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THE REVENGE OF AUGUSTUS

CAESAR, OCTAVIAN AND HISTORY IN NEIL GAIMAN'S *AUGUST*

ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the reception of Roman history in Neil Gaiman's graphic short story *August*. It concentrates on the analysis of narrative approach and the ways in which the history of Rome, Caesar and Augustus has been interwoven with Gaiman's fictional world.

KEY WORDS: comic books, graphic novel, classical reception, Octavian Augustus, popular culture

1. THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK. NEIL GAIMAN, *THE SANDMAN, DISTANT MIRRORS AND AUGUST*

Neil Gaiman, a British novelist, screenwriter and comic book author, is a person well known among the readers of speculative fiction. A prolific writer, an author of both numerous short stories and novels, he is also well known for his scripts, written both for big screen movies and TV series. His works were awarded a number of prizes prestigious within the science fiction and fantasy community.¹

A work of special importance in his career is the long series of graphic novels, called *The Sandman*²; originally started in 1989, the is-

¹ See [on-line:] http://www.neilgaiman.com/About_Neil/Awards_and_Honors for details of awards.

² Gaiman was the main script author of the series; he cooperated with a large number of highly specialized graphic artists: illustrators, lettering designers, colouring spe-

sues of *The Sandman* were being published until 1996 and were many times reprinted and supplemented with new material ever since. Regrettably, it has not been studied in more detail by scholars, and classicists make no exception here. One of the reasons why it has been rather neglected even by those interested in classical reception in popular culture might be the medium. Comic books and graphic novels are relatively new objects of interests for the students of classical receptions³ and there is still a lot to be done in this particular field of study. *The Sandman*, especially, is a phenomenon well worth analysing as a case study in reception (not only classical) and it is because of Neil Gaiman's concept of world building. In recent years some academic studies, devoted to various aspects of the *Sandman*'s fictional universe⁴ have been produced; a growing interest in Gaiman's fiction can also be detected by the increasing number of students' work devoted to his fiction.⁵ Of special interest for this particular paper is the essay of Anise Strong, devoted to the analysis of *August*.⁶ In her paper, the author gives a detailed analysis of the events in *August* presented against the background of Roman art, mythology and sexual morality, especially the attitude to rape as well the concepts of masculinity.

In my paper I would like to concentrate on the issue of narrative and the relationship between Gaiman's retelling and its sources, as well as try to place the story of Caesar and Augustus within *Sandman*'s fictional universe.

In *The Sandman* Gaiman aimed at creating a world of mythical dimensions, concentrating the main storyline around the title character: the Sandman, Lord of Dreams, named Morpheus. His character is based on the mythological concept of the Greek divinity of dreams and enhanced with numerous qualities and background stories taken from different

cialists and others. Their work, as co-authors of the graphic novel, should not be neglected. The graphic artists involved in the production of *August* are Bryan Talbot and Stan Woch.

³ The main publication on the presence of classical motifs in comic books is Kovacs, Marshall 2011. See also further volume by the same editors, Kovacs, Marshall 2015.

⁴ See e.g. Sanders 2006, a rather popular and at times uneven work.

⁵ Reilly 2011.

⁶ Stron 2011.

mythological and cultural traditions, pertaining to dreaming and sleep. Morpheus is surrounded by a large number of supporting characters of varied and miscellaneous origins: some of them are originally comic book characters (like John Constantine, previously known from a popular comic series *Hellblazer*, who is alluded to in some of the issues) or various creations of popular culture.⁷ Others can be traced back to classical literature, from Aeschylus⁸ to Shakespeare (the recurring character of Oberon the king of elves, the presence of William Shakespeare himself in *Midsummer Night's Dream*). Various figures in the *Sandman* universe came from fairy tales, legends and various mythological systems from all around the world, from ancient Greek tradition (Morpheus himself) to Norse mythology (Loki) and unorthodox Christian visions of Satan and Hell (Lucifer, who in *The Sandman* is the former king of Hell). Yet another group of *The Sandman*'s characters are those rooted in history, or, should one say, in mythicized history or historical myths. It is on those characters and their role in the universe created by Gaiman that I would like to concentrate here.

The main storyline in *The Sandman* is complicated and multi-layered. It concentrates, in short, around the life and eventual death of the title character. Along with this main storyline, however, *The Sandman* comprises a number of stories, usually short, that are only vaguely connected to both the main narrative and main characters. More often than not, these stories are used by the author to throw additional light on the motivations and characters of the main protagonists of the series, suggest some small episode from their lives or underline a particular feature of their demeanour. Among such stories the collection called *Distant Mirrors* is of special importance. Four stories belonging to it were originally published as separate issues of the *Sandman*: No. 29, 30, 31 and 50 (the latter was written at the same time as the previous stories and its late publication is a result of some technical problems).

