In the Spirit of Suetonius:

A Closer Look at Argus Books’ 1930 *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*

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Abstract

This thesis centers on an illustrated limited-edition copy of Suetonius’ *Caesares* published in 1930 and currently a part of the collection of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University. *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* was published by Argus Books, a bookstore and small publishing house in Chicago owned by Ben Abramson. The book, apparently a new translation of a second-century (CE) Latin text, is physically striking and unusual both in Argus Books’ production and in the choice at this time in history to illustrate Suetonius’ biographies of the early Roman emperors. Investigation of this book reveals it is much more than it looks.

Abramson was a Jewish immigrant and great lover of books who used the influence of his store, publications, and personal life to subvert censorship and support those suppressed by terror and restriction. He personally commissioned this edition of Suetonius’ work. The edition was “translated” by H. M. Bird, whose initials suggested a male scholar of some prominence. This thesis discovered that H. M. Bird was Abramson’s secretary, Helen Marie Bird, who had no knowledge of ancient languages and assembled her “translation” by putting lines of earlier English translations into her own words. Abramson negotiated repeatedly with the famed British artist Frank C. Papé to illustrate the work, and the most notable feature of this volume is its sixteen full-page, copper-plate illustrations. These drawings depict various scenes from the lives of the first Roman emperors and are at once amusing and disturbing.

The publisher, translator, and illustrator worked together to create a truly unique edition that pays homage to Suetonius in its candidness. This investigation into the context and creation of this edition underscores the continuing fascination with Suetonius’ engagement with, and representation of, imperial power, as well as our enduring need of satire.
Introduction

In 2018, Professor Mary T. Boatwright made a donation to the Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University. She had received a translation of Suetonius’ *Caesares* as a gift—perhaps an unremarkable event for a scholar of Roman history, but this volume seemed to deserve wider use and study.\(^1\) *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* was published by Ben Abramson of Argus Books in Chicago in 1930. It was advertised as an “original translation” by H. M. Bird, with illustrations by Frank C. Papé.\(^2\) Sitting on a bookshelf, it cuts a very striking figure; the book is over a foot tall, nearly two inches thick, wrapped in a vivid blue cover, and embossed with gold lettering (Figs. 1-3).\(^3\) Its contents are equally eye-catching: weighty paper, an intriguing title page, sixteen intricate full-page illustrations, an emperor’s portrait at the beginning of each chapter, and dozens of charming, smaller illustrations throughout. This volume is number 23 of the 300 copies signed by both H. M. Bird and Frank Papé (Fig. 4).

There is an introduction by the translator, a table of contents, and a glossary explaining some of the Latin terms that the reader might need to know. It is, from beginning to end, a magnificent and entertaining volume, compelling for both the quality of its composition and its impressive illustrations. Professor Boatwright was right to envision a further, deeper study of this remarkable edition: an edition that is, nevertheless, only a small part of the much longer history of Suetonius and his *Caesares*.

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was a Roman author and biographer who lived and wrote during the early Imperial era, when Rome was still figuring out what kind of power it would be. Suetonius was a prolific writer and covered a wide variety of topics, from Roman spectacles

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\(^1\) *De Vita Caesarum*; henceforth referred to as Suetonius’ *Caesares*.


\(^3\) All illustrations can be found at the end of the thesis.
through types of insults to the lives of famous courtesans.⁴ He wrote in both Latin and Greek, but unfortunately, most of his works have been lost over the centuries, and none of his texts are fully extant today.⁵ The most complete is his *Caesares*, which is missing only the first few pages of its first section. *Caesares*, written probably in the 120s CE, is a collection of biographies of Julius Caesar and the first eleven Roman emperors: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. Although Suetonius’ writing has often been characterized as gossipy and graceless over the years, his biographies still stand as important primary sources that offer a unique glimpse into the lives of the emperors and the Rome that they lived in and ruled.⁶

Over the centuries, *Caesares* has waxed and waned in popularity along with the growth and decline of various European societies and states. According to the research of the late Professor L. D. Reynolds, there was a renewed interest in Suetonius and his *Caesares* in the Carolingian Empire, during the eighth and ninth centuries. The oldest surviving manuscript of this text dates to 820 CE, and there are records of several other copies created, borrowed, and excerpted at this time. Biographies of another lineage of powerful European rulers must have appealed to the emperors of the Carolingian dynasty, and the Frankish biographer Einhard intentionally based his biography of Emperor Charlemagne, *Vita Karoli Magni*, on Suetonius’ *Augustus*.⁷ A few centuries later, Suetonius’ *Caesares* underwent another period of heightened popularity. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, notable authors like Petrarch and Boccaccio read, owned, and utilized *Caesares* for their own writing, and over half of the surviving

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⁶ Hurley, xxiv.
Suetonius manuscripts were written after 1375, mostly in Italianate hands.\(^8\) This relative boom in esteem and recognition carried the text into the printed world as well, and *Caesares* was released in a dozen printed editions in the last third of the fifteenth century.\(^9\) An additional 25 editions were published in the sixteenth century.

After the sixteenth century, however, Suetonius’ *Caesares* entered a slow but steady decline in printed popularity that extended through the early nineteenth century. There were several English translations over the years, but it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that *Caesares* enjoyed the renewed, concentrated interest of notable scholars like Carl Ludwig Roth, Leon Preud’homme, and Maximilian Ihm.\(^10\)

With the rise of interest in social history in the latter part of the twentieth century, Suetonius’ *Caesares* underwent a resurgence in popularity. Scholars like Andrew Wallace-Hadrill further argued that Suetonius was not a second-rate thinker and writer, but deserved consideration for the care with which he preserves a myriad of facts from the Roman world.\(^11\) Today, recent editions like Donna Hurley’s 2011 translation prove that Suetonius’ text is just as relevant and noteworthy now as it seemed in the fifteenth, ninth, or second centuries.

An outlier of this general history of Suetonius’ *Caesares* is Argus Books’ publication in 1930 of an illustrated, limited-edition translation of *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. It seems unique in the Suetonian tradition that precedes it. As far as I can tell, up to this point editions of *Caesares* (either in Latin or English) were intended for scholarly use; any illustrations they contained were meant to be educational, not entertaining. But as I will discuss further in the

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\(^8\) Ibid., 404.
\(^10\) Rolfe, 206.
following chapters, the Argus Books edition was purposefully created to tell the stories of the Caesars’ lives in an engaging, compelling way, and enormous amounts of attention and care were dedicated to its physical layout, appearance, and of course, Frank Papé’s full-page illustrations.

At the beginning of this project, no one knew much more about this specific edition of 1930 beyond what was printed in its pages: published in Chicago in 1930, one of 300 signed copies, and translated, illustrated, and published by the names given inside. This paper began with the hope of filling out these basic facts with more context and details about the creative process for this book. In the end, my research took me to several different libraries and institutions, relying on the special collections of Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Saint Louis University’s Vatican Film Library, and of course, the Rubenstein Library at Duke, as well as the online records of databases like Ancestry.com. In the following chapters, I will investigate the three individuals who formed the primary creative team for this edition: the publisher in the first chapter, the translator in the second, and the illustrator in the third. I will show how their individual characters unified into a shared artistic vision for this book: producing a new edition of Suetonius’ *Caesares* that would reflect the violence and absurdities of both the Roman emperors and the totalitarian rulers of twentieth-century European nations.
Chapter I. The Publisher and the Book

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, one particular bookstore, and one particular bookseller, were at the heart of Chicago’s bibliophile community: Argus Books, owned by a wholly unique man named Ben Abramson. Everyone who loved reading books, loved buying books, and loved talking about the books they read and bought was a regular at Argus Books. The store was more than a typical bookstore. It functioned as a classroom, a meeting space, and even a kind of community center for people who shared a passion for reading and collecting books. At the heart of it all was Abramson, the quirky, forward-thinking advocate for books whom the Chicago Sun Times described after his passing as “one of the last of the sweetly screwy booksellers. He was a round cultural peg who never was bothered by not fitting into a square economic hole.”

Argus Books enjoyed only two decades of bustling prosperity before Abramson attempted unsuccessfully to relocate his business to New York City, experienced a mental breakdown, and eventually passed away by his own hand in 1955. However, in those twenty years of prosperity, Abramson had a profound effect on the literary community of Chicago and other parts of the United States. The books that he sold and published stand as a witness to this remarkable man and his singular cultural moment.

Ben Abramson was born in Kadenei, Lithuania on August 25, 1898. His Jewish and impoverished family immigrated to the United States in 1901, sailing from Hamburg, Germany to New York. He never returned to Lithuania but grew up in the “teeming west side of Chicago at the turn of the century…reading and schooling at the heels of experience.”

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13 Ibid.
father was a peddler, and in exchange for helping him repair the items they found, Abramson was allowed to keep the old books they came upon. From roughly age five to fourteen, Abramson attended a Jewish Training School, which had been established as schools for Eastern European Jewish students who were deemed unlikely to attend secondary school or college. At schools like this, Abramson would have received classes in several subjects, including one year each of Latin, French, and algebra, and some practical classes to prepare students for careers as tradespeople.\(^1\) Abramson apparently did not take to such practical classes as readily as the more literary ones: in *The Argus Book Shop: A Memoir*, his daughter, Deborah Covington, recalled that in one class the students were taught how to build their own sleds. While all the other students were happily putting their creations to use in the November snow, Abramson was still working away and did not finish his sled until the following June: “He had absolutely no skill with a hammer and a screw driver was far beyond his ability to handle.”\(^2\) His record in the 1930 U.S. Census reports that although he did not attend secondary school, Abramson did speak English and was able to read and write.\(^3\)

After leaving school, as a teenager Abramson traveled the Midwest via train, finding temporary work in various cities. While his traveling companions would head to farms and factories, Abramson would walk through the downtown and see if there was a bookstore that would take him on. In Chicago, he also found work as a clerk at Alexander Caldwell McClurg’s rare books shop, but by 1922 he entered the bookselling industry on his own. He purchased an old barber sharp with his partner, Jerrold Nedwick, and after some major renovations, Argus Books was born.\(^4\) I have found no explanation for the origin of the store’s name, but I expect it

\(^2\) Ibid., 3-4.
\(^4\) Stern, 102.
is at least partly inspired by the myth of Argus Panoptes, the hundred-eyed giant who gave his life in service to Juno. Ovid reports that Juno later commemorated him in the magnificent pattern on the tail of the peacock, resembling the giant’s many eyes. The Argus Books logo also includes peacock in its design (Ovid Met. 1.716-22; Figs. 5 and 6). This is not concrete proof by any means, but it certainly suggests that Abramson was interested in and knowledgeable about classical mytho-history from the very beginning of his career as a bookseller.

Abramson later moved the store to 333 South Dearborn Street, where it remained until 1940, when he relocated once again, this time to more impressive quarters at 16 North Michigan Avenue. From these humble beginnings, Argus Books grew to great renown: Abramson’s long-time friend Adrian Goldstone said it was “a meeting place for literary people of Chicago—reporters, writers…You could hardly go in there and spend a few hours there without being introduced to somebody that was in the field of letters.” Argus Books was a center not just for purchasing books, but for literary discussions and discoveries of new authors and titles to cherish.

