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Caligula's Sexual Desire for the Moon

(Suet. *Calig.* 22.4)

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Abstract: The different modern interpretations of Suetonius' claim that Caligula used constantly to invite Luna to have sexual intercourse with him (*Calig.* 22.4) are surveyed in brief. It is then argued that this allegation is best treated as the mistaken expansion of some statement such as Dio 59.26.5 where the key verb (*συγγίγνεσθαι*) was misunderstood to mean "to have sexual intercourse with" rather than simply "to hold a conversation with" and this statement was itself a generalization based on a sarcastic comment made by Caligula while meeting one night with Vitellius as described at Dio 59.27.6.

Keywords: Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum*, Caligula, Dio Cassius, Latin sexual vocabulary.

Suetonius begins his description of the actions of Caligula as monster following his initial description of his actions as *princeps* with an account of his pretensions to divinity. He describes his orders that the most famous statues of the gods should be brought to Rome from Greece and their heads replaced by his own likeness (*Calig.* 22.2), his erection of a golden, life-sized statue of himself in a temple dedicated to his *numen*, and to which a range of exotic birds were offered in sacrifice (*Calig.* 22.3), and his habit of conversing with two divinities in particular, the moon-goddess Luna and the father of the gods Jupiter (*Calig.* 22.4):

Et noctibus quidem plenam fulgentemque lunam invitabat assidue in amplexus atque concubitum, interdiu vero cum Capitolino Iove secreto fabulabatur, modo insusurrans ac praebens in vicem aurem, modo clarius nec sine iurgiis. Nam vox comminantis audita est: "H μ' ἀνάειρ' ή ἐγώ σέ, ...¹

At night he used constantly to invite the full and radiant moon to his embraces and his bed, while in the daytime he would talk confidentially with Jupiter Capitolinus, now whispering and then in turn putting his ear to the mouth of the god, now in louder and even angry language; for he was heard to make the threat: 'Lift me up, or I'll lift thee'.

The purpose of this note is to re-examine the significance of Suetonius' claim that Caligula used to invite the goddess Luna to share his embraces and lie with him, and to offer a new explanation for the origin of the same.

It is not easy to explain why Caligula should have behaved in the manner alleged. Several different theories have been offered, but none has won general acceptance. The usual approach has been to assume that Suetonius' allega-

¹ Text and translation from J.C. Rolfe, *Suetonius I*, Loeb Classical Library 31 (Cambridge MA 1913) 436–437.

tion is basically correct, and that Caligula did indeed behave towards Luna in much the same manner as described, but that Suetonius, or his source, has misrepresented the significance of this behaviour, whether deliberately or otherwise. Benediktson drew attention to the facts both that Caligula had suffered from epilepsy as a boy and that there was a common ancient belief that the moon played a role in causing seizures to argue that Caligula may have suffered from a persistent fear of renewed seizures as an adult so that his behaviour towards the moon may be explicable as some form of attempt to ward off seizures.² Unfortunately, he is vague as to how exactly such behaviour was supposed to ward off seizures, and does not offer any parallels for the invocation of the moon in this way for this purpose. Another possibility, perhaps not entirely unrelated, is that Caligula may have been indulging in sorcery, since sorcerers were commonly believed to have been able to ‘draw down the moon’ (*lunam deducere*).³ Against this, there is no explicit mention here of sorcery, and no evidence otherwise that Caligula was interested in sorcery, although a hostile tradition would surely have rejoiced in reporting such had any existed.

Suetonius often generalizes on the basis of a single example, so it is possible that he does the same here, misrepresenting what was originally a single incident as a more common occurrence.⁴ So Barrett accepts that Caligula did indeed invite Luna to have sex with him, but claims that this was “probably an example of his mischievous humour”.⁵ However, he makes no attempt to explain the nature of this joke, exactly how or why it was humorous. Furthermore, one suspects that many, if not most, Romans would have regarded this alleged joke as blasphemous rather than humorous. Perhaps the most popular explanation of this behaviour is that it was connected with Caligula’s religious policy, particularly his alleged cult of Isis. According to this argument, this

² See D.T. Benediktson, “Caligula’s Phobias and Philias: Fear of Seizure?”, *CJ* 87 (1992) 159–163. For further evidence that Caligula may have continued to suffer from epilepsy into adulthood also, see D. Woods, “Concealing Caligula’s Epilepsy”, in C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History XIV*, Collection Latomus 315 (Brussels 2008) 306–312.

