The Shadow of the Comet: Divine Patronage in the Rise of Augustus

by

Dora Y. Gao

Submitted to the Department of Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science in Ancient and Medieval Studies at the MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

This thesis explores the appearance alleged by ancient sources of a comet over Rome in 44 B.C. and its role in the use and abuse of divine patronage in the rise of the young Octavian between 44 and 27 B.C. The comet was concluded to have actually occurred through an analysis involving Poisson statistics, basic calculations of orbital dynamics, and historical context. The physical manifestation of this comet over Rome granted Octavian the opportunity to begin asserting himself as a legitimate political competitor in the wake of Julius Caesar’s death and his adoption in Caesar’s will. With the comet as a symbol of his father’s deification, Octavian’s new status as divi filius portrayed him as a pious young man dedicated to the traditions of the Roman Republic and won him the early support of the people, the legions, and the Senate. This image persisted through the 30s and became far preferable to that of the drunk and eastern Marc Antony when Octavian began to associate himself with the very Roman and republican figure of Apollo. Together, Julius Caesar and Apollo became two key divine patrons behind Octavian, with the generous Julius Caesar representing the more public aspects of Octavian’s plan for Rome, and Apollo portraying the more personal side of Octavian’s character and his dedication to the harmony of the Republic.

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Contents

1 Introduction 5
   1.1 The Political Terrain of 44 B.C. 10

2 Did the Comet Exist? 18
   2.1 Difficulties of Scientific Verification 19
   2.2 A Case for the Comet 26
   2.3 Conclusion 31

3 Octavian's Republican Image and the Deification of Julius Caesar 32
   3.1 44-42 B.C.: Octavian's First Claims of Legitimacy 33
   3.2 Comets, Omens, and Gods: Religion in the Late Republic 37
   3.3 Octavian as divi filius 41
   3.4 The Deification of Julius Caesar 44
   3.5 Conclusion 48

4 The Emergence of Apollo 49
   4.1 42 - 31 B.C.: Deification to Actium 50
   4.2 The Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar 56
   4.3 Apollo: A New Divine Patron 62
   4.4 The Complementary Images of Julius Caesar and Apollo 70
   4.5 Conclusion 72

5 Epilogue: Augustus the Pater Patriae 74
Chapter 1

Introduction

Imagine looking up during the day and seeing a stationary plume of light, rising steeply from a bright point of origin somewhere above the horizon and blazing a trail of red as it arcs its way across the sky. To maintain visibility in broad daylight, the comet would have to be multiple orders of magnitude brighter than most of the stars that populate the night sky. For a week, it becomes a fixture as it travels lazily from east to west, following the Earth’s rotation each day. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, it is gone.

According to ancient sources, such is the sight that must have met the Romans as they went about their daily activities during the summer of 44 B.C. At this time, Rome was in the midst of political uncertainty following the assassination of Julius Caesar at the hands of Brutus and Cassius in March of the same year, and in fact, the comet’s appearance coincided with the funeral games Octavian, Caesar’s adopted son, had organized in honor of his father. In addition to the awe any daytime comet would evoke through its striking appearance, the ancient Romans would have been further moved: comets were regarded as omens and bearers of misfortune, a fact that would presumably have been in the forefront of the mind of any Roman who could see the bright visitor in the sky that appeared, then disappeared.¹ Coupled with political turbulence and its coincidental appearance with the funeral games for the late dictator who had catalyzed the chain of events leading to the

¹Ramsey & Licht, 135.
Indeed Octavian, the adopted son who suddenly found himself in this precarious situation, the man who would in less than three decades become Augustus Caesar, first emperor of Rome, seemed to have taken full advantage of this fortuity. He wrote in his *Memoirs*, "eo sidere significari vulgus credidit Caesaris animam inter deorum immortalium numina receptam," that "the common people believed that this star signified the soul of Caesar had been received among the spirits of the immortal gods" (*Memoirs*, fr.6). This association between Caesar and the comet was one upon which Octavian capitalized: the image of a celestial object appears on several of his coins in later periods (fig. 1-1), there are several mentions of stars and comets in works by Augustan poets such as Vergil, Horace, and Propertius, and a temple was dedicated by Octavian to both Caesar (deified in 42 B.C. by the Senate) and his comet. Later historians such as Pliny the Elder and Cassius Dio also remark upon the comet with respect to Augustus; and Pliny especially, as shown below, grants the comet a fair amount of detail.

Yet the exact nature and role of this object in the grand picture of Octavian’s transfor-
formation from the adopted son of Julius Caesar to the first emperor of Rome remains unclear. Upon closer scrutiny, the evidence raises several important points of ambiguity and in some instances, contradiction. While there are several sources alluding to the comet significantly after the comet’s occurrence, the first mention of the comet comes from Augustus himself in his *Memoirs*, and much of the attention given to the comet in later works is directly derived from this Augustan account. Furthermore, the silence of a key source during this period, Cicero, is also troubling – given Cicero’s deep political involvement during the late Republic and his general loquacity, many scholars find it difficult to conceive that he would not have even mentioned the appearance of such a striking omen and its alleged resonance. These two points have led some historians to postulate that the comet might not even have existed – that it was altogether a construct of Augustus, perhaps as an attestation to the man’s political genius.

Despite being the most comprehensive source on the comet from antiquity, Pliny the Elder’s description of the celestial object and its associated temple in his *Naturalis Historia* presents several problems concerning many aspects of the occurrence and subsequent reception of the object. A historian and natural philosopher writing in the 70s A.D., Pliny describes the object as follows:

Cometes in uno totius orbis loco colitur in templo Romae, admodum faustus divo Augusto iudicatus ab ipso, qui incipiente eo apparuit ludis quos faciebat Veneri Genetrici non multo post obitum patris Caesaris in collegio ab eo instituto. namque his verbis id gaudium prodit: Iis ipsis ludorum meorum diebus sidus crinitum per septem dies in regione caeli quae sub septentrionibus est conspectum est. id oriebatur circa undecimam horam diei clarumque et omnibus e terris conspicuum fuit. eo sidere significari volgus credidit Caesaris animam inter deorum immortalium numina receptam, quo nomine id insignie simulacro capitis eius, quod mox in foro consecravimus, adiectum est. haec ille in publicum; interiore gaudio sibi illum natum sequi in eo nasci interpretatus est; et, si verum fatemur, salutare id terris fuit. (2.93-4)
In only one place in the whole world is a comet an object of cult, in a temple at Rome. The late emperor Augustus, now deified, judged it to be propitious to himself, and it appeared at the beginning of his career, at the games that he was celebrating in honor of Venus Genetrix, not long after the death of his father Julius Caesar. Augustus was a member of the board that had been established by Caesar to give the games. With these words he made known his joy in his Memoirs: “On the very ... dedicated in the Forum.” These are the sentiments that he expressed publicly. Privately he took pleasure in the view that it [the comet] had come into being for him and that he was coming into being in it. And, if we admit the truth, it was beneficial to the world.]

(translation from Ramsey & Licht)

Even in light of Pliny’s favorable opinions of Augustus, the passage does not at all clarify the nature of the occurrence or its value to Augustus. Pliny first describes the object as a comet (cometes), but later quotes Augustus referring to the object in his Memoirs as a “hairy star” (sidus crinitum, synonymous for comet), and then a regular star (sidus) without hair. It is impossible to determine why Augustus might have used multiple terms to describe this celestial object. He could merely have used sidus crinitum and sidus interchangeably as synonyms, or as Gurval suggests, the inconsistencies may have been due to revisions in Augustus’ message to accommodate the shifting political situation in Rome – an argument which will be more closely explored and refuted in subsequent chapters. Both these possibilities again could indicate that the object might altogether have been a construct in the first place. Gurval, in fact, supports his argument further with the use of numismatics; he argues that the object on the temple pediment in Figure 1-1(b) more closely resembles a star lacking a tail, in contrast to Figure 1-1(a), which clearly displays the comet’s tail.

It is equally difficult to interpret the reception of this celestial object both publicly by the people of Rome and privately by Augustus. Pliny, quoting Augustus, writes that the people believed the star to be a sign that the immortal gods had received the soul of Caesar; however, neither Augustus nor Pliny indicate how or when this idea first took hold, from whom it originated, and how widely accepted it was. Pliny’s assessment of Augustus’ inner reaction towards the object is likewise puzzling, as it is unclear how or where Pliny could
have obtained information concerning Augustus’ private opinions. Furthermore, nasci in the last sentence is ambiguous, given that Augustus had not literally been born under the object, and thus perhaps alludes to a more metaphorical meaning of being born, or “coming into being.” In what manner Augustus might have “come into being” under this sign, however, remains uncertain.

What the passage does reiterate, however, is that the occurrence of this celestial object, whether a comet or star, factual or fictitious, had a significant impact at Rome. Pliny’s specific reference to its worship in the temple demonstrates both that Augustus held the comet in high enough regard to construct a temple, and that this was the only instance in which a comet was treated in such a way. According to Augustus in his Memoirs, the peoples’ reaction to this object was significant enough to merit the placement of its symbol on the head of Caesar’s statue in the forum. Additionally, Pliny, with hindsight, seems to have recognized the value of the comet enough so as to presume that Augustus would have received it with inner joy, “interiore gaudio sibi.” In fact, Pliny even writes “si verum fatemur, salutare id terris fuit,” and asserts its occurrence as positive and beneficial. This attitude, however, directly contradicts the common attitude of regarding comets as harbingers of misfortune. Why, then, did the people regard this particular comet as the sign of the acceptance of Caesar’s soul by the gods, and how exactly might their reception have helped Augustus, then the young Octavian, come into being? To answer these questions, and before attempting to study the object’s nature and its role in Augustus’ politics, it is first necessary to understand the unique situation of Roman politics in 44 B.C. that could have cultivated such an unlikely reaction to the appearance of such an object over Rome.²

²The following section contains a broad summary of relevant events that occurred within the first century B.C. Specific assertions are cited, but a general reference on this era in Roman history is given by sections in chapters 7-9 in Boatwright’s The Romans (pp. 185-261), and chapters 4-6 in Scullard’s From the Gracchi to Nero (pp. 77-148).
1.1 The Political Terrain of 44 B.C.

In the aftermath of the assassination of Julius Caesar, Rome found herself thrown into a highly unpredictable and potentially dangerous predicament. Although Rome, by the mid-first century, had already suffered through multiple rounds of internal strife and turmoil during the several civil wars beginning in the 80's, the situation in 44 was unique in that Rome was suddenly in the midst of a power vacuum with no established contenders for the power. After Caesar’s defeat of Pompey and many staunch Optimates who had been the core of the senatorial opposition against Caesar, there remained no one between 48 and 44 who presented any real challenge to Caesar’s power. Even Caesar’s assassins, Brutus and Cassius, had not planned past the deposition of the man whom they regarded as a tyrant, and had no further defined plans for the restoration of the Republic after Caesar’s murder. In addition to the lack of competition, Caesar, upon being appointed dictator in 48, and then having declared himself to be dictator in perpetuity in February of 44, had been holding an essentially absolute power that he had displayed no signs of giving up in the near future. Thus, with his unexpected assassination, there suddenly was a power vacuum in dire need of filling.

While Caesar might have intended to keep his dictatorship for as long as he could, he had also named an heir. It came as a surprise to everyone, however, when Marc Antony, upon

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3 The traditionalists amongst the Roman Senate, headed primarily by Cato the Younger, who were proponents of the Republic and believed in the concentration of power in the hands of senators and the political elite.

4 Contrary to negative connotations of the word in modern society today, the word *dictator* in ancient Rome merely meant someone appointed by the Senate in special circumstances to assume full control of the state and lead it out of crisis. A good republican dictator would then put down the title once the problem had been resolved.

5 Boatwright, 254-258.

6 It is important to note that this power vacuum might not necessarily have needed to be filled by a single man replacing Caesar, though there were men who wished to do so. In fact, it was the view of Caesar’s assassins and many other pro-republican members of the Senate to keep the power out of the hands of a single man and instead, restore it to the Senate under the traditional system of the Republic.

7 This would not have been an “heir” in the traditional sense of the word as we may know it today. Caesar did not mean for his title as dictator in perpetuity, or any of his other powers, to be passed down to Octavian. Instead, “heir” only meant that he had adopted Octavian as his son, and left to him his clients, his troops, and his wealth – effectively, only a position of leadership in the Caesarian faction. In this sense, Julius Caesar had never intended to establish a dynasty under his name as a tyrant king might have.
opening Caesar’s will before a large gathering of plebeians, discovered that Julius Caesar had adopted Gaius Octavius, his great-nephew, as his son, and named the 18 year-old boy his heir. Before his adoption, Octavian was little known throughout the Roman political sphere, and in fact, could hardly even claim to have come from a particularly distinguished senatorial family (Suetonius, *Augustus* 2). In fact, as Suetonius tells the story, Octavian had only made a good impression on his great-uncle after joining the Caesarian cause in the war against Pompey, and even then, Caesar had only witnessed an attestation to the boy’s character rather than his capabilities, as Octavian had suffered a shipwreck while out at sea (Suetonius, *Augustus* 8).

It is not surprising, then, that Octavian hardly appeared to be a man worthy of following in Julius Caesar’s footsteps, and that, instead, there were several more promising candidates. One of Octavian’s prime rivals was Marc Antony, the man who had opened Julius Caesar’s will and delivered a rousing funeral speech on behalf of Julius Caesar with the full expectation that he was to be named Caesar’s heir. As the right-hand man of Julius Caesar, Marc Antony had led Caesar’s legions during Caesar’s initial campaign in Gaul in the 50’s. With the help and patronage of Caesar, he had been a tribune\(^8\) in 50, “Master of the Horse”\(^9\) in 47, and had been holding the consulship in 44 at the time of Caesar’s assassination. Thus, unlike Octavian, Marc Antony was a much more experienced and well-known candidate to continue in Caesar’s place as the leader of the Caesarian faction. As a man who had clearly been a staunch supporter of Caesar, and in return, had been held in Caesar’s favor, it was clear that Marc Antony still believed himself to be the one who should have been named Caesar’s heir over Octavian, even after the will had been opened (Plutarch, *Antony* 16). This rivalry would continue to permeate the relationship between the two men, even as they became political partners later in their careers.

In addition to Marc Antony, there were also Marcus Brutus and Gaius Cassius, Julius

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\(^8\)One of ten elected officials that had the power to convene the popular assembly and to preside over it. A tribune also had the right to propose legislation to this assembly, making it an increasingly important and influential office as the second and first centuries B.C. progressed.

\(^9\)The *Magister Equitum* was a position that could be appointed by a dictator to serve as his main lieutenant.
Caesar’s assassins, and other like-minded men. Though Brutus and Cassius were forced to flee from Rome in the wake of the rioting of the plebeians incited by the opening of Caesar’s will and Marc Antony’s funeral speech, they not only represented two figures who had a clear belief in the Roman government as a Republic and what was needed to revive the state, but also the views of other senators. Although there no longer remained staunch Optimates such as Cato the Younger, who had vehemently opposed popular politicians like Caesar and had committed suicide rather than accept Caesar’s clemency, the presence of men such as Brutus and Cassius who were wary of the power that Julius Caesar had collected represented a general senatorial dislike towards the concentration of large amounts of power in the hands of one man. Regardless of whether it was possible for the Roman state to return to the balanced system of government it was during the height of the Republic, there was no doubt that there still remained those who clung to the ideals of the Republic, and who would do anything to to preserve them. For these people, the removal of Julius Caesar was the first step towards the restoration of the Republic, and they would be the ones to see the rest of the process through.

