



GOLDEN PROSE
IN THE AGE OF AUGUSTUS

Translated with notes and introduction

Paul T. Alessi

*Golden Prose
in the Age of Augustus*

PAUL T. ALESSI

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PREFACE

As in the case of my previous volume, *Golden Verses*, this book is designed for the general reading public and for students and teachers in courses on the literature of the Augustan Age. Although many anthologies exist that include one or two of the prose authors of the Augustan period, I do not know of any collection that concentrates solely on the writers in prose who belong strictly to the age. It is my hope that this volume, as the first, will fill a void and be useful in the classroom and be appealing to the public in its own right.

I have tried to offer translations that are accurate, idiomatic, and readable. They are for the most part literal, but not so literal as to be stilted or dry nor too free to frustrate the reader of Latin. I have felt that it is more important to keep the phraseology and metaphors—where possible—of the ancient author than to soar off into a faddish colloquial style filled with slangy expressions. I believe that readers want to feel as if they are encountering the words of the writer rather than the quirks and idiosyncrasies in phraseology of Alessi. Since it is impossible to reproduce the sounds of the original Latin in the English, in these translations I have striven to capture the tone of the original. I offer complete sections, books, or individual works, believing that a snippet here and there does not provide enough context and the proper “feel” of the author. Notes have been kept to a minimum. For the most significant names, places, and terms the reader is advised to consult the glossary. I hope that the modern readers of this volume can identify with the works and authors here presented and can feel for themselves the passions and emotions evoked by the words.

I would like to thank my colleague John Rundin and Ms. Linda Frausto for their assistance and Ms. Thu V. Cox for her patience. This book is dedicated to the memory of Theresa Lu Koch, devoted friend and helper.

INTRODUCTION

On 1 January, 42 BCE, the Senate of Rome voted divine honors to Gaius Iulius Caesar and vowed a temple to be built in the forum and dedicated to the new god, Divine Julius. His adopted grand-nephew Gaius Octavius, as recent triumvir, was instrumental in procuring and effecting these distinctions. This young man, now Caesar,¹ was not slow to claim that he was the son of a god. The coinage that he had minted and numerous inscriptions attest to the propagandistic value of Julius Caesar's deification. This young man had come a long way since the assassination of Julius Caesar on 15 March, 44 BCE. Indeed, barely twenty years old, he had achieved much and was an important political and military figure. He promoted his name and his background, two features that saved his life and helped win him allegiance and protection. His father, Gaius Octavius from Velitrae, a town about twenty-five miles southeast of Rome, had entered politics at Rome and achieved senatorial rank. He had married a certain Atia, the daughter of Marcus Atius Balbus and Julia, youngest sister of Gaius Iulius Caesar. For some reason Julius Caesar liked the young Octavius and showed to him a marked preference, introducing him to political and military life. At the time of Caesar's assassination Octavius was stationed in Apollonia, sent there by his great-uncle, to be trained in military tactics and strategy, and to complete his literary education. Caesar had chosen to include the young Octavius in his expected campaign against the Dacians and Parthia. But, March 44 changed all that and propelled Octavius on a course that was

1 Born Gaius Octavius, he became Gaius Iulius Caesar as soon as he was adopted. Writers of the period usually refer to him as Caesar or Octavius; modern scholars designate him as Octavian after his adoption. The honorific name Augustus was not bestowed upon him until January of 27 BCE.

to bring him to the pinnacle of power, to bring the Roman Republic to a close, and to make him a monarch overseeing the Roman Empire.

Although no one calculated the sudden arrival of Octavius into the political arena nor could have predicted the success that he was to enjoy, Cicero (*ad Att.* 14.12.2) notes his presence and is somewhat disquieted about the potential effect his entry could make. But, outside of Cicero, it is difficult to assess or to draw any conclusions about the kind and degree of Octavius' impact upon the politics of Rome. Our contemporary sources are few and scattered, and it is not until the late forties, as the *Eclogues* of Vergil abundantly show, that the literati begin to mention him. However, we do have the letters and orations of Cicero to consult; they provide much valuable information about Octavius' early period before he became a triumvir in November of 43 BCE and their presence helps make up the corpus of prose that punctuates the age of Augustus. Although it would be desirable to have more direct literary testimony and treatment of Octavius' (Augustus') history and life from contemporary witnesses, the age, nevertheless, does provide a wealth of material from a wide range of prose authors of varied political and literary tastes and diverse treatments of several genres. There are treatises on agriculture and architecture, biographies, histories, orations, letters, and an autobiography.

