

# Nero's Gang

*by Kevin Bouillot*

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**In ancient times, mythological and historical criminals were not always inhuman. They show us that there is nothing universal about our self-evident truths, particularly when they concern such fundamental concepts as good and evil.**

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Reviewed: [Caroline Petit, \*Scelerati. Antiques, sadiques et diaboliques\*, preceded by an interview with Daniel Mendelsohn, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, Signets series, 2023, 272 pp., €15.50.](#)

Our fascination with evil and the “villains” who embody it has inspired countless works of fiction, as well as historical and psychological studies. Caroline Petit's book follows in this vein, shifting the investigation to Greek and Roman antiquity, so dear to the Belles Lettres publishing house.

As a specialist publisher of ancient texts—and a benchmark for all French-speaking research—the company began publishing the Signets series in 2007. This collection is aimed at the general public. It brings together and comments on extracts from ancient texts, translated into French, organized around a “modern” theme such as the environment, the paranormal, leisure, humor or, in this case, evil.

This “etic” approach—as anthropologists refer to it—is based on the categories of the observer (here, the contemporary reader) and not on those of the observed, i.e. the authors of these texts and their contemporaries. The aim is not to deliver a scholarly study of the notion in the ancient context; indeed, the bibliography refers the reader to as many specialized works as possible.

Rather, the idea is to compare our modern category with those of the Greeks and Romans, whose conceptions often, but not always, differed from our own. The Signets series has set itself the ambitious goal of measuring the gap between our perception and that of the Ancients, in order to better reflect on their relevance.

## Villains past and present

Caroline Petit is a lecturer and researcher in ancient history at the University of Warwick (UK). Her book is the latest addition to this series, and is dedicated to what she calls the *scelerati*, the Latin term discreetly chosen to refer to “bad guys.”

Like all the volumes in the Signets series, this one opens with an interview. The author talks to Daniel Mendelsohn, professor of classical literature, literary critic and specialist in Euripides' tragedies, as well as author of *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (2006), a memoir about his family who were murdered by the Nazis. Petit and Mendelsohn seek to delineate the subject, from ancient literary figures such as Euripides' infanticidal Medea, to twentieth-century perpetrators of genocide, tyrants, mass killers and murderers, whether historical, fictional or both.

Rather than providing answers, they propose questions to ask of ancient texts: do villains choose to be villains, or are they persuaded to do good? Why are they so often defeated in fiction, when this is not the case in history? Why are women and foreigners so often associated with evil? What roles do villains play in fiction, from tragic tyrants to the Lannisters of *Game of Thrones*? And what can ancient texts teach us about the evils of today?

## The evil within us

Ancient philosophers wrestled with the definition of evil and the wicked. They agreed on one point, summed up by the Stoic Seneca in the 1st century AD: evil stems from anger and the failure to control oneself. Galen, a Roman physician of the 2nd century AD, saw it as an illness that could be cured by temperance, or even self-flagellation. But his diagnosis was grim: from the master who needlessly beats his

slaves to the mob who massacres in a frenzy of indignation, we all have the potential to become villains.

Consequently, the great mythical criminals were not inhuman absolutes. On the contrary, they were subjects of empathy and reflection: they served as useful counter-models, because they had unwittingly succumbed to evil. The Homeric hero Ajax, blinded by anger, slaughtered a herd of oxen in the belief that he was killing his rivals, before killing himself in shame. The infamous Medea, infanticidal mother, was portrayed by Seneca as a woman betrayed, deceived, wounded and plagued by self-doubt. Even Clytemnestra, wife and murderer of King Agamemnon, alternated in Euripides' tragedies between absolute monster, condemned to death by her own son Orestes, and ordinary woman, a wounded mother rightly mourning her daughter Iphigenia.

