Recollections of a Heavenly Augustus  


(1) Then the divine Augustus got up to give his own opinion in turn, and discoursed with the utmost eloquence. “I”, he said, “have you, honourable members, as witnesses that, from the time that I was made a god, I have not made a single word: I always conduct my own business. And yet I can no longer pretend or contain the grief which shame makes heavier to bear. (2) Was it for this purpose that I created peace on land and at sea? Was it for this reason that I checked civil wars? Was it for this reason that I gave the city a foundation of laws, and adorned it with public works, so that—? What I ought to say, honourable members, I cannot find: all words fall short of my indignation.”

At a critical moment during the heavenly debate on whether or not to admit the recently deceased Claudius as a deity, the divine Augustus stands up and delivers a forceful character assassination of Claudius which sways the gods into refusing his admittance (*Apoc.* 10-11). I am in agreement with Momigliano’s classic assessment of the importance of Augustus’ speech within the *Apocolocyntosis*, in that it succeeds in dispelling the hitherto harmless image of Claudius as a bumbling figure and brings to the fore his disposition as an arbitrary domestic serial killer. But the seriousness of Augustus’ role in the work does not rule out the opportunity for some light-heartedness in his characterisation. Indeed, it is

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1 The text is taken from Eden 1984. All translations are my own.
2 See Momigliano 1934, 76-77, further developed by Leach 1989, 200-216. For Augustus’ speech as an essentially serious and authoritative display, see also e.g. Eden 1984, 115; Schönberger 1990, 78; Lund 1994, 100-101; Binder 1999, 149-150; Vannini 2013. The cases for Augustus as a purposefully ludicrous and/or unpleasant figure have generated limited enthusiasm: see Alexander 1949; Jal 1957, 251-255; esp. Wolf 1986. Whitton 2013, 157-161 argues that the divine Augustus is both a paradigm and a flawed character.
noticeable that Seneca has constructed his divine Augustus from the apparent idiosyncrasies of his mortal self: Augustus the god maintains his former fondness for proverbs and quotation from Homer, and even possibly his penchant for playing dice.3

Towards the beginning of the speech (Apoc. 10.2), it is quite apparent that Seneca has his divine Augustus draw upon the wording and sentiment of his own official inscription, the Res Gestae. But while scholars have duly noted the instances of specific intertextuality between these two sources,4 they have not fully explored their effect. This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion by arguing that: (a) the spectre of the Res Gestae looms more largely across Apoc. 10.1-2, even before instances of specific intertextual engagement, and; (b) the differing levels of engagement between Augustus’ words in the Apocolocyntosis and the Res Gestae may reveal an amusing development in his characterisation in the early stages of his speech.

To turn to the first area of discussion, I would contend that the Res Gestae is foreshadowed by Augustus’ very first word, ego (Apoc. 10.1), which Seneca lends extra prominence by isolating it from the rest of the words in Augustus’ first sentence. This gives an immediate signal to the alert reader as to the essentially egocentric, first person nature of the ‘source’ from which Augustus intends to draw, egocentricity being a key rhetorical feature of the Res Gestae.5

Augustus’ first point is to emphasise that he is making an unprecedented utterance. On one level, of course, Augustus is simply declaring that he has not said anything in a public divine setting since he has been in heaven. We might even be tempted to take this as a metatextual comment: as far as one can ascertain from surviving sources, the divine Augustus is not given a speaking part in any ancient literature before Seneca. On another level, however, we might do well to take particular note of the language used. uerbum facere is a relatively uncommon idiom to denote speaking. I would not wish to deny the phrase its potential for adding a colloquial or even mildly comic flavour to

3 His fondness for proverbs: with Apoc. 10.3 muscam excitare (proverb in Greek about knee, shin and anklebone), 11.5 hominem tam similem sibi quam ouo ouum, cf. Suet. Aug. 87. His recasting of Homeric verse: with Apoc. 11.1 (recasting Il. 1.591), cf. Suet. Aug. 65.4. His fondness for dice may be indicated if we choose to adopt (as e.g. Rouse 1913) the less popular MSS reading at Apoc. 10.3, tam facile homines occidebat quam Canis excidit (‘he would kill men as easily as a Dog-throw falls out [of a dice-box]’); see further Eden 1984, 118.
5 See Ramage 1987, 21-28; Cooley 2009, 24-25.