

Living on a Prayer: Augustus as a *Praesentem Conspicuumque Deum* in Ovid's Sacrifices

This paper argues that Ovid views Augustus and his power as that of a *praesens deus* in offering sacrifices and prayers to the emperor (e.g., *Fasti* 2.631-8; *Ex Ponto* 1.4, 2.8, 4.9). Ovid's sacrifices and prayers to Augustus are called "pathetic," (Gradel 2009), overly imaginative (McGowan 2009), and inflated (Fishwick 1991). Moreover, they are universally not categorized as prayers (e.g. Fishwick 1991), because the emperor could not respond in a supernatural way. These interpretations overlook Ovid's own descriptions of Augustus' power and interpretation of the emperor as a *praesens deus*. Augustus' power (and Ovid's fear of it) is like that of a god's, but the emperor does not strike down Ovid with lightning –Ovid's rescue from exile depends upon a human response from the emperor. Augustus as a *praesens deus* is simultaneously both the emperor and a divine figure, who "had the power to punish him and retains the power to save" (Pandey 2018).

This paper understands Augustus' power following Kennedy 1992: "The power of Augustus was a collective invention, the symbolic embodiment of the conflicting desires, incompatible ambitions and aggression of the Romans, the instrumental expression of a complex network of dependency, repression and fear." Ovid in his prayers both defines and responds to the emperor's power; in viewing Augustus as a *praesens deus*, this power is no longer limited by chronology or assumed context.

Manfred Clauss (1996) argued that as a *praesens deus*, Augustus could function as both emperor and god simultaneously; there is need to distinguish his actions as one or the other. A representation of a *praesens deus* (following Ker 2007) makes the god present and available. Ovid outlines the emperor's power to enact divine judgement in the human word when he labels Augustus as a *praesentem conspicuumquem deum* at *Tristia* 2.1.53-4, calls Augustus a

Jupiter-on-Earth at *Fasti* 1.608, and states *Caesaris ira mihi nocuit, quem solis ab ortu solis ad occasus utraque terra tremit* at *Ex Ponto* 1.4.29-30. In all of these, Augustus has both a dual status and ultimate authority over Ovid's fate.

In his prayers and sacrifices to Augustus, Ovid makes no supernatural request of the emperor. Ovid offering prayers and a libation during the *Caristia* (*Fasti* 2.638: *dicite suffuso per sacra verba mero*), burning incense (*Ex Ponto* 1.4.55: *turaque Caesaribus*), and offering worship (*Ex Ponto* 2.8.6: *colo*) to the absent Augustus seek to make him present in order to respond to and solve Ovid's human problems (i.e. his support of his family and his exile). McGowan (2009), Hardie (2002) argue that Ovid's prayers do not seek a real response from Augustus. This distinction overlooks Ovid's own characterization of the emperor's power and status as a *praesens deus*; the prayers and sacrifices to Augustus' divine power beseech him to respond as emperor (the two are intrinsically linked) and ultimately return Ovid to Rome. Augustus as a *praesens deus* is not a replacement for Jupiter, but rather possesses the power of a god on earth.

Even after Augustus' deification in 14 CE, his status as *praesens* does not change. Ovid still seeks a human response when he offering words of prayer and incense to Divus Augustus (*Ex Ponto* 4.9.111: *do totiens cum ture precantia verba*). Both as emperor and as a *divus*, Augustus possesses the simultaneously human and divine ability to forgive Ovid and save him from his exile.

The interpretation of Augustus as a *praesens deus* circumvents binary distinctions of the emperor's power and status as "divine" or "human," allowing the emperor in these poetic representations to function as both. The poet does not alter the nature of his requests after Augustus' deification, but rather characterizes Augustus as a dual figure, simultaneously human

and divine. Augustus' power is like that of Jupiter on Earth, but he does not respond to prayers with a lightning strike; Ovid does not separate the human from the divine in praying and sacrificing to Augustus as a *praesens deus*.

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