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Roman Emperors across Comics Traditions

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to investigate the representation of Roman Emperors across different comic traditions: Anglophonic Comics, Francophone *bandes dessinées*, Japanese *manga* and Italian *fumetti*. These representations are analysed through the lens of reception studies on Classical Greek and Roman cultures, and their intersection with comics studies and narratology. While reception studies often assume that Classical cultures are liberally re-interpreted, historical accuracy is a distinguishing feature of comics operating within the “historical fiction” and biographic genres. This claim is supported via the analysis of how Roman emperors are portrayed across different works and traditions. It is thus proposed that genre norms, and their interaction thereof, play a key role in how historical sources are received and elaborated in comics.

1. Introduction: Reception Studies in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Scholarly interest in the reception of classical Greek-Roman cultural heritage has recently witnessed a renaissance. *Reception studies*, defined as the discipline studying the adaptation and re-elaboration of this heritage, have expanded their focus beyond their traditional literary domain (Hardwick 2003). Comics thus represent such a novel domain of inquiry (Kovacs & Marshall 2010; 2016). Reception studies in comics analyse which sources and modes of transmission are attested across different comics traditions¹ (Hammar 2017). An initial conclusion is that Classical Greece and Rome represent a source of inspiration

¹ We use the term *comics* as a general label for the medium, when no confusion arises. For instance, “comics traditions” refers to all the traditions discussed in this paper.

for creators of Anglophonic comics, Francophone *bandes dessinées* or *bedées*, and Japanese *manga*, among others. However, authors reinvent historical sources in often subtle manners, possibly including inspiration from non-classical sources (Shanower 2010).

Another, more controversial conclusion is that certain themes have played a preponderant role, but authors have often liberally re-interpreted these themes. For instance, Greek and Roman mythology has been vastly reinterpreted in Marvel and DC comics (Kovacs & Marshall 2010, chap. 1). The popular *Asterix* stories provide a very loose representation of Rome's republican period (Barnett 2016). Imperial Rome has also been cited as a powerful source of inspiration for several francophone artists; however, these stories tend to remain close to the actual historical facts (Dinter 2010). Thus, both history and myth have offered inspiration for artists who wish to work with classical themes in modern comics. However, such inspiration seems to sometimes lead to faithful adaptations, and sometimes to open re-interpretations.

From a theoretical perspective, these instances of reception in comics raise questions regarding *how* faithful these adaptations may be, and *why* authors may adapt these sources (Hardwick 2003, 5). Ultimately, authors working with classical themes challenge themselves with the task of presenting novel interpretations of "old stories" to audiences that may not be acquainted with Classical culture(s). For *manga*, the second question has been explicitly formulated as "why should the Japanese be concerned with ancient Greece and Rome in the first place?" (Kovacs & Marshall 2016, xxv). Initial answers to these questions in the literature are perhaps obvious. The dramatic nature of classical stories offers a rich narrative potential. However, authors do not completely respect all the source material (Tomasso 2010; Johnson 2016; Nisbet 2016).

The goal of this article is to show that a more nuanced answer to both questions emerges once we examine a broader domain of "Classical comics". We achieve this goal by analysing the representation of Roman emperors across different comics traditions, and across the genres of biographic, historical, horror, fantasy, and science fiction comics. Our answer is that authors concerning themselves with Classical themes offer re-interpretations that aim to meet genre-driven narrative goals. Thus, authors working within the genre of historical fiction maintain a strong degree of faithfulness to their sources (Martin 2019, 210; and references therein). Authors working within

other genres but importing classic themes, instead, often take historical liberties consistent with the genre norms they work with (e.g., fantasy). These claims act as our answer to the *how*-question. We then argue that authors may select classical themes for their narrative potential, but also because they have a genuine interest in re-telling “history as stories”, so to speak. These claims, instead, form our answer to the *why*-question.

To reach this goal, we follow this theoretical and empirical roadmap. We introduce and motivate theoretical tools that combine insights from reception and comics studies, narratology, and possible worlds literary theory, and that we use for our analysis (Section 2). We introduce a method that we implemented to create a corpus of comics focusing on imperial Rome and Roman emperors as a case study (Section 3). We prove that faithfulness to historical sources is a cross-cultural theme *qua* a norm of historical fiction also respected in comics. Lesser degrees of faithfulness aim to coherently integrate historical sources with themes specific to horror, fantasy, science fiction and other genres in which a comic operates (Section 4). We conclude by offering some observations on the nature of reception of the Classical tradition in comics (Section 5).

2. Theoretical Background: Key concepts

In his study of reception modes, Hardwick (2003, 8–9) outlines 24 possible modes that form a continuum ranging from “faithfulness” to “invention”. For instance, the *adaptation* mode is considered the maximally faithful mode of reception. It involves the presentation of a Classical work in its original form (e.g., the *Iliad* in the original Greek language). Conversely, the *transplant* mode, described below, may involve ample liberties taken on the original concepts. For our goals, four modes play a key role: *acculturation*, *translation*, *hybridization*, and *transplant*. Acculturation is defined as the adaptation of themes from classical sources to modern texts (e.g., the use of the Roman Empire’s history in comics). Translation involves translating a work into a different language (e.g., French), and adapting it to a language’s cultural demands. Hybridization is defined as the combination of themes from different media (e.g., visual and textual) into target works. Transplant is defined as the importing of images, ideas and themes from an original text into a novel text, and the development of these elements into novel concepts.

In studying how authors can use these and other modes in their works, reception studies set themselves at least these three goals. The first is to study how classical themes are received in modern cultures, broadly defined. The second is to study how faithful the reception of these themes can be, and the nature of eventual divergences. The third is to study the “cultural horizon”, i.e., the context, media, norms, and genres that can affect the reception of a work. Thus, reception studies analyse how different reception modes can determine the degree of faithfulness or re-interpretation that a work displays. They also study the context and possible cultural constraints that may explain why authors may diverge from the original texts but may render a work more accessible to contemporary readers.

These concepts must be tailored to the medium-specific properties of comics, and how they may influence modes and goals. For this purpose, we take Groensteen’s theory of comics as a semiotic (i.e., sign-based), multimodal and intertextual system (Groensteen 2007, 90-100; Groensteen, 2013, 130-140). This theory suggests that comics operate as systems through which authors can combine themes from different sources into multi-modal narratives. Other theories on the nature of comics certainly exist, two examples being McCloud (1993) and Cohn (2014)’s proposals. The first theory suggests that comics are sequential, multi-modal narratives; the second, that they are “languages” with its own structural and interpretive rules. McCloud’s approach permits researchers to analyse the formal properties of comic works but leaves open questions regarding their modes of production (cf. also Cook 2011, 288-289; for discussion). Cohn’s proposal offers powerful accounts of how comics can be read and understood but leaves aside matters of comics production. Thus, both theories focus on different aspects of analysis than the ones we seek to explore in our paper.

