

Revenge and Cruelty: Suetonius and his Depiction of Octavian in the Civil Wars

This paper analyzes Suetonius' portrayal of Octavian and his cruelty during the civil wars in the *Divus Augustus*, and how Suetonius provides a transition for him from cruelty to future *clementia* through the use of the temple of Mars Ultor as a symbol.

Much scholarship has been written on Suetonius and his biographies, and on the depiction of Augustus in particular. David Wardle (2014, 2019) has dwelt heavily on the *Divus Augustus* and the portrayal of civil war in the biographies, and Jannis F. Koltermann (2023) has explored the influence of the figure of Augustus on the following lives. But although Wardle has pointed to Octavian's victory being a transition between cruelty and *clementia*, another point in the text also serves to symbolize this change (Wardle 2014, 156). I intend to argue that the temple of Mars Ultor is that symbol, which completes the claim that Octavian fought the civil wars for vengeance. This transition then allows for the mostly positive view of the *princeps* of the rest of the biography (Wallace-Hadrill 1984, 142).

Suetonius starts his section on the civil wars by setting forth Octavian's goal, which is to avenge (*vindicare*) Caesar (Suet. *Aug.* 10.1). He is established from the beginning, then, as desiring vengeance, and his action toward that goal is characterized by rapidity (*confestim, sine cunctatione*) and the use of violence against opponents (10.1, 12.1). Suetonius portrays Octavian as immediately planning an attack on the assassins, until their escape from Rome leaves him with only the laws to aid him (10.1). This is the first step Octavian considers after returning from Apollonia, and Suetonius follows this with his attempt to assassinate Mark Antony (10.3). However, this follows Antony's stubborn refusal to help Octavian in any way (10.2). Although

replicating the violence which had been shown against Caesar, Octavian is given justification for his actions through the revenge motive by Suetonius.

However, Suetonius then highlights Octavian's harshness toward his prisoners in the remaining civil war narrative, using terms of supplication to both emphasize his cruelty and then to begin transitioning him from cruel to clement. In the aftermath of both Philippi and Perusia, Octavian is reported as behaving cruelly and condemning many to death; although Suetonius attributes others with these accounts (*dicitur, scribunt quidam*) to distance authority from himself, he does not provide any sort of alternate image of Octavian for consideration (13.1-2, 15; Wardle 2014, 137). This leaves the impression of an overly cruel Octavian who has no capacity for pity, an impression which is especially emphasized by an account of one prisoner petitioning him as if a suppliant (*suppliciter*) for burial and getting denied (13.2). This cruelty, however, is then juxtaposed later with the Sicilian war, where Octavian's status for undisputed cruelty is softened by him accepting Lepidus' new status as a suppliant (*supplicem*) and granting him his request for mercy, thus pointing toward his later *clementia* (16.4).

After the civil war narrative, Suetonius provides the transition between Octavian's cruelty and later *clementia* by the positioning of the temple of Mars Ultor within his larger war and administration narrative. The temple of Mars Ultor is first mentioned during the section on foreign wars, which follows shortly after the civil war narrative. After claiming that all of Augustus's wars with foreign tribes had valid reasons, Suetonius then points to the temple of Mars Ultor as the place where these tribes would swear to be at peace with Rome (21.2). This reference, by picking up Octavian's dedication of his Actium camp partially to Mars, as well as pointing back to the mention of a sacrifice to Mars by an ancestor in the beginning of the biography, draws a connection between him and the god (18.2, 1.1). As it is later revealed that

Octavian vowed to build this temple following Philippi, Suetonius connects the temple back to Octavian's initial motivation of revenge, signaling an end to his vengeance and his cruelty (29.2).

Ultimately, this paper attempts to understand how Suetonius depicts Octavian during the civil wars and how he shifts him away from his former cruel actions toward later *clementia* through the use of the temple of Mars Ultor as a symbol of his completed revenge.

Works Cited

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