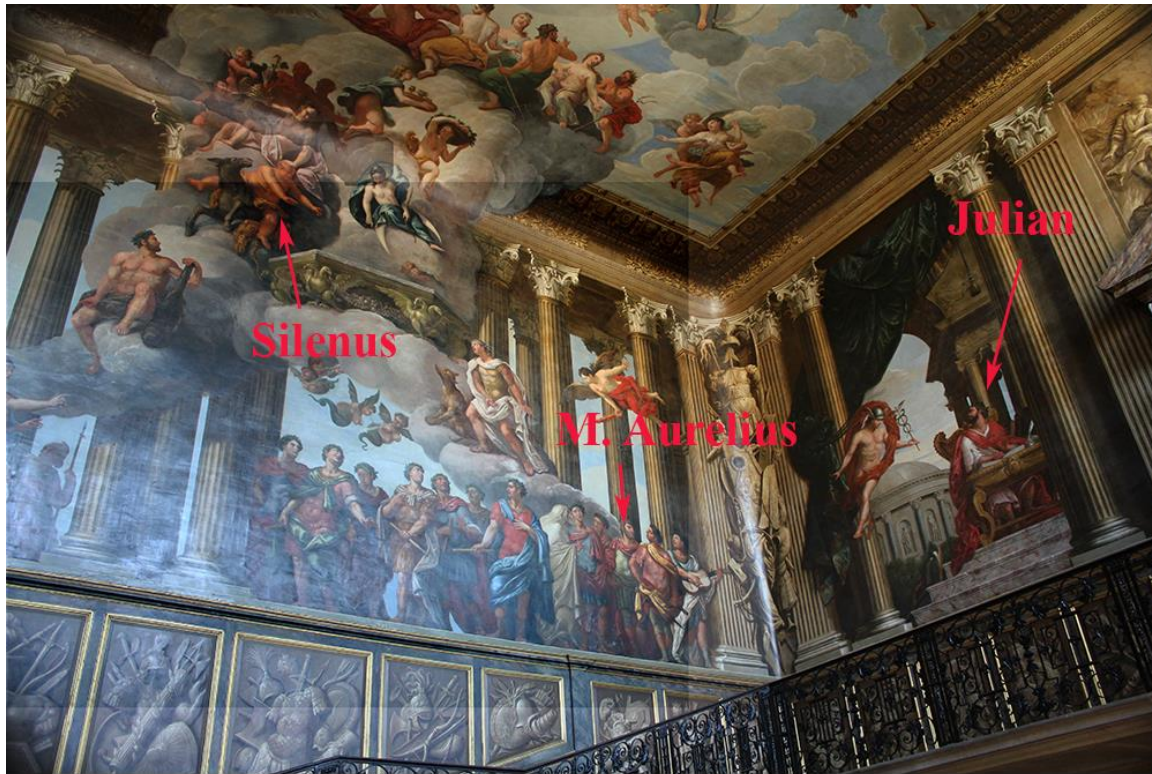


The Subtle Jocularly of Verrio's Staircase for William III: An Interpretation

(David McNeil, Dalhousie University: dmcneil@dal.ca)

In the next ten minutes, I wish to endorse the case for embracing the subtle jocularly, or the joke if you will, that critics have already identified in Verrio's murals that adorn the King's Staircase. The allegorical source for the images on the east and south walls and the ceiling has been known to critics since Edgar Wind's 1940 article.¹ These images, spilling across three surfaces, represent a literary text, that is Julian the Apostate's *The Caesars* (361 AD). There is, I believe, a profound irony insofar as *The Caesars* clearly mocks the idea of glorifying military conquest while what we see on the east wall encourages us to recognize the honoring of military conquest. In brief, the viewer's initial reaction is to identify William III and the Protestant cause with Alexander the Great on the left, set against the line of Romans on the right, who are supposedly meant to represent the Stuarts. What we see on the south wall is a dramatization of the act of composition of this literary text—that is Julian the Apostate at his desk with Hermes hovering as inspiration.



**The King's Staircase, Hampton Court Palace
(ceiling, east and south walls)
Photo and annotations: David McNeil**

Before I unpack the joke, I will just remark that the choice to dramatize the act of composition in this manner strikes me as unusual (general biblical or classical scenes being the norm), although we might generalize here and call for precision when we identify source material.² (And for the record there are most probably other composition or inspiration scenes as murals.) Wind suggests a convincing reason for Julian's *The Caesars* as a specific source--a pamphlet war involving the image of Julian that occurred in the early 1680s at the height of fears about the Popish Plot, and Rowland Smith offers a very convincing case for the possible influence of Spanheim's 1683 French commentary on *The Caesars*.³ Brett Dolman and Rowland Smith have taken up the question that Wind left unanswered—if the scene is meant to depict *The Caesars*, then where is Marcus

