



Constructing Autocracy: Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome by M. B. Roller

Review by: Rhiannon Ash

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M. B. ROLLER, *CONSTRUCTING AUTOCRACY: ARISTOCRATS AND EMPERORS IN JULIO-CLAUDIAN ROME*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001. Pp. xii + 319. ISBN 0-6910-5021-X. £27.95.

Roller, embracing the notion that the advent of the imperial system marked 'a massive and unprecedented relocation of power and authority in the Roman world' (6), investigates in this four-part study how Roman aristocrats in the Julio-Claudian period sought (both successfully and unsuccessfully) to guide and shape the new order. R. conceives this process to be 'dialogical' (6), as a variety of ways in which the emperor could potentially function in society were proposed and placed in competition with one another; and literary texts are where R. sees the richest possibilities for finding evidence of this process in action.

The first two chapters focus on Lucan ('The Ethics of Civil War: Competing Communities in Lucan') and Seneca ('Ethics for the Principate: Seneca, Stoicism, and Traditional Roman Morality'), not necessarily because they are straightforwardly representative in their responses, but because they 'address the same problems that are revealed more broadly in Julio-Claudian sources' (12). R. analyses Lucan's poem in terms of fractured communities, who are constantly in competition with one another, but who ultimately deploy irreconcilable ethical discourses. Since concepts of 'insider' and 'outsider' shift constantly, depending on the focalizer, R. argues that the poem generates disturbing ethical contradictions, whereby (e.g.) *pietas* and *uirtus* can pull in opposite directions: so, 'a soldier who demonstrates *uirtus* by fighting the adversary effectively may also be judged *impius* for harming other members of his own civic community or family' (28). Not even Lucan as internal narrator, whom R. characterizes as inconsistent rather than omniscient, can offer readers any easy solutions, and the anxious narrative shifts thereby 'perform' civil war, as well as narrating it (52). As an analytical tool, R. refers throughout to 'assimilating' and 'alienating' viewpoints of one's opponents: the Pompeians are more often associated with the former, and the Caesarians with the latter. Certainly, how far the enemy in a civil war is viewed as being just like oneself (i.e. an emotionally distressing target) or foreign (i.e. fair game) is profoundly important, but this is surely a feature of *all* civil war narratives (or indeed of any well-constructed narrative about war, as a reading of Homer, *Iliad* 24 reminds us). I therefore had unresolved questions about how successfully this mode of analysis cohered with R.'s particular project, with its self-imposed Julio-Claudian parameters. This was an enjoyable chapter with many compelling observations (e.g. 59–62: Laelius' oath, 1.373–86, analysed against surviving texts of imperial oaths of loyalty), but it was also the least well-integrated (a previous version having originally appeared in *Classical Antiquity* for 1996).

Next comes R.'s illuminating discussion of Seneca. R.'s broad argument is that Seneca modifies traditional Roman ethics with an improved Stoic version, which allows aristocrats to reclaim some power from the *princeps* (66). Since true *bona* are (ideally) internal, rather than being dictated by external circumstances (such as imprisonment or illness), aristocrats can now embrace *uirtus* by their mental disposition instead of by traditional means, such as warfare. In an absorbing discussion (88–97), R. argues that this necessitates a different kind of *exemplum*, which is diachronic rather than pinpointing a single glorious (or awful) moment. It also allows aristocrats to achieve a different kind of *gloria* in a society where military honours are monopolized by the emperor and his family (cf. T. Habinek, 'Seneca's renown: *gloria, claritudo* and the replication of the Roman elite', *CA* 19 (2000), 264–303, perhaps appearing too late for inclusion in R.'s bibliography, which incorporates material up to 1998). Whether this alternative way of gaining glory was a real victory for aristocrats is another question — one thinks glumly of the starving Drusus, chewing on *tomentum* in prison (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.23.2) — but R. offers a clear and convincing picture of Seneca's strategies, which should have far-reaching implications for our reading of all literature written under the Principate.

R. next moves from specific studies to the broader picture. In ch. 3 ('The Emperor's Authority: Dining, Exchange, and Social Hierarchy'), R. examines reciprocal relations between the emperor and his subjects (including the occasional non-aristocrat, 207–8) in terms of gift-exchange. For R., the term 'gift' incorporates not only dinners (135–46), works of literature (182), and money (202–6),

but also more abstract entities, such as conversations at the *convivium* (146–54) and clemency (182–93; cf. P. Plass, *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome* (1995), 163–7). R. firmly underlines the importance of reciprocity to his analysis of the power dynamics (212), and therefore considers both sides of the equation, imperial and aristocratic. His discussion of how emperors sought to prevent the cycle of gift-exchange from getting started when they still needed to exact aristocratic wealth is fascinating (198–206). In general, R.'s eye for detail is pleasing. One deft touch came during his discussion of Augustus' dinner with the infamous Vedius Pollio (Seneca, *de Ira* 3.40): 'the presence of lampreys in the *piscina* suggests that they themselves are on the menu, so there is the unappetizing possibility that the guests will shortly be dining upon the very fish that have consumed the slave' (169).

In the final chapter ('Modeling the Emperor: The Master-Slave Relationship and its Alternatives'), R. explores two potentially competing metaphors to articulate the relationship of the emperor and his subjects, that of master/slave and father/child (son), which provide 'the channels through which its [the autocratic regime] power can be seen as flowing legitimately or illegitimately' (247). These metaphors, as R. acknowledges, transcend the Julio-Claudian period, and R. usefully extends his analysis to examine the end of the Republic (247–53). R. speaks in terms of a 'rhetoric of social inversion' (264), through which he analyses the anxieties of the élite about their own status, as well as that of the emperor and excessively powerful freedmen.

This is an enjoyable and far-reaching book, which provides much food for thought for both ancient historians and specialists in literature. One quibble is that there were unnecessary slips in the proof-reading (25, 33, 53, 78, 113 n. 87, 113 n. 26, 180 n. 79, 232, 265), but I end with a general observation. R. expresses occasional anxiety about (i) whether an event falls within or beyond the Julio-Claudian period (e.g. 175, 247, 248) or (ii) whether an author was writing after A.D. 68 (e.g. 199, 256, 272). Certainly, many of the sources cited by R. naturally post-date the Julio-Claudian era and his observations are often pertinent to the efforts of aristocrats to relate to their emperors after A.D. 68 (e.g. his discussion of military *gloria* and Senecan *virtus* could be extended to Tacitus' portrait of Agricola). Is R.'s respect for his Julio-Claudian parameters actually rather a strait-jacket? For this reader, at least, the implications of R.'s conclusions certainly extend beyond the confines of 31 B.C.–A.D. 68.

University College London

RHIANNON ASH