In the face of these challenges, Octavian, the little-known 19 year-old whom Julius Caesar had unpredictably adopted in his will, had the task of not only quickly legitimizing himself as someone to be taken seriously as Caesar’s heir, but also proving himself as the prime choice over capable, qualified, and established men. While his rivals might have appeared to be better candidates at the time of Caesar’s assassination, there were several conditions presented by the unique political situation at that time that were in Octavian’s favor.

First, there was a resurgence of love and fervor for Julius Caesar amongst the people of Rome. Throughout his rule, Caesar remained a popular politician who had alienated the Senate but had garnered the love of the people. Although initially, according to Plutarch, Brutus had been able to sway the common people to his cause against Julius Caesar, their sympathy did not last for long (Plutarch, Brutus 18). A day later, during an attempt at

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Cicero, in his letter to Atticus in April of 44, summarizes quite well the sentiments of many in Rome concerning Octavian: “His supporters hail him as Caesar, though Philippus does not, and accordingly neither do I” (Cicero, Att. XIV 12).
reconciliation between Marc Antony and Brutus and Cassius, the reading of Caesar’s will once again rallied the plebeians to Caesar’s side. According to Plutarch, it was “found that the will of Caesar gave to every Roman seventy-five drachmas, and left to the people his gardens beyond the Tiber... [An] astonishing kindliness and yearning for Caesar seized the citizens” (Plutarch, Brutus 20). Building upon gratitude, anger began to surface once Antony displayed Caesar’s torn robe and “[pointed] out the many places in which it had been pierced and Caesar wounded” (Plutarch, Brutus 20). The result, as Plutarch recounts, was chaos. Fully riled by their love for Caesar, the plebeians “dragged from the shops the benches and tables, piled them upon one another, and thus erected a huge pyre; on this they placed Caesar’s body, and in the midst of many sanctuaries, asylums, and holy places, burned it” (Plutarch, Brutus 20).

As a result, Brutus and Cassius, men who had acted on the behalf of the Roman Republic, and who had held the support of the people only the day before, were forced to flee the city of Rome. Thus, both the people’s vehement love for Caesar and the influence that they as a collective body could wield were powerful weapons that Octavian, as Caesar’s selected heir, could use for his own cause. To fully utilize these opportunities to his advantage, Octavian would have to strengthen the tenuous bond between himself and Caesar the will had established, and to prove that he was the loyal, adopted son of the popular dictator beyond a shadow of doubt.

Second, there was an equally influential and important group to win in Caesar’s troops. These legions would have been stationed across the Roman empire, but more importantly, there were also veterans who were right in Italy and who could mobilize quickly if recruited. Although these troops were Roman, and therefore technically, should have served loyally under any Roman general, there was a distinct trend in the first century B.C. towards armies that would be loyal to a specific commander.11 This shift was brought about by several changes in the Roman campaigns in the late Republic, which shifted the army from a citizen militia in the Republic to a body that looked more like a large, standing army.12

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11 Boatwright, 347-352; 391-392.
12 The official reorganization of the Roman army would not occur until 13 A.D., when Augustus instated
First, more and more, Roman campaigns were being conducted farther away from Rome and would take many years to complete. Legions would spend years together serving under their general, which would increase their loyalty to that specific general over the distant state and Senate back in Rome. Furthermore, if successful, these long campaigns would be extremely lucrative, and many soldiers would become rich by the loot and plunder their generals would give them upon victory. These winnings would strengthen their loyalty further. It was, in part, because of the specific loyalty of troops that so many civil wars occurred during the first century, as legions would have less qualms about marching and fighting against fellow Romans under their separate generals. These sentiments manifested in the marches of Sulla’s troops upon Rome in the 80’s, and then once again, when Caesar crossed the Rubicon with the legions he had commanded in Gaul and warred against Pompey and the Optimates in January of 49.

There was no doubt that, at the time of his death, Caesar still retained the same loyalty in his troops as he did when he marched on Rome in 49. The question in 44, after Caesar’s assassination, was who would inherit that loyalty. To the Caesarian legions, both Octavian and Marc Antony were legitimate choices. On the one hand, Octavian had been named by Caesar himself as the legal heir, and the word of their formal general would have weighed heavily on the minds of his legions. On the other, Marc Antony had served with Caesar and his legions in Gaul, and would have been a more familiar figure to the troops. Furthermore, previous successes under Antony held promises of more victories, and with them, more loot, while Octavian’s military capabilities remained unproven. Both men, then, were possible candidates to whom the troops could have transferred their loyalties. To ensure that they would support him over Antony, Octavian would have to make sure that he established himself as more Caesarian than Antony, and once again, would have to strengthen and emphasize his bonds to his adoptive father while also attesting to his strength and capability as a military leader.

And finally, there remained the sentiments of the Senate. The Senate in 44 B.C., although a formal standing army with a fixed length of service at the end of which the soldiers received a set payment (Boatwright, 302).
still, in name, the most important ruling body of political elites in Rome, was nothing like the institution of the mid-2nd century that Polybius had described in his *Histories* at the height of the Republic. Instead, it was clear that the power and influence of a collective body were giving way to the concentration of power in the hand of one person. Ironically, Sulla, wielding unchecked dictatorial power, had given the Senate some of its prestige and power back in the late 80's and early 70's. However, the decline of the Senate was still readily apparent in the six special commands of *imperium* it gave Pompey throughout the 70’s and the 60’s. These grants of power are evidence of the Senate’s inability to solve problems such as pirates on the Mediterranean, which would have fallen under its jurisdiction according to Polybius, on their own. Furthermore, the eventual takeover of the state by Julius Caesar showed that the Senate had not been strong enough to withstand the power and influence of a single, albeit popular and successful, man. In the process of the political turmoil that had taken place, many senators, including the staunchest of the Optimates, had been killed, and even Brutus and Cassius, who had murdered Caesar in the name of republican ideals, were forced to flee Rome. However, despite the waning power of the Senate, certain Romans, such as Cicero, clearly still clung to the ideals of their previous institution and their restoration. Thus, a third opportunity presented itself for Octavian, to not only win the support of the people and his father’s troops, but of the Senate as well by presenting himself as a new champion of the virtues of the Republic.

Should he win in the support these three large constituencies of the people, Caesar’s legions, and the Senate, it is clear that Octavian could wield extraordinary influence. In the case of the first two, the key to winning support lay in asserting and the strengthening the connections Octavian had with Julius Caesar, and in convincing both the people and the troops that he was the man to whom they should transfer loyalty instead of Marc Antony.

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13 As outlined by Polybius, the domain of the Senate included control of the state treasury, public investigations of crimes, and foreign affairs including the declaration of war (Polybius, *Histories* 13).
14 Scullard, 80-83.
15 Scullard, 85-103.
16 Cicero makes this clear in his letter to Gaius Cassius, and writes, “[F]or in what has been achieved so far we seem to have been delivered from the king, but not from the kingship... it appears that merely the loathing for that impious man and our resentment at slavery have been purged, while the state still lies prostrate in the upheavals into which he cast it” (Cicero, *Fam. XII* 1).
In the case of the Senate, Octavian would have to prove that he was, above all else, a man who believed in and was committed to preserving the customs, traditions, and ideals of the Republic alongside the Senate.

The introduction of the celestial object just four months after the opening of this power vacuum would serve to jumpstart Octavian into successfully collecting the support of all three in a remarkably short amount of time. This thesis, then, focuses on the comet in the years of Octavian’s rise from the obscure, adopted son in 44 to the granting of his title of Augustus by the Senate in 27. In particular, the comet’s links to the divine patronage of two deities, Julius Caesar after his deification in 42, and Apollo in the late 30s, will be explored. Though the comet was most directly associated with Julius Caesar and his deification, it created an opportunity for Octavian to portray himself as a man unyieldingly dedicated to republican morals and ideals – an image that both lent itself to divine patronage and was further bolstered by the favor of Julius Caesar and Apollo. The reasons for the appearance of Apollo as a second divine patron will also be discussed in the context of the shifting political situation in the 30s and the ways in which Octavian’s message adapted to fit the demands of the new political landscape.

Because the thesis is framed within the years of 44-27, the following chapters are organized chronologically. It is also important, however, to consider the themes that run across chapters and to remember that structures and coins in Rome would have been able to be seen or were in circulation for much longer than when they were first vowed or struck. Though new images of Apollo might have been more prevalent in the 30s, their emergence did not necessitate the disappearance of images of Julius Caesar during this time. Thus it may also be useful to consider Octavian’s message in terms of the two divine patrons, and to draw continuities between the two to understand better the overall image Octavian presents in this period. Above all, the comet and its symbol of Julius Caesar’s deification remain essential to understanding the effect and importance of divine patronage as a whole in the rise of Octavian. As a result, the following chapter attempts to answer the question of whether the comet actually existed, in order to proceed with as complete a picture as possible of how the
comet might have been received in Rome in midst of the turbulent year of 44 B.C.
Chapter 2

Did the Comet Exist?

In light of all the questions raised by ancient sources as discussed in the introduction, it is useful first to take a step back and ask perhaps a more basic question: did the comet actually exist? Though multiple ancient sources mention the comet, these records alone are not enough to assume the comet’s existence; often including creative embellishments in their works, Roman authors were not very concerned with historical accuracy as defined by modern scholarship. Additionally, the earliest surviving account of the comet is that of Augustus himself, a fact slightly suspect considering that it was Octavian who eventually benefited the most from the comet. It is possible that Octavian had constructed the comet’s occurrence for further leverage during his father’s funeral games, perhaps by spreading the rumor himself and bribing others to be witnesses supporting his claim. Equally likely is the possibility that there had been no talk of a comet in 44 at all, and that Augustus, while writing his Memoirs in the 20s, had included the comet retroactively.

The comet’s existence is an interesting inquiry precisely because of these conclusions historians may draw concerning Augustus. If the comet had actually occurred, then Octavian’s political prowess would have lain in his ability to portray a usually ominous event as advantageous to himself in the political context of 44 B.C. If the comet had not actually occurred, however, then Octavian’s political genius would have been in his successful construction of an event that he knew would be fortuitous to himself. This distinction feeds into a larger
question of our ability to discern and evaluate Augustus’ motivations. Galinsky claims that
Augustus’ true intentions cannot be discerned from the ever-present image of his statesman-
ship, while Osgood believes that Octavian/Augustus always kept the needs of the people
of Rome in mind, even during the bloody years of 43-30 B.C. On the other hand, Levick,
also rejecting the notion of a motivated transformation between the ruthless Octavian of the
Triumviral period and the benevolent Augustus who brought peace and stability after civil
war, suggests that a desire for personal power drove Octavian/Augustus through all stages
of his life.\footnote{Levick, 14.} The context of Octavian’s use of the comet may help to subtly characterize the
man between two distinct images: a smart politician who knew how to work events to his
advantage, and one who began creating his image before he ever took any official political
offices.

Given the limited amount of information we can draw from ancient sources, which are
already ambiguous \textit{per se}, we may turn to science to help determine the factual existence of
the comet. The following section presents a situation in which the comet could have occurred
in July of 44 B.C. While the narrative details a plausible progression of events, it is not the
\textit{only} narrative necessitated by logic. Furthermore, several problems arise from the historical
evidence or lack thereof, and perhaps most obviously troubling, there remains the issue that
the comet of 44 cannot be identified as a catalogued comet. However, these concerns will
be dismissed in the remainder of the chapter, with the result that, given our sources and
context, we may accept the existence of the comet as more likely than not.

\section*{2.1 Difficulties of Scientific Verification}

To most conclusively prove the existence of the comet, one would ideally seek scientific
verification that is entirely separate from historical significance or other possible forms of bias.
Incidentally, many historical comets are, in fact, included in certain lists of cometary orbits
compiled by scientists whose information concerning these comets comes directly from the
ancient sources. Other catalogs, however, do not include such comets, because quantitative
conclusions can rarely be drawn from qualitative records, most of which are taken without the necessary tools to accurate and reliable measurements by modern standards. In the same way that a line must be defined by two points, a comet’s location on its orbit, or indeed the location of any object on its orbit, is uniquely specified in three dimensions by six parameters; thus a scientifically complete and useful comet orbit entry must include all six of these parameters, explained below.

Figure 2-1 displays four of the six orbital elements, i, Ω, ω, and ν. i, or the inclination, characterizes the tilt of the orbit with respect to a plane of reference. The line at which the plane of reference and the plane of the tilted orbit is called the lines of nodes, and the orbit itself intersects this line at two points. The point at which the orbit passes from below the plane of reference to above is called the ascending node. Given a fixed reference direction,
the angle between the reference direction and the ascending node defines the second orbital element, \( \Omega \), the *longitude of ascending node*. The *periapse* is defined as the point on the orbit at which the object is closest to the sun, and the *line of periapse* is the line from the sun to the periapse. The third orbital element, \( \omega \), the *argument of periapsis*, is defined as the angle from the ascending node to the line of periapse. The angle between the periaspe and the known location of the comet along the orbit at a given time is \( \nu \), the *true anomaly*.

The final two orbital elements, not shown, are \( a \), the semimajor axis, and \( e \), the eccentricity. The semimajor axis is defined as the average of the minimum (perihelion) and maximum (aphelion) distances from the sun to the orbit, and the eccentricity specifies how elliptical the orbit is.

The scientific verification of the existence of the comet of 44 thus requires the calculation of these six orbital parameters to specify the orbit of the comet. Using these parameters, it may then be possible to match them with an existing set of parameters already cataloged, effectively confirming the comet of 44 as a comet that has been recorded and characterized at some time other than 44 B.C. and removing the historical bias.

The process of determining these orbital parameters to modern standards of astronomy, however, requires careful quantitative observation of specific aspects of the comet from multiple locations. By contrast, there survives one ancient source written twenty years after the comet of 44 allegedly appeared which vaguely describes that

> On the very days of my games [Octavian’s funeral games for Julius Caesar], a comet was visible over the course of seven days, in the northern region of the heavens. It rose at about the eleventh hour of the day and was bright and plainly seen from all lands.

*Memoirs, fr.6*

The account is frustratingly uninformative for the modern day astronomer: what exactly constitutes the “northern region” of the sky? For how long did the comet remain in the sky after it rose? What geographic locations are encompassed by “all lands?” Without these
specifics, only a precious few mathematical parameters can be calculated, and only after conclusions are drawn from the evidence with large amounts of uncertainty.

In spite of this challenge, John T. Ramsey and A. Lewis Licht have calculated a set of tentative orbital parameters for the comet of 44. They have used three of these parameters to narrow down a list of possible comet matches from the Marsden Catalog of Cometary Orbits to fifteen. Using the orbital parameters of these fifteen comets, one can, in theory, back-integrate the orbits to calculate the location of the object at any given time. After the orbits have been back-integrated to 44 B.C., the location of the comet can be compared with the predicted location of the comet of 44. This task is much easier said than done, however, because orbits are defined for a perfect universe in which the objects are not subject to any outside forces. To back-integrate accurately the orbit of any object traveling through the Solar System, the effects of forces upon these orbits, most notably that of Jupiter, will have to be considered. The more forces considered, the more accurate the back-integration will be. Accuracy comes at a price, however, as the speed of the back-integration decreases and the required processing power of the computer increases drastically as more forces are taken into account. Additionally, the further back we integrate, the more error accumulates as the program drops more and more forces to which the orbit is subject; thus the accuracy of the back-integration is especially key when integrating back as far as 44 B.C. Such a calculation can take an indefinite amount of time as the back-integration becomes more complex, and even then, it would be unclear exactly how accurate the result can be given that the orbit must rewind back over 2000 years.