Under Abramson’s leadership, the store flourished. Thanks to cross-country railroads, Chicago was an exciting place, bustling with visitors making transfers, and Abramson capitalized on this. Argus Books had a thriving community of regular customers, and a significant number of mail orders, but Abramson also excelled at attracting passersby to his store and wearing them down until they purchased something. Goldstone recalled that Abramson “would quote, it seemed for hours and probably verbatim, from some book to a visitor who had walked upstairs to the Argus Bookshop (simply because it was warmer there than on Michigan Avenue) and who

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20 Dickinson, 1-2.
21 Adrian H. Goldstone, “Book Collecting and Steinbeck,” San José Studies 1, no. 3 (1975): 130.
had no intention of buying anything.”22 Lecturing customers until they gave in and purchased a book may not seem like a sustainable business practice, but it worked for Abramson and illustrates his unwavering commitment to finding people the perfect book they did not know they needed. In Abramson’s own words, “It is an adventure to persuade a man who never reads anything but detective stories, to read Shakespeare…It is a bookseller’s duty, not merely to sell books, but to make people more aware of books, to induce them to examine their tastes and interests and to help them expand both.”23

By 1924, a self-made businessman in his mid-twenties, Ben Abramson married Mollie, a Russian Jewish immigrant who also had immigrated to the United States as a young child and grown up primarily in Chicago. Their only child, Deborah, was born shortly thereafter.24 Years after her father passed away, Deborah wrote a memoir recalling his life and career as a bookseller, with all its highs and lows. The Argus Book Shop: A Memoir supplements with personal, intimate details and anecdotes the census records and rather dry biographical entries in books like Dickinson’s Dictionary of American Antiquarian Bookdealers. She remembers having to dye her father’s shirts because he liked wearing bright colors, long before the vivid color palettes of the 1960s and 70s.25 Even at the end of his life he fervently encouraged her creativity and insisted that she pursue her career in theater instead of moving home to care for him.26 Although her married name is Covington, as a young adult she had legally changed her last name to Benson (“Ben’s-son”) because her father told her both that she should have her own identity separate from their old family name, and that he had always wished for a son.27

22 Adrian H. Goldstone and John R. Payne, John Steinbeck: A Bibliographical Catalogue of the Adrian H. Goldstone Collection (Austin, Texas: University of Texas at Austin Humanities Research Center, 1974), 9.
23 Ben Abramson, Reading and Collecting 2, no. 3 (1938): 43.
25 Covington, 19.
26 Ibid., 40.
27 Ibid., 52.
Deborah Covington certainly had an unusual childhood. Growing up as an only child in such a literary environment, with such a unique father, seems to have made her a mature child. From a young age, Abramson treated her as an adult and would discuss topics like sex and nudity with her with uncommon frankness, despite their taboo status at the time. She candidly recalls a time when, in fourth or fifth grade, her classmates came over to visit her while she was recovering from an illness. When she returned to school, a boy said his mother told him they could not play together anymore because there were naked women in the Abramsons’ living room. Distraught and confused, Covington told her father and they searched the room until they realized the boy was talking about Abramson’s painting of a woman and a satyr by artist Norman Lindsay. Her father “carefully explained that some people did not approve of nudity but suggested [she] ignore the situation and make some new friends at school.”28 In addition to the nude painting, their house also featured a lamp bearing eight original drawings by provocative artist Clara Tice that her mother had lacquered into place around the octagonal shade.29

Abramson’s progressive, unbothered approach to topics like nudity is apparent not just in his parenting but also in his professional life. His daughter recalls, “everyone in Chicago who had anything to do with books knew that Ben sold pornography. He used to tell people that it was the pornography which paid for my private school education.”30 Police regularly raided Argus Books, but since many of Abramson’s customers were lawyers and judges, he usually had some advance warning. On at least one occasion, Abramson had just received a shipment of flyers which “he considered classical material but which he knew the judge, and certainly the police department, would look upon as pornography.” He concealed the pamphlets in his

28 Ibid., 58.
29 Ibid., 57.
30 Ibid., 26.
secretaries’ desks, hiding them under their seat cushions and inside their sanitary products. Just as Abramson expected, the police did not dare to disturb the Kotex boxes, and the material survived the raid intact. 31 Years later, Abramson provided influential and controversial sexologist Dr. Alfred Kinsey with the printed “pornographic” materials necessary for his research. 32 These details from both his private life and his professional career highlight Abramson’s progressive attitude towards topics traditionally seen as unseemly, even immoral.

Outside of the bookseller community, Abramson is most well-known for his friendship with John Steinbeck. The two got to know each other in Argus Books and although they experienced a falling-out in the early 1940s, they maintained regular correspondence before then. 33 It is also thanks to Abramson that Steinbeck’s first commercial success, Tortilla Flat (1935), was published at all. When publisher Pascal Covici wandered into Argus Books, Abramson forced some of Steinbeck’s earlier works into his less-than-willing hands. After giving in and reading the books, Covici was highly impressed by the potential of this young writer and asked Abramson to put them in contact with each other. Covici went on to publish many of Steinbeck’s later books, including Tortilla Flat, which was an instant, albeit unexpected, success. 34 Steinbeck scholar Peter Lisca shared that Steinbeck missed all the acclaim for his stage version of Of Mice and Men because he had left New York to see Abramson in Chicago: “Upon completing the stage version, and not even waiting for the play to be produced, [Steinbeck] went to Detroit, bought a car, and, after visiting Ben Abramson in Chicago, drove to Oklahoma.” 35 This relationship between author and bookseller had a profound

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 27.
33 Goldstone, “Book Collecting and Steinbeck,” 130.
35 Ibid., 143.
impact on the lives of both men, and their correspondence is testimony to their great friendship and respect for each other.

These were the prosperous years, when Argus Books was recognized throughout the city as a cultural haven for people who loved to read and talk about books. Unlike most Americans, the Great Depression served as an opportunity for Abramson, who was able to purchase valuable editions at a fraction of what they were worth from people looking to make a quick profit. Abramson maintained correspondence and friendship with many contemporary authors, from Steinbeck to Henry Miller to William Saroyan. In her memoir, Covington recalls her parents taking vacations to New York to see Bennet Cerf, one of the founders of Random House Publishing. Her mother Mollie used to play Chopin on the piano and impress all the socialites with her talent.

In 1930, their rented home on Fullerton Parkway was valued at $100 per month (approximately $1,509 in 2020 when adjusted for inflation), and their daughter attended a local private school, the Girls’ Latin School of Chicago. In both 1930 and 1940, the Abramsons employed a servant who shared their residence. In 1930, this was a young woman named Honor Carey who had immigrated to Chicago from Ireland just three years before. In 1940, this was a black woman from North Carolina named Hattie Freeman who reported an income of $312 for the previous year, worth approximately $5,790 in 2020. For contrast, Abramson’s reported

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36 Stern, 102.
37 Covington, 22.
38 This amount, and all following figures that I have adjusted for inflation, was calculated by the “Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator,” United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, accessed 11 March 2020, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.
40 Ibid.
income for the same year was $3,900, or approximately $72,380 in 2019. Abramson had a mind for business, and the store was thriving.

Emboldened by this success, Abramson soon branched into book publishing as well as selling. Because he stipulated in his will that all of Argus Books’ records should be destroyed after his death, there is no complete record of the titles he published, but as early as 1929 he had published one of his first books: an illustrated edition of Norman Douglas’ *South Wind* with images by John Austen. His daughter reported that “Ben became a publisher because there were books he thought should be published and no one else would publish them.” From 1936 to 1938, Abramson printed a monthly magazine called *Reading and Collecting*, a collection of essays, explanations, and advertisements proudly promoting the titles for sale at Argus Books. He evidently published in a wide range of genres, from poetry to children’s books to novels, and repeatedly chose to print works by local authors from the Chicago area, like Edith Franklin Wyatt and Julian Arnold.

 Abramson’s love for creating books that held value both as textual works of literature and physical works of art is clear from these advertisements. He emphasizes the quality and beauty of his publications, paying special attention to illustrations, binding, and paper weight in his descriptions. For example, Abramson’s advertisement for the aforementioned edition of Norman Douglas’ *South Wind* reads: “The masterpiece of one of the greatest wits of his age in the finest of all editions. The typography was designed for reading, the two volume arrangement for the maximum of ease and pleasure for the reader. The illustrations by John Austen extend and embellish the delights of the text. Bound in blue Buckram, richly gilt, boxed. The ideal

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42 Ibid.
44 Covington, 57.
45 Ibid., 68, 71.
Christmas gift for sophisticated friends.” His glowing review praises every aspect of the book, from its author and illustrator to its binding and golden embossing. Abramson knew what would catch customers’ attention while shopping and he esteemed the materials and aesthetic appearance of his publications perhaps as much as their content.

Abramson’s personal character and political views are revealed as much in his publishing as they are in his bookselling. In the years preceding World War II, as fascist regimes promoting genocide and oppression were coming to power throughout Europe, Abramson published and sold several anti-Nazi pamphlets by prominent Jewish scholars and writers. In 1934, he printed *Problems of the Jews in the Contemporary World* by Charles E. Shulman, then the rabbi at North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, Illinois. In just forty pages, Shulman analyzes the challenges faced by Jewish people globally, nationally, and locally, and proposes multiple courses of action they ought to take in each of these communities. One year later, Abramson published Dr. Solomon Freehof’s *Race, Nation or Religion: Three Questions Jews Must Answer*. Freehof was a regular Argus customer and just finishing his tenure as Rabbi of Congregation Kehillath Anshe Maariv, the oldest synagogue in Chicago. Abramson published another booklet by Charles Shulman in 1939, entitled *Europe’s Conscience in Decline*, in which the author examined how each European country had instigated their own form of oppression and genocide against the Jewish people.

Covington also recalls that her father contributed to community efforts to resettle Jewish refugees arriving from Europe in the decades leading up to the Holocaust. He used his scholarly

connections in Chicago to help Jewish doctors find placements in local hospitals in order to get their American medical certification, and he and Mollie found jobs for their wives and apartments for their families in the meantime. At the end of his life, when Abramson needed to see a mental health specialist, the family was surprised to learn that the doctor’s bills were paid in full by a professor at the medical school who believed that he owed his start in America to Abramson’s help in the 1930s, when he had arrived in Chicago as a refugee. Although none of his biographers, including his daughter, remember Abramson as a particularly religious man, he was clearly troubled by the surge of violent anti-Semitism sweeping through Europe and the rest of the world. Choosing to publish these writings openly affirmed Abramson’s anti-Nazi, anti-fascist stance as international tensions escalated and the Holocaust intensified in the years leading up to World War II.

His publishing record discloses his social as well as his political views. As previously discussed, Abramson had no qualms with or aversion to selling “pornographic” texts or treating nudity as art. This liberality continued as he entered the world of publishing: many of the authors and illustrators he collaborated with were well-known for depicting risqué scenes in their work. He published books by contentious authors like Oscar Wilde, Pierre Louys, and Henry Miller with no hesitation, and many of his chosen illustrators also flirted with indecency in their art. Clara Tice, the artist who had drawn the nude sketches that adorned a lampshade in Abramsons’ home, was known as “The Queen of Greenwich Village” and considered a leader of the American bohemian art movement. Characterized by its languid forms and sinuous lines, Tice’s art had been the object of a raid on a New York restaurant by the Society for the

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51 Covington, 26.
52 Ibid., 44.
53 Ibid., 57, 72, 92.
Suppression of Vice in 1915. Abramson also worked with Donald Denton, an African-American artist from Chicago whose illustrations for Argus Books’ 1928 translation of Balzac’s *Girl with the Golden Eyes* prominently feature naked women in sensual, suggestive poses.

Even Frank Papé, the illustrator of Abramson’s 1930 *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, frequently depicted nude or semi-nude, provocative figures in his art (Figs. 7, 9, 12, and 13). Abramson seemed entirely unbothered by conventional standards about what was appropriate or permissible for the contents of books.

In all aspects of his career, both as a bookseller and a publisher, Abramson despised censorship and fought against it whenever he could. He purposefully sold controversial books in his store and treated complaints from his opponents as an opportunity to stand in support of literary freedom. When he stocked Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, he had many conversations with customers, both black and white, who disapproved of his decision to sell the book. He even discussed the novel with the author himself several times. But Abramson never took it off his shelves. He also sold John Roy Carlson’s *Undercover: My Four Years in the Nazi Underworld of America*, a decision that resulted in the physical vandalism of his store. His daughter remembers the police calling their home one morning to tell them their front window had been smashed and covered with stickers that read: “Dirty Jews.” Abramson considered it both his right and his obligation to publish and sell books that the public needed to read, even if some found them offensive or inappropriate.

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56 Covington, 49.
However, while selling controversial materials was how Abramson defended freedom of speech, it also was good publicity, plain and simple. On one occasion, Christian Scientists marched on Michigan Avenue in front of Argus Books in protest of an unflattering biography of their founder, Mary Baker Eddy. Abramson enthusiastically welcomed their picket line and particularly the many new customers that the hubbub on the street brought into the store.\(^{57}\) In the 1940s, when Abramson had moved to New York, he published Albert Richard Wetjen’s *Youth Walks on the Highway*, an allegorical short story about a young man’s sexual experiences. A local official was appalled by the contents and took Abramson to court, promising that the book would be censured. Abramson called the printers and told them to hold production: if the book was banned, he would triple the order. Abramson lost the case, expanded publication, and cheerfully ran advertisements that read, “Banned in New York State but not in Boston.” He sold all but 200 copies.\(^{58}\) Printing and selling materials by controversial writers and artists firmly situates Abramson in support of literary and artistic freedom. The practice, however, also evidences his capability as a shrewd businessman.

*Argus Books’ The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* articulates and reinforces all these aspects of Abramson’s identity as a father, a businessman, a bookseller, a publisher, an immigrant, and a Jew. As a physical book, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* fits neatly into Abramson’s established brand of publishing. It is large, heavy, and bound in a vibrant, royal blue. The cover and spine are embossed, stamped with imperial gold letters and decorative motifs. The thick and opaque paper holds up well to the boldly printed words and images. Perhaps the most special, eye-catching aspect of this edition are the illustrations, done by British artist Frank Papé. They are a featured element of the book and each of the twelve copper-plate illustrations are printed on

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\(^{57}\) Covington, 49-50.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 58-9.
a sturdy sheet of paper and protected by a thin flap of translucent wax paper that can be lifted to view the image. In addition to these full-page illustrations, each biography is preceded by a portrait of the respective emperor and followed by a small sketch of miscellaneous classical motifs inspired by Roman art.