Though Groensteen’s theory allows us to address these matters directly, a refinement of the concepts of multimodality and intertextuality can sharpen its empirical import. We pursue such refinements via John Bateman’s “GeM” (Genre and Multimodality) model, and its application to comics (Bateman 2008; Bateman & Wildfeuer 2014; Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala 2017). The GeM model introduces *documents* as units used to convey information amongst individuals (or “agents”). *Multi-modality* holds when documents involve at least two distinct modalities to present information, e.g., comics and their combination of text and images. The model uses the *page* as a

unit carrying information within a document. A multi-modal document can include a single page (e.g., a flyer), several pages (e.g., comic issues) and collections of pages including potentially connected information (e.g., books and trade paperbacks). Crucially, comics distinguish themselves in including *panels* as the minimal semiotic units forming pages of documents (Bateman 2008, 100-138). Thus, combinations of panels can form pages that in turn can potentially combine into issues, volumes, series, and other more complex types of documents.

Documents can convey coherent information when their constituting elements establish thematically related semiotic structures, or *narratives*. *Intertextuality* is therefore defined as a semiotic relation between two or more documents and the narratives they may present, whether this relation involves panels, pages, chapters, issues, and volumes (Bateman 2008, 200-210; Allen 2011, 130-155). When an intertextual relation holds, one or more documents act as the “source” documents (or “sources”), providing content that can be partially or fully utilised in “target” documents (or “target”). Intertextuality therefore acts as a relation potentially holding between parts of documents, but also between documents as “wholes” (e.g., Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Homer’s *Odyssey*: Allen 2011, 130-155). Authors may be conceived as “compilers” and “assemblers” of inherently intertextual documents, usually re-elaborating sources (classical or other) in novel ways (Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala 2017, chap. 1).

Via these concepts, we can answer our *how*- and *why*-questions in an elegant manner. However, to maintain our analysis compact, we choose to narrow our focus on Roman emperors and their renditions across different comics traditions and genres. Our choice is based on the fact that most reception studies in comics focus on concepts (e.g., the portrayal of Troy: Shanower 2010) and events (e.g., the battle of the Thermopylae: Tomasso 2010). However, the reception of classical historical figures has been mostly left aside. Luckily, Hammar (2017) presents a pilot study that analyses the reception of Emperor Caligula’s figure in the British science fiction comic *Judge Dredd*. Hammar’s work shows that a futuristic version of Caligula, based on both historical and fictional sources (e.g., Robert Graves’ *I, Claudius*), acts as an antagonist to Judge Dredd. The work suggests that Caligula is transplanted into this series’ fictional world and re-interpreted for its narrative potential as a villain. We therefore conceive our work as a continuation of this study offering a broader, cross-cultural empirical basis.

Before we present the analysis, we must address the question of how to interpret intertextual faithfulness through the lens of genre norms. To answer this question, we adopt some notions from possible worlds literary theory (Ryan 1991; Ryan 2001; Bell 2010; Bell & Ryan 2019). Central to our concerns is that this theory offers a simple but systematic view of (some) genres and their relations. In so doing, it permits us to highlight a connection between faithfulness in reception, and the demands of genres and narrative goals as elements of divergence. We show why this seems to be the case by introducing the theory's key concepts.

Within possible worlds literary theory, texts are taken to present alternative renditions or "possible worlds" of what we know as the "actual world" (e.g., Eco 1984; Doležel 1998). Five key ontological assumptions permit researchers to analyse the relations between these alternative renditions and the actual world. First, the actual world is defined as the centre of our literary analysis, i.e., the reality that the reader experiences. Second, possible worlds represent alternative models to the actual world, and may be considered as speculations about possible events, concepts and individuals. Third, textual actual and possible worlds are renditions of the actual world and possible worlds, respectively. If the world we experience is the actual world, then documents representing this world create fictional worlds, which may or may not be faithful representations (e.g., historical vs. science fiction). Fourth, a document can present actual and possible/fictional worlds as co-existing within a narrative structure. Fifth, these worlds form the "textual universe", the set of worlds that a text/document describes.

For our concerns, a crucial tool of analysis comes from the formulation of fiction genres that this theory offers. If documents present possible renditions of the actual world, then they can also offer possible renditions of future and past events (Alber 2019; Martin 2019). Therefore, the fictional nature of a narrative does not only lie in the use of (im)possible themes, but also in the creation of alternate, fictional worlds nevertheless related to the actual world. "Historical fiction" may thus be conceived describing past historical events with possibly high, though not necessarily perfectly accurate, levels of faithfulness. Other fiction genres may instead take ample liberties with historical sources, by inserting their genre-specific themes in target narratives (cf. also Schuknet 2019). As also suggested in Hammar (2017), genre norms may strongly influence which modes of reception authors use for their narrative purposes.

Let us take stock. We envision reception studies in comics as the study of how Classical Greek-Roman sources have been received (i.e., used and interpreted) in modern comic texts. We assume that comics are multi-modal and intertextual semiotic texts. They may involve multi-modal, intertextual relations that may operate at any level of organization, from the panel to the series. Fictional texts involving such historical sources can furthermore combine themes from different genres (e.g., historical, science, fantasy fiction). Therefore, they can create complex textual universes that can display differing degrees of faithfulness to their historical sources. There is ample evidence that many authors liberally re-interpret classical sources. However, evidence showing that authors can also be faithful to sources, given the role of genre norms, is outstanding.

3. Methodology

Our methodology was as follows. We compiled a corpus of documents featuring Roman emperors as characters, across different comic traditions. For this purpose, we queried the database of American comics (<https://www.comicsdatabase.org>), the “bakaupdate” database of *manga* (<https://www.bakaupdate.com>), and the online collection of *bedées* (<https://www.BD.org>) via the key words “Rome”, “roman”, “republic”, “emperor”, “empire” and “history”. For Italian *fumetti*, we used the ComiXtime Italian app, which is an ongoing project of cataloguing *fumetti* and other works from different traditions (<https://www.ComiXtime.com>). A second round of selection identified texts that featured Roman emperors as characters in at least one issue. The results amounted to three documents out of seven candidates for comics, three documents out of eight candidates for *bedées*, five documents out of 21 candidates for manga, and two documents out of eight candidates for *fumetti*. Candidate documents were discarded when they did not feature any Roman emperors (e.g., *Ad Astra: Hannibal to Scipio*, a manga that focuses on the second Punic war: Kagano 2011–2018).