The question of back-integration may also be entirely futile given that orbit is believed to be near-parabolic, or that $e \approx 1$. $e$, the eccentricity, characterizes how circular an orbit is. An orbit’s dependency on eccentricity is shown in Figure 2-2. An orbit with $e = 0$ is a circle, while an orbit with $e = 1$ is a parabola, meaning that it is open. A comet that follows an open orbit, as is possible for the comet of 44, will not loop back to a previous position.

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2 Ramsey & Licht, 133.
3 The Marsden catalog contains orbits for 1109 comets and is complete up till the end of May 1982. All comets in the catalog have all six orbital elements included.
Figure 2-2: Various orbit eccentricities, with both open and closed orbits. The red orbit has $e = 0.7$, the green has $e = 1$, and the blue has $e = 1.3$. Note that $e = 1$ is the boundary separating open and closed orbits: $e < 1$ results in a closed orbit, while $e > 1$ results in an open orbit. (http://biology.wsc.ma.edu)
This quality of the orbit means that the comet of 44 probably never returned to the inner Solar System after its initial visit in 44, making it impossible for it to have been cataloged at a later time. Even if an accurate back-integration were possible for the fifteen candidate comets, the likelihood that one of them is a match to the comet of 44 remains slim.

If the comet does not have \( e > 1 \), but is near-parabolic, then it will follow a closed orbit. However, the period, or the time it takes for the comet to complete one orbit, may also prove problematic. Kepler’s Third Law,

\[
P^2 \propto a^3 \tag{2.1}
\]

which states that the square of the period, \( P \), of an elliptical orbit is proportional to the semi-major axis, \( a \), cubed, provides a crude calculation with which we may estimate the period of this comet. \( a \) can furthermore be defined as

\[
a = \frac{r_a + r_p}{2} \tag{2.2}
\]

where \( r_a \) is the radius at apoapsis (the farthest distance of the object from the body it is orbiting), and \( r_p \) is the radius at periapsis (the closest distance of the object from the body it is orbiting). And finally, the eccentricity \( e \) is defined as

\[
e = 1 - \frac{2}{(r_a/r_p) + 1} \tag{2.3}
\]

Ramsey & Licht have calculated the comet of 44 to have an \( r_p < 0.26 \text{ AU} \). Taking \( e = 0.999 \) for a near-parabolic orbit, \( a \) can be calculated with Eq. 2.2 by finding \( r_a \) using Eq. 2.3. Kepler’s Third Law thus gives the period \( P \) with a known \( a \).

Figure 2-3 displays the possible periods in years for orbits that have \( r_p < 0.26 \text{ AU} \). From the graph, it can be seen that an near-parabolic orbit with \( r_p = 0.26 \text{ AU} \) has a period of \( \sim 4200 \) years, meaning that it takes 4200 years for the comet to complete its orbit. Assuming that no outside forces perturb the comet’s orbit, the comet still has another 2000 or so years before it returns to Earth. A comet with \( r_p = 0.13 \text{ AU} \) has a period of \( \sim 1500 \) years, meaning that it would have already returned to Earth sometime in the 1400s, when
astronomers would not have had the technology with which to take accurate measurements. In fact, as the graph shows, more than half of the possible values for the semi-major axis (> 100 AU) yield periods of greater than 1000 years, making the comet an infrequent visitor with few chances to be properly observed and cataloged.

None of these problems, however, invalidate the possible existence of a comet. The inability to perform an accurate back-integration reflects the inadequacy of back-integration programs and the processing power of computers, not the failure of back-integration itself as a possible method to identify the comet. The probable near-parabolic nature of the comet’s orbit is only an inconvenient quality of the comet, but has no bearing on whether the comet existed. In fact, the open orbit of the comet provides a plausible explanation as to why a match has not yet been found for the comet of 44, and so it may be that historians and scientists must accept that the comet will never be able to be identified. Given the vast number of comets that have not been cataloged and never will be, this fact per se should not form any basis of skepticism against the existence of the comet. Instead, Ramsey & Licht have built a comprehensive case for the existence of the comet, which will be summarized in
2.2 A Case for the Comet

Though the Roman record itself offers very little useful information about the comet, there exists a second source, from the Han Dynasty, that dates to two months prior to the Roman source. The passage records that,

In the 4th lunar month of the 5th year [of the Chuyuan reign period of the Emperor Yuan, i.e. 44 B.C.], a comet appeared from the northwest. It was reddish-yellow in color and about eight chi [Chinese feet] in length; within a few days it had lengthened by a chi or so. It pointed towards the north, and was in the asterism of Shen. A little over two years later, the Western Qiang rebelled.  

\textit{Han shu}, fascicle 26\textsuperscript{4}

Given that the Chinese were dedicated record-keepers with designated court astronomers to observe the skies, this Chinese record of a comet that occurred in May of 44 B.C. can be taken as fairly reliable.\textsuperscript{5} To give further validity to the Roman record of the comet, basic statistical calculations may be used to predict the likelihood that the Chinese and Roman accounts document the same comet.\textsuperscript{6} Comets originate from the outer reaches of the solar system beyond Neptune, in either the Oort Cloud ($10^3 - 10^4$ AU) or the Kuiper Belt ($< 50$ AU), as shown in Figure 2-4.\textsuperscript{7} A large spherical cloud of comets, the Oort Cloud encompasses both the Solar System and the Kuiper Belt, a region beyond the solar system comprising of small bodies such as comets and asteroids. Comets that are seen from Earth are mostly sent into the inner Solar System (the terrestrial planets separated by the asteroid belt – Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars) by gravitational forces from the Sun, planets, large asteroids, or giant molecular gas clouds. These largescale perturbations, which occur in the Oort Cloud...

\textsuperscript{4}Translation courtesy of Professor Ian Chapman.
\textsuperscript{5}Ramsey & Licht, 65-6.
\textsuperscript{6}Ramsey & Licht, 73-4.
\textsuperscript{7}1 \textit{AU} = 1 astronomical unit = distance from the Earth to the Sun \approx 1.5 \times 10^8 \text{ km}.
Once every $\sim 10^8$ years, result in large comet showers that scatter comets out from the cloud both further into and out of the Solar System. The orbits of these scattered comets then evolve as the comets travel new paths that result in other stellar encounters.

This somewhat haphazard perturbation of comet orbits into the inner Solar System lends itself to Poisson statistics, which are used to describe processes in which events occur continuously at a constant mean rate, but are otherwise random and occur independently of one another.\(^8\) For all Poisson processes the following equations hold true

\[
N = r dt 
\]  

\[
P(x) = \frac{N^x e^{-N}}{x!} 
\]  

\(^8\)The most famous application of Poisson statistics was in 1898 by Ladislaus Bortkiewicz to calculate the chance of a Prussian cavalryman being killed by the kick of a horse. More modern and possibly relevant processes modeled by the Poisson statistics include radioactive decay, website hits, and rainfall.
where $N =$ mean number of events occurring in a time interval $dt$ and $r =$ the mean frequency of the events. $P(x)$ then represents the probability that $x = 0, 1, 2, 3...$ events occur in succession.

The supposition that the mean rate remains constant for a Poisson process allows us to apply a calculation made with any data back to antiquity. Between various cometary catalogs, the fullest record of comets is from 1701-1970, and together these catalogs lists a total of 236 comets seen in this period. Thus the rate $r$ for comets to be seen by the naked eye is calculated to be

$$r = \frac{236 \text{ comets}}{270 \text{ years}} \approx 0.87 \text{ comets/year}$$  

(2.6)

The Chinese and Roman records of the comets are approximately two months apart; thus, the time interval for which we want to find the probability of successive events is $dt = 2 \text{ months} \approx 0.17 \text{ years}$, and $N$ is calculated as

$$N \approx 0.87 \times 0.17 \approx 0.15$$  

(2.7)

Knowing that Chinese recorded a comet, we want to determine the probability that the Romans recorded the same comet. In other words, the probability that the Chinese and Roman records are of the same comet is denoted as $P(0)$ – the probability that there were zero successive comets distinct from the one that the Chinese saw in the two month period between May and July. This probability is calculated as

$$P(0) = e^{-N} \approx 0.86$$  

(2.8)

As such, according Poisson statistics, there is an 86% chance that the Chinese and Romans recorded the same comet, and thus a 14% chance that they recorded different comets, meaning that the former is six times more likely. Assuming that the Chinese recorded an actual comet in May, it is much more likely than not that the Romans recorded that same
comet than recording a different comet. 9

The eruption of Mt. Etna and the natural occurrence of the dimming, then brightening of comets serve as possible reasons for the discrepancy in timing between the two records. Geologic records in ice cores indicate a volcanic eruption in 44 B.C., and Livy wrote of a great flame which erupted from Mt. Etna before Caesar’s death in *Periochae* 116. 10 If it was indeed true that there had been a volcanic eruption in the early months of 44 B.C., then the dust in the air could have obscured for the Romans the comet the Chinese viewed in May. In July, the comet experienced an outburst that caused it to become even brighter than it had been in May; this would have made the comet more likely to be seen in Roman skies, which may also have become clearer due to dust from the volcanic eruption settling. 11

Additionally, the existence of the comet is supported by historical context. As previously mentioned in the introduction, the Romans usually viewed comets as bearers of misfortune, and certainly did not often receive them with optimism. If there actually had been a comet, one can imagine the young Octavian searching for a way to portray the comet as advantageous to himself – or, in the very least, as something less ominous than a comet usually would be, especially in light of recent events in Rome. However, if there had been no comet, Octavian would have picked a surprisingly inconvenient object to construct in his favor. In addition to the traditional stigma attached to comets, a bright object that allegedly could have been seen from all lands and that remained in the sky for seven days is by no means an easy object to fake. Why would Octavian have chosen a comet, when he could have used an event that would have been received more positively according to Roman tradition, and would have been more localized so that all of the general populace would not have been expected to see it? Though the argument could be made that Octavian’s genius lays precisely in his ability to make risky political maneuvers, it is nevertheless undeniable that the invention of the comet was by no means the path of least resistance. More likely than not, Octavian’s

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9 It is important to note that this calculation lends credit to the nature of the celestial object as a comet, instead of a star as described by some of the ancient sources. However, this does not consider the theory that the Romans had made up the comet entirely in the first place. This possibility will be addressed later in this section.

10 Ramsey & Licht, 99.

11 Ramsey & Licht, 72.
treatment of the comet and his subsequent success was in response to an unexpected event.

The inconvenience of the choice of a comet on Octavian's part is perhaps the most compelling argument against that of Gurval in his article, *Caesar's Comet: The Politics and Poetics of an Augustan Myth*. Gurval proposes that prevalence of celestial objects in literature and the evolving appearance of the object on Octavian's coins suggest the fabrication of such an event for the purposes of Octavian's propaganda. The object, he believes, first began as a star, which had been previously established as a symbol of divinity, and thus would have been a likely choice for Octavian, who had hopes of deifying his adoptive father. The star then morphed into a comet “a decade or more later... for [Augustus’] own purposes”.¹² This claim, however, makes little sense – why would the comet, which would have been damaging to Octavian in 44 according to Gurval, become advantageous to him later in his reign? It is, instead, more likely that the Roman perception of the comet would have shifted due to an actual event of a comet and its subsequent reception in 44 B.C., as recorded to have occurred by Augustus.¹³

Furthermore, should Octavian have fabricated any celestial event, one might expect its mention in other sources from the time, yet there is no mention of the comet from any source before Augustus’ own in 24. Ramsey & Licht have raised the question of Cicero’s silence, since as an extremely prolific writer deeply invested in the welfare of the Republic, Cicero should have at least mentioned a comet that carried as much weight as Augustus claimed. Cicero, however, expresses a distinct skepticism towards divination and astrology that very well could have prompted him to dismiss any celestial occurrences as insignificant (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2.43). This counterargument is strengthened by the fact that Cicero, faced with the complexities of the political situation during this period, was at no loss for other material that would have concerned him far more than a comet would have. Furthermore, if the comet had not actually occurred but instead, was the result of a rumor spread by Octavian himself, one could readily imagine that Cicero would have written about the reaction of the populace

¹²Gurval, 70.
¹³This, in fact, could have set the precedent for later emperors such as Claudius, whose death was also marked by a comet. Seneca satirizes his deification in the *Apocolocyntosis*, in which he suggests that Claudius was not made into a god, but instead, a pumpkin.
to an event that had not actually occurred; in fact, he might have been more inclined to comment on the absurdity of this situation than on the appearance of a comet. Yet there is no such reference in any of Cicero’s works either. In a field where historians almost always find themselves with less evidence than they would like, the problem of Cicero’s silence is not a compelling argument either for or against the existence of the comet.

2.3 Conclusion

There may never be a definitive answer to the question of whether the comet of 44 existed. The case for the comet’s existence, however, is quite compelling. Poisson statistics gives good reason to believe that the Romans documented the same comet as the Chinese did, and the Romans generally viewed comets with apprehension. Coupled together, these two facts make unlikely the possibility that a young Octavian invented a comet under which “to be born” that just also happened to have coincided with a Chinese record. Thus, the rest of the thesis will proceed under the assumption that there was indeed a comet that appeared over Roman skies in July of 44 B.C., four months after Julius Caesar’s assassination and during Octavian’s funeral games for his adoptive father.
Chapter 3

Octavian’s Republican Image and the Deification of Julius Caesar

Assuming the validity of the comet’s existence, the picture Augustus paints for us in his Memoirs is that of a celestial visitor over the skies of the young Octavian’s adoptive father’s funeral games, which would have been publicly attended and well-noted throughout Rome. The comet and games, though strikingly coincidental, would have been one of the few events upon which Octavian could capitalize and begin to establish himself at Rome; thus they merit further investigation. As this chapter will argue, in fact, the timing of these two events, both with each other and in the summer of 44, will be instrumental in establishing Octavian as committed to the ideals and traditions of the Republic from the very beginning of his political career. This image, along with the unique political situation of the period, allowed Octavian to quickly enter the world of Roman politics as a legitimate competitor against his rivals.

Though crucially important to Octavian’s rise, the comet and funeral games were just two events in the narrative unfolding after the assassination of Caesar on the Ides of March in 44 B.C. To fully understand the effects of Octavian’s message, then, it is necessary first to contextualize them within the key events of 44-42 that would have both influenced and resulted from Octavian’s actions. What follows is a detailed description of the relevant events
that took place in Rome from the assassination of Julius Caesar to the deification of Caesar and defeat of Caesar’s assassins at the Battle of Philippi.

3.1 44-42 B.C.: Octavian’s First Claims of Legitimacy

Given that Octavian had been at Apollonia in Illyricum when Caesar had been assassinated, Marc Antony became the main representative of the Caesarians for the days immediately following the assassination. According to Appian, Antony initially pursued peace with Caesar’s assassins; the two parties decided upon a truce, and to “examine matters [...] in the senate and [...] deem whatever course [...] jointly to leave the community unpolluted” (Appian, 2.124). The amity was not to last, however; as Plutarch writes of the morning after,

> The subjects of Caesar’s will and of his burial came up for discussion. Antony demanded that the will should be read publicly, and that the body should be carried forth to burial, not secretly, nor without honors, lest this also should exasperate the people. [...] When it was found that the will of Caesar gave to every Roman seventy-five drachmas, and left to the people his gardens beyond the Tiber, [...] an astonishing kindliness and yearning for Caesar seized the citizens; and in the second place, after Caesar’s body had been brought to the forum, Antony pronounced the customary eulogy, and when he saw that the multitude were moved by his words, changed his tone to one of compassion, and taking the robe of Caesar, all bloody as it was, unfolded it to view, pointing out the many places in which it had been pierced and Caesar wounded. All further orderly procedure was at an end, of course; some cried out to kill the murderers [...] This incident more than anything else, except, perhaps, Antony’s change of heart, frightened Brutus and his adherents, and they withdrew from the city.  

