

## A Cold Case of Historical Bias

by Angelo Paratico

23 September 2012 — 450 years ago this month, in September 1562, the celebrated Basel press of Sebastian Henric Petri, published a two-volume edition of miscellaneous works by Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576?)<sup>[1]</sup>, the famous Milanese polymath whose books were always in great demand.

The first volume consisted of the *Somniorum Synesiorum Omnis Generis Insomnia Explicantes*<sup>[2]</sup>, a work dealing with dreams, their classification, origin and interpretation. The second volume contained eleven shorter philosophical and medical treatises, among which was the *Encomium Neronis*, a new biographical treatment of Nero, the much-maligned Roman emperor. It is a work that still has much to teach us, four and a half centuries later.



*Encomium Neronis*, Ioh. et Cornelium Blaeu, 1640.

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Today, the name of Girolamo Cardano pop ups here and there in books dealing with certain scientific matters. But he probably left his greatest mark on the study of algebra with the publication in Nuremberg in 1545 of his *Ars Magna*, which contained the solution to cubic equations.

But his name also appears in fields as varied as philosophy and literature. For instance, his *De Propria Vita* — a sort of eccentric autobiography, published posthumously in Paris in 1643 — is considered a masterpiece of the genre and, due to his disarming frankness, is often compared to that of Benvenuto Cellini and to the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne.<sup>[3]</sup> It is here that Cardano gives his famous portrait of himself,

starting from his feet and moving up



Girolamo Cardano

I am a man of medium height; my feet are short, wide near the toes, and rather too high at the heels, so that I can scarcely find well-fitting shoes; it is usually necessary to have them made to order. My chest is somewhat narrow and my arms slender. The thickly fashioned right hand has dangling fingers, so that chiromantists have declared me a rustic; it embarrasses them to know the truth.<sup>[4]</sup>

His frankness—which reaches its apex in his discussion of the sexual habits attributed to Nero—can be shocking to a modern reader.

I have suggested that Shakespeare was inspired by Girolamo Cardano<sup>[5]</sup>, as well as perhaps by John Dee, when he created the haunting figure of Prospero, the Milanese nobleman expert in magic, the lover of books, unjustly banished to an island, in his comedy *The Tempest*. Even the book that Shakespeare puts in the hands of Hamlet, while he is musing on life, dreaming and death was Thomas Bedingfield's translation of Cardano's *De Consolatione*, entitled *Cardanus Comforte*.<sup>[6]</sup>

Cardano, indeed, left an enduring impression in Great Britain. He had traveled to Scotland to treat the ill Archbishop of St. Andrews, John Hamilton (1512-1571), reaching Edinburgh on 29 June 1552. He cured the prelate by advising him to shower, walk after meals and buy a clock in order to follow a more regular routine during the day—things which, we are told by his biographer Henry Morley, had been previously unknown among the Scots. On his way back he spent a few days in London where he had a private audience with King Edward VI (1537-1553). He was a guest of his good friend (he was lodging in his house) Sir John Cheke

(1514-1557)— a Hellenist and tutor to the King— who had just been nominated chamberlain of the Exchequer for life. Cardano was impressed by the young King: the boy mastered seven languages, and was particularly fluent in French, English and Latin. They had a deep discussion on astronomy.<sup>[7]</sup>

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Cardano's *Encomium Neronis*—rendered in my translation as *Nero, an Exemplary Life*—is structured like a pleading in Nero's defense delivered in front of a modern court of law by a very clever, if not entirely genial, lawyer. Cardano's method must surely have looked odd to his contemporaries, but it was revolutionary historiography.

