of a general, a ruler, or a god.<sup>28</sup> These characteristics too can be deceiving. In the sphere of public action and religion, personal identification requires the right name, and the right clothes or σχῆμα. When Gaius Asinius Pollio tossed aside his general's cloak on a battlefield where a man of the same name had recently been killed, Dio says that Pollio's soldiers surrendered, convinced by the name of the corpse and the captured

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<sup>23</sup> On low-status individuals usurping higher status in the Roman Empire see Reinhold 1971. On the development of passports and other forms of identification in early modern Europe, see Groebner 2007.

<sup>24</sup> The Latin term for external tokens of status was *insignia dignitatis*. They might be deployed fraudulently in either direction. A freedman might wear a gold-plated brass ring to assume equestrian status, while a genuine equestrian might give up his ring to evade his creditors (Pliny *Natural History* 33. 6. 23; Apuleius *Apology* 75). See Reinhold 1971.

<sup>25</sup> "Genuine Egyptians can easily be recognized among the linen-weavers by their speech, which proves that they have assumed the appearance and dress (ὄψεις τε καὶ σχῆμα) of another class; moreover their mode of living and less civilized manners reveal them to be Egyptian peasants" (*Pap. Geissen* 40 III-IV = Hunt and Edgar 1932-4, vol. 2: 215, cited by Reinhold 1971: 296 and Moatti 2006: 120).

<sup>26</sup> On *schemata*: Catoni 2008: 72-123.

<sup>27</sup> A runaway slave with a bold gait might hope to pass for a free man (a catalogue of fugitives from Oxyrhynchus: *Pap. Oxy.* 51. 3617).

<sup>28</sup> Dio 45. 11. 2; 49. 17. 6; 51. 13. 5; 73 (72) 19. 4.

cloak that their general was dead.<sup>29</sup> (For similar reasons, in medieval Burgundy, the naked corpse of Charles the Bold was simply not recognized by his troops until it had been appropriately clothed).<sup>30</sup> When the emperor Gaius impersonated gods and goddesses, “he assumed not only their names but also the whole ensemble of their characteristic attributes (σχῆμα) so as to seem to resemble them.”<sup>31</sup> While typological identification by external tokens reigns in the public sphere, tokens of physical uniqueness belong to the sphere of women. For example, when Dio’s Agrippina is trying to ID the severed head of her rival Lollia Paulina, she pries open the mouth to inspect the teeth, “which had some individual features.”<sup>32</sup> Perhaps this is why, in the story of the returning Sextus, physical idiosyncrasies, sentimental tokens, and intimate family relationships play no role in the identification process—we hear of no scars, no nurse, no wife, no hand-made textiles or secret knowledge of the marriage bed, in striking contrast to the return of Odysseus, Orestes, or Martin Guerre.<sup>33</sup> Unlike those revenants, Sextus’ imposter attempts to recover his standing in the public sphere, which Dio presents as entirely male. Women and slaves are not canvassed for their testimony, and intimate criteria from the domestic context are not applied. Instead, on the strength of a very general physical resemblance, a studied manner, and presumably the right sort of clothing, the imposter almost pulls off identity theft, until Pertinax proves he lacks an elite education, the crucial token of elite male identity.<sup>34</sup>

Stories about disguise and impersonation render problematic the relationship between external and internal qualities. Roman senators preferred to naturalize this relationship as self-evident. Birth, wealth, and virtue belong together; together they create an entitlement to honor. Honor, objectified as office, and virtue, objectified as *paideia*, were supposed to be mutually-entailing, and this relationship was supposed to guarantee the stability of privilege. Such were the assumptions undergirding the honor system by which senators liked to think they lived.<sup>35</sup> When that system was upheld, as it was by Pertinax when he prevented an unworthy man from stealing a senator’s identity, the vindication made a deeply gratifying story. When that system was violated, as in Dio’s day it so often was, the senators’ corporate dignity was thereby diminished, and its members might be forced to behave in ways that undermined their personal integrity and self-respect.

Besides exploring puzzles of personal identity, the story of Sextus’ disappearance also affords a way to think concretely about signs and the problematics of their interpretation. At the moment when Pertinax unmasks the imposter, all hermeneutical

<sup>29</sup> Dio 45. 10. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Charles the Bold: Groebner 2007: 96.

<sup>31</sup> 59. 26. 6 πρὸς γὰρ δὴ τὴν τῶν ὀνομάτων μετάθεσιν καὶ τὸ ἄλλο σχῆμα πᾶν τὸ προσῆκόν σφισιν ἐλάμβανεν, ὥστε εἰκέναι ἂν δοκεῖν.

<sup>32</sup> 61 (60) 32. 4: καὶ τοὺς ὀδόντας ἐπεσκέψατο ἰδίως πως ἔχοντας.

<sup>33</sup> Davis 1983.

<sup>34</sup> 73 (72) 6. 5: οὕτω που τὸ μὲν εἶδος ἐκ φύσεως καὶ τᾶλλα ἐξ ἐπιτηδεύσεως αὐτῷ ἐώκει, τῆς δὲ δὴ παιδείας αὐτοῦ οὐ μετεσχέκει. *Thus, though his appearance was naturally somewhat similar, and he had cultivated a resemblance in other respects, he had no share of Sextus’ learning.* In Josephus, Augustus detects a pretender to the Hasmonean throne by his non-aristocratic body-habitus alone (*BJ* 2. 101-110; *AJ* 17. 324-37; cf. Gleason 2001 66-7).

<sup>35</sup> Dio 52. 19. 2; Lendon 1997.

problems seem to be solved, as Dio shifts his narrative emphatically into the first person, “I myself was present and **heard this with my own ears.**” But he immediately complicates this assertion of epistemological confidence with another interpretive puzzle: the disappearing Sextus left behind traces of his dreams. Note how the passage shifts in perceptual mode from hearing to seeing and back again.

I also **saw** the following **with my own eyes.** There is an oracle of Amphilocheus in Cilicia that gives its responses through dreams.<sup>36</sup> The oracle had given a response to Sextus too, which he disclosed in a **drawing**: depicted on a tablet was a little boy strangling two snakes, and a lion pursuing a fawn. I was not able to put everything together (συμβαλεῖν) regarding these **images** (I was accompanying my father who was then governing Cilicia) until I **heard** [πυθέσθαι] that the Quintilii brothers had been, as it were, strangled by Commodus, who afterwards imitated Hercules, just as Hercules is reported to have strangled the snakes sent against him by Hera (for the Quintilii had in fact also been throttled), and until I **heard** that Sextus was [like the fawn] on the run from a more powerful pursuer.<sup>37</sup>

Dio’s youthful visit to the dream-oracle takes a step back from the adult historian’s after-the-fact interpretive clarity to evoke a world of puzzling visual images that the young Dio does not understand. Here visual experience does not clarify reality—quite the reverse. The oracular drawings left behind by the invisible Sextus make no sense at all until young Dio *hears* (presumably from his father) the interpretive key that permits him to decode what he *sees*. As Dio describes how he made sense of Sextus’ dream-drawings, the decoding process is conveyed in jerky phrases that force the reader to toggle back and forth between the visual images and the individuals they represent. As readers we are constrained to follow closely in the historian’s hermeneutical footsteps while he moves from visual perplexity to the omniscience of hindsight.

Visible reality was not the only reality; this Dio knew. He was sensitized to the problem of hidden meaning because, as courtier and as a senatorial historian, he was forever trying to interpret the behavior of an opaque, and frequently duplicitous,

<sup>36</sup> Plutarch describes this oracle at Mallos in Cilicia as being still in full operation (*de Defect. Orac.* 434D); it was considered by Pausanias to be the most reliable oracle of his day (1. 34. 2).

<sup>37</sup> Dio 73 (72) 7. 1-2. τοῦτό τε οὖν αὐτὸς ἤκουσα παρών, καὶ ἕτερον τοιόνδε εἶδον. ἔστιν ἐν Μαλλῶ πόλει τῆς Κιλικίας Ἀμφιλόχου χρηστήριον, καὶ χρᾶ δι’ ὄνειράτων. ἔχρησεν οὖν καὶ τῷ Σέξτῳ, ὃ **διὰ γραφῆς** ἐκεῖνος ἐδήλωσε· παιδίον γὰρ τῷ πίνακι ἐνεγέγραπτο δύο δράκοντας ἀποπνίγον καὶ λέων νεβρόν διώκων. οὐδὲ ἔσχον αὐτὰς συμβαλεῖν, τῷ πατρὶ συνῶν ἄρχοντι τῆς Κιλικίας, πρὶν **πυθέσθαι** τοὺς τε ἀδελφοὺς ὑπὸ τοῦ Κομμόδου, ὃς μετὰ ταῦτα τὸν Ἡρακλέα ἐζήλωσε, τρόπον τινὰ πνιγένας, ὡσπερ καὶ ὁ Ἡρακλῆς ἔτι νήπιος ὧν ἰστορεῖται τοὺς ὑπὸ τῆς Ἥρας ἐπιπεμφθέντας αὐτῷ δράκοντας ἀποπνίξαι (καὶ γὰρ καὶ οἱ Κυντίλιοι ἀπηγγονήθησαν), καὶ τὸν Σέξτον φεύγοντα καὶ διωκόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ κρείττονος. We have no way of knowing when or why Sextus consulted the oracle, and we cannot be sure that the interpretation reported by Dio was the interpretation originally given Sextus by the priests (Weber 2000: 343).

Princesps.<sup>38</sup> The aberrations of the heavens and the natural world required interpretation too. As a man of his time, Dio was convinced that baffling phenomena—dreams, sights and sounds that could not be immediately explained—were signs of consequential events to come. His first historical work, “On the dreams and signs [σημεῖα] that encouraged Severus to hope for the throne,” may have been self-serving, but it was not, by his lights, intellectually dishonest.<sup>39</sup> Dio was not an epistemologically naïve realist. He rejects, or instinctively avoids, the “hegemony of the visible” associated with the common-sense materialism, in which “things” are just there to be “seen.”<sup>40</sup> For Dio, may things are just there to *mean*. His first-person account of interpreting Sextus’ dream pictures shows how he experienced the process of historical interpretation as the retrospective interpretation of signs.<sup>41</sup>

First-person anecdotes are one of the remarkable features of Dio’s contemporary books.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes he describes his own reactions explicitly; at other times a single word betrays obliquely the emotional impact of something he saw or heard. But however genuine his first-hand experiences, the narrative effect of immediacy is rhetorical. Dio recreates the suspense of the historical moment so effectively that it is easy for his readers to forget that he wrote long after the fact; everything he recounts has been long mediated in memory and enriched by hindsight. Thus the Dio we meet in these anecdotes is a constructed persona. This persona is more often an observer than an active participant; his first-person observations often describe his own emotional response to events precipitated by others. Since the conventions of classical historiography generally did not sanction the insertion of the author’s own subjectivity into his narrative, it may be that Dio’s first-person remarks betray the influence of ancient novels, whose narrators frequently confide to the reader how it feels to be a helpless spectator of events as they

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<sup>38</sup> In his extended discussion of the watershed events of 27 BC, Dio emphasizes how the secrecy of autocratic government complicated the historian’s interpretive efforts (53. 191-6). Haynes 2003 delves into the complexities of this issue in Tacitus. Although it is not certain that Dio read Tacitus, for both historians “the principate was founded in duplicity, and its existence causes a dislocation between appearance and reality, which makes the correct behavior of a senator problematic, and the writing of history difficult” (Sidebottom 2007: 76). Sailor 2008: 138, however, finds Dio’s comments on the difficulties of writing about the principate “a sunny, matter-of-fact exposition of what Tacitus only hints at darkly.” Dio may seem sunnier because set the bar low: he would have happily settled for a decent *Princeps*, and had no nostalgia for a *libertas* that he had never known and could not imagine.

<sup>39</sup> περὶ τῶν ὄνειράτων καὶ τῶν σημεῖων δι’ ὧν ὁ Σεουήρος τὴν αὐτοκράτορα ἀρχὴν ἤλπισε 73 (72) 23. 1. On the ex post facto use of prophecy by emperors to justify their accession, see Potter (1994).

<sup>40</sup> On the assumptions behind the common-sense materialism that some scholars term “Standard Average European” thought, Peradotto 1997: 384-5; Tyler 1987: 149-50.

<sup>41</sup> It is precisely in this model of interpretation that Dio disappoints modern historians as he “blocks his own path to a Thucydidean search for causation in Roman history” (Schmidt 2000: 35).

<sup>42</sup> Marincola 1997: 199-200. Fortunately the epitomator Xiphilinus did not change Dio’s first person verbs into the third person. On Dio’s non-eyewitness narratorial interventions in earlier books, which often explain his historiographical choices, see Hidber 2004.

unfold (So Cleitophon, the juvenile lead in Achilles Tatius: “*I sat there, watching intently the totally unexpected sight—shocked—thunderstruck by the enormity of the disaster*”).<sup>43</sup> Passages in which Dio operates novelistically as both character and narrator achieve a kind of double perspective; the story is focalized by turns through Dio the participant-observer and Dio the historian. Dio the participant-observer is rarely active. He reacts. He is often uncertain or afraid. Dio the historian, on the other hand, has the benefit of hindsight. He knows what the portents mean.

Dio's first-person statements are often plural: “we senators” saw this or feared that.<sup>44</sup> These plurals assert corporate identity: shared experience as well as shared status. They invoke an invisible cohort of like-minded colleagues who corroborate Dio's impressions. (Occasionally to a modern ear these plurals also suggest on Dio's part a weaselly diffusion of individual responsibility). Dio shows an awareness that his first-person remarks exceed the norms of his genre when he fends off possible criticism of his personal reminiscences:

Let no one think I am dirtying the dignity of history because I record even this sort of thing [how the senators cheered for Commodus as he performed in the arena]. I would not mention it but for the fact that these events took place in the presence of the emperor, and I myself was there. Since I heard everything, and I saw everything, and I too uttered those foolish cheers, I thought it my duty not to conceal anything, but to hand down to the memory of posterity every detail, just the same as for events of great moment. In fact I will record precisely and in more detail than before, both because I was present personally, and because I know of no other witness capable of writing about them as accurately as myself.<sup>45</sup>

Behind Dio's expressed embarrassment about dirtying the dignity of history lies concern about dirtying the dignity of the senate. It was a fact that under pressure of various malign autocrats, the senate in Dio's day did and said many unworthy things.<sup>46</sup> If,

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<sup>43</sup> Cleitophon is watching while his beloved is (apparently) eviscerated: ἐγὼ δὲ ἐκ παραλόγου καθήμενος θεώμην. τὸ δὲ ἦν ἔκπληξις· μέτρον γὰρ οὐκ ἔχον τὸ κακὸν ἐνεβρόντησέ με (Achilles Tatius 3. 15).

<sup>44</sup> Swain takes Dio's first person plurals as a sign of political affiliation with Rome, and nothing more (1996: 403-4).

<sup>45</sup> 73 (72) 18. 3-4 (cf. 65 (66) 9. 4): καὶ μὴ μέ τις κηλιδοῦν τὸν τῆς ἱστορίας ὄγκον, ὅτι καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα συγγράφω, νομίση. ἄλλως μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ἂν εἶπον αὐτά· ἐπειδὴ δὲ πρὸς τε τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος ἐγένετο καὶ παρῶν αὐτὸς ἐγὼ καὶ εἶδον ἕκαστα καὶ ἤκουσα καὶ ἐλάλησα, δίκαιον ἠγησάμην μηδὲν αὐτῶν ἀποκρύψασθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτά, ὡσπερ τι ἄλλο τῶν μεγίστων καὶ ἀναγκαιοτάτων, τῇ μνήμῃ τῶν ἐσέπειτα ἐσομένων παραδοῦναι. καὶ μέντοι καὶ τὰλλα πάντα τὰ ἐπ' ἐμοῦ πραχθέντα καὶ λεπτολογήσω μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ πρότερα, ὅτι τε συνεγενόμην αὐτοῖς, καὶ ὅτι μηδένα ἄλλον οἶδα τῶν τι δυναμένων ἐς συγγραφὴν ἀξίαν λόγου καταθέσθαι διηκριβωκότα αὐτὰ ὁμοίως ἐμοί. On the generic blurring between historiography and memoirs suggested by this passage see Marincola: 1997: 91-2.