*Life of Brutus, 20-21*

Less than a month after the alleged deposition of a dictator for the good of the Republic, Caesar’s assassins, Rome’s would-be saviors, had been driven out of the city of Rome.
Indeed, Plutarch acknowledges Antony’s astute handling of the situation, stating that “by sparing Antony’s life as he had done [Brutus] incurred the charge of raising up against the conspirators a bitter and formidable foe” (Plutarch, Life of Brutus 20). Upon the departure of the assassins, Antony enacted several policies largely beneficial to himself, including the passage of an agrarian bill granting land to Caesar’s veterans now loyal to Antony. Thus almost immediately after the assassination of Caesar, Antony had begun to appropriate a large amount of power for himself, both from the Senate and from Caesar’s legacy.

Perhaps one of the few events not in Antony’s favor, however, was the naming of Caesar’s heir in his will. As Caesar’s most trusted general, Antony had expected himself to be named Caesar’s heir, as most presumably did. When the eighteen year-old Octavian, having received the news of Caesar’s death and his new status as the late dictator’s heir, returned to Rome from Apollonia in April, Antony “[treated] him dismissively, thinking that he was hardly more than a boy” and attempted to dissuade Octavian from getting involved in political affairs (Plutarch, Life of Antony 16). Having none of it, Octavian carried his adoptive father’s wishes through, and granted every Roman his promised seventy-five drachmas, taken from Octavian’s own borrowed funds. At the same time, Octavian, though young and little-known, began recruiting his own legions with fair success, and even managed to win over two of Antony’s by the power of the name his adoptive father had given to him. Recognizing that Julius Caesar’s name was one of the precious few points of leverage he had, Octavian capitalized upon his name and moved to further strengthen his connection with Caesar, prompting the funeral games for his father over which the comet appeared in July.

The summer, meanwhile, found Antony attempting to dispel Decimus Brutus’ occupation of Cisalpine Gaul, which had originally been given to the conspirator as part of the reconciliation treaty between Antony and Caesar’s assassins. This task, however, proved to be difficult, and detained Antony at Mutina into 43 in an attempt to starve Decimus out. Recognizing Octavian, who had raised a formidable army at this point, as perhaps the only other man with a military force comparable to Antony’s, the Senate dispatched him to lift

1 Scullard, 156.
2 Scullard, 156.
Antony’s siege along with the consuls of that year, Hirtius and Pansa, at the insistence of none other than Cicero. Though Cicero had no true loyalty to Octavian, he had vehemently spoken out against Antony in his *Philippics* starting in 44 and continuing into 43, attacking Antony’s character through scathing invective stories of the general’s debaucheries and general depravity. Octavian, about whom Cicero had admitted “I do not trust his youth, nor do I know his intentions” to Atticus in November of 44, had become a friend by virtue of Octavian’s own dispute with Antony (Cicero, *Att. XVI* 9 1). By March of 43, in the midst of Antony’s siege on Decimus, Cicero’s sentiments concerning Octavian had changed considerably: “As [Antony] belched and vomited,” he writes to Cornificius, “I drove him into the nets of Caesar Octavian, for that outstanding youth has raised a protective force for himself and for me, and then for the entire state. If he had not been at hand, the return of Antony from Brundisium would have plagued our land” (Cicero, *Fam. XII* 25 4).

As Cicero had intended, Octavian indeed lifted the siege at Mutina while Antony escaped into the Alps in April of 44. The situation surrounding Octavian’s victory, however, was less desirable to the Senate. Hirtius and Pansa had both died, one in battle and the other of his wounds, leaving Octavian in sole control of all the legions – eight in total. Furthermore, Decimus, as one of the chief conspirators in the plot against Julius Caesar, had been received none too warmly by Octavian once the siege had been lifted. In response to Decimus’ attempts at thanksgiving and reconciliation, Octavian hadcoldly responded, “I am not here to save Decimus’ life, but to make war on Antonius. With him I may rightly one day come to terms, but nature forbids me to either set eyes on or talk to Decimus” (Appian, 3.73).

Cicero and the Senate, however, took the side of Decimus and celebrated him as the victor over Antony instead of Octavian – an ill-conceived act, perhaps, given that Octavian had eight legions at his command. Taking full advantage of his military advantage, Octavian demanded the consulship left vacant by Hirtus and Pansa be given to him; having this request refused by the Senate, he marched on Rome with all eight of his legions in August of 43. Meeting no resistance, he easily secured the consulship for himself and Quintus Pedius, an obscure relative.
Thus the boy whom Cicero had intended to use merely as a tool for the Senate had effectively forced Cicero and the Senate to give him one of the highest levels of *imperium* in Rome. As consul, Octavian quickly enacted several laws against his enemies and for benefit of his own status. He passed the *lex curiata* "[to validate] his adoption by his father. [...] this is the most legitimate mode of adoption for the fatherless, who have full rights, exactly like the natural children, towards the relatives and ex-slaves of the persons who have adopted them" (Appian, 3.94). Furthermore, Pedius decreed Caesar’s murder a crime, making Brutus, Cassius, and the other conspirators outlaws of the Roman state. A second measure, quite unexpectedly, was carried in which the outlawry of Antony and Lepidus, Julius Caesar’s *magister equitum*, Master of the Horse, and Antony’s ally post-assassination, was revoked. Extending this act of amnesty towards the two men, Octavian arranged to meet both Antony and Lepidus, the latter of whom incidentally had seven legions in Narbonese Gaul. In November of 43, only seven months after Octavian’s war against Antony at Mutina, the three men officially entered into an alliance near Bononia, and had themselves appointed *Triumviri Reipublicae Constituendae*, Triumvirs for the Restoration of the Republic, and divided the rule of the provinces between the three of them. As one of their first acts as triumvirs, the three men carried out mass proscriptions which amounted to the deaths of 300 senators and 2000 equestrians, a small number of whom Appian describes (Appian, 4.17-51). The most notable victim was Cicero himself, whose proscription was called for by Antony most likely in retaliation for Cicero’s scathing *Philippics*.

With the proscriptions underway and Lepidus as consul in 42, Antony and Octavian turned their attention to eliminating Brutus and Cassius, or as they would officially have it, bringing justice to the men who committed the crime of Caesar’s murder. Furthermore, as will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter, the Senate’s official deification of Julius Caesar on January 1st, 42 not only strengthened the portrayal of Brutus and Cassius as outlaws, but also legitimized Octavian’s status as *divi filius*, the son of a god. With Caesar as a god and Octavian as the legal son of a god, the declaration of Brutus and Cassius as outlaws came with no stretch of the imagination. While Rome had been entrenched in
conflicts between Antony, Octavian, and the Senate, Brutus and Cassius had been raising a force in the east. The first clash between the triumvirs and conspirators took place on October 3rd of 42, ending with the suicide of Cassius, who had wrongly thought that Brutus had been faring ill against the enemy. Brutus himself committed suicide on October 23rd at the second battle, in which he was overwhelmed by the triumvirs’ legions.

Thus the men who claimed to be saving the Republic by assassinating Julius Caesar in 44 had become outlaws and were themselves killed by men who similarly claimed to be restoring the Republic just two years later. Given that the politics of 44-42 were constantly slippery as allegiances shifted and the messages of politicians changed day by day, scholars could easily scrutinize every event to better understand the dynamics behind this important period in Roman history. This chapter will focus on the significance of the comet of 44 over Octavian’s funeral games for his father, its part in the road to the Senate’s official deification of Caesar in 42, and the importance of these two events in solidifying Octavian’s status as the son of a god.

3.2 Comets, Omens, and Gods: Religion in the Late Republic

In describing the occurrence of the comet of 44, Augustus mentions first that the comet occurred “on the very days of [his] games” and that, second, “the common people believed that this star signified that the soul of Caesar had been received among the spirits of the immortal gods” (Augustus, Memoirs fr.6). The situation that summer was momentous in both respects: for many Romans, Octavian’s generous gesture to his father would have been the first direct link between Caesar and his adopted son; and the comet would have been striking to the general population attending the games, as everyone would have been able to see the bright star that lingered over their heads. If the comet was indeed as noteworthy to the Roman people as Augustus writes, then a closer examination of why and how such a connection between Julius Caesar and the comet formed will be helpful in understanding
the comet’s general significance.

Today, even those who do not study astronomy would not connect the occurrence of such a comet to a supernatural portent; at most, we would perhaps remark upon the curious coincidence of its timing with the funeral games. However, celestial occurrences, including comets, were quite common in the general repertoire of ancient Roman omens; nor were comets and celestial objects the only signs that brought hints of the future. There existed a precedent for portents and omens beginning in the regal period of Rome’s history from even before the Republic. Concerning Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, Rome’s fifth king, Livy tells the story of “an eagle on motionless wings [that] gently dropped down and seized the cap [Tarquinius Priscus] was wearing; with a great scream it flew over the wagon and then returned to the place cap deftly back on Tarquin’s head” (Livy, 1.34). Many, including Tarquinius Priscus’ wife, interpreted this as a sign of Tarquin’s future as a king. This careful observation and recognition of these omens and their meanings carried into the late Republic as well. In his Life of Julius Caesar, Plutarch writes of many “remarkable signs and apparitions” that heralded Caesar’s assassination on the Ides of March, including “lights in the sky, bangs and crashes that travelled from place to place one night, [and] flocks of birds which settled every day on the forum.” All these omens, Plutarch asserts, rendered Caesar’s fate “unavoidable rather than unexpected” (Plutarch, Life of Caesar 63).

Insofar as the nesting habits of birds foretold the death of Julius Caesar, the Romans viewed comets as baleful omens signifying the onset of disastrous events such as war, plague and famine, and the death of great rulers. Cicero writes in his De Divinatione of a comet as “a warning [...] of slaughter nocturnal” and later categorizes comets, along with “earthquake[s] [...] opening[s] of the heavens [...] showers of stones or blood [...]and] shooting stars” as causes for alarm (Cicero, De Divinatione 1.18; 2.60). Similarly, Tacitus specifically alludes to an interpretation of changing regimes when he tells of a comet “which in popular opinion always portends revolution to kingdoms” during the reign of Nero (Tacitus, Annals 14.22). Claudian, a fourth century A.D. poet, perhaps summarized the interpretation of comets to Romans the best, writing in his De Raptu Proserpinae of “a comet, fraught with augury of
ill, [falling] headlong, a glowing portent of blood-red fire; no sailor may look on it and live, no people view it but to their destruction; the message of its threatening tail is storm to ships and enemy’s attack to cities” (Claudian, *De Raptu Proserpinae* 33.34). Thus it comes as no surprise that the Romans attached a significance to the appearance of the comet in 44 – the question is, instead, why this particular comet came to symbolize the reception of Julius Caesar’s soul by the gods, instead of perhaps oncoming war or famine as its predecessors did.

The answer lies at least partly in the unique relationship between Roman religion and politics. Unlike our modern conceptions of religion and politics as two separate spheres, Roman religion and politics were intertwined and inseparable on a fundamental level; in fact, as Beard and Crawford suggest, modern notions are so significantly different from that of the Romans that they comprise a major obstacle to scholars’ understandings of the Roman system. Beard and Crawford continue to outline three basic aspects of the relationship between Roman politics and religion, that 1) the Roman religion was a highly public religion in which the interests of the gods were placed above all else, 2) the gods were concerned only in promoting success of the Roman state and acted to that end, and 3) priests were not intermediaries between the gods and people as they are today; instead, they were specialized religious advisors to the Senate, which was simultaneously the main political and religious body in Rome.\(^3\) As a result, there was no true distinction between a priest and politician – the positions were inherently interwoven, and many men, including Octavian in his later years, would hold both religious and political offices at the same time. To ensure that actions taken by popular assemblies would have the approval of the gods (and by extension serve as a good course of action for Rome), auguries were taken before every meeting.\(^4\) Similarly, portents and auguries also dictated proper military actions. In a more amusing anecdote, Suetonius describes an instance in which

\(^3\)Beard & Crawford, 30-5.

\(^4\)Beard and Crawford do point out that auguries were never taken before meetings of the Senate; this is best explained by the fact that “the Senate, as the direct focus of communication between gods and men, could never be out of harmony with the divine” – another attestation to both the unique political as well as religious role the Senate held (Beard & Crawford, 34-5).
Claudius Pulcher showed his scorn of religion during a naval engagement off Sicily. When he took the auspices and discovered that the sacred chickens were not eating, he threw them into the sea, saying, “if they don’t want to eat, let them drink”; and then he engaged the enemy in a naval battle. He lost the battle. (Tiberius 2.2)

Thus omens and portents were not haphazard occurrences that struck the superstitious, but instead, were integral and necessary components to both Roman political and religious life. The Roman government could not exist without religion; the Roman religion, in turn, fundamentally concerned politics.

Furthermore, Beard and Crawford identify “openness and flexibility simply [as] a characteristic of the Roman religion” – the consequences of which have prompted the traditional view of Roman religion to suggest an erosion of religion in the late Republic as traditional practices disappeared and new, foreign customs began to take hold.⁵ Beard and Crawford do not view this as a necessary decline of religion; instead, they offer that these changing practices were meant to accommodate changing times. For instance, they suggest that the disappearance of the tradition that fetiales, priests, would throw spears into enemy territories to initiate war was not in fact due to neglect, but instead, due simply to the fact that Rome’s increasingly foreign wars made the custom impractical. Following Beard and Crawford’s argument, the novel interpretation of the comet of 44 as Caesar’s soul rising to heaven over the traditional significance of comets as baleful omens could very much have been an instance of the adaptability of Roman religion – and in fact, Octavian’s recognition of the Roman religion’s potential for the manipulation of the comet in 44 may very well have been a testament to his political genius.

What exactly, then, might have made such an interpretation of the comet of 44 preferable to the conventional one? Given the importance of political implications in omens and portents, the unique political situation in the wake of Julius Caesar’s death could very well have

⁵Beard & Crawford, 29.
served as a strong argument that this daytime comet was to be different than its predecessors. Specifically, the precise timing of the comet with Caesar’s funeral games, surprisingly coincidental even to the skeptical minds of today, would have been taken very seriously by a culture already accustomed to interpreting strange and uncanny occurrences with meaning pertinent to lives of people and the welfare of the state. Additionally, the funeral games were held in July, the month named after Julius Caesar in accordance with his birth. The resulting three-pronged coincidence greatly emphasized the connection between the comet and Caesar. Though historians may never be sure whether additional interpretations of the comet might have existed as well, it should be noted that Augustus’ version in his Memoirs was, at least, accepted by later historians as the dominant interpretation of the comet. Furthermore, as will be discussed at greater length in a later section, the Senate’s deification of Julius Caesar just two years after his assassination provides another instance of the important connection between Julius Caesar and the comet of 44.