The abovementioned stories are called, respectively, *Thermidor*, *August*, *Three Septembers and a January* and *Ramadan*; their original

⁷ See e.g. the appearance of a character based on Barbie doll in *Sandman*'s two issues, *The Doll's House* and *The Game for You*.

⁸ See e.g. the crucial role of the three female characters called The Kindly Ones, combining the mythological figures of Moirae with an inspiration taken from Aeschylean *Eumenides*.

publication year is 1991 in case of the first three and 1993 for the last one. They were later republished, together with a number of other comic shorts, in a collection called *Fables and Reflections* (1993).

The title of *Distant Mirrors* suggests, at first sight, an importance of historical themes for the stories which it contains: the title as such is taken from an important 1978 book by Barbara Tuchman, entitled *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (the source of the title is stated in the single 1991 issue of the first story). Gaiman's stories have ostensibly little to do with the main theme of Tuchman's book: one of them is set in 1st c. CE, one in 10th c., another at the very end of 18th, yet another in the second half of the 19th century. Yet the similarity reaches deeper than the choice of historical period: for Gaiman, as for Tuchman in this particular book, it is important to show history through the lens of an individual. In this case, the individuals in questions are leaders, politicians and, actually, tyrants.

The titles of all the stories are apparently derived from the names of the months, but there is always a different, double meaning hidden behind a seemingly simple name. *Thermidor* denotes not only the month, but also a political event associated with it, the end of the Terror and the fall of Maximilien Robespierre in July 1794. The title *Ramadan* is an allusion to the month of fasting and prayer in Islamic tradition, pointing the reader immediately towards the main set of associations which the story evokes, religious as well as historical and political. The most interesting case is *August*: it is named after the eighth month of the year, but also, obviously, after the man who gave this month its Latin name (and hence the English, Romance and numerous other ones), Octavian Augustus.

All the stories in *Distant Mirrors* concentrate around two central issues: power and memory. The main characters and the exponents of the theme in this collection – the theme of ruling, of kingship and empires – are always characters derived from history. In *Thermidor* two of the main personages are Robespierre and Saint-Just, presented by Gaiman as absolute rulers of the Terror-stricken France. *Three Septembers and a January* deals with a largely forgotten figure of Joshua Abraham Norton, or, as he would style himself, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Norton I of these United States, Protector of Mexico – a mid-19th c. eccentric businessman from San Francisco, who believed himself Emperor of

America. *Ramadan* has, as a protagonist, Harun al Rashid, the fifth Abbasid Caliph from the times of the Islamic Golden Age. Finally, in *August*, the main character is Octavian, but there is a looming shadow of yet another ruler, yet another almost-emperor here: Julius Caesar.

2. THE STORY AND THE EVENTS

The story as such, told in *August*, is deceptively simple. *August* is about one day in the life of Gaius Octavius, whom, as Gaiman's narrator says, *the whole of the world, Roman and barbarian, was to know as Emperor Augustus*. Octavian is told to be seventy during the events (which would date the story to about 5 CE) – although *events* is perhaps too much of a name for what happens here. Indeed, very little happens at all. An elderly Octavian is visited by his associate, the dwarf Lycius, an actor by profession. In his company the emperor is about to embark on a special quest: in a beggar's guise, he would sit on the stairs of a temple and listen to the Romans, observing everyday life in his city. The observations and the city, however, turn out to be of little consequence here: the main storyline centres around Octavian's conversation with Lycius, concerning the emperor's own past and Rome's possible future – or should we say, futures?

3. *AUGUST* AND THE ART OF TELLING STORIES

That simple story is presented in a complicated, intricate narrative form. Like other stories in the collection, *August* is told in the form of the story within a story. The ostensible viewpoint is Lycius – but Lycius, who features as a youth in the narrative itself, is now old: as old as Augustus was in the story told by Lycius. We see, therefore, the past as memory, filtrated and mediated through the eyes of Lycius. But this is not the only trick here. The story starts with a surprising image: a dark frame, isolated and differentiated from the rest: an image of a boy, hiding in his bed, cowering in fear. Only this much we know from both the image and the enigmatic text that accompanies it. It is only much later that we return to this frame and this particular story. Its narrator seems to be someone else

than Lycius, some omniscient, distant narrator concentrated on Octavius (the boy is, as it turns out, his younger self). This frames brings a tone of uneasiness and surprise into the narrative: what we see seems to be told by old Lycius and belong to his memories. Yet the crucial events and the pivotal facts are narrated to us by some other voice, as of yet undisclosed. Such an artistic decision allows Gaiman to stress two important facts about this motif. Firstly, the choice of another, distant narrator, of dark colours and isolated frame, stresses the secretiveness and deeply personal character of this motive. This is something that Octavius rarely shares with others; it is his, his own, his personal story.

