How do we locate the “politics” of a literary text? Most people would probably agree that “politics” refers to a struggle for power, as members of society seek to assert and sustain claims upon the whole or upon others. The *locus classicus* of such struggle is the formal, institutionalized setting of government, where people seek and discharge public offices, and compete to set and carry out particular policies or agendas. Thus one way to locate the politics of a literary text is to consider what it says about government and governmental operations. In Roman literary studies, questions about the “political” (in this sense) views of literary authors have been asked since at least the nineteenth century; however, this approach found a new vogue in the 1970s and 1980s as scholars turned away from the excessive decontextualization of New Criticism and sought to reconnect texts and authors with the social, cultural, and material environment within which literary production occurred. Regarding literature of the imperial age—when government was closely associated with the imperial regime—“political” questions were typically formulated as follows: What is the author’s opinion of the emperor, his regime, or of contemporary events? Through what techniques and devices does the author express his support/opposition? What influence does the regime itself have upon the author, what he says, and how he says it? The words “propaganda” and “patronage” often appear in such discussions, since scholars suspected that an author might be expressing, if only out of prudence, an (excessively?) positive image of the regime, and since his means of support—especially if provided by someone within the regime—might affect what he said and how he said it.¹

In due course, however, this approach came to seem unsatisfactory. In the first place, arguments for or against the imperial regime can be teased out of almost any author, depending how a scholar selects

---

¹ For these kinds of questions see, e.g., Woodman and West (1984) vii; Sullivan (1985) 19–73.
and marshalls quotations, how inclined she or he is to see irony, and so on. And with literary critics’ increasing awareness of the complexity, mutability, and multifacetedness of the imperial regime itself, the quest for “for or against” judgments began to appear Procrustean if not incoherent. Consequently, by the early 1990s, a broader, more flexible understanding of “politics” began to find currency in Roman studies, as in other areas of the humanities and social sciences. Retaining the idea that “politics” refers to a struggle for power through the assertion of claims against others, the broader understanding extends beyond government to embrace a variety of social arenas in which such struggles occur, and strategies by which agents compete for advantage. This broadened scope of the “political” has allowed the questions asked of literary texts to range more broadly and become more fundamental. For example: What other social rifts—beyond those between emperors and putatively dissident aristocratic writers—do literary texts reveal as generators of power struggles? Such a question directs our attention to contestation along gender lines, along ethnic lines (e.g., between urban Romans and Latins, or Latins and other Italians, or Italians and provincials), along class lines (e.g., between aristocrats and non-aristocrats), and among sectors of the aristocracy. In what arenas do our texts show these struggles being carried out, and what are the weapons with which the antagonists compete? This question spotlights (for example) the moral and aesthetic discourses that permeate Latin literature, inviting us to consider how the regimes of moral value established and exposed by everything from sexual insults to aesthetic judgments of poetry and art uphold the interests of some social sectors against others. And since it follows that literary texts can themselves be arenas for, and weapons in, struggles for power, a further question arises: how and to what extent do our texts themselves intervene in these contests? For literary texts not only describe and respond to “political” events, but may help constitute those events as such.

Regarding Livy, the “political” question that scholars have traditionally asked is of the narrower type: what is the historian’s view of Augustus and the Augustan dispensation? Admittedly, this question is tempting. The men were near contemporaries; a few texts have been taken to

---