<sup>46</sup> “Judged by Dio's account, a senator's function would seem to have been merely to bear silent witness to imperial eccentricities” (Gowing 1992: 1). Dio notes occasionally

to paraphrase Judith Butler, it is not senatorial identity that creates senatorial behavior, but senatorial behavior that constitutes the senator, what happens to this construct when the emperor demands not just deference, but sycophantic submission?<sup>47</sup> Bad emperors like Commodus put external pressure on senators by executing them or forcing them into hiding; they also put internal pressure on senators' identity by pressuring them to perform sub-senatorial acts.

Thus, though he does not question the need for autocracy itself, Dio shares with Tacitus an interest in the strain that autocracy imposed on senators' personal integrity. Dio also shares Tacitus' preoccupation with the theatricality of imperial power, and the consequent tension between appearance and reality.<sup>48</sup> While Tacitus' concern with this tension is largely ethical, Dio tends to give more prominence to techniques of disguise and impersonation than do Tacitus and Suetonius when they recount the same episode. For example, when Tacitus describes how aristocrats performed as actors at Nero's Juvenalia, he moralizes about the resulting depravity and sexual license. It is Dio, however, who adds the detail that the senators attempted to hide their humiliation behind *masks* (προσωπεῖα), disguises that Nero forced them to remove.<sup>49</sup> When Suetonius recounts how spectators grew restive during Nero's interminable performances in Greece, with a lively eye for the ridiculous, he describes people giving birth in the stands, jumping over walls, and being carried out for burial in simulated death.<sup>50</sup> When Dio tells this story, however, his focus is on senators and the excruciating dilemmas of self-falsification that they faced during Nero's theatrical performances.<sup>51</sup> "Senators (and others) were constantly scrutinized in their entrances and exits, in their body language, head movements, and applause... As a result, those who could stand it no longer pretended to expire, and were carried like corpses out of the theater."<sup>52</sup> Thus, though both authors describe Nero's audience staging *Scheintod* to escape Nero in the theater, Suetonius presents the episode objectively as a farce, while Dio presents the same episode subjectively as a nightmare.

Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio all report that Britannicus was buried in the rain, but

courageous exceptions to the general rule: Victorinus (73 [72] 11. 1-2) and Claudius Pompeianus (21. 1); Cassius Clemens 75 (74) 9; Erucius Clarus 76 (74) 9. 5-6.

<sup>47</sup> Butler 1997: 401-417, 402.

<sup>48</sup> Bartsch 1994; Gowing 1997.

<sup>49</sup> *Annales* 14. 15; Dio 62 (61) 19.3: καὶ ἐπειδὴ γέ τινες αὐτῶν προσωπεῖα ὑπ' αἰσχύνῃς, ἵνα μὴ γνωρίζωνται, περιέθεντο, περιεῖλεν αὐτὰ... *And when some of them, out of shame, put on masks, Nero had them taken off...* This difference in emphasis is all the more interesting because Tacitus and Dio seem to be working from the same source. (Dio's text is fragmentary after Book 60; his account of the reign of Nero survives mostly in the epitome of Xiphilinus).

<sup>50</sup> Suet. *Nero* 23. 2 *aut morte simulata funere elati*.

<sup>51</sup> On theatricality in Nero's reign see Gowing 1997 (written in 1993), Bartsch 1994, and Edwards 1994. On Dio's interest in the spectacle of the games, see Newbold 1975.

<sup>52</sup> 62 (63) 15 ἐτηροῦντο δὲ ἀκριβῶς καὶ τούτων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων αἰεὶ ποτε καὶ αἰ ἕσοδοι καὶ αἰ ἕξοδοι τὰ τε σχήματα καὶ τὰ νεύματα καὶ τὰ ἐπιβοήματα... ὥστε τινὰς μὴ δυναμένους ἐπὶ πολὺ ἀντέχειν... προσποιεῖσθαι τε ἐκθνήσκειν καὶ νεκρῶν δίκην ἐκ τῶν θεάτρων ἐκφέρεσθαι.

only Dio has Nero use whitewash to disguise the poisoned body's livid hue.<sup>53</sup> Dio's interest in tropes of disguise and mistaken identity can also be seen in his selection of escape-stories from the triumphal proscriptions. There was a large corpus of such stories, from which he selected four.<sup>54</sup> Two involve disguise: slaves who impersonate their masters through exchange of clothing; the third escape story involves a *Scheintod*, and the fourth involves both. In this last example, a faithful slave, prevented by penal tattoos from impersonating his master, kills a stranger and burns his corpse on a pyre, telling the pursuers that he has killed his master in revenge. In Dio's version of this *Scheintod*, though not in Appian's, there is also an element of masquerade: the slave makes his master change clothes with the corpse, then offers his master's clothing to his pursuers as proof of his death.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Dio's interest in doubles, disguise and mis-identification is noticeable even in his early books. It is in his contemporary history, however that these themes come to the fore.

### *Disorientation Under Commodus*

Various details in Dio's narrative suggest that under Commodus' regime, the gap between appearances and reality yawned open in particularly disorienting ways. In an orderly world, proper names ought to remain stable. But Commodus monkeyed with traditional names and titles. We may imagine how little the conscript fathers enjoyed being addressed by their emperor as "the fortunate *Commodian* senate."<sup>56</sup> Commodus' name-games also distorted the familiar parameters of space and time. Rome herself was now to be called "Commodiana;"<sup>57</sup> the months of the year were renamed "Amazonius," "Invictus" etc., echoing Commodus' boastful titles. To make matters worse, it was the senate itself that voted these changes, succumbing, Dio says, to fear.<sup>58</sup> Dio describes numerous ways in which Commodus altered surface appearances. He indulged in extravagant changes of costume.<sup>59</sup> When he played at gladiator, he nipped bits and pieces off the facial features of his sparring partners.<sup>60</sup> In the arena he dressed cripples in

<sup>53</sup> Dio 61 (61) 7. 4; Suetonius 33. 3; Tacitus *Annales* 13. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Dio 47. 10. 1-6, cf. Appian 4. 41, 43, 44. Other collections of escape stories: Valerius Maximus 6. 8. 6, 7, and Macrobius 1. 11. 16, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Stories about the fungibility of master and slave play with the possibility that status-difference is contingent, but they affirm in the end the comforting illusion that any reversal of roles will always operate to the advantage of the master.

<sup>56</sup> Γερουσία Κομμοδιανή 73 (72) 15. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Κομμοδιανήν γούν—the particle adds a sniff.

<sup>58</sup> 73 (72) 15. 1-3.

<sup>59</sup> Costumes changes of Commodus: 73 (72) 17. 1: costume of the Greens, 17. 3: silk outfit for receiving senators, 17. 3-4: purple and gold with a Greek *chlamys* for the amphitheater, morphing in to a Mercury-costume (also 19. 4); playing Hercules in the arena (73 (72) 20. 3). When Commodus altered the senators' traditional public clothing by ordering them to appear at his next performance in equestrian clothing and woolen cloaks (funeral gear), the senators were delighted; he was unintentionally making them enact an omen of his own demise (73 (72) 21. 3).

<sup>60</sup> 73 (72) 17. 2.

monster-outfits so he could pretend to be Hercules and club them to death.<sup>61</sup> Dio alleges that Commodus even altered the features of a familiar landmark, decapitating the Colossus and replacing its head with a likeness of himself.<sup>62</sup> For one awful moment in the arena, Commodus threatened Dio and his colleagues with decapitation too. He sliced the head off an ostrich and strode over to the senatorial seats. Waving the severed head in one hand and his bloody sword in the other, he bared his teeth and silently intimated that he could do the same to them. As terror fought with an hysterical urge to laugh, Dio concealed his emotions by chewing leaves from his garland and persuaded his neighbors to do the same.<sup>63</sup> The problem was not just that senators under this kind of pressure dared not show what they were feeling; they didn't even *know* what they were feeling.

Drastic shifts in the social position of prominent people were another disturbing feature of the regime. Dio observed the downfall of Commodus' wife and sister, whose sculpted images, as we know from the material record, disappeared or were defaced.<sup>64</sup> Dio claims that numerous men and women of distinction were openly executed or secretly poisoned by the emperor.<sup>65</sup> The brothers Quintilii were murdered, and Sextus Quintilius, as we have seen, simply disappeared. A leading citizen of Edessa evaded the hit squad sent by Commodus and tried to vanish over the Parthian border.<sup>66</sup> The very fact that this story got around suggests that people in senatorial circles harbored escape fantasies. At Rome, three of the empire's highest officials fell violently from favor to their deaths.<sup>67</sup> Commodus' all-powerful chamberlain was lynched, turned into a symbol of his own demise. Rioters mauled his body, stuck his severed head upon a pole, and paraded their grisly trophy through the town.

Commodus himself fell in 192. His death precipitated a public dismantling of the empire's most privileged individual identity. Because nearly a century had elapsed since any emperor had been overthrown by violence, the *damnatio* of Commodus would have

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<sup>61</sup> 73 (72) 20. 3.

<sup>62</sup> 73 (72) 22. 3. Surely Dio is oversimplifying here. On the representational complexities of theomorphic imperial statues that facilitated hostile reinterpretation after an unpopular emperor's death see Hallett 2005: 248-56.

<sup>63</sup> 73 (72) 21. 1-2. Though at the conclusion of this anecdote Dio claims to have felt laughter (*γέλως*) rather than distress (*λύπη*), he introduces it as an example of terror (*φόβος*) that caused the senators to fear death. It is difficult to imagine Tacitus describing his own mastication under any circumstances.

<sup>64</sup> On the imperial images defaced in this period see Varner, 2004: 136-199.

<sup>65</sup> 73 (72) 4. 1. At least twenty senators were executed: Leunissen 1989: 399-403.

<sup>66</sup> 73 (72) 14. 1-3.

<sup>67</sup> Among the notable casualties were the praetorian prefect Paternus, and his successor Perennis, handed over by the emperor for lynching to his own men, as well as Julianus, whom Commodus used to greet in public with deference and affection [73 (72) 14. 1]. Upward mobility of the wrong sort of people could be disconcerting too, even when followed by a gratifying fall. Dio watched Cleander, a former stevedore, become the emperor's all-powerful chamberlain, upending social standing everywhere: selling governorships, making nonentities senators, and appointing consuls by the dozen for the same year. Cleander's rise seemed to Dio the work of *Tuche*, his fall equally supernatural, the work of a demonically tall woman (surely a man in disguise) who started a hostile demonstration in the hippodrome 73 (72) 12-13.

been a novel and shocking experience for even the most senior senators. Young Dio would have been part of the process he describes: senators and common citizens screaming themselves hoarse, toppling imperial statues and tearing them apart.<sup>68</sup> Pertinax restored order, but not for long. He designated Dio for the praetorship, and was soon assassinated. Unlike Commodus, who was dismembered only in effigy, Pertinax's fall from power was accompanied by a literal dissolution of his physical integrity: he was decapitated. Dio would have seen his head paraded on a pike—or would have heard about it, as he like other senators skulked at home, listening anxiously for news. They hesitated (he says) until after bath and dinner time, then pushed their way through the intimidating press of soldiers surrounding the senate house to meet Didius Julianus, their quondam peer who had suddenly become their master. Dio tells us twice that he and the other senators were afraid (ἐφοβούμεθα), in particular those who, like himself, had supported Pertinax or clashed with Julianus in the courts.<sup>69</sup>

Fear also appears in this narrative as an apprehensive intensification of self-consciousness. Dio describes how each senator had to anticipate how his actions and expressions might be read: was it safe to go to the senate house right away? Might one become suspect merely by staying home?<sup>70</sup> Dio describes trooping up the Palatine to call on Julianus after Pertinax's assassination. As they performed this submissive duty, the senators subjected themselves to an intense stylization of the body: “modeling ourselves as it were, and posturing lest we be caught in the act of grief.”<sup>71</sup> The Greek words

<sup>68</sup> Dio 74 (73) 2. 1 πολλά γε ἐς αὐτὸν καὶ δεινὰ καὶ τῆς βουλῆς καὶ τοῦ δήμου συμβοησάντων. ἠθέλησαν μὲν γὰρ καὶ τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ σῦραι καὶ διασπάσαι ὡσπερ καὶ τὰς εἰκόνας... *Both senate and people together shouted many terrible imprecations against him. They wanted to drag his body and pull it to pieces like his statues...* The acclamations against Commodus shouted by the senate in the *Historia Augusta* (Commodus 18-19) are probably after-the-fact reconstructions (Baldwin 1981: 140-1).

<sup>69</sup> 74 (73) 12. 2 ἐφοβούμεθα μὲν τὸν Ἰουλιανὸν καὶ τοὺς στρατιώτας, καὶ μάλιστα ὅσοι τι ἢ πρὸς τὸν Περτινακὰ ἐπιτήδειον ... (καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ εἶς ἐξ αὐτῶν ἦν...) *We were afraid of both Julianus and the soldiers, particularly those of us who were close to Pertinax, of whom I was one;* 12. 5: καὶ ἐμισοῦμεν αὐτὸν καὶ ἐφοβούμεθα *We both hated and feared him.* Note the special emphasis on Julianus' use of soldiers for intimidation: ἵνα καὶ ἡμᾶς καὶ τὸν δῆμον προκαταπλήξας πρόσθῃται... *in order to bring us and the people over to his side by terrifying us first* (12. 1).

<sup>70</sup> Dio 74 (73) 12. 3 οὐ γὰρ ἐδόκει ἡμῖν ἀσφαλὲς εἶναι οἴκοι, μὴ καὶ ἐξ αὐτοῦ τούτου ὑποπτευθῶμεν, καταμεῖναι. *For it did not appear safe to us to remain at home, lest by that very fact we become suspect.*

<sup>71</sup> Dio 74 (73) 13. 2 πλαττόμενοι τρόπον τινὰ καὶ σχηματιζόμενοι ὅπως μὴ κατάφωροι ἐπὶ τῇ λύπῃ γενώμεθα. Surely this experience informed Dio's reconstruction of senatorial emotions in 27 BCE. He says that whatever senators felt about Augustus' autocracy, they dared not show their true feelings, but resorted to pretence (ἐπλάττοντο) Dio 53. 11. 4. Compare also Dio's description of the Sullan proscriptions whose witnesses, fearing themselves observed (οὕτω καὶ τὰ σχήματα αὐτῶν ἀκριβῶς ἐτηρεῖτο), dared not show emotion (fr. 109. 16). Jervis 2001: 137 n.27, observes, “The concept of externally imposed control over emotional expressions seems to have

πλαττόμενοι τρόπον τινὰ καὶ σχηματιζόμενοι describe the process of sculpting ones facial expressions and body language to suppress the display of unacceptable emotions. (Thus the usurper makes us impostors of ourselves). The common crowd felt no such inhibitions, and made scowling faces openly: ὁ δὲ δῆμος ἐσκυθρώπαζε φανερώς. At this point in Dio's narrative the crowd seems to function as the externalization of the senators' concealed feelings. While Julianus prepared to enter the senate house, the crowd's angry chants reverberated horribly (φρικῶδές) from the buildings round.<sup>72</sup> We can practically feel the hair rising on the back of the narrator's neck.