Once a corpus of relevant works was obtained, the subsequent analysis of the documents followed these principles. For each emperor, we analysed the portrayal in terms of “characterization”, i.e., narrative rendition of his psychological traits (Iannidis 2013) and appearance. We also analysed how the

imperial Rome period associated to the emperor was portrayed, if attested (i.e., each emperor's "reign"). We thus verified if an emperor's portrayal was consistent with the overall setting of each story and series, the two factors jointly contributing to outlining the genre at stake. We verified which historical sources the authors used for their research when possible (e.g., translations of Suetonius' *De Vitae Caesarorum* was often cited in the authors' commentary to volumes). We then analysed such renditions with information from historiographical sources (e.g., the *Britannica* encyclopaedia). For visual representations, we verified if emperors' appearances and illustrations of imperial Rome could be considered close to their bust portrayals, mosaics, or other classical sources obtained via Google Images.

Next, we analysed which reception modes were used in each work by focusing on the hybridization and transplant modes. By definition, all the documents in this corpus feature the acculturation and translation modes. They adapt classical history and figures (acculturation mode) for an audience speaking a language other than Latin (translation mode). However, only some documents resort to non-classical sources for their visual representations (hybridization mode), usually to fill in missing information. Most documents, instead, insert fictional themes that "connect" historical facts with their specific fictional universe, and that usually follow the norms of the genres they operate within (transplant mode). After identifying these modes and their narrative function, we conclude each analysis by proposing the possible cultural horizon in which a document can be analysed. Since each document is produced within a given comic tradition but potentially aims at a global audience, we focus on the genre(s) to which a document seems to belong. We then propose how and why the target document may be considered faithful to its classical sources or the genre norms it may follow. With this point in mind, we turn to the results.

4. Results

4.1 Comics

The first document we discuss is *Caligula*, a horror (fiction) series set during the rule of Emperor Caligula (Lapham (w) & Nobile (i) 2012). The series features the titular emperor as a demon-possessed immortal antagonist to meek

Junius, a rich farmer whose family is brutally slaughtered and dismembered by Caligula's soldiers. Junius travels to the capital and infiltrates the court to assassinate Caligula during an orgy, but he discovers to his chagrin that the emperor is immortal. A knife transfixing his head has the only effect of slowing down the rape of his sister Drusilla (Fig. 1):



Fig. 1. Caligula (left panel) and Junius (right panel).

As the story unfolds, Junius decides to avenge his family by following a rather diverse approach: he becomes Caligula's favourite slave lover. In so doing, he discovers that a demon drives Caligula's perversions and his many massacres of innocent citizens in gladiatorial games and orgies. The demon's ultimate goal is to enjoy as much carnage as possible, while also bringing Roman civilization to ruin. Though Junius ultimately obtains his revenge, this comes at the cost of the demon escaping Caligula's body and possessing Junius' to use for his purposes.

Caligula is a series that finds its genre roots in the sexually explicit, gore-driven approach to horror of modern authors (e.g., *Cabal*, Barker 1988). Though imperial Rome is sometimes portrayed in an accurate manner, the series features

several forms of transplant that establish its clear status as a horror fiction comic. The first case is swapping Caligula's alleged folly, probably due to epilepsy ("Editors" 2020b), with satanic possession. The second case is vastly exaggerating the more truculent aspects of Roman life. Though certainly violent, chariot games were not known to feature anthropophagic undead horses. Caligula's alleged orgies seemed not to include cannibalistic practices, at least according to historical sources. The third case includes the exploration of how (abusive) male homosexual relations might have taken their course in a society having a very ambivalent relation with sexuality. This is also a well-trodden theme of modern horror, as themes involving the dark aspects of gender and race are often explored in detail (Bloom 2012), and perhaps consistently with Caligula's bisexuality.

One might argue that *Caligula's* cultural horizon falls entirely within the horror fiction genre, while "borrowing" the decidedly wicked figure and rule of Caligula for this purpose. Thus, historical faithfulness is mostly left aside, as the goal of using Caligula in the story is to have a blood-thirsty tyrant abusing, socially and sexually, the protagonist and Roman citizens. Readers acquainted with horror fiction can acknowledge that the wealth of gruesome acts that the demonic Caligula performs are perfectly consistent with the genre's norms. If one leaves aside such supernatural themes, it seems also obvious that the series seems to take inspiration from the Tinto Brass' 1979 movie *Caligula*, via hybridization. The movie notoriously depicted the emperor as organizing orgies and mass murders in his court (Brass (d) 1979). Thus, this work's lack of historical accuracy should come as no surprise, for the series seems to operate within the cultural horizon of horror, not historical fiction.

The second document we discuss is the series *The Sandman* and its story "August" (Gaiman (w) & VV. AA. (a) 1992, chap. 2). The protagonist is Emperor Augustus, and the story is based on an apparently apocryphal episode described in Suetonius' *De Vitae Caesarum* (Gaiman and VV. AA. 1992, appendix). Old Augustus visits the market at the imperial forum camouflaged as a beggar, in the company of the actor Lycius, so that he can observe the daily lives of Romans. During this day of anonymity, he reminisces about a dark episode of abuse from his uncle Julius Caesar. He also describes the oneiric meeting with Dream/Morpheus (i.e., the titular "Sandman") concerning the fate(s) of the Roman Empire. The story concludes by showing Augustus retiring in *Domus Augusta* and reflecting on whether his life and choices have been the best for the future of imperial Rome or not.

As our compact summary suggests, *The Sandman* may be considered a series loosely classifiable as modern fantasy (Strong 2010). The narrative arc to which the story belongs (i.e., *Fables and Reflections*, Gaiman (w) et al. (i) 1992) sometimes explores the lives of various historical figures. However, it firmly (and intertextually) embeds them in *The Sandman*'s fantasy world via their interactions with Morpheus. Augustus' portrayal thus offers an interesting case of analysis. Augustus tends to be perceived as an ambivalent figure: cruel, power-hungry, and ruthless in his republican days; benevolent and respectful of republican institutions in his imperial days (Grant 2020). Gaiman's characterization seems based on the republican period: old Augustus is portrayed as a bitter, cold, ruthless master to Lycius. At the same time, he lapses into mellower narrations of the past when discussing with the actor. On the other hand, illustrator Brian Talbot portrays a historically accurate Rome. It also presents an Augustus as a vigorous and intellectually sharp individual in his old age (Fig. 2):



Fig. 2. Lycius (left) entering Augustus' (right) private office.

