

BOOK REVIEW

A Suetonius Reader: Selections from the Lives of the Caesars and the Life of Horace. By Josiah OSGOOD. Mundelein, Ill.: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2011. Pp. xxxix + 159. Paper, \$19.00. ISBN 978-0-86516-716-2.

As the coda to his depiction of Julius Caesar's assassination, Suetonius notes that when the corpse was being carried away in a litter, one arm drooped into view (*dependente brachio; Iul. 82.3*). The focus on this one limp arm as Caesar departs the stage of history indelibly marks the pathos of the scene. The detail is also typical of Suetonius' biographical style: understated and concise, without authorial comment. His methods are subtle, his vocabulary often technical, his style businesslike. Hence he is regularly mined for information but too rarely read in Latin, much less taught at the undergraduate level.

That tradition can (and should) now change, however, because Josiah Osgood's *Suetonius Reader*—part of the Bolchazy-Carducci Latin Readers series—admirably brings Suetonius into the corpus of Latin prose authors teachable to intermediate Latin students. In keeping with the design of the series, Osgood offers a limited amount of Latin text (527 lines, unadapted) with a full pedagogical apparatus: introduction, commentary, and vocabulary. Given that no intermediate-level commentary on Suetonius' Latin had previously existed, Osgood has had to work from scratch, and the result is an effective teaching text of high quality. As if in imitation of Suetonius himself, Osgood is unintrusive as a commentator, efficient in his selection of information, and deft in his manner of characterization.

Osgood's thirty-page introduction is rich in content and insightful in judgment. He opens with a winning explanation of the value of biography as opposed to history proper, then surveys the history of the biographical and autobiographical genres at Rome, the biography of the biographer Suetonius, the scope and structuring of the *Lives of the Caesars*, Suetonius' achievement and legacy, some specific notes about his Latin style, the basic facts about Roman names, dates, and sums of money, and, lastly, suggestions about further reading and a three-page bibliography. Osgood's level of detail seems just right for his intended audience: stimulating and full without being ponderous or overly technical. He synthesizes

current Suetonian scholarship in accessible ways that can be immediately and productively applied to the Latin passages that follow.

The best feature of this reader is the selection of the passages for inclusion. At least one selection is included from each of the twelve *Lives of the Caesars* (to which is added the *Life of Horace* as a nod to Suetonius' literary biography). As Osgood discusses in his introduction (pp. xxii–xxv), Suetonius' thematic arrangement and serial composition invite comparison between subjects, for he regularly treats a certain set of topics. But rather than trace one topic throughout different *Lives*, Osgood has chosen selections that represent the kind of topics that particularly interested Suetonius. The opening selection describing the assassination of Julius Caesar, for example, includes a long section on religious portents. The selections on Augustus concern his work habits, those on Tiberius his personal vices (esp. his sexual perversity and his cruelty), those on Gaius his love of public spectacles and his military (in)competence, those on Claudius and Nero their intellectual and artistic pursuits, etc. Hence Osgood does not cull from the *Lives* for their historical highlights but for their collective biographical method. Rather than being hampered by the series requirement to include a range of short passages, Osgood has deployed his selections to demonstrate his understanding of Suetonius' representative interests, thereby deepening the pedagogical value of his commentary.

Osgood introduces each selection with apt assessments of the Caesar in question and the cultural background to the particular passage at hand. The line-by-line commentary that follows is likewise brief and selective, and sometimes not generous enough for the genuinely intermediate student. As Osgood notes, reading Suetonius is a good way to learn vocabulary in context, but Suetonius' style is not easy at first. His sentences often include a lot of information, are dense in participles, and unpredictable in their ordering. Hence more help seems needed in the early parts of the commentary. To take one example: on *si ... posset* at *Aug.* 78.2, Osgood's only comment (p. 32) is that "in Livy and later writers, the subjunctive of the historical tenses is used in place of the indicative in the protasis of a general conditional (Bennett sec. 302.3.a)." It is helpful that he cites Bennett's *New Latin Grammar* (as he regularly does), and those students who do indeed look up the citation in Bennett will appreciate Osgood's point, but I anticipate that such a comment will mean little (or be confusing) to the average intermediate student. The great majority of Osgood's notes are appropriate, and his inclusion of relevant cultural material is often adroit, but the overall level of

the commentary suggests to me that it would be more appropriate for third-year college Latin students than second-year students.

In sum, Osgood has successfully added Suetonius to the undergraduate Latin canon. For an instructor to teach this reader effectively, however, he or she needs to start slowly and help students acclimate to Suetonius' Latin. Once underway, the unforgettable details of Suetonius' biographies will pique student interest as well as sustain the cross-biographical comparison that Osgood's structure fosters. Osgood's achievement in this reader is not only that he has made teaching Suetonius possible at this level, but that his execution so illustratively reveals the virtues of his subject.

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