NOTES • KORT BYDRAES

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE DEATH OF AUGUSTUS

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In this note I attempt to supplement my recent discussion of the treatment by Suetonius of the death of the emperor Augustus in which I argued that the biographer carefully constructed an account of a perfect imperial death.1 I shall first consider an aspect that escaped my first treatment and then consider the contribution made in another recent study of death to which I did not have access in 2006, both of which relate to the presentation of the repentina mors in Latin sources. Lastly, I shall return to the notion of theatricality and acting that has played a central role in most interpretations of Augustus’s last words to his friends to reassert the point that in the interpretation of Augustus’s actions that Suetonius follows, based on Stoic ideas, there is no room for the notion of insincerity.

Sherlock Holmes should remind us to think about ‘the dog that didn’t bark’. While this may solve no great mystery, it is worth considering a standard element in some famous ancient death scenes that does not appear in Suetonius’s account. Plato’s depiction of Socrates’s death is important for subsequent versions of the excellent, prepared death. As death approached, Socrates covered his head, then uncovered it to say his final words, before again enveloping himself.2 Xenophon’s Cyrus, in an account which most scholars consider is unhistorical in its presentation of a peaceful death for the Persian monarch, requests his children to leave him veiled, when he dies, so that not even they should see his body.3 In the Roman context, two immediate predecessors of Augustus, Pompey and Julius Caesar, also covered their faces with their togas as they met, by contrast with Socrates

2 Plat. Phd. 118a.
3 Xen. Cyr. 8.7.28: ταύτ’ εἰπὼν ... ἐνεκαλύψατο, καὶ οὕτως ἔτελεύτησεν.
and Cyrus, sudden, unforeseen ends.\(^4\) The interpretation of this action, which must be distinguished from the regular covering of the head by Romans when engaged in a range of religious activities (\textit{capiti,s velatio}),\(^5\) appears to be related to fear and \textit{pudor}.\(^6\) In particular, it indicates a surrender or resignation of self either to extreme emotion or to death. Clearly, in the case of Augustus, Suetonius envisages no extreme emotion, no fear\(^7\) and no \textit{pudor}; as he demonstrated in the earlier narrative, the gods had both assured Augustus of his divine destiny and also told him to the day when his death would come.\(^8\)

Mary Beagon has recently written at length about the primarily popular notion of \textit{mors repentina} as a desirable form of death, a notion which coexisted with, and in extant sources is largely overshadowed by, the idea of the ideal death as one that is prepared for.\(^9\) In a brief discussion of Suetonius’s account of Augustus’s death, she argues that the biographer has attempted ‘to blend elements from the two traditions to produce the ultimate, perfect death.’\(^10\) Suetonius, she contends, has added to the ideal, prepared death a final element of \textit{mors repentina}: Augustus passes away \textit{repente} while asking for news of what is happening in Rome, and is thus struck down, like Pliny’s examples, ‘in the midst of his daily business.’\(^11\) It is preferable, however, in the light of the full narrative that Suetonius supplies to emphasise that Augustus’s ‘business’ had been completed: after his lengthy discussions with Tiberius, Suetonius says, \textit{neque post ulli maiori negotio animum accommodavit} (Aug. 98.5). Even his friends had been dismissed, and his end came among his

\(^{4}\) Plut. \textit{Pomp.} 79: \textit{ταῖς χερσίν ἀμφότεραις τῆς εὐφελτασμένος κατὰ τοῦ προσώπου; Cas. 66: ἐφελκυσότας κατὰ τῆς κεφαλῆς τὸ ἱμάτιον. \\

\(^{5}\) See the very useful discussion of R. Waltz, ‘Autour d’un texte de Sénèque’, REL 17 (1939) 292-308. \\


\(^{7}\) Although Suetonius, \textit{Aug.} 99 describes Augustus as \textit{subito pavfactus}, he minimises the negative aspects of this emotion by emphasising that Augustus was in fact prophesying; see Wardle (n. 1) 459-60. \\

\(^{8}\) Suet. \textit{Aug.} 97. For a full treatment of the divine signs, see D. Wardle, ‘Initial indications of Augustus’ imminent (im)mortality (Suet. \textit{DA} 97.1)’, \textit{Athensaeum} 116 (2008) 353-65. \\

\(^{9}\) M. Beagon, ‘\textit{Mors repentina} and the Roman art of dying’, \textit{Sylleca Classica} 16 (2005) 85-137. \\

\(^{10}\) Beagon (note 9) 128. \\

\(^{11}\) Beagon (note 9) 129.
family and particularly in the midst of physical and verbal expression of his love for his wife, the perfect domestic scene. Public and private were as connected and yet as separable in his death as in Suetonius’s conception of his whole life.