In general the works of the prose writers reflect two separate societal forces that shaped their themes and treatments: the turmoil of the late Republic that included the death of Julius Caesar with the resultant military and political struggle, and, secondly, the peace won and established by Octavian soon to be Augustus. In the former, civil war punctuated Roman life; a fierce rivalry between dynasts that seemed to repeat the partisan battles of Marius and Sulla, Pompey and Caesar, that engulfed citizens to fight against citizens, that rendered the rule of law and order virtually impossible, straining not only the Republican constitution but the nerves and will of the ruling class.² In the latter case, writers note and reflect upon the sense of relief from the wars, the constant recruiting, and the war-time demands upon the economy and psyche that depleted life and soul. In this arena the writers, like the winning survivor of the military and political battles, could turn attention back to ancestral mores and customs, re-instill a sense of purpose modeled upon the character and forms of the past, and herald ideals and values that resided deep

2 Since the expulsion of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, the last king of Rome, in 509 BCE, Rome had been governed by elected magistrates. The highest office was the consulship shared by two men. Because it became the prerogative of leading members of the senatorial order, very few equestrians ever obtained this highest magistracy. The struggle for power by strong dynasts and generals in the Late Republic of the first century BCE weakened the control that the senatorial order had over the body politic.

in the Roman psyche. In this sense, Varro's treatise on agriculture and Livy's and Sallust's histories fit appropriately the Augustan program of renewal in the continuing values of the Republic, values and ideals heralded and observed as inherent in the yeoman farmer, in the pious man of manly courage, and in citizens willing to sacrifice on behalf of an idea larger than their individual selves.

AUGUSTUS

When Julius Caesar was assassinated on 15 March, 44 BCE, Gaius Octavius was not yet nineteen years old. No one could have predicted that he would eventually lend his name to a great era of military expansion, political success, and creative energy in the areas of art, architecture, and literature. And, it seems ironic that 2,000 years after his death we would be reading his own words as part of the literary scene of his age. But, that is exactly what chance has provided us. It has saved the autobiographical catalogue of his achievements which he had set up on bronze tablets in front of his mausoleum and had copies inscribed in stone in capitals of the Empire. As a literary form Augustus' *Res Gestae*, the usual title given to the document, has its antecedents in *elogia*, the inscriptional memorials that record the careers and achievements of famous men. Augustus had seen to the erection of such memorials in his Forum Augustum. In his own case he elaborated upon the genre with a grandiose and highly selective presentation of his virtues, achievements, and honors. The genre did not permit any outright falsification of fact, but in an autobiographical form such as this the author could present himself in the most favorable light, shape the account of events, and color the presentation and treatment. Much could be and was omitted. Octavius/Augustus did not provide the names of his political and military enemies: thus, Antony, for example, appears as a "faction." No mention is made of the Perusine War and its aftermath, nor is anything said about Octavian's role in the Battle of Mutina except that he became consul after it. The modern reader may be disappointed that Augustus did not present a comprehensive outline of his political positions and policies. However, the work was designed to show the people of Rome and to validate to them his preeminent status and merit. Little is stated or implied about his administrative reforms, his legislation, social or political, or his conscious attempts to revive traditional religious worship. Instead, there is an emphasis on his triumphs and successes in foreign policy that underscore the many honors which a grateful senate and Roman people bestowed upon him. Thus, Augustus included much routine matter, particularly covering the enormous expenditures that he made and incurred on behalf of the army and the people of the city. The work shows an accounting, a balancing of the books, as it were, of achievements and merited honors.

RES GESTAE

The so-called *monumentum Ancyranum* is without doubt one of the most important epigraphical documents that has survived classical antiquity. In his own words Augustus sets down and justifies what he believes to be the most significant of his political and military achievements. He glosses over the political machinations and brutal means by which he came to power in order to stress that it was by his *auctoritas* (authority, prestige) that the senate and people of Rome invested in him so much power and that allowed him to dominate and govern the Roman world. The style is deliberately unadorned and direct, as befits a document intended for the peoples of Rome, Italy, and the Empire.

Below is a copy of the achievements of the divine Augustus by which he subjected the world to the empire of the Roman people, and the expenses he incurred for the state and the Roman people as inscribed on two bronze pillars set up in Rome.¹

(1) At the age of nineteen,² on my own initiative and at my own expense, I raised an army with which I championed the liberty of the state that had been oppressed by the tyranny of a faction.³ For this rea-

1: Suetonius (*Aug.* 101.4) tells us that the document was set up in front of his mausoleum in Rome. Copies were also erected in provincial capitals, three of which exist in Asia Minor at Ancyra (modern Ankara), Antioch, and Apollonia in Pisidia

2: Octavius/Augustus proudly and emphatically heralds the age at which he led his first army. It is thought to intimate that he, Octavius, outdid Alexander the Great, whose first command was at twenty. The army to which he alludes came from some of Julius Caesar's veterans and those soldiers enticed from two of Antony's legions.

3: the reference is to Antony who was then consul, and to his supporters.

son the senate decreed me honors and co-opted me into its order, in the consulship of Gaius Pansa and Aulus Hirtius [43 BCE], according me the status of a consul with the right to give my opinion, and it granted me *imperium*.⁴ It ordered me, together with the consuls, in the rank of a *propraetor*, to provide measures to protect the state from harm.⁵ In the same year, when both consuls had died in war, the people appointed me consul and *triumvir* for regulating the government.⁶

(2) The assassins of my father⁷ I drove into exile, avenging their crime at lawful trials with due process; and later I defeated them twice on the battle field,⁸ when they brought war against the country.