This lawyer analyzes, one by one, all the proofs of Nero's guilt provided mainly by the historians Tacitus and Suetonius, and shows us, modern readers, what lies behind them. He first investigates the background of the two historians, their possible hidden motives, their positions in society and then draws a comparison with the emperors which, the same historians claim, had been exemplary. For instance, he questions Suetonius on why he had called Emperor Titus *The delight and darling of the human race* in his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, suggesting that it was probably due to the fact that during his short reign, Titus had not condemned a single Senator to death. Did it count for nothing that Titus's friend, the historian Flavius Josephus, says that in a single day he had thrown one thousand unarmed Jews, mostly women and children, to the beasts in the Coliseum? Or we might add, his murder of over a million innocent people and the sack of Jerusalem during his suppression of the great Jewish revolt also count for nothing? For Suetonius, Cardano concludes, these were probably just footnotes in history.

These are just a few of the devastating blows that Cardano delivers. After reading the entire *Encomium Neronis*, one cannot but acquit Emperor Nero of most of the charges of criminality traditionally made against him.

What Stacy Schiff astutely said about accumulated accounts of Cleopatra in her recent biography applies here as well:

The result is a nineteenth-century British life of Napoleon or a twentieth-century history of America, were it to have been written by Chairman Mao.

Thomas Hobbes wrote: *Auctoritas non veritas facit legem*. Authority, not truth, makes laws.<sup>[8]</sup> Cardano's views were even more radical: he tells us that it is actually violence, indeed brute force and not mere authority, that set the rules of the game.

Nero, according to Cardano, exemplifies this reality: he tried to apply the law with justice, but he lost his life. The historians, unleashed by the brutish emperors that succeeded Nero —Vespasian, Titus and Domitian—buried him for a second time.

Most of the charges leveled against Nero are untrue and historically unfounded, as most modern biographies of the great Roman emperor now hold. Girolamo Cardano demonstrated this fact 450 years ago, and he did it solely by reading between the lines of the works of the biased historians, Tacitus and Suetonius.

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According to Morley, the draft of the *Neronis Encomium* was sketched out as early as 1546. The invasion of Lombardy by the French army and the retaking of the Duchy of Milan by the imperial troops of Charles V forced Cardano to move from Pavia to Milan, because the University in which he had been teaching was closed. During this period, he could only count on his pen to sustain his family, and he wrote for six months without interruption. One of the fruits of that unceasing writing might be this book.

This study of Nero went through several editions in Latin; the first modern translation was a Dutch edition from 1649<sup>[9]</sup> and more recently it has been translated into Italian and German. Most of the critics still tend to see it, as Morley did, as a curious oddity, failing perhaps to compare it with Nero's modern biographies or to examine Cardano's words with sufficient attention.

Morley believes that in this work Cardano is imitating the satirist Lucian of Samosata, and writes:

It was an old scholastic manner of amusement to heap up in an uncompromising way all possible arguments in favor of some obvious paradox. So earnestly Girolamo set to work, that we may be misled by his writing into the belief that he did really take Nero for a great and good man, if we did not know that not a doubt had then been cast on the good faith of those by whom he was originally painted as monster. In the sixteenth century it would have been almost heretical to separate from Nero seriously the ideas of cruelty and wickedness.<sup>[10]</sup>

After spending a great deal of time with the *Encomium Neronis*, I believe it to be a serious historical work, not a whitewash nor a clever absurdity. Perhaps it was conceived initially as a smart paradox, much like Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, or Favorinus's *Encomium of Thersites*, but Cardano's personal and professional misfortunes added poignancy to the subject. At the time of the publication, only two years had passed since the execution of his beloved son, Giovanni Battista—tortured and beheaded in Milan in 1560, accused of having poisoned his wife—and one year since the loss of Cardano's post of professor in Pavia, due to slanderous claims originating, perhaps, from the desperate defense he had put up to save his son's life. Cardano, we might suppose, felt himself close to Nero, and he wished to redress his reputation posthumously.

