Julius Caesar in Western Culture
Julius Caesar
in Western Culture

Edited by Maria Wyke

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This collection of essays developed out of an international conference held at the British School at Rome in March 2003. On the fifteenth of that month, as on the Ides of March every year, spring flowers were placed ceremoniously at the feet of a bronze statue of Julius Caesar that stands in the heart of Rome. Even though, for centuries, many Italians have raised a toast to Caesar on the anniversary of his murder, this particular ritual dates back only as far as the Fascist regime. The yearly adoration of the Roman dictator was originally designed to encourage in participants an equal adoration of their own twentieth-century dictator, Mussolini.

It is not just in Italian culture, however, that Julius Caesar has continued to hold court. Associated with a crucial turning point in the history of western civilization from republic to empire, the Roman statesman quickly took on monumental, almost mythic, proportions at the same time as he was elevated to the ranks of the divine. Right from the time of his own somewhat spare accounts of himself, his life (whether as founder or destroyer) became a huge resource through which to support or challenge conquest and imperialism, revolution, dictatorship, monarchy, and assassination. Either by analysis, re-presentation, or direct imitation, Caesar has been and continues to be a significant term in western culture.

The essays collected in this volume seek to examine important aspects of Caesar’s role in western culture across a wide chronological range and diverse media. While retaining a strong focus on Julius Caesar, individual chapters are often interdisciplinary and cross-cultural. Ranging over the fields of history (religious, educational, military, as well as political), archaeology, architecture and urban planning, the visual arts, and literary, film, theatre, and cultural studies, the chapters examine the
Caesars of Italy, France, Germany, Britain, and the United States in particular. The objects of analysis vary, from Caesar’s own commentaries on the Gallic wars composed in the 50s BCE to a cinematic narrative of the defeat of Vercingetorix released in 2000, and on to Caesarian analogies for George W. Bush and his “American empire” that achieved global prominence early in the twenty-first century.

Such diversity is, however, tightly framed within the book’s various sections. *Julius Caesar in Western Culture* opens with an introduction which investigates those early writings of Caesar’s life that stamped him with historical importance and came to dominate all his subsequent reception. In contrast to his own confident self-presentation in his commentaries, the classical biography of a Plutarch or a Suetonius turns Caesar into a dramatic moral problem: Is such a life the right one to live? Should such a life be terminated? The first section of our collection, “Literary Characterization,” then remains with the classical and late antique period to broaden our opening concern with writing Caesar, and to look beyond the dominant historiography at other constructions of the dictator (whether as victim, hero, or villain).

The second section, “The City of Rome,” explores Caesar’s reception from the Middle Ages to the High Renaissance and shifts attention from writing to the materiality of the memory of Caesar. It investigates the importance of place in the original affirmation of Caesar’s power, the perpetuation (as well as the loss) of the memory of Caesar’s monuments and the corresponding monumentality of his person, and the ritual reenactments of Caesarian triumphalism through the urban landscape of Rome in order to authorize and celebrate the power of both emperors and popes.

The central section of the volume, “Statecraft and Nationalism,” moves beyond material memory and ritual imitation in the city of Rome to explore Caesar’s new crucial function in discourses of government, nationalism, and empire. Advancing from the early modern period through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on into the new millennium, these chapters explore Caesar’s place in the national identities of France, the United States of America, and Italy by analyzing the discourses of popular culture and pedagogy as well as those of political science and oratory. Caesar’s twin receptions here come to the fore – as both model and anti-model. Reproduction of his excessive ambition will drive nations to civil unrest or damaging imperialism. Reproduction of his strong leadership and thirst for conquest will render nations firm, powerful,
and glorious. The act of reading or even watching Caesar can, variously, stimulate a distasteful bellicosity in individuals, educate them in the cruelty of conquerors and the heroism of resistance, forge a civic or national spirit, and shape a cultivated person.

The final two sections return to reconsider the same time spans as the central section, while focusing on different (but interrelated) aspects of Caesar’s reception. “Theatrical Performance” begins with an investigation of the ambivalent politics of Shakespeare’s hugely influential play and moves on to consider more controversial stagings of Caesar as a Superman or political and military genius. It explores the performance history of Caesar as progressively interlocked with discourses of monarchism, republicanism, colonialism, and fascism, and draws attention to the ways casting, performance, or audience expectation affect understanding of the Caesars who appear on stage.

