

### ***di praesentes: apotheosis and epiphany in Augustan poetry***

When Julius Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March 44 BC, his body was cremated in the forum and the spot sanctified by the building of a temple, to Divus Iulius. The state turned a Roman into a deity for the first time since Romulus, the founder (deified as Quirinus), and thus began the practice of imperial apotheosis that continued until the age of Constantine and the imposition of Christianity. Already in the 30s Vergil's *Eclogues* explores the theme, with the herdsman Tityrus in 1 vowing monthly offerings to an unnamed youth, easily understood as Julius Caesar's heir, known to us as Octavian (and later Augustus), and a prophecy in 4 that foresees a life among the gods for a new-born boy. By the 20s the *Georgics* wonder what divine role Augustus will take up, and Horace pictures him drinking nectar. For Propertius he is simply *deus Caesar*; and in his exile poetry Ovid equates him repeatedly with Jupiter. Such treatments anticipate the state cult for Divus Augustus that will follow his death in AD 14; but there is good reason to doubt whether all are sincere or supportive.

In the same period the poets present themselves as visited by Muses and other gods. In dreams and in moments of introspection these epiphanies provide warnings, encouragement, new directions, in writing and in life. The Muses give an auspicious start to the birthday of Propertius' girlfriend Cynthia. Bacchus is seen by Horace in the wilderness and provokes him to more inspired strains. Apollo advises Vergil and Propertius that a pastoral poet and an elegist (respectively) should not write on grand epic themes, but inspires Tibullus to do so in his longest elegy; he also appears to Lygdamus in a dream, and warns him not to rely on the fidelity of Neaera, but to be persistent in his hopes. Cupid steals a foot from Ovid's epic opening, thus turning it into an elegiac couplet, and then shoots the poet with his arrow when he complains that he is not in love and so cannot write elegy; later he gives him permission to write the *Remedia Amoris*, and he even flies all the way to Tomis when Ovid has long been exiled. In Hellenistic Alexandria, Callimachus had recounted his dream meeting with the Muses in *Aetia* books 1 and 2; Ovid is imitating this in his *Fasti* when he conducts conversations with deities in his search for aetiological knowledge and good stories. Another fragmentary Callimachean poem, *Iambus* 9, reported a conversation between an ithyphallic statue of Hermes and a pederast whose name is lost – conceivably the poet, as in Tibullus's imitation (1.4), where he seeks advice from the perpetually erect Priapus.

Gods reveal themselves in more serious narratives too. Aeneas has brief meetings with his mother Venus and with Mercury, as well as dreams of the Penates, Tiberinus, and more; Iris provokes the Trojan women to burn their ships, Juturna the Rutulians to break the truce with the Trojans. Apollo restrains Ascanius from further participation in the war after his successful shooting of Numanus Remulus, but he himself employs his bow in poetic accounts of the battle of Actium. Encounters between gods and men are frequent in the *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*: Jupiter reports his encounter with the sceptical Lycaon – on the basis of whose wickedness he sends a flood to destroy most of humanity; Apollo and Diana punish the hybris of Niobe by killing all her children; their mother Latona turns to frogs a group of mean rustics who stop her drinking from a pool. Ceres searching for Persephone spends a night with a family at Eleusis, and Bacchus visits Thebes in disguise: both thus initiate cults.

These are also the kinds of narratives that can stage apotheosis directly, and here we find apotheosis as disappearance, the opposite of epiphany. Romulus is snatched up to heaven while still in the midst of his law-giving: his wife mourns his loss (until she too vanishes into thin air) and his senators are suspected of murder. But a manifestation of the new god

Quirinus declares his own divinity. Elsewhere in the *Fasti* the divinity of Hercules and Mater Matuta is announced, when each of them is in Rome, though the prophetic insight of Carmentis. Apotheosis, then, may have to be guaranteed by a trustworthy source: after all, as we can see from Dido's sceptical reaction to Aeneas' accounts of epiphany, not everyone in the Augustan world believes that the divine and human realms can intersect.

The conference will encourage responses to such passages (among many) and to some important books that have explored divinity in Augustan poetry: J. Miller, *Apollo, Augustus, and the Poets* (Cambridge, 2009), M. Bettini, *Il dio elegante: Vertumno e la religione romana* (Torino, 2015), J. Schrader, *Gespräche mit Göttern: Die poetologische Funktion kommunikativer Kultbilder bei Horaz, Tibull und Properz* (Stuttgart, 2017), J. D. Hejduk, *The God of Rome: Jupiter in Augustan Poetry* (Oxford, 2020), J. Farrell, *Juno's Aeneid: A Battle for Heroic Identity* (Princeton, 2021), B. Xinyue, *Politics and Divinization in Augustan Poetry* (Oxford, 2022). Participants are encouraged to build on these recent insights, broadening and deepening our understanding of Augustan poetry while focussing on two topics that are historically important and rich in themselves, and sometimes two sides of the same coin.

Stephen Heyworth  
Gail Trimble  
June 2025