

BOOK REVIEW

The Poetics of Power in Augustan Rome: Latin Poetic Responses to Early Imperial Iconography. By NANDINI B. PANDEY. Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xiii + 302. Hardback, \$105.00. ISBN: 978-1-108-42265-9.

This novel and engaging study of Augustan poetry in its political context applies a literary-critical lens to the creation, reception and negotiation of early imperial iconography. Making effective use of reader response theory and semiotics, Pandey describes the co-construction of this iconography through a discursive exchange between ruler and subject, a give-and-take which Augustan poets, principally Vergil, Propertius and Ovid, analogize to the relationship between poet and reader: as both poets and emperors are “fellow subjects of the public gaze” (5) whose authorial signs ultimately rely on the interpreting audience for their signification, “imperial authority, like poetic fame and the meaning of signs, is constructed in collaboration with an audience” (29). Exercising their “power of reader response” (33) as a political act, the poets appropriate Augustan iconography “as a tool for dissecting, debating, even disrupting imperial power” (5), and in so doing model the interpretive authority wielded by all the emperor’s “readership” over official media.

These main arguments and a prospectus of the book’s contents occupy its first chapter (“The Mutual Constitution of Augustus”); over the subsequent five chapters, Pandey applies this framework to a series of prominent Augustan images, sites and practices, each analyzed in tandem with new readings of the poets themselves. Chapter 2 (“History in Light of the *Sidus Iulium*”) investigates the Julian star as a product of Pandey’s co-creative model, tracing the circumstances that shaped the use of this icon and the conceptions of apotheosis and divinity it represented. Contrary to earlier interpretations of the *sidus* as a device expressly claimed and promoted by Augustus, Pandey argues that its significance developed “through multivocal negotiations among heterogeneous readers over a broad band of media and a long period of time” (37).

The following two chapters turn to the Augustan cityscape. Pandey's treatment of the Palatine complex in Chapter 3 ("Questioning Consensus on the Palatine") describes a poetic reaction against the site's imagery of patriarchal authority, exclusion and silence—emblemized especially by the Danaid portico—through a strategy of elegiac "revoicing" (98) that exposes the complex's signs to alternative significations. The fourth chapter ("Remapping the Forum Augustum") focuses on the imperialist narratives and ideological mapping of the world that sustain the Forum's iconography, and the ways in which Vergil and Ovid problematize them. The poets' unmasking of the darker omissions and implications of the Forum's symbolism—usefully rendered by Pandey as a program of *aposiopesis*, the device of explicitly leaving something unsaid—works to "encourage audiences to think critically about Augustus' attempt to order history, define spatial boundaries, and stabilize monumental messages" (183).

Moving from the city's physical monuments to one of its premier political rituals, the fifth chapter ("The Triumph of the Imagination") takes up the poets' adaptation of triumphal imagery, with an eye to aspects of performance, representation and civic identity. As an artistic production in which the *triumphator* "carefully curated words, images, and actions to create a moving, speaking text" (186) strongly dependent on the audience's participation, the triumph provided poets with a visual and verbal language "to conduct a wide-ranging dialogue about the expansion of empire, the transmission of information, the nature of representation, the meaning of *Romanitas*, and the author/*imperator*, reader/audience negotiations that underwrite political and poetic power" (189).

The sixth and final chapter ("The Last Word?") doubles as a retrospective of the preceding chapters and a closing examination of Augustus' final provisions for his legacy—his will, funeral and *Res Gestae*—whose careful orchestration "betray[s] an authorial anxiety for control" (245) over a text relinquished at the death of its author. Despite Augustus' attempts to influence his own interpretation, Pandey emphasizes that even these efforts to secure the "last word" were subject to the directives of his survivors, or repurposed to suit agendas outside their original intent. She closes with the compelling observation that the figure of Augustus was, and continues to be, "not so much a person as a collective text" (251) whose co-authorship by his Roman subjects and later interpreters offers an object lesson in "readers' role in resisting, critiquing, and creating power" (253) as valuable today as it was to the poets' initial audience.

This review can only hint at the impressive breadth and depth of this book, which represents a significant contribution to the study of Augustan poetry, early

imperial ideology, and the relation between the two. Its guiding hermeneutic of reader response inspires a multilayered model of the political milieu, one that gives voice to the period's dynamic tensions while moving beyond traditional pro- or anti-Augustan paradigms. Pandey's sound philological work combines with this theoretical grounding to advance fresh readings of several key texts; her insights into Ovid's exilic corpus are especially strong. She presents sophisticated material in clear, focused and energetic prose, complemented by a well-organized arrangement of subsections within each of the substantial chapters. Typos and other errors are exceedingly rare.¹ In addition to its immediate interest to students of imperial literature and politics, Pandey's work has wide application as a case study in the discursive underpinnings of political authority, and the role of "texts" (broadly defined) in its mediation, in ancient Rome and beyond.

TEDD A. WIMPERIS

Elon University, twimperis@elon.edu

¹ Of note is an incorrect image supplied for Figure 5.3 (220): what should be the obverse of a denarius of 12 BCE featuring a bare-headed Augustus (*RIC*²I no. 416) is that of an earlier denarius depicting Venus (*RIC*²I no. 367).