While the senators stand by, solemnly watching Julianus perform his inaugural sacrifices, it gradually dawns on them that the soldiers are looking up at the sky, pointing and whispering amongst themselves. Imagine what it was like to notice this, yet not dare to look up oneself, save for one sidelong peek, in the terror of the moment.<sup>73</sup> It is perhaps to this sidelong peek that we should trace the beginnings of Dio's career as an historian. For what he glimpsed up there in the heavens, surrounding the sun, were the three strange stars that portended the three far-off generals about to challenge Julianus for the throne: Severus, Niger, and Albinus.<sup>74</sup> These stars were destined to feature in Dio's first historical work, a pamphlet on the signs that foreshadowed Severus' ascension to imperial power.<sup>75</sup> Again, as in the story of Sextus' dream-drawings, Dio presents himself as a decoder of ambiguous signs. Here again he emphatically claims autopsy, as if autopsy of the sign guarantees his interpretation of what it signified: "and it happened like this, as I know."<sup>76</sup>

Julianus, whose inauguration Dio observed with such anxiety, lasted only two months. The more he feasted the senators and courted their support, the less they trusted him. They suspected he was faking his emotions, just as they were faking theirs. They duly voted him an honorific statue, which was soon destroyed.<sup>77</sup> During the ensuing civil war, Niger, a would-be usurper, was killed in Antioch; Severus, a successful usurper, sent Niger's severed head as a message to his supporters in Byzantium.<sup>78</sup> Severus then fell out with Albinus, his erstwhile Caesar. Dio implies that he was among the senators who stayed neutral in Rome, "While these events convulsed the world, we

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interested him, perhaps not surprisingly in view of the erratic and autocratic rulers of his own day."

<sup>72</sup> 74 (73) 13. 4. Elsewhere in Dio φρικῶδές always refers to the horrible reverberation of battle-noise (or in one case, the screaming of vultures), as heard by the losing side.

<sup>73</sup> 74 (73) 14. 4-5 ἀλλ' ὑπό γε τοῦ παρόντος δέους οὐδ' ἀναβλέπειν ἐς αὐτούς, εἰ μὴ παρορῶντές πως, ἐτολμῶμεν. *Pressured by fear, we did not dare look up at them, except with a sort of sidelong glance.*

<sup>74</sup> "Portend" is really too strong a word—Dio says something like "sub-intimate" (ὑπηνίττοντο). This gives us a sense of the subtlety of the decoding process, when viewed from the historian's point of view.

<sup>75</sup> 73 (72) 23.2.2 βιβλίον τι περὶ τῶν ὀνειράτων καὶ τῶν σημείων δι' ὧν ὁ Σευῆρος τὴν αὐτοκράτορα ἀρχὴν ἤλπισε... *a short book about the dreams and signs on account of which Severus entertained hopes of imperial rule.*

<sup>76</sup> 74 (73) 14. 4 καὶ τοιοῦτο μὲν τοῦτο οἶδα γενόμενον.

<sup>77</sup> 74 (73) 14. 1-2a.

<sup>78</sup> 75 (74) 8.3. *H.A. Pescennius Niger* 6. 1 says that Niger's head was also sent to Rome, but Dio's extant text does not record that detail.

senators kept quiet (those of us who had not clearly taken sides with one party or another and shared their risks and hopes).<sup>79</sup> In fact Dio himself had already taken sides,<sup>80</sup> but in his narrative he fudges his position by folding his own emotions into the generalized anxiety of the senators, watching the populace in the hippodrome protest the civil war with uncanny precision.<sup>81</sup> This event, along with various strange meteorological phenomena, “terrified us even more.”<sup>82</sup> After defeating Albinus in Gaul, Severus gloated over his corpse (Dio insists upon the truth of this), and sent his severed head to Rome, a shorthand message that literalized the disintegration of his rival’s claim.<sup>83</sup>

When Severus himself arrived in the capital, he gave the senators a nasty shock (μάλιστα δ’ ἡμᾶς ἐξέπληξεν) by suddenly styling himself the son of Marcus Aurelius and ordering the deification of Commodus.<sup>84</sup> This move effectively reversed the *damnatio* of a much-loathed emperor, and did not bode well for the senators’ security. There was in addition the problem of their personal integrity. It became necessary to pretend that one had espoused the winning side.<sup>85</sup> “Everyone was pretending (ἐπλάττοντο) to favor Severus, but they were caught out when they could not conceal their secret preferences in the face of sudden news... And some were even judged guilty because they were pretending too hard.”<sup>86</sup> This passage recalls Dio’s description of the senators’ response to Augustus in 27 B.C.: “Those who believed that Augustus spoke sincerely were unable to feel pleasure, held back by fear or hope, while those who did not believe him, in their dread or indifference, dared not attack him or refute what he said. So everyone believed him: either they were forced or they faked it” (ἐπλάττοντο).<sup>87</sup> Dio’s

<sup>79</sup> 76 (75) 4. 2. On Dio’s tendency to endorse senatorial quietism see Gowing 1998.

<sup>80</sup> Dio was partisan of Severus as early as June 193 (78 (77) 23. 1-2); Millar 1964: 29.

<sup>81</sup> 76 (75) 4. 5 ἔκ τινος θείας ἐπιπνοίας ἐνεθουσίασαν... *inspired by some supernatural impulse.*

<sup>82</sup> 76 (75) 4. 6. 4 ταῦτά τε οὖν ἔτι καὶ μᾶλλον ἡμᾶς ἐτάραττε.

<sup>83</sup> 76 (75) 7. 4 τὴν δὲ κεφαλὴν ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην πέμψας ἀνεσταύρωσεν... ἔτι μᾶλλον ἡμᾶς τε καὶ τὸν δῆμον, οἷς ἐπέστειλεν, ἐξεφόβησεν... *and he ordered the head to be sent to Rome and impaled on a pole...and with the letters he sent, he terrified us and the people even more.*

<sup>84</sup> 76 (75) 7. 4. Is Dio exaggerating the shock for rhetorical effect? Some senators must have had word from the provinces of Severus’ Antonine adoption propaganda, which was well under way (Ando 2000: 182-8).

<sup>85</sup> Dio’s own attitude to Severus went through multiple phases, which are difficult to date precisely. First unease and apprehension, then a show of partisanship, made public by his pamphlet on Severus’ dreams and portents, and finally, either a rupture in personal relations with the emperor, or a post-mortem repudiation (Schettino 2001 suggests we look for clues to Dio’s attitude to Severus in his portrayal of Sulla).

<sup>86</sup> 76 (75) 8.5 πάντες μὲν ἐπλάττοντο τὰ Σευήρου φρονεῖν, ἠλέγχοντο δὲ ἐν ταῖς αἰφνιδίαις ἐπαγγελίαις, μὴ δυνάμενοι ἐπικαλύπτειν τὸ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ κεκρυμμένον... τινὲς δὲ καὶ ἐκ τοῦ σφόδρα προσποιεῖσθαι πλέον ἐγινώσκοντο .

<sup>87</sup> 53. 11. 3-4 οὔτε γὰρ πιστεύσαντες ἀληθῶς αὐτὰ λέγεσθαι χαίρειν ἐδύναντο, οὔθ’ οἱ βουλόμενοι τοῦτο διὰ τὸ δέος, οὔθ’ οἱ ἕτεροι διὰ τὰς ἐλπίδας· οὔτ’ ἀπιστήσαντες διαβαλεῖν τε αὐτὸν καὶ ἐλέγξει ἐτόλμων, οἱ μὲν ὅτι ἐφοβοῦντο, οἱ δ’ ὅτι οὐκ ἐβούλοντο. ὅθεν περ καὶ πιστεύειν αὐτῷ πάντες οἱ μὲν ἠναγκάζοντο οἱ δὲ ἐπλάττοντο. Dio pinpointed this speech as the moment when autocratic government began ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκριβῆς μοναρχία κατέστη (53. 17. 1).

description of senatorial insincerity under Augustus reflects the agonizing moments of constraint and self-falsification that senators experienced in his own lifetime.

*Septimius Severus: Usurpers and Other Bandits*

When Severus adlected himself into the Antonine dynasty, he forced the senate to countenance identity theft. As a usurper and as a pseudo-Antonine, he was doubly an impostor—a successful impostor, who stayed firmly in power for 15 years more. But the situation of even his closest associates was precarious. His cousin Plautianus, for example, became prefect and grew very great: the senators found themselves voting him statues, portraits, and honorary decrees.<sup>88</sup> Like Kremlin-watchers of the cold war tracking disappearances in official photographs, senators tried to read palace power struggles in the public record of honorific images. A rival's statue has appeared in the forum? Plautianus' ascendancy must be in decline.<sup>89</sup> Such shifts in imperial favor were prudent to anticipate, but dangerous to get wrong; when rumors spread to the provinces that Severus had ordered a melt-down of Plautianus' statues, the governor of Sardinia hurried to comply, then found himself on trial for treason. Dio says that he himself participated in this trial, as a member of the emperor's *consilium*.<sup>90</sup> It must have been a squirmy business. The unfortunate governor was punished, and Plautianus' position seemed secure. But rumblings from Vesuvius disturbed the quiet of Dio's writing retreat near Capua.<sup>91</sup> Clearly something dreadful was going to happen, but what? Within the year, Plautianus was gone, executed on suspicion of treason, his name scraped off inscriptions and his images destroyed.<sup>92</sup>

Everyone who had once prudently sought Plautianus' favor was endangered by his fall. To deal with the aftermath, Severus convened a very uncomfortable meeting in the senate house. Dio describes how one suspect individual attempted to hedge his bets, though everybody knew that he had given Plautianus a very favorable interpretation of a treasonable dream. Was he a friend of Plautianus or not, the Emperor demanded. The suspect conceded that he was often invited to the *salutatio* at Plautianus' house, but insisted that he never went all the way inside. He claimed that he “lingered in the borderland (ἐν τῷ μεταίχμῳ) between the outer and the inner gate, appearing to Plautianus to be outside, but to those outside to be inside.”<sup>93</sup> This remark, besides showing a finely calibrated awareness of the gradient of access and status in the Roman house, suggests how pressure to play it safe might transmute a courtier's loyalty and

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<sup>88</sup> 76 (75) 14. 7; 15 2b.

<sup>89</sup> 77 (76) 2.4.

<sup>90</sup> 76 (75) 16. 4; cf. 77 (76) 17. 1.

<sup>91</sup> 77 (76) 2. 1-2.

<sup>92</sup> 76 (75) 16. 4. On the images of Plautianus, see Varner 2004: 161-64. On his career see Grosso 1968: 7-59.

<sup>93</sup> 77 (76) 5. 3-4. This individual, Κοίρανος (*PIR*<sup>2</sup> A 161), illustrates how unpredictable careers could be when things were unstable at the top. He reached one of the highest offices available to an equestrian when he became imperial secretary to Severus. After the Plautianus debacle, he did time on an island for seven years, and then under Caracalla became consul, Dio claims, without having held any other office. *CIL* XIV, 03586 honors a Publius Aelius Coeranus, who also is mentioned among the Arval brethren.

personal integrity into laboriously stylized ambivalence.

The pressure exerted on senatorial integrity, individual and collective, by Severus' autocracy emerges from Dio's narrative of another treason crisis, which Dio flags as especially strange.<sup>94</sup> Let us imagine ourselves senators, assembled in the senate house for the trial. The accuser is the emperor himself. But he is not present. He has sent us a letter accusing one of our number of treason. Apronianus, the accused, is not present either, being the governor of Asia. He is being accused because his former nurse (allegedly) dreamed that he would become emperor, and because he (the governor) engaged (allegedly) in some magical practices to hasten this destiny. Although the condemnation of the absent senator is a foregone conclusion, there is something weirdly insubstantial about the facts of the case.<sup>95</sup> The courtroom scene takes on a hall-of-mirrors quality as the alleged crime recedes behind layer upon layer of hearsay. Suddenly a new piece of information changes everything: an informant claimed under torture that whilst the treasonable dream was being told, he saw "a certain bald senator peeping in." Another senator? All of a sudden the receding hall of mirrors is closing in: a secondary suspect is in this room! He is one of us! Everyone must have been wondering, "Could he be me?" "Once we heard this, we were in a dreadful state," Dio says. Even though no names had been named, the whole senate was "stunned and terrified," even people who had never visited the accused, let alone the bald and the balding. "Only those with a full head of hair had any confidence. We all were looking around at the others, and there was a buzz: 'That's the one...' 'No, it's he...'"<sup>96</sup>

Dio begins narrating this trial in the third person. He heightens suspense by switching to "we" when panic strikes all the senators simultaneously. Then he switches again, from "we" to "I," pulling us readers in to experience this nightmare from his point of view alone. This narrowing of focalization emphasizes Dio's isolation from his peers, as everyone starts suspecting every one else. "I will not conceal what happened to me then, however ridiculous: I was so unnerved that I reached up with my hand to feel the hair on my head." Dio's gesture shows how the paranoia of living under autocracy could make people lose the privileged connection to the reality of their own bodies that, under normal conditions, anchors their sense of who they are. "We were all looking at the bald ones, as if to push the danger off onto them."<sup>97</sup> Here "we" no longer means "all of us senators," but only "those of us with hair." Those fortunate enough to belong to the unmarked category have begun splitting themselves off from those marked to misfortune

<sup>94</sup> 77 (76) 8. 1 καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο τὰ περὶ τὸν Ἀπρωνιανὸν ἐτελέσθη, παράδοξα ὄντα καὶ ἀκουσθῆναι *And after that came the climax of the Apronianus affair: a strange experience, even in the telling.*

<sup>95</sup> Schmidt (2000: 29) speaks of "atmospherics" ("mehr Stimmungsbild") that are of no use for historical analysis. My point is that the historian's atmospherics are thematically coherent, and meaningful in relation to his larger narrative of the period.

<sup>96</sup> 77 (76) 8. 3-4 ἀκούσαντες δὲ τοῦθ' ἡμεῖς ἐν δεινῷ πάθει ἐγενόμεθα· ὄνομα μὲν γὰρ οὐδενὸς οὔτε ἐκεῖνος εἰρήκει οὔτε ὁ Σεουῆρος ἐγγράφει, ὑπὸ δὲ ἐκπλήξεως καὶ οἱ μηδεπώποτε ἐς τοῦ Ἀπρωνιανοῦ πεφοιτηκότες, οὐχ ὅτι οἱ φαλακροὶ ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ ἄλλως ἀναφαλαντῖαι, ἔδρυσαν. καὶ ἐθάρσει μὲν οὐδεὶς πλὴν τῶν πάνυ κομῶντων, πάντες δὲ τοὺς τοιοῦτους περιεβλέπομεν, καὶ ἦν θροῦς "ὁ δεινὰ ἐστίν." "οὐκ, ἀλλ' ὁ δεινὰ".

<sup>97</sup> 77 (76) 8. 5 καὶ πάνυ γε ἐς τοὺς φαλακροειδεῖς ἀφεωρῶμεν ὡς καὶ <ἐς> ἐκείνους τὸν ἑαυτῶν κίνδυνον ἀπωθούμενοι...

by baldness, and the focalization stays with the fortunate. It's a game of Ultimate Survivor played out in the senate house.

Because of their distinctive dress, all senators look alike. They are all, in effect, each other's doubles. They are accustomed to functioning as a collectivity, but at this moment their corporate identity splinters as each seeks desperately to split off from himself the "others" that are his doubles. The situation shifts abruptly when another piece of the informer's testimony is read: the bald suspect wore a purple-bordered toga, and was therefore a curule magistrate. All eyes seek out one man, Baebius Marcellinus, who had been aedile at the time, and was totally bald. The senate has reunited. Under intense pressure from their corporate stare, Marcellinus rises to his feet. What we see in operation here is an extreme version of the consensus model of personal identity. On this model, you are who your peer-group says you are.<sup>98</sup> Marcellinus acknowledges the force of the collective gaze, but does not concede guilt. He walks to the center of the room, "The informer, I suppose, will doubtless recognize me, if he has seen me." Marcellinus is challenging the informer to pick him out of a line-up. The line-up will be the entire body of senators. Out of this group the informer will have to pick out the man he claims to have seen "peeking in" on the discussion of the treasonable dream. All the informer will have to go by is social status (senatorial rank and dress), generic physical characteristics (baldness), and perhaps individual facial features. Is Marcellinus certain of his own innocence, or is he banking on the possibility that, since the informer is an outsider, he will not be able to tell one senator from another?<sup>99</sup> His attempt to shift the identity contest to more precise criteria of individuation fails. When the informer is brought in, he looks slowly around the room—a moment that must have seemed an eternity to the anxious senators. At a loss amidst the sea of togate figures, the informant recognizes no one, until his strained attention picks up on someone's almost imperceptible nod, and he fingers Marcellinus. It is the aristocrat's dream turned nightmare: your identity *is* determined by the consensus of your peers. The corporate body closes ranks, and the scapegoat is excluded. Marcellinus is marched off to execution.<sup>100</sup> The senate had doubtless concluded, after multiple purges during the civil wars, that Severus was touchy about loyalty. "Which side are you on?" was an identity-question they were willing to answer by sacrificing one of their own.