The voice of its narrator is, as it turns out, associated with a character, who is secondary here, but crucial for the entire *Sandman* story: the title character, Morpheus, god of dreams. Only when in the latter part Morpheus appears in Augustus' bedroom, taking on the role of the storyteller who comes to assuage the emperor's nightmare with his narratives, that the reader can recognize the pattern of colours and shapes in the story about the frightened boy as typical for Morpheus and associated with his throughout the entire story. Gaiman presents Morpheus, as often, in terms of the paradoxical and the unexpected: this time, the lord of dreams comes to talk about reality, the storyteller tells the truth. Because it is from Morpheus that we hear, for the first time, the grim and shameful story of what happened between the teenage Octavius and his uncle the general during their stay in the camp. One may add here one more observation: the choice of colours here stresses also the dominant themes – those of shame, humiliation, betrayal and grim secrets.

August is also quite particularly complicated, when the chronology of the story is concerned. There are three main time perspectives in this story. Firstly, there is the *now* of Lycius' narrative, fifty years after the death of Augustus: this is the frame of the main story. Secondly, there is the *now* of Lycius' memories, that day when he went with the emperor to sit on the stairs of the temple. There is also a past: the less distant one, that of Augustus' meeting with Morpheus, and the more distant past of Octavius' youth: those few years from his first meeting with Caesar, when he was twelve, until the time when he was sixteen. An additional time plane is created with the appearance of Morpheus, who lives permanently in mythical *illo tempore* and for whom time has little meaning; the same perspective of timelessness is additionally introduced with the

motif of Caesar and Octavian's knowledge of prophecies and of the possible futures of the Roman empire.

4. *AUGUST AND HISTORY: THE FACTS AND THE WAYS*

For a careful reader, yet another intriguing concept is easy to discern: the juxtaposition of history and dream, of facts and fiction, of history and myth. In *August*, Gaiman often alludes to facts and details from Augustus' life. We are dealing here with a great attention devoted to historical features, both on the visual and the textual level. The details of Roman clothing, Roman coins and of the sights of the City itself, such as the temple of Mars Ultor, are carefully represented in the drawings. On the textual level, we have frequent remarks about historical facts. They go well beyond the common knowledge of the period and seem to be based mostly on Suetonius' *Divus Augustus*. Octavian mentions his building programme (p. 5), discusses his anti-theatre proclamations (p. 6) and the disappointment that his daughter and granddaughter bring him (p. 9). He tells Lycius about the legends concerning his conception, his birth and his possible divinity (p. 10). He also comments on the way in which he is related to Caesar and reflects on the first occasion of their meeting during the funeral of Julia, Caesar's sister, when he himself was 12 (p. 9) and slowly reveals the well-known history of becoming Caesar's heir. He names political and civic offices that he has held in Rome (p. 10) and then he cites the reason for neither himself nor Caesar assuming royal titles (*the Romans are proud people; they would not permit themselves to be ruled by a king*, p. 14).

Octavian's characteristics, as much of it as we can glimpse from the story, is also based on Suetonius. We have here Augustus commenting on his liking of simple, traditional and rather sparse food (p. 5, where he lists dried dates, raisins and watered wine as his only meal during the day: this comment is clearly based on Suet. *Aug.* 76). That very remark is juxtaposed with Lycius' sarcastic comment on *lark's tongues and sows' udders* that he imagines to be typical food for Roman aristocracy; no doubt that this particular belief of Lycius is shared by the story's modern readers, since exotic, exquisite and slightly nauseating food is a staple in popular culture's representations of ancient Rome.