As also observed in Strong (2010), this target (document) offers at least two forms of transplant mode. One is the abusive relation between Caesar and Augustus and how it motivates Augustus' choices, and Morpheus' appearance in Augustus' dreams. Morpheus meets human individuals

mostly in their dreams, and in this narrative arc asks them to make important choices about the future of their domains of influence. Thus, Augustus' transplant in the narrative system underpinning *The Sandman* establishes that this traumatized version of the emperor exists in a fictional, fantasy world in which the so-called "Endless", like Morpheus, interact with mortals. This world exists in a cultural horizon in which comics readers may not be fully acquainted with Augustus' life. Readers may certainly appreciate him as a controversial if not tragic figure, like the other historical figures in this narrative arc. However, readers would expect Augustus and Morpheus' meeting to follow the fantasy genre narrative norms of *The Sandman*, whence the oneiric discussion.

The third document we discuss is *Britannia*, which consists of three five-issue series published by American Valiant Comics (Milligan (w) & Jose Ryp 2016–2018). *Britannia* follows Antonius Axia, a former Roman centurion living during Nero's rule. Antonius becomes the first "detectioneer" (i.e., detective) in history, after being trained in deductive reasoning and basic psychological skills by Drusa, high priestess of the Vestals' order. Antonius' adventures involve an apparent mix of horror and supernatural elements which, upon further inspection, are revealed to be elaborate subterfuges that Antonius' antagonists create to carry out their plans. Antonius appears to also have developed psychic powers, though it is left open whether these "powers" are his newfound analytical skills, understood via Antonius' own superstition. Thus, Antonius becomes a special agent responding only to the orders of the emperor or the Vestals' high priestess.

Britannia presents an accurate rendition of imperial Rome, both in visual style and narrative themes, combined with various themes from detective fiction. The authors draw information and themes from the essays of classical scholars, thus collecting back matter to the stories (e.g., the overview of Nero's late rule in Milligan (w) & Jose Ryp 2016 vol. 1, chap. 1). Such faithfulness is reflected in Nero's rendition as an unstable, cruel despot, given that the series is set in 64 (i.e. in Nero's twilight years: "Editors" 2020d). Nero does not want the Vestals' power to expand as a result of Antonius' actions, and even attempts to have him executed in a bout of madness (Milligan (w) & Jose Ryp 2017, vol. 2, issue 3). However, in each mini-series he acts as the ruling figure ordering Antonius to solve the cases threatening Rome, begrudgingly admitting the usefulness of his work

(Milligan (w) & Jose Ryp 2018 vol. 3, issue 4). Faithful to most historical portraits, Nero is illustrated as a usually angry and bearded man, often carrying an evil smirk (Fig. 2.):



Fig. 3. An adult Nero in *Britannia*.

Overall, *Britannia* includes a form of transplant that allows the authors to combine historical and detective fiction: the introduction of Antonius Axia as the first investigator. Nevertheless, the series maintains a fairly high degree of faithfulness to the sources that inspired and fascinated its creators (*Britannia* vol. 1 issue 4). *Britannia*'s publisher, Valiant Comics, is known for its super-hero series, and thus caters to an audience perhaps more used to historical liberties. If we consider this culture as the chief cultural horizon in which the authors may operate, then it is perhaps surprising that *Britannia* does *not* feature more significant forms of transplant. Aside a general ambiguity regarding Antonius' "powers", however, the series operates within the norms of historical fiction, while also combining them with action and detective fiction. Like *The Sandman* but unlike *Caligula*, it displays faithfulness to its sources, while also adhering to the norms of the historical and detective genres.

4.2 Bédées

The first document we discuss is *Les Aigles de Rome* ('The Eagles of Rome', Marini 2007-2011). This is a 5-volume historical fiction series chronicling the lives of Arminius and Marcus, respectively a Germanic boy and the son of a centurion. The two initially meet and mistrust one another but grow to become friends and members of the Roman Empire during the rule of Emperor Augustus. The series offers a subtle study of how Arminius, first enslaved and brought to Rome, meets Marcus. The two develop a complex form of friendship over the years, even if they belong to opposing cultures. Arminius ultimately returns to "Germania" to lead the Germanic tribes in the Teutoburg forest's battle; Marcus participates amongst the Roman troops. Aside from offering often very accurate renditions of historical events (e.g., the aforementioned battle; Marini 2011, vol. 5), the series is also widely praised for its lavish illustrations and sober portrayal of the opposing cultures, via its representatives Arminius and Marcus (Dinter 2010).

Given this premise, it should come as no surprise that Augustus' rendition in the series is also historically accurate. In his old age, the emperor is portrayed as an overall benevolent though certainly stern autocrat, still fit and of sober manners (Fig. 4):

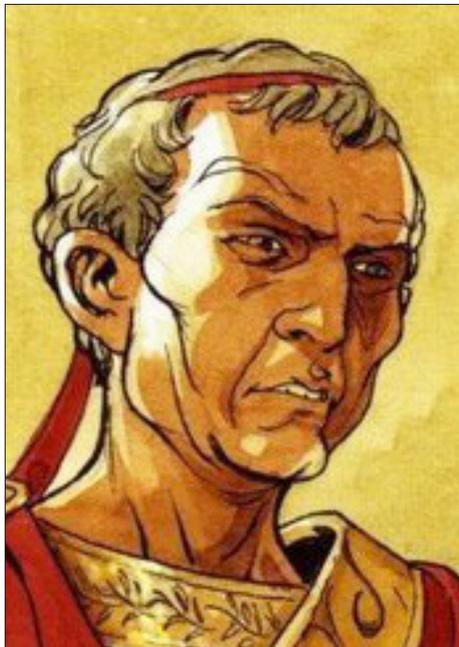


Fig. 4. An old Augustus addressing the protagonist (not in the picture).

Unlike his counterpart in *The Sandman*, however, Emperor Augustus plays a lesser role in this series since the main focus is on Marcus and Arminius' *bildungsroman*. Nevertheless, the author acknowledges that a painstakingly detailed work of research went into the development and characterization of each historical figure (Marini 2007, vol. 4). Thus, the transplant of two (partially) fictional protagonists in an historical context determines the status of *Les Aigles de Rome* as an historical fiction comic. Crucially, *bédées* are well-known for their attention to detail, and for including a relatively small but very lively sub-genre of historical fiction, usually with adult connotations (Dinter 2010). Hence, this target (document) belongs to a genre and tradition acting as a cultural horizon that prizes historical accuracy, and in which audiences demand potentially high faithfulness to historical sources.