Severus' own authenticity was problematic, as we have seen. He did not come to power through birth, like Commodus, or adoption, like Marcus Aurelius. He came to power with no dynastic legitimacy, representing himself as the avenger of Pertinax and

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<sup>98</sup> Similarly, a portrait statue "was" whoever people said it was, and statues' identities might change over time (Pekáry 1985: 29-41).

<sup>99</sup> In another episode, a senator accused of treason roundly denied any acquaintance with the soldier who was claiming to have been his associate. The soldier proved unable to pick him out of a crowd, pointing instead at another bald man who happened to be standing nearby (Dio 61 (60) 29. 5). Thus a senator might hope to escape accusations brought by a person of low degree, since such a person, whether accusing spontaneously or suborned, might only know how to recognize him by his dress and crude physical traits.

<sup>100</sup> 77 (76) 9. 2. Dio is quite clear that Severus did not directly cause the death of Marcellinus. The senate did. "His head was cut off before Severus heard he was condemned."

thus as pro-senatorial and opposed to Commodus. When he adopted an Antonine genealogy, he did so in stages, presenting different identities to different constituencies, as his hold on power solidified.<sup>101</sup> In the fragments that remain of Dio's Severan narrative, we can see that Dio included several anecdotes about impostors that comment obliquely on the emperor.

We hear how an enterprising schoolmaster left his pupils and set out for Gaul while Severus and Albinus were still at war. Posing as a senator, he brashly proceeded to raise troops in Severus' name.<sup>102</sup> With these troops he harassed Albinus' cavalry until Severus himself got wind of his success, and wrote to encourage his efforts. Thus encouraged, the impostor captured seventy million sesterces from the enemy. When the war was over, he demanded an audience with the emperor. (Perhaps he and Severus had been in cahoots all along, but Dio doesn't seem to consider this possibility). Dio was struck by the fact that this man neither concealed his masquerade, nor did he ask Severus to make him a real senator, though he might have obtained great wealth and rank.<sup>103</sup> He accepted a small pension, retired to the country, and died in his bed. Dio notes this encounter with surprise and perhaps a touch of envy: here was a person who had guessed right during the civil war, but passed up the political spoils. In a period when real senators were desperately hedging their allegiances, this low-status person boldly unmasked himself. We note how the impostor schoolmaster shifted roles adroitly to make the best of unstable times. Like a usurper, he raised troops in a mutinous province; like a bandit, he pulled off an enormous heist. Like Severus, he successfully carried off an assumed identity—but unlike all these, he enjoyed his Walter Mitty moment and retired. One can see how the story of the schoolmaster's masquerade might have intrigued Dio and his colleagues, too prominent to retire safely themselves. After the defeat of Albinus, the pseudo-senator schoolmaster received a pension, but sixty four real senators were arrested. Only thirty five survived.<sup>104</sup>

In his history of the Severan period, Dio includes two other stories about bandits who successfully assume other identities. These stories are told in such a way that the bandits' success seems to undercut the emperor's authority. The first story takes place in Syria after the defeat of Niger. "While Severus was congratulating himself on this success, as if he were himself the cleverest and bravest of men, something really bizarre befell him."<sup>105</sup> Syria's most-wanted outlaw, disguised in the uniform of a military tribune, rode straight up to Severus, embraced him, and gave him a collegial kiss. Then,

<sup>101</sup> On the senators' dismay when Severus switched positions and deified Commodus, see 76 (75) 7. 4. On Severus' self-presentation and assumption of various titles in this period see Ando 2000: 182-8.

<sup>102</sup> The impostor schoolmaster was named Numerianus: 76 (75). 5. Potter (2008) suggests that this individual was part of a fifth column organized by Severus with contacts made while he was governor of Lugdunensis.

<sup>103</sup> 76 (75) 5. 3 οὐτ' ἀπεκρύψατό τι οὐτ' ἤτησεν ὡς ἀληθῶς βουλευτῆς γενέσθαι, καὶ τιμαῖς μεγάλας πλοῦτόν τε ἂν αὐξήθῃναι δυνηθεῖς οὐκ ἠθέλησεν...

<sup>104</sup> 76 (75) 8. 4 states that the thirty five released were leading senators, and implies that the twenty nine Severus executed were senators also (cf. 75 (74) 2. 1-2). The *Life of Severus* in the *Historia Augusta* (13, 1-3) lists 41 senatorial victims, but a significant fraction of these names are likely bogus (Jacques 1992).

<sup>105</sup> 75 (75) 2. 4. *Something really bizarre*: πρῶγμα παραδοξότατον.

just as suddenly, he disappeared before his imposture was discovered. This incident is historically gratuitous, and makes no logical sense (if the masquerade went undetected, how would anybody know about it?) Yet the story got around. People enjoyed telling it because such stories were good to think with about the legitimacy of imperial power.<sup>106</sup> A bandit who successfully impersonates a military officer, and fools Severus into greeting him on terms of equality, suggests that Severus, a successful usurper, may be just another bandit impersonating an emperor.

The story of the bandit Bulla serves a similar narrative function.<sup>107</sup> Dio introduces Bulla as a foil for Severus, stressing that his insolent depredations took place on Italian soil, despite the presence of the emperor and all his soldiers. Dio intimates that Severus obsessively trailed the footsteps of his rival, presenting emperor and bandit as equally-matched adversaries engaged in a perpetual chase.<sup>108</sup> At one point Dio makes us privy to Severus' exasperation, "He was enraged that while his deputies were conquering enemies in Britain, he himself was being bested in Italy by a brigand."<sup>109</sup> Focalizing the narrative through the emperor at this juncture, Dio authenticates Severus' inadequacy by presenting it as something of which the emperor was himself aware.

In Dio's Severan narrative, Bulla's escapes and trickster shenanigans delegitimize imperial power by evoking a folktale motif that pits ingenuity against authority; Bulla plays the role the clever thief who repeatedly outwits the king and his bungling deputies.<sup>110</sup> When some of his men had been arrested and were about to be thrown to the lions, Bulla appeared at the jail in the guise of a government official and demanded their release, pretending to have need of men of their precise description, presumably for games of his own.<sup>111</sup> On another occasion, he pretended to be an informer, and

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<sup>106</sup> On the upper class' ambivalent attitude to bandits, viewed alternatively a scourge of civilization and as a noble figures that implicitly critique an unjust social order, see Shaw 2000: 388. Grünwald 2004 categorizes various types of bandits, trying to sort "myth" from "reality." For another example of stories about outlaws being used to point a moral about rulers, compare *The City of God* 4. 4: "What, leaving aside justice, is the difference between kingdoms and banditry?" Augustine segues into a story about a pirate challenging the legitimacy of Alexander the Great, which reminds us that such tales with their punch lines all rubbed shoulders in people's memories because they were part of a common fund of *topoi* used in ancient rhetorical training.

<sup>107</sup> 77 (76) 10. 1-7. On the historicity of this individual, see Schmidt 2000, who also acknowledges the typological element of "Räubergeschichte."

<sup>108</sup> 77 (76) 10. 2 φιλοτίμως αὐτὸν ἀνιχνεύοντος τοῦ Σεουήρου, *Severus tracked his whereabouts with competitive zeal* (the trope of obsessive adversaries, as in a Roadrunner cartoon).

<sup>109</sup> 77 (76) 10. 6.

<sup>110</sup> Compare Rhampsinitus and the thief: Herodotus 2. 121-2.

<sup>111</sup> 77 (76) 10. 3 **πλασάμενος** ὡς τῆς πατρίδος ἄρχων (though the text may be faulty here, the idea of impersonating a government official seems pretty clear). In Dio's day, falsifying one's identity and family background, assuming the insignia of a higher social status, or impersonating a government official for purposes of intimidation or extortion were crimes punishable under the *Lex Cornelia de falsis*: *Qui sibi falsum nomen imposuerit, genus parentesve finxerit, quo quid alienum interciperet caperet possideret, poena legis Corneliae de falsis coercetur. Qui insignibus altioris ordinis utuntur*

denounced himself to the centurion pursuing him.<sup>112</sup> In hopes of capturing his quarry, the centurion willingly followed him into the woods, but found himself captured instead. Then Bulla, changing personae yet again, assumed the insignia (σχήμα) of a magistrate. Mounting an improvised tribunal, he staged a parody of a Roman criminal trial, and sentenced the centurion to have his head shaved. (He did this, presumably, for the same reasons as the trickster Rhampsinitus in Herodotus: to stigmatize the professional soldier's incompetence, and to advertise his own cleverness to the king). The shaved centurion was then sent back to his masters like a runaway slave, bearing the impertinent message: "Feed your slaves lest they become bandits."<sup>113</sup>

Bulla's parody of a criminal trial mocks the power of Roman justice to leave its mark on the bodies of the deviant; it also highlights the contingency of social roles by asking us to imagine their reversal. This contingency of social roles also informs Bulla's famous last words. When, like a Hollywood outlaw, he was caught in the arms of his woman, the prefect Papinian asked him, "Why did you become a bandit?" Dio has Bulla retort: "Why are *you* a prefect?"<sup>114</sup> Now Papinian was a real person, the famous jurist, someone Dio knew. That should be enough to authenticate Bulla's last words. Yet they have a familiar ring. Both Tacitus and Dio record the story of another great pretender, the false Agrippa Postumus, who, when arrested and asked by Tiberius, "How did you become Agrippa?" replied, "In the same way that you become Caesar."<sup>115</sup> This quip in fact goes farther back, to stories about a pirate rebuking Alexander the Great.<sup>116</sup> In the Greco-Roman educational system students were trained to improvise narratives about stock characters like outlaws and kings; these exercises were sometimes lightly historicized, with punch lines attributed to famous historical figures.<sup>117</sup>

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*militiamque confingunt, quo quem terreant vel concutiant, humiliores capite puniuntur, honestiores deportantur.* "The Cornelian Law on Fraud: he who has assumed a false name, and claimed false ancestry, in order to obtain or retain the property of others, shall be punished under the Lex Cornelia on Fraud. He who uses insignia of a higher rank and fabricates a military rank for purposes of intimidation or extortion shall be executed if he is a person of low status, exiled if he is a person of higher status" (Sententiae Pauli V 25. 11-12). Reinhold 1971: 276 connects Paul's strictures against usurpation of military status to conditions in the early third century C.E.

<sup>112</sup> 77 (76) 10. 4. κατηγορήσεν αὐτὸς ἑαυτοῦ ὡςπερ ἄλλος τις ὢν. *He denounced himself as if he were someone else.*

<sup>113</sup> 77 (76) 10. 4-5 ἐπὶ τὸ βῆμα ἀνέβη σχῆμα ἄρχοντος ἀναλαβὼν, καὶ καλέσας τὸν ἑκατόνταρχον τῆς τε κεφαλῆς ἀπεξύρησε, καὶ ἔφη "ἄγγελλε τοῖς δεσπόταις σου ὅτι τοὺς δούλους ὑμῶν τρέφετε, ἵνα μὴ ληστεύωσι." The head-shaving seems to be an irreverent alternative to the practice of sending back to the enemy a mutilated messenger (cf. Gleason 2001).

<sup>114</sup> 77 (76) 10. 6-7.

<sup>115</sup> Tacitus *Annals* 2. 40; Dio 57. 16. 3-4.

<sup>116</sup> Cicero *De Rep.* 3. 14. 24. Such stories probe the paradox that imperial power is both a socially-constructed fiction and a deadly reality (cf. Haynes 2003: 9-10).

<sup>117</sup> Though there were differences between Greek and Latin rhetorical training, both systems involved developing stories about stock characters and improvising narratives around punch lines (*apophthegmata* or *sententiae*). Punch lines attributed to well-known authors and historical figures formed the core of the *chreia*. The same punch line might

Yet however stereotyped the pattern, in Dio's history the Bulla stories serve a specific historiographical purpose. They are presented in a way that invites the reader to take them as an oblique commentary on Severus' competence and legitimacy.<sup>118</sup> Their position in the narrative contributes to this impression, since it seems that they followed a senator's cheeky comment about Severus' self-adoption into the family of Marcus Aurelius: "Congratulations, Caesar, on finding a father."<sup>119</sup> Severus's legitimacy was ambiguous. As a successful usurper, his dynastic credentials were bogus, but his power all too real. Not only do Bulla's masquerades make his identity ambiguous on the surface, but in Dio's narrative this surface confusion becomes an existential fog: "When glimpsed, he wasn't seen, while being found, he wasn't found, while being captured, he wasn't caught."<sup>120</sup> Like the disappearing Sextus, the chimerical Bulla dropped like a seed crystal into the imagination of his contemporaries, and there became encrusted with a precipitate of stories. These stories had both a time-less folk-tale dimension, and a time-bound relevance to their historical period. They operate in Dio's narrative as thought-experiments about the instability of personal identity and social position.<sup>121</sup>

→ *illustration: coin with Geta's face stamped out*

*Caracalla Destroys his Double and Masquerades as Alexander*

When Severus died, he left two sons. He had promoted both of them to equal rank, intending them to rule as co-Augusti. Iconographically, the boys were indistinguishable. Many of their images look so much alike that art historians today have trouble telling one brother from the other. Caracalla hated his brother Geta; he had, in effect, an unwanted double. Dio makes it very clear that in this case murder was not

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be attributed to different historical figures. On *chreiai* in general see Hock and O'Neil 2002; on *chreiai* and Dido's anecdotes see Schmidt 2000: 21-5.

<sup>118</sup> "The bandit is less a positively constructed alternative form of power than he is a symbol of what the emperor should be" (Shaw 1984: 48). Elsewhere Dio uses a bandit-meets-emperor story to commend Augustus' good humor (56. 43. 3, cf. Grünwald 2004: 112).

<sup>119</sup> Dio 77 (76) 9. 4. The Bulla stories follow immediately after the quip about Severus' ancestry in the epitome of Xiphilinus, which is all that remains for this part of Dio (Boissevain vol. III, 705). We can be pretty confident of the sequence, but cannot be certain that in Dio's original text there was no material in between.

<sup>120</sup> 77 (76) 10 οὔτε δὲ ἐωρᾶτο ὁρώμενος οὔτε εὕρισκετο εὕρισκόμενος οὔτε κατελαμβάνετο ἀλισκόμενος. His mutability made him seem almost uncanny, a shape-shifter. Apuleius' bandit Thrasyleon is a shape-shifter too, though he takes on animal form, in keeping with the theme of the *Metamorphoses* (*Metamorphoses* 4. 15-21).

<sup>121</sup> Given the amount of attention Dio gives to Bulla, it remains a bit of a mystery why, in his account of Commodus' reign, he apparently did not mention the bandit-conspirator Maternus (Herodian 1. 10). Perhaps Alföldy (1971: 375) was right, and Herodian invented the story. At any rate, Herodian uses the motif of disguise and role-playing differently. The Hilaria provides Maternus with the opportunity to disguise himself as a praetorian, but there is no implication that Commodus is merely role-playing as emperor, or that any sort of gap yawns between social roles and reality.

enough: what Caracalla was after was annihilation.<sup>122</sup> He killed his brother in their mother's arms, announced to the army that Geta had been executed for treason, and precipitated the destruction of his name and images.

