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This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.
Suetonius has the dubious distinction of being much read but little studied. His biographies of the Caesars and “Illustrious Men,” filled with unique observations and salacious detail, are exploited as sources for political, social, and cultural histories, and yet his style, method, and aims as a writer have attracted relatively little attention. When he has been the subject of investigation, too often he is seen as falling short, but these judgments rest on applying to Suetonius standards and objectives that were not his own. The present volume of thirteen papers, which stem from a conference held in 2008 at the University of Manchester, explores Suetonius on his own terms. The first English language volume dedicated to Suetonius in well over two decades, the papers reveal the unity of Suetonius’ work and demonstrate the value of reading and studying Suetonius as a writer and stylist. While offering many new insights, the volume also points the way for further study of Suetonian biography. For the range of approaches and the up-to-date bibliography, the text should be the first stop for anyone considering future work.

Following an introductory essay by Tristan Power that frames the discussion and summarizes the contributions, the first nine papers explore aspects of the *Lives of the Caesars*. The first of Donna Hurley’s two contributions looks at the use of rubrics and divisions within the *Lives* and the tension that arises with matters of chronology. By privileging topics over chronology Suetonius has organized his voluminous and diverse evidence in a way that allows comparisons to be drawn between the subjects of his biographies. The device is most successful in the *Life of Augustus*, which Hurley argues was established by Suetonius as a model for literary composition. The use of rubrics is shown to be less successful for emperors who had shorter reigns, and is suppressed when Suetonius chooses to connect negative qualities of his subjects with narratives of their deaths in order to show causation.

Suetonius’ use of quotations, the many instances where the subjects of his biographies speak in their own voices, is the focus of Cynthia Damon’s study. These quotations, Damon argues, are deployed by Suetonius in place of *sententiae*, providing a structural element at the conclusion of episodes and sections of rubrics. Damon’s reading simultaneously connects Suetonius to a major literary trend of his day and
marks him out as an innovator. In the space of a short article, Damon can only offer a sample; her ideas warrant further study.

Several articles demonstrate the need for reading the *Caesars* as a collection in order to appreciate Suetonius as a stylist. Tristan Power examines the endings of individual lives, revealing the artistry of Suetonius through verbal echoes and ring composition. The end of *Domitian*, Power argues, links back to the first quote from *Julius Caesar*, providing a new argument for the unity of composition. John Henderson contributes a narratological reading of the *Life of Julius Caesar*, also pointing to the unity of the lives. Henderson shows that Julius Caesar’s biography is programmatic as Caesar himself serves as an important literary theme in later lives. In regard to family, Augustus serves as an example of disappointed expectation in Rebecca Langlands’ contribution. Augustus, who worked to promote the family and set a new moral standard, is seen to fall far short of his goals as his hopes for the future fail to materialize. In the biographies of Augustus’ successors, Langlands shows, Suetonius uses hindsight as an effective literary device to reveal Augustus to be an ironic example.

The way that individual lives inform one another is explored in a number of other essays. Looking at Augustus’ fondness for setting examples, Erik Gunderson argues that Suetonius uses Augustus’ exemplarity to undermine Tiberius, whose own efforts to serve as a model end in failure. Focusing on Caligula, Hurley’s second contribution examines Suetonius’ use of irony in the account of Caligula’s death. Through comparison to Julius Caesar, Caligula’s assassination is seen as confirmation of his character. Returning to Augustus as a model, W. Jeffrey Tatum argues that Suetonius presents Titus as a successful emperor because, like Augustus, Titus was able to overcome his past. In the final chapter devoted to the Caesars, Jean-Michel Hull examines Suetonius’ reference to the mirrors of Domitian’s palace to explore his characterization of Domitian. Hull argues that the device of mirrors is used by Suetonius to portray Domitian as a lone tyrant who is unwilling to play the public role that Augustus so successfully embraced. Through his analysis, Hull restores what others have considered an unsuccessful biography.

Roy Gibson turns the focus to other works of Suetonius. By comparing the *De Viris Illustribus* with the discussion of literary figures found in Pliny’s letters, Gibson identifies Suetonius’ unique interest in social mobility through literature. While Gibson does not fully subscribe to the view that Suetonius represents a distinctly equestrian perspective, he nevertheless sees Suetonius as an important counterweight to the senatorial viewpoint presented by Pliny and others. In his second article in the volume, Tristan Power re-examines Suetonius’ work on “Famous
Courtesans,” known to us by title through a reference in the 6th century writings of John Lydus. Power suggests that the work was probably a commentary on literary beloveds, not a collection of biographies as has been generally believed. The breadth of Suetonius’ writings is also seen as T.P. Wiseman presents a forceful argument that we ought to follow Suetonius as a source for the evolution of pantomime from comedic performances of the Augustan age. Wiseman argues that Suetonius had a far wider ranging perspective than our extant comedic texts represent.

The final chapter by Jamie Wood considers Suetonius’ reputation in the Carolingian period and the use of the Lives of the Caesars by Einhard as a model for the Life of Charlemagne. Suetonius was known in the period not only directly through a manuscript of the Caesars, but also indirectly via mentions in the works of the earlier Christian writers, Jerome and Isidore. Wood’s essay serves as a fitting capstone to the volume. In the Carolingian age Suetonius was appreciated as a literary stylist of high repute. He was deemed worthy of imitation. In our day, as the diverse papers in this collection illustrate, we can benefit from considering Suetonius on his own terms.

As a whole, the volume makes a compelling case for examining Suetonius’ biographies as literary works. The rewards are a better understanding of the author and a new appreciation of the complexity of his writing. As is the case in any collection of essays that presents multiple views, the reader will find some arguments more convincing than others. It is not always clear that it is Suetonius’ artistry that is being revealed; it sometimes seems that an author is skilled at finding hidden meaning that may not have been intended by Suetonius himself. Nevertheless, those who mine Suetonius for evidence should be warned: Suetonius was concerned with more than simply ordering and recording details. If Suetonius’ style, method, and aims are not considered, the material cannot be fully appreciated or understood.

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