Cardano was also one of the first to understand, more than any other author before him, the deeply corrupted nature of Cicero and Seneca; the latter was an hypocrite who is often mistaken for a saintly philosopher murdered by Nero, the monster that Seneca had tried, in vain, to educate. But Seneca had in reality amassed a huge sum of money leveraging his position as tutor and adviser to the Emperor.<sup>[11]</sup>

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Jacques-Auguste de Thou was twenty years old in 1574. While on a tour in Italy with the French ambassador Paul De Foix, he took the opportunity to visit Girolamo Cardano in his modest Roman home in the Via Giulia, close to the church of Saint Mary of Monserrato.

He noted in his diary that he found that Cardano didn't live up to his expectations. Instead of the Faustian doctor that he had hoped to encounter, he saw a strangely-dressed old man. Even the conversation he had with him did not impress the refined Frenchman. He concluded that Cardano's detractor, Julius Caesar Scaliger, was right when he called him "a learned man with a childish mind."<sup>[12]</sup>

Girolamo Cardano was indeed by then the shadow of what he had been when kings and archbishops sought his counsel, and when European science considered him as a brilliant comet in the intellectual firmament. He was in bad health, toothless, destitute and with only a couple of years to live. Another Frenchman, Francois Amboise, visited Cardano shortly after de Thou and received a similar impression. He recorded that his room had no pictures, but only banners bearing the device *tempus possessio mea*. "Time is my possession": Cardano was still counting on the immortal fame due him because of his many inventions and discoveries. A crater on the Moon bearing his name proves that he was right.

Cardano had retained many books and manuscripts in cases and was feverishly working on them, still correcting, rereading and amending. He was alone, his daughter out of reach. His younger son Aldo was pestering him for money, even stealing, and had to be restrained by the police. Cardano knew that he had been a bad father, but his wife had died too early.

We can imagine him constantly pondering his past misfortunes and trying to rationalize them, while preserving intact his sense of destiny, which had been his primary motivation in life. His downfall had been swift and painful: the execution of his son, his imprisonment by the Inquisition at Bologna, his humiliating recanting of some of his so-called mistakes; the prohibition to write and teach; his enemies' air of triumph.

Girolamo Cardano had published a great variety of works during his lifetime, dealing with many subjects, perhaps too many: medicine, astrology, mathematic, astronomy, philosophy, chemistry, dream interpretation, physiognomy, and history. But if there was a thread uniting them all, it was his habit of looking at things from different angles. He had noted in his *De Immortalitate Animorum*: "I believe Hippocrates not because

[it] is Hippocrates speaking, but because I am forced by his reasoning to agree with what he says.” And Leibnitz said of him: “Cardano was a great man for all his faults; without them he would have been incomparable.”

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The Nero that Cardano describes might be compared, by today’s standards, to a Labour politician, perhaps even a Socialist; he got a lot of bad press as a result of agitation from the Conservative party of his day. Even Napoleon, analytical as he was, could see that Nero was loved by the people because he pressured the high and mighty rather than burdening the poor. Napoleon famously said to General Bertrand at St. Helena:

*Le peuple aime Néron. Néron lui inspire attachement et respect. Il y a une cause à cela. Tacite ne la fait pas connaître. Qu’il opprime les grands et ne pèse jamais sur le petits, on entrevoit une raison de ce sentiment populaire. Mais Tacite n’en dit rien. Il parle de crimes. Il en parle avec passion. Dès lors, on le sent prévenu; il n’inspire plus la même confiance; on est porté à croire qu’il exagère; il n’explique rien, il semble ne chercher qu’à faire des tableaux.<sup>[13]</sup>*

The accusations against Nero—the best-known and most of egregious of which is that “he fiddled while Rome burned”—do not hold up. Nero was not in Rome when the great fire started in July, AD 64 and, after rushing back, he did all in his power to help relieve the sufferings of the homeless citizens affected, offering shelter in his own gardens and in the buildings of the Campus Martius.