*Damnatio memoriae* was a set of traditions, not a fixed inventory of procedures.<sup>123</sup> These procedures, authorized at the top, but effected by many hands, amounted not so much to an actual destruction of memory as a “highly symbolic, universal display of pantomime forgetfulness.”<sup>124</sup> The obliteration of Geta's traces was exceptionally thorough. Thousands of Geta's partisans were executed in a massive purge.<sup>125</sup> Dio says that Geta's very name disappeared: it could not safely be written down (erasures in papyri attest to this),<sup>126</sup> or spoken out loud: although Geta was a common name in comedies, poets self-censored to remove it from their scripts.<sup>127</sup> Geta's statues were melted down or vandalized.<sup>128</sup> Dio notes also that Caracalla's anger extended even to the statue bases. This means he had Geta's name obliterated from inscriptions, including two prominent monuments in Rome that are still standing: the arch of Septimius Severus and the Arch of the Argentarii in the Forum Boarium.<sup>129</sup> Dio adds that Caracalla also melted down coins that bore his brother's image. “And even this was not enough for him,” Dio writes. Taking annihilation beyond the grave, Caracalla staged annual sacrifices to his brother's *manes*—a way of underscoring the fact that Geta had not been deified and therefore remained in the underworld.<sup>130</sup> It seems that senators, Dio included, were pressured to participate.<sup>131</sup>

Dio's narrative suggests that Caracalla's fratricide made him into an enigma, pregnant with invisible signs whose interpretation people could never quite resolve. “Physically, he suffered from ailments both visible and hidden, while mentally he suffered from distressing hallucinations.”<sup>132</sup> The double Caracalla had tried to annihilate

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<sup>122</sup> The more interchangeable the brothers, the greater the urgency of the annihilation: “Since there were no arguments Caracalla could come up with to convince his contemporaries that he had the better rights to the throne than his brother, the only thing he could do was the deny his brother's existence altogether” (de Jong 2007: 108).

<sup>123</sup> The term is modern. For background on ancient terminology and procedures see Vittinghoff 1936, Flower 1998 and 2006, Benoist 2007.

<sup>124</sup> Stewart 1999: 167.

<sup>125</sup> 78 (77) 3. 4; 12. 4. Discussion in Potter (2004: 136-7). The purge extended beyond bodyguards and palace staff to those who had written Geta letters or sent him gifts.

<sup>126</sup> de Jong (2007).

<sup>127</sup> 78 (77) 12. 2a. 5.

<sup>128</sup> Varner 2004: 168-84 collects the material evidence for Geta's *damnatio*.

<sup>129</sup> On the Severan arch see Brilliant 1967 with a summary of the changes in Varner 2004: 175-6. On the arch of the Argentarii, see Haynes and Hirst 1939.

<sup>130</sup> For this interpretation see Price 1987, 56-105, 91. Caracalla also cancelled the commemoration of his brother's birthday, which had been an empire-wide celebration (Dio 78 [77] 12. 6; *Passio Perpetuae* 7).

<sup>131</sup> “He even forced others to stain themselves with this pollution” 78 (77) 12. 6. This passage derives from the *Excerpta Valesiana de virtutibus et vitiis*, in which Dio's first-person remarks are reported in the third person.

<sup>132</sup> 78 (77) 15. 3 ἐνόσει μὲν γὰρ καὶ τῷ σώματι τὰ μὲν ἐμφανέσι τὰ δὲ καὶ ἀρρήτοις ἀρρωστήμασιν, ἐνόσει δὲ καὶ τῇ ψυχῇ πικροῖς τισι φαντάσμασι....

just would not go away. People told stories, which Dio reports, about how Geta, sword in hand, haunted his brother's dreams. They whispered that when the desperate emperor held séances to seek advice from his father's ghost, the ghost of his brother showed up uninvited.<sup>133</sup> These stories suggest that the more strenuously Caracalla tried to erase his fraternal double, the more eagerly popular imagination fantasized about its return.

Caracalla also went in for masquerades. His trip to Asia in 214 allowed him to impersonate his heroes. He went out of his way to cross over the Hellespont in the footsteps of Alexander and continued on to Troy, where he staged a full-scale re-enactment of a Homeric funeral. Dio says that he was honoring Achilles, Herodian says that he was imitating Achilles, and Froma Zeitlin says (I think rightly) that he was imitating Alexander imitating Achilles.<sup>134</sup> Both Dio and Herodian emphasize his fondness for costume, particularly military gear. Caracalla liked to dress up as a German, with a quasi-barbarian cloak of his own design.<sup>135</sup> He chiefly liked to pretend he was Alexander the Great.<sup>136</sup> Dio undercuts Caracalla's imitation of Alexander by presenting it as an irrational enthusiasm shored up by dubious props. "He was in such a tizzy about Alexander that he used certain weapons and drinking cups because they had supposedly belonged to him."<sup>137</sup> On top of the props, a fancy-dress phalanx: sixteen thousand Macedonians got up in linen breastplates and rawhide helmets like an opera chorus. In this surreal environment, a fortuitous name could trump social reality: when Caracalla met a Macedonian soldier who bore the same patronymic as Alexander the Great, he made him a senator and gave him praetorian rank.<sup>138</sup> This did not sit well with those who held a more essentialist view of senatorial identity.<sup>139</sup>

Herodian, a non-senatorial historian, does not probe beneath the surface of

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<sup>133</sup> 78 (77) 15. 4. Another sign of popular interest in Caracalla as an enigma: despite the emperor's dire threats, people circulated ominous prophecies about "sickness in secret places" allegedly issued him by Commodus' ghost (78 (77) 15. 5).

<sup>134</sup> Dio 78 (77) 16. 7; Herodian 4. 8. 4-5; Zeitlin 2001: 195-266, 239. Collapsing the chronological distance between the present and the Homeric past was a very "Second Sophistic" thing to do: Philostratus may have written his *Heroikos* to celebrate Caracalla's visit to Troy. This trip was re-enacted by another pseudo-Alexander in 221CE. Millar, 1964: appendix 5.

<sup>135</sup> The cloak was the source of the nickname Caracalla Dio 79 (78) 3. 3. 3; Herodian 4. 7. 3.

<sup>136</sup> It was by no means unprecedented for powerful Romans to assimilate themselves to heroic or divine figures—we think of Mark Antony and Hadrian posing as "The New Dionysus" and Commodus' self-presentation as Hercules.

<sup>137</sup> 78 (77) 7. 1 *περὶ δὲ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον οὕτω τι ἐπτόητο ὥστε καὶ ὄπλοις τισὶ καὶ ποτηρίοις ὡς καὶ ἐκείνου γεγονόσι χρῆσθαι...* Dio often uses *ὡς* to add a sneer or imply that some alleged reason is bogus.

<sup>138</sup> 78 (77) 8. 1-2.

<sup>139</sup> Whether or not Caracalla sensed this disapproval, he found it difficult to "read" the senate. He addressed this problem with market research, asking the senators' slaves, freedmen, and friends under torture, "He loves me? He loves me not?" Caracalla also used to claim that he had classified the leading men of his entourage as friends or enemies according to their horoscopes (79 (78) 2). Resorting to astrology seems to represent a breakdown of more informal ways of "reading" a person.

Caracalla's masquerade, but dryly reports the surface result: "Suddenly, he was Alexander!" Herodian's evidence for identity confusion is visual—all those statues stressing the connection, and some particularly risible images in which a single head was split into two faces, Caracalla on one side and Alexander on the other.<sup>140</sup> For Dio, the chief evidence for Caracalla's identity confusion is not visual but verbal. According to Dio, Caracalla used to refer to Alexander as "the Augustus of the East," and wrote to inform the senate that he himself was Alexander re-incarnate. Dio quotes from this letter, "Since Alexander lived so short a life, he has entered into the Emperor's body in order to enjoy a longer life through Him."<sup>141</sup>

Herodian undercuts Caracalla's Alexander masquerade by focusing on the visible incongruity of his heroic pretensions and un-heroic physique.<sup>142</sup> Dio, in contrast, undercuts Caracalla's military playacting by stressing the incongruity of external pose and internal character. He says Caracalla wore a linen breastplate out of weakness and cowardice, "to achieve the impression of armor without having to bear its weight, to protect himself from plots, and to make himself admired."<sup>143</sup> Dio also undercuts Caracalla's military asceticism by contrasting it with his mother's *paideia*: while the empress mother devotes herself to philosophical discussion with prominent men, her degenerate son abandons *paideia* in favor of physical asceticism, and boasts of his ability to subsist on cheap food (all the while requisitioning expensive delicacies from the senators).<sup>144</sup>

Why would Dio try to frame Caracalla's military identity as a pretense? Caracalla

<sup>140</sup> Herodian 4. 8. 1-2 καὶ χλεύης εἶδομεν ἀξίας εἰκόνας, ἐν γραφαῖς ἑνὸς σώματος ὑπὸ περιφερείᾳ κεφαλῆς μιᾶς ὄψεις ἡμιτόμους δύο, Ἀλεξάνδρου τε καὶ Ἀντωνίνου. *And we saw some ridiculous portraits in which one body was represented with the appearance of two faces, Alexander and Antoninus, within the circumference of the head.* The only image I have seen that might conform to this description is a medallion of Commodus, a head with two profiles facing opposite directions (Commodus and Janus?). See Hekster 2002: 99-100, 109.

<sup>141</sup> 78 (77) 7. 2 καὶ τῆ βουλῆ ἔγραψεν, ὅτι ἐς τὸ σῶμα αὐθις τὸ τοῦ Αὐγούστου ἐσηλθεν, ἵνα, ἐπειδὴ ὀλίγον τότε χρόνον ἐβίω, πλείονα αὐθις δι' ἐκείνου ζῆση. Of course Herodian, not being a senator, was not in a position to report the contents of Caracalla's letters to the senate. But I also think that his more visual approach is characteristic of his view of truth in general.

<sup>142</sup> Caracalla too bald to cut a proper lock of hair at the Homeric funeral he staged at Troy (Herodian 4. 8. 5); Caracalla too short to imitate Alexander and Achilles successfully (Herodian 4. 9. 3) This last observation is focalized through the jeering eyes of the Alexandrians; the soldiers, in contrast, are impressed by Caracalla's strenuous military labors, "And it was really marvelous," Herodian adds, "such cultivation (ἄσκησις) of noble labors in a body of so small a size" (4. 7. 7).

<sup>143</sup> 79 (78) 3. 2 (full text) ἵνα τὴν τοῦ ὅπλου δόξαν χωρὶς τοῦ βάρους αὐτοῦ ἔχων μῆτε ἐπιβουλεύηται καὶ θαυμάζηται.

<sup>144</sup> 78 (77) 18. 3. In 78 (77) 13 Dio presents Caracalla's military asceticism in a somewhat more favorable light (marching, eschewing baths, eating common soldiers' food), but complains that by doing lowly chores Caracalla was hardly performing the functions of a general.

did have intellectual interests, as independent evidence attests;<sup>145</sup> Dio admits that he had been given a proper education. The problem was that he let it wither in favor of physical conditioning: endurance rides and ocean swims.<sup>146</sup> *Paideia*-men like Dio felt he held them in contempt.<sup>147</sup> Imagine how humiliating it must have been to be among the senators who accompanied the emperor to Nicomedia. Far from being asked to dine with him, or serve as his *consilium*, they were brusquely instructed to attend him at dawn—only to be refused admission to the vestibule. Then they had to stand around outside all day without refreshment while Caracalla made up his mind whether or not to grant them an audience. To compound their humiliation, Dio and the others had to watch in thirsty silence while drinks were handed round to the soldiers of the guard.<sup>148</sup> The most face-saving explanation for these insults was to conclude that the emperor had come to value physical toughness over *paideia*.

Mimesis of Alexander and Achilles in the Troad was ridiculous perhaps, but not dangerous. When Caracalla reached Alexandria, however, something went horribly wrong. The leading citizens dutifully got up a welcoming committee—and the result was a massacre.<sup>149</sup> Dio assumed that the emperor had been provoked by popular ridicule and allusions to his fratricide.<sup>150</sup> Herodian also says the Alexandrians attacked Caracalla as a fratricide, but, in keeping with his interest in the visual dimension of things, he adds that they also ridiculed his physical appearance, “They mocked him for imitating Alexander and Achilles, the most aristocratic and tallest of heroes, when he himself was so short.”<sup>151</sup> Dio learned from hearsay that numerous persons from the emperor’s entourage were caught up in the slaughter *because nobody recognized them*.<sup>152</sup> His description of the massacre he never saw resembles a paranoid thought experiment about what happens when elite status fails to protect. What if the emperor ordered a massacre and no one knew, or cared, who we were? Dio says that Caracalla actually wrote the senate that it didn’t matter how many had died in the massacre or who they were. Dio’s account emphasizes the obliteration of individuality, a sort of black hole into which individual identities implode. “No one, even if he had wanted to, was able to tell people apart, but

<sup>145</sup> Meckler 1999; Potter 2004: 142.

<sup>146</sup> 78 (77) 11. 2-4. Dio disapproved of people who made a show of physical toughness, like Caracalla’s military adviser who during winter training ostentatiously rolled in the snow. This fellow pretended to be a cynic philosopher, but proved a fraud: he deserted to the Parthians: 78 (77) 19. 1-2. Dio also undercuts the asceticism of the hard-boiled general Ulpius Marcellus, who was genuinely abstemious about food, but deliberately exaggerated his reputation for wakefulness: 73 (72) 8. 4-5.

<sup>147</sup> Caracalla set no store by cultural accomplishments, “and despised those of us who had any *paideia*” 78 (77) 11. 2.

<sup>148</sup> Dio is especially indignant about the refreshments: καὶ τοῖς στρατιώταις τοῖς τὴν ἔνδον αὐτοῦ φρουρὰν ἔχουσι καὶ κρατῆρας πρὸς τῇ ἄλλῃ τροφῇ ἐκεράννυε καὶ κύλικας παρόντων καὶ ἡμῶν καὶ ὀρώντων διέπεμπε *And he used to mix wine bowls for his palace guards (on top of their other rations) and would send round cups to them while we were standing there and looking on* 78 (77) 17. 3-4.

<sup>149</sup> On the historicity of this episode see Harker 2008, 133-8.

<sup>150</sup> Dio 78 (77) 22-3.

<sup>151</sup> 4. 9. 3.

<sup>152</sup> 78 (77) 22. 3; 78 (77) 23. 1.

men died according to chance, and their bodies were immediately thrown into deep pits so that the magnitude of the disaster might become invisible to the survivors.”<sup>153</sup> Herodian also mentions mass graves, but does not mention any failure of social differentiation. The identity confusion Herodian mentions is of a more generic kind: the living were buried indiscriminately with the dead.<sup>154</sup>

*An Unsuccessful Masquerade: the Usurpation of Macrinus*

Fortunately Caracalla was not long for this world. Two different seers announced that his prefect Macrinus would be the next emperor. Macrinus realized he would not survive this disclosure unless he acted fast, so he improvised an assassination. Once Caracalla was dead, and Macrinus proclaimed his successor by the Syrian legions, Caracalla’s reputation entered limbo. The troops were too fond of him to countenance a full-scale *damnatio*, but the senate disliked him too much to countenance his immediate deification. The result was that the senate did not declare him a public enemy, but did its best to undermine his posthumous repute with various insults: abolishing his birthday, reading aloud a catalogue of his victims, canceling his *acta*, and melting down his statues.<sup>155</sup> The populace in Rome were reduced to annihilating Caracalla's imperial identity with words: they stopped referring to him as Antoninus (thus undoing his claim to belong to the Antonine dynasty), and used nicknames instead (like “Tarautas,” the nom de guerre of a gladiator who was ugly, brutal, and short).<sup>156</sup> Dio’s narrative, which we have almost in full,<sup>157</sup> recapitulates this erasure, referring to Caracalla from this point onward by nicknames only.

The usurper’s status adequacy was problematic. Macrinus was an equestrian bureaucrat, more of a lawyer than a military man, so the soldiers did not like him. And he was not a senator, which Dio found hard to take. He was a Mauretanian of obscure

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<sup>153</sup> 78 (77) 23. 1 οὐδένα, οὐδὲ εἰ πάνυ τις ἐβούλετο, διακρίναι ἠδύνατο, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἔθνησκον ὡς που ἔτυχον, καὶ τὰ σώματά σφον αὐτίκα ἐς τάφρους βαθείας ἐνεβάλλετο, ὅπως ἀφανὲς ἦ τοῖς λοιποῖς τὸ μέγεθος τῆς συμφορᾶς. Compare Dio’s description of the confusion of names and identities during Sulla’s proscriptions (fr.109.17).