Beagon’s subtle discussion of the normative expectations of the Roman élite in their preparation for death opens up another opportunity for contrasting what Suetonius sees as distinctive in Augustus’s death. Beagon discusses one role played by friends in death scenes of assuring the dying man of a form of immortality: Seneca in reflecting on a spell of ill health comments on the comfort and upliftment experienced by his friends’ presence at his bedside and concludes (Ep. 78.4):

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\text{non indicabam me, cum illos superstities relinquerez, mori. Putabam, inquam, me vitium non cum illis, sed per illas. Non effindere mihi spiritum videbas, sed tradare.}
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I would not hold that, if I left them in the land of the living, I were dying. Yes, I repeat that I thought that I would go on living not with them, but through them. I imagined that I was not pouring out my spirit but handing it over.

Beagon comments: ‘it is vital that the close ties made during life are reinforced and summarised during the process of dying, since this will offer the most certain form of immortality’,12 rightly holding that most Romans had no secure expectation of continued existence with their individuality preserved. Even Stoics, such as Seneca, were not certain of such ‘personal’ immortality, although in Stoic thought the soul had the potential to survive the body.13 For Suetonius, however, Augustus is very different, as his translation to godhead has been confirmed by two divinely sent messages.14 Augustus’s friends are allowed no response to his question, the validation of his earthly role is not dependent upon the views of other mortals.15

12 Beagon (note 9) 117.
15 In the historical context of AD 14, however, as Suetonius was aware, the opinion of the Senate was crucial in securing formal deification, and it has been plausibly argued that Augustus’s Res Gestae was written to serve as the justification for his deification; most recently A.B. Bosworth, ‘Augustus, the Res Gestae and Hellenistic
In her recent monograph, *Death in Ancient Rome*, Catherine Edwards has placed due emphasis on the performative aspect of death: the act of dying for many Romans of the elite was not passive, but an active process, one that could be planned with meticulous precision. Death, then, could be a complex and subtle act of communication, freighted with allusions historical, literary and philosophical.\(^{16}\) Although she has a nuanced discussion of the theatrical metaphor in narratives of death, her reading of Stoic or Stoicising philosophy, in which the power of fate to decide one's role is emphasised and the human being has the duty to play his role well, 'as establishing a distance between the subject and the part he or she happens to have played in life', seems doubly inappropriate to the case of Augustus.\(^{17}\) For firstly,

\(^{16}\) C. Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven 2007) 144. Her specific comments on the death of Augustus wrongly attribute Augustus’s Greek quotation to a play by Menander. The words may plausibly come from a New Comedy, but not necessarily nor even probably from Menander. PCG Vol. 8 fr. 925 is expressly included among the *adespota*. The frequency of appeals for applause by the audience at the conclusion of Greek Middle and New Comedy and in the Latin genre of *palliata* is well demonstrated by G. Monaco, 'Επικροτήσατε’, *Dionisa* 45 (1971-1974) 309-15 and thus a secure attribution to Menander is excluded.

\(^{17}\) See Wardle (note 1) 447ff. for a rejection of the notion that Suetonius’s account contains any negative reflection on Augustus, either as a vain fraud or as one who had not fulfilled perfectly the role assigned to him by Fate. A. Corbeill, *Nature Embodied. Gesture in Ancient Rome* (Princeton 2004) 165-66, adds F. Nietzsche (cf. *The Gay Science* [New York 1974] 105) to the list of those who view Augustus as an actor. R.C. Beacham, *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome* (New Haven 1999) 92-93, without consideration of the philosophical context of Augustus’s words, argues that the transformation from ruthless *triumvir* to benevolent patron ‘was achieved, as Augustus himself implied on his deathbed, in part through his sense of the dramatic and his formidable skill in producing potent acts of theater.’ Most recently, for Geoffrey Sumi, *Ceremony and Power. Performing Politics in Rome between Republic and Empire* (Ann Arbor 2008) 7, 220, ‘Augustus’ comparison of his life and career to the performance of a mime ... was an explicit acknowledgement that his actions as *princeps* were a performance, a notion that arose perhaps because so much of his career took place in the gaze of the Roman people’ and ‘he acknowledged that his actions were highly performative – that is, self-conscious, represented actions that took place in the gaze of the Roman people.’ While Sumi rightly emphasises the performative aspects of Augustus’s public life, seen in the evolving ceremonial of his reign and his deliberately dramatic gestures in such actions as refusing the dictatorship (see now U. Huttner, *Recursum Imperii. Ein politisches Ritual zwischen Ethik und Taktik* [Hildesheim, 2004]), his use of this passage in Suetonius ignores essential philosophical background.
‘happens’ is a notion expressly to be excluded from Stoic theorising, which has to take into account determinism. Secondly, within the broader narrative framework that contains his description of Augustus’s death, it is clear that Suetonius intends no distance between Augustus and the role he plays, however plausible that might be for lesser mortals: his career has been divinely ordained (as demonstrated at all the key stages by divine signs),

his imminent divinity had been clearly advertised, and even the precise date of his death was spelled out for the perceptive. Suetonius’s Augustus was engaged in no struggle to make sense of his life.

Suetonius’s Augustus, then, dies the perfect, controlled death that was the ideal of the Roman élite: the biographer is diligent both in what he excludes and in the details his account presents, to give the first princeps the perfect send-off.

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18 See esp. Suet. Aug. 94-96. For a broader collection, see Vigourt (note 16) 22-44.
19 See above, note 8.
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