It is also not true—as we read in Tacitus and Suetonius—that he accused the Christians of causing the fire nor that he had thousands of them executed: there were very few Christians around at that time. The first Christian author to mention Christians being singled out as arsonists was Tertullian, but he was writing at the end of the second century. Stephen Dando-Collins acutely notes<sup>[14]</sup> that the texts of Tacitus and Suetonius may have been corrupted by medieval monks in their *scriptorium*. Rather than Christians being the victims of the Neronian repression after the fire, a more likely target is the followers of the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis, who were infamous for using altars with fire during their ceremonies. This could explain why those who were cruelly executed had animal skins placed on them, as a sort of mockery which would have been puzzling for Christians, but more understandable for the followers of that cult which centred on animal worship (hence also Tacitus’s depiction of them as possessed by an insane hatred against mankind). There are in fact no known Christian martyrs for that period, except Peter and Paul, who were executed not in connection with the fire, but later at the time of great rebellion in Judea.



False accusations.

(NYPL Digital Library Image ID: 1707871)

Nero was also alleged to have murdered his adopted brother Britannicus, who dropped dead during a banquet. It is however well documented that Britannicus was epileptic; the more likely explanation could be a seizure, perhaps with a piece of food stuck into his throat, which may also have turned his face blue, a symptom reported by Suetonius.<sup>[15]</sup>

Nero's reign had been one of the most peaceful in Roman history; this is hardly in dispute. He was a lover of arts; the ruins of his *Domus Aurea*, the marbles, the coins of his period, which greatly influenced Renaissance artists, bear witness of this. He did not squander the treasury, but increased the revenue of the State and also placed a large part of his personal wealth into the public coffers.

Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, Pliny the Elder, Plutarch and Josephus treated Nero not as a historical figure, but as an object of horror, a buffoon, transforming hearsay into facts. It is important to realize, as Cardano did, that they were all connected with the senatorial class squeezed by Nero in favor of the people, and with the Flavian Emperors—Vespasian, Titus and Domitian—who were interested to consolidate their own shaky legitimacy to rule by pouring scorn over their predecessors.

Modern historians have revised what had been the traditional narrative. The Italian historian Mario Attilio Levi<sup>[16]</sup> was one of the first to critically re-examine Nero's reign, and the image that he painted was different from the usual Hollywood kitsch. Ettore Paratore<sup>[17]</sup>, another illustrious Italian Latinist, concurs on Cardano's opinion (without having read the *Neronis Encomium*) of the classical accounts, admitting that those historians managed to reduce the golden age of the Roman Empire, corresponding with the rule of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, into a series of murders, orgies and follies.

Cardano's study of Nero is useful precisely because Nero is himself completely divorced from 21st-century concerns. Contemporary Asia, in particular, is separated by 2000 years and the entire length of the Silk Road, stretched to the breaking point. The distortions of Nero's record are particularly egregious, something Cardano managed to demonstrate 450 years ago with nothing more than the nearly one-thousand-and-five-hundred-year-old texts that everyone else accepted at face value. That the lessons are delivered with Cardano's trademark verve and brio is an advantage: his writing is as accessible as it was when first published.

We should remember George Orwell, who wrote in his masterpiece *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that “[he] who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.”

The conclusion reached by Girolamo Cardano is equally radical and inescapable; to him History is essentially evil:

Therefore I have asked myself several times if it is better not to write about history: the study of history appears to be more damaging than advantageous for us mortals. How could be excited to pursue virtue those who read about the volubility of the Athenians, of the perfidy of the Carthaginians, or of the cruelty of tyrants? Which advantage we may get by the actions of Agatocles, or Phalarides, or Dionysians? But not even the campaigns of Marius, Sulla or Julius Caesar contain any useful example: nothing else than tricks, robberies, traps, disloyalty, cruelty, the murders of egregious men, oppression against the honest, devastations of fields, destruction of cities, indiscriminate butchery, heavy enslavement of unhappy people, slanders against innocents and an infinite sequel of disgraces. It is therefore clear that there is no pleasure or advantage to gain from such readings. Then the books of history by Tacitus, Suetonius, Diodorus Siculus, Appianus of Alexandria and Thucydides, likewise those of Machiavelli, they are opposite to the study of sacred philosophy. But even worse than these are the histories of Herodotus and these of our times, which, besides the common defects, are full of lies, adulation and false accusations.<sup>[18]</sup>

Asia is hardly immune and in most of Asia today the perverse use and the distortion of the past is all too apparent. Both Nero and Cardano have something to teach us.