³ For sorcerous attempts to draw down the moon, see D.E. Hill, “The Thessalian Trick”, *RhM* 116 (1973) 211–238. C. Calhoon, “Is There an Antidote to Caesar? The Despot as *Venenum* and *Veneficus*”, in A. Turner, J.K.O. Chong-Gossard, F. Vervaet (eds.), *Private and Public Lies: The Discourse of Despotism and Deceit in the Graeco-Roman World*, Impact of Empire 11 (Leiden 2010) 271–294, at 291, argues in support of Caligula’s “literary construction as a ‘would-be’ sorcerer”. Yet criticism of Caligula was not normally as subtle as her argument suggests.

⁴ See e.g. his claim that Tiberius exiled some Jews from Rome to unnamed provinces (*Tib.* 36), whereas Josephus (*AJ* 18.84) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.85) note their dispatch to Sardinia alone, or his general claim that Tiberius ordered young girls due for execution to be raped first (*Tib.* 61.5), as if there were multiple examples of such, compared to the single example of this known to Tacitus (*Ann.* 5.9).

⁵ A.A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Abuse of Power*, 2nd ed. (London 2015) 291. Similarly, J. Bellemore, “Gaius the Pantomime”, *Antichthon* 28 (1994) 65–79, at 76, includes this among Caligula’s “clearly jocular claims”.

passage misrepresents some form of initiation into this cult whereby he married Isis, who may even have been identifiable in his mind with his deceased sister Drusilla with whom he was supposed to have committed incest until her death in June AD 38.⁶ Against this, one notes that the passage under discussion contains no explicit reference to Isis nor displays any evident Egyptian influence. Furthermore, there is no hard evidence that Caligula really did have any interest at all in the cult of Isis.⁷ Indeed, the fact that none of the coins struck at Rome under Caligula depicts Luna, Diana, or Isis, suggests that he had no great interest in the moon-goddess under whatever name.⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that while Wardle insists that “the bias of Suetonius and his sources permits that some intelligible rite or practice has been deliberately misrepresented”, he concludes his quick survey of the above interpretations with the statement that “no explanation is obviously superior to the others”.⁹

There remain other possibilities. It may be relevant that Caligula had been passionately devoted to the theatre even before he became emperor, remained equally devoted to it during his reign, and even took the pantomime actor Mnesster as his lover.¹⁰ Furthermore, the reports of him disguising himself as a variety of gods or goddesses suggest a real love of performance.¹¹ This suggests that he may have been performing some sort of dramatic piece when he allegedly invited Luna into his bed. In particular, he may have been playing the part of Endymion from Greek myth, the handsome shepherd with whom Luna fell in love, visited every night, and by whom she bore fifty daughters.¹² Or perhaps he

⁶ See e.g. E. Köberlein, *Caligula und die ägyptischen Kulte* (Meisenheim 1962) 55–57; D.W. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius' Life of C. Caligula* (Atlanta 1993) 90; F. Gury, “L'ideologie imperiale et la lune: Caligula”, *Latomus* 59 (2000) 564–595.

⁷ No text explicitly refers to his worship of Isis. Instead, modern commentators seize on various vague statements concerning his behaviour, such as the claim that he participated in certain mystery rites disguised as a woman (Jos. *AJ* 19.30), as evidence of such worship. For a critical assessment of such claims, see Barrett (n. 5) 291–293.