(3) I waged many wars on land and sea, civil and foreign, all over the world, and as victor I spared all citizens who asked for pardon. The foreign peoples who could safely be pardoned I preferred to preserve rather than to extirpate. Roman citizens under military oath to me numbered about 500,000. Somewhat more than 300,000 of these I settled in colonies or sent back to their towns after they were honorably discharged. To all of them I assigned lands or bestowed money to reward their military service. I captured six hundred ships, excluding those smaller than *triremes*.⁹

(4) I twice celebrated an ovation and I was honored with three *curule triumphs*¹⁰ and twenty-one times I was hailed *imperator*. All of the many more triumphs which the senate decreed to me, I refused. I deposited the laurels adorning my *fascēs* in the Capitol, after fulfilling the vows I had publicly pronounced in each war. For the successful exploits accomplished by me or through my legates acting under my auspices, fifty-five times the senate decreed thanksgivings to the immortal gods. The days on which thanksgivings were given by decree of the senate numbered 890. In my triumphs nine kings or children of kings were paraded before my chariot.¹¹ At this writing I have been consul thirteen

4: on the motion of Cicero on 1 January, 43 Octavius' position was legalized.

5: this formula refers to the so-called "ultimate decree of the senate" that, in effect, proclaimed martial law, also passed on 1 January, 43.

6: the *triumvirate* of Octavius, Antony, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus was legalized by the *lex Titia*, passed in November of 43.

7: an allusion to Julius Caesar, Octavius' adoptive father. In this document Augustus neither names nor mentions his natural father or mother.

8: the two battles of Philippi in 42 against the forces of Brutus and Cassius.

9: the 600 war ships captured in naval victories over Sextus Pompey off the coast of Sicily and over Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 31.

10: the triple triumph of 13-15 August, 29 celebrated victories in Dalmatia, at Actium, and in Egypt.

11: included in this number were the two small children of Antony and Cleopatra, Alexander Helios (Sun) and Cleopatra Selene (Moon).

times and I am in the thirty-seventh year of tribunician power.¹²

(5) The dictatorship offered to me both in my absence and in my presence, both by the people and the senate, in the consulship of Marcus Marcellus and Lucius Arruntius [22 BCE], I did not accept. However, I did not decline, during an acute shortage of grain, the administration of the grain supply which I directed in such a manner that within a few days I freed the entire citizenry from fear and immediate danger at my own expense and by my own attention. The consulship also offered to me at that time to be held annually and in perpetuity, I refused.

(6) In the consulship of Marcus Vinicius and Quintus Lucretius [19 BCE], and later of Publius Lentulus and Gnaeus Lentulus [18 BCE], and a third time of Paullus Fabius Maximus and Quintus Tubero [11 BCE], the senate and Roman people agreed that I be appointed the sole supervisor of the laws and morals with supreme power,¹³ but I did not accept any office offered to me contrary to the custom of our ancestors. The programs the senate proposed me to undertake, I carried out through the tribunician power. To share that power five times I voluntarily requested and received from the senate a colleague.¹⁴

(7) I was triumvir for regulation of the state for ten consecutive years.¹⁵ Up to the day of this writing I have been the president of the senate for forty years.¹⁶ I have been *Pontifex Maximus*, augur, member of the Board of Fifteen for Conducting Sacrifices, member of the Board of Seven in charge of Public Feasts, Arval brother, *Sodalis Titius*, and Fetial.¹⁷

(8) When I was the consul for the fifth time [29 BCE], by order of the people and the senate, I increased the number of patricians. I revised the roster of the senate three times, and in my sixth consulship [28 BCE] I conducted with my colleague Marcus Agrippa a census of the people

12: Augustus assumed this annual power in 23 from which he often dates his term of power. He was consul in the following years: 43, 33, 31, 30, 29, 28, 27, 26, 25, 24, 23, 5, and 2. He held the office in 5 and 2 in order to introduce his grandsons by Agrippa, Gaius and Lucius, to public life.

13: in some capacity Augustus was granted or exercised the power of the censor.

14: he refers first to Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, his son-in-law and presumed successor, two times a colleague, and then to Tiberius, his heir, three times a colleague.

15: the triumvirate was legalized as a five-year term; it was renewed for a second five-year period in 38.

16: a Republican title given to a distinguished member who was the first to be asked his opinion in the deliberations of the senate.

17: subsequent Roman emperors held the first four of these seven priestly offices listed here. Augustus is proud, boasting of serving in these 'colleges' of which, in Republican times, a pre-eminent person normally held only one or, possibly, two.

A new anthology containing fresh, accurate and readable translations of the great prose writers from the Augustan period, including Cicero, Sallust, Cornelius Nepos, Marcus Terentius Varro, Vitruvius, and Livy. This book serves as a prose companion to *Golden Verses*, Alessi's anthology of Augustan poetry. Together these volumes provide an exciting new introduction to the best literature of the finest period of Roman culture.

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Professor Paul Alessi is Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He has earned his PhD from the University of Missouri. He has published on the poet Propertius, and his research and interests are with Augustan literature, Roman culture and Etruscan archaeology.

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 R. Pullins Company
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