

Book reviews

(Mis)reading Augustus

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Pyy, Elina 2018. *The Semiotics of Caesar Augustus*. Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 209 pp., ISBN 978-1-4742-7722-8, £85.50, ePDF 978-1-4742-7725-9, £82.08, ePub 978-1-4742-7723-5, £82.08.

This is rather an odd book. It is written by a classicist, but approaches its topic largely as a thematic study in comparative literature or popular culture. It begins with an examination of interpretations of Octavian Augustus, the first Roman emperor, dating from his own lifetime or shortly thereafter, then skips to mid- and late-20th-century novels in which Augustus figures directly or indirectly, and finishes with depictions of Augustus in cinema and television from the 1960s to the early 21st century. The author herself calls it a 'study in cultural history' (p. 25), which is accurate enough if we take it as referring to the history of western European and American culture of the late 20th century.

Pyy's position, set out in Chapter 2, is that the image of Augustus was ambiguous from the beginning, possibly by his own design. He points out that Roman historiography as a genre was only partly concerned with recording events; it was equally preoccupied with ethical and political issues. The narrative techniques of Roman historiography simplify the characterisation of historical actors, making them representatives of virtues or vices. Roman historiographers therefore tend to portray Octavian largely according to whether they approve or disapprove of the outcome of his actions, which was to put an end to half a century of civil war and impose a new form of centralised, autocratic government to replace the old republic. Roman accounts of the life of Octavian, Pyy argues, are best approached as works of fiction, and as such have become 'the founding texts for certain literary archetypes that live on in modern representations of the emperor' (p. 30).

According to Pyy, the Roman sources tend to divide the career of Octavian into two parts: 'The end of the civil war splits his life in two halves, and in ancient literature the change in

his character reflects this dramatic break' (p. 30). During the civil war, Octavian is portrayed as a power-hungry schemer who does not hesitate to eliminate his rivals by violent and unscrupulous means. However, after the defeat of Anthony in 31 BC, and especially after 27 BC, when the Senate voted him the titles of *Augustus* and *Princeps*, he tends to be presented as a benign, paternal figure.

This ambiguity is inherent even in the emperor's portrayal of himself. He seems to have engaged in constant role-playing. His life is represented in the sources as a sort of spectacle, 'a magnificent show written and directed by the emperor himself' (p. 35), in which his subjects seem to have been willing participants.

Pyy's analysis of the Roman understanding of Augustus is fascinating and gives the reader an unexpectedly timely introduction to the complexities of Roman political life. It is based on numerous academic sources; studies of both modern and ancient readings of Augustus seem to be rather fashionable, and she has plenty of bibliographical material to work with.

The chapter then continues with an analysis of the use made of the image of Augustus in the mid-20th-century novel *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* by Kurt Vonnegut. The discussion of Vonnegut's novel continues through all of chapter 3 and the first half of chapter 4 (the second half goes on to a different novel, Christoph Ransmayr's 1988 *Die letzte Welt*). In practice, this means that nearly half of the book is devoted to one novel by Vonnegut. Pyy's analysis of Vonnegut is convincing enough, but it is not quite what the book's title had led us to expect.

There is no doubt that the symbolism of Augustus figures largely in Vonnegut's novel. Pyy argues that Roman history, both of the Republic and of the Empire, plays an important symbolic role in American attempts to understand their own history. She sees Vonnegut's novel as a story of the conflict between two versions of the American Dream, 'the dream of freedom' and 'the dream of wealth', in which 'Vonnegut reconstructs ancient Rome as an historical analog to contemporary America' (p. 41). There is one difficulty with this juxtaposition, which she does not address, and that is that the symbolism is actually employed, not by Vonnegut himself, but by one of his fictional characters, a reactionary politician who uses the example of Augustus rhetorically to further his political career. Vonnegut does have a taste for allegory, but he certainly does not identify with the political opinions expressed by Senator Rosewater, so it feels a bit awkward to base an argument about the importance of Augustus 'as a sign and a symbol ... in times of cultural or ideological turmoil' (p. 49) on the fictional behaviour of a character in a novel.

That Augustus is seen as a political and ideological symbol, particularly in 'times of ideological turmoil' is the first of two central arguments in Pyy's book. The second is the postmodern position that any attempt to understand the past will inevitably be a fiction. She puts this quite eloquently in chapter 3 (pp. 63-64):

The past and the present continuously construct each other in cultural texts and discourses. History repeats itself, because we keep rewriting it that way, and because we keep constructing our ideas of the present on the basis of our historical narratives... but it is essential for us, as readers of these cultural texts ... to be aware of our responsibility as readers, as active creators of the past and the present.

This position is reflected in her choice of texts to analyse. She tends to be rather dismissive of historical fiction in the realist tradition and shows a clear preference for novels that explore themes central to the postmodern sensibility, such as 'the impossibility of prescribing a meaning' (p. 95) that she finds in Ransmayr's book.

After Vonnegut, the discussion of the other texts is much less developed and focuses on the two arguments I have identified above. John Williams's *Augustus* is analysed in terms of the use of political power to control meaning, to control 'the reading of the world' (p. 126), which she argues is the truly frightening aspect of dictatorship. The relevance of *Augustus* for the 20th century is as an example of 'autocracy born out of democracy' (p. 129), showing the fragility of the democratic form of government.

Chapter 6 turns to the uses of Roman antiquity in cinema and television. Pyy considers (briefly) the film *Cleopatra* by Joseph Mankiewicz (1963), the BBC adaptation of Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* (1976), Granada Television's mini-series *The Caesars* (1968), and four television productions: *Cleopatra* (1999, directed by Frank Roddam), *Imperium: Augustus* (2003, directed by Roger Young), *Empire* (ABC, 2005) and *Rome* (HBO, 2005-2007). She is quite clearly frustrated by the traditionalism and lack of postmodern sensitivity of these productions, which 'belong to the same essentializing narrative tradition of utilizing the ancient past to understand and explain the human experience in the contemporary world' (p. 145). Since she cannot really explain why such simplistic depictions of Augustus are popular, she falls back on the 'entertainment value' of 'mainstream art forms' that are not as sophisticated as postmodernist art (p. 155) but 'offered an escape from the anxiety-provoking contemporary world' (p. 156), which sounds suspiciously like a version of Adorno's and Horkheimer's culture industry recycled three-quarters of a century later.

Pyy consistently wants to explore the ideological agendas of the texts she examines and their relevance for 20th-century and early 21st-century situations and conditions. But to do this, she uses entirely traditional theories and methods of literary and cultural criticism. There is no attempt to use semiotic methodology in any systematic manner. Instead, she chooses the standard postmodern reading of 'the uncontrollable fluidity and ambiguity of meaning, the power over definition and interpretation, and the relationship between the author and the reader in the creation of meaning' (p. 177) – a relationship, incidentally, which she completely fails to explore for its potential as a means of political subversion and resistance, an area in which Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies have been working for at least half a century.

Instead, Pyy appeals to a kind of internalised metalinguistic semiotic interpretation, arguing that central to modern readings of Augustus is that 'political power is represented as a metaphor for the semiotic power over meaning and significance', a power which she considers 'the basest form of tyranny', but which is doomed to fail, since 'power over meaning and definition always slips through one's fingers' (pp. 178-179). This deconstructionist conclusion is of course irrefutable, but it leaves at least this reader wondering why, if such is the case, one should bother to analyse anything in the first place.

The book would have benefitted from better copy editing and from correction by a native English speaker, though the occasionally awkward language is not an obstacle to understanding. Whether or not one agrees with the perspective the author takes, she offers the reader interesting insights on a fascinating and timely subject.

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