It is against this specific cultural horizon that *Murena* (Dufaux (w) & Delaby (i) 1997–2013; Dufaux (w) & Caneschi (i) 2015–current) should also be analysed. *Murena* chronicles the relationship of the centurion Lucius Murena with Emperor Nero, the imperial court and its machinations. Lucius is the son of Lollia Paulina, a noblewoman that Emperor Claudius wanted to marry in his late age and thus represented an obstacle to Agrippina's ambitions. Nero's mother has Lollia assassinated, thus setting in motion a complex spiral of events in which Murena, Nero and several other historical figures enter into conflict. As a result, Nero and Lucius grow from childhood friends to adult enemies.

As this synthesis suggests, *Murena* includes a form of transplant on which the narrative structure hinges to create an intense historical drama. Though a *gens Murena* is attested in Roman history ("Editors" 2020e), Lucius' story is likely to be fictional. In all other aspects, however, the series is known for its high historical accuracy and lavish attention to detail. Emperor Claudius is featured in the first volume as an old and brutal tyrant in the thralls of Agrippina's schemes. It is Nero's representation throughout the series, however, that offers our main source of analysis. Nero is initially portrayed as a young, fit and sensitive boy who slowly develops into the famous tyrant. Ultimately a tragic figure, Nero is portrayed as a man descending into madness due to the pressures he faces in court. Such characterization is visually captured through Nero's changing physical appearance throughout the years, from slim and cheerful boy to overweight, cruel adult (Fig. 5):

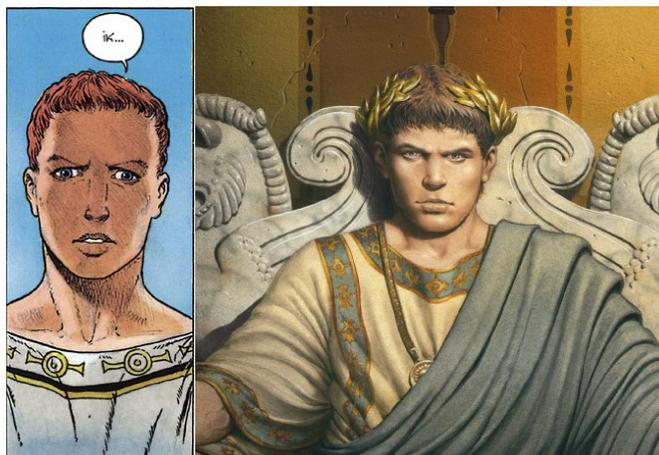


Fig. 5. Young Nero (left) and older Nero (right) in *Murena*.

Thus, *Murena* presents a perhaps more complex rendition of Nero than the one offered in *Britannia*. However, the series aims to cover a longer historical period, and takes an overall brooding, tragic perspective on Nero and his life. Once Lucius Murena is transplanted as the protagonist against antagonist Nero, the emperor's figure and actions become powerful narrative themes to create a brooding tragedy rife with adult tones.

We conclude this section by discussing *Alix: Senator*, our third *bédé* document (Mangin (w) & Démarez (i) 2012–current). The series *Alix* was created in 1948 and features a Gallic boy who is first enslaved, but then freed by his Roman owner and subsequently becomes a Roman citizen (Martin 1948–2010). His adventures often involve diplomatic missions commissioned by Julius Caesar himself, and having the goal of ensuring Rome's safety while interacting with antagonist cultures. *Alix* has always been known for its often-nuanced representation of historical cultures, more adult tones and generally strong historical accuracy (Barnett 2016). Thus, while *Asterix* is perhaps notorious for its historical liberties, *Alix* has always represented its historically accurate, if less popular, counterpart.

Publisher Casterman decided to continue *Alix*'s adventures as a Roman senator in his 50s, in the modern *Alix: Senator* sequel series. *Alix* has become a respected senator who is often sent to diplomatic missions by an aged Augustus during the years 11–14. Old Augustus, as in the case of *Les Aigles de Rome*, is presented as a benevolent but firm autocrat, as befits the “first senator” of the Roman senate (Fig 6):



Fig. 6. Old Augustus addresses the senators on matters of governance. The speech is in French because the panel has been taken from the original version of the comic. The panel recites: “Come on, senator, let us know what is it that you want!” (my translation).

As in the previous cases discussed in this section, *Alix: Senator* includes one instance of transplant, in the form of the protagonist Alix. Augustus in particular, but imperial Rome in general, tends to be represented with high accuracy, thus being faithful not only to historical sources, but to Martin’s original vision. Though Alix’s adventures do take some liberties when historical details are scarce (e.g., Cleopatra’s death in Mangin (w) & Démarez (i) 2017, vol. 8), they can generally be considered as fairly accurate examples of historical fiction in comics. Overall, this and the other documents discussed in this section show that the historical sub-genre in adult *bédées* acts as a cultural horizon in which faithfulness is a powerful norm. As also mentioned in Dinter (2010), authors and readers engage in this norm, though they also appreciate the introduction of fictional elements in these stories.

4.3 Manga

The five *manga* series discussed in this section offer some interesting renditions of several Roman emperors. Before we discuss the documents, however, we must offer a compact overview of *manga* genres and demographics that act as the documents' cultural horizon.

From the '80s onwards, the *manga* market has been divided into age/gender demographic and genre sub-types (Schodt 1996; Berndt, Nagaïke and Ogi 2019, chap. 1). Modern *seinen* ('young men') manga, like their *josei* ('young women') counterparts, are an age-based genre that includes *rekishi* ('historical') manga; adult themes (e.g., politics, sex, thorough characterization, gender, and ethnic relations) are central in *seinen* manga. Historical manga thus match their francophone counterparts by also being fairly faithful to their sources (Bryce and Davis 2010, 47). Such norms do not generally apply to *shōnen* ('boys') *manga*, which represent the mainstream segment of this comic tradition. Since action, imaginative settings and simple plots are central to this segment/genre, historical accuracy is often a marginal aspect (Bryce and Davis 2010, 43–44). Widely popular cases such as *Saint Seiya* (known as 'knights of the Zodiac') offer examples of this libertine approach to historical sources (Theisen 2010). Different release pressures also play a role: *shōnen* are weekly, *seinen* are mostly monthly/fortnightly publications. In general, *shōnen* authors have little time for accurate background research (*pace* Theisen 2010).

