

REVIEW

A REASSESSMENT OF SUETONIUS

Tristan Power and Roy K. Gibson, edd., *Suetonius the Biographer. Studies in Roman Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 338. Hardcover, £70.00. ISBN 978-0-19-969710-6.

This volume, which derives mainly from the papers delivered at a 2008 conference in Manchester, sets itself somewhat grand ambitions, ‘to breathe new life into Suetonian scholarship and refocus attention on his skill as a biographer’ (v). Certainly the first named editor, acknowledged as ‘the leading editor and driving force’, is the most energetic scholar currently working in the area of Suetonian studies (twenty-two items listed in the bibliography).

In his wide-ranging introduction Power makes a strong case for the originality of Suetonius as a writer of ‘lives’, e.g. a particularly sharp focus on the subject of the ‘life’ and a uniquely elaborate use of the technique of *divisio* (manifest not only in his biographical works).

1. Formal Features

Donna Hurley discusses Suetonius’ organisational choices, a study of how the biographer chooses to slot his information into the various pigeonholes he has selected for his individual emperors—he composes ‘by choice and by will’ (23) and offers his readers a ‘rubric sandwich’. She starts from the *Life of Augustus*, an emperor who was to serve as a role-model for his successors, and sees the *Divus Julius* serving as a pair supplying a contrasting abuse of power. The suggestion that the *Augustus* was written before the *Divus Julius* (26) is intriguing, but Suetonius’ reader surely had to read the latter *Life* first. The sandwiches vary—sometimes there is more bread than filling, as with *Divus Julius*, others are mostly filling with little bread (e.g. *Augustus* and *Caligula*)—this is an inevitable feature of the lives, because emperors reached the throne at differing ages and with differing initial careers. H. rightly points to the signal division between ‘public’ and ‘private’, but in the case of *Divus Julius* probably misstates the problem in saying that ‘although Suetonius gathers many of Caesar’s skills and these qualities under the heading of the private individual, he illustrates them by examples from the public sphere’ (27)—in fact, the examples that Suetonius provides in these chapters (57–75) do not belong to Caesar’s public life,

that is from the triumphs of 46 to his assassination, except for material in 75.4–5. H. rightly points out that Suetonius postpones the physical descriptions of most emperors who met violent ends in order to make a sharper connection between their bad behaviour and their fates (30–1). Is the *Titus* a canapé rather than a sandwich? She rightly emphasises that the material Suetonius had to deal with was not *pret à manger* and required hard work (38), but is she right to hold that Suetonius in effect put himself into a strait-jacket and then demonstrated Houdini-like flexibility in wriggling out of it when necessary?

Cynthia Damon looks at Suetonius' use of quotations as a device of characterisation, both when the emperors speak themselves and when others use their words. She begins sensibly with an attempt to isolate Suetonius' own views on language and style, garnered from comments in both the *Caesares* and *De viris illustribus*, and then discusses whether his prose lacks elegance, as his critics have often claimed. If Suetonius lacks the *sententiae* of a Tacitus, the one-liners he borrows from his subjects more than fill the gap—he displays not just 'Zitierweise but Zitierkunst' (49).

A particular thrust of D.'s arguments is that Suetonius uses the emperors' words to incriminate them (52) as the words often encapsulate a vice. For example, Domitian's *saevitia* is confirmed ultimately by his own words (*Dom.* 11.3). Quotations fit his characters: six of the seventeen sayings of the gluttonous Vitellius concern food (55).

I had a PhD student once who was hunting for irony in Suetonius ... ; Damon finds it, for example, in Suetonius' use of *coetus* for Julia's contact with strangers at Baiae (*Aug.* 64.2) contrasted with the next words from Augustus' mouth, *maluisse ... Phoebes patrem fuisse* (*Aug.* 65.3). What Damon sees as Suetonius' highlighting that Augustus' good intentions in respect of Julia had been thwarted, I see as a vindication of Augustus' values—despite being let down by his own progeny, he preferred to be seen as traditional Roman father. More attractive is her suggestion that Augustus' warning to his young granddaughter Agrippina about being *molesta* must be read as a kind of prophecy by Augustus, as on her next appearance she is reaping the bitter harvest of her own words (*Tib.* 53.1–2).