Girolamo Cardano's *Nero: an Exemplary Life*, translated into English for the first time by Angelo Paratico will be published in November 2012 by Inkstone Books.

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## Notes

- [1] The date of his death is disputed. See Ian Maclean *Girolamo Cardano: the last years of a polymath*. Renaissance studies Vol.21 No. 5. 2007. According to the *History of Milan, Milan, 1783-98* by Pietro Verri, Cardano died at the beginning of 1577.
- [2] Cardani, Hieronymi Somniorum Synesiorum Omnis Generis insomnia explicantes. De libris proprijs; De curationibus et predictionibus admirandis; Neronis encomium; Geometria encomium; De uno, actio in Thessalicum Medicum; De secretis; De gemmis et coloribus; Dialogus de morte; Dialogus que dicitur Tetim, seu de humanis consilijs; De minimis & propinquis; De summo bono. Henricum Petri, Basel, September 1562.
- [3] Wolfgang Goethe made the comparison with Benvenuto Cellini in his account of the Theory of Colours, published in 1810. Ian Maclean *ibid.* calling this work “One of the text symptomatic of the sixteen-century shift in the perception of the human self.”
- [4] Cardano Girolamo *The Book of My Life* E.P. Dutton, New York, 1931.
- [5] Angelo Paratico *Cardano and Shakespeare*, Portland, 1987.
- [6] *Cardanus Comforte* Thomas Marsh, London 1573; reprinted 1576; reprinted by B. Aylmer 1683.
- [7] Girolamo Cardano *Geniturarum Exemplar*. p.15 Lyon 1555.

- [8] T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London, 1968.
- [9] Neroos Lof trans. J. H. Glazemaker, Amsterdam, 1649.M
- [10] Henry Morley *The Life of Girolamo Cardano, of Milan, Physician.* London, 1854.
- [11] Richard Holland Nero. *The Man Behind the Myth*, London, 2000.
- [12] De Thou, Auguste *Historiarum sui temporis ab anno Domini 1543 usque ad annum Domini 1607. Libri CXXXVIII Accedunt Commentariorum de vita sua libri sex hacienus inediti*, Geneve, Pierre de la Roviere. 1620-1621. And *Monumenta Litteraria, sive Obitus et elogia doctorum virorum* London, 1640. De Thou (1553-1617) was a friend of Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540-1609) the son of Cardano's bitter enemy.
- [13] The people love Nero. He inspires in them both affection and respect. There is a reason for this which Tacitus omits. One can discern the reason for this popular feeling: Nero oppressed the great and never burdened the ordinary people. But Tacitus says nothing of this. He speaks of crimes. He speaks of them with passion. We, as a result, feel he is biased; he no longer inspires the same confidence. One is lead to believe that he exaggerates; he explains nothing and appears satisfied with vignettes.
- [14] Stephen Dando-Collins *The Great Fire of Rome*, Cambridge, Mass., 2010.
- [15] This has been confirmed by Prof. Gavin Joynt, a specialist in Anaesthesia and Intensive care at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Britannicus's seizure may indeed have caused suffocation.
- [16] Levi, Mario *Attilio Nerone e i suoi tempi* Istituto editoriale Cisalpino, Milan, 1949.
- [17] Ettore Paratore *La narrativa Latina nell'età di Nerone.* Ed. dell'Ateneo, 1961.
- [18] Girolamo Cardano Nero, *an Exemplary Life*, Hong Kong, 2012.
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