The final section, “Warfare and Revolution,” considers the pragmatics of being Caesar for the modern general or statesman, while also returning us to the volume’s initial interest in Caesar’s own writings as crucial to his later reception. From the late sixteenth century, to be Caesar on the battlefield began to require not the direct adoption of his military strategy and tactics but the more abstract imitation of his extraordinary courage, leadership, and ingenuity, while, in the political domain of later centuries, the writings of Caesar could be used to legitimate recourse to revolution, and the crossing of modern Rubicons. Thus Julius Caesar in Western Culture explores the strikingly direct impact of Caesar on the modern history of western culture.

The volume closes with an Afterword by the editor that examines a new and immensely topical role for Caesar in the political discourses of the early twenty-first century. Critiques of American empire and the imperial presidency of George W. Bush, prompted by the invasion of Iraq, have regularly drawn on and transformed anew the rich reception history of the Roman dictator outlined in this volume.

Great thanks are due to the Leverhulme Trust whose generous award of a Major Research Fellowship allowed me to begin my own research into the reception of Julius Caesar and to initiate the conference which led to this volume. The Director of the British School at Rome, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, generously provided a superb setting for the conference as well as warm hospitality. His assistant, Sarah Court, organized all the administrative aspects of the conference so smoothly as to leave me free to concentrate on the more academic and social matters, while Maria Pia...
Malvezzi proved adept at tracking down a version of Enrico Guazzoni’s *Cajus Julius Caesar* (1914) suitable for screening at the event.

I owe a special debt of gratitude also to Christopher Pelling, who kindly agreed not only to be a plenary speaker but also, subsequently, to read and comment on all the essays submitted for inclusion in this volume. It is a better book for the attention he has been kind enough to pay to it.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this collection to Jonathan Walters and Dominic Montserrat, good friends of mine and lovers of the classics, who both tragically died during the course of its preparation.
Part I
Introduction
Judging Julius Caesar

Christopher Pelling

Caesar Then and Caesar Now

The conference from which this book was born took place in spring 2003, just after the Second Gulf War had begun. It was impossible for speakers and for audience to escape from the shadows that the conflict cast: issues of tyranny and freedom, of preemptive strikes, of empire, of slaughter, of deeply contestable questions of right and wrong were in all the participants’ minds. Julius Caesar had always been an equivocal figure, as this volume will make very clear. Within a few generations of his death the elder Pliny would admire the extraordinary range of Caesar’s ability, but still doubt whether the Gallic campaigns were really so glorious, “so great a wrong to the human race, even if a necessary one” (*tantam etiamsi coactam humani generis iniuriam*, *NH* 7.91–2). In the spring of 2003 similar ideas were in the air: cartoons figuring the American president as Caesar were appearing in the press, and they were not friendly ones. Yet that is itself testimony to the lasting immediacy of Julius Caesar, for the man has always been a way of thinking about the present as well as the past. It is human nature to seek lessons from the past to illuminate the present; it is even more inevitable that the issues of the present create the filters by which we understand the past. The essays in this volume help us to see this, as in one period or culture after another the two perspectives of the first century BCE and of a later society come together. And doubtless we contributors are often writing about the present day too; such is the nature of scholarship, for good and for ill.

Let us take Shakespeare. At the beginning of the second act of *Julius Caesar*, Marcus Brutus is musing. There are all sorts of pressures on him
Christopher Pelling

to act in order to remove a tyrant, to act in defense of the freedom that
was his and the Romans’ life-blood.

It must be by his death . . .

Consider all the things that Caesar might do unless he is stopped now:

so Caesar may;
Then, lest he may, prevent. And, since the quarrel
Will bear no colour for the thing he is,
Fashion it thus: that what he is, augmented,
Would run to these and these extremities;
And therefore think him as a serpent’s egg
Which, hatched, would, as his kind, grow mischievous,
And kill him in the shell . . .

( Jul. Caes. 2.1.10, 27–34)

– a stark conclusion. So he must be removed, not for what he is, but for
what he may become.¹ This is a preemptive strike, and it is a strike in the
cause of freedom. One sees too why he must persuade himself like this.
It is partly a matter of his family. This is a duty inherited from an earlier
Brutus, the first Brutus who overthrew the first tyrant: this is a debt that
has now come down to Marcus.