I once believed that Suetonius' imperial lives should be read individually or rather at the level of the *liber* (although they were clearly part of a greater work). In looking at the ends of the *Lives* Tristan Power gives one pause for thought: 'these endings often echo each other and earlier divisions in the *Caesars*, inviting comparisons and contrast across the collection that reaffirm ... the verdicts of his portraits' (59). Some suggestions are not compelling—e.g. that the apportioning of offerings at *Aug.* 1 is recalled by the list of the empire's resources among Augustus' final papers at *Aug.* 101 and involves an implicit comparison with Augustus' forefather, or that the appearance of *mors eius* at *Cl.* 45 recalls the one earlier occurrence of the rather bland phrase at *Tib.* 75.1, or

that a reader without the aid of Howard and Jackson or *Diogenes/PHI* could remember that *nuper* appears only twice (*Iul.* 20.2 and *Dom.* 23.2). Others are good—e.g. that *gallacineus* at *Vit.* 18 echoes the *gallina* of *Gal.* 1, thus rounding off Book 7. P. interestingly suggests a link between the verdict on Caesar *iure caesus existimetur* (*Iul.* 76.1) and the beginning of Book 8 where Domitian's reign is summarised *constet ... merito poenas luisse* (*Vesp.* 1.1), but, I would argue, there is a clear difference between the force of *constet* in the latter—‘there is general consent that’—and the force of *existimetur* in the former—where the justification of Caesar's death was hotly debated and officially denied for the period of the Julio-Claudian principate at least. Suetonius does not commit himself to the rightfulness of the assassination of a state divinity.

2. Reading the *Lives*

John Henderson offers a thesis that the *Divus Iulius* belongs within the overall structure of the *Lives* but also that it is so anomalous that it is different from the kind of structures seen first in *Augustus* (81)—antefix or exemplary inauguration, in fact a ‘classic “runaround” priamel ... (a booby trap!) ...’ (89)? The biographer works hard to merit the appellation Suetonius, but Henderson also sheds much perspiration to produce a typically enlightening and infuriating contribution. The *Divus Iulius* is grievously understudied as a work.¹ H. divides the existing parts of the *Life* into eight chunks, highlighting elements of prophecy or revelation about the true nature of Caesar—a Marius with knobs on, an Alexander wannabe, a future Semiramis, a radical reformer bossing time itself.

The votary of style becomes the thrall of obscurity—what does the following mean, ‘either: between *Galb.* 1 and the end of *Dom.*, with its closing beckon into the future we read from; or: between *Vesp.* 1.1 where the envoi is anticipated and, again, the end, the end of *Dom.*?’ H. shows how Caesar lives well beyond his own *Life* and that there are repeated contrasts between Suetonius’ ‘Caesar’ and his ‘Augustus’. Henderson does not chicken out of the main question ‘Was he a Caesar?’; his answer is NO, but also YES. Mine will be YES.

Rebecca Langlands envisages a Suetonius at odds with Augustus, not so much a paradigm as a pervert with a pernicious moral legacy! The emperor was unable ‘to control his own exemplarity’ (113). Anyone who reads Suetonius without regard to the careful structures within which the biographer places his material can produce almost any picture—for a healthy corrective to Langlands on Augustus’ moral legislation, see D. Wardle, ‘Suetonius on the Legislation of Augustus’, *Fundamina* 21 (2015): 185–204. Laws are transgressed, but

¹ The reviewer confesses that he is currently producing a large-scale commentary which may one day remedy some of the current shortcomings.

such transgression does not mean that the laws are bad; poor enforcement similarly does not detract from intention. In the case of the Augustan marriage legislation it remained on the books for centuries, cited and accepted by pagan and Christian emperors and jurists alike. Grumpiness aside, L. gives the attractive suggestion of Suetonius invoking an Herodotean aspect in his depiction of Augustus' disappointed hopes for his offspring (121–3).

Erik Gunderson looks at the contrast between Augustus and Tiberius as a facet of Suetonius' exemplarity. Suetonius may not overload the reader with *sententiae*, G. offers a selection: 'Augustus and Suetonius are simultaneously concerned, then, with both the *fata librorum* and the *libri fatorum*, both the fate of books and the books of fate' and 'here too we find an *editio principis* whose political import is its effort to act as an *editio princeps*' (135). Tiberius' collection of sex-statues makes an ironic contrast with the *duces* of Augustus' forum (143), but not all the good that Tiberius did is undercut by Suetonius.

Donna Hurley offers a reading of Suetonius' account of the assassination of Caligula: his death conforms with his character and makes use of the motif of death as sacrifice. The powerful priest becomes the helpless victim; parallels with the murder of Philip II of Macedon illuminate.

Jeffrey Tatum examines the apparently anomalous *Titus*, arguing that it is more than a plain panegyric or an exercise in cut and paste. For T. Suetonius' presentation of Titus' *studia* unusually early in the *Life* underlines the fact that he achieved an ideal balance between talent and exercise, recalling the saintly Germanicus (169), but his paunch may signal to the reader who is abreast of physiognomical theory concerns about potential vice. Titus alone merits the description of *incivilis* and displays *saevitia*, but his vices are overwhelmed by *clementia*; Titus learned from his mistakes.