Advertisements for *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* appear several times in the two-year run of Abramson’s literary magazine, *Reading and Collecting*. These commercial descriptions substantiate Abramson’s appreciation and respect for this book’s high quality and visual elegance. He calls this edition “the book that no one can miss”; “a splendid example of fine book making”; “the ideal gift.” His admiration for Papé’s illustrations is even more pronounced than his appreciation for the book’s craftsmanship. “Suetonius has waited many centuries for the ideal illustrator; and the world has been waiting for Mr. Papé’s masterpiece. Both needs have now been realized.” This glowing acclaim for both the structural binding and the interior illustrations demonstrates that Abramson took pride in the physical beauty and structure of the books he published. He was justified in this pride: *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* truly is a work of art.

*The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* is perhaps not as racy or sexually explicit as some of the other titles published by Argus Books, but it certainly does not shy away from the more R-rated elements of Suetonius’ writing. Even into the later twentieth century, it was a common practice to leave the unseemly passages of the text in the original Latin or Greek when translating ancient texts into English, in order to preserve the reader’s sense of modesty. As I will discuss in greater detail in the following chapter, the Argus Books edition does not follow this precedent, but instead frankly translates even the passages that might have shocked or offended some readers.

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60 Ben Abramson, *Reading and Collecting* 1, no. 3 (1937): 32.
In a similar vein, many of Papé’s illustrations openly depict naked figures, specifically women with their breasts or backsides clearly exposed. One image shows Julius Caesar kneeling before Cleopatra, who is sprawled backwards on a luxurious bed with her arm raised to her hair, baring her breast to both Caesar and us, the readers (Fig. 12). When we remember Abramson’s progressive attitude towards discussing nudity with his daughter and selling “pornographic” material in his store, the explicit passages and illustrations in this edition make sense. This unconventional liberality shaped and informed this edition and *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* is further proof that in terms of sex-positivity and bodily freedom, Abramson was ahead of his time.

Despite Abramson’s forward-thinking notions, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* is also clearly a product of the decade in which it was created. At the time of its publication in 1930, fascist regimes had already come to power in parts of Europe and were rapidly expanding their sphere of influence. Following his march on Rome in 1922, Benito Mussolini had seized power from the existing Italian government, established himself as absolute dictator, and begun to take control of every aspect of public and private life.\(^{61}\) Meanwhile, although he was not appointed chancellor of Germany until 1933, by 1930 Adolf Hitler had become the leader of the Nazi party, attempted to overthrow the government, and written both volumes of *Mein Kampf*, published in 1925 and 1927.\(^{62}\) Spurred on by poverty and instability following World War I, nationalist leaders and parties were quickly rising to power. The ethnocentrism and oppression that would eventually escalate into the genocide and violence of the Holocaust and World War II was already thriving in Europe and growing stronger every moment.

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The hatred and xenophobia fueling these rulers’ rise to power is not unprecedented, or so Abramson’s publication demonstrated. In his *Caesares*, Suetonius records the lives of Julius Caesar and the first eleven Roman emperors, including descriptions of not just their military record and physical features but also their many crimes and abuses of power. Despite the grandeur and might of the Roman Empire, the emperors who led Rome were often paranoid, depraved, and cruel. They made rash decisions and acted impetuously, ruling over the state with absolute, undivided power. Such attributes resonated strongly in a world and a time that was witnessing the political ascent of several oppressive, totalitarian regimes at once.

Moreover, as Charles Shulman points out in his booklet *Europe’s Conscience in Decline*, published by Argus Books in 1939, these dictators openly encouraged comparison to the Roman emperors. Shulman concludes that despite their intentions, twentieth-century rulers like Mussolini and Hitler equaled those of the Roman Empire only in their “brutalities and their cynical treatment of human life.” Shulman writes, “Mussolini may think he is a noble Roman, fit to be the successor of the Caesars…Drained Pontine marshes, ruthless subjugation of primitive Ethiopians and destruction of a country’s most loyal and useful citizens are not qualifications enough for the mantle of the Caesars.” These two sets of rulers are separated by many centuries, but putting them in direct conversation with each other on the basis of the atrocities and brutalities they committed during their lives establishes a straightforward comparison between them.

Abramson seemed to encourage this juxtaposition, or at the very least to understand that Suetonius’ *Caesares* carried a deeper significance at that particular moment in time than a mere collection of biographies. In the advertisements for *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* that he

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63 Shulman, *Europe’s Conscience in Decline*, 83.
64 Ibid., 84.
printed in his *Reading and Collecting* magazine from 1936 on, Abramson repeatedly calls attention to the book’s interest in political leaders and the function of government. In July of 1937, Abramson writes, “Here were tyrants and dictators maddened by power. All that psychologists and philosophers can teach us about the human heart, they revealed. Their cruelty, their arrogance, and their magnificence shame the puny annals of today. There is no book that can tell you more about the state of the world today than this ruthless record written fifteen centuries ago. What can be more timely than the timeless?” Abramson clearly understood the parallels between Suetonius’ emperors and the fascist dictators coming to power in contemporary Europe. He actively draws attention to this comparison and encourages the reader to think about what the lives, crimes, and stories of the Roman emperors might mean in the modern political context.

If all this was not enough, the front cover of *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* is stamped with a symbol that seems to be a direct reference to the fascist parties establishing control in Europe. The spine and the front cover are embossed with golden eagles, with a wingspan of approximately four centimeters on the spine and nine centimeters on the cover (Figs. 2 and 3). The eagle was associated with Jupiter, the Romans’ chief deity, and thus was an important part of Imperial Roman iconography, but it also came to be used by the Italian Fascist party in the twentieth century. The image of an eagle clutching in its talons the fasces (the Roman symbol of absolute power from which the Fascist party obtained their name) was the central figure of the flag of Mussolini’s Italian Social Republic. The Nazi party used a similar image on their flags.

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65 Ben Abramson, *Reading and Collecting* 1, no. 8 (1937): 17.
and uniforms, sometimes grasping a swastika instead of the fasces.\textsuperscript{67} Both the Nazi eagle and the fasces still appear in the Anti-Defamation League’s Hate Symbols Database. Perhaps this illustration was merely meant to be a reference to the Roman Empire and the emperors whose lives are recounted by Suetonius, but its prominent location on the book’s cover and its design, so similar to the symbols appearing on flags and army uniforms throughout Europe, index a connection and comparison between this text and the contemporary political landscape. Abramson displays this symbolism on the cover of the book, so from the moment readers opened it they would understand the contrast and political commentary that run throughout the text.

There is no definitive record of Abramson choosing to publish \textit{The Lives of the Twelve Caesars} in direct response to the rise of fascist governments in Europe. We do not have a statement clearly declaring his intent or a note to the reader explaining how this edition is meant to be a comparison to current events. The eagle on the front cover could just be an eagle and nothing more. What we do know is that Abramson was a Jewish immigrant who helped other Jewish refugees find homes in America, who went on to publish several forcefully anti-Nazi and anti-fascist books, and who fought censorship whenever he could. Even if it is not explicitly demarcated as such, it is not a stretch to understand this chronicle of the lives and crimes of the Roman emperors as a foil to the violent, authoritarian regimes coming to power in Abramson’s contemporary world. In addition to the impact of the frightening, appalling developments in Europe, Ben Abramson’s political opinions, personal character, and social identity all shaped the Argus Books edition of \textit{The Lives of the Twelve Caesars}, marking its pages and stamping its cover with his own personality and beliefs. The book we read today is as much a reflection of its particular time, space, and creator as it is a reproduction of a much older historical text.

\textsuperscript{67} “Nazi Eagle,” \textit{Anti-Defamation League Hate Symbols Database}, Anti-Defamation League, accessed 11 March 2020, \url{https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/nazi-eagle}. 
Chapter II. The Translator and Her “Translation”

The full name of the translator is never given in the Argus Books edition of *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. The name “H. M. Bird” is printed multiple times throughout the volume, including a cursive signature in blue ink next to that of the illustrator, Frank Papé, on one of the opening pages. However, the advertisements for this edition in Ben Abramson’s literary magazine, *Reading and Collecting*, present the translation as a selling feature of the book. In one from 1937, Abramson calls it “a beautiful edition, containing the only complete, unexpurgated, modern translation.” In another, he describes it as a “new, complete version by H. M. Bird. All of the piquancy and flavor, all of the distinction and color of Philemon Holland’s version are preserved in this modern version.”

The deliberate promotion of the translator, but the relative anonymity of that person, was perplexing at the beginning of the project—why would Abramson publicize this aspect of the edition without revealing the translator’s full name? An online search in the Library of Congress Authorities, which includes 5.5 million authority records, reveals that only one book is credited to H. M. Bird. Additionally, this database often includes information about authors’ full names and even their birth and death dates, but the record for H. M. Bird includes no such data. Why would this person’s identity be so mysterious?

The answer comes from the same source that provided so much context to the life of Ben Abramson: the memoir his daughter, Deborah Covington, wrote twenty years after his death. In the section of the book devoted to his publication history, she includes an enlightening paragraph about Argus Book’s *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. Covington writes:

The title page reads: translated by H. M. Bird. H. M. Bird is Helen M. Bird Pettee who was a long-time Argus secretary, catalogue introduction writer and friend. She had

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68 Ben Abramson, *Reading and Collecting* 1, no. 8 (1937): 17.
remarkable talent but no ambition. She also knew no Latin and no Greek. Her translation was cribbed from another standard one in which she simply rearranged the sentence structure enough so that she could not be accused of plagiarism. However, she did indeed write the introduction and did the research necessary on it.\textsuperscript{71}

This quotation answered many of my questions about why Argus Books might have intentionally kept the full name and credentials of the translator of this edition a mystery. In 1930, the field of classical studies was overwhelming male, and a Latin text translated by a woman would not have been just atypical; it would have been seen as substandard and inadequate. Even in modern times, many classical texts have only very recently—or still have not—been published in editions with female translators, like Emily Wilson’s \textit{Odyssey} (2017) and Stephanie McCarter’s \textit{Metamorphoses} (pending publication).\textsuperscript{72} Given the societal expectations and educational standards of the time, it would have been very poor marketing to openly show the full name of this female “translator,” especially for an edition that is more plagiarism than translation. With just Bird’s initials given, readers would probably have assumed that the translator was a man. I certainly did.

Biographical records do exist, albeit sparingly, for a woman named Helen Bird living in Chicago at this time. In the 1930 \textit{United States Census}, a 27-year-old Helen Bird is listed as the head of household, living with her younger sister Angela in an apartment that cost $60 per month (approximately $905 in 2020, when adjusted for inflation). Helen and Angela are recorded as white and single. Both women were born in Ohio, were able to read and write, but did not attend school in the preceding year. While Angela was a stenographer, Helen’s occupation was “Publishing” in the “Editorial” industry.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} Covington, 64.
\textsuperscript{72} Kate Parrish, “Translation in the Age of #MeToo,” \textit{Sewanee Features}, Sewanee: The University of the South, 14 November 2018, \url{https://www.sewanee.edu/features/story/mccarter.html}.
\textsuperscript{73} 1930 United States Census, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, digital image s.v. “Helen Bird,” \url{Ancestry.com}. 
By 1940, Helen had married Frank Pettee, who worked in an advertising agency and had an annual salary of over $5,000 (approximately $92,795 in 2020). In 1935 they were still living in Chicago, but by 1940 the couple had bought a home in Lombard, Illinois, valued at $5,900 (approximately $109,498 in 2020). They also had a daughter, Antoinette, who was eight at the time of the 1940 census, and Helen was no longer working outside of the home.\(^7\) These records corroborate the information that Covington provides in her memoir, and emphasizes how peculiar it was that Helen authored a translation of an ancient Latin text. She did not attend secondary school or know any Latin or Greek; she was a secretary who would become a housewife and who never again exhibited higher learning or multiple language skills. Every part of this story is extraordinary.

Putting together the biographical information from the census records and Covington’s explanation of this edition, it is perhaps not surprising that Bird’s translation was heavily critiqued by reviewers. Covington reports that it was “cribbed” from other English editions, that Bird simply rearranged the word order and sentence structure in order to make it seem like it was not blatant plagiarism, and no attention at all was paid to the original Latin. Russel M. Greer, a professor at Brown University, reviewed Argus Books’ *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* in 1932 for *The Classical Journal*. Greer’s review is, if not harsh, certainly honest and upfront with his opinions about this edition: “The translation is of no value. Of the portions that I tested, hardly a single page escaped criticism.”\(^7\) He immediately identifies Bird’s unoriginal method of translation, and names several English editions that he believes Bird used: the translations of Holland, of Thomson, and of Forester. For instance, Geer writes: “[Bird] seems to have used


Forester for all the lives but the *Julius*, in which he has often followed and occasionally misunderstood Holland…He often takes sentence after sentence from Forester without change.”⁷⁶ Geer obviously assumed H. M. Bird was a man, just as I did when I began my research, indicating once more how unexpected and rare a female translator would have been at the time.

