

**'I AM MASTER OF NOTHING': IMPERIUM: AUGUSTUS AND THE STORY OF AUGUSTUS ON
SCREEN**

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ABSTRACT

The story of Octavian / Augustus' life follows a rather problematic narrative trajectory. Reduced to its basic elements, it is the tale of a man who overthrew the Roman Republic and installed himself as an absolute monarch, yet enjoyed widespread contemporary acclaim and died peacefully in his bed. Lacking the moral complexity of Julius Caesar's story, or the prurient thrills offered by proper 'bad' emperors, this narrative has rarely been tackled in full by western story-tellers. Instead, in the 20th century, Octavian / Augustus appeared most frequently on screen as a secondary character in the stories of others – particularly as a villainous foil to Antony and Cleopatra – while only a handful of novelists attempted a fuller biographical approach. Nonetheless, a popular appetite for screen portrayals of Roman history in the early 21st century has kept producers and screenwriters returning to his story, and one TV mini-series, *Imperium: Augustus* (2003), has now offered the first ever screen biopic of this contradictory character. This paper examines the narrative strategies used in this production and their degree of success in making the story of Octavian / Augustus palatable to contemporary western audiences. Making strong claims to historical accuracy, *Imperium: Augustus* builds on approaches already established in biographical novels, but also deploys characteristically filmic devices such as the flashback to help create a compelling drama. Audience responses suggest that it was only a partial success, but Augustus' story still offers ample opportunities for exploring modern concerns such as the crafting of political personas or the relationship between security and civil liberties. These could perhaps be better satisfied in the medium of the documentary, and we can fully expect such treatments to appear in connection with the bimillennium of his death on 19th August 2014.