The historical context here is built also by the presence, in the action or in the narrative reminiscences, of actual historical characters. That Augustus and Caesar are based on a real character is obvious; less obviously so, the same is true about Lycius. The character of a young man, born into a noble family, affected with dwarfism and favoured by Augustus, appears in Suetonius' *Life of Augustus* (43, 3):

*Ad scaenicas quoque et gladiatorias operas et equitibus Romanis aliquando usus est, uerum prius quam senatus consulto interdiceretur. postea nihil sane praeterquam adulescentulum Lycium honeste natum exhibuit, tantum ut ostenderet, quod erat bipedali minor, librarum septemdecim ac uocis immensae.*⁹

Interestingly, Gaiman's Lycius comments casually on the fact that the god Apollo gave him a strong voice as a gift; the *stentorian voice* of the young dwarf-actor is mentioned in the same passage of Suetonius.¹⁰

Apart from the main characters, also those less crucial or mentioned in passing are often historical characters. For a short moment we see Livia. Remarks about the funeral of Iulia Caesaris, Atia's mother, and of the person of Cicero as pillar of the republic, are also made by Octavian. In one of the final frames the images of Tiberius (named), Caligula, Claudius and Nero (unnamed) also appear. Interestingly, each of them is given a short description that may, together with an image, identify them: *evil* (Tiberius), *mad* (Caligula), *foolish* (Claudius) and *all three of these* (Nero). Also, a number of allusions is made to various aspects of Roman religion, both in the *realistic* plane (Octavian mentioning the temples and gods) and on the *mythical* one (Morpheus discussing the reality of the existence of gods such as Apollo and Terminus).

On the other hand, the Rome and Romans of *August* are also deeply rooted in (mostly British rather than American) popular culture tradition.

⁹ *He sometimes employed even Roman knights in scenic and gladiatorial performances, but only before it was forbidden by decree of the senate. After that he exhibited no one of respectable parentage, with the exception of a young man named Lycius, whom he showed merely as a curiosity; for he was less than two feet tall, weighed but seventeen pounds, yet had a stentorian voice* (transl. J.S. Rolfe).

¹⁰ On Lycius and the general attitude towards people with deformed bodies see also Trentin 2011.

Popular ideas and concepts about Rome present in *August*, such as strange food, were mentioned before. It is also immediately visible in the faces of Octavian and Livia: they are both based on the images of the emperor and his wife as seen in classical British TV series, *I, Claudius*, in which their characters were interpreted by Brian Blessed and Sian Phillips, respectively. For a reader familiar with the series, shown many times in UK and in many countries of the world, the faces in the comic book immediately seem familiar. At the same time, this familiarity goes beyond image: the association covers also the features and characteristics, mostly of Augustus, but also of an episodic character of his wife. The character of Augustus in *I, Claudius* is that of a meek, elderly man, dominated by his wife. Nevertheless, Claudius, narrating the story, has no doubts about the fact that his grandfather was, in his time, a shrewd and ruthless leader and an astute politician. These qualities fit very well with the necessarily limited knowledge we have about Augustus in *August*: we see him as an old man and Livia, in a short glimpse, as controlling and strong personality, but we also cannot help but notice that Octavian here is a merciless killer (we see him kill a rat – a metaphor obvious in the context of him mentioning a moment earlier the proscriptions and the death of Cicero as well as suggesting that Lycius should fear him due to the political power that he wields) and a brutally efficient ruler of Rome.

5. AUGUST AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF GAIMAN'S SANDMAN

Against this canvass of political, historical, biographical and visual reality Neil Gaiman weaves another story, the private and fantastic one. It is based on a notion that even in antiquity was considered a rumour: Suetonius mentions it in *Divus Augustus* 68, saying:

Prima iuuenta uariorum dedecorum infamiam subiit. Sextus Pompeius ut effeminatum insectatus est; M. Antonius adoptionem auunculi stupro me-

*ritum; item L. Marci frater, quasi pudicitiam delibatam a Caesare Aulo etiam Hirtio in Hispania trecentis milibus nummum substrauerit.*¹¹

The information crucial for Gaiman's reworking of the story is hidden here among other pieces of ancient gossip: it is the accusation that Antonius formulated against Octavian, a suggestion that young Octavius allowed his maternal granduncle Caesar to sexually possess him (i.e., committed *stuprum*) in order to get adopted and thereby to partake in Caesar's power and wealth.