<sup>154</sup> Herodian 4. 9. 7-8. Perhaps mixing the living with the dead was part of the standard litany of tyrannical behavior (compare Mezentius in *Aeneid* 8, 485-8).

<sup>155</sup> 79 (78) 17. 4 - 18. 1, 5. Some senators speculated that Macrinus hoped the senate would take the initiative and declare Caracalla a public enemy, thereby initiating a full-scale *damnatio* on their own responsibility. But for fear of the soldiers they did not dare (79 [78] 17. 2-3). Ultimately the senate had to decree Caracalla’s deification.

<sup>156</sup> 79 (78) 9. 1-3. Another one of these nicknames was Caracallus. Dio echoes popular insult in the closing words of his obituary: “Such was the life and death of Tarautas” (79 [78] 10. 3).

<sup>157</sup> 79 (78) 4. 1. Vaticanus Graecus 1288 (5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century), though full of holes, gives the full text, so from 79 (78) 2 to 80 (79) 8. 3 we do not have to rely on epitomes and excerpts. See Boissevain vol. 3 iii-ix and p. 404.

parentage, and had a physical peculiarity: a pierced ear.<sup>158</sup> Dio does not consider Macrinus' marked body to be a disqualification for the purple. He is aware that ear-piercing was a local custom, and thus not some sort of penal stigma. He considers such a mark to be a bit of a drawback, but not definitive, as we can see from his comment that Macrinus' reasonableness as a lawyer "overshadowed even this [defect]."<sup>159</sup> This remark shows that Dio did not locate aristocratic identity definitively in birth or in the body and that he remained guardedly open to the idea of achieved status. The problem was that Macrinus achieved the highest status without being a senator first.<sup>160</sup>

In usurping, Macrinus attempted identity theft. Ultimately, he failed to authenticate himself. Dio's account of Macrinus' reign is the story of a precarious masquerade that unravels on three fronts: with the senators, with the plebs, and with the army in Syria. Macrinus failed with the senate because he destroyed the illusion that the emperor's legitimacy depended on the senate's formal approval. Ideally, senate and emperor stood in a relationship of mutual authentication. The senate confirmed the emperor's accession, and presided over the disposition of his memory after his death. Senators served the emperor by governing his empire, and received in exchange the honorific appointments that were the lifeblood of the aristocratic value-system.<sup>161</sup> But Macrinus' usurpation highlighted a fact that senators would rather not face: they were becoming irrelevant.<sup>162</sup> Macrinus was not a senator, and did not seek the senate's validation. After seizing power, he did not return to Rome to receive a ceremonial welcome. Perhaps through ignorance of correct procedure, he did not wait for the senate to vote him honorific titles: his dispatches arrived with "Pius, Felix, Augustus" etc. already on the letterhead.<sup>163</sup> Most offensive to Dio was the way Macrinus devalued the honor system.<sup>164</sup> He gave upstart nobodies the rank of ex-consuls and sent them to govern provinces, while authentic ex-consuls were still waiting in line.<sup>165</sup> Undeserved promotion is another kind of identity theft; it turned nobodies into imposters and senators into nobodies. Dio found it particularly galling to watch a former hairstylist sent off to govern

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<sup>158</sup> 79 (78) 11. 1. Macrinus expected to be slighted by senators because of his low birth (79 [78] 15. 3). The populace did not care (79 [78] 18. 4). Pierced ear: a decapitated bronze portrait head of Macrinus in Belgrade shows a slit left ear (Varner 2004: 187).

<sup>159</sup> 79 (78) 11. 2. "Fairness" (ἐπιεικεία) in a Roman lawyer did not exactly refer to justice, but from Dio's senatorial point of view meant something more like "reasonableness"—that is, being amenable to the right sort of influence.

<sup>160</sup> Dio has Maecenas advise Augustus to keep senators and equestrians distinct (52. 19. 2-4; 20. 20-25). See Swan 2004: 6, "At the membrane between senatorial and equestrian orders, where real cultural and economic differences were often the hardest to demonstrate, we find Dio standing guard like Cerberus."

<sup>161</sup> Lendon 1997: 176-91.

<sup>162</sup> A modern person might understand this change as government function shifting from decentralized senatorial control to a more centralized system in the hands of the equestrian bureaucracy and palace staff (Potter 2004).

<sup>163</sup> 79 (78) 16. 2.

<sup>164</sup> In Dio 79 (78) 22. 4-5, Macrinus cancels a senator's appointment and tries to fob the fellow off by giving him the salary for staying home. The senator refused the salary, saying that what he wanted was not the money, but the honor of the job.

<sup>165</sup> 79 (78) 13. 1.

Dacia, and a former enlisted man sent off to govern Pannonia, where he once had been the governor's doorman.<sup>166</sup> It was particularly upsetting to see that under Macrinus *paideia* was not necessary for success. He appointed as his fellow-consul and prefect of the city a ridiculous illiterate: a man so old (Dio says) he could not see, so uneducated he could not read, so inexperienced that he could not get anything done, and so incapable of holding a decent conversation with any senator that on the day he was supposed to conduct elections he played sick and stayed home.<sup>167</sup> The business seemed to Dio a bad joke: was Macrinus trying to pollute the senate house by appointing someone who had been a spy and an executioner, or was he just trying to cast his own dubious record into the shade by appointing to high office a man who, like himself, had never been a senator?<sup>168</sup>

Dio admits that Macrinus' failures with the senate did not bother the common people. Herodian, not being a senator, wasn't bothered by these failures either.<sup>169</sup> Although Dio gives Macrinus credit for having discharged his duties as justly as was possible under Caracalla, Herodian was not interested in the moral niceties of Macrinus' exercise of power. He views Macrinus from the outside as a person who wears expensive clothes.<sup>170</sup> But Herodian's more visual interest in externals gives us something that Dio does not: a glimpse of Macrinus' laboriously stylized self-presentation as he lingered in Syria after his usurpation. "He passed his time in Antioch growing out his beard, walking about with exaggerated stateliness, and speaking so slowly and deeply at his public appearances that people could barely hear him. He adopted these traits in imitation of Marcus Aurelius."<sup>171</sup> Herodian presents Macrinus as constructing an imperial identity for himself out of externals, trying to make himself appear both different from Caracalla and adequate to an idealized vision of the imperial role.<sup>172</sup>

An important part of the imperial role, which Macrinus pulled off with even less success, was to act as patron of the Roman plebs and impresario of games in the capital. In May, shortly after the news of Macrinus' usurpation arrived in Rome, crowds at the *Ludi Martiales* were cheering, delighted by the assassination of Caracalla.<sup>173</sup> By September, however, Dio witnessed an unmitigated public relations fiasco in the hippodrome. Dateline: the *ludi Romani* of 217.<sup>174</sup> The new emperor, who has yet to

<sup>166</sup> 79 (78) 13. 2-4. 3.

<sup>167</sup> 79 (78) 14. 14. 1-2. For the career of Adventus see Pflaum 1950, #247.

<sup>168</sup> 79 (78) 14. 2-4, cf. Gowing 1992: 24.

<sup>169</sup> Herodian composes a letter to the senate in which Macrinus justifies his accession despite his equestrian origins (5. 1. 5), but he does not discuss how Macrinus gave offense to the senate by his appointments or titulature, nor does he remark upon Adventus' lack of education (4. 12. 1).

<sup>170</sup> 5. 2. 4.

<sup>171</sup> Herodian 5. 2. 3 ἐν δὲ τῇ Ἀντιοχείᾳ διέτριβε γένειόν τε ἀσκῶν, βαδίζων τε πλέον τοῦ δέοντος ἡρεμαίως, βραδύτατά τε καὶ μόλις τοῖς προσιούσιν ἀποκρινόμενος ὡς μηδ' ἀκούεσθαι πολλάκις διὰ τὸ καθειμένον τῆς φωνῆς. ἐζήλου δὲ ταῦτα ὡς δὴ Μάρκου ἐπιτηδεύματα...

<sup>172</sup> While Macrinus' first coins make him look more like his predecessor, the longer beard appears on later issues (*BMCRE* V ccxiii).

<sup>173</sup> Dio 79 (78) 18. 3, cf. Millar 1964: 164.

<sup>174</sup> 79 (78) 20.

appear in Rome, is sponsoring a horse-race to honor the birthday of his son. Ideally, such a display should fill the hole left in the city's ceremonial life by the new emperor's prolonged non-appearance. It should make the absent emperor present, conjured up by the mass chanting of appreciative acclamations that imperial munificence was supposed to inspire.<sup>175</sup> But Macrinus' absentee sponsorship of the horse race has the opposite effect. The populace laments in unison, "Why must we be the only people on earth without a protector, without a king?" As the crowd shrieks, "Jupiter is our only ruler!" the senators and equites try, desperately, to restore the officially sanctioned dynamic to the occasion. They start up a counter-cheer praising Macrinus and his son: "Oh Joyful day! O peerless emperors!" Needless to say, this effort fails to catch on in the stands. The Roman crowd, taking advantage of the anonymity that is denied their betters, refuses to go along. They acclaim Jupiter, pointing to the sky. "There's the emperor of Rome! Having him we have everything."<sup>176</sup> In other words, "If we have to have an invisible ruler, Jupiter will do us nicely. We don't need Macrinus and his precious son." Thus a ceremony intended to shore up Macrinus' legitimacy became instead a ritual cancellation of his imperial identity. From that moment, Dio says, the populace "considered Macrinus and his son as completely non-existent, and trampled them as if already dead."<sup>177</sup> It's a spooky moment: the emperor has been erased while still alive.

Having offended the senate and lost his standing with the plebs, Macrinus is clearly doomed. A catalogue of portents lends an aura of retrospective inevitability to Dio's narrative of his downfall.<sup>178</sup> The problem, of course, was the army. The Parthian campaign had not been going well, and Macrinus decided to buy peace. In order to afford this he cut the soldiers' pay.<sup>179</sup> Meanwhile, Dio was in Rome, trying to make sense of a puzzling situation: why does the emperor write us to describe his Parthian victories, but then decline the title when we vote him "Parthicus"?<sup>180</sup> As usual in times of uncertainty, Dio was watching the sky. An eclipse; two comets. These things "caused us horrific anxiety."<sup>181</sup> Dio and his friends could not stop quoting Homer's line about the sky ringing like a war trumpet as the gods collided in battle.<sup>182</sup> They saw themselves not as political actors, but as helpless spectators of an imminent civil war.

Caracalla's surviving relatives were well-positioned to exploit Macrinus' fragile legitimacy and the army's discontent. Dio is not going to say this, because he owed his second consulship to the women of the Severan dynasty, but by failing to eliminate them Macrinus had clearly made a mistake. Caracalla's aunt had two daughters and these

<sup>175</sup> On amphitheater chants as a traditional medium of communication between populace and emperor see Vanderbroeck 1987: 143; on acclamations see Roueche 1984.

<sup>176</sup> 79 (78) 20. 2 ἀλλ' ἔς τε τὸν οὐρανὸν τὰς χεῖρας ἀνέτεινον καὶ ἐβόων "οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Ῥωμαίων Αὐγούστος· τοῦτον ἔχοντες πάντα ἔχομεν."

<sup>177</sup> 79 (78) 20. 3 ὥστε καὶ ἐκείνους μηδ' ἀρχὴν ἔτι εἶναι τὸν τε Μακρῖνον καὶ τὸν Διαδουμειανὸν νομίζειν, ἀλλ' ὡς καὶ τεθνηκότας αὐτοὺς ἤδη καταπατεῖν.

<sup>178</sup> 79 (78) 25. 1-5.

<sup>179</sup> 79 (78) 28-29. Macrinus' plan was to limit pay cuts to new recruits, but since so many legions were concentrated in one province, morale problems spread rapidly.

<sup>180</sup> 79 (78) 27. 3.

<sup>181</sup> 79 (78) 30 δεινῶς ἡμᾶς ἐξετάραττεν.

<sup>182</sup> *Iliad* 21, 388: ἀμφὶ δ' ἐσάλπιγξεν μέγας οὐρανός, ἅϊε δὲ Ζεὺς. *Clarion rang the broad heaven, to Zeus' delight.*

daughters had two sons. Although Dio tries to minimize their responsibility for the coup,<sup>183</sup> we may suspect that these Syrian ladies had been intriguing with the Syrian legions to engineer the usurpation of one of their sons, young Elagabalus. Their trump card was the aura of dynastic legitimacy that they could generate by exploiting his relationship to Caracalla.<sup>184</sup>

*The Usurpation of Elagabalus: a Crisis of Signification*

The usurpation of Macrinus, and the counter-usurpation of Elagabalus were events of great public moment that dramatized the instability of imperial power. As Dio presents them, however, these events also raise questions about the stability of signification. This part of Dio's narrative, which we have almost in full, teems with identity crises that generate semiotic confusion. Perhaps this is because both usurpation and *damnatio memoriae* amount to self-canceling identity statements that undo the logic of their own signification. To assert one's own imperial identity—to say, in effect, “I usurp, therefore I am emperor”—is also to undermine that very claim, by exposing one's rise to power as contingent rather than inevitable. That is why successful usurpers like Severus disseminated prophecies and horoscopes that made their rise seem foreordained.<sup>185</sup> Usurpation exposes imperial identity as socially constructed rather than essential. A *damnatio memoriae* is likewise an act that subverts itself: though a defaced statue or partially erased inscription calls attention to the power that ordered its erasure, it also calls attention to the presence-of-which-it-is-an-absence. Effacement implies an image or identity that is logically and chronologically prior.<sup>186</sup> Thus it makes a certain kind of logical sense that Dio's narratives of usurpation and *damnatio memoriae* should call into question not just the stability of imperial identity, but the stability of signification itself.

In Dio's narrative of Elagabalus' usurpation, which survives almost complete, the themes of identity theft, doubles, and masquerades reach a crescendo. Dressed in Caracalla's childhood clothes, young Elagabalus is spirited off to the nearest legionary camp.<sup>187</sup> But he is not introduced to the troops *in propria persona*. By presenting him as Caracalla's natural son, his handlers create a fictitious identity. The odd thing is that their little usurper is impersonating someone who does not exist; he remains, in Baudrillard's

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<sup>183</sup> He claims in 79 (78) 31. 4 that Elagabalus was brought to the camp without the knowledge of his mother or grandmother.

<sup>184</sup> Macrinus, as a usurper, was aware of his deficiencies in this regard. He had begun styling his son Antoninus (79 [78] 19. 1), a move implying a dynastic connection to Caracalla that Dio claims was intended to curry favor with the soldiers, but caused people to think the worse of him in Rome.

<sup>185</sup> See the discussion of personal power in Potter 1994: 146-82.

<sup>186</sup> Material evidence in Varner 2000: 2004, theoretical discussion in Hedrick 2000: Elsner 2003.

<sup>187</sup> 79 (78) 31. 3 Ταράυτου υἷὸν αὐτὸν μοιχίδιον εἶναι πλασάμενος, καὶ τῆ ἐσθῆτι τῆ ἐκείνου, ἧ ποτε ἐν παισὶν ἐχρῆτο, κοσμήσας... *Pretending that he was the natural son of Tarautas (Caracalla), and dressing him in clothes that Caracalla has supposedly worn as a child...*

terms, a walking simulacrum.<sup>188</sup> Dressed in “authentic” clothing, and addressed by a bogus Antonine name, the boy simulacrum gives a formal address to the troops in which he refers to Caracalla as “father.”<sup>189</sup> (Besides demonstrating that he has the right sort of *paideia*, this speech presumably performs some additional authenticating function for the soldiers—would a little boy lie about his Daddy?). The usurpation becomes even more theatrical when Macrinus' praetorian prefect rushes with reinforcements to the camp. Before his horrified gaze, a *tableau vivant* unfolds atop the ramparts. The mutinous soldiers are parading the young impostor around the walls, and alongside him they are also parading some childhood pictures of Caracalla.<sup>190</sup> The little face atop the wall has multiplied. Visually, the impostor has spawned his double(s). By juxtaposing the boy with Caracalla's images, his handlers mean to imply physical resemblance, which may or not exist. “They exhibited the pictures as if they resembled him” (ὡς καὶ προσφερεῖς αὐτῷ is Dio's dry phrase).<sup>191</sup> They evidently hope that a resemblance between face and image will develop *ex post facto*, like Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein.<sup>192</sup> The authenticity of a portrait is supposed to derive from the human original, but here that dynamic is reversed: the human impostor's authenticity is being created after the fact by the painted image. Watching an image generate its original induces semiotic vertigo.<sup>193</sup>

However disingenuous, the charade atop the ramparts succeeds; the troops accompanying the praetorian prefect are completely taken in. A conspirator impersonating Caracalla's chamberlain induces the soldiers to murder their officers, usurp their positions, and surrender to the young impostor, whose identity Dio flags as bogus with the nickname “Pseudantoninus.”<sup>194</sup> The praetorian prefect escapes to warn

<sup>188</sup> Baudrillard 1984: 253-79, 256-7.