3.3 Octavian as divi filius

Though the official deification by the Senate took place in 42, the interpretation of the comet as a symbol of Caesar’s soul amongst the gods granted Octavian several key advantages by affirming his connection to Julius Caesar. The bond between Caesar and his adopted son would likely have been weaker than that of Caesar and his most trusted general, Antony, given that Antony had been known as Caesar’s right hand man since the Gallic campaigns ten years prior. However tenuous his relationship with Julius Caesar, the eighteen year-old Octavian’s only validating quality lay in his adoption specified in Caesar’s will, and thus Caesar’s name was the only means in which Octavian could hope to emerge on at least equal footing to Antony. The emphasis Octavian placed on his status as Caesar’s son is apparent even after he had begun to establish himself as a serious contender; in 43, having newly been made consul and with eight legions at his back, he still took care to pass the lex curiata which
affirmed Caesar as his legal father once and for all. The comet in 44, then, when Caesar’s name would have been most important to Octavian, would have been another instance in which Octavian could strengthen his bond with Caesar in a unique and memorable fashion.

Octavian had already begun to strengthen his relationship to Caesar through his funeral games for his adoptive father, as he was using his own money to hold games publicly honoring and celebrating the memory of his father. These games would have been an obvious display of filial piety, an important tradition and practice in the Roman Republic. His declaration of Caesar’s apotheosis during those games would have further extended his filial piety and association with Caesar in a unique way that Marc Antony could not match, since Caesar’s soul was rising to heaven during the time at which his son chose to honor him. Given the love for Caesar the people of Rome held at this time, this ostentatious display of the link between Octavian and his adoptive father made Octavian extremely favorable, and a worthy successor to their beloved Caesar, in the eyes of both the general public and his father’s troops. If there had been any doubt that Octavian was not the true son of Caesar, then the appearance of the comet during Octavian’s games and its depiction as Caesar’s divine essence would have quelled such doubts. This one assertion would have been monumental in winning Octavian the support he needed from the people and the legions – the two major constituents to win in order to gain political footing in Rome as identified by Zanker. Though Marc Antony and Octavian’s other rivals presented formidable records in both politics and conquest, they lacked the riveting proof of legitimacy that the comet granted Octavian.

Not only was the notion of filial piety central to the Romans, but also was the notion of religious piety. Roman religion was based on a contractual relationship with specific gods in which Romans would often sacrifice an animal or vow to construct a building in return for the god’s favor. Therefore, demonstrating religious devotion and loyalty would have been extremely important to anyone who wished to establish a working rapport with the gods

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6 Octavian’s deliberate legalization of his adoption is just one example of what Galinsky identifies as the realization Octavian came to early on regarding politics in Rome, that “without the official sanction of the senate, he would remain an illegitimate warlord” (Galinsky, 44).
7 Zanker, 34.
8 Shelton, 371-5.
and live a successful life in their favor. Though the concepts of filial and religious piety were already linked through the general idea of devotion, they remained distinct in most contexts. By claiming his father to be a god, however, devotion to the gods and to his father became one and the same for Octavian. Under the comet’s confirmation of Caesar’s apotheosis, Octavian was able to demonstrate both filial and religious piety by simultaneously paying homage to his father, and his father’s immense power as a god.

By association, if Octavian’s father was a god, then Octavian, as his son, would naturally be extremely important as well. Though he never expressed the wish to be deified himself, Octavian could expect his status as the son of a god to be honored. To afford him any less would have been against the wishes and intentions of a Roman god, and by asserting the apotheosis of his father through the comet, Octavian was able to paint himself as a figure who held the approval of the gods. Since the Romans believed that the gods always championed Rome and ensured its wellbeing, a man whom the gods favored would clearly be worthy and indeed, trusted, to lead the Romans. Thus, the comet also allowed Octavian to display himself as someone who was committed to Roman tradition and religion, and was the very embodiment of both those ideals. Galinsky, in fact, identifies the comet and Octavian as the divi filius to be key in developing the notion of “Octavian the savior,” the man who would protect both Rome and its values.9

Having established himself by his use of the comet first, Octavian could look to build upon the image he had created by actually proving himself to be a competent leader and general as well. Though he began as an eighteen year-old with almost nothing to his name, Octavian quickly became one of the most prominent figures in Rome as he struggled to match his opponents in political and militaristic spheres. His assertion as the legitimate heir of Julius Caesar was enough to bring many of Caesar’s troops to his side instead of Antony’s; as Appian tells us, “Octavian had two legions [...] which had deserted from Antony to him” (Appian, 3.47). Additionally, his claim as the son of the generous and beloved ruler quickly gained him fame and reputation in the eyes of the people – a claim further strengthened by Octavian’s efforts as the responsible son to carry out the last wishes of his father and

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9 Galinsky, 312-3.
distribute seventy-five drachmas to every Roman citizen. Thus even Cicero, who previously had been so staunchly anti-Caesarian, could not deny that the inexperienced, potentially unpredictable son of the very man they had assassinated was still preferable to the clearly belligerent and dangerous figure of Marc Antony.

It was in this way of emphasizing his piety and his high regard for tradition that Octavian was able to win the trust of the Senate and his first military command to aid Decimus Brutus against Antony. This command was enough for Octavian to muster a considerable force – one of the greatest at the time of Antony’s defeat in 43 – which, in turn, allowed him to turn back on the Senate. These events had all been due, in part, to the inherent disassembly and weakness of the Senate; not only had the Senate, as an institution, been weakening several decades prior as it called on Pompey time and time against to fight its wars, it was physically diminished and in disarray as a result of the civil war between Pompey and Caesar and then various wars the Caesarians were waging on its consuls. Thus Octavian, seeing that the Senate could not act without a powerful commander to fight on its behalf, and seeing that he himself was that commander, was able to seize the consulship which he had demanded and been refused. It is perhaps even as early as this point that the Senate ceased to wield any true influence or power; with the ever constant threat of Octavian’s legions, Caesarian laws such as the *lex curiata*, or the revoking of amnesty for Caesar’s murders, were easily passed – perhaps the most significant of which being the formal deification of Julius Caesar on January 1st, 42 B.C.

### 3.4 The Deification of Julius Caesar

The deification of Julius Caesar is noteworthy for many reasons, the first of which being that the Senate gave divine status to the very man several senators conspired to kill in order to preserve the Republic just two years prior. This was to be a momentous event, both in and of itself and in its special importance to Octavian; officially sanctioned by the Senate with its religious importance and special connection to the gods, the deification elevated Julius Caesar to the status of the other Roman gods in Roman sacred law. In the words of Galinsky
with reference to poetry on this matter, "[the deification] was based on the idea that men could become divine because of their great deeds. Caesar's had been primarily military, and to the poets, therefore, his deification could connote Rome's supremacy in the world." Furthermore, such a deification of a mortal, and one who had only just recently died and of whom Romans would have fresh memories, was unprecedented through Roman history. The classic view of Roman religion refuted by Beard and Crawford, in fact, might even have seen such an act of deification as yet another affirmation of the decline of the Roman religion – as they did with the personified goddess of Rome, Roma, in the third century, the Romans seemed to be adding deities left and right without regard for the sanctity of the traditional Roman gods. Beard and Crawford might argue, quite convincingly, that Caesar's deification was once again an instance of the flexibility of the Roman religion; what remains, however, are the circumstances to which the religion adapted.

According to Weinstock, Julius Caesar had plans for deification all along. Drawing upon Caesar's actions in the last five years of his life, taken mainly from Cassius Dio's account, Weinstock looks to aspects of Caesar's career such as the white horses of the triumph in 46, which Weinstock argues would have been reminiscent of the white horses of Jupiter. Jupiter was not the only god with which Caesar identified; claiming that the Julian clan was descended from Aeneas, who was in turn descended from the goddess Venus. To this end, the star of Venus appears on several coins minted by Caesar in his lifetime (fig. 3-1). Furthermore in 46, Caesar dedicated a temple to Venus Genetrix, Venus of motherhood, in which he sat while receiving senators – one of the many grievances Caesar's assassins held against him, according to Dio (Dio, 44.7). Weinstock also places a fair amount of emphasis on Caesar's cult, especially the role that Antony was supposed to have assumed as flamen Divi Iulii. Weinstock argues that the Antony's flaminate was modeled on that of Jupiter; thus not only would the existence of a cult bring Caesar closer to divinity, but the cult itself

\[10\] Galinsky, 18.

\[11\] Divus Julius, 1972.

\[12\] Incidentally, it is these coins that gives scholars such as Gurval cause to see later representations of celestial objects on Octavian's coins as continued evocations of Caesar's stars of Venus, instead of the comet of 44.
would have imitated that of the king of the gods. All this, Weinstock argues, points to the fact that “by 44, Caesar had decided to become a god, Iuppiter Iulius, in his own lifetime.”

By contrast, North takes a more cautious view on Caesar’s actions and the associated aspirations. In addition to the perhaps excessive faith Weinstock puts into Dio’s account, North’s main line of criticism is that there is no way for scholars to know what “deification” might have meant in 49 and of what it would have consisted. In essence, he argues, the line between acceptable honors for a celebrated general, king, or god – all titles associated with Caesar either by his contemporaries or modern scholars – remains blurred to historians, and so it is impossible to determine whether one aspect of Caesar’s career might have alluded to aspirations to divinity or monarchy while others did not. Furthermore, as with politicians both ancient and modern, it is usually difficult to extract intention and ambition from actions. Even if it were possible for historians to distinguish between the connotations of

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13Caesar’s choice of Jupiter despite his existing connections with Venus could perhaps result from his aspirations to monarchy, with which his assassins were most concerned.
14North, 171
16North, 172.
different honors, there is no saying for certain to what exact end Caesar might have been acting.

North's criticism, for the most part, is well-founded and compelling, yet while he acknowledges that Caesar was deified two years later, he does not acknowledge that it was the deification of a man whom senators had conspired to kill two years ago. Given that deification had been unprecedented, it seems unlikely that the notion to deify a figure as controversial as Julius Caesar could germinate and bear fruit in a short span of two years after his assassination. Instead, it seems far more likely that the thought of Caesar's deification had already been afoot in Rome before 42, and perhaps even 44 as Weinstock argues, so that Romans had already been primed for the idea. With the sentiments in place, what was required was a catalyst — that came in the form of a comet.

Regardless of Caesar's *intentions* for his actions and the formal acceptance of these actions in Rome, it is undeniable that many of them seemed reminiscent of divinity. One problem, however, might have lain in the agency of these actions — all of them were Caesarian, meaning that while they could have implied Caesar's divinity, they could also have been the delusions of a megalomaniac who dared to call himself the equal of gods. The comet, however, took the agency entirely out of Julius Caesar's hands. As an ominous celestial object, its interpretation as a sign from the gods would not have been remiss, and furthermore, it occurred both after Caesar's death and as a natural phenomenon. There was no way in which Caesar himself could have brought about the comet to prove his own divinity; instead, the comet could only have come about by forces outside of Caesar's control. It is perhaps upon this point that Octavian capitalized, and made the brilliant yet perfectly logical claim that the comet symbolized the divine acceptance of Caesar's soul. To this end, the Senate's deification in 42 was only a formality — a gesture of Rome's acknowledgement of Caesar's divine status. As for Caesar himself per Octavian, he had already joined the ranks of the gods in the summer of 44.
3.5 Conclusion

The physical manifestation of a comet in the skies of Rome and its timing with Octavian’s funeral games for his father thus served as the first instance in which Octavian could begin asserting his dedication to the Republic. The close connections with Caesar that the comet brought allowed Octavian to win the support of both the people and the legions. The military power and popularity he gained from these two groups along with his emphasis on the Roman traditions of filial and religious piety painted him as a figure preferable to that of Marc Antony, thus compelling the Senate to grant him a military command against Antony. From there, with his success at Mutina, Octavian had the military legitimacy with which he could demand the consulship and gain for himself political legitimacy as well. The comet, then, served as an opportunity from which Octavian could take advantage of the political situation in 44 to reach equal footing with that of his rivals.

The comet and Julius Caesar’s divine patronage had served Octavian well in the period from 44-42; having established both his military and political legitimacy, however, Octavian’s focus shifted to the elimination of his rivals in the 30s, the most notable of which being Sextus Pompey, the son of Pompey the Great, and Marc Antony. Octavian’s message and assertions of divine patronage shifted accordingly, with a new emphasis placed on Apollo in the late 30s. The following chapter explores Apollo’s place in Octavian’s image, both in the reasons for its emergence as well as the ways in which it complemented the patronage of Julius Caesar.
Chapter 4

The Emergence of Apollo

The comet of 44 and the deification of Julius Caesar proved crucial in catapulting Octavian from an unknown teenager to an established politician and a legitimate rival of Marc Antony at the formation of the second triumvirate. With Rome in the hands of three men, however, the political terrain changed drastically. With more than just his name as Caesar’s son, Octavian’s bonds with the late dictator became less important, especially in light of Marc Antony’s connections with Caesar. The period from 42 to 31 prompted a revision of Octavian’s message to include other aspects besides the comet and Julius Caesar’s status as a god – most notably, a connection with Apollo. Caesar and the comet, however, were not discarded and instead served as the base upon which Octavian built his messages through the 30s. The changes in Octavian’s image were deliberate and by no means accidental; as Zanker suggests, Octavian’s messages were constantly in flux to accommodate the shifting political situations.¹ To understand why Octavian might have changed his propaganda in the ways he did, it is first necessary to understand the events of the 30’s and their various implications that prompted these revisions.

¹Zanker, 33-4.
4.1 42 - 31 B.C.: Deification to Actium

Though the battle of Philippi and proscriptions of 43 B.C. had eliminated much of the civil opposition against the newly established triumvirs, there was much work to be done by the three men charged with the restoration of the Roman Republic. With the war against Brutus and Cassius concluded, the three men disbanded all but eleven of their legions, which now included those who had been with Brutus, and Octavian was charged with the difficult task of settling all the veterans (Appian, 5.1.2). He was also given the problem of Sextus Pompeius, son of Pompey the Great, who had begun to make a name for himself and was the last of the prominent anti-Caesarians. Antony, in the meantime, was to raise funds in the east while Octavian remained in Italy; furthermore, he was given all of Gaul save for Cisalpine, which was to become part of Italy, and Africa, while Octavian took Spain and Numidia (Dio, 48.1). Lepidus who had been suspected of treason, received no provinces at the time but was promised Africa, provided that the charges against him would be proven false and that he remained loyal to the triumvirs (Appian, 5.1.2).

This sense of unity between Octavian and Antony had already begun to fade in the subsequent year. With 100,000 veterans on his hands, Octavian was faced with a dilemma. Should he settle them as promised before the war, he would invariably be taking land from farmers, thus leaving him with a host of unhappy citizens. Conversely, if he chose not to displace the civilians, he not only risked losing the loyalty of his soldiers but would also have a large number of dissatisfied, potentially violent veterans. In light of the power and protection a general enjoyed with the support of the legions, Octavian chose to settle his veterans, but not without raising the concerns of Lucius Antonius and Marc Antony’s wife, Fulvia. According to Appian, L. Antonius, consul in 42 and more importantly, the brother of Marc Antony, raised eight legions to occupy Rome “to delay the settlement of the colonies till Antony should return home, in order that it might not seem to be wholly the work of Octavian, and that he might not reap the thanks alone, and Antony be bereft of the favor of the soldiers” (Appian, 5.2.14). L. Antonius’ actions not only show the great importance of having the support of the troops, but also the rift between Octavian and Marc Antony –
legions were not loyal to the triumvirate or the city of Rome, as they had been during the golden age of the Republic, but to individual triumvirs. Despite the efforts of L. Antonius and Fulvia, Octavian managed to drive them into Perusia at the end of the winter of 41 to 40, where they surrendered due to starvation after Octavian besieged them. In a rare act of mercy, perhaps as an act of clemency to Antony, Octavian spared both L. Antonius and Fulvia, the latter of whom died a couple of months later. L. Antonius, however, was installed as the new governor of Spain.