This pervasiveness of evil gave it a thousand faces—including those of its avowed enemies. Philosophers, who claimed to strive for the good, were not exempt from the accusation of hypocrisy, as in the case of the satirist Lucian, enemy of the Cynics (among others) in the 2nd century AD. They were accused of being greedy and incompetent charlatans, much like the physicians of antiquity who, at the time of the first anatomical treatises, were suspected of profiting from the misfortune of the sick, and even of committing infamous crimes such as poisoning and vivisection.

Power, as anger's ally, was also suspected of leading to evil. The Ancients denounced these incarnations of an evil that had become absolute, from the mythical king Atreus, who killed his brother's children and served them to him at his table, to Roman emperors as cruel as they were insane, such as Nero, Commodus and Elagabalus, all of whom displayed every known vice.

## **Evil is other people**

Nevertheless, others were more likely to be suspected of harboring evil. Women were victims of this: Pandora was the first of them—whom the Greeks held responsible for all evils—followed by a long list of historical examples.

Roxane, wife of Alexander the Great, embodied the jealous woman ready to eliminate her rivals. Socrates' wife Xanthippe became the proverbial shrew and her husband's daily poison. Fulvia, who married Mark Antony, was accused of

dominating him—a means of conspiring against both spouses. Agrippina, wife and murderer of Emperor Claudius, then mother, guardian and victim of Nero, was the epitome of female power and evil. Caroline Petit is careful to point out that these portraits fueled a misogynistic discourse that justified the social inferiority of women and was produced by men, as was the entire body of ancient literature.

For the Greeks, and later the Romans, the “other” was also the barbarian foreigner, and thus evil. The Persians were responsible for the cruelty and elaborate tortures described by the historian Plutarch in the 2nd century AD. The Celts were known for their brutality, sacrilege and even human sacrifice, to the extent that the massacres committed by Julius Caesar during the Gallic Wars were considered justified. The Carthaginians, Rome's mortal enemies, showed contempt for the law, honor and respect for the gods—in other words, the cardinal Roman values.

Otherness and the evil associated with it could lurk in sexual mores. Adultery, open sexuality, pedophilia and zoophilia shared a common disapproval among philosophers, who nonetheless seemed to receive little attention from their contemporaries on this point. For biographers like Suetonius, however, and orators like Cicero, debauchery trials were also a weapon used to sully a bad emperor, a political rival or, of course, a woman, whose sexual freedom was all the more reprehensible, since it was deemed contrary to her submissive nature.

## **Innovations in Christianity**

The emergence of Christianity at the end of Antiquity heralded the incarnation of evil, which took on a name: Satan. He sought to infiltrate everyone and everywhere, even where the Greeks and Romans would never have suspected it: in their own literary, philosophical and artistic culture, which Saint Jerome admired but swore to renounce as evil, calling on all Christians to follow in his footsteps. Accusations of barbarism were then leveled against this now well-established culture, while emperors and polytheistic apologists urged people to resist the Christians.

Christian innovation had its limits, however. The first suspects remained suspects, and Eve replaced Pandora as the mother of all evil, justifying the subservience of her female descendants. The thorny question of the rightful punishment of the wicked was an extension of—rather than a break with—classical

thought. For Plato, evil was its own punishment, and the villain suffered from his crime even more than the victim. For Plutarch, the Platonic historian and philosopher, the final responsibility for punishing evil lay with the gods, whose justice could be a long time coming, in some cases not until the villain's death or even in the next life. Christians believed it was in the afterlife that the wicked would finally be unmasked and punished for their wrongdoing.

Caroline Petit does not offer a systematic, exhaustive study, but rather an anthology of ancient reflections on evil and its *scelerati*. This will provide food for thought for the contemporary reader, who is called upon to put his or her categories and certainties into context. As such, the author provides an insight into what Greco-Roman antiquity means to us today.

It is no longer just a “miracle,” as Renan described it, believing that almost every aspect of Western culture was already in its infancy in the Athens of Pericles. It is also a different kind of civilization, as Jean-Pierre Vernant has shown, and as anthropologists understand it: a mirror in which to observe ourselves and realize that there is nothing universal about our self-evident truths, even (or especially?) when they concern such fundamental notions as good and evil.

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