

Review

BOBBY XINYUE, *POLITICS AND DIVINIZATION IN AUGUSTAN POETRY*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xii + 239. ISBN 9780192855978. £71.00.

Bobby Xinyue's excellent monograph explores how narratives of divinisation intertwine with Octavian's progressive affirmation of his individual power. By focusing on the poetry of Virgil, Propertius and Horace, often referred to as 'the first-generation Augustan poets' (34), X. argues that the trope of divinisation adds further layers to Rome's complex relationship with authoritative power, as well as uncovering the polysemy and ambiguity of poetic language against the ascent of a new political order. Using Cicero's depictions of Pompey and Caesar as examples, X. demonstrates that divinisation was already present in republican literature, where it contributed to integrating military aristocracy into the republican system. The primary objectives of his study revolve around exploring how the concept of divinisation offers valuable insights into the role of poetry in both constructing consensus and fostering resistance to Octavian's authority. Building on scholarship on Augustus' self-representation as divine, particularly J. Miller, *Apollo, Augustus, and the Poets* (2009) and N. Pandey, *The Poetics of Power in Augustan Rome* (2018), X. aims to illustrate how, through the motif of divinisation, poetry engages with Augustus' retelling of Rome's political transformation, thus representing a space of mediation between poets and the regime.

Section 1 examines how poetic discourse renegotiates the notion of *libertas* to embed and at the same time throw into question the dominant political force. Through mechanisms of ambiguity and anonymisation, Virgil's *Eclogues* 1 establishes a connection between *libertas*, an undefined *iuvenis* and poetic creation. Having compellingly identified the *iuvenis* with Octavian, X. argues that *Ecl.* 1 anticipates important principles of Augustus' programme, including authority and charisma, insofar as it presents an (unidentified) individual as being more significant than other forms of power. While in the *Georgics* Virgil appears more preoccupied with the new form of charismatic power, Prop. 3.4 outlines the intrinsic ambiguity of the new regime, which both stimulates and restricts the individual's *libertas*. Accordingly, literary *otium* is both a welcome concession and a necessary consequence of the distance between literary production and political intervention.

In Section 2, X. demonstrates that the divinisation motif adds complexity to representations of the transition from Republic to Principate. Horace's *Satires* and *Epodes* display the poet's attempt at making sense of the new order by exploiting discourses of divinisation: on the one hand, Octavian has become the 'centre of gravity' (80); on the other hand, his exceptionality is problematic, as he is the restorer of peace, while simultaneously overcoming limits and boundaries of the previous political and cultural system. This tension articulates the function of Horace's poetry, which, X. argues, works as a coping mechanism for the new political power. Virgil, too, presents his *Georgics* as a poetic mediation in respect of the new regime. While Octavian's divinisation at the outset of Book 1 establishes a connection between the poet, the farmer of the *Georgics* and the new ruler, the poem goes on to show that Octavian will not subscribe to the kind of divinisation that Virgil wishes for him, consisting of dedication to, and exaltation of, farming (*cura terrarum*; 91) — the object of the *Georgics*. As Octavian reaches divinity through his own path and agenda, Virgil seems to forego the idea that poetry can have agency within the new political system.

Section 3 focuses mainly on Horace's *Odes* 1–3, where the poet attempts to find a balance between political control and poetic authority. By pointedly examining several identifications of Augustus with deities (including Mercury and Bacchus), X. sheds light on their intrinsic ambiguities and contradictions. For instance, Augustus' (semi)covert identification with Bacchus (*Odes* 2.7, 19; 3.25) jeopardises the idea of peace and order promoted by the emperor. In the so-called 'Roman Odes', Horace dangerously hints at monarchic power by establishing a parallel between Augustus and Jupiter (cf. *Odes* 3.4); concurrently, *Odes* 3.5 exemplifies Horace's 'poetic evasion' (148), that is, his departure from the mythologisation of Augustus. At the end of this section, X. maintains that *Odes* 1–3 unveil problematic aspects of Augustus' self-representation as divine; yet these poems also imply Horace's acknowledgement that Augustus' restoration of peace facilitates poetic creation.

In Section 4, X. investigates forms of divinisation within the *Aeneid*, with a particular emphasis on prophecies. While prophetic visions shape Augustus' power as inevitable, the parade of heroes in the

Sybilline prophecy (*Aen.* 6), along with the overlap between Aeneas' son Ascanius and Apollo, produces discontinuity and inconsistency between fiction and reality, as well as between the actual unpredictability of (Rome's) history and its representation as destiny. In the Coda to this section, X. further demonstrates that the early reception of the *Aeneid* in Horace's *Carmen saeculare* and Prop. 4.6 contributes to encoding Virgil's epic as the poetic expression of Augustan supremacy. However, the filter of Horace and Propertius' poetry not only enhances Augustus' authority, but also uncovers the ambiguity of his self-representation.

In the Epilogue, X. presents the conclusions drawn from this very well written and well-argued book. That divinisation is sometimes more peripheral and only appears in the background of the main argument (cf., for example, the discussion about Horace's *Satires* and *Epodes* in Section 2) is an intrinsic result of X.'s approach, whereby ambiguity, polysemy and vagueness are regarded as prominent features of early Augustan poetry. Indeed, divinisation functions to give further nuances to the discourse of Augustan poets, and their role as mediators between art and politics, fiction and reality, compliance and resistance, and past and present.

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