One document we found in our corpus that highlights *shōnen*'s liberal attitude is *Hishintan - Vita arcana* (Itoh 2010). This is a discontinued series featuring Ishintan, an alluring but deadly Cappadocian female killer during the rules of Emperors Caracalla and Macrinus. The first Emperor only appears in the first panel of the series. His assassination by the praetorian guards and soon-to-be-emperor Macrinus in year 217 opens the narration and defines the historical *mise en scene*. Emperor Macrinus is represented as a North African man. Caracalla's visual representation is, however, vague, and may or may not be consistent with historical portrayals (Fig. 7). Aside this brief cameo, neither emperor appears again:



Fig. 7. Caracalla appears in the top panel, Macrinus in the bottom panel. Note that the comment regarding “usurpation” refers to Macrinus’ assassination of Caracalla.

Though brief, this characterization of facts seems consistent with historical sources (Kolb 2020). More in general, the series presents latter-day imperial Rome as a violent, decadent society, but does not dwell on historical matters. Once a form of transplant is used (i.e., Ishintan as the protagonist), the narrative focuses on her assassination missions. The historical side of the genre equation is thus less relevant than the action side, a fact fully consistent with the manga’s appeal to a *shōnen* demographic/genre.

A different picture, however, emerges in *Kendo Ankokouden Cestvs* (‘Dark fight history Cestvs’ Wazarai 1997–2009) and its sequel *Kento Shitouden Cestvs* (‘Death fight history Cestvs’ Wazarai 2010–current). This *seinen manga* focuses on the adventures of the eponymous Cestvs, a slave boy fighting in the “cestomachia” (a form of “Roman boxing”), during the years 54–56 of Emperor Nero’s rule. In this document, Nero acts as a sponsor of the various gladiatorial tournaments. Though not a central figure, adolescent Nero is generally (but not always) portrayed as a more psychologically stable, wise and less ruthless emperor, with a gentler aspect reminiscent of his young counterpart in *Murena* (Fig. 8):



Fig. 8. The youthful Nero in *Cestvs* has flaxen hair, which is only indirectly shown via the lighter shade use in the black and white *manga*.

A more complex rendition of Nero that can also be directly compared to the *Murena* rendition is the one found in *Waga Wa Na Nero* ('I am Nero!', Yasuhiko 1998).² This document offers a biographic novelization of Nero's rule from his ascension to the throne to his alleged death. Its author, Yasuhiko Yoshikazu, is one of the celebrated creators of the science fiction *Gundam* multimedia franchise, but also an author well-versed in *seinen* biographic *manga*. Examples include documents covering Jesus Christ and Alexander the Great's lives (respectively Yasuhiko 1997, 2003). *Waga Wa Na Nero* symmetrically differs from *Murena* in having a slave turned gladiator, Germanicus, as a fictional character through which part of the story is narrated. However, Nero is the veritable and tragic protagonist, from his beginnings as an emperor to his violent death. Like in *Murena*, Nero's trajectory is also represented via his growth into an overweight, bearded man of ruthless behaviour (Fig. 9):

2 Emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius are also mentioned in single-panel summaries at the beginning of the work (Yasuhiko 1998, vol.1). No other mention of these and other emperors are however offered.



Fig. 9. Cithara-playing Nero from the cover of vol. 2, in colour. The almost David Bowie-esque androgynous portrait and flaxen hair hint at the hybridization elements of the series.

Both authors have acknowledged researching classical and contemporary sources. Both authors have also acknowledged attempting to carefully reconstruct an historical period they are fascinated with (Yasuhiko 1998, vol. 1; Wazarai 1998, vol. 1). Case in point, both authors have included events from Nero's life in the series that might help in portraying him in a more sympathetic light. Thus, young Nero in *Cestvs* attempts to save his stepbrother Britannicus from a fatal seizure to no avail (Wazarai 1998, vol. 2). Adult Nero in *Waga Wa Na Nero* leads the fire-fighting efforts during Rome's fire in 67. However, adult Nero is also shown to place the blame on Christians, therefore authorizing exceedingly cruel public slaughtering of innocent individuals (Yasuhiko 1998, vol. 2). Thus, while *Cestvs* includes a form of transplant by focusing on Cestvs' life as a boxer, *Nero* minimally includes an alternate point of view on Germanicus' relationship with Nero. However, Nero's perspective generally dominates this story, and sets the overall tragic tone of this biographic *manga*. Nevertheless, both series seem fairly faithful to their historical sources.

Interestingly, both series include minor forms of hybridization. Nero is imagined flaxen-haired in *Cestvs* (again Fig. 8) and the series also includes

information on Roman, Greek and other fighting styles (e.g., pankration), not easily traceable to Roman sources. A flaxen-haired Nero plays the Cithara on the cover of vol. 2 of *Waga Wa Na Nero* (Fig. 9). His passion for Greek culture is often a pre-text for the author to use historically accurate renditions of this culture (e.g., statues and ships). Such choices however confirm that both series maintain the high standards of faithfulness expected of historical manga: they do so by also using Greek historiographic sources, given their richness of themes.

We conclude this section by analysing the documents *Plinius* and *Thermae Romae*, both by Yamazaki Mari. *Plinius* (Yamazaki 2012–current) is a series that chronicles the life of Pliny the elder from the latter rule of Nero to the Vesuvius’ eruption (i.e., years 66 to 79 CE). *Plinius* distinguishes itself for its sober and serious tone, as befits biographies. Consequently, Nero is portrayed as a despotic, overweight, and deranged tyrant in his twilight years. His successor Vespasianus, on the other hand, is portrayed as a pragmatic and direct ruler with a stout body and a severe expression, in his rare appearances (Fig. 10):



Fig. 10. A Nero intensely focusing on his Cithara performance (left), and Vespasianus as a personal aide to Nero (right).

Since this series focuses on Pliny the elder and his voyages, both emperors are secondary but accurately depicted characters. Both emperors are at times illustrated as giving orders to Pliny, himself a Roman general, with Nero being arrogant

and Vespasianus being stern but respectful of Pliny. Such rigour permeates the whole series. As the author acknowledged, such an attention to detail could only become possible through the support of Miki Tori, a manga author (*mangaka*) famous for his ability to draw intricately detailed backgrounds. More in general, *Plinius* can be considered another biographic work that faithfully chronicles the life and time of Roman emperors, though its focus is on Pliny the elder.