Regardless of the translator’s gender, Geer can very quickly pinpoint the weaknesses of Bird’s work, highlighting just how flagrant her plagiarism is. What can be the value of such an edition, a book whose translation is patched together from other scholars’ work and is not accurate to or thoughtful of the original in any literary way? The following in-depth analysis of excerpts from these various editions does reveal that Bird’s “translation” clearly does not hold up to review by anyone familiar with the original Latin. For these comparisons, I selected *Nero* chapters 28 and 29, in which Suetonius discusses the emperor’s violent sexual tendencies. The passage seemed apt because it evidences several key features of Suetonius’ writing. First, it demonstrates the unrestrained, absolute power of the emperors. Nero has the ability to do exactly what he wishes, and he acts without fear of denial or retribution. Second, this is an example of a section in which Suetonius writes plainly and freely about sexual practices, including rape and incest. As previously discussed, the publisher of this edition, Ben Abramson, also had no qualms about printing, selling, and displaying sexually explicit materials, including this book itself.

This passage ties together several crucial themes that thread their way through the entire body of writing, lying at the intersection of them all. The Latin reads:

XXVIII. Super ingenuorum paedagogia et nuptarum concubinatus Vestali virgini Rubiae vim intulit. Acten libertam paulum afuit quin iusto sibi matrimonio coniungeret, summissis consularibus viris qui regio genere ortam peierarent. Puerum Sporum exsectis

⁷⁶ Ibid., 378-9.
Aside from the abuse of freeborn sons and taking married women as his concubines, he also raped Rubria the Vestal Virgin. He joined the freewoman Acte to himself as if in marriage, with several consular men falsely claiming that she was born from a royal family. Having castrated the boy Sporus, Nero attempted to turn him into a natural woman and held him as his wife, having taken him in a traditional, well-attended service of marriage, with the dowry and wedding veil. There was an insightful joke going around about Sporus, that it would have been good for humankind if Nero’s father Domitius had had such a wife. He took this Sporus, decked out in the ornaments of the empresses and carried on a litter, with him around the Greek assemblies and markets and around the Sigillaria at Rome, kissing him again and again. No one doubted that he desired to sleep with his mother but was put off by her opponents, who feared that the bold and headstrong woman would prevail also because of this kind of influence, especially after he took into his concubines a prostitute who was supposedly very similar to Agrippina. They affirm that whenever he was carried with his mother on her litter, his lust was indulged in incest and proven by his stained clothes.

He also prostituted his own modesty so much that, after having defiled almost every part of his body, he invented a new type of game, in which he was covered in animal furs, let loose from his den, and then would attack the genitals of men and women who were tied up to posts. When he had worked off his raging lust enough, he was finished off by his freedman Doryphorus. He was wed to Doryphorus like Sporus was to him, even imitating the cries and lamentations of a virgin submitting to rape. I have learned from

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some people that he was absolutely convinced that no one was pure in any part of his body, but that most people hid their shame and covered it slyly. Therefore, he pardoned of all their other offenses those who showed him their indecency.

Suetonius’ critics often claim that he writes like a gossip instead of a true biographer. He records all the intimate details of the emperors’ lives, from their height and hair color to their nightmares and sexual proclivities. His accounts of their sexual activities and crimes are particularly interesting and function both as a marker of what Romans deemed morally acceptable and unacceptable and as a demonstration of trust between Suetonius and the reader. He thoroughly describes particulars of the emperors’ bedroom lives and does not hold back the more scandalous specifics, affording us an intimate look into the minds of the emperors and the biographer alike. These shocking, racy passages evidence Suetonius’ commitment to presenting complete, multi-dimensional portraits of the emperors, regardless of whether the reader was prepared or not to read such a thorough account of any of these depraved crimes.

A principal name in the discussion of debauchery and sexual impropriety in the Principate is Emperor Nero. As we saw above, chapters 28 and 29 of his biography include a litany of sexual crimes: incest, rape, kidnapping, violation of a Vestal Virgin’s sacrosanctity, and physical torture during nonconsensual foreplay. Suetonius is not modest when examining Nero’s inhumane violence and he speaks explicitly and directly throughout the passages covering this aspect of Nero’s life. Grotesque, upsetting details stand out, like the description of Sporus forcibly castrated and dressed as a woman, or Nero exiting his mother’s litter with soiled robes, or victims tied to stakes as Nero, wearing animal skins, molests and rapes them. Suetonius recounts these stories frankly and clearly in order to present a vivid and damning portrait of Nero as an emperor. These scandalous passages are not pleasant to read, but an account of Nero’s life

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78 Hurley, xxi.
would be incomplete without this report of his sexual depravity and violence. Our discomfort is intentional, purposefully curated by Suetonius to enhance our understanding of the emperors’ impurity and inhumanity. Nero’s sexual exploits are monstrous and repulsive, but they contribute meaningfully to Suetonius’ investigation of a life polluted by absolute power and vice.

Despite Suetonius’ candid, explicit voice in these passages, his translators tend to take a more discreet approach. Philemon Holland strays far from Suetonius’ candid tone in his translation of 1606. Holland was an English schoolmaster, physician, and scholar who is primarily known for the first English translations of several works by Livy, Pliny the Elder, and Plutarch. In 1606, he was also the first to translate Suetonius’ Caesares into English, and dedicated his edition to “the Right Honorable and Vertuous Ladie Harrington,” his patron and sponsor. He writes:

28. Over and besides the unnaturall abusing of boyes freeborne, and the keeping of mens wives as his concubines, he forced also and defloured Rubria, a vestale Virgin. Acte a freed woman he went very neere to have wedded as his lawefull wife: suborning certaine men who had beene Consuls, to avouch and forswear, That she was of Roiall bloud descended. A boy there was named Sporus, whose Genitories he cut out, and assayed therby to transforme him into the nature of a woman. Him he caused to be brought unto him as a bride, with a dowry, in a fine (yellow) veile, after the solemne maner of marriage: not without a frequent and goodly traine attending upon him: whom he maintained as his wife. Hereupon there goes abroad a pretie conceited jest of a pleasant fellow, That it might have beene wel and happie with the World, if his father Domitius had wedded such a wife. This Sporus trimly set out with the jewels, decked with the ornaments of the Empresses, and carried in a licter, hee accompanied all about the shire-townes of great resort and market burroughes of Greece: yea and afterwards at Rome, up and downe the street Sigillaria, manie a time sweetly kissing him by the way. For, that he had a lust to ly with his owne mother, and was frightened from it by some depraving backe-friendes of hers; for feare, least the proude and insolent dame might by this kind of favour grow too mightie, no man ever made doubt: especially after that he entertained among his Concubines an harlot, most like in all points (by report) unto Agrippina. It is affirmed moreover, that in times past, so often as hee rode in a licter together with his mother, hee played the filthy wanton, and was betrayed by the markes and spottes appearing upon her vesture.

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29. As for his owne body, certes, he forfeited the honour thereof, prostituting it to bee
abused so farreforth, as having defiled in manner all the parts of it, at the last, he devised
a kind (as it were) of sport and game: that being covered all over in a wilde beastses skin,
hee should be let loose forth of a cage and then give the assault upon the privites of men
and women both as they stood tyed fast to a stake: and when he had shewed his rage to
the full, be killed, forsooth by Doriphorus his freed-man, unto whom him selfe also was
wedded like as Sporus unto him: insomuch as hee counterfeited the noise and cries of
maidens, when they bee forced and suffer devirgination. I have heard of divers that he
was fully persuaded, No man nor woman was honest, or in any part of their bodies pure
and cleane, but most of them dissimuled their uncleannesse and craftily hid it. As many
therefore as professed unto him their obscene filthinesse, he forgave all other faults and
trespasses whatsoever.\(^{80}\)

To a modern reader, this translation can feel stilted and difficult to read. In the seventeenth
century, the English language operated very differently from how it functions today, both written
and spoken. Spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structure still had not been
standardized, so the way words and phrases appear in this translation may feel rather foreign.
English vocabulary has also developed quite substantially in the last four centuries, and some
terms in this edition have fallen out of use in modern times, although they can still be easily
understood from context. This translation does clearly express Emperor Nero’s violent, corrupt
tendencies, and pays particular attention to the pain and indignity he inflicted upon his sexual
partners. In an article for the American Philosophical Society in 1913, Suetonius scholar John C.
Rolfe wrote that Holland “found no embarrassment in translating Suetonius into the frankest
English.”\(^{81}\) Nonetheless, I believe he does not treat the text as openly as he could have.

While Holland does not excise or leave untranslated the most explicit sentences, the
specific words he chooses still quickly pass over the parts that are less pleasant to read. For
instance, when describing how Nero mimicked the cries of virgins being raped, he writes that

\(^{81}\) Rolfe, 225. Rolfe was the translator of the Loeb Classical Library’s edition of Suetonius’ Caesares, published in
two volumes in 1914. Like most of the Loeb collection, his translation has stood as an “industry standard” since
then; the 1997 reprint of his edition is cited earlier in this chapter.
they “suffer devirgination.”⁸² Perhaps he felt uncomfortable with the sexual violence in this passage because of the gender of his patron, Lady Harrington, and tried to tone down its obscenity for her sake. It is not that the English language lacked more forceful language, or that contemporary English literature was typically very pure and readers would have been scandalized by a more literal translation. Shakespeare wrote at the same time as Holland and his bawdy, sexual wordplay is a well-known feature of many of his plays. No, it seems an intentional choice to translate this passage of Suetonius the way he did, and that Holland himself was made uncomfortable by the contents of this section. In a footnote after the sentence containing the word “devirgination,” Holland writes: “I wish that both Suetonius and Dio had in this place and such like been altogether silent.”⁸³ To his credit, Holland does translate this entire passage, but he still allows his understanding of propriety and modesty to supersede his devotion to accuracy.

In the late eighteenth century Alexander Thomson published a new translation of Suetonius’ *Caesar* that goes even further than Holland in terms of glossing over the most unsavory parts of this narrative. Thomson’s translation reads:

XXVIII. Besides his abuse of boys free-born, and the liberty he took with married women, he committed a rape upon the Vestal Virgil Rubria. He was upon the point of marrying Acte his freedwoman, having suborned some men of Consular rank to swear that she was of royal descent. He gelded the boy Sporus, and endeavored to transform him into a woman. He even went so far as to marry him, with all the usual formality of marriage-writings, the veil, and a numerous company at the wedding. When the ceremony was over, he had him conducted like a bride to his own house, and treated him as his wife. It was jocularly observed by some person, “that it would have been happy for mankind, if his father Domitius had had such a wife.” This Sporus he carried about with him in a chair round the solemn assemblies and market-towns of Greece, and afterwards at Rome through the Sigillaria, dressed up in the rich attire of an empress, and now and then kissed him as they rode together. That he was passionately delirous to ly with his mother, but was dissuaded from it by her enemies, for fear that the haughty insolent woman should, by her compliance, get him entirely into her power, and govern

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⁸² Holland, 123.
⁸³ Ibid.
in every thing, was universally believed; especially after he had entertained amongst his concubines a strumpet, who was reported to have a strong resemblance of Agrippina.

XXIX. He prostituted his own chastity to that degree, that, after he had defiled every part about him with some unnatural pollution, he at last invented an extraordinary kind of diversion, which was, to be let out of a den covered over with a wild beast’s skin, and to seize upon the private parts of both men and women, tied to a stake for that purpose. After he had sufficiently spent his fury upon them, he was, at his own desire, served in the same manner himself by his freedman Doryphorus, to whom he was married in the same way that Sporus had been married to himself, imitating the cries and shrieks of young virgins, when they are deflowered. I have been informed by several, that he firmly believed, that not one man in the world was chaste, or undefiled in any part of him: but that most men concealed that vice, and had the cunning to keep it private. To such, therefore, as frankly owned their unnatural lewdness, he forgave all other crimes.84

The asterisks at the end of chapter 28 are a replication of stars printed in the book to excise one of the most off-putting and explicit lines of the whole text (Fig. 10). In the preface, Thomson tells his readers: “those who are acquainted with the Language of this Author, will observe, that his objectionable Expressions have been softened, and, in one or two places, necessarily suppressed, in the Translation.”85 The censored line in question is the sentence about Nero’s robes being stained with semen after having sex with his mother: it is corporeal, and biological, and ultimately, at least to Thomson, unacceptable. He deems this line unfit for print and removes it completely from his translation, intentionally choosing to prioritize his readers’ modesty over his faithfulness to the original text. Unless readers had access to (and the ability to read) a Latin copy of Caesares, they would have no way of knowing what Suetonius had written. It is certainly unpleasant to read and think about, but without this line, the full extent and horrific nature of Nero’s crimes cannot be properly understood or discussed.

