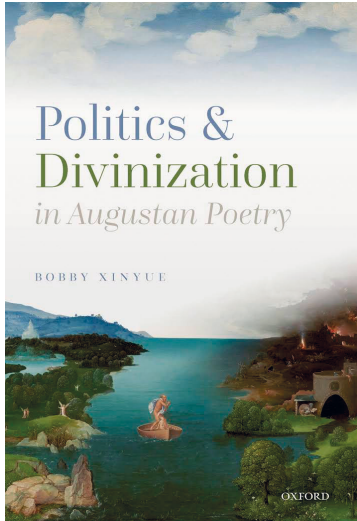


POLITICS & DIVINIZATION IN AUGUSTAN POETRY



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In this clearly argued and well-informed book, which is the development of a UCL doctoral thesis, Bobby Xinyue (henceforth X.) revisits a problem that has attracted considerable scholarly attention, and is of eminent significance across the range of Classical Studies: how the divinisation of Augustus is understood and discussed in contemporary poetry, and what connections those literary pronouncements have with the political and intellectual climate in which they were produced. X. takes some much-trodden texts as his case studies, and is quite aware of the limitations that any selective approach entails (Ovid is an intentional and glaring omission). His focus is on Horace's Odes, on prophecies in Virgil, and on the stimulating case

of Propertius – a voice that is as refreshingly distinctive as it is ostensibly ill at ease with key developments of the time. None of the poets that X. discusses can be regarded as an Augustan agent, nor as an unreconstructed spokesperson of dissent: the whole book, in fact, judiciously steers away from any straightforwardly binary opposition between “Augustans” and “anti-Augustans”, and makes an effective case for protecting the poetry of the Augustan period from unidimensional or teleological readings. The fundamental contention is of very wide interest indeed: the divine attributes of the emperor become a major theme in the literary production of the late first century BCE, and some key authors engage directly with the issue and its complex and troubling implications.

X. fascinatingly argues that the approaches to the divine status of the emperor are a form of “political science”: a strategy through which a measure of order is brought into a deeply changed world, and the place of the new regime in the history of Rome is made sense of. The strength of this contention is perhaps most apparent in the opening chapter, where the concepts of *libertas* and *otium* in the First *Eclogue* receive a sensitive discussion, helpfully placing them within the wider context of the Augustan settlement and its inherently problematic connections with the Republican past.

If there is a keyword that weaves together the examples studied by X., it may well be “concern”. The discussion of the emperor’s divinity is a way of exploring the conditions that brought about his regime, probing its inevitability, and scanning the future direction of Roman history: whether the monarchic turn may really be seen to be as its endpoint, and poetry might have to take up the task of plotting a different story. Some challenges are inescapable: placing the fate of the city in the hands of one man presents unprecedented risks, and the challenge that it mounts to whatever may be left of poetic autonomy is potentially fatal. Horace’s Roman Odes explore the latter problem in the most creative terms, while Book Four is more broadly preoccupied with what the conceivable ending of the Augustan age will entail.

One of the key rewards of this book is its willingness to chart the development of the problem through time: from the Triumviral period to Actium, down to 23 BCE and the *ludi saeculares* of 17. Within two decades the political landscape changed beyond recognition, and the divine status of Augustus came into increasingly sharp focus as a revealing factor of discontinuity and a new irreplaceable orientation point. As X. rightly notes, the focus is not so much on the practice of imperial worship, but on its key conceptual tenets: that feeds into a wider pattern of competitive and critical engagement with the imperial power, which is the defining aspect of the poetic tradition explored in this book. X.’s “Augustan poetry” is not Augustan because it buys into the emperor’s agenda, but because it takes up the emperor as one of its key problems. This overall take can prove very productive to the wider exploration of the

intellectual developments of the period. X's work does much to question the convenient distinction and divide between literary and historical approaches, and readers will greatly profit from its close reading of a number of major texts and its careful definition of a major problem, wherever their sub-disciplinary allegiances might lie. This book warrants the close attention of those working on the history of the Augustan age, and will be of interest to anyone who wishes to think harder about the interplay between literature and power.