These particular pieces of gossip in Suetonius are left uncommented, even though the author distances himself from them, by carefully mentioning them as opinions of various individuals or of unspecified Romans (such is the case of the story that follows in the same passage: the well-known anecdote about an ambiguous line: *uidesne, ut cinaedus orbem digito temperat*, spoken in theatre, referring in-play to the castrated priest of Kybele and his drum, but understood by the public as an allusion to Augustus and his ruling of the world). The gossip can be summarized as follows: Augustus as a boy had shamelessly exploited his youth and good looks: he was effeminate (that is, he took part in homosexual acts as the passive partner), he made Caesar have sex with him in exchange for the adoption, he later kept engaging in the same behaviour, this time for simple financial gratification. The anecdote about the play seems to suggest that these accusations and the image of Augustus as engaging in passive homosexual behaviour have become common knowledge in Rome and were still remembered years later.

It is interesting to observe the tone of Suetonius' allegations, because it is on the difference between the modern judgement of such an act that Neil Gaiman builds his reworking of the character of Augustus. It is commonly known that in Rome an accusation of willingly committing this kind of *stuprum*, of, in other words, partaking in homosexual acts as the passive partner, was believed to be seriously damaging to one's reputation and thus often used against political enemies with little or

¹¹ *In early youth he incurred the reproach of sundry shameless acts. Sextus Pompey taunted him with effeminacy; Mark Antony with having earned adoption by his uncle through unnatural relations; and Lucius, brother of Mark Antony, that after sacrificing his honour to Caesar he had given himself to Aulus Hirtius in Spain for three hundred thousand sesterces* (transl. J.S. Rolfe).

none factual support for the accusation – as may well be the case here. Leaving aside extensive discussion on the topic of Roman *cinaedi* and on possible changes in the way they were viewed by the public in different periods of time,¹² it is safe, I believe, to state that in case of the stories told by Suetonius, it would be obvious for the Roman public to see the young Octavius as a cunning, conniving and unprincipled young man, who prostitutes himself, using his sexual attractiveness for political and financial gain.

Here it is that Neil Gaiman introduces his *secret history* of the Roman empire, the fantastic history that becomes a part of Gaiman's mythical narrative about the history of the world and the place of the Lord of Dreams within. This *secret history* starts, indeed, from the story mentioned above, one that Morpheus tells Augustus: the story of cruel rape and abuse of which the teenage Octavius is a victim and the invincible Caesar – perpetrator. It is easy to see how the possible Roman reading of such a the story is sharply contrasted with the modern one present here: here, the teenage Octavius feels sick, humiliated, violated. Caesar in fact does promises him adoption and teaches him everything about the future of Rome, grooming him for the future wielding of power and leadership. This, however, does not change the fact that we, as readers, are meant to view Octavius here as a victim, not a schemer, not someone who gains something. The story of Caesar's brutal abuse of his young relative should not, however, be interpreted as only a modernizing, somewhat subversive reworking of the motif known from Suetonius. Gaiman uses it also to introduce the theme of the fantastic into the story. And he does it in a particularly Roman way.

Through Caesar, and later also through Morpheus, Augustus has deep knowledge about the future of the world; he gained it not by some divine revelation, but by studying (and later controlling) the contents of the books of prophecies: this is a knowledge of an augur, of someone particularly familiar with a very Roman phenomenon of forecasting the future. Caesar demanded of him to steer Rome towards the proper direction: a direction which would allow Rome to become a unified, unchangeable

¹² On the overview of Roman homosexuality see e.g. Williams 1999. On the *cinaedi* and their characteristics see esp. Richlin 1993. On the possible change of viewing passive homosexuality in Rome in Augustan times see Cantarella 1992: 155–164.

and invincible eternal empire, one and only under the sun. Octavian tells that to Lycius – but he does not tell, not openly, what course of actions he took. Yet we may guess it: his hatred for Caesar (and Caesar here, with his position, his arrogance and his disregard for the will and emotions of other, is a perfect representative of Rome) and his controversial decisions (the end of conquests, the choice of Tiberius for an heir) may suggest that he deliberately *averted* that future. He guaranteed that Rome will fall – and he did it, among other reasons, for personal vendetta. The human world, as in other stories from *Sandman*, has to be changing; it cannot remain stable, unchanging, unified; without change, there is no hope, and without hope, what meaning is there to life?

6. CONCLUSIONS

Neil Gaiman's approach here, from a literary point of view, is rather traditional: it is, after all, typical for the historical-adventure narrative to introduce a secret, fictional factor, changing the course of known history (Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, where the invented character of Milady brings about the historical assassination of the duke of Buckingham, provide a very good example of such a method). Through this approach, Gaiman incorporates the story of the rise and fall of Rome into the general history and historiography of his fictional universe. Using history, well researched and carefully rendered, he creates a narrative that is both psychological, and, above all else, mythical in its dimension.

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