85 Ibid., A2.
In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, translator Thomas Forester published several editions of a corrected version of Thomson’s *The Lives of the First Twelve Caesars*. In the preface of a copy printed in 1914, Forester comments on his endeavor to revise Thomson’s earlier translation: “Considerable care therefore has been bestowed in correcting it, with the view of producing, as far as possible, a literal and faithful version.” It is certainly faithful to Thomson, but perhaps less literal in regards to Suetonius:

XXXVII. Besides the abuse of free-born lads, and the debauch of married women, he committed a rape upon Rubria, a Vestal Virgin. He was upon the point of marrying Acte, his freedwoman, having suborned some men of consular rank to swear that she was of royal descent. He gelded the boy Sporus, and endeavored to transform him into a woman. He even went so far as to marry him, with all the usual formalities of a marriage settlement, the rose-colored nuptial veil, and a numerous company at the wedding. When the ceremony was over, he had him conducted like a bride to his own house, and treated him as his wife. It was jocularly observed by some person, “that it would have been well for mankind, had such a wife fallen to the lot of his father Domitius.” This Sporus he carried about with him in a litter round the solemn assemblies and fairs of Greece, and afterwards at Rome through the Sigillaria, dressed in the rich attire of an empress; kissing him from time to time as they rode together. That he entertained an incestuous passion for his mother, but was deterred by her enemies, for fear that this haughty and overbearing woman should, by her compliance, get him entirely into her power, and govern in every thing, was universally believed; especially after he had introduced amongst his concubines a strumpet, who was reported to have a strong resemblance to Agrippina.

XXIX. He prostituted his own chastity to such a degree, that after he had defiled every part of his person with some unnatural pollution, he at last invented an extraordinary kind of diversion; which was, to be let out of a den in the arena, covered with the skin of a wild beast, and then assail with violence the private parts of both men and women, while they were bound to stakes. After he had vented his furious passion upon them, he finished the play in the embraces of his freedman Doryphorus, to whom he was married in the same way that Sporus had been married to himself; imitating the cries and shrieks of young virgins, when they are ravished. I have been informed from numerous sources, that he firmly believed, no man in the world to be chaste, or any part of his person undefiled; but that most men concealed that vice, and were cunning enough to keep it secret. To those, therefore, who frankly owned their unnatural lewdness, he forgave all other crimes.

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87 Ibid., 357-8.
Once again, the translator has censored the detail about Nero’s stained robes, replacing the lewd sentence with a line of asterisks to block out the offensive words. Unlike Thomson, however, Forester does provide the original Latin of this sentence as a footnote: “Olim etiam, quoties lectica cum matre veheretur, libidinatum incest, ac maculis vestis proditum, affirmant.”88 This is at least marginally more accessible than Thomson’s translation: if the reader knew Latin, he would be able to translate the line for himself without having to locate a Latin copy of the text.

Still, it would not have been readable to the general public, and despite the intentions Forester expresses in the preface, the urge to preserve the average reader’s modesty seems to have outweighed his commitment to producing “a literal and faithful version.”89

This edition of Forester’s was published just fifteen years before Bird’s version, and the many similarities between her work and those of previous translators are abundantly clear.

Bird’s translation of this passage reads:

28. Besides the unnatural abuse of freeborn boys, and the dishonouring of married women, he committed a rape upon Rubria, a Vestal Virgin. He very nearly took Acte, a freedwoman, as his lawful wife, having suborned some men of consular rank to swear that she was of royal blood. There was a certain boy named Sporus, whose genitories he cut out, and endeavored to transform him thereby into a woman. He even caused him to be brought to him as a bride, with a marriage settlement, and in a rose-colored nuptial veil; and he invited a numerous company to attend the ceremony. Afterwards, he had him brought to his own house, and there treated him as his wife. It was upon this occasion that there went forth a quip made by some wag, “that it would have been well for the world, if his father Domitius had wedded such a wife.” This Sporus, decked with rich ornaments and apparel of an empress, he carried about with him in a litter round the solemn assemblies and fairs of Greece, and afterwards at Rome through the Sigillaria; kissing him sweetly from time to time as they rode together. That he had an incestuous passion for his own mother, but was deterred from it by some enemies of hers, for fear that this proud and overbearing woman should, by this kind of favour, wax too powerful, no one ever doubted; especially after he had introduced among his concubines a strumpet, who was reported to bear a strong resemblance to Agrippina. It is said moreover that so often as he rode in a litter with his mother, he played the wanton and was betrayed by the marks appearing on her garments.

88 Ibid., 357.
89 Forester, vii.
29. As for his own body, it is known that he dishonored it to such a degree, that after he had defiled every portion of it with some unnatural pollution, he at last devised a new kind of sport; that, being covered all over with a wild beast’s skin, he should be let loose from a cage, and then assault the private parts of both men and women, while they stood tied to stakes. And when he had vented his furious passion upon them, he finished the game in the embraces of his freedman Doryphorus, to whom he was married in the same way that Sporus had been married to himself; insomuch that he counterfeited the noise and cries of maidens, when they are forced to suffer devirgination. I have heard from various sources, that he firmly believed no man or woman was chaste, or in any part of their bodies pure and clean, but that most of them dissimulated their uncleanness, and craftily kept it secret. To those, therefore, who frankly owned their obscene practices, he forgave all other faults and crimes.90

Several key elements of Bird’s translation deserve further analysis. First, there is no doubt that Bird copied from these earlier translations, confirming what Covington recalled in her memoir and what Geer speculated in his book review. Several sentences are taken almost word-for-word from previous editions; elsewhere, peculiar words and phrases are obviously borrowed, like “genitories,” “rose-colored nuptial veil,” and “devirgination.” Second, from census records, we know that Bird was born in Ohio and lived in Illinois as an adult, but she copies the British English spelling of words like “dishonoured” and “favour” from earlier English translators, yielding a more scholarly, antique sense to her translation. And while it still feels slightly stiff and jumbled to the modern reader, it is certainly much less stilted than the earlier translations. Covington explains that Bird made an attempt to rearrange words in order to avoid accusations of plagiarism (rather fruitlessly, it seems), and this process of restructuring contributed greatly to her translation’s readability, if not its authenticity or literality.

Furthermore, Bird is also the first of these translators since Holland who does not excise the line about the robes being stained with the proof of Nero and Agrippina’s incest. The Latin does leave ambiguity about whose clothing was stained, but Bird simply copies Holland in asserting that it was Agrippina, indicating once more that she did not know Latin. But more

90 Bird, 278-9.
important than evidencing her lack of ancient language knowledge, this passage shows Bird’s unusual commitment to addressing even the most abhorrent, depraved parts of the emperors’ lives. While Holland skims over this sentence, Thomson cuts it out entirely, and Forester only includes the Latin as a footnote, Bird delivers it head-on. She writes, “often as he rode in a litter with his mother, he played the wanton and was betrayed by the marks appearing on her garments.”\footnote{Bird, 279.} This entire passage is perhaps not as explicit or frank as it could be. The fact that she copies words and phrases wholesale from earlier editions leaves her with an antiquated vocabulary that minimizes the overall emotional impact of Nero’s sexual crimes: again, the word “devirgination” comes to mind. But unlike several of the translators whose work she relies on so heavily, she at least includes every sentence of Suetonius’ original, without excising any of the more shocking parts.

Bird’s relative openness about the scandalous details of the emperors’ sexual activities reflects her publisher’s commitment to liberality. As previously discussed, Ben Abramson fought censorship wherever and whenever he could. He sold controversial books, published titles that were banned in certain states, and welcomed protestors who opposed his decisions. Helen Bird and Ben Abramson were close, and worked together very personally over the years. In the Argus Books Correspondence collection in Yale’s Beinecke Library there is a memo from the desk of Helen Bird, with her name printed at the top alongside the store’s logo and address (Fig. 6). The contents of this note are vague, but the fact that she had her own official Argus Books stationery demonstrates her long-term, significant role in the business.

When Abramson passed away in 1947, Bird commuted into the city to work\textit{ pro bono} and help Abramson’s family wrap up the financial logistics details of closing the store, a detail
his daughter remembers in her memoir. “All through the dreadfully hot summer she gave up the cool of neighboring Lombard and sat at a hot typewriter eight hours a day, and sometimes longer.” Covington also recalls that Bird had “translated” another book published by Argus Books: *What Never Dies* by Sebastian Melmoth, the nom de plume of Oscar Wilde. “Again Helen Bird…did the ‘translation’ merely editing another translation as she also did not read French but her writing was superb in English and her ‘adaptation’ was very well done.” The publisher and his secretary assistant clearly knew each other well and shared an understanding of the mission and vision of Argus Books. Knowing how well and meaningfully they worked together, it makes sense that Bird would have shaped her translation to suit Abramson’s devotion to frankness and hatred for censorship in its many forms.

The value of this translation does not lie in its authenticity or accuracy. Bird unapologetically copied other scholars, stealing their work and doing the bare minimum to disguise it as her own. Bird’s translation is something of a Frankenstein’s monster, hobbled together from pieces and parts of editions dating back four centuries. This edition cannot be considered a valid source for historical or biographical research, nor should it be used as an aid if one attempts to translate Suetonius on his or her own. It is not valuable or reliable in that way, but as a marker of how Suetonius lived into the twentieth century and was interpreted by modern readers. Ben Abramson and Helen Bird saw *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* as a chance to undermine censorship and oppressive regimes. For them, it was an opportunity to discuss the violent, hateful crimes of the Roman emperors without shirking at conceptions of what is proper or acceptable to read. In this instance, publisher and translator worked together to create a truly

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92 Covington, 51.
93 Covington, 72.
unique book that remains a testament to the values of its creators and the world in which it was produced.
Chapter III. “Mr. Papé’s Masterpiece”

Despite the intriguing biographies of Ben Abramson and Helen Bird and the long history of Suetonius translations *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* is rooted in, the most notable feature of this edition is its illustrations. In his 1932 book review of *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Professor Russel Geer wrote that “this sumptuous volume is of interest only for the sixteen amusing illustrations by Papé.” 94 This is perhaps a harsh view of all of the work Abramson and Bird committed in creating this book, but not entirely untrue. Papé’s sixteen copper-plate illustrations are absolutely charming, depicting a wide variety of moments from the lives of different emperors—some straightforward and tragic, some hilariously bawdy, all incredibly compelling. As mentioned in the first chapter, Abramson understood the artistic and economic value of Papé’s work and bestowed great praise upon the illustrator in advertisements for *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* in his literary magazine, *Reading and Collecting*. He calls Papé “one of the foremost living illustrators” and he claims that “Suetonius has waited many centuries for the ideal illustrator; and the world has been waiting for Mr. Papé’s masterpiece.” 95

Papé’s unique treatment of such classic, well-known subject matter is captivating. He brings the ancient Caesars to life through his art, portraying them as spirited, dynamic individuals who were subject to the same whims, desires, fears, and perversions as everyone else. This edition’s lively, energetic scenes are a stark comparison to the cold marble busts or flat medieval portraits of the emperors that have occupied the art historical tradition for so long. 96 Papé’s drawings represent a new form of imperial portraiture, straddling the line between satirical political cartoons and imaginative illustrations like something from a children’s book.

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94 Geer, 378.
95 Ben Abramson, *Reading and Collecting* 1, no. 3 (1937): 32.
Geer writes that the drawings “deal for the most part with unimportant incidents in the lives of the emperors,” and Papé makes clear that his priority was not the most important or well-known moments of the Caesars’ biographies, but the ones that conveyed the most tantalizing, diverting stories. With the encouragement of Abramson, Papé deftly creates a new, compelling world of imperial intrigue, cruelty, and depravity—a delightful tribute to Suetonius’ own colorful, humorous work.

Biographical evidence for Papé is limited, but some census, parish, and military records do exist. These, along with his correspondence with Ben Abramson preserved in the Argus Book Shop Correspondence at Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, are enough to piece together a general timeline of his life. Frank Cheyne Papé was born in 1879 on the Isle of Wight, an island off the southern coast of England that was a popular vacation destination in the Victorian era. In 1907, he married Agnes Mary Stringer in St. Mary’s Church in Putney, England. At age 35, she was six years his senior and on their marriage certificate, he is listed as “bachelor” and she as “spinster.” The couple’s only child, Lionel Frank Papé, was born in Putney a year later. Papé served in the Royal Army Service Corps during World War I and received a Victory Medal from the Record Office in 1921 honoring his service. He lived to be 93 years old, dying in 1972 in Bedfordshire, England.