⁸ See C.H.V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage 1: From 31 BC to AD 69*, 2nd ed. (London 1984) 102–113. The most prominent goddess was Vesta, and even she only appeared on a series of asses (*RIC* 1², Gaius nos. 38, 47, 54). The failure of Caligula to depict Luna upon his coinage is all the more noteworthy in that there was excellent precedent for depicting her on such. For example, the denarii struck during the period c. 200–170 BC had frequently depicted Luna in a biga on their reverses. See M.H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage* (Cambridge 1974) nos. 133/3, 136/1, 140/1, 141/1, 156/1, 158/1, 159/2, 161/1, 163/1, 187/1. An even more relevant and interesting type struck in 44 BC depicted Luna descending towards a reclining figure often identified as either Sulla or Endymion (*RR*C no. 480/10). See J. Rufus Fears, “Sulla or Endymion: A Reconsideration of a Denarius of L. Aemilius Buca”, *Museum Notes* 20 (1975) 29–37.

⁹ D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula: A Commentary*, Collection *Latomus* 225 (Brussels 1994) 214–215.

¹⁰ Suet. *Calig.* 11, 54, 55.1. In general, see Bellemore (n. 5).

¹¹ Dio 59.26.6–10.

¹² See e.g. Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.55–58; Cic. *Tusc.* 1.92; Prop. 2.15; Paus. 5.1.3–4. In contrast to Endymion, Caligula was rather ugly, if one can trust Suetonius' not unbiased description of him (*Calig.* 50.1).

was re-enacting the claim by the dictator Sulla that Luna had appeared to him in a dream, handed him a thunderbolt, and ordered him to strike down his enemies, although with the addition of some erotic foreplay also.¹³ Alternatively, one cannot exclude the possibility that this story misrepresents a claim by Caligula that he used regularly dream of having sex with Luna, since it was considered a good omen to dream of having sex with her.¹⁴ Finally, Selene, the Greek for ‘moon’ was also a female name, so it is even possible that this story may misrepresent a relationship with a concubine called Selene.¹⁵ However, before preferring any of the above explanations, or speculating further concerning other possibilities even, the evidence of other authors concerning the relationship between Caligula and Luna needs to be taken into account also.

Dio Cassius preserves two passages of particular relevance here. The earlier passage describes how Caligula had developed pretensions to divinity even before some members of the senate had begun to praise him as such following his release of an alleged senatorial conspirator against him (59.26.5):

ἡξίου μὲν γάρ καὶ πρότερον ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον νομίζεσθαι, καὶ τῇ Σελήνῃ συγγίγνεσθαι καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς Νίκης στεφανοῦσθαι ἔλεγε, Ζεύς τε εἶναι ἐπλάττετο, ...¹⁶

Indeed, even before this he had been demanding that he be regarded as more than a human being, and was wont to claim that he had intercourse with the Moon, that Victory put a crown upon him, and to pretend that he was Jupiter, ...

The second passage was intended to illustrate the submissiveness of Lucius Vitellius, former governor of Syria and father of the future emperor of that name, to Caligula as an example of the submissiveness of the senate as a whole to him (59.27.6):

καὶ ποτε τοῦ Γαῖου συγγίγνεσθαι τε τῇ Σελήνῃ λέγοντος, καὶ ἐρωτήσαντος αὐτὸν εἰς ὄρῳ τὴν θεὸν συνοῦσαν αὐτῷ, κάτω τε ὡς καὶ τεθηπώς ἔβλεπεν ὑποτρέμων, καὶ συμικρόν τι φθεγξάμενος “ύμῖν” ἔφη “τοῖς θεοῖς, δέσποτα, μόνοις ἀλλήλους ὄρῳ ἔξεστιν.” Οὐιτέλλιος μὲν οὖν ἐκεῖθεν ἀρξάμενος πάντας καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο τοὺς ἄλλους κολακείᾳ ὑπερεβάλετο.¹⁷

¹³ Plut. *Sulla* 9.7–9. However, there is serious doubt as to whether the name of the goddess involved should be read Selene or Semele.