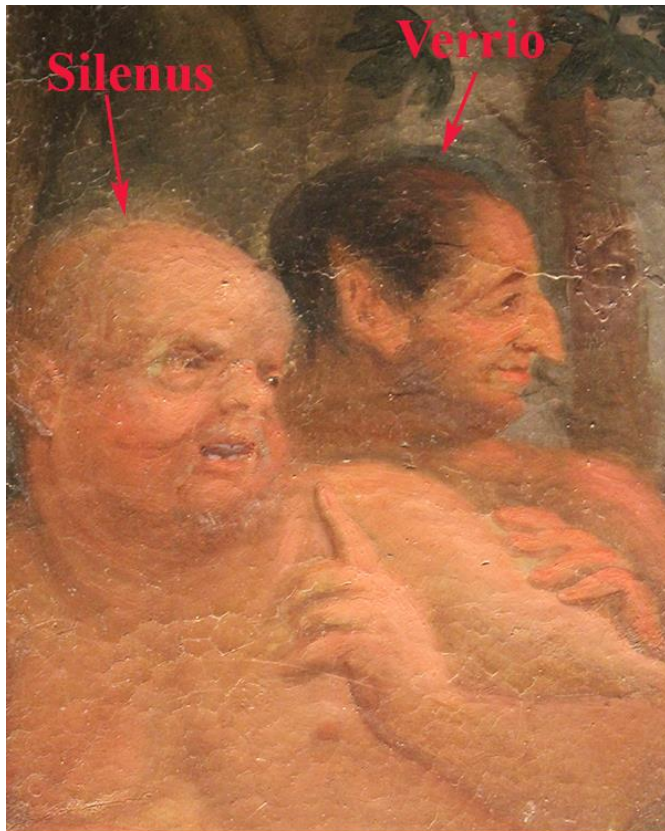
Aurelius, the figure who is voted most worthy by the gods?⁴ In a lengthy commentary on the mural, T. R. Langley goes further than anyone else on the subject in identifying Marcus Aurelius on the east wall and providing reasons why William's administration might have wanted associations between Marcus Aurelius and William III.⁵ My purpose is to highlight the jocular element in this source text, which has long been associated with the Lucianic dialogue, and in Verrio's work itself, and to encourage the embracing the jocular in our interpretation of this mural.

Julian's text *The Caesars* follows the style of Lucian's military dialogues quite closely insofar as the majority of the participants, at least those who do the most talking, are clearly ridiculed. Hence, it would seem to be an inappropriate text on which to base a mural that ostensibly is meant to pay homage. To understand fully the satiric element it is necessary to expand on the nature of Julian's satire. A typical Lucian dialogue between military conquerors will involve the classical figure of the braggart soldier—somebody who is depicted making verbal boasts about past deeds that are historically challenged.⁶ Such is the structure of the saturnalia or banquet represented in *The Caesars*. Here it is Julius Caesar himself and Alexander the Great who do most of the talking. The gods have invited the military figures (and the more philosophical figure of Marcus Aurelius) to the banquet so that they can make their cases for earning the sanction of the gods. The jester Silenus plays a prominent role in commenting on the proceedings. The idea of being "voted" is a key part of the structure—and the dependence of the gods on the human drama for entertainment is also part of the overall comic spirit. Braggarts are routinely exposed as exaggerating their exploits, and those who speak the most usually have the weakest cases.

Julius Caesar makes the first case for being the most accomplished of conquerors. He speaks at length, in an informal and repetitive manner. Here we have the fool who will indict himself naturally as long as one provides him with the opportunity to speak.⁷ Alexander responds and lays out his own case based on having faced superior opposition or on conquering more expansive territory. We need not concern ourselves with the details. What is important is that when ultimately given the opportunity Marcus Aurelius (more philosopher than military figure) chooses to say nothing because nothing can fool the gods: "I have no need to make a speech. . . . since you know it [i.e., all that concerns me] and nothing at all is hidden from you, do you of your own accord assign me such honour as I deserve."⁸ This is deadpan comedy. Later on, when asked to speak directly to his motivation, Marcus "answers modestly, 'To imitate the gods.'"⁹ Pressed to elaborate by Silenus, Marcus does speak a few sentences but quickly checks himself and repeats, "I did but imitate the gods."¹⁰ Marcus can easily be accused of wheedling or courting favor by flattery. No matter, the gods buy it and vote Aurelius the best of the humans. Julian's text is characterized by the essential components of Lucian's dialogues on military matters. The braggart talks himself into the opposite of what he desires. The whole sense of competition, immediate or by reputation, falls flat.

Returning to Verrio's staircase, we can point to at least two other jocular elements. First, there is the central depiction of the jester Silenus, riding a donkey, who appears above Alexander on the east wall. Silenus, of course, plays a key role in Julian's text. The presence of his image here is the most direct expression of the general mockery that Verrio seems to be following. Second, we can entertain Langley's suggestion that the bearded figure, or the third from the

right in the line of Romans is meant to be Marcus Aurelius. He is the only figure who stares back at Julian and does not take in the spectacle of military showmanship. Again, this is the figure in *The Caesars* who tries to opt out of the verbal boasting. Last year, I presented on the subject of irony in the mural or what Woods-Marsden refers to as “self-likenesses.”¹¹ The artist who paints himself into the scene in such a way as to imply playfulness. We know that Verrio engaged in this very practice as he painted himself as a satyr admiring his own work, or the interaction of Bacchus and Ariadne in the Hampton Court Banqueting House.



