

BOOK REVIEW

Politics & Divinization in Augustan Poetry. By BOBBY XINYUE. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xii + 239. Hardback, \$85. ISBN 978-0-19-285597-8.

The idea of personal liberty in the shadow of creeping authoritarianism is a highly topical subject in America today. Bobby Xinyue's book (developed from his 2015 dissertation at University College, London) is centered on these ideas, and though he limits his discussion to a narrow window of time in the first century BCE, the book might be of interest for those seeking historical perspective on current events. The book examines how Vergil, Horace and Propertius depict Octavian's status as elevated or divine, and how they negotiate their own status in relation to Octavian. Xinyue's argument is clearly laid out and easy to follow. He collects the relevant evidence and organizes it in chronological sequence, presenting a linear development in the attitude of these three poets toward Octavian, from the first *Eclogue* (Chapter 1) to the *Aeneid* and the *Carmen Saeculare* (Chapter 4).

In the introduction, Xinyue draws together relevant background material for his discussion of these three poets. Alongside poems dedicated to Hellenistic monarchs and Roman descriptions of the fate of Romulus, Xinyue foregrounds Cicero's works and the exalted, divinely-ordained status granted to Pompey in the *Pro lege Manilia* and *Pro Marcello*, drawing on Spencer Cole's book *Cicero and the Rise of Deification at Rome* (Cambridge, 2013). Octavian's self-presentation in relation to divinity is also heavily discussed, especially in the media of coins, monuments, and public art. Here Xinyue builds on John F. Miller's book *Apollo, Augustus, and the Poets* (Cambridge, 2011) and Nandini Pandey's book *The Poetics of Power in Augustan Rome* (Cambridge, 2018).

Chapter 1 focuses on the *Eclogues*, principally the *deus iuvenis* in *Eclogue 1*. Xinyue delves into the concept of *libertas* which Tityrus presents as a gift from the unnamed *iuvenis*. In the late republic/early principate, Xinyue argues, *libertas* was a complex concept that was applied to various political ends, and Tityrus'

concept of *libertas* is a departure from previous notions, which did not have to be mediated by a patron. Moreover, he reads discomfort in the dependent role accepted by Tityrus. Xinyue draws attention to the increasing (and increasingly uncomfortable) divide between private citizens and authority, emphasizing Octavian's "divine self-imagining" in connection to Apollo. He ends with a discussion of Propertius 3.4, in which, he argues, the poet outlines a complicated relationship between himself and Octavian, in which the poet's *libertas* allows him freedom to withdraw from politics—simultaneously engaged with and marginalized from Octavian's triumph.

Chapter 2 considers poems published around the time of Actium: Horace's *Satires* and *Epodes*, and Vergil's *Georgics*. Xinyue argues that these poems emphasize the increasing divide between Octavian and all other potential authorities at this juncture of history. Xinyue's discussion of the *Georgics* is clear and straightforward, showing how the poem's description of Octavian as a nebulous future god progresses to Book 3's promised "Temple of Poetry" in which Octavian will be formally worshiped, and culminates in the *sphragis*, with Octavian thundering in Jupiter's chariot, having broken free from earthly restraint. The discussion of Horace in this chapter is more challenging; the references on which the argument is built are not so forthright and obvious. It is difficult to draw out a conclusive argument based on Horace's few, indirect references to Octavian in the *Satires* and *Epodes*, but Xinyue argues that Horace's poems articulate a similar divide between Octavian and other authorities, as well as Horace's political alignment with Octavian despite his uncertainties regarding the political future. He also states that Horace, Vergil and Propertius (2.7), in contrast to previous custom, attribute increasing legal authority to Octavian.

Chapter 3 opens with a historical discussion of Octavian's evolving status as a legal and governmental authority in the 20s: his process of cementing his power and negotiating his own cult practices in Rome and abroad. Xinyue then dives into Horace's *Odes* 1-3, which engage with Octavian's political position, especially the military campaigns, much more directly and extensively than the *Satires* and the *Epodes*. Xinyue draws in many references in which Octavian is associated with or assimilated to gods, stressing Octavian's ability to provide divine aid in military endeavors on an international scale. Nevertheless, Xinyue argues that Horace takes an ambivalent attitude toward Octavian. In the Roman *Odes*, Xinyue says that Horace presents himself as an independent policy advisor (even while he casts himself as dependent upon Octavian), and Octavian as a future god.

Chapter 4 is focused on the *Aeneid*. Xinyue presents Vergil's attitude in the *Aeneid* toward Octavian's authority as highly equivocal: "Virgil ... show[s] to the readers that there are two ways of viewing Augustus' rise to power ... either as predestined, or as a process that is rarely straightforward, often unknowable, and even ambiguous" (158). His discussion centers on the image of Octavian revealed in the *Aeneid*'s prophecies (Jupiter's prophecy in Book 1, the Parade of Heroes, the Shield of Aeneas), with divergent readings of each that can undermine the notion of Octavian's power as inevitable and perpetual. Xinyue goes on to argue that references to these *Aeneid* passages are embedded in the *Carmen Saeculare* and Propertius 4.6, but the references are transformed to be unambiguous and to describe Octavian's inevitable future supremacy. The Epilogue expands the discussion to other private citizens and their relationship with Octavian. Further, it discusses the public perception of Octavian in later years, as shown in Horace's fourth book of *Odes*. Horace, Xinyue argues, puts forward an image of Octavian as unaging and superhuman, even as this image fades into fantasy—thus subtly undermining Octavian's political image.

Xinyue chooses to focus on only three poets and their evolving relationship to Octavian in his early career and early principate. A productive path for future research would be to examine how the discussion of Octavian's divinity continued to evolve in the later years of his reign and after his death (perhaps venturing into Ovid's works, which provide not only frequent references to Octavian's superhuman status but also other apotheosis stories for comparanda). In the present work, however, Xinyue's argument is a thorough, precise and sound analysis of the evidence under consideration.

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