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**Nandini B. Pandey, *The Poetics of Power in Augustan Rome. Latin Poetic Responses to Early Imperial Iconography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xiii, 302. ISBN 9781108422659. £75.00.**

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Almost exactly thirty years after Paul Zanker's *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* put on a new footing the study of how monuments and images shaped 'Augustan' culture, Nandini Pandey offers a novel approach to these and related issues, in a sophisticated monograph that focusses on the (distributed) power of *interpreting* images in the new emperor's age. In five densely argued chapters and a conclusion, she delves into the competing interpretations that a particular set of privileged readers, the most accomplished poets of the time, put forward as they confront those images. Viewing and interpreting, on Pandey's reading, are inextricably linked, and poetry represents a locus for advancing and contesting interpretations of monuments and artifacts. As readers of readers, we are thus asked to engage in the telescopic interpretation of monuments in texts, and texts about those monuments. Whilst Augustus' intentions recede, as it were, into the background, they give space to a variety of responses that occasionally cohere with what we may regard as the emperor's wish, but more often, predictably, differ from them, to the point that—as Pandey summarizes— 'Augustus was less a person than a creative, collective and remarkably democratic act of the imagination' (p. 32).

One of the most important contributions of the book is the attention Pandey pays to the chronological layering of interpretations—what she suggestively labels 'the poetic biographies of particular icons' (p. 241)—, and her repeated warnings against teleological interpretations that can all too easily be retroactively imposed on monuments. A case in point is the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, whose history is more nuanced and less linear than what we may appreciate from the vantage point of the late Augustan age. We are thus confronted not just with one monument and its supposed 'original meaning', but with a succession of different takes on the same

object, responding to different individual sensibilities and to a changing cultural and political climate.

In chapter 1 Pandey sets out her methodological coordinates. An important point, here, is the reference to the ‘broadening circulation of texts within the Roman empire’ (p. 14), which points to the existence of a community — or communities — of readers likely expanding beyond rarefied high literary circles.<sup>1</sup> Visual artifacts, however, are interpreted not just through writing and reading; indeed, as Pandey points out (p.168); some evidence suggests that the political implications of images were appreciated by the public at large, not just the intellectuals. The blueprint for opening up the interpretation of monuments comes from the *Aeneid*, where the reliefs in the temple of Juno at Carthage are focalised and interpreted through Aeneas’ eyes and experience, and resist the imposition of a univocal meaning.

Chapter 2 focuses on a fundamental item of the Augustan iconographical repertoire, the *sidus Iulium*, the Julian star that appeared at the time of Caesar’s funeral games, and which, according to Pliny the Elder, quoting from Augustus’ own autobiography (*Natural History* 2.23.94), the new emperor went on to identify as a key sign of his own unique status. But, as Pandey convincingly shows, this retroactive explanation is overreaching. The interpretation of the star must be included in the broader contemporary discourse about deification, and we should exercise caution in assuming that the very young Octavian could or would have been able to impose such an authoritative and exclusive meaning on the phenomenon. Here, as she charts the slow accretion of meaning to the star over the decades (coins represent a valuable source of evidence), Pandey is able to show that Pliny’s —or the mature Augustus’— appropriation of this symbol could not be taken for granted *a priori*, not least because Mark Antony also acted in the same direction. Nor does poetry engaging with the *sidus*, from Virgil to Horace, from Propertius to Ovid, offer a more univocal interpretation; rather, these authors show the gradual evolution of the symbol’s meaning and import.

The risk involved in retrospective teleology is particularly evident in connection with the Temple of Augustus on the Palatine, the subject of chapter 3. The symbolic association between the temple and the ruler’s house, as Zanker emphasises, was very powerful, but Pandey rightly questions whether we can assume that it already held true when the monumental complex was inaugurated. Again, poets offer differing perspectives: The Palatine in Propertius 2.31/32 is not the same as the building that Horace suggests in *Odes* 3.1, although both exploit silence as a powerful tool of analysis and critique.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the Forum of Augustus and its ‘mapping impulse’ (Lindheim). Pandey focusses mostly on the *Aeneid*, especially book 6 and the landscape of the

Underworld (including Daedalus' frieze at the beginning of the book), but also on inconsistencies and perturbations in the geography of the Italian landscape. The unifying theme, on her reading, is that Virgil develops a hermeneutic strategy that foregrounds loss over accomplishments and absence over presence: what Pandey calls 'an aposiopetic style of interpretation' (p. 160). In a book that sets itself explicitly in the post-Harvard School generation (p. 33), this approach does not come as a surprise, but Pandey's innovation consists in leaving the door open to a variety of interpretations that cannot necessarily be filed under the category of 'Anti-Augustan'. Indeed, she repeatedly refers to a 'democratic' construction of the emperor's image and imaginary, not strictly, of course, in political terms, but as a reference to the polyphonic nature of the debate that both surrounds and shapes these cultural constructs. There are no monoliths in this book: neither a monolithic, all-powerful Augustus, who imposes meaning once and for all, nor a monolithic anti-Augustan reaction. There are, to be sure, 'alternative voices' (p. 89), many of which—invariably—can be read as oppositional, but these are seen as part of an expansive interpretive arena where multiple points of view co-exist, both synchronically and diachronically.

Pandey's take on the Roman triumph (chapter 5) centres on the interplay between facts and representations: her main interest lies in how poets, by offering a narrative about triumphs, expose the relation between imagination, presence, and distance. Theirs are *ekphraseis* about an event which is also, by its very nature, an *ekphrasis*, a compacted illustration of events and landscapes that can only be evoked through an act of creation and imagined by engaging with the performance's structural assumptions. Whether we look at the Shield of Aeneas, at Gallus (who discusses a representation of Caesar's victory, not the victory itself), or at Propertius 3.4, descriptions of the triumph become privileged sites for debating semiotics, and for incorporating these topical descriptions into a wider discussion about the possibilities of imagination. This process reaches its climax with Ovid, where we can compare both pre- and post-exilic takes on the event. It is already clear in *Ars Amatoria* 1 that Ovid is suggesting a form of interpretive collaboration in the construction of the triumph's meaning. This is even more evident when, after he is exiled to the Black Sea, those very meanings, completely detached from any representational actuality, become the way in which his very experience of 'being Roman' amongst the Barbarians can take shape.<sup>2</sup>

This important book offers rich gains both in terms of methodology (which the concluding chapter 6 usefully recaps), and of the many sharp exegetical insights on some of the most important Augustan texts and images. It will become a standard point of reference in the continuing debate on the power of images—and indeed of texts—in the age of Augustus.

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## Notes:

[1.](#) On the expansion of the readership beyond élite circles, which coincides with, and favours, the gradual growth of books rather than *volumina* as a medium, esp. in connection with Ovid's poetry, see now O. Pecere, 'Libro e lettura nella poesia di Ovidio', in P. Fedeli & G. Rosati., eds., *Ovidio 2017. Prospettive per il terzo millennio*, Teramo 2018, pp. 375-403.

[2.](#) Pandey seems inclined to accept (p. 237 and n. 130) the truthfulness of Ovid's claim, at *Pont.* 4.13, that he has written a poem in Getic, which is doubtful: cf. G. D. Williams, *Banished Voices. Readings in Ovid's Exile Poetry*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 91-99.