

Genre in a Time of Tyrants: Shostakovich, Stalin, and the *Historia Augusta*

Over a century ago, Hermann Dessau showed that the author of the *Historia Augusta* (*HA*) had falsified the extradiegetic features of his narrative (Dessau 1889). The authorial persona feigns a time of composition at least sixty years before the author actually wrote, complete with improbable dedications to historical figures and discussions of compositional principles with those dedicatees. Ever since, one of the consuming questions of *Historia Augusta* scholarship has been, simply, why? What motive would the author have had to disguise a work that is relatively innocuous—if tabloid in its tastes? Much of the interim debate has focused on the ideological contests playing out between Christians and non-Christians as the most probable point of contention (see Savino 2017, 159-236). The author of the *HA* does show far more fondness for traditional Roman institutions than Christian. Yet, mention of religion within the work is limited, and never centered in the author's own discussions of his agenda and goals. Instead, the first-person passages foreground his writing methods, the boundaries of genre, and his arrangement of materials. This focus on defining the boundaries of historiographic genres provides not only a frame of reference for the general reader, but also a model by which imperial powers are directed to view the relationships between themselves, the author, and his work through the characters of the dedicatees. This model emphasizes distance between the author's opinions and the work's form and content, allowing genre to serve as both model and defense.

The degree to which the peculiarities of genre can serve as justification for the contents of a work depend not only upon social conventions, but the proclivity of the audience to accept those conventions as real and potent. When a single member of society embodies as much political, military, and social force as did the Roman emperors, changes in regime can destabilize

these conventions as all spheres of society reorient around the new leader's preferences (Illias-Zaripofol 1994). Although our window into the court of Honorius, during whose rule the *HA* likely emerged, is fairly limited, this paper examines the instability of genre under authoritarian governments by examining the instability that followed the elevation of Theodosius I and comparing a better documented, and more modern, case of an artist for whom genre provided both danger and defense: Dmitri Shostakovich.

Shostakovich's initially acclaimed opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District* met the disapproval of Joseph Stalin and, thereby, the apparatus of the Soviet state. And yet, unlike many artists who ran afoul of the state censorship agencies, Shostakovich was able not only to preserve his life, but rehabilitate his career. His saving grace was the distance he was able to put between himself and the content of his opera by appeal to having followed the extant conventions—now rejected—of a disfavored genre (Herrala 2012). Although the mutability of genre norms was underscored by the reversal of Shostakovich's condemnation after the death of Stalin, the agency of the party under his direction to enforce dictates upon artistic expression reinforces the degree to which state apparatus can make real, or undo, the conventions of genre.

In the case of the author of the *Historia Augusta*, it appears that he was operating shortly after the regime change that followed the death of Theodosius I. The paper will briefly examine the shifts in political power and jockeying for position that occurred at Theodosius's elevation as a model for the environment that likely surrounded the less well-documented elevation of Honorius as emperor in the West (Heather 2010). In this environment of uncertainty, the *HA* attempted to negotiate a literary genre that has the potential to critique imperial power. The authorial passages carefully define the expectations, boundaries, and proper reception of that genre generating a distance between himself and his work that may have been designed to

protect him from the whims of the new potentate. The possibility of success for this method will be evaluated by reference to the similar tactics employed by Shostakovich, under a regime about which we have the benefit of more secure knowledge.

Bibliography

- Dessau, H. 1889. "Über Zeit und Persönlichkeit der Scriptores Historiae Augustae." *Hermes* 24: 338-392.
- Heather, P. 2010. "Liar in Winter: Themistius and Theodosius." In *From the Tetrarchs to the Theodosians: Essays on later Roman history and culture, 284-450 CE*, edited by S. McGill, C. Sogno, and E. Watts, 185-214. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herrala, M.E. 2012. *The Struggle for Control of Soviet Music From 1932 to 1948: Socialist Realism Vs. Western Formalism*. Ceredigion: Edwin Mellen press.
- Illias-Zaripofol, C. 1994. "Portrait of a Pragmatic Hero: narrative strategies of self-presentation in Pliny's letters." Ph.D. diss. Indiana University Bloomington.
- Savino, E. 2017. *Ricerche sull'Historia Augusta*. Naples: Naus Editoria.