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## **Afterlives of Augustus, ad 14-2014 ed. by Penelope J. Goodman (review)**

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**Review: Penelope J. Goodman (ed.). *Afterlives of Augustus, AD 14-2014*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xv, 418. \$120.00 (hb.). ISBN 978-1-108-42368-7.\***

To a particular subset of readers, the most disconcerting item to emerge from a recent *New Yorker* profile of Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg was the revelation that he is an avid admirer of the Roman emperor Augustus.<sup>1</sup> Anyone looking to understand the enduring appeal of the first *princeps*, as well as the anxiety his legacy continues to provoke, will find much to chew on in the book under review.

As the title suggests, the topic of this edited collection is Augustus' posthumous reception, a theme suggested by the bimillennium of the emperor's death in 2014, which provided the occasion for a conference organized by the editor at the University of Leeds. The nineteen chapters represent a culling from a far more extensive program of papers presented at that event. While Goodman does not spell out her rationale for the selection of individual contributions, an effort clearly has been made to cover as much of the two-thousand year span as possible.

In a collection of such broad scope, there are bound to be exclusions and omissions. Goodman owns up to this at the outset, noting that this volume is "not a survey or encyclopedia," (2) but rather an initial attempt at tracing the outlines of Augustus' reception from antiquity down to the present. When it comes to modern reception, however, a tendency to exalt the unfamiliar in place of material already

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\* Published in *Classical World* 113.1 (2009)

<sup>1</sup> Evan Osnos, "Ghost in the Machine," *The New Yorker* September 17, 2018, 32-47 at 37.

covered elsewhere can produce an awkward impression, as when one weighs an extended discussion of John Buchan's laudatory 1937 biography of Augustus (chapter 13) against the few passing mentions of Syme's *Roman Revolution* (Osford 1939).<sup>2</sup> While it is good to promote work that expands and complicates our understanding of Augustus' reception in the twentieth century, the significance of these contributions will be better appreciated by those already familiar with the basic contours of the story.

An emphasis on politics unites the contributions around a coherent if somewhat one-dimensional narrative thread. In a nutshell, Augustus became synonymous with monarchy early on, serving both as an aspirational model against whom later emperors and kings have been measured (chapters 3-6, 8-9, 12) and a negative icon for opponents of autocracy (chapters 11 and 15). In the Christian tradition, the Gospel of Luke (2:1) plays an important role, as the power of Caesar Augustus to decree a global census established a precondition for the birth of the savior, suggesting to some the essential harmony of monarchy and monotheism (albeit in the context of ongoing debates about the balance between secular and religious institutions, chapters 7-10).

The unrelenting emphasis on politics contributes to an impression that "the primacy of [Augustus'] agency has been assumed throughout his reception history" (29). Goodman contrasts this "Great Man narrative" with the turn to social and cultural

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<sup>2</sup> For the impact of the latter work, see *La révolution romaine après Ronald Syme: bilans et perspectives*. Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique 49. (Geneva, 2000); Zvi Yavetz, "The Personality of Augustus: Reflections on Syme's *Roman Revolution*," in K. Raaflaub and M. Toher (eds.), *Between Republic and Empire: Interpretations of Augustus and his Principate* (Berkeley, 1990) 21-41.

explanations in contemporary scholarly discourse, but insofar as the writing of reception history is itself an act of reception, we should beware the circularity of the argument here. I am not convinced that the priorities of the wider public are as far removed from those of the academy as Goodman suggests. Another way to view the emperor's cameo appearance in the story of the Nativity would be to place it alongside other texts in which Augustus plays only a minor role in the dramas of other, more compelling historical figures (think Caesar in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* or Octavian in television's *Rome*). Perhaps instead of dismissing this relegation to the background as a form of "non-reception" (chapter 19), we might instead recognize an underlying disinterest in the *res gestae* of great men similar to what animates the writing of history "from below." Portrayals of Augustus as uxorious husband and terrible father (think *I, Claudius* or John William's ingenious epistolary novel *Augustus*) might also repay closer attention, as these arguably indicate convergences between popular and scholarly interests in the private realms of gender and family history.

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