Detail from Banqueting House. Photo and annotation: D. McNeil

Part of the case that Langley lays out involves the endorsement of Marcus Aurelius by Bishop Burnet when the latter gave a sermon in 1691 on William and Mary taking the throne.¹² Langley also believes that a William III / Marcus Aurelius association would have been appropriate following the Treaty of Ryswick and the sense that a new century or new age was on the horizon. Finally, he points to John Wilson's 1688 edition of Erasmus' classic *The Praise of Folly* and how Marcus Aurelius is depicted therein. It is possible that Verrio himself was not familiar with Julian's *The Caesars*, and that, as Smith suggests, was more directly influenced by texts about Julian.¹³ However, when I see Silenus, the jester, dominating the central scene, and when I consider the arguments by Langley (as difficult as it is to read Langley), I find this hard to accept. It may be easier to believe that by 1700 William and his administration simply weren't paying attention. William had lost interest in Hampton Court after Mary passed away in 1694, and according to one of his biographers, he wasn't that fond of literature.¹⁴ Of course, it is possible he was in on the joke—that he accepted the Marcus Aurelius association and disliked the tradition of military boastfulness that could more easily be associated with his rival, the Sun King, Louis the XIV. Whatever the case, there is a playfulness in mural art that has not received the attention that it deserves.

To conclude let me just say that I do love the way Verrio's images spill over from the walls to the ceiling (the classical and human meeting the divine in the celestial sphere), something the viewer, despite Walpole's dismissive comments, might notice as he or she mounts the stairs). So I make my case that what critics have revealed is a Wind-like pagan mystery,¹⁵ and we as posterity have stopped short of embracing it. Perhaps we can say that posterity has been rendered dizzy,

if I can use that expression, as it moves forward glancing upward and backward into the imagined worlds of Julian and Verrio and the court of William III. Although the obscurity has been lifted, we hesitate to embrace the humour about Verrio's work—how sad I think, and sadder still for Verrio. The murals surrounding the King's Staircase at Hampton Court certainly contain a subtle indictment of the militarism it appears to honour on the surface, an indictment which includes the monarch himself, if we are to accept the William-Alexander-Hercules association. The boast that shouts in this space cannot be accepted without qualification, and we cannot be sure that Verrio himself was not responsible for the qualification. We are not trained to consider art as ironic, but I believe that this interpretation offers an answer to one of the most puzzling and intriguing mural compositions of this period.

¹ Edgar Wind, "Julian the Apostate at Hampton Court," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 3 (No. 1/2): 127-37.

For general commentaries on Verrio's work, see the 10th Anniversary Edition of the *British Art Journal*, 10 (no. 3)—specifically Cécile Brett, "Antonio Verrio (c1636-1707): His Career and Surviving Work," 4-17; Brett Dolman, "Antonio Verrio and the Royal Image at Hampton Court," 18-28; and Claire Brisby, "Antonio Verrio and the Royal Image at Hampton Court," 29-34.

² Another example is cited by T. R. Langley, *Image Government: Monarchical metamorphoses in English literature and art, 1649-1702* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 154—that is Roy Strong's belief that Rubens's ceiling at the Banqueting House in Whitehall was based on James' own text, *Basilikon Doron* [Royal Gift]. See Roy Strong, *Britannia Triumphans: Indigio Jones, Rubens and Whitehall Palace* (Hampshire: Over Wallop, 1980), 52-ff.

³ Rowland Smith, "The *Caesars* of Julian the Apostate in Translation and Reception, 1580-ca. 1800," in *Emperor and Author: The Writings of Julian the Apostate*, eds. Nicholas Baker-Brian and Shaun Tougher (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2012), 302-303.

⁴ See Dolman (22, 23) and Smith (300). Langley also point to this inconsistency between Julian's text and Verrio's scene.

⁵ Langley 150-54.

⁶ The Lucianic content of *The Caesars* has been well documented; see Wright 2: 343 and Smith 313, n. 3. For a general survey of the Lucianic military dialogue in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see David McNeil, "Dialogues on Military Affairs," in *Compendious Conversations*, ed. Kevin L. Cope (New York: Peter Lang, 1992): 129-38.

⁷ *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright, *The Caesars* (London: Heinemann, 1962) 2: 375-93.

⁸ *The Caesars* 2: 395.

⁹ *The Caesars* 2: 407.

¹⁰ *The Caesars* 2: 409.

¹¹ Jonna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture: The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998), 1.

¹² See Langley 150.

¹³ See Smith 301. ". . . whoever devised the fresco's programme—not Verrio himself, one assumes, but a highly placed advisor or supporter of William—clear had Julian's *Caesars* in mind."

¹⁴ See Stephen B. Baxter, *William III* (London: Longmans, 1966), 249, 302.

¹⁵ I refer to *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber, 1958).