The perhaps more popular *Thermae Romae* offers an idiosyncratic rendition of imperial Rome, on the other hand. The series chronicles the misadventures of Lucius, an out-of-luck Roman thermal engineer/designer who can travel in time. Such a science-fictional event occurs when Lucius takes a bath and fully submerges himself to escape from the hardships of life. His travels invariably bring him to modern-day Japan, perhaps the only modern culture that considers public baths as central to public life as ancient Rome. Lucius, via his accident-ridden but overall safe travels, can save his career by bringing back and popularising Japanese cultural artefacts (e.g., bath caps, after-bath smoothies) to Roman audiences.

Though the series mixes this fantastic premise with comedy (and romance, in its later part), it also offers accurate renditions of Roman Imperial life of the 2nd century. The relevance of comedic overtones becomes clear when Lucius visits the imperial palace. Emperor Antoninus Pius, the heir to Hadrianus, briefly appears as a young womaniser and a generally frivolous individual attracting Lucius' scorn. Emperor Hadrianus is however portrayed as a stern, authoritative figure when asking Lucius to re-model his own imperial baths (Fig. 11):



Fig. 11. Hadrianus is portrayed with his trademark Greek-style full beard.

Interestingly, Hadrianus' homosexuality and artistic sensibility are explicitly mentioned in the series, but treated with sobriety (Yamazaki 2008, vol. 1–2, 2010, vol. 4; cf. Bowersock 2020; for discussion). Nevertheless, Hadrianus aptly incarnates the “stern ruler” figure when ordering Lucius to innovate his baths design style, lest he incur in the emperor's wrath. Antoninus also seems to playfully antagonise Lucius, when not chasing skirts and generally wasting time. Many comedic episodes follow from these general premises. Crucial for our goal, however, is the fact that the series includes two distinct instances of transplant. The first is the use of the science-fictional theme of time travel. The second is the consequent presence of strong cultural barriers creating comedic episodes (e.g., Lucius yelling to Japanese individuals in a futile attempt to be understood). Though leading to comedic scenes, Antoninus' frivolity and Hadrianus' sternness seem historically accurate. Hence, *Thermae Romae* is a faithful, passionate rendition of Imperial Rome, its emperors and its bath-loving citizens.

From this analysis of these works, one may wonder in what kind of specific cultural horizon these works find their inception. Yamazaki Mari's personal background becomes crucial in understanding such a matter. At age 18, the author moved to Florence to study the Italian language, art and history during the early '80s (Yamazaki 2010, vol. 4), and also became well-versed in Roman history. During a period she spent back in Japan, she worked as a part-time *mangaka* and a lecturer of Italian culture and language in various universities (Yamazaki 2009, vol. 2). As a *mangaka*, she has worked extensively on biographies (including her own), given her passion for history and European (in particular, Italian) culture. In a sense, historical accuracy is a norm that Yamazaki Mari is used to follow, given her commitment to the historical and biographic genres.

Given this premise, *Plinius* represents a pure biographic work. *Thermae Romae*, instead, represents an attempt to create a series connecting her two beloved, quintessential “bath-loving” cultures: Rome and Japan. At the same time, the series aimed to offer a vivid rendition of Roman daily life and culture (Yamazaki 2009, Vol. 1). Like the other historical manga discussed in this section, it provides an example of a document that shows an author's genre-driven commitment to faithfulness to historical facts. At the same time, this series respects the norms of fiction and comedy, though always in a perspective respectful of its historical commitment.

4.4 Fumetti

We conclude our discussion of relevant works with the two *fumetti* documents that feature roman Emperors *RanXeroX* and *Storia D'Italia a Fumetti*.

RanXeroX presents the adventures of the eponymous character, a cyborg built off scrapes of a Ranx Xerox copy machine, in a dystopic version of the late 20th century (Tamburini & Liberatore 1992). Mixing harsh social commentary, sex, drugs and (very) black humour, *RanXeroX* was a pioneer in the cyberpunk genre and a comic with strong postmodern undertones. In the second volume (Tamburini (w) & Liberatore (i) 1992b), *RanXeroX* ends up living in New York, and is involved in the machinations of “Enogabalus”, a shady new media tycoon who builds his image after the notorious roman emperor Elagabalus/Eliogabalus. *RanXeroX* becomes part of a video clip shooting that aims to reconstruct the imperial chariot races, though mediated via their *Ben Hur* version, with cars and modern weapons. Enogabalus plans to use the video to promote his latest protégé band, and via the shock value of real-life deaths. *RanXeroX*, however, thwarts Enogabalus’ plans and ends the shooting in a gigantic crash, killing most of the participants.

It should be clear from the brief description that Elagabalus’ reception represents a radical case of transplant. The fictional Elagabalus, Enogabalus, is a character only partially inspired by the corresponding Roman emperor, who followed Caracalla and Macrinus’ rule and distinguished himself as a very decadent emperor (“Editors”, 2020c). The *RanXeroX* character, though based on this figure, is nevertheless a distinct character. Case in point, Enogabalus’ appearance mixes a roman tunic with hair-style and make-up that seems to be based on 1980’s fashion (Fig. 12). Thus, hybridization also features as a clear mode of reception for this emperor:



Fig. 12. Enogabalus.

The idea of reconstructing the chariot races in “cyberpunk” form also acts as a nod to dystopian works such as the book *Crash* (Ballard 1973) or the cult movie *Death Race 2000* (Bartel (d) 1975), aside from *Ben Hur*. After all, the cultural horizon in which the authors worked is Italy of the early ‘80s, and the tradition of alternative/underground comics. Thus, one might argue that the authors’ chief concern is to combine several historical and fictional sources to create a work of (then) contemporary social commentary, mixed with the nascent cyberpunk genre. Historical faithfulness seems certainly not a concern of the two authors, as this type of re-interpretation is generally found in cyberpunk works (e.g., *Judge Dredd*, Hammar 2017; Ursini 2016, 2017).³

The other *fumetti* work we discuss to conclude our analysis offers a very different picture, however. *Storia D’Italia a fumetti* ‘History of Italy in Comics’ (Biagi (w) & VV.AA., 1978–1986) represents a multi-volume collaboration between Enzo Biagi and some of most illustrious *fumetti* illustrators (e.g., Milo Manara, Guido Crepax and several others). Enzo Biagi was one of the most important, influential and intellectually rigorous journalists of post-war Italy (Zippel 1991). At the end of the ‘70s, Enzo Biagi launched this complex project with the goal of introducing young and not-so-young readers to Italy’s history. For this purpose, Enzo Biagi chose a medium considered to be better pedagogically oriented to younger generations, within Italian culture (Barbieri 2009). At the same time, Enzo Biagi also chose to offer an expansive if not excessively detailed historiographic approach to the subject matter. Thus, the document traces the history of the Italian peninsula from his earliest attested settlers to the modern age.