The conflict between Octavian and Antony’s supporters was perhaps checked by Antony’s absence from the west; having gone to Asia after Philippi, it was likely that Antony had not heard of the dispute till after it had passed. In the midst of raising funds in 41, Antony’s main focus was the wealth of the Ptolemies, the Greek dynasty who ruled Egypt. He requested to meet Cleopatra, princess of the Ptolemies; given that she had sent aid against Cassius, he had perhaps hoped that she would grant him financial assistance. Instead, their relationship quickly reversed and Cleopatra became the one issuing requests. Antony seemed eager to comply, and as Appian describes, “whatever Cleopatra ordered was done,” including the murder of her sister, Arsinoe (Appian 5.1.9). Both Dio and Appian write that Antony had already fallen hopelessly in love with Cleopatra by the end of the winter he spent with her between 41 and 40 (Appian 5.9; Dio 48.24). “This passion,” Appian laments, “was the beginning and end of evils that afterwards befell him” (Appian, 5.1.9).

Though Antony had been away for Octavian’s war with his brother, his reunion with Octavian in 40 was fraught with tension. A misunderstanding had blocked Antony’s troops from entering the gates at Brundisium, where Octavian’s troops were stationed (Dio 48.56). Taking personal offense, Antony immediately attacked Octavian, who responded by mobilizing his men as well. The animosity between the two commanders, however, was largely not reciprocated amongst their soldiers. Dio alludes to groups of colonized veterans who “had the secret intention to bring Antony and Octavian into harmony with each other,” and attributes the eventual truce that resulted to Octavian’s soldiers who had chosen deputies “not to decide a controversy, but to restore peace” (Dio, 48.59; 63). Once again, the troops
had exercised their collective power, and without the support of their men, their commanders were helpless to do much else. Brought to the brink of outright civil war, Antony and Octavian renewed their pact as triumvirs with Lepidus in the Treaty of Brundisium. Further strengthening the bond between Antony and Octavian was the marriage of Antony to Octavian’s sister Octavia, given that both Fulvia and Marcellus, Octavia’s previous husband, had recently died (Appian, 5.7.64). Rome’s provinces were once again divided amongst the three men, with Antony retaining control of the east, Octavian holding Transalpine and Narbonese Gaul, and Lepidus controlling Africa, which, having been cleared of the charges against him, he had attained the previous year.

The first half of the 30s B.C. saw both Octavian and Antony at war against several of Rome’s rivals. Antony, for the most part, had two major campaigns in the east against the Parthians, a longterm enemy of the Romans who most recently had defeated Crassus and captured the legionary standards at the battle of Carrhae in 53, in Syria and the Parthini in Macedonia. Octavian, on the other hand, had turned to Sextus Pompey, who had begun to interfere with shipments of corn in the Mediterranean and was causing famine in Rome (Appian 5.8.67). Hoping to reach a truce, Antony and Octavian met with Pompey at Misenum in 39 where they granted him consulship of Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia, and Achaea (Dio, 48.36). The truce, however, quickly broke down when Menas, one of Pompey’s men, surrendered the island to Octavian, though Dio notes that even had this incident not occurred, “[Octavian and Pompey] were bound, of course, to go to war in any case, even if they had found no excuse” (Dio, 48.48). The war with Pompey did not start well for Octavian; having suffered losses in initial battles, it was clear that he was in need of greater naval power (Appian 5.10.92). Antony, in the midst of fighting a land war against the Parthians, returned to Tarentum in 37 with the hope of exchanging his naval power for Octavian’s soldiers; Octavian, however, chose to delay the exchange. Only the mediation of Octavia was able to reconcile the two men, and Octavian reluctantly granted Antony the exchange. The triumvirate, which had technically lapsed in 38, was furthermore renewed for another five years.
Despite Octavia's role as mediator, Antony left his wife with Octavian in Italy when he returned to Syria later that year (Appian 5.10.95). Reunited with Cleopatra after four years of separation, he also formally acknowledged the twins he had fathered with her during the winter of 41/40. He additionally granted several large portions of Arabia to his and Cleopatra's children after pronouncing himself king of several provinces in east – actions further pronounced by the fact that he also had a daughter with Octavia, who received nothing (Appian 5.10.95; Dio 49.32). The gestures, clearly not in the best interests of Rome, were not well-received, and it would be acts such as these upon which Octavian would later capitalize as his relationship with Antony deteriorated.

For the time being, however, Octavian's efforts were focused upon Sextus Pompey, who had declared himself to be the adopted son of Neptune given his recent naval victories and was causing further trouble in the Mediterranean. In August of 36, both Octavian and Pompey had amassed naval fleets of 300 ships at Naulochus; the difference between them, however, was that Octavian's general, Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, had invented the *harpax*, designed light in order to be thrown long distances onto the sides of other ships, thus allowing for the enemy ship to be winched and boarded. The *harpax* enjoyed an overwhelming success – unlike the last naval battle against Pompey in which Octavian lost half his fleet, only seventeen of Pompey's ships managed to flee Naulochus, while Agrippa lost just three of his (Appian 5.12.119; 121). Pompey himself managed to escape, but was intercepted and killed by Marc Antony at Messana (Appian 5.12.122). The defeat of Pompey, who had essentially become a pirate, finally brought security to shipments of grain and corn to Rome across the Mediterranean, a problem which had plagued the Romans for seven years. Furthermore, the Pompeians comprised the last faction of anti-Caesarians and their elimination was to be Rome's last civil war in the eyes of many such as Appian, whose *Civil Wars* ends with the Battle of Naulochus. As Octavian would have it, his subsequent war with Antony, who was irrevocably in Cleopatra's clutches, was not presented as a war between fellow Romans but instead, a foreign conflict in which the values of the Republic were besieged by corruptive forces of the east.
The dissolution of the triumvirate, however, came with the expulsion of Lepidus. While Agrippa had engaged Pompey at Naulochus, Lepidus had attacked several other cohorts of Pompeians in Sicily and had gained for himself twenty-two legions and a considerable amount of cavalry. Hoping to gain an advantage over Octavian when the other triumvir arrived, he denied entrance to Octavian’s emissaries and made to threaten Octavian militarily. It was then, however, that his legions, which were comprised of both his own and Pompey’s men, refused to fight. The soldiers were first and foremost displeased with the possibility of another civil war, according to Appian, yet they also “did not [...] seek to compare Octavian and Lepidus; not even the army of Lepidus did that. They admired the energy of Octavian, and they were aware of the indolence of Lepidus” (Appian 5.13.124). There was no question that a civil war was not to happen; yet Octavian, faced with a Lepidus utterly humiliated and destroyed, chose not to have him killed. Instead, Octavian mandated that Lepidus was to be stripped of his status as triumvir, while allowing him to retain his position as pontifex maximus, the high priest (Appian 5.13.126). With Lepidus removed from the picture, Octavian was in complete control of the west – challenged in his power over Rome only by Antony in the east.

Relations between Octavian and Antony rapidly deteriorated after the removal of Lepidus. Antony was reunited with Cleopatra when he returned to Egypt in 34, where he staged an elaborate triumphal procession in the name of his various campaigns against the Parthians and Armenians. Dressed as the Greek god Dionysus and seated upon a golden throne with Cleopatra, dressed as Isis, he granted various regions he planned to conquer as Roman land to his children with Cleopatra in the Donations of Alexandria (Dio, 49.41-2). Though the appropriation of Roman land for Cleopatra’s children would have been a troubling sign of Antony’s increasing loyalty to Cleopatra and the east over Rome, the biggest problem, at least for Octavian, would have been Antony’s declaration of Caesarion, the child of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, as Caesar’s lawful son and heir. The acknowledgment of another son of Caesar, one related by blood and not by adoption, would have been a direct challenge to the base of all legitimacy Octavian had gained for himself. Antony continued
to widen the rift between himself and Rome in 32, when he officially sent a letter of his divorce from Octavia (Dio, 50.3). For several of Antony’s men this act was the last straw in the triumvir’s increasingly mad and concerning behavior, and Dio tells of two politicians, Munatius Plancus and his nephew, Titius, who defected from Antony’s camp to Octavian’s in 32. They furthermore delivered Antony’s will, which was opened by Octavian in front of the senate – a deed that might have scandalized senators had it not been for the details of the will that were revealed. In the event of his death, Antony mandated that enormous presents be granted to his children with Cleopatra, and furthermore, asked to be buried in Egypt with its queen. The will, according to Dio, “caused the Romans in their indignation to believe that the other reports in circulation were also true, to the effect that if Antony should prevail, he would bestow their city upon Cleopatra and transfer the seat of power to Egypt” (Dio, 50.4). They deprived Antony of the consulship in 31, and declared war on Cleopatra, seeing her as the major threat against Roman power. Dio makes clear, however, the implications of the declaration: “[the Romans] made no such declaration against Antony, forsooth, knowing full well that he would become an enemy in any event, since he certainly was not going to prove false to her and espouse Caesar’s cause; and they wished to have this additional reproach to put upon him, that he had voluntarily taken up war on the side of the Egyptian woman against his native country, though no ill-treatment had been accorded him personally by the people at home” (Dio, 50.6).

Thus the tensions that had been brewing since the opening of Caesar’s will in 44 finally came to outright war in 31. Antony, as expected, had taken the side of Cleopatra, and met with Octavian’s forces in September of that year at Actium. Though the propaganda war between the two men had become quite heated, the battle of Actium was a remarkably anti-climactic defeat in which Antony, perhaps due to a miscommunication between his squadrons, was forced to flee from Octavian’s forces under Agrippa. Having signaled his flight to Cleopatra, the two sailed to Egypt as the rest of their forces were captured. Upon reaching Egypt in the summer of 30, he found himself unable to defend Alexandria. Incorrectly believing that Cleopatra was dead, he took his own life. Cleopatra herself was captured by
Octavian when he arrived in Egypt in pursuit of Antony; unwilling to be taken as part of his triumphal procession and after hearing that Octavian had no intention of allowing her to retain her kingdom, she too committed suicide (Dio, 51.10-13). Octavian was generally lenient with most of Antony’s men, punishing some and pardoning others, and allowing many to return to their homes (Dio, 51.16). He brought Antony’s children back to Rome to be raised and educated, and even ordered Iullus, the son of Antony and Fulvia, to be given what legally would have been his at his parents’ death. It was only Caesarion, the son of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, with whom Octavian exercised no clemency and ordered to be killed.

With the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian had become the undisputed ruler of the Roman world at the age of 32, just thirteen years after he first emerged onto the scene of Roman politics. Though his various military successes at both Naulochus and Actium were key in establishing his dominance, Octavian also relied heavily on his propaganda to legitimize some of his more controversial actions and retain the support of the Roman Senate. In particular, the nature of his two rivalries with Sextus Pompey and Marc Antony as described above prompted the new addition of Apollo to his divine patrons as his message adapted to Octavian’s new challenges. The following sections study the evolution of Octavian’s message through the 30s as it changed in tandem with political situations, starting from the temple of his deified father, which was very much in line with his earlier message in the 40s, down to his identification with Apollo in poetry concerning the battle of Actium.

4.2 The Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar

Though Octavian’s imagery may have shifted with the politics, Julius Caesar and the comet were both still crucial elements of his message in 42 and had continued effects into the 30s. With the deification of Julius Caesar, Octavian immediately vowed a temple (fig. 4-1) to his father, though it was not formally dedicated till 29 (Appian 2.148; Dio 51.22).

Located in the Roman forum, the temple would have been seen by most who lived in the city of Rome since the forum served as a central public space where much of the city’s
activity took place. The senate house, governmental offices, other temples and shrines, and open spaces for the general public were all contained within the forum, and thus there would always have been a large amount of ongoing activity. Such a temple would have had consistently reminded those who would walk past and see it in their daily forum activities of both Caesar's divinity and Octavian's piety as *divi filus* – an effective summary of two of Octavian's most crucial messages in the late 40s.

Furthermore, as already introduced in the Pliny passage concerning the temple, there is good evidence that the temple was associated in some way with Caesar's comet. The extent to which the temple associates Julius Caesar with the star is unclear; Pliny describes the temple as "the only place in the whole world where a comet is the object of worship," yet the temple seems to have been built in honor of Julius Caesar, the man made god. Does this imply that Julius Caesar actually *was* the comet, that what the Romans saw as a comet in July of 44 was indeed the soul of Caesar rising up to the heaven, as opposed to a sign per Augustus? Regardless of what Pliny might have meant, however, further evidence on
Figure 4-2: Coin depicting Octavian and the Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar. What appears to be a comet is on the pediment of the temple. Struck 36 B.C. (www.utexas.edu)

coins (fig. 4-2), which will be discussed to fuller detail in due course, gives strong evidence that the comet, depicted on the pediment of the temple, was at least a central part of the design. The appearance of the comet also emphasized Octavian’s unique tie to his deified father – Antony, who originally had been designated a flamen in Caesar’s cult, was not without religious ties to Caesar himself (Dio, 44.4). The comet, however, had appeared over Octavian’s funeral games; thus not only was it a reminder that Octavian was the divi filius, it was also a symbol explicitly associated with Octavian’s religious piety over that of anyone else.

The temple’s placement and orientation in the forum also would have drawn much attention to it. Figure 4-3 displays the location of the Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar in relation to the other buildings in the Roman Forum. As shown by the plan, the temple was in a central location and faced towards the rest of the forum. In effect, it claimed an entire side out of four in the forum, which would have symbolized the importance of the temple and Octavian himself to those walking through. The space directly in front of the temple was wide open and would have made the temple easy to see, even from a distance. The temple was also quite high and raised up on a platform, as shown in Figure 4-1. Should the
doors of the temple be open, most people walking through the forum would have been able to see the statue of Julius Caesar that would presumably have been inside.² Surrounding the temple, furthermore, were other Julian buildings such as the basilica and curia iulia, which would have concentrated reminders of Julius Caesar in the forum in one location. The temple was also located near Octavian's triple triumphal arch, the importance of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Forum Romanum

Figure 4-3: Plan of the forum Romanum. (resources.oncourse.iu.edu)

Both the temple itself, and its location, would have had a very pronounced effect on the people of Rome. Octavian’s dedication of a temple, instead of an arch or another celebratory monument, to his father would have emphasized Julius Caesar’s new status as a god. Traditionally within the Roman religion, temples were regarded as the homes of the deities for the duration of their stay on earth. The statue of the god or goddess inside the temple represented the earthly form of the deity, and the doors of the temple would often

²Boatwright, 103.
be open so that the statue could look out upon the sacrifices and rites that were taking place outside the temple. In this sense, it would have been quite natural for the Romans to construct temples in the name of traditional gods such as Apollo or Jupiter. Octavian’s construction of the Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar, then, would have signified that his deified father would also need an earthly home as the other gods did, and been another instance of filial piety. Thus, not only was the temple a constant reminder to the Roman people of the deification of the beloved Caesar, but also the loyalty that Octavian himself, as his father’s son, carried for his father.

Additionally, the temple would have served as a public building gifted to the city and people of Rome. The construction of this temple follows the tradition Roman generals observed of using the great amounts of wealth they obtained from successful campaigns abroad to undertake large building projects within the city. The construction of this temple would not only have been a gift displaying Octavian’s love for and generosity towards the Roman people, but also would have demonstrated the wealth and influence that he wielded in order to construct such a temple. Thus, the temple would have been a very obvious and constant statement to the Roman people of the tradition and custom of Octavian’s actions as well as his own power.

