

Regarding Augustus' Image

Within the realm of Roman history, many important figures have been treated with varying degrees of affection by their respective authors. For example, the worshipful treatment of Julius Caesar in the hands of Suetonius was almost overpowering, while the same man was treated by Cicero as a liar and miscreant. Similarly, in the texts of Tacitus and Suetonius, one encounters a differing handling of the life of Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, the man who became Augustus. Specifically, in Suetonius one encounters the fortunate, restrained and compassionate man that has often been treated as *the* historical Augustus; Tacitus, on the other hand, tended towards a more violent, deplorable description of the man, and his (i.e. Tacitus') treatment comes off as being the more valid one.

In Suetonius' treatment of the second Caesar, there was no real disparity of ill feeling towards Augustus; on the contrary, his every deed had some parallel misdeed. However, following every wrong of Augustus, the reader is exposed to yet another great accomplishment of the man. Thus, while Augustus was, in fact, famous for "being a womaniser... [and one who] as an elderly man was said to have still harboured a passion for deflowering girls (Suetonius D.A. 71)", he also had "other habits [which] are agreed to have been moderate and unexceptionable (D.A. 72)"; Suetonius' account was structured such that in the end, the net sum of Augustus' deeds would be seen as positive in relation to his misdeeds. Tacitus, however, approached the life of Augustus from the more sceptical viewpoint, saying of "most people" that they "were struck by meaningless points such as the coincidence

between the dates of his first public office and his death” and that they were taken by “the fact that he died in the same house and room at Nola as his father, Gaius Octavius (Tacitus, *Annals* 37)”. Thus immediately setting himself at odds with Suetonius (who had made reference to Augustus’ death at Nola in the second-to-last chapter of his “*Divus Augustus*”), Tacitus lay forth a history of Augustus without the talk of his “other honours, traditional or novel, single or repeated (*Annals* 37).”

First, Tacitus further wedged the gap between himself and Suetonius by stating that “intelligent people praised or criticised him (Augustus) in varying terms”; that is, those who were intelligent did not merely grant Augustus wanton praise, and while *Tacitus* is a member of this group, *Suetonius* - perhaps - is not. Working from this haughty viewpoint, Tacitus then proceeded to express the opinion of those who supported Augustus.

Augustus’ followers, according to Tacitus (*Annals* 37-8), justified his behaviour by excusing the following three major points: (1) his actions against the murderers of Caesar (filial duty, of course), (2) his actions against his allies after the war (Antony and Lepidus were respectively too self-indulgent and too old), and (3) his actions against the Roman Senate (at least he had not tried to become a dictator or a king!). In every case, the provided excuse made reference to Augustus’ duties, both to his adopted father and to the State, and warranted his interference as a safe-guard against tyranny.

The dissenting view, however, was that “filial duty and national crisis had been merely pretexts.... [And] the motive of Octavian, the future Augustus, was lust for power (Tacitus, *Annals* 38)”; furthermore, this view not only explored the three

aforementioned mishaps, but also the incidental calamities that rather frequently sprung up throughout Augustus' reign. Specifically, a few of them included "judicial murders and land distributions", putting "personal enmities" above "public interest" in pursuing his war against Cassius and Brutus, and forcing the "reluctant senate to make him consul". Add into the mix a few murders and fortunate deaths (such as that of Iullus Antonius) as well as a touch of debauchery (courtesy of both Augustus and his friend Publius Vedius Pollio) and an entirely different view of Augustus began to coalesce.

In furtherance of this outlook, Tacitus concluded his dissection of the monster Augustus by looking at his selection of a successor. Where Suetonius (and presumably other supporters) had told the sad tale of Augustus' disintegrating family and eventual selection of Tiberius as an heir as though it were great tragedy, Tacitus again provided a shocking dissent. "His appointment of Tiberius as his successor was due neither to personal affection nor to regard for the national interests", Tacitus claimed, "[but rather] he intended to heighten his own glory by comparison to one so inferior (Annals 39)."

Yet it is the dissenting viewpoint that Tacitus seemed to advocate, as his account was obviously paying the attack far more attention than the praise, and Tacitus' narrative voice also provided a wealth of spite for the fawning imperial bootlickers that he perceived in Augustus' advocates. In fact, the loathing present in Tacitus' brief treatment of Augustus (a scant two-and-one-half page rant) is so fierce that it is instantly more compelling than the entire Augustan life story provided by Suetonius. Furthermore, the willingness to dig underneath the surface of the

Augustan façade and expose the flaws beneath makes Tacitus' account all the more believable; Suetonius felt that he had to put a kindly veneer on any and all of Augustus' faults, while Tacitus proudly revealed them for what they were - corruption.

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