¹⁴ On dreams of intercourse with Luna as a good omen, see Artem. *Oneir.* 1.80. Suetonius reports that Caligula was often disturbed by strange dreams, including one wherein the spirit of the Ocean talked to him (*Calig.* 50.3). Hurley (n. 6) 183 suggests that this dream of the Ocean talking to him “is suspiciously like his conversation with Jupiter and his intimacy with the moon”.

¹⁵ Most famously, the daughter of Mark Antony and Cleopatra VII of Egypt married to King Juba II of Mauretania was called Cleopatra Selene II (d. c. 5 BC). See Suet. *Cal.* 26.1.

¹⁶ Text and translation from E. Cary, *Dio Cassius VII*, Loeb Classical Library 175 (Cambridge, MA 1925) 344–347.

¹⁷ Text and translation Cary (n. 16) 350–351.

On one occasion, when Gaius claimed to be enjoying converse with the Moon, and asked Vitellius if he could see the goddess with him, the other, trembling as in awe, kept his eyes fixed on the ground and answered in a half whisper: "Only you gods, master, may behold one another". So Vitellius, from this beginning, came later to surpass all others in adulation.

An important feature of these two passages is that they both use the same verb – συγγίγνεσθαι – to describe the interaction between Caligula and Luna, even though the translator renders them rather differently in each case, as "to have sexual intercourse with" in the earlier passage and as "to hold a conversation with" in the later passage. He can translate the same verb in these two different ways because it bears these two quite different meanings, where the context alone indicates what meaning was intended in any particular case.¹⁸ The only obvious reason why he should have preferred to translate this verb as "to have sexual intercourse with" in the first passage is that he is comparing it in his mind to the passage from Suetonius under discussion here. If this passage was considered in isolation, however, that is, if one did not know about the passage from Suetonius, it would make just as much sense to translate it as "to have conversation with" instead. In contrast, the same verb occurs in a fuller and very different context in the later passage, and this really only allows of one translation, that adopted by the translator. Although Vitellius might have been bold enough to approach Caligula while he was walking about under the full moon, perhaps muttering to himself as he did so, one suspects that he would have probably have made a discrete withdrawal should he have discovered Caligula engaged in some form of sexual activity. Indeed, if one were to translate the verb συγγίγνεσθαι as "to have sexual intercourse with" in this case, the implication would be that Vitellius was watching Caligula masturbate under the full moon, and while the sources make many charges against Caligula, none ever accuse him of public displays of masturbation, so this seems a far less plausible translation.

Questions arise concerning the relationship between the three passages, and whether they do in fact refer to different incidents during the life of Caligula. Two points are noteworthy. The first is that there is a direct comparison between the event described by Suetonius and Dio 59.26.5 in that both describe Caligula's behaviour towards Luna within the context of his divine pretensions, in particular, his apparent belief that he had a special personal relationship with the gods. The second noteworthy point is that Suetonius'

¹⁸ See H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement* (Oxford 1996) 1660. J.W. Humphrey, *An Historical Commentary on Cassius Dio's Roman History Book 59 (Gaius Caligula)*, a doctoral dissertation submitted at the University of British Columbia in 1976, 264 agrees in translating the same verb in reference to sexual intercourse at Dio 59.26.5 and to conversation at Dio 59.27.6. For other uses of this verb by Dio, see e.g. 59.11.4 (Drusilla, sister of Caligula, conversing with gods in heaven); 60.14.3 (Silanus refusing to have sex with Messalina); 60.22.4 (Messalina forcing Mnester to have sex).

claim that Caligula used to call Luna to his embrace at night contains no information that one would not already have been assumed by the very decision to translate the verb *συγγίγνεσθαι* in a statement such as Dio 59.26.5 as “to have sexual intercourse with” rather than “to hold a conversation with”. Suetonius says that Caligula called upon Luna at night, but she would not have been available to be called upon except at night. He says that Caligula summoned her to his embrace, but if they were having sexual intercourse, they surely embraced at some point also.