To spread the image of the temple beyond the city of Rome, Octavian also minted the image of the temple, with specific depictions of the comet, on his coins. Figure 4-2 is an example of a coin from 32 which clearly portrays the comet on the pediment of the temple. The coin’s message is readily clear with just a quick glance: the picture of Octavian on the obverse, paired with the Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar on the reverse, show the obvious connections between Octavian, his deified father, the Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar, and his father’s comet.

The letters circling the bust of Octavian on the obverse read “DIVI · F · IIIVIR · ITER · R · P · C,” short for divi filius triumvir iterum rei publicae constituenae – “son of a god,

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3One such example is the Theater of Pompey, where Julius Caesar was famously murdered. Pompey the Great dedicated the theater in 55 to the city of Rome as a tribute to his many successful military achievements (Boatwright, 227).
twice elected Triumvir for Restoring the State.” Again, Octavian emphasizes his status as the *divi filius*, and displays his filial and religious piety along with his importance. His father is mentioned on the reverse with the inscription of “DIVO IUL,” “to the deified Julius.” Both sides of the coin would have been obvious statements to whomever was handling the coin that Octavian was the son of the deified Caesar. These reminders would once again allude to not only the inherent importance Octavian carried as a son of a god, but also one’s role in supporting a man who held the gods’ favor. Furthermore, asserting his status specifically as *divi filius* may have lent more legitimacy to his actions and words. Beard and Crawford introduced a flaw in the Roman system of divine patronage: while those who had the support of the gods necessarily had Rome’s best interests in mind, problems undoubtedly arose when two people of contradictory opinions both claimed divine patronage.\(^4\) As *divi filius*, however, Octavian’s link to the gods was above that of everyone else’s; while his opponents could *claim* the favor of the gods, it was only Octavian who was undoubtedly the son of one.\(^5\)

Additionally, on the reverse, there are inscriptions of “IIIIVIR · ITER” on the obverse and “COS · ITER · ET · TER · DESIG,” short for *consul iterum et ter designatus*, or “twice elected consul and designated a third.”\(^6\) These inscriptions all point to the political offices that Octavian held. While Octavian had no true record to his name in March, or even July, of 44, he certainly had attained his fair shares of honors by the late 30’s, with the notable defeats of Brutus, Cassius and Sextus Pompey, as well his title as a triumvir in 43 and 37. More importantly, the *rei publicae constituendae* on the obverse once again emphasizes the image that Octavian maintained of a man who was committed to restoring the Republic in conjunction with the Senate. Displaying these titles would have been reminiscent of the accomplishments that proved Octavian’s political and military capabilities, in addition to the religious legitimacy the comet and his father’s deification already granted him.

As with most currency, Octavian’s coins would have been widespread throughout the

\(^4\)Beard and Crawford, 32

\(^5\)The one exception to Octavian’s exclusive status as *divi filius* may have been Sextus Pompey, who called himself the son of Neptune. Regardless of whether his assertions ever caught on in Rome, his defeat at the hands of Octavian must have spoken for itself in confirming who had the more legitimate claim.

\(^6\)The coin would have been minted in between the period during which Octavian had been elected to a third consulship, but had not yet assumed the office.
Roman territories, which meant that many people on the far reaches of the empire would have been able to see the coins and the messages that they carried. The specific coin depicted in Figure 4-2, along with most other coins containing such instances of propaganda, is a denarius and of low enough denomination to have been handled frequently and exist in great quantities, increasing their chances of being seen by a wide audience on multiple occasions. These coins would have constantly reminded Romans of Octavian, his status as the son of a god, and his accomplishments every time they handled the coins. Placing the Temple of the Deified Julius on the coin allowed the temple, a symbol of Caesar’s deification, to reach those who perhaps did not live in Rome, or were not able to experience the temple up close – given that the denarii are believed to have been distributed to the troops first, these coins brought the temple to soldiers who most likely were unable to view the temple for themselves, and the support of whom proved time and time again as crucial to the success of a general. Thus the coins which Octavian minted very succinctly perpetuated and maintained the messages and ideals that he used to establish his legitimacy.

At the same time as these images of Julius Caesar and the comet were circulating around the Roman world in the mid 30s, Apollo began to appear in Octavian’s messages. Beginning with the vowing of the temple of Apollo upon the Palatine hill in 36, Apollo became a prominent Augustan figure who was Octavian’s most important divine champion at the battle of Actium as portrayed by poets such as Vergil, Horace, and Propertius. The following section explores the use of Apollo in Octavian’s changing message throughout the late 30s and the impact he hoped this new divine patron would have had upon the hearts and minds of Rome.

4.3 Apollo: A New Divine Patron

In 36, Octavian’s rivalry with Sextus Pompey had come to a head. Having taken the islands of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica granted to him in 39 in the Pact of Misenum, Pompey’s raids on grain shipments were causing famine back in Rome. Furthermore, Pompey had begun to promote himself as the Son of Neptune. Though the context under which Pompey declared
himself as such is unclear, his proclamations would have challenged Octavian’s own claims as the son of Julius Caesar, perhaps either as presenting another son of a god whom Rome could follow, or undermining Octavian’s assertions that as \textit{divi filius} he necessarily had the good of Rome in mind, given that Pompey was, in fact, actively causing trouble for the state by disrupting the grain shipments.

The same year, Octavian vowed a temple to Apollo up on the Palatine, where he lived. The circumstances surrounding Octavian’s vow are obscure, and only two sources, Dio and Suetonius, identify a lightning strike as the reason for which Octavian vowed the temple. As Suetonius writes, “he reared the temple of Apollo in that part of his house on the Palatine for which the soothsayers declared that the god had shown his desire by striking it with lightning” (Suetonius, \textit{Life of Augustus} 29). Neither Dio nor Suetonius, however, specify whether Octavian vowed the temple before or after the Battle of Naulochus, though it is more likely before than after given that generals often vowed temples to divinities in order to gain favor before battles, and that Apollo was Octavian’s patron god over Naulochus. Furthermore, soothsayers often had a reputation of being purchasable; thus it is unclear whether they had indeed declared Apollo’s desire for a temple upon that spot, or if Octavian himself had desired to build a temple to Apollo. Once again, as with the comet, the question of agency arises: did the lightning strike actually occur, or did Octavian fabricate the event entirely for the purpose of validating his own agenda? As with the comet, and perhaps even more so, given that it is impossible to verify cases of lightning storms, there is no way of knowing for sure – though it also should be said that lightning strikes are much better candidates for fabricated omens than comets, since they are nearly instantaneous and do not necessitate confirmation of its existence from large crowds of people, in addition to being a usual mode of communication from the gods down to Earth.

What can be said, however, is that the lightning strike, similar to the comet, became a crucial aspect in the evolution of Octavian’s divine patronage. The presence of Apollo gave Octavian two main advantages against Sextus Pompey, with the first simply being that the addition of a second deity to Octavian’s cause would have tipped the scales of divine
patronage in Octavian’s favor, given that both he and Pompey claimed equal legitimacy as a the son of a god. A second, more subtle use of Apollo is that it allowed Octavian to distance himself from Julius Caesar while still enjoying the benefits of divine favor. By continuing to advertise himself as *divi filius*, Octavian was necessarily emphasizing the fact that he was Julius Caesar’s son. Thus the battle between Sextus Pompey, the son of Pompey the Great, and Octavian, the son of Julius Caesar, could have very strongly evoked the civil war between Caesar and Pompey in the early 40s. Unlike the Battle of Philippi, which Octavian had portrayed as a battle between the saviors of the Republic and his father’s murderers, the war between Caesar and Pompey in the 40s had been a civil war without doubt – one that resulted in the deaths of many senators, turmoil and chaos, and the endangerment of the Republic. Civil war was to be avoided at all costs, and the presence of Apollo as Octavian’s primary divine patron, as opposed to Julius Caesar, would have distanced the Battle of Naulochus from the memory of the war in the 40s. By having Apollo fight on his side, Octavian could paint the Battle of Naulochus as a war between Apollo and Neptune – a war, in effect, between two divinities. This motif would return in Octavian’s battle against Antony and Cleopatra five years later, a battle over which Apollo once again reigned.

When Octavian finally confronted Marc Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31, neither his legitimacy as a leader nor his capability as a general were still in question after his many military successes in the previous decade. Neither would his special connection to Julius Caesar have been especially potent, given that Antony, too, had once been a loyal Caesarian. Though this had always been the case, Antony had not been the focus of Octavian’s messages in the late 40s; instead, Octavian had capitalized upon his unique connection with Caesar to win the support of the people and the legions. Now that he was directly faced against Antony, however, Octavian would need something to set him apart even more. Thus the benefits derived from the comet that had helped propel Octavian to initial prominence no longer carried the effectiveness they had in the late 40’s. Octavian now had to wage a careful

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7Galinsky offers a third advantage: simply that Apollo was “relatively unencumbered by the constraints of a previous tradition, which left [Octavian] with much creative latitude for shaping the image of Apollo in Rome” (Galinsky, 216). Galinsky’s claim further supports the emerging idea of Apollo as the antithesis to Bacchus explored later in this chapter.
war against a fellow triumvir without appearing to engage in the very non-republican act of civil war, and so his message needed to evolve to meet this new criteria. To accomplish such a task, he emphasized his own Roman and republican nature while claiming that Antony, in his liaison with Cleopatra, had subscribed to the dubious customs and beliefs of Egypt. The war according to Octavian, then, was not a civil war against Marc Antony, the Roman triumvir, but instead, a foreign war against the corruptive forces of the east.  

To reflect this new political message, Octavian’s propaganda from the late 30s changed accordingly and thus its emphasis began to shift away from the direct symbol of the comet. Though the focus of his propaganda shifted from proving his legitimacy to asserting his unwavering Roman nature, such an image remained consistent with the theme of his dedication to the Roman Republic that had been so prominent in his initial propaganda originating with the comet. Octavian had always been a proponent of traditional Roman morals; in the later 40s after the assassination of Julius Caesar, he had paid homage to the comet of Caesar’s apotheosis and avenged the murder of his father as a pious son. A decade later in the 30s, he had succeeded in upholding his father’s honor, but Rome now faced a new enemy in what Wallace-Hadrill calls “a battle for Roman values, to save the Roman world from a frontal assault on its gods, its ideals, its moral fabric.” As the god of harmony, truth, light, and culture, Apollo served as the perfect god with whom Octavian could align himself in his defense of Rome — in fact, it was perhaps even expected that Octavian, who championed harmony, peace, and virtue, would naturally have the god of these qualities as his patron.

Much of the imagery of Apollo at Actium comes from Augustan poets, and as always, poetry, even more so than other pieces of propaganda, is difficult to evaluate. Literature, unlike coins or temples, is a product of figures other than Augustus; thus there exists the age-old issue of authorial intent. Certain poets, such as Vergil, were commissioned by Augustus’ men to write, yet with the inherent ambiguities of language, words carry different meanings that depend on how the reader may want to interpret the passage. Thus it is

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8 Zanker, 84.
9 Wallace-Hadrill, 7.
10 Galinsky, 225.
11 An example of such an ambiguity occurs in Book VIII of Vergil’s Aeneid: Vergil uses the word superbus,
important not to place so much emphasis on literature at the cost of a complete disregard for other possible interpretations. In the case of the Actium poetry, however, what can be said is that Propertius, Horace, and Vergil all depict the battle of Actium as mythological war greater than the conflict between two mortal men. At the heart of this depiction lie the gods, specifically Apollo, acting as the guardian of Octavian as Roman forces engage the Egyptians. Though the intent of these poets may never be certain, the prevalence of Apollo and his ties to Octavian suggest that Apollo played a large role in Octavian’s myth of Actium.

As the great epic poet who immortalized the foundation of Rome in his *Aeneid*, Vergil’s description of the battle of Actium, depicted on the shield of Aeneas, retains the same level of mythological divine intervention as Aeneas’ own fate. Vergil writes that,

...[Cleopatra’s] gods, misbegotten,
Of every kind, even barking Anubis, ranged against Neptune,
Minerva, and Venus, brandished their armaments. At the heart
Of the struggle, engraved in iron, Mars raged...
...Above and surveying it all, Actian Apollo was drawing his bow.

(8.698-8.705)

As Wallace-Hadrill suggests, it was not only Rome, the physical city and its provinces, which had been under assault; it was also the Romans gods who were being challenged by the Egyptians. While Apollo, with whom Octavian had a special connection, overlooked the entire battlefield, the upstanding Roman gods of Neptune (the same to whom Sextus Pompey, Octavian’s enemy, had proclaimed his devotion), Minerva, Venus, Mars and Apollo were all in support of Rome and Octavian at the Battle of Actium. Cleopatra, in contrast, had the strange, dog-like patron of Anubis. Not only was Vergil therefore able to praise

with the general meaning of “proud,” in both a positive and negative sense to describe Hercules and Cacus, respectively. Vergil also uses the word to describe both Octavian and Agrippa at Actium, and later Augustus, in his triumph. It is up to the interpretation of readers to decide which of the two connotations of *superbus* Vergil might have intended.

It is noteworthy that Vergil, after his initial mention of Antony in line 686, chooses to refer to Cleopatra or the “Egyptian queen” as Octavian’s enemy for the rest of his description of the battle. Once again, this reinforces the notion that the Battle of Actium was portrayed as a foreign war.
Rome's victory over the east, but also the dominance of the Roman gods over Egyptian deities through Octavian.

Similarly, Propertius also greatly emphasized the role of the Roman gods at the Battle of Actium and indeed, focused on this aspect in his poetry. In fact, Propertius 4.6 is dedicated to the Temple of Apollo that Octavian vowed to build on the Palatine in 36 before the battle of Naulochus and dedicated in 28. Propertius describes Apollo to have played a major role in the Battle of Actium, and to have said,

...Scion of Alba Longa, Savior of the World,
Augustus, acknowledged greater than your great Trojan ancestors,
Conquer now by sea; already the land is yours. My bow fights for you,
And the whole burden of the quiver on my shoulders fights on your side.
Set your country free from fear; you are its champion; on you it depends

(36-41)

The first notable aspect of this passage is Apollo's support of Octavian's cause, which he enunciates directly to Octavian. Many Roman generals followed the tradition of vowing their devotion to a patron god before a battle, as Octavian did for Apollo by vowing a temple in 36 before Naulochus. Apollo's language in this passage, however, mirrors the sentiment a general would have carried for his god before entering battle. Though Octavian was only the son of a god, Apollo's deference to Octavian is a startling, almost ironic sign of the importance of Octavian's victory at Actium. Should the battle of Actium have been a civil war, Octavian certainly would not have had such a vow of support from a prominent Roman god, especially one who was the god of harmony.