Jean-Michel Hulls looks at the *Domitian* focusing on the image of the lonely tyrant and seeing secrecy as the defining theme of the reign (184). Despite surrounding himself with mirrors Domitian was unable to reflect on his own performance (unlike his older brother!). Those unsympathetic to literary theory may balk at 'the mirror acts in Suetonius as a metaliterary reflector, transforming the unknowable private existence into something performed and public' (192).

3. Biographical Thresholds

Roy Gibson uses Pliny's letters to contrast the different perspective of Suetonius on literary figures and literary activity, seen in his lost and barely reconstructable *De viris illustribus*. Pliny has a greater interest in contemporary and Flavian figures, and downplays the Tiberian to Neronian period. Suetonius' long-argued expertise in the literature of the Late Republic and Augustan period is reaffirmed and he eschews contemporary writers. Pliny writes as an

active patron, Suetonius as a historian of literature. Suetonius, himself a perfect example of the phenomenon, was interested in upward social mobility among *virii illustres*, recording enhanced status as a reward for literary achievement, whereas Pliny, more the senatorial patron, sees talent and status rather as ‘mutually supportive’ (225). Della Corte’s thesis that Suetonius shows a distinctively equestrian perspective does not quite rise from the ashes, but the individual voice of Suetonius emerges clearly.

Tristan Power then examines a lost work for which very few fragments have been identified, producing the most extensive study ever of *περὶ ἐπισημῶν πορνῶν*. For this P. attractively suggests the original Latin title *De feminis famosis* (250). P. posits that Suetonius was the first to essay a work on this topic in Latin, but drew on Hyginus. No *Kama Sutra*, Suetonius produced a scholarly treatise on the love-interests of Latin poets and figures from mythology who appeared in their poems, perhaps commentary rather than biography.

Peter Wiseman turns the spotlight on another area of Suetonius’ scholarly endeavours, the history of public entertainment in Rome, known to us from the title preserved by the Suda *περὶ τῶν παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις θεωριῶν καὶ ἀγώνων* (possibly rendered back into Latin as *De ludis scaenicis et circensibus*).² From Tertullian’s *De spectaculis* W. plausibly divines the five headings under which Suetonius analysed the games: *origines*, *tituli*, *apparatus*, *loca*, and *artificium*. The bulk of his essay W. devotes to discussing the fifth-century AD grammarian Diomedes’ use of Suetonius—arguing that his discussion belonged to Suetonius’ work on the games, rather than his *De poeta*, and that he held that pantomime emerged from comedy.

Lastly Jamie Wood takes the story forward to the age of Charlemagne and looks at how and why Einhard drew on Suetonius for his *Life of Charlemagne*. W. argues that it is more than the chance survival of one manuscript that explains the biographer’s influence on Einhard’s work, which, although it never acknowledges Suetonius by name, can be seen on many pages. Einhard wanted to demonstrate through clear parallels with Augustus that Charlemagne ‘was a true Roman emperor, the founder of an empire to rival that of Augustus’ (283). An author whose prestige was high, as seen by his contribution to important Christian works of scholarship, such as Jerome’s *De viris illustribus* and Isidore’s and by his influence on the *Historia Augusta*, was a good model to follow.

² Wiseman’s suggestion earns the support of C. Pelling, ‘Suetonius’, *CR* 66 (2016): 140–2, at 140, but it may be too narrow a designation for a work that plausibly included gladiatorial contests (see C. L. Roth, *C. Suetoni Tranquilli quae supersunt omnia* (Leipzig, 1858) 280). Suetonius’ regular term *spectacula* easily lends itself to the Greek *θεωρία* and *certamina* is his regular designation for a range of ‘sporting’ and cultural contests.

Power and Gibson and their contributors have given us what is often a demanding read, but certainly something that for students of Suetonius demands to be read.

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APPENDIX

Howler

26 Caesar being named dictator in AD 46.

Minor errors

xi Coceiani s/b Cocceiani

9 βλασφημιῶν s/b βλασφημιῶν

52 Favour s/b Favor

238 surely the prostitutes' pseudonym should be rendered in English in the nominative form, e.g. Clausigelos?

242 Manuan s/b Mantuan

285 *De rerum naturalis* s/b *De rerum naturis*.

296 Breebart s/b Breebaart

299 Entstehung s/b Entstehung

302 Beauliue s/b Beaulieu

306 Kektüre s/b Lektüre

314 gerenic s/b generic

Missing from bibliography: S. Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror. A History* (Oxford and New York, 2001).