Papé described his occupation by means of several different specific titles throughout his life, but they were consistently of an artistic nature: “artist,” “illustrator of books and

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97 Geer, 378.
newspapers,” and “artist/painter.” When Abramson first begins communication with him in 1928, Papé had already worked on 30 different books, spanning from 1908 to titles that had not even been published yet. He was certainly prolific, and throughout his career he demonstrated a strong dedication to his art and the publishers he worked for. He later wrote to Abramson, “I have never yet let a publisher down and I want them to know that they can absolutely rely on my promise.” This level of commitment shows through in the detail and consistency of his drawings, and must have been one of the qualities that attracted Abramson to hire him as an illustrator.

His contact with Ben Abramson begins in June 1928 with a request from the publisher for a full list of books Papé had illustrated. Papé he responds to this with a comprehensive, handwritten bibliography. Several months later, Abramson writes back and proposes a collaboration on his forthcoming The Lives of the Twelve Caesars. Abramson specifically names a book of Papé’s that convinced him that Papé was the right artist for the job: “in looking over the illustrations for Penguin Island, we thought them so fine in every sense, that we are persuaded that you could just as admirably interpret the spirit of Suetonius.” Penguin Island is a work of political satire written by Anatole France, originally printed in 1908. Papé illustrated an English translation published in 1925, in which a reviewer from Connoisseur wrote that Papé “is highly successful in conveying and interpreting the elusive imaginings of the author, giving concrete form to his fancies, and aptly suggesting that curious combination of broad fun, and subtle, philosophic irony which characterizes his work.” Papé’s demonstrated ability to

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103 Frank Papé to Ben Abramson, 2 December 1928, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Hartford, Connecticut.

104 Ben Abramson to Frank Papé, 19 November 1928, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.

eloquently combine and work between straightforward, entertaining stories and deeper, more complex passages of political and philosophical satire must have caught Abramson’s attention. Like Anatole France, Suetonius also played with various genres, registers, and moods in his *Caesares*, and any illustrator of his work would also have to be able to portray his writing in a nuanced, dynamic way.

It is after seeing Papé’s work in *Penguin Island* that Abramson seeks to hire him for *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, and stylistically, there are clear parallels between his illustrations for both titles. For instance, one of his drawings in *Penguin Island* depicts a priest in bed, writhing with anguish as a demon tortures him with the figure of a beautiful young woman (Fig. 7). In composition, lighting, and the facial expressions of the various characters, this image is remarkably comparable to his illustration in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* of Emperor Nero haunted at night by his mother’s ghost and tormented by Furies brandishing whips and torches (Fig. 16). Additionally, Papé’s depiction of women is generally consistent between both books: large eyes and lips; ornate jewelry; long, dark hair; full, round breasts loosely covered by sheer fabric or not at all (Figs. 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, and 25). Throughout the two volumes, Papé combines predictable images, like the women described above, with whimsical, imaginative elements that are hardly life-like but still aptly match the subject matter. As the same *Connoisseur* reviewer wrote about *Penguin Island*, “his drawings happily combine realism with fancy, and minute presentation of detail with decorative effect.” Papé demonstrates the same nuanced artistic style in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* that Abramson saw in *Penguin Island*—the very qualities that convinced him that Papé was the right illustrator for his publication.

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106 France, 347.
Abramson officially extended an offer to Papé in October 1928, intending to publish *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* a year later, in fall 1929. Argus Books initially asks Papé for twenty full-page copper-plate illustrations, to be printed in two volumes, but Papé responds two weeks later that his previous contracts would keep him too busy to complete twenty large drawings. Offhandedly, he tells Abramson: “Had your proposed book been a one volume publication with say 12 plates I could just have managed it.” During the publication process, Argus Books alternates between planning for a one- or two-volume edition, but ultimately yields to Papé’s suggestion: the final product is one volume with sixteen full-page illustrations. Abramson responds to Papé: “We are so eager to have you do the work that we are now revising our plans in the expectation that you will make the twelve drawings for us, according to the suggestion in yours of November 6th.” This concession is still not enough for Papé, who sends an urgent telegram to Abramson on December 1, 1928: “Regret extremely impossibility illustrating book for 1929 can accept commissions after July writing.”

That could have been the end of their collaboration, but Abramson refused to take no for an answer. Responding a month later, Abramson informs Papé that Argus Books has agreed to change their schedule to fit his: “We are so sure that your work, above that of any other artist, would fully answer our needs in this instance, that we have arranged to postpone publication until you shall have completed the drawings.” Abramson was so impressed by Papé’s illustrations in earlier works of his like *Penguin Island* that he believed no other artist could interpret and revitalize Suetonius as well as Papé. He was so convinced that he gladly disrupted Argus Books’ entire publication schedule to accommodate Papé’s busy workload, favoring this

107 Frank Papé to Ben Abramson, 17 October 1928, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
108 Ben Abramson to Frank Papé, 19 November 1928, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
109 Frank Papé to Ben Abramson, 1 December 1928, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
110 Ben Abramson to Frank Papé, 9 January 1929, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
particular artist’s illustrations over meeting the ideal publication window in fall, before the winter holidays. Argus saw something in Papé, and was willing to fight for him.

After these initial hiccups, Abramson and Papé quickly unified around a shared vision for *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, each contributor expressing an emphasis on compelling content and overall quality. A letter from Argus Books to Papé clearly explains their objective and hopes for this edition: “It is our intention to make it a really de luxe [sic] book, and to exceed…any book which you have heretofore illustrated. We are confident that, with your drawings, and the special care that will be taken, together with the quality of the text, it will be a book which you, as well as we, will be proud to acknowledge.”¹¹¹ Papé held similar aspirations for the project, and after finishing several of his full-page illustrations, he tells Abramson: “I find the subject matter exceedingly interesting and think that the completed drawings should rank with the best work I have as yet done. I am delighted to hear that you propose making a really fine publication.”¹¹² Both men seem equally dedicated to a unique product that is as elegant and grand as it is entertaining, a commitment that shines through in the book’s thick paper, embossed golden title, and of course, Papé’s captivating illustrations.

From the beginning, Abramson gives Papé free rein over which sixteen scenes are included in the book’s illustrations. He extends this freedom to Papé as an incentive in his initial offer to the artist, writing: “You will be permitted all the latitude you desire in the selection of scenes for representation.”¹¹³ Once Papé has accepted the job, Abramson lays out more of the details regarding the nature of the text and the edition, explaining to Papé that some emperors’ lives were more consequential and momentous than others. Ultimately, he reminds Papé that the

¹¹¹ Ben Abramson to Frank Papé, 25 October 1929, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
¹¹² Frank Papé to Ben Abramson, 30 November 1929, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
¹¹³ Ben Abramson to Frank Papé, 10 November 1928, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
decision about the content of the drawings is entirely in his hands: “It logically follows that the illustrations will not be drawn equally from the twelve chapters as the reigns were not all uniform in length nor in events. The scenes for representation, however, are being left to your own good judgement, as we have heretofore indicated.” Abramson plainly wanted to give Papé leeway to do his best work with the illustrations and repeatedly makes his intentions clear. It took so many weeks of correspondence and deliberations to secure Papé’s involvement that Abramson offered him all the freedom and authority he could to keep the artist from backing out on the project.

Like Abramson, Papé was aware of the events of the emperors’ lives and the nature of the world they lived in. In fact, it is partly the artist’s dedication to understanding and accurately portraying the historical context that makes this project such a lengthy commitment for him. Papé writes to Abramson: “A classic title like the Caesars is an historical book conditioning absolute correctness of detail in portraits, costumes and architecture etc., which, as you will readily understand, requires a large amount of research and consequently time.” In choosing scenes, Papé had to take into consideration what special research he would have to conduct in order to understand the passage in its entirety. Eventually, he settles on a collection of very different moments in the emperors’ lives, ranging from sober and serious to blatantly satirical. He tells Abramson: “I have given you drawings of as much variety as the book allows, some tragic and others in a humorous vein.”

Throughout the process, Papé relies on Thomas Forester’s translation from the Bohn Classical Library for research and reference purposes. Abramson even sent him a copy, saying:

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114 Ben Abramson to Frank Papé, 23 February 1929, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.  
115 Frank Papé to Ben Abramson, 27 October 1928, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.  
116 Frank Papé to Ben Abramson, 31 January 1930, Folder 342, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
“We think that for your use the small, compact Bohn edition, in volume, would be eminently satisfactory, as it contains the complete work, with voluminous notes.”¹¹⁷ This edition of Suetonius was fundamental to Papé’s work, made particularly clear by the titles accompanying each illustration that are merely quotations excerpted from Forester’s translation. In selecting and researching his illustrations, Papé relied entirely on this translation and its accompanying commentary, not the original Latin text itself—much as Helen Bird did while creating her “translation.”

Although the illustrations are distributed consistently throughout the volume, occurring about once every twenty-five pages, the dispersion between the different emperors is hardly even. Augustus has five illustrations dedicated to scenes from his life; Julius Caesar, Tiberius, and Nero all have two; Caligula, Claudius, Galba, Vespasian, and Domitian only have one each. Meanwhile, Emperors Otho, Vitellius, and Titus are neglected entirely. This is perhaps understandable for Otho and Vitellius, who each served as princeps for only a few months during the infamous Year of the Four Emperors, but Titus, and his marble arch still standing proudly in the Roman Forum today, might have complaints for Papé about his treatment. Papé’s priority was not equal distribution between the emperors, nor was it necessarily the most noteworthy events of the emperors’ reigns. As will become clear in the following discussion of the individual illustrations, Papé did not treat his drawings as chapter summaries by choosing the most famous, significant moments of each emperor’s life to illustrate. Instead, he selected the scenes that best suited his and Abramson’s vision of a book that would impress, educate, and entertain all at once.

¹¹⁷ Ben Abramson to Frank Papé, 19 November 1928, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
Only two of Papé’s illustrations depict scenes that were major events in the life of the emperor, and both are from Julius Caesar’s biography. Ironically, the most well-known and significant moment of Julius Caesar’s life is his death, at the hands of his fellow senators in 44 BCE. Papé’s “He was stabbed with three and twenty wounds” illustrates the violence and frenzy of the Ides of March in a very straightforward, customary manner (Fig. 11; Suet. Jul. 82.2; Forester 51). In the background, Caesar is surrounded by a horde of assailants and falls to the floor, while panicking senators in the foreground shout and attempt to flee. For centuries, the death of Julius Caesar has been one of the most noted events in the history of European civilization, and Papé does not break from the tradition in his treatment of this scene.

The only other illustration of his that depicts a comparably significant moment is “But his liveliest fancy was Cleopatra” (Fig. 12; Suet. Jul. 52.1; Forester 34). Along with his assassination, the love affair between Julius Caesar and Cleopatra is one of the most widely known details of his life, and it is not surprising that Papé chooses to include their liaison in his illustrations. Still, he works to enhance the sensuality of the scene by drawing a bejeweled Cleopatra sprawled backwards on soft cushions, her breasts exposed and hand outstretched to Julius Caesar. The tiger-skin rug beneath them adds to the exotic, Orientalizing tone of the scene, while the serpentine spiraling of the lamp at Cleopatra’s bedside hints at the asp that killed her, years later. Although it is a noteworthy historical moment, Papé focuses on the enchanting, erotic nature of their relationship instead of the dangerous political ramifications of their union. Despite this sensationalism, only these two illustrations out of Papé’s sixteen can reasonably be said to depict moments that were some of the most notable of the emperors’ lives.

Turning from those two, we should note that several of Papé’s illustrations are partly or wholly erroneous. One of these, titled “He continued to use the same bedchamber for forty
years,” is a case of artistic license distorting a scene to the point of unintelligibility (Fig. 13; Suet. Aug. 72.1; Forester 125). The illustration is graphic and eye-catching, showing three figures in very different, but equally peculiar, actions. Removed to the background of the scene, the Emperor Augustus lies in his bed, apparently naked after sexual intercourse. His face is contorted into a grotesque yawn as he scratches himself with one hand. On the stairs outside the bedchamber, an older man dressed in a very short and ragged tunic is carrying up a steaming basin and a towel, frowning at a descending woman. This woman is half-clothed in a very sheer garment, pulling the sleeve over her left shoulder while still balancing an urn on her head. With a mischievous smirk, she flaunts her large necklace at the manservant as they pass each other on the stairs.

The title phrase of this illustration, “He continued to use the same bedchamber for forty years,” clarifies very little about the characters and actions illustrated in the scene, but Papé seemed to think it was self-explanatory. He wrote to Abramson: “It is essential that these very words should be retained in your new version, as otherwise the drawing will miss the point!”

The title phrase might explain Augustus in his bed, but it does nothing to justify the insertion of the servant and the woman on the stairs or explain what they are doing. Neither Forester’s translation nor the original Latin provide any specific answers, although in nearby chapters Suetonius does mention Augustus’ repeated sexual escapades with young women and his bathing habits (Suet. Aug. 71-82). Although they were not originally joined in any meaningful way, Papé seems to have condensed these separate aspects of Augustus’ life into one single image. While this drawing does attract visual attention and interest very effectively, it reduces the passage to a sensational, entirely unhelpful jumble of unsettling details and images that has very

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118 Frank Papé to Ben Abramson, 1 February 1930, Folder 342, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence, emphasis in original.
little connection to the text itself. Furthermore, it lowers Augustus, the subject of this biography, to a small, unpleasant image in the background.