<sup>189</sup> 79 (78) 32.4 καὶ αὐτοῖς καὶ τὸ παιδίον ἀπὸ τοῦ τείχους ἐδημηγόρησεν ὑπόβλητα, τὸν τε πατέρα ἤδη ἐπαινῶν... *And the boy delivered them a counterfeit speech from the ramparts, praising his “father” ...*

<sup>190</sup> On portraits of child emperors in this period see Wood 1987.

<sup>191</sup> 79 (78) 32. 2-3 τὸν τε γὰρ Ἀουίτον, ὃν Μάρκον Αὐρήλιον Ἀντωνῖνον ἤδη προσηγόρευον, περιφέροντες ὑπὲρ τοῦ τείχους, καὶ εἰκόνας τινὰς τοῦ Καρακάλλου παιδικὰς ὡς καὶ προσφερεῖς αὐτῷ ἀποδεικνύοντες, παῖδά τε ὄντως αὐτὸν ἐκείνου καὶ διάδοχον τῆς ἀρχῆς ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι λέγοντες... *For they carried Avitus, whom they were already addressing as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, around above the circuit of the walls, and displayed some childhood portraits of Caracalla as if the pictures resembled him, claiming that he was authentically Caracalla's son and should therefore be his successor.*

<sup>192</sup> Roman traditions of representation probably made such a shift easier: “In antiquity...the relations of image and prototype were much less distinctly separable [than in modern culture], not just in the case of sacred images but also in that of portraits of emperors” (Elsner 2003: 226).

<sup>193</sup> Perhaps the display of a boy in royal clothing atop the ramparts filled a visual vacuum left by the annihilation of Geta. The legionaries may have been predisposed to accept Elagabalus as their Augustus because of the hole left in their mental picture of the imperial family left by the disappearance of Geta five years before.

<sup>194</sup> 79 (78) 32. 3-4 ὁ Εὐτυχιανὸς † τὸν Φῆστον, κατὰ τὸν τοῦ Ταραύτου πρόκοιτον ἀντωνομάσθη, ἔπεισεν ἀποσφάξαι πάντας ἐκείνους, ἄθλόν σφισι τὴν τοῦ τεθνήξοντος <ἐκάστῳ> οὐσίαν τε καὶ χώραν ἐν τῇ στρατείᾳ προθείς. *Eutychianus*

Macrinus who, in response to the news, appoints his own son as a counter-Augustus, effectively creating a double of the young impostor.<sup>195</sup> Evidently Macrinus hoped to shore up his own legitimacy with a junior Augustus who is more “real” than the bogus son of Caracalla.<sup>196</sup> But in trying to make his dynastic legitimacy more real, Macrinus engages, like his rivals, in make-believe. He celebrates his son’s promotion with a feast at Apamea, all the while concealing the fact that there is a usurpation going on. Everyone’s invited, the caterer has out-done himself at 150 drachs a head, and everything seems to be going well—until a soldier enters (stage right) and presents Macrinus with a parcel tightly-wrapped in linen cloth and tied with string. The parcel is sealed with the signet ring of his praetorian prefect and supposedly contains—O joy!—the head of Pseudantoninus himself. The soldier runs off, the parcel is unwrapped, and Macrinus is finessed into a horrific recognition worthy of *Rigoletto*: it's not his rival, but his prefect whose head is in that sack!<sup>197</sup> This is *Scheintod* with a difference: instead of a real person’s fake death we have the real death of the wrong person.

What better way to tell an emperor his number is up than to force him to recognize his ignorance of crucial identities? That is, if he can't correctly “read” the message sent under the seal of his trusted lieutenant, if he doesn't know whose head is in the sack, then maybe he doesn't know who he himself is... and maybe he is not emperor any more. The seal that purports to authenticate the identity of the severed head actually signifies the breakdown of signification. Macrinus is operating under the assumption that signs represent reality in a straightforward way: if my prefect’s seal is on the parcel, then the parcel was sent by my prefect. He assumes that the presence of the seal is an adequate stand-in for the owner of the ring. But he is actually living in a universe where the breakdown of trust and social consensus has rendered signification unstable. In this universe, a conventional, arbitrary sign like the signet ring is actually misleading. The

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<sent> “Festus,” operating under the name of Caracalla’s cubicularius, to persuade the soldiers to kill all their officers, offering <to each> as an inducement their victim’s property and military rank.

The nickname “Pseudantoninus” was perhaps coined by Dio; it appears in appears in no other source.

<sup>195</sup> 79 (78) 34. 2. Macrinus’ son was ten years old; Elagabalus was about fifteen. Macrinus’ letter to the senate announcing the promotion made great play with the words “father” and “son,” but bungled the boy’s titulature (79 [78] 37. 6-38. 2). Macrinus had the Roman mint issue gold coins for Diadumenianus that looked exactly like gold coins with a juvenile image of Caracalla (Baharal 1999: 56, with figs 12 and 13).

<sup>196</sup> Later in the third century the usurper Maximinus Thrax appears to have deployed his son’s portraits to similar ends, by having him made to look like the boy emperor Alexander Severus. “The visual reference is very likely to have been intentional, designed to remind viewers of the last comparatively stable rule with legitimate dynastic claims to power” (Wood 1987: 120, cf. 123 ).

<sup>197</sup> 79 (78) 34. 3-5 καὶ αὐτῷ ταῦτα πράττοντι στρατιώτης τις τῶν ἀφεστηκότων προσῆλθεν, τὴν ὅσοι δὲ σχηματίζουσιν ἑαυτοὺς<τοῦ> Ἰουλιανοῦ κεφαλὴν...κομίζων ἐν ὀθονίοις πολλοῖς ἰσχυρῶς σφόδρα σχοινίοις καταδεδεμένην ὡς καὶ τοῦ Ψευδαντωνίνου οὐσαν· καὶ γὰρ τῷ τοῦ Ἰουλιανοῦ δακτυλίῳ ἔσεσήμαντο. *While he was thus engaged, one of the rebel legionaries arrived, bearing what they pretended was the head of Pseudantoninus, tightly wrapped in layers of cloth and tied with ropes.*

ring does not authenticate the head it seals. The head is the true sign, a non-arbitrary signifier that determines the true meaning of the ring.

In Dio's narrative, this semiotic breakdown at the top precipitates a more generalized crisis of signification. Both sides send messengers to the provinces and to the legions; counter-messengers arrive with counter-letters; the chaos is compounded by a blizzard of follow-up messages all contradicting one another.<sup>198</sup> Dio's syntax recapitulates this chaos: his opening phrase οἱ μὲν never manages to find its counterpart, and by the time we finally get to the main verb ("mixed up" ἐταράχθησαν), it's no longer clear what the subject is—everyone and everything is swept up in the confusion. A further symptom of the semiotic crisis is that the cross-currents of contradictory messages prove fatal to the messengers.<sup>199</sup> The partisan recipients lose track of the distinction between signifier and signified. In this moment when two mutually incompatible truth-systems are competing head to head, it is a completely open question which man is the real emperor whose commands must be obeyed, and which man is the false emperor who must be annihilated. On a practical level one can see why it would be in the interest of one party to eliminate the truth-claims of the other by exterminating his messengers. There has been a breakdown of social consensus about where lies the authority that can authenticate identities, and in Dio's nightmarish and impressionistic description, both sides show a tendency to locate the competing vision of reality in the body of the messenger. A messenger, unlike the truth-crisis that he brings to one's attention, can be neatly and definitively rubbed out.

While Pseudantoninus' masquerade gathers steam, Macrinus' masquerade unravels. Defeated on the battlefield, he retreats to Antioch, faking a victorious arrival so that the city will think he's still emperor.<sup>200</sup> When this pretence fails, he shaves, he changes clothes, he flees—by night, on horseback, and in disguise.<sup>201</sup> Macrinus' last ride

<sup>198</sup> 79 (78) 34. 6 καὶ οἱ μὲν τά τε ἄλλα ἀντιπαρεσκευάζοντο, καὶ ἀντέπεμπον ἕς τε τὰ ἔθνη καὶ ἕς τε τὰ στρατόπεδα ἀγγέλους καὶ γράμματα, ἀφ' ὧν πολλαχόθι πρὸς τε τὴν πρώτην ἑκατέρου περὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου πέμψιν καὶ πρὸς τὰς συνεχεῖς καὶ διαφόρους ἀλλήλαις ἀγγελίας ἐταράχθησαν· (The Vatican ms. has ΕΤΑΡΑΧΘΗ; ἐταράχθησαν is Leunclavius' emendation). *And one party made counter-preparations against the other and sent counter-messages and letters to the legions, from which in many places they were thrown into consternation by the initial message from each side against the other and by the subsequent dispatches that kept continually contradicting each other.*

<sup>199</sup> 79 (78) 34. 7 κακ τούτου συχνοὶ μὲν καὶ τῶν γραμματοφόρων ἀμφοτέρωθεν ἐφθάρησαν... *Because of this even many of the messengers from both sides were killed.* Compare 79 (78) 35. 1-2 where Macrinus' governor and procurator in Egypt put to death the messengers of "Pseudantoninus." After receiving news of Macrinus' defeat, the procurator tries to disappear into hiding like Sextus Condianus, but is betrayed (79 [78] 35. 3).

<sup>200</sup> 79 (78) 39. 1-2 αὐτὸς δὲ ἕς τὴν Ἀντιόχειαν ὡς καὶ νενικηκώς , ὅπως καταδεχθῆ, ἐσελθόν... *He himself went to Antioch as if victorious, in order that he might be received.*

<sup>201</sup> Italo Calvino describes an Allied pamphlet that was dropped shortly before the collapse of the Italian fascist regime. "In the cartoon, Benito and Adolf were trying on women's dresses, preparing to escape to Argentina." (Calvino 2003). By portraying Il Duce masquerading as a woman, the cartoonist sought to expose his carefully cultivated imperial image as a masquerade as well. Calvino's essay also contains a riveting

is like a usurpation in reverse: his former identity now a dangerous burden, he sheds piece by piece the components of his imperial persona: his name, the beard he so carefully cultivated in imitation of Marcus Aurelius, his purple clothes.<sup>202</sup> At first, shaved, but still on horseback, he retains sufficient authority to impersonate an imperial messenger and commandeer a vehicle from the *cursus publicus*. At this stage his persona still commands enough residual respect that even when recognized he is not molested.<sup>203</sup> When he tries to commandeer money, however, he is recognized and arrested at Chalcedon.<sup>204</sup> “Fleeing like a runaway slave through the peoples he had ruled, he was apprehended like a bandit in a chance encounter, and saw himself imprisoned among the most debased of criminals.”<sup>205</sup> When he learns that his son has been captured, Macrinus attempts suicide. But when he throws himself out of the police wagon, he succeeds only in breaking his collar bone. Inability to consummate a suicide attempt means that he has lost the Roman aristocrat’s last bastion of personal autonomy. Stripped by degrees of imperial insignia, military and fiscal authority, parental role and personal autonomy, he is reduced at last to the zero-grade of personal identity, a severed head.<sup>206</sup>

### *Sights and Surfaces: Dio Contrasted with Herodian*

Dio’s perspective stands in contrast with the perspective of his younger contemporary, Herodian, who can serve as a control for the uniqueness of Dio’s point of view. Herodian is a very superficial author, but he is superficial in an interesting way. He is highly visual and fond of the tableau.<sup>207</sup> He is fascinated by clothing and by the surfaces of things. Herodian’s description of Commodus’ first imperial journey to Rome is highly visual. He describes the crowds gathering as if to witness an epiphany.<sup>208</sup>

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description of a spontaneous *damnatio memoriae* when people destroyed Mussolini’s images after the fall of his regime.

<sup>202</sup> 79 (78) 39. 2-3 On Dio’s sensitivity to the social significance of Roman vestimentary codes see Freyburger-Galland 1993. For the imperial role abandoned in extremis by an inferior performer compare Dio 63. 28. 4 on the death of Nero : ἤδη καὶ ἑαυτὸν ὑποκρίνηται *now at last forced to play himself*. See Gowing 1997: 2579.

<sup>203</sup> 79 (78) 39. 5. Trajan besieging Hatra is recognized by the barbarians even without his cloak: the imperial identity of a true Princeps cannot be disguised (68. 31. 3)

<sup>204</sup> Dio’s detailed knowledge of Macrinus’ last days, down to the names of various centurions, must have been gleaned from various informants in Asia. At some time late in Macrinus’ reign, Dio had been sent by Macrinus as *curator* to Pergamon and Smyrna (80 [79] 7. 4; 18.3).

<sup>205</sup> δραπετεύσας διὰ τῶν ἐθνῶν ὧν ἦρξε, συλληφθεὶς ὑπὸ τῶν τυχόντων ὡς περ τις ληστής, ἐπιδὼν ἑαυτὸν μετ’ ἀτιμοτάτων κακούργων ..... φρουρούμενον (79 [78] 39. 4-5, text supplemented by Bekker).

<sup>206</sup> 79 (78) 40. 2. 5.

<sup>207</sup> Herodian may in fact have used pictures (like the placards displayed in triumphs) for sources (Potter 1999: 87).

<sup>208</sup> Herodian 1. 7. 2-3. This passage is full of the language of visual experience: ἐπιφανείς... ὥφθη... θεασόμενοι (*made manifest...was seen...in order to see*). This description must be completely imaginary, since he was too young to have seen the procession.

Herodian, however, is not only interested in the appearance of visual phenomena, but he is also intrigued by the way visual phenomena are interpreted. He describes how Commodus' blond hair gleamed in the sun, and offers two alternative models of how this gleam was perceived, "Some people thought that gold dust was sprinkled on his hair before he went out in public, others regarded the phenomenon as something supernatural, saying that a heavenly radiance shimmered about his head."<sup>209</sup> Herodian does not imply that one explanation is the real explanation; he is a relativist: things seem one way to some people, another way to other people. Similarly, when Herodian describes the scene in which young Elagabalus is paraded around the battlements, he simply says the troops were convinced that the boy was the son of Caracalla and resembled him, "for they saw what they wanted to see."<sup>210</sup> Herodian does not see resemblance as a matter of intrinsic similarity between representation and thing represented. To him resemblance is entirely in the eye of the beholder. When describing the Black Stone of Emesa, for example, he says that the aniconic image of the Sun god "has bumps and indentations that the Syrians point out and want to be an unwrought image of the Sun, and so see it thus."<sup>211</sup> Herodian also says that Elagabalus' mother worried that his appearance in exotic clothing would offend the Romans. She therefore tried to persuade Elagabalus to change to Roman dress before arriving in the capital and entering the senate house.<sup>212</sup> She wanted him to adapt his appearance to the sensibilities and expectations of his audience. But Elagabalus decided to do the reverse, to adapt the audience's expectations to his appearance.<sup>213</sup> So he had a huge full-length portrait painted of himself in the garb of the Syrian god's priest and sent on ahead to the senate house. Dio mentions none of this. Herodian's story about Elagabalus conditioning the senate's visual expectations reflects his characteristic interest in visual phenomena and the psychology of visual perception.

