Suetonius’ biography of Rome’s first emperor has acquired a significance that goes well beyond its intrinsic historical value. The reason for this is not complicated. Tacitus treats the career of Augustus very cursorily in his *Annals*, and opts to begin the detailed part of his narrative with the accession of Tiberius. He does at one point (*Ann. 3.24.3*) mention his ambition eventually to write a history of the Augustan period (*cetera illius aetatis memorabo*), but, if he did so, no trace of or other reference to that work has survived. The consequence is that, apart from the account of Dio and Augustus’ own self-serving *Res Gestae*, the *Vita Divi Augusti* is the only major work to provide substantial information on the crucial period of the establishment of the principate. Hence scholars are obliged, if at times only *faute de mieux*, to pay special attention to it.

Given the importance of this biography for a key historical era, it is remarkable that it does not have a thorough and up-to-date commentary. In French, there is Henri Ailloud’s useful, but limited, edition in the Collection des Universités de France series, published initially in 1931 and revised in 1954. Levi published a similarly useful but also similarly limited commentary in Italian in 1951. Germans are served only by the brief notes that accompany the translations by Martinet and by Wittstock. In the English-speaking world, students still, remarkably, use Shuckburgh’s commentary, published in 1896 and recently reprinted, supplemented by two briefly annotated texts, by Adams in 1939 and Carter in 1982. The case for a new full-scale commentary is self-evident, and this gap has now been filled admirably by Louis’ weighty exegesis.

Louis begins with a preface, where she outlines her background in Classics and reveals that she was also at one point a student of law, a qualification she uses to good effect in legal discussions. She also in the preface mounts a defence of Suetonius as a historical source. She notes that unlike such writers as Caesar he was personally detached from the great events of war and politics that he was describing. She also defends his ‘thematic’ approach to history as in no way inferior to the annalist tradition.

The preface is followed by an account of Suetonius’ life, then by a detailed analysis of his methodology. Louis finds much to admire in him and observes how his research could be meticulous. She elucidates the general principles of his approach, and how the careers of the emperors are laid out in predictable phases, in both chronological directions – Suetonius likes to start by going back into the past with an extensive family tree. She shows how the character of the emperor could be fixed in its basic features, but then evolve in other less fundamental areas. The various modes of accession are described, as well as the nature and the
exercise of imperial power. She presents a detailed description of how Suetonius presents his evidence, and of how he often leaves open the question of the truth. She follows these broad observations with an analysis of how the themes were applied specifically in the case of Augustus.

The preliminary observations are followed by the major feature of the book, the translation and commentary (73–585). Louis breaks up Suetonius’ 101 chapters into their component sections and provides the text, translation and commentary for each separate section. This is an acceptable arrangement, more or less dictated by the nature of the translation, although it reduces the usefulness of the translation, which cannot conveniently be read as a coherent whole. It should be noted that the numbered sections of the chapters are based on single sentences (following the idiosyncratic precedent of Ailloud [see above p. 321 note 1]). This can at times be frustrating, especially in the longer chapters, since it makes it difficult to correlate her comments to the work of other scholars, who generally use Ihm’s Teubner text, where the numbered sections are based on paragraphs.1

Because Louis’ concern is with the historical significance of the Vita, detailed discussion of the manuscripts is perhaps not to be expected. It is nonetheless surprising that there is no textual apparatus, and often no acknowledgement that Ailloud’s text, on which her translation and commentary are based, is, of course, like all Classical literature, derived from a range of diverse manuscript readings. Some of the readings are, naturally enough, modern emendations, some of them significant, such as (I use the Louis/ Ailloud section numbers) signatores for senatores (33.2), Scaptiensibus tribulibus for Scaptensibus tribubus (40.4), remedio habenarum for remedio harenarum (80.2). This is not necessarily to suggest serious shortcomings in Ailloud’s text, but rather to highlight the need to alert the reader to the fact that sections of that text (and by necessity of its subsequent translation) do not have manuscript authority.

The commentary is commendable, and many of Louis’ discussions are first-rate. On legal topics she provides excellent summaries, as in the valuable account of Augustus’ marriage laws, or in the discussion of parricidium (at 33.2). In other areas she is almost always impressively thorough. At 37.1, the description of the new offices created by Augustus is on the scale of a small essay, with four succinct pages on these important innovations. In her commentary on Augustus’ death Louis provides a compelling and detailed comparison of Suetonius’ narrative (98) with that found in other sources. She points out that Tacitus and Dio both offer versions that differ from that of Suetonius on the whereabouts of Tiberius at the time. Tiberius had taken his leave shortly before to cross over to his provincial command in Illyricum. According to Suetonius, he was recalled and was able to have a long discussion with Augustus, the last serious business that the emperor conducted. Tacitus casts doubt on the story (Tac. Ann. 1.5.5), and Dio (56.31.1) claims categorically that Augustus was dead by the time Tiberius reached him and that his death had been kept secret. Suetonius agrees basically with Velleius Paterculus’ report of events (2.123), and to Louis this suggests the use of a pro-Tiberial tradition, as opposed to Tacitus’ and Dio’s use

1 M. Ihm, C. Suetoni Tranquilli De vita Caesarum libri VIII (Leipzig, 1907).
of a hostile tradition. Although she has reservations about Velleius, she, in my opinion correctly, places more faith in his and Suetonius’ version, noting that they are consistent with other references (such as Suet. Tib. 21.1–2) and that Tacitus admits uncertainty in the matter.