There is another overt misstep of Papé’s in an illustration from the life of Augustus, titled “That Ovid knew not of Augustus being in the place, is beyond all doubt” (Fig. 14; Forester 181-2). In the image, a scowling Augustus sits in a throne under a flowering tree while a naked young woman crouches at his feet, her face turned away from us. Around the corner from Augustus, a man who must be Ovid pauses mid-step and stares at the woman, surprise and concern clear on his face. Once again, Augustus is unexpectedly shunted to the side of this drawing. Compared to the distinct ringlets of the woman’s dark hair and the bold drapery of Ovid’s hooded cloak, Augustus appears strangely foggy, his torso and legs indistinct and his face half-hidden in shadow. The drawing is rich and full, and its many intriguing details seem to hint at deeper meanings, although it is impossible to be certain. The white flowers in the woman’s hair could symbolize her purity; the decidedly phallic reed in Ovid’s hand could reference the sexual, amorous nature of his poetry; the peacock in the background could represent Juno, the goddess of marriage, or mark the excess and grandiosity of Augustus’ palace, or even reference Argus Books, whose logo was also a peacock (Figs. 5 and 6).

Despite the many tantalizing elements of this drawing, this scene has no grounding in Suetonius’ *Augustus*. The title phrase, “That Ovid knew not of Augustus being in the place, is beyond all doubt,” does not exist in the Latin but comes from a commentary at the end of Forester’s edition in which the translator speculates that Augustus exiled Ovid after the famous poet happened upon the emperor in a compromising situation with a young woman. When Professor Russel Geer reviewed Argus Books’ edition of *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* in 1932, he noted the mistaken inclusion of this scene and offered an explanation to how it might
have been added: “Apparently the artist read Forester’s volume while looking for material, and failed to distinguish between the translation and the excursus. Then when the drawing had been made, Bird was obliged to add the passage to permit its use.” There are many possible explanations for the error, but there is no denying that this scene has no place in Suetonius’ original. This interaction is not a historic event from the life of the first Roman emperor; it is mere, unsubstantiated speculation by authors writing nearly two millennia after the incident allegedly took place. However, whether Papé did not realize that the commentary was not part of the central text or he knew it was separate but included it anyway, he still chose this moment, when the emperor acts out of embarrassment and rage, to be one of his sixteen illustrations.

With those few exceptions set aside for the moment, the rest of the illustrations fall easily into several general categories. Many of Papé’s drawings depict supernatural elements from the emperors’ lives, from fateful dreams to ghostly apparitions. In “He dreamt...he fell headlong upon the earth,” Caligula has a dream that Jupiter kicked him over, predicting his death on the next day (Fig. 15; Suet. Cal. 57.3; Forester 290). Here, Caligula seems laughably scrawny compared to Jupiter and Juno, who tower high above him in the clouds; even Jupiter’s eagle seems to be mocking Caligula, who is so tiny that the bird could easily swallow him whole. “He was haunted by his mother’s ghost” shows Nero tormented by nightmares of raging Furies and the body of his mother, Agrippina the Younger, whom he murdered (Fig. 16; Suet. Ner. 34.4; Forester 363-4). A paunchy, horrified Nero raises himself on one elbow from his bed to look at the hazy ghost of his mother, who lies naked with a sword through her throat and a sinuous demon latched onto her torso, its talons encircling her breast. In the background, Furies brandish

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119 Geer, 379.
torches and whips, baring sharp teeth and pointing at Agrippina, seeming to say to Nero: *Look what you have done.*

Galba is similarly haunted by a woman appearing to him in the night. In “He dreamt that Fortune appeared to him,” Galba has a vision of the goddess Fortune cursing him for stealing a necklace from her temple (Fig. 17; Suet. *Gal.* 18.2; Forester 412). Fortune seems to be scolding him, pointing her finger at him like an angry schoolmarm as he sleeps below, unaware of her ire. She holds a spilling cornucopia in her left hand, but it is unclear whether she is offering this symbol of prosperity to Galba or snatching it away. And one of the last illustrations of the book, “A plough-ox…broke into the room,” shows an ox interrupting Vespasian’s dinner, a detail that Suetonius presents in a list of omens that all appeared to Vespasian (Fig. 18; Suet. *Vesp.* 5.4; Forester 446-7). While the ox seems content to lie on the floor, calmly munching on wildflowers, Vespasian seems terrified, the tendons on his hands sticking out and his face contorted in a cartoonish grimace as he quickly lifts his sandaled feet away from the animal like someone evading a mouse or spider.

The emperors in these illustrations seem timid and ineffectual, intimidated by dreams and strange signs that have arbitrarily been deemed unlucky. In choosing to illustrate these specific passages, Papé elevates these supernatural details from small, inconsequential moments to essential components of his portraits of the emperors. Omens and portents are certainly part of Suetonius’ *Caesares*, but Papé’s illustrations heighten the emperors’ superstition to absurdity.

But the emperors are not just foolish; they are cruel. Suetonius’ *Caesares* drips with the blood that the Caesars have spilled, and the biographer never hesitated to describe the atrocities various emperors inflicted on both their enemies and their own citizens. Many of Papé’s illustrations contribute to the effort of exposing the emperors’ violence and crimes, chronicling
examples of the *principes* subjugating others to their power. Despite the fact that Mark Antony was striving to reach a peace agreement between them after he was defeated by Augustus at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, Antony was compelled by Augustus to take his own life, illustrated by Papé in “He drove Antony to kill himself” (Fig. 19; Suet. *Aug.* 17.4; Forester 81). Notice the curious monkey peering down at Antony’s corpse and the hieroglyphics on the wall that firmly position the scene in Egypt, emphasizing the double death of both Mark Antony and Cleopatra, his lover and ally. Later, Augustus ridiculed a young man with dwarfism and forced him to perform for a crowd, a freakish show that Papé presents in “The only exhibition he made of that kind, was of a young man…who was not quite two feet in height” (Fig. 20; Suet. *Aug.* 43.4; Forester 106). A small figure wears a theatrical mask in front of a painted backdrop as a prop harpy looms above him on the stage, the skulls at her feet grinning derisively at the performer. This illustration is one of Papé’s most cartoonish and artificial, emphasizing the cruelty inherent in making a spectacle out of a human being.

In “She resolved to starve herself to death,” Augustus’ successor, Tiberius, seems equally cruel, driving his daughter-in-law Agrippina the Elder to starve herself to death after he ordered a soldier to beat out one of her eyes and then to force-feed her when she began starving herself (Fig. 21; Suet. *Tib.* 53.2; Forester 225). In this illustration, a hulking maid angrily brandishes porridge and a wooden spoon and two soldiers mockingly extend a dead rat at the end of their spear, but the emaciated old woman refuses to eat. The final drawing of the book, “He did nothing else but catch flies,” depicts Domitian capturing insects and meticulously stabbing their bodies with sharp pins, a sadistic act so random and pointless that it feels particularly disturbing (Fig. 22; Suet. *Dom.* 3.1; Forester 481). Important papers lay crumpled on the floor as the emperor delicately tiptoes up to a fly that has landed on a marble statue of the goddess Diana,
poised with her bow drawn. Domitian’s skinny legs and small butterfly net complete a striking contrast between the two “hunters,” with Diana’s strong form, quiver full of arrows, and hunting dog ready at her feet. The ludicrous, disconcerting elements of these illustrations put a spotlight on the emperors’ recurring violence, committed for no objective but their own satisfaction and pleasure. Their cruelty is deeply rooted in their desire to flex their power over others, serving no real purpose but to prove their imperial superiority.

The senseless, wanton nature of the emperors’ violence parallels the absurdity and pointlessness of many of their other actions and characteristics. Papé draws out this quality in his remaining illustrations, focusing on incredibly minute details that, when taken together, present the succession of emperors as a lineage of mad kings. Two of the emperors were so devoted to certain gods that they committed to impersonating them in their lifetimes. Augustus’ affinity for Apollo led him to throw elaborate dinner parties where he dressed, acted, and spoke as Apollo all night, seen in Papé’s Bernini-esque “He personated Apollo himself” (Fig. 23; Suet. Aug. 70.1; Forester 123). Augustus, clothed only in a cape and sun-like crown, wraps his arms around a naked woman adorned with tree branches, recreating the myth of Daphne, the nymph who transformed into a tree to escape Apollo’s attempts at rape. In the background, a statue of Jupiter surveys the scene from his throne, his stoic features nevertheless expressing displeasure at the drunken, riotous crowd watching Augustus. Nero similarly impersonated Hercules, allegedly donning a lion-skin cape and facing a real lion in the arena wielding only a club, just like Hercules slaying the Nemean Lion. Nero’s chubbiness and nudity in “He resolved to imitate the achievements of Hercules” makes clear how unprepared he was for this task, and Papé heightens the absurdity of the scene by drawing his adversary as a petite lioness, not a ferocious beast (Fig. 24; Suet. Ner. 53.1; Forester 380).
Emperor Tiberius appears equally ludicrous in “He was in the habit of diverting himself with a serpent,” showing Tiberius gleefully tormenting birds that he intends to feed to his pet snake, a snake that functions as a bad omen later in the passage (Fig. 25; Suet. Tib. 72.2; Forester 236). A naked young woman looks fearfully over her shoulder at the emperor, who grins maliciously as he pins one bird down by its tailfeathers, having tied a weight to another so that it cannot fly away from the serpent. One of the most preposterous illustrations of the book is “While in this condition, a feather was put down his throat,” which shows a rotund Claudius snoring away in a drunken stupor while an attendant attempts to induce vomiting in order to expel the alcohol from his body (Fig. 15; Suet. Cl. 33.1; Forester 324). Claudius’ guard, servant, and onlookers all appear entirely indifferent, and the attendant inserting a feather into Claudius’ mouth seems almost glad for the discomfort he is about to cause the inebriated emperor. Again, Papé builds on themes of mental frailty and incompetence, using the emperors’ various quirks as evidence of their feebleness and volatility.

This presentation of the emperors as unstable and freakish could hardly be more different from how they have traditionally appeared in classical portraiture and earlier editions of the Caesares. Papé’s title page introduces this distinction, replicating traditional numismatic representations of these twelve emperors in a conventional, familiar style and appearance (Fig. 5). With this image established as background context for comparison, the reader is set up to be surprised and unsettled by Papé’s more dynamic, bizarre illustrations of the same twelve men. Beyond Papé, some of the very manuscripts from which modern scholars have pieced together the text of Suetonius’ Caesares feature portraits of the emperors. Some of these are held in the Vatican Library and accessible through Saint Louis University’s Vatican Film Library. Within their illuminated pages lies an entirely different presentation of the rulers of imperial Rome.
Suetonius’ *Caesares* survived from ancient Roman times into the ninth century as a single manuscript which has since been lost but is the ancestor of all other copies of the text. One of the oldest surviving Suetonius manuscripts is Vat. lat. 1904, created in the later eleventh century in France, perhaps at the Abbey of Flavigny.\(^{120}\) The extant section is incomplete, ending in the third chapter of Caligula’s biography, but it still is considered one of the most trustworthy of the remaining copies from this early time period.\(^{121}\) In addition to Suetonius’ writing, this manuscript preserves portraits of two *principes*: Julius Caesar and Tiberius. These illustrations were penned in the margins after the text had been copied, so their exact date and artist are unknown, although manuscript scholar Élisabeth Pellegrin estimates they were added in the fifteenth century based on the style and content of surrounding marginalia.\(^{122}\)

The figures look like most in medieval artwork, with simple facial expressions, oddly disproportional limbs and fingers, and pointy shoes. Although the draping of their robes suggests some movement, the drawings are simple line sketches that offer no evidence of depth or three-dimensionality. The portrait understood to be Julius Caesar is not labeled, but it is identified this way because it appears on a page of his biography (Fig. 27). Furthermore, the crown he wears could be a reference to the kingly diadem Mark Antony offers Julius Caesar during the festivities of the Lupercalia, a story that was told just a few pages after this illustration (Suet. *Jul.* 79.2). In this image, Julius Caesar holds a palm frond, a Roman symbol of victory, and seems to be orating or gesticulating, with one hand raised as he holds his head high and gazes slightly upwards. In his illustration, Tiberius appears similarly poised and dignified, wrapped in luxurious robes and carrying a royal scepter (Fig. 28). He is also crowned and looks


\(^{121}\) Reynolds, 401.