It is my argument, therefore, that Suetonius’ description of how Caligula used to call Luna to his embrace at night represents no more than an elaboration of some statement such as preserved at Dio 59.26.5, the unpacking of some basic details implicit in such a statement when the verb *συγγίγνεσθαι* is translated as “to have sexual intercourse with” rather than “to hold a conversation with”. The real question here is whether Suetonius, or his source, was correct in translating the verb in such a statement to mean “to have sexual intercourse with” rather than to “to hold a conversation with”. The fact that Dio 59.26.5 uses the same verb to describe the interaction between Caligula and Luna as does Dio 59.27.6 suggests not. The probability is that the description of the interaction between Caligula and Luna at Dio 59.26.5 draws upon some such account as preserved at Dio 59.27.6, that is, that this part of Dio 59.26.5 and Dio 59.27.6 are effectively doublets.¹⁹ This leads to the conclusion that all three passages from Suetonius and Dio refer to the same, unique event, so that Suet. *Calig.* 22.4 expands upon some such statement as found at Dio 59.26.5, where this is a generalizing summary of some such account as found at Dio 59.27.6.²⁰ Hence the only passage of any value when seeking to understand the attitude of Caligula towards Luna is Dio 59.27.6.

So what is the significance of the event described at Dio 59.27.6? One may start by acknowledging that Caligula suffered from insomnia, never resting for more than three hours at night apparently, and that he used sometimes wander through the colonnades until dawn.²¹ This rather than any peculiar devotion to Luna may explain what he was doing up in the middle of night, taking a walk outside in the open air rather than along the colonnades, perhaps because a clear night and a full moon provided sufficient light to make

¹⁹ Dio does not name any of his sources for the reign of Caligula. However, his comments upon the differing figures for the wealth discovered in the treasury by Caligula upon his accession (59.2.6) suggest, as one would expect, that he used multiple sources.

²⁰ H. Lindsay, *Suetonius: Caligula* (London 1993) 105 equates the story about Luna at Suet. *Calig.* 22.4 with that at Dio 59.26.5, with no attempt to explain how he reaches this conclusion. Similarly, A. Winterling, *Caligula: A Biography* (Berkeley 2011) 160 explains Suet. *Calig.* 22.4 in terms of Dio 59.26.5, claiming that “the basis for it was a cynical joke intended to demean the flatterer Vitellius”, but this does not really explain how one passes from one description of events to another when they appear so different.

²¹ See Suet. *Calig.* 50.3.

this safe on this occasion. He may have summoned Vitellius to keep him company, or to conduct some other business that should more properly have been done during the day.²² However, it is not difficult to imagine a surprised Vitellius gently inquiring what Caligula was doing, and how he could assist him, nor to imagine the sarcastic reply from a tired and short-tempered Caligula that he was talking to Luna, and could he not see her besides him. The tone probably warned Vitellius that danger lurked, but some quick-witted flattery then helped to defuse the situation.

In conclusion, the simplest explanation of the origin of Suetonius' description of Caligula's apparent sexual desire for the goddess Luna is that it represents the expansion of a brief report in a Greek source that Caligula had used to claim "to hold a conversation with" Luna, a generalizing summary of his famous moon-light meeting with Vitellius, where the key verb συγγίγνεσθαι has been misunderstood to mean "to have sexual intercourse with" instead. The author responsible for this misunderstanding had the unenviable task of deciding whether it was more probable that Caligula should have regularly claimed "to hold a conversation with" Luna or "to have sexual intercourse with" her instead. Neither would be credible of a man whom tradition held in high esteem, but both seemed equally credible of a man generally held in the lowest contempt as a monster of megalomania and lust. However, this was not necessarily an either/or choice, because sex would normally entail some conversation also. Therefore, the author was able to fudge the matter somewhat by having Caligula call out to Luna to share his embrace, so engaging in some minimal conversation as a prelude to sex, but with the emphasis remaining firmly on the sexual element still.

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²² He also summoned several leading senators to the palace one night in order to display his dancing to them (Suet. *Calig.* 54.2; Dio 59.5.5).