It is only on rare occasions that Louis omits to comment on points of historical interest. At Aug. 24.2 Suetonius mentions that among Augustus’ military reforms he stipulated that legati would not be allowed lengthy stays with their wives and would be restricted to short sojourns during the winter months. Louis confines herself to a few general comments on the office of legatus legionis (an innovation of Augustus which she asserts was created «pour commander aussi les auxilia»), although the restriction surely had more relevance to the legati Augusti with overall responsibility for their province. In any case, the whole issue clearly merits extensive discussion, since during Augustus’ lifetime the wives from the imperial family certainly accompanied their husbands on military service (such as Agrippina the Younger, wife of Germanicus). Moreover, there is documented evidence that by at least very soon after Augustus’ death the practice of lengthy sojourns by the wives of ‘regular’ legati was firmly established, and given that Tiberius was generally reluctant to abandon his predecessor’s administrative procedures it is more than likely that the practice was in place before Augustus’ death too. Plancina, the wife of Piso, who accompanied her husband, in AD 18, for the full term of his office in Syria, stands as a good example. There is scholarly literature on this general problem, and it is surprising that Louis does not take the opportunity to discuss it.¹

Having completed the commentary, Louis uses it to draw a broad picture of Suetonius’ Augustus. This is done in the form of a long contemplative essay (pp. 586–644), very much in the French tradition, un-indexed, without footnotes, and apart from one citation each of the Vitae of Caesar, Claudius and Domitian and a single citation of Florus, all the text references are to the Vita of Augustus. Louis seeks to show how Suetonius reconciled the ruthless conduct of Octavian the triumvirs with the enlightened statesmanship of Augustus the emperor. Suetonius’ Augustus is to be classed among the ‘good’ emperors, who do have faults, but whose faults fade and give way to lofty moral qualities through the exercise of imperial duties. In this respect he stands in contrast to the ‘bad’ emperors, where the process was reversed. The background to the change in the specific case of Augustus is a complex one, but at its heart was his reverence for the past. Hence in two colonnades of his forum he dedicated statues of the great figures of Roman history in triumphal garb, and accompanied them with an inscription in which he declared that he would be judged by the degree to which he lived up to the standards set by these great figures of old (31.8). Fundamental in the progress towards the status of enlightened emperor was Octavian’s emotional reaction to seeing the body of Alexander the Great, and the sense that Alexander would be an inspiration for his own future acts, although this is to a considerable extent

Louis’ own extrapolation (p. 587), and indeed Suetonius was generally comfortable with the notion that positive and negative traits could co-exist in one and the same ruler. The biography is, of course, of ‘Divus’ Augustus, and Louis argues that Suetonius seeks to show that although Augustus did manifest human weakness while he was alive, he also, unlike his predecessor, Caesar, manifested during his lifetime the divine qualities that would be acknowledged officially only after his death. Louis has much of interest to say in this extended essay, but since the format does not permit her to place her conclusions within the context of current scholarly thinking, her treatise will probably be consulted less often than it deserves.

The Bibliography is arranged in two parts, the first consisting of translations of and commentaries on ancient authors, including Aristotle, Macrobius and Manilius, but for some reason not Tacitus or Velleius Paterculus, followed by works of modern scholarship. Perhaps a little confusingly, multi-authored publications are listed twice, first by their title preceded by AAVV plus date (the date determining the order), as, for example, AAVV (1996) *The Cambridge Ancient History*, a scheme that will be unfamiliar to many readers, and then again alphabetically, this time more helpfully, by the name of the first mentioned editor, as, in the case just cited, Bowman A.K. (1996). The Bibliography is extensive (42 pages) and especially strong on French publications, but it does not manifest a similar familiarity with works in English and German. It surprisingly does not include Baldwin’s engaging and informative monograph on Suetonius, or Carter’s worthwhile commentary on the *Vita Augusti*.1 Also, Edwards’ and Hurley’s recent annotated translations of the *Vita* need to be added.2 There are signs that the body of the work was completed some time ago, and recent publications, listed in an bibliographical appendix, do not seem to have been systematically incorporated into the discussions. The Bibliography is followed by a series of Indices: Laws, Names, Peoples and Places, Res (‘Topics’, only three pages long and of necessity highly selective), Literary Citations, Epigraphic Citations. Finally, a collection of Stemmata, of Augustus himself, but also of the Claudii Pulcheri, the Aemilii Lepidi and the Scribonii.

There are many typographical problems (apart from misprints, note that, more significantly, the first three items indexed under ‘Laws’ do not appear in their appropriate index but have become attached to the end of the Bibliography). A second, revised, edition is clearly called for. These editorial slip-ups are presumably not to be laid at the door of the author, and are not fatally damaging. Louis has made a valuable and lasting contribution to Suetonian studies, and her commentary will be widely used.

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1 B. Baldwin, Suetonius (Amsterdam, 1983), Carter (see above p. 321 note 1).