\(^{122}\) Pellegrin, vol. 3, 463.
straight ahead with a serious expression, as bold and notable as his name, which is printed in
distinct block letters above his head. Here, these two emperors are distinguished and
coolheaded, presented with the vestments and symbols of their rule and noble, stoic appearances.
This is a far cry from Papé’s love-struck Caesar and roguish Tiberius (Figs. 12 and 25).

Another Latin manuscript from a few centuries later offers a comparably dignified
description of Emperor Nero. Created in Milan by Johannes de Camenago in 1438, Cod. Ott. lat.
1966 is elaborately decorated throughout, with a coat of arms on the first page and enlarged,
illuminated capitals at the beginning of each chapter. Unlike the portraits in Vat. lat. 1904,
this illustration of Nero is not added in the margins but takes up a whole page itself, directly
preceding the beginning of Nero’s biography (Fig. 29). Since the image is integrated entirely
into the text, it could not have been sketched in years later and the creator must have planned to
include it from the beginning of the production, although the illustrator and the scribe were not
necessarily the same person.

The rectangular illustration depicts Nero playing a psaltery in the foreground, crowned
with a laurel wreath and accompanied by two figures in the far background: a woman on the lute
and a diminutive man on a drum. There are no clues as to who these other people are, but the
male musician calls to mind Suetonius’ report of the young man with dwarfism that Augustus
compelled to perform for an audience. Several features of this illustration are overtly
anachronistic, notably Nero’s full beard (Romans were famously cleanshaven) and his plate
armor, a product of the Late Middle Ages. Nero’s firm stance and upright posture echo the
rigidity of his metal armor and the impassivity of his facial expression, which offers no insight to
his thoughts or emotions. He stands resolute and composed, dedicated to his performance and

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du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1975), 713-5.
focused on the task at hand. This portrait of Nero is directly opposed to Papé’s illustrations, which depict Nero as an unstable, inept ruler who alternates between paralyzing fear and foolish over-confidence (Figs. 16 and 24).

The preexisting artistic tradition within which Papé completed his work is entirely different from his finished product in many ways. The customary approach to ancient Roman imperial portraiture that persisted throughout the Middle Ages and beyond is everything that Papé’s work is not. Where these traditional illustrations of Julius Caesar, Tiberius, and Nero are dignified and aloof, Papé’s emperors are a rollicking, indecorous bunch who seem to spend as much time drinking, carousing, and tyrannizing as they do governing the affairs of state. They are guided only by their own impulses and demands, filling their days with feasts, spectacles, and sex. As previously mentioned, Papé informed Abramson that he would have to conduct extensive research for this project, laboring to achieve “absolute correctness of detail in portraits, costumes, and architecture.”\(^\text{124}\)

Papé did his homework, and we see some of it in his representation of specific historical particulars, like the Egyptian hieroglyphics surrounding Antony as he kills himself, the uniforms of Roman guards, or intricate architectural elements like fluted columns (Figs. 11, 18, 19, 22, 23, and 26). In all his preparation, it is difficult to consider that he did not encounter historical portraits of the Roman emperors like these of Julius Caesar, Tiberius, and Nero from the Middle Ages, or like the ones already on display in the British Museum. His decision to create his own, unconventional style of illustrations was a conscious choice, founded in his understanding of the text and his vision for the characters. Papé carefully maneuvers himself out of the established

\(^{124}\) Frank Papé to Ben Abramson, 27 October 1928, Folder 341, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence.
artistic tradition, leaving behind the noble dignity of centuries-old imperial portraits in favor of riotous, mercurial emperors.

Papé’s illustrations are usually bizarre, often unsettling, and always intriguing. He cares less about historical accuracy or faithfulness to the literal text than he does about creating a captivating, powerful image. Over and over, Papé takes artistic liberties that privilege moments of drama and peculiarity over biographical importance or historical relevancy, rarely choosing to illustrate the most noteworthy moment of an emperor’s life. His priority was not chronicling the emperors’ most glorified, notable achievements but presenting a compelling, dynamic portrait of each of the emperors exactly as they were in their most human and weak moments.

This unfiltered approach aligns well with the interpretations of the book’s publisher and translator. Like Ben Abramson and Helen Bird, Papé approached his work with a commitment to forthrightness and a vision of creating a compelling, straightforward volume that tackled the emperors’ actions, crimes, obsessions, weaknesses, and perversities head-on, with no allowances made for modesty or the glorification of the past. A World War I veteran living in England in 1930, Papé would likely have been even more aware of and disturbed by the quick rise of authoritarian, nationalist rulers in Europe than Abramson or Bird, who were all the way in Chicago. Portraying the Caesars as inept, depraved fools was an intentional choice, and one that must have felt especially meaningful to Papé at the time. Not far away, rapidly coming to power were rulers whose deeds were not and would not be too dissimilar from the violence and terror perpetrated by the Roman emperors.
Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to express how much work I am leaving undone. This paper has been somewhat hydra-like; for every question I answered during my research process, several more would emerge. Part of the challenge of this project was sorting through these questions and deciding which to pursue, and many remain that I am sure could provide fruitful avenues of research. Some regard this specific version of Suetonius’ *Caesares*: What did the rest of Papé’s career as an illustrator look like? Did this time period produce comparable illustrated editions of Suetonius or another ancient author, particularly any editions as subversive as that of Argus Books? Did Abramson himself ever publish any other classical texts? Where are the other 299 signed copies of *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*? Other questions focus more on the broader implications of my findings: How has the global political climate throughout the rest of the twentieth century continued to shape the wider publication and transmission of Suetonius’ work? Which other Latin (and Greek) authors over the centuries have waxed and waned in popularity with contemporary political movements and regimes? How do publishers and translators decide which texts are worthy of updated translations, and when?

All of these questions are still open and would repay further investigation. As it stands, my work centers on the history and context of this specific book, and the people who created it. In summary, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* was published in 1930 by Argus Books, a bookstore-turned-publishing house in Chicago owned and operated by Ben Abramson. Abramson was a Jewish immigrant whose love of books and reading brought together a whole community of like-minded people. In many ways, he took a stand against terror and suppression: he helped Jewish refugees settle in Chicago during the 1930s and 40s, he sold
censored materials with great relish, and many of his published works, including *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, reflect his commitment to freedom of expression and belief.

I also discussed how Abramson’s secretary, Helen Marie Bird, “translated” Suetonius’ *Caesares* by compiling and rearranging earlier translations. She knew no Latin or Greek, but her version of the text treats illicit topics like rape and incest as plainly and openly as in Suetonius’ original, breaking from the contemporary practice of excising or glossing over unsavory passages. Finally, the translation’s frankness is supplemented significantly with Frank Papé’s drawings. These illustrations are equal parts amusing and unsettling, portraying the emperors not as noble statesmen but blundering fools who act fearfully and impulsively, like children.

None of the three creators of this book had a particularly strong education, much exposure to classical literature and civilizations, or any knowledge of ancient languages. This begs the question—Why Suetonius? Of all the titles and authors Argus Books could have chosen for their revision and publication, why would they have selected this particular text?

Their choice seems even more perplexing when we consider the contemporary view, then current, of Suetonius as an unreliable gossip. In recent decades, Suetonius’ reputation has had something of a renaissance thanks to new translations like Donna Hurley’s *The Caesars* (2011) and revisionist biographies like Andrew Wallace-Hadrill’s *Suetonius: The Scholar and His Caesars* (1983). But throughout the early twentieth century, Suetonius was widely understood as second-class in terms of both style and content, especially in comparison to Tacitus, the Roman historian who covered roughly the same years as Suetonius. In 1913, Professor John C. Rolfe wrote that the reason Suetonius’ *Caesares* “do not take first rank as literature is because he did not have the pen of a Tacitus; that they are rated no higher as an historical source is due to his
lack of critical judgement." When Argus Books’ *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* was published in 1930, the general consensus was that Suetonius might be unique and diverting, but should not be considered as eloquent, trustworthy, or accurate a source as other authors: in other words, not very worthwhile.

Bird’s foreword to Argus Books’ edition apparently aligns with this view. She writes, “It is not as a military annalist, nor as a civil servant, nor yet as an astute biographer, that Suetonius writes; but rather as a gossipy old domestic, with a born genius for story-telling.” In the process of researching and compiling her “translation,” Bird would have encountered the viewpoints of experts like Professor Rolfe, and it is unsurprising that her foreword reflects their understanding of Suetonius’ works. And although he never attended university, Ben Abramson was part of Chicago’s thriving literary community and a regular at one of the city’s foremost cultural institutions, the Newberry Library—he even willed that his ashes be scattered there after his death. In close conversation with so many intellectuals, Abramson must have known how most scholars viewed Suetonius: a writer who could hardly be called a true biographer, who overstated certain trivial details of the Caesars’ lives while entirely omitting information of great importance and relevancy. What value did Abramson see in producing a new translation of a work by such an author?

Suetonius is admittedly selective in his biographies. His treatment of the emperors is flat-footed and straightforward and focuses not on their accomplishments as political rulers or military leaders, but on their characters and deeds as people; they do not appear apotheosized or holy, but entirely, bodily human. While the biographer includes many details that might surprise

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125 Rolfe, 220.
126 Bird, viii.
127 Covington, 45.
us, he still leaves out plenty that we wish he had included. Suetonius plays with various genres, registers, and moods, sometimes serious and forthright, sometimes sly and mocking. Any translator, illustrator, or publisher of his work would also have to be able to portray his writing in a similarly nuanced, dynamic way, especially in an effort to reflect the contemporary political moment that featured characters and villains so similar to those of Suetonius’ text.

Abramson, Bird, and Papé honor Suetonius’ selectivity in their interpretation of his *Caesares*. The value of their edition lies not in its literal exactness, but in its representation of the same attitude and approach that Suetonius himself held as he composed these biographies. As discussed in earlier chapters, Argus Books’ priority was not necessarily accuracy or authenticity to the original Latin; rather, the edition’s aim appeared to be entertainment value. The three creators sought to tell a good story in a compelling way, so that Argus Books could make a profit. Bird did not excise the lewder, more indelicate passages from her “translation” but approached them candidly with the same frankness of spirit with which Suetonius wrote them in the first place. Papé selected and illustrated sixteen energetic, vibrant scenes that are more significant for their amusing charm than their historical importance. And Abramson put it all together, wrapped in a blue and gold cover and marketed as “the book that no one can miss.”

The whole may seem as faithful a representation of Suetonius and his writing as a literal translation would have been. But my investigation has shown it was much more. Abramson’s fierce commitment to human rights, free expression, and education, Bird’s audacious “translation” that transcended the restrictions of her education and gender, and Papé’s subversive choice to illustrate derisory scenes combined so that Argus Books’ *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* powerfully imparts Suetonius’ timeless lesson: beware the seductions of power.

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Figures

Figure 1: Spine of *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

Figure 2: Eagle on the spine.

Figure 3: Eagle on the front cover.
This special edition of Suetonius’ Lives of the Twelve Caesars is limited to 300 numbered copies, each one of which is signed by the artist and translator. This is No. 23

Frank C. Pape
H. M. Bird

Figure 4: Signatures of the illustrator and translator (Bird, iii).

Figure 5: Title page (Bird, i).

Figure 6: Argus Book Shop Memo (Helen Bird, undated, Folder 342, Box 10, Argus Book Shop Correspondence).
Figure 7 (France, 10).

Figure 8 (France, 32).

Figure 9 (France, 97).

Figure 10: Asterisks marking an excised passage from Thomson’s 1796 translation (Thomson, 446).
Figure 11: “He was stabbed with three and twenty wounds” (Bird, 51).

Figure 12: “But his liveliest fancy was Cleopatra” (Bird, 35).

Figure 13: “He continued to use the same bedchamber for forty years” (Bird, 99).

Figure 14: “That Ovid knew not of Augustus being in the place, is beyond all doubt” (Bird, 115).
Figure 15: “He dreamt...he fell headlong upon the earth” (Bird, 227).

Figure 16: “He was haunted by his mother’s ghost” (Bird, 275).

Figure 17: “He dreamt that Fortune appeared to him” (Bird, 323).

Figure 18: “A plough-ox...broke into the room” (Bird, 355).
Figure 19: “He drove Antony to kill himself” (67).

Figure 20: “The only exhibition he made of that kind, was that of a young man…who was not quite two feet in height” (Bird, 83).

Figure 21: “She resolved to starve herself to death” (Bird, 163).

Figure 22: “He did nothing but catch flies” (Bird, 371).
Figure 23: “He personated Apollo himself” (Bird, v).

Figure 24: “He resolved to imitate the achievements of Hercules” (Bird, 307).

Figure 25: “He was in the habit of diverting himself with a serpent” (Bird, 179).

Figure 26: “While in this condition, a feather was put down his throat” (Bird, 255).
Figure 27: Julius Caesar, Vat. lat. 1904.

Figure 28: Tiberius, Vat. lat. 1904.

Figure 29: Nero, Cod. Ott. lat. 1966.
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