For our discussion, suffice it to say that vols. 4–5 cover the history of imperial Rome, offering concise overviews of the rules of the emperors discussed so far. Since the work covers several emperors and their rules, we do not offer an exhaustive list. However, we can confirm that Augustus, Nero and the other emperors discussed so far are also represented in the work, if only briefly. Such representations are overall accurate and offer what one could call “highlights”

³ Post-modern undertones are also present in the first volume, in which RanXeroX is forced to dance in a Broadway musical combining all Fred Astaire’s movies (Tamburini and Liberatore 1992a). One can thus argue that the series generally answers to post-modern norms of hybridization, than to historical norms of faithfulness, as the explicit reference to a not so faithful source such as *Ben Hur* also clearly indicates.

of each emperor's rule. This is part of the work's goal to offer an illustrated history of Italy as a land.

Storia D'Italia a Fumetti perhaps represents the clearest case of non-fictional, historiographic document in our corpus. By offering an overall faithful rendition of history from the actual world, the series offers a consequent faithful rendition of Roman emperors and countless other historical figures. In so doing, it offers clear proof that comics as a medium can certainly involve faithful modes of reception, if authors create works within a historiographical, non-fictional genre. In such a case, the cultural horizon that authors and readers come to share seems to amount to a common language (Italian, in this case) and perhaps an interest in the history of Italy, conceived of as land with ancient roots.⁴ With this point in mind, we turn to the discussion and the conclusions.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

We believe that four key results emerge from our analysis.

First, Nero and Augustus emerge as the most famous emperors in these comic traditions, probably due to their historical popularity (or notoriety). Other emperors are also attested, and with the exceptions of Elagabalus in *RanXeroX*, Caligula in the eponymous series and perhaps the Caracalla/Macrinus duo in *Ishintan*, they are represented in a faithful manner. This fact should not appear surprising if one considers the genre norms at stake. *Shōnen* 'boys' manga tend to gloss over historical details (cf. *Ishintan*). Horror, fantasy and science fiction comics must include genre-specific themes (cf. *Caligula*, *The Sandman*, *RanXeroX*). Other works are instead faithful to their sources apart from minimal fictional elements. *Britannia*, *Les Aigles de Rome*, *Alix: Senator*, *Cestus* and *Thermae Romae* introduce fictional characters interacting with "realistic" emperors, though the latter does include a concession to fiction in the time-travelling Lucius. Finally, some works represent clear examples of historiographic/biographic non-fiction. *La Storia D'Italia a Fumetti* and

⁴ It is worth noting that Enzo Biagi authored several other editorial projects involving *fumetti*, and chronicling history at various levels (e.g., *Storia della Seconda Guerra Mondiale a Fumetti* 'history of WWII in comics': Biagi (w) & VV. AA. (i) 1991). We leave a discussion of such interesting works for future endeavours.

Plinius can be considered to offer accurate representations of roman Emperors and their rules. We therefore conclude that genre norms and historical sources are a key factor influencing the reception of “Classics” in comics.

Second, transplant seems a key mode of reception in comics, since it determines the degree of faithfulness of a document in often subtle manners, and may operate via incremental, discrete steps. The introduction of fictional protagonists is a first step in the creation of a fictional world that may nevertheless lead to an historical fiction narrative (e.g., *Murena*, *Britannia*). The introduction of the aforementioned “fantastic” themes can decrease the degree of faithfulness to historical sources, but it can also increase that of adherence to fantasy, science fiction or other genres. Hybridization may also affect this degree, but one might argue that this happens in a more limited set of cases. Our analysis has shown that visual portrayals of emperors tend to be close to historical sources, but certain visual concessions may appear across works (e.g., a Cithara-playing Nero). Both modes signal narrative themes that authors use to create their fictional worlds, while also establishing intertextual relations with real-world sources.

Third, all these choices must be interpreted within the cultural horizon in which each author operates: in our case, comics traditions. It is a fact that adult *bedées* and *seinen manga* belong to comic traditions in which historical fiction has strong currency within a well-defined market. Such authors are thus compelled to be faithful to sources, for their audiences expect this norm to be respected. If these works can offer themes allowing “cultural bridges”, then one can also expect readers to better appreciate these works. Case in point, *Thermae Romae* is a critically and commercially successful series that has generated a small multi-media franchise (e.g., a TV series, two live-action movies, several translations, and an *anime*). Note, furthermore, that with the likely exception of *fumetti*, these comics traditions have long had international audiences willing to buy original or translated documents. Thus, the cultural horizon in which 21st century authors of “classic comics” operate tends to be a veritable multi-cultural, ever-changing horizon.

Fourth, comics authors may certainly find classical (Greek and Roman) history fascinating and stimulating enough to use it in their creations. At least in the case of Yamazaki Mari, a fascination with her adoptive culture becomes the reason for creating such documents. Yoshikazu Yasuhiko (*Waga wa na Nero*) and Pat Milligan (*Britannia*) also cite such a fascination with Roman

history, though they (likely?) lack Roman roots. Nevertheless, these authors seem to be acquainted well enough with Classical culture to consider certain events and figures (emperors, in our case) as having a strong narrative potential. In the 21st century, the reception of imperial Rome seems to be part of the cultural horizon of any author and reader of comics that can love these rich (hi)stories from this period.⁵

We can conclude by offering the answers to our initial questions. First, our answer to the *how*-question (i.e., how faithfulness is achieved) is that authors usually compile information from historical sources to create potentially accurate renditions of roman emperors in their targets (e.g., comics series). Divergences from this norm may be motivated by the need of authors to introduce fictional themes specific to the genre they wish to operate in. Second, our answer to the *why*-question (i.e., why these themes are used) is that imperial Rome seems to be an extremely fascinating and rich source of interesting figures, events, and themes. Audiences from very diverse cultural backgrounds may intensely appreciate them, whether they involve tragic villains such as Nero or ambivalent autocrats such as Augustus. Reception studies may thus become able to study these forms of reception in precise manners, provided that Classical heritages are interpreted as potentially interesting to comics fans across different cultures.

⁵ Perhaps tellingly, Yamazaki Mari has received the title of *Commendatrice dell'Ordine della Stella D'Italia* 'Commander of the Order of the Italian Star', in 2017. This is an honorary title offered to non-Italian individuals who offer invaluable global contributions to Italian culture. *Pace Kovacs and Marshall* (2016: xxv), Japanese (and other) artists have excellent reasons to concern themselves with cultures other than their "ancestral" ones.

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