In Herodian, people see in the black stone of Emesa what they want to see. Ditto for the alleged resemblance between Elagabalus and Caracalla's childhood portrait. Surfaces are all that count—a foretaste of the Dominate, perhaps. For Dio, however, visual images are inherently unstable. We remember his puzzlement when he inspected the drawings of Sextus' dreams. Dio wants to get to the truth behind surface appearances. His model of interpretation is figuring out what a portent really means. Herodian, in contrast, is cynical about portents. He comments about the portents and dreams predicting Severus' rise to power, "all these things are believed to be true and trustworthy at that

<sup>209</sup> Herodian 1. 7. 5 τοὺς μὲν οἴεσθαι ῥίνημα χρυσοῦ προϊόντι ἐπιπάσσεσθαι, τοὺς δὲ ἐκθειάζειν, λέγοντας αἴγλην τινὰ οὐράνιον περὶ τῆ κεφαλῆ συγγεγενῆσθαι αὐτῷ. Commodus' signature blond hair is mentioned in the Sibylline Oracles (12, 206).

<sup>210</sup> Herodian 5. 4. 4 οἱ δὲ πιστεύσαντες Ἀντωνίνου τε εἶναι τέκνον καὶ ὁμοιότατόν γε (βλέπειν γὰρ οὕτως ἤθελον)... Herodian's information is less detailed than Dio's: he knows nothing about use of Caracalla's childhood clothes and pictures, or the story of what happened to the prefect's severed head.

<sup>211</sup> Herodian 5. 3. 5 The text is possibly muddled, but the sense is pretty clear: ἐξοχὰς τέ τινας βραχείας καὶ τύπους δεικνύουσιν, εἰκόνα τε ἡλίου ἀνέργαστον εἶναι θέλουσιν, οὕτω βλέποντες. (βλέπειν ἐθέλοντες is an emendation proposed by Schwartz).

<sup>212</sup> Herodian 5. 5. 5.

<sup>213</sup> Herodian 5. 5. 6 βουλόμενος ἐν ἔθει γενέσθαι τῆς τοῦ σχήματος ὄψεως τὴν τε σύγκλητον καὶ τὸν δῆμον Ῥωμαίων... *Wishing the senate and citizens of Rome to become accustomed to the sight of his get-up...*

point in time when they have *already* turned out well.”<sup>214</sup> For Herodian, people are what they are believed to be, visual images look like what people want to see, and portents mean what people want them to mean. Hence in his text there is no sense of vertigo that obtrudes if you try to reach past the surface for some “real” meaning, some “real” identity. Herodian’s a social constructionist, to use the argot of our day. Dio’s an essentialist. He believes that senators should be aristocrats and that emperors should be senators.<sup>215</sup> Dio does feel vertigo. In his eyes the whole world “went topsy-turvy” when senators of questionable pedigree (and, if you can imagine it, a wool-worker) attempted usurpations.<sup>216</sup> Though it may seem quaint to modern readers that Dio keeps trying to locate some sort of absolute standard of human excellence in the *senate* of all things, his idealism can sometimes generate pathos and irony, effects that are not possible in the world view of Herodian. As a final example we can compare how the two historians present Elagabalus’ creature Comazon. Comazon was a nobody who was twice appointed prefect of the city, each time to replace more distinguished individuals.<sup>217</sup> Herodian will tell you literally that Comazon was an actor, who had danced the pantomime in the theater at Rome.<sup>218</sup> But Dio’s makes Comazon’s connection to the theater metaphorical. He compares Comazon, who was promoted to fill the empty space left vacant by weightier men, to a mask on an empty stage, a mask without a face behind it, a persona without a real identity, a place-holder on the social stage.<sup>219</sup>

Yet if Comazon was an actor, was not Dio an actor too? He survived—and thrived—under a succession of capricious autocrats. For all that he portrays himself as a helpless bystander, he was in fact an extraordinarily successful seeker of high office. He was not in fact obliged to follow his father into the senate; many senator’s sons did not.<sup>220</sup> But Dio was ambitious. When Severus occupied Rome at the head of an army in 193 CE,

<sup>214</sup> Herodian 2. 9. 3 ἄπερ πάντα ἀψευδῆ καὶ ἀληθῆ τότε πιστεύεται ὅταν ἐς τὴν ἀπόβασιν εὐτυχηθῆ.

<sup>215</sup> Macrinus, he says, should have chosen a senator to be emperor after he killed Caracalla, but as it was he deserved his fate, having become emperor “when he had not even the title of senator” 79 (78) 41. 1-4.

<sup>216</sup> 80 (79) 7. 2-3 οὕτω γὰρ που πάντα ἄνω κάτω συνεχύθη; *Thus just about everything was turned upside-down...* Dio makes Maecenas draw the line at appointing former enlisted men to the senate because they have been tainted by manual labor (52. 25. 6-7). Dio’s contemporary Tertullian counts reversals of social status among the afflictions of the present age: *quod humiles sublimitate, sublimes humilitate mutantur* (*Apology* 20. 2).

<sup>217</sup> One of these other prefects was Fulvius, who was killed along with Elagabalus (80 [79] 21. 1-2). He may or may not have been the senator Diogenianus mentioned in 79 (78) 36. 5, but the simile comparing Comazon to the mask left on stage between the appearances of real actors implies that the prefects that Comazon succeeded were of higher status than he, most likely senators.

<sup>218</sup> Herodian 5. 7. 6; cf. *H.A.* Elagabalus 12. 1.

<sup>219</sup> 80 (79) 21. 2 ὡσπερ γὰρ προσωπεῖόν τι ἐς τὰ θέατρα ἐν τῷ διακένῳ τῆς τῶν κωμῶδων ὑποκρίσεως ἐσεφέρετο... *Like some mask that is brought into the theater in the vacant interval between comedy performances.* Schmidt (1997: 2633) proposes that Dio concluded his full historical narrative with this passage.

<sup>220</sup> Hopkins 1983: 120-200.

Dio sent him a pamphlet detailing the signs that had promised him the throne.<sup>221</sup> The pamphlet was well-received; presumably it harmonized with the usurper's own propaganda. The fruit of this overture was confirmation of Dio's praetorship in the following year. Dio's next literary effort was an account of Severus' civil wars. This was also well-received, and Dio's career was made. His literary ambitions kept pace with his political rise (Severus appointed him suffect consul), and he conceived the grand plan of expanding his history of Severus' civil wars into a comprehensive history of Rome.<sup>222</sup> Eventually he held posts in Asia under Macrinus, and a number of important governorships under Elagabalus' successor Severus Alexander, culminating in their joint consulship in 228 CE, after which he sought the prince's leave to retire. Dio could not have achieved all his ambitions had he not also been an actor. In the senate house as in the Emperor's *consilium*, a successful courtier knew how to conceal what he thought and felt while pretending to think and feel something else. To be successful in this role was to know how *not* to name the obvious, even while one's better judgment screamed it inside one's head.<sup>223</sup> Perhaps the disingenuous deportment that fascinated Dio in others was something he practiced himself.

The goal of this study has been to develop a context for the story of Sextus Quintilius, to show how its doubles and masquerades are thematically related to other embedded narratives in Dio's contemporary books. Dio's embedded narratives are usually categorized as anecdotes, with the implication that they are marginal or irrelevant to the business of a serious historian. It has been my intention to show further how these digressions related thematically to contemporary historical events, particularly usurpations and *damnationes memoriae*. In this study I have not tried to draw a line between anecdotes and longer, more central narratives. This is partly because of the fragmentary nature of the surviving text, and partly because the themes under discussion appear in minor episodes and major events alike. The question of how to use Dio's anecdotes has vexed modern historians. By examining fifty two anecdotes that appeared in both Suetonius and other sources, Richard Saller demonstrated that anecdotes change readily in written transmission and cannot be relied upon to preserve factual detail.<sup>224</sup> In his contemporary books, Dio was working from oral sources; we must assume that such material mutated even more readily. To recuperate historical value for his anecdotes, some historians like Brent Shaw interpret them in terms of ideology. "The bandit is less a positively constructed alternative form of power than he is a symbol of what the emperor should be."<sup>225</sup> Manfred Schmidt, in contrast, is reluctant to concede that Dio's anecdotes about bandits were intended as social critique; he emphasizes on the one hand that "Bulla" may have been a real person named "Bullatius," and on the other that Dio has been influenced by typological bandit stories.<sup>226</sup>

I believe that the same narrative may be both typological and historical because

<sup>221</sup> 73 (72) 23. 1-2.

<sup>222</sup> 73 (72) 23. 3.

<sup>223</sup> Cf. Epictetus *Discourses* 4. 139-40: οὕτως ἐν συγκλήτῳ τις οὐ λέγει τὰ φαινόμενα· ἔνδοθεν τὸ δόγμα αὐτοῦ βοᾷ. Cited by Hopkins 1983: 166.

<sup>224</sup> Saller 1980.

<sup>225</sup> Shaw 1984: 48.

<sup>226</sup> Schmidt 2000, citing in n. 41 a praetorian named "Bullatius Felix" (*CIL* VI 32627).

traditional plots, whose stock characters operate with intelligible motivations in predictable ways, actually influence how people perceive and remember contemporary events. As people transform events into narratives, the raw material of lived experience tends to be pulled into patterns already familiar from fiction, folktale, and gossip. Motives are simplified, narrative is streamlined and puzzling episodes gradually take on a typological cast.<sup>227</sup> But what counts as a puzzling problem, and what makes sense as an intelligible motivation, will vary according to historical context. The story of Martin Guerre, for example, when told in the sixteenth century, was all about problems of legitimate inheritance, and the imposture was explained in terms of the prodigious, while in the eighteenth century, the imposter's amazing feat was rationalized, and readers were invited to analyze the whole business as a legal case.<sup>228</sup>

The story of Sextus and his imposter, I would argue, is both typological and historical. Its basic facts were true: a well-known person named Sextus was persecuted by the emperor and disappeared. Years later, someone appeared who tried to take his place. Potentially typological elements in this story --the persecuted hero(s), the *Scheintod*, the imposter double-- would have become more prominent in oral retellings. But not all doubles are alike. The meanings they carry vary with historical context. The novelist Iamblichus, for example, when he has his hero mistaken for the twins Tigris and Euphrates, may have been exploring issues of cultural assimilation and identity in the Antonine era.<sup>229</sup> In a Christian novel, on the other hand, the trope of doubles may dramatize concerns about heresy impersonating orthodoxy.<sup>230</sup> In the imperial romantic novels, which are generally thought to be earlier than Dio, well-born protagonists experience sudden changes of fortune, including multiple instances of mis-recognition and apparent death. *Scheintod* in these stories encoded a reassuring message for well-to-do provincial readers: that the fickleness of fate is ultimately an illusion, and that good birth will carry you safely through all possible permutations of social position.<sup>231</sup> The message of Dio's doubles seems somewhat less reassuring.

In this essay I have also tried to show how the typological elements in Sextus' story were *particularly* meaningful in relation to Dio's own social position and historical context. Abrupt and violent regime change was a marked feature of Dio's lifetime. Regime change entailed abrupt change in the social status of prominent people, sometimes accompanied by violent dissolution of their corporeal integrity. The demotion, disappearance, or corporeal dissolution of prominent individuals was amplified by the disappearance of, or damage to, material representations of their bodies displayed in public space. Furthermore, usurpation and impersonation raised urgent questions about identity and its authentication. For senators, the tendency of usurpers to short-circuit the *cursus honorum* in their appointments effectively compounded the sensation of status-disruption brought on by the change of regime. It has been my hypothesis that these disturbing historical events also posed troubling cognitive conundrums. The practices of

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<sup>227</sup> "Stories provide us with a set of stock explanations which underlie our predispositions to interpret reality in the ways that we do...memory is not merely retrospective, it is prospective as well" (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 51).

<sup>228</sup> Davis 1997.

<sup>229</sup> Stephens and Winkler 1995: 184-6.

<sup>230</sup> I hope to treat doubles in the *Clementine Recognitions* in a future essay.

<sup>231</sup> Perkins 1994.

*damnatio memoriae*, for example, destabilized the boundary between representation and event, because the effacement of an inscription or the destruction of a statue were simultaneously both representations and events. The decapitation of deposed emperors and unsuccessful usurpers also destabilized the boundary between representations and bodies, since a severed head was both a material body and a representation.<sup>232</sup> These crises repeatedly highlighted the gap between appearances and reality, a perennial sore point for Roman aristocrats who engaged in politics under autocracy, and, by destabilizing traditional relationships between signs and meanings, created a kind of epistemological challenge to the operating assumptions of aristocratic life.

In this essay I have tried to show how Dio's contemporary books repeatedly engage with the theme of unstable identity, particularly in the form of stories about doubles and masquerades. I also have suggested this engagement is in some way a response to instability in the imperial succession. But how are we to analyze the connection? When I began this study I was inclined to prioritize experiential factors: that Dio's personal experience as a senator and courtier in this period made him exquisitely sensitive to moments of discordance between appearance and reality in public life, to practices of disguise, pretense, and self-falsification on his own part and on the part of others, and to the potential instability inherent in human systems of signs. While I still think that this is largely true, I would caution that this model relies perhaps too much on the image of Dio as a passive recipient of experience that Dio himself projects through literary art. I would add now that this passive model does not do justice to Dio the literary artist and maker of meaning. Who is to say that there was no element of artistic intention in the way he selected minor anecdotes, or in the way he developed longer narratives that highlight these themes? The full-text development of Elagabalus' usurpation, in which semiotic confusion is so prominent, would seem to bear this out.

When it comes to appreciating Dio as a maker of meaning, his thoroughly pre-modern cosmology tends to get in the way. Dio was a man who believed in the universe as a system of signs; it makes sense that he would be particularly attuned to instabilities of representation. But we should not let ourselves be misled by his literary self-portrait: he did not pass all his life watching events in superstitious passivity. He actively chose to write history in order to demonstrate that, while chaos might appear to reign on the human level, on the divine level the cosmic sign-system still worked. Dio's portent-driven model of historical meaning frustrates modern historians because it precludes a rational approach to historical causation. Yet it is this portent-driven model that best explains the scandal of his anecdotes, apparently so riddled with trivial particulars.<sup>233</sup> In this system of historical meaning, signs may always be found after the fact to prefigure even the most bizarre and unexpected historical events; no detail is too small as to be without potential significance. Like Peter Brown, but with a different interpretive agenda, Cassius Dio was a "master of the stray detail."<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Roman statue culture, which thematized representation and remembering as embodiment, would have contributed to this effect (Elsner 2003: 212). On the ambiguity of the boundary between representations and events as a preoccupation of New Historicism see Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000: 15.

<sup>233</sup> Schmidt 2000 seems to be heading this way in the last sentence.

<sup>234</sup> Henry 1980.

Dio's last books afford a rare opportunity to see how political events of an unstable and poorly documented period were refracted through the sensibility of a single individual, someone who was close to events and at times perhaps complicit. This is to read fragments of historiography almost as if they were poetry, listening for nuance in the modulations of the authorial voice. Since, in the process of exploring why these events and the stories they generated may have been meaningful to Dio, I have inevitably analyzed them in terms that are meaningful to me, this essay is also an exercise in reception. Although I cannot claim to have recuperated Dio's authorial intentions uncontaminated by my own preoccupations, I nevertheless suggest that Dio, who has never been accused of sophisticated abstract thought, used stories—fact, rumor, or fiction, it matters not—to think concretely about problems relating to personal identity and signification that the vicissitudes of contemporary political life had rendered particularly urgent.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Although, following Dio's preoccupations, I have discussed mostly imperial usurpation, it is important to remember that under the Empire, enhanced opportunities for travel and social mobility encouraged people from a wide range of backgrounds to attempt to usurp higher social status than was their due by birth. Masquerade and impersonation were strategies practiced by runaway slaves, travelers and hucksters, upstart freedmen, religious entrepreneurs, and ambitious fathers in large town, like those who tried to enroll their sons in the ephorate via the gymnasium (for examples see Reinhold 1971 and Moatti 2006). This phenomenon may have been facilitated by the fictive aspects of Roman status, in which one might acquire free birth (*ingenuitas*), for example, by imperial grant (*ius anuli auri*). This may have emboldened some simply to assume a gold ring, and hope to pull it off.

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