

BOOK REVIEW

Suetonius the Biographer: Studies in Roman Lives. Edited by TRISTAN POWER and ROY K. GIBSON. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xii, 338. ISBN: 9780199697106. \$150.00.

Since the brief spate of Anglophone monographs on Suetonius in the middle of the 1980s, there has been a conspicuous absence of major studies.¹ Thus the appearance of a collection of papers entitled, *Suetonius the Biographer*, if not precisely fulfilling a desideratum, does much to whet one's appetite for future monographs. This volume originated in a 2008 conference held at the University of Manchester. To their credit, the editors, Tristan Power and Roy Gibson, have endeavored, for the most part successfully, to present the varied papers of the event as a cohesive collection.

In the Introduction, Power provides a glimpse of an author worthy of deeper investigation by illuminating elements of linguistic and organizational distinctiveness of Suetonius' biographies. The book is divided into three parts. Part One's contributions examine formal characteristics of Suetonian lives. Part Two is comprised of studies of individual lives as interpreted in the context of the *De vita Caesarum* (DVC) as a whole. Part Three, creatively titled, "Biographical Thresholds," addresses other aspects of Suetonius' scholarship and *Nachleben*.

Part One opens with Donna Hurley's "Suetonius' Rubric Sandwich" (21–37), a title that suggests the author's inclination to find Suetonius ultimately coming up short in his effort to compose artistic biographies *per species* instead of *per tempora*. Hurley also proposes Suetonius' programmatic statement in the *Divus Augustus* indicates that this biography was written first, while the composition of the *Divus Iulius* followed chronologically and set the pattern for dealing with bad emperors, whose mixture of virtue and vice devolved into a predominance of the latter.

Cynthia Damon's contribution, "Suetonius the Ventriloquist" (38–57), explores the structural placement and effect of the author's quotations of the emperors. Although Damon does not see more than a very indirect relationship between

¹ Baldwin (1983), Wallace-Hadrill (1984), and Lounsbury (1987).

the author's ventriloquism and the religious practice of "belly-speaking," the latter phenomenon has inspired Damon to reflect on the ways that the power of the emperor might be appropriated or undermined by the act of throwing his voice.²

Tristan Power (58–77) takes up the popular theme of closure in historiography. He demonstrates not only that Suetonius dealt with closure in a way that distinguished him from Plutarch and Tacitus but also that Suetonius's use of closure in individual lives in the *DVC* reveals an overarching organizational schema. Interweaving lives in their closures is indicative of a well-crafted, unitary work, not a mere chronological collection of individual imperial biographies.

Part Two opens with John Henderson (81–110) tackling a question that naturally follows from Power's argument for a unitary *DVC*: what does one make of the presence of the biography of Julius Caesar, a man who was not emperor, and thus an apparent outlier? Henderson offers data that suggests how Julius' life relates to, and contrasts with, the other lives. His characteristic sense of wit and sense of play facilitates one's discovery of the same qualities in the biographies.

Beginning with Augustus' deathbed plea to Livia to remember their marriage, which was entered into under a cloud of suspicion, Rebecca Langlands (111–129) sees Suetonius as intentionally depicting an Augustus whose moral behavior with respect to his own marriage frustrated the intended purpose of his moral legislation. Augustus could not control the exemplarity of his own adulterous behavior.

Erik Gunderson's piece (130–145) highlights the tension inherent in the relationship between exemplary literature such as Valerius Maximus' *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* and Suetonius' *DVC*. Unlike Valerius' exempla, Suetonius' are placed under the rubric of Caesar. This deliberate organizational subjugation of exempla to the Caesar undermines exemplary instruction since Suetonius does not shy away from his subject's inconsistent behavior.

Donna Hurley (146–158) interprets Suetonius' depiction of the assassination of Gaius as a mock sacrifice and further unpacks the author's use of ironic reversal. Suetonius made the "tyrant ... powerless, the executioner executed, and the Jupiter wannabe no *divus* in the end" (158). Jeffrey Tatum (159–177) tackles the *Titus*. A compelling assessment of an emperor who was universally adored, clearly flawed, and short-lived presented a significant challenge to historians of antiquity. Tatum reveals a biographer who is surprisingly masterful at grappling with the moral complexity of his subject in a brief biography. Finally, Jean-Michel Hulls (178–196) takes up the popular theme of mirroring. Domitian's use of mirrors is

² On belly-speaking, see also Dodds (1966) 71–72.

read in the context of other famous passages about Roman men and their mirrors. His observation that Domitian's use of mirrors shows him to be a solitary tyrant is surely correct.

At the opening of Part Three, Roy Gibson (199–230) examines all the literary men (tables provided!) Pliny mentioned in his letters and Suetonius portrayed in *De viris illustribus* in order to tease out what the similarities and differences in their choices may tell us about the two authors. Gibson concludes that Suetonius' equestrian status finds expression partly through his interest, which the senatorial Pliny does not share, in the phenomenon of upward social mobility. Tristan Power (231–255) traces the generic history behind Suetonius' *Famous Courtesans* and convincingly argues that it is not a work of biography but instead belongs to a tradition of commentaries. Peter Wiseman (256–272) insightfully uses neglected evidence to shed new light on Suetonius' contribution to the history of pantomime. Finally, Jamie Wood (273–291) reveals the profound influence of the *DVC* on the Carolingian Renaissance in a manner that renders subsequent developments of the period's ruler culture (one thinks particularly of Otto III's visit to the tomb of Charlemagne at Aachen) markedly more intelligible.

By offering scholarship on the *DVC* that employs a wide variety of approaches and includes successful forays beyond the *DVC*'s borders, *Suetonius the Biographer* expands our awareness of the myriad of possibilities for future work on this underestimated author. That there can be great care, artistry, and purpose to be explored in works that, to the casual reader, may seem at times to be compilations of mere data (however quirky) is something we are just beginning to appreciate in such authors as Pliny the Elder and Suetonius. *Suetonius the Biographer* piques one's appetite for the next modest spate of Suetonian monograph(s).

TREVOR S. LUKE

Florida State University, tluke@fsu.edu

Works Cited

- B. Baldwin (1983). *Suetonius. The Biographer of the Caesars*. Amsterdam: Gieben.
E. R. Dodds (1966) *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- R. C. Lounsbury (1987). *The Arts of Suetonius. An Introduction*. Bern; Frankfurt am Main: Lang.
- A. Wallace-Hadrill (1984). *Suetonius. A Scholar and His Caesars*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

REVIEW OF Power and Gibson, *Sucto-*
nus 5