Octavian's new association with Apollo brought him another advantage in the evolution of his attack against Antony – namely, it served as a scathing propagation of Cicero's invective against Antony's depravity and foreign obsessions. By the end of 44, Antony's relationship with Cicero, the great Roman orator, had greatly deteriorated as the two engaged in waves of accusations before the Senate. Most notably, Cicero's Second Philippic, though never
delivered publicly to Antony in front of the Senate, attacks all aspects of Antony’s character and paints him to be a drunk, womanish, and depraved statesman who failed his duties due to his own inebriation and participation in wild and unnatural activities. For instance, Cicero describes in vivid detail an instance in which “...At a gathering of the Roman people, while conducting public business, as Master of the Horse, when a mere belch would have been shocking, he vomited, filling his lap and the whole platform with morsels of food stinking of wine! (Cicero, *Philippic II* 63). As regards Antony’s dubious activities, Cicero asks, “How many days you carried on your disgraceful orgies in [Varro’s estate]! From nine o’clock in the morning there was drinking, gambling, and vomiting” (Cicero, *Philippic II* 104). The *Second Philippics*, Cicero concluded at the end of his invective, was a defense of Roman tradition and virtue against the depraved menace that was Marc Antony.\(^{13}\) It was this Antony that many later historians, such as Suetonius or Plutarch, chose to remember, and it was also this picture of Antony that many in the late 30’s and early 20’s B.C. would have held of the man as well. The perpetuation of Antony’s image as begun by Cicero is what Wallace-Hadrill refers to as “a systematic denigration of Antony” that effectively both bolstered Octavian’s image and undermined that of Antony.\(^{14}\)

In particular, Augustan poets built upon the idea of Antony as a brutish and wild drunkard. Antony had furthermore begun to align himself with Bacchus, whom he found, as Zanker describes, “a much more attractive and effective model, in the manner of Alexander the Great” after 42 – a role that was meant to emphasize his “passionate nature, generosity, and naiveté, his love of wine, elegant parties, worldly women, and flashy affairs.”\(^{15}\) By the time the Actium poets were writing in the 30s, however, this image had taken on a less positive interpretation. Marc Antony was not identified with Bacchus because of his passion

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\(^{13}\)“I shall speak for myself. I defended this country when I was a young man: I shall not desert it now that I am old” (Cicero, *Philippic II* 118).

\(^{14}\)Wallace-Hadrill, 5.

\(^{15}\)Zanker, 46.
and appreciation for a sophisticated, cultured life, but instead, for his depravity, constant inebriation, and utter lack of control. The descriptions of Antony and Cleopatra from the Actium poetry bear many similarities to the descriptions and criticisms of Cicero a decade earlier, with an additional Bacchic twist. Horace, in his *Odes 1.37*, displays the rampant drinking that had been characteristic of Octavian’s invective against Antony by criticizing that Cleopatra (and by association, Marc Antony as well) before the battle of Actium had been

*Diseased by vice... without restraint
In hoping for what she fancied and drunk [on Mareotic wine]
With fortune’s sweetness.*

(10-12)

According to Horace, Antony and Cleopatra’s inebriation and their drunken revelry was a direct cause of their demise at the hands of Octavian and his virtuous Romans. Similarly, the drunken orgies of which Antony had allegedly been so fond were also a staple practice of the Bacchanalia, the cult of Bacchus, that had originated in the east and had been a source of religious offense in the Roman Republic. As Livy describes,

> When wine had inflamed their minds, and the dark night and the intermingling of men and women, young and old, had smothered every feeling of modesty, depravities of every kind began to take place because each person had ready access to whatever perversion his mind so inclined him.

(39.8)

Because of the Bacchanalia’s various debaucheries, the Senate took measures against the cult which sought to suppress but did not end the worship of Bacchus in 186 B.C. Thus, to align Antony with Bacchus would both have been a logical extension of Cicero’s invective given
Antony’s obsession with the east. Not only would it have emphasized Antony’s drunkenness and immoralities, it also would have served as a sign of the threat that Antony posed to the Republic. In the words of Zanker, “Marc Antony made it easy for his enemies to attack him.”

4.4 The Complementary Images of Julius Caesar and Apollo

Though it may be tempting to section the divine patronage of Julius Caesar and Apollo off from one another, with Julius Caesar predominantly in the 40s and Apollo in the late 30s, the complementary aspects of these two divinities merit further investigation. Although Apollo emerged as a second divine patron in the 30s and became the patron of the battles of Naulochus and Actium, Julius Caesar had not at all disappeared from either Octavian’s message or Rome. Instead, these two divine patrons came to represent two different facets of Octavian’s image – with Julius Caesar serving as the divine patron with which Octavian identified publicly, and Apollo more personally. Furthermore, the evocations of these two deities, often with close proximity with each other, served to enhance and promote the idea of one unified message for Octavian.

In the midst of Octavian’s successes at Actium and over Egypt, the Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar, which Octavian had vowed back in 42, was dedicated in 29. The dedication of this temple, which would have been cause for great celebration in Rome, would have been a reminder of the Caesarian aspects of Octavian’s message that may have been over-shadowed by the Apolline events of the victory over Antony, Cleopatra, and Egypt. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the Temple of Deified Julius Caesar would have been under construction sometime during the 30s and may have even stood completed for some time.

16 Zanker, 47.
before its dedication, thereby serving as a tangible and quite striking reminder of Julius Caesar in the Roman Forum. The dedication of Caesar's temple was followed shortly by the dedication of the Temple of Apollo up on the Palatine just one year later in 28. Thus the timing of the dedications of these two temples would have served as a link between the two.

The placement of the two temples, though spatially separate, nevertheless contributed to one coherent message concerning Octavian's divine patronage. With Julius Caesar's temple in the Roman forum, a very public space, the temple would have evoked memories of Caesar's generosity as a popular politician. The temple would also have been in the presence of buildings such as the curia iulia, the Basilica, and the Rostra. The curia iulia, Julius Caesar's senate house which Octavian finished in 29, is one of the many public projects of Julius Caesar that Octavian completed for his father. Thus both Caesar's temple in the forum and Octavian's actions would have served as reminders to aspects of Julius Caesar which had made him so loved—namely, his generosity and willingness to give to the people of Rome.

Apollo's temple on the Palatine, on the other hand, represented a more personal and individual aspect of Octavian's image. Though Julius Caesar's generosity had been well-loved by the people of Rome, his private aspirations to power and perhaps monarchy had clearly not been well-received by certain senators. By placing the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, within the confines of his property, Octavian could distance himself from the shortcomings in Julius Caesar's personal character that eventually led to his downfall. Instead, by allying himself with Apollo, Octavian could portray himself as someone who valued peace, honor, and truth—the virtues of Apollo—in his character. Zanker, in fact, goes so far as to remark that over the next twenty years, Octavian's personal ambitions for "healing Rome's wounds bore the stamp of Apollo."\(^{17}\)

In addition to the celebration of the dedication of the Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar

\(^{17}\)Zanker, 50.
in 29, Octavian also had his three-day long triple triumph celebrating his victories at Actium, over Egypt, and in Illyricum. The physical remnant of this celebration, the triple arch of Augustus, was erected right next to the Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar, as shown in Figure 4-3. Between these two buildings, one Caesarian and one Apolline, a whole side of the forum was occupied with Octavian’s buildings. These buildings, then, would have served as physical reminders of both the celebrations that had taken place in 29 and the two divine patrons of Octavian’s rise.

4.5 Conclusion

The latter half of the 30s saw a shift in Octavian’s message to adapt to his rivalries with Sextus Pompey and Marc Antony. The emergence of Apollo as a new divine patron not only added weight to Octavian’s divine favor by virtue of having the support of another god, but also through the specific advantages that Apollo himself offered. Against two Roman citizens, the Battles of Naupactus and Actium could have been seen as civil wars – a concept which was to be avoided at all costs should Octavian wish to continue the image of himself as a man with the welfare of the Republic in mind. By claiming the patronage of Apollo, the god of harmony and peace, Octavian could diffuse some of the tension that came with going to war against other Romans. Furthermore, Apollo provided the perfect antithesis to Bacchus, with whom Antony had associated himself. With himself under Apollo and Antony under Bacchus, Octavian portrayed the Battle of Actium as a foreign war entirely, as a Roman defense of virtue and upstanding traditions against the forces of the east which had already corrupted Antony and would take all of Rome if left unchecked. Thus Apollo became a logical choice for a second divine patron of Octavian; even when Antony was defeated in 31 and the threat of Egypt conquered in 30, Apollo remained as an integral part of Octavian’s arsenal of divine patronage along with Caesar. Taken together, these two divine patrons
painted an image of Octavian who held the favor of the gods in both his public and private life.
Chapter 5

Epilogue: Augustus the *Pater Patriae*

On January 16th, 27 B.C., the unknown boy Julius Caesar had adopted in his will seventeen years prior was awarded the title of “Augustus” by the Roman Senate. That same year, Octavian, henceforth known as Augustus, was granted a provincial command that gave him immense amounts of power unseen to this point in the hands of one man at Rome. Yet perhaps even more important than the powers themselves were the sentiments behind the Senate’s actions and Octavian’s place in Rome – he was Rome’s savior, the man who had led his people through civil and foreign wars, avenged his father’s murderers who would have further oppressed the state had they not been checked, restored grain shipments to the city from marauding pirates, and defended Roman honor and virtues against the insidious corruption of the east. Having led his country thus far out of the chaos and turmoil in the 40s and 30s, Augustus was charged with the continued protection of Rome. He was to become, under the title officially granted to him in 2 B.C., *pater patriae*, Father of the Fatherland (Augustus, *Res Gestae*, 35).

Although 27 is the year conventionally marked by historians as the end of the Republic
and beginning of the Roman Empire, very few Romans at the time, if any, would have taken
note of a clear delineation between these two phases in Roman history. It was the result
of what Galinsky refers to as Augustus' "supreme skill at having it both ways," the careful
manipulation of his actions to usher in a new age without abandoning the traditions of the
old.¹ The power that came with his title of Augustus, his imperium maius, was nothing
more than a combination of existing powers that had previously been distributed amongst
many men. Changing times called for changing measures, and this particular age called for
Augustus' leadership as Rome's protector, yet there was nothing extraordinary, no extra
offices or powers, that had been created solely for Augustus.

Augustus' careful dedication to the traditions of the Roman Republic did not begin in
27 with his new powers and titles; the groundwork, in fact, was laid in 44, shortly after
the assassination of Julius Caesar. The comet and funeral games for his father were the
first instances in which the young Octavian could very boldly and publicly begin asserting
his commitment to traditional Roman virtues and morals – the funeral games as a display
of both Octavian's personal piety to his father and also the importance he placed on the
virtue of filial piety, and the comet as the first sign of the divine patronage he would enjoy.
Both these qualities would prove crucial in Octavian's emerging image as a champion of the
Republic, chosen as Rome's protector by the gods themselves. Though Octavian had not
yet established himself either as a politician or general when the comet rose in July of 44,
the picture he had begun to paint with his games and the comet would prove essential in
maintaining and perpetuating his republican image for the rest of his career, even when he
eventually came to have the victories to show for it.

With its close ties to Julius Caesar, the comet was perhaps most visually effective in the
late 40s, as Octavian capitalized upon the name of his adoptive father to win the support
of the legions and the people, and further used the associated divine patronage and his

¹Galinsky, 49.
commitment to Republic values to appeal to the Senate. The base effect of the comet, however, was not lost in the 30s when Apollo began to appear as Octavian’s primary divine patron through the wars against Sextus Pompey, Marc Antony, and Egypt; in fact, the comet as a symbol of the divine patronage Octavian enjoyed served as a stepping stone upon which Octavian could claim the favor of Apollo. It is hard to imagine that Octavian in the late 30s, if without his association with the concept of divine patronage through Julius Caesar in late 40s, could suddenly have begun claiming the favor of Apollo to any great effect, especially given that Sextus Pompey had essentially done the same with Neptune in 36. If divine favor was fair game for anyone to proclaim, then there would have been no reason for anyone in Rome to take Octavian’s claims over that of Sextus Pompey. But Octavian did have an advantage over Pompey, and that advantage was precisely that he already held the patronage of one god, Julius Caesar; Apollo as a second patron, then, was no big stretch of the imagination given that all Roman gods had in mind the same goal: the good of Rome. The comet, in effect, set a high standard of legitimacy for any Roman wishing to claim a level of divine favor to rival that of Octavian.

Furthermore, the republican ideals to which Octavian attached himself through his use of the comet early in his career allowed him to gradually build his reputation as a champion of the Republic, eventually leading to his ultimate title as *pater patriae* in 2 B.C. His early dedication to the tradition of filial piety and the divine favor he held portrayed him as republican from the start; thus he was not only a statesman committed to the welfare of the Republic, but one who had always been so. Apollo, then, became a logical choice as a second patron god – the first, being his father, would have been a given, but the god of harmony and virtue would have followed closely. All of these republican qualities, in turn, made Octavian the perfect antithesis to Marc Antony and his brutish, drunk, and uncultured worship of the east.

Although hardly anyone was in a position to challenge Augustus’ power even in 27 B.C.,
he continued to perpetuate his image as a republican statesman well after 27. Expanding upon the close connections he held with the Roman gods, he began construction on his own forum in the 20s, shown in Figure 5-1. As one of Augustus' biggest projects in the 20s, it is but one of many instances of Augustus' continuing image. The two main features of the forum would have been the Temple of Mars Ultor in the back, and the golden statue of Augustus himself in the middle, directly in front of the temple. As Zanker labels in his plan, the temple would have housed all the major Augustan deities: Venus, Mars, and Julius
Caesar, thereby reaffirming the importance of these divinities to Augustus and his message. Furthermore, lining the walls of the forum are believed to statues of great Roman men, including the likes of Romulus and Aeneas. The placement of these men along the sides of the forum would have portrayed them as supporting figures to Augustus in the middle – in essence, they are literally sidelined by Augustus himself, Rome’s greatest champion. The direct line between the statue of Augustus and the temple would have been a physical representation of Augustus as a direct descendant of these gods; yet the temple remains in the background, thus keeping the attention on Augustus as the central figure in the forum and placing the gods as patrons behind Augustus. Once again as with the Temple of the Deified Julius Caesar, the public space of a forum would have displayed Augustus’ message in a visually striking manner to all those who lived in Rome. As the layout of the forum of Augustus clearly shows, even several decades after the comet arced over Roman skies did divine patronage remain an integral aspect to the image of Rome’s *pater patriae*.

But to return to the comet and the context of its appearance, it is interesting to consider the delicate political situation of 44 B.C. and the way it came to a resolution in an incidental, yet almost orchestrated manner. The seemingly personal and self-contained, self-serving actions of multiple parties unintentionally contributed to Octavian’s quick and unlikely rise to power; for instance, Marc Antony, who read the will declaring Octavian to be Caesar’s heir and gave Caesar’s funeral speech, did so only for his own benefit in the hopes of immediately transferring all of Caesar’s support to himself. Instead, he inadvertently rekindled a love for Caesar amongst the plebeians that Octavian was then able to use to proclaim his own political legitimacy. Cicero, in encouraging the Senate to grant Octavian *imperium*, did so in the hopes of using a lesser evil to defeat Marc Antony and save the Senate from a dangerous man. Instead, this *imperium* served as the one opportunity Octavian needed to begin to assert his dominance with military power. Even Marc Antony’s associations with Bacchus, begun independently by himself to express his love of sophisticated living, fell straight into
Octavian’s lap as the perfect antithesis to his virtuous and Roman Apollo. The outcomes of these events give an impression of the inevitable, that the Roman Republic was fated to fall at the hands of Octavian regardless of those who would counteract the process. Yet simultaneously, there is a tenuous sense of specificity and contingency, that had it not been for individual, unpredictable, and obscurely motivated political maneuvers of an 18 year-old boy, the events of the first-century B.C. might have concluded in a radically different way. The comet of 44 perfectly encapsulates this paradox: that at the center of the large and complex process that was the fall of the Roman Republic there might have been something as capricious and haphazard as a comet, lingering briefly over the skies of Rome before it continued its long journey to the outer reaches of the solar system and beyond.
Bibliography