No audience at the beginning of the twenty-first century could avoid
the contemporary resonance, as George W. Bush turned again to Iraq
and continued in the path of his father a decade before. No audience,
either, could avoid noticing that this language of preemptive strikes is
rather different from that of the other characters in the play, most of
whom are offended enough by what Caesar is already. Nor could any
audience avoid having their response to Brutus affected, probably in-
deed directed, by their views of the present. Not that everyone will be
sensitized by current events in the same direction. Some theatregoers
will be more inclined to give Brutus the benefit of the doubt: the cause is
not ignoble, the man tries his best, he does not take this course lightly,
and who can be sure that he is wrong? Others will find Brutus’ percep-
tion wildly askew. He and others readily believe that, once the tyrant is
removed, freedom will be restored, and all will be well. But will it be so
easy? Once the tyrant is removed, will that simply be the answer? A
shrewder judge than Brutus, Mark Antony, foresees what will happen,
with the killing not ended, but
Judging Julius Caesar

Blood and destruction shall be so in use,
And dreadful objects so familiar,
That mothers shall but smile when they behold
Their infants quartered with the hands of war . . .

(\textit{Jul. Caes.} 3.1.265–8)

The consequences are shattering. Does not the man who most believes in
the rhetoric of freedom see things just a little too simply?

Those may be the natural thoughts of theatregoers now, and any direc-
tor will have ideas abut how to exploit them. Readers of this book in ten
or twenty years’ time will be able to reflect on whether they are still the
thoughts then. Responses in the past, as well as those in the speculative
future, may give us pause, making us wonder if Shakespeare himself is
quite so simple about this as a politically engaged modern audience may
be: for the stage-history of \textit{Julius Caesar} suggests that most directors and
most audiences have thought that, basically, Brutus was more right than
wrong.\(^2\) It is even clearer, though, that this play has always had a way of
being highly relevant to the present, whenever the present has happened
to be. There was the 1937 production of Orson Welles, with Caesar look-
ning like Mussolini; there was the 1968 version with Caesar resembling
General de Gaulle – a weak old man, but the conspirators quail before
him all the same; there was the 1980s presentation of a Caesar recall-
ing Fidel Castro (played in Miami, and there again the audience’s pre-
existing views distorted the moral balance of the piece); there was the
1993 production in London when Julius Caesar was played by a prime-
ministerial-looking woman.

That was doubtless already the case when the play was first performed.
Shakespeare’s Caesar is so very frail, there in his night-gown, deaf in one
ear, collapsing in the assembly, humiliated as he tries to race Cassius
across the river: and this was after all when Queen Elizabeth had been on
the throne for fifty years, when a succession crisis was looming, when there
was a vigorous intellectual debate about the strengths and weaknesses
of Republicanism.\(^3\) Some of that again sounds rather contemporary to a
modern British audience: the different perspectives do have that way of
coming together.

Nor is it just Shakespeare’s play that has found contemporary
resonances in Caesar’s story – and in particular Caesar’s \textit{death}. For it is
regularly the death which makes the story especially absorbing and
thought-provoking, and at times, for instance for seventy-five years after
the British civil wars, so provocative that it was hardly possible to talk about it at all: regicide was too hot a theme. Even the best-connected could not do it. Around 1716 the Duke of Buckingham revised and expanded the Shakespearean material into two plays, The Tragedy of Julius Caesar and The Tragedy of Marcus Brutus: they were never performed. And we can find several cases around that time when disaffected authors took their censored plays and performed them in Italy.\(^4\)

There were other ways of dealing with the delicacy of regicide. Handel’s Giulio Cesare, put on in London in 1724, switches the king who is to be killed: the victim here is the Egyptian king Tolemaeo, infantile, sulky, feline, with angular music to match. Everyone seems to think that killing him is a good idea: his sister Cleopatra, his right-hand villain Achilla, Pompey’s widow Cornelia, her son Sesto, and Caesar himself. It is not so much a whodunnit, it’s a who’s-going-to-do-it. And the theme of justifiable regicide is put into a safe and distant world, far away in Egypt: a mixture of regicide and good fun.

But death, regicide, is still what Caesar’s story focuses on first: and that is even true for those who found the other aspects of Caesar’s life inspiring, particularly those people who liked to present themselves as following in Caesar’s pattern – the first strand in Caesarian reception, how very like myself . . . , and one of which we shall see a good deal in this volume. Normally this strand is a matter of propaganda and projection, but one can see a more reflective element too. When one reflects on a historical figure, one needs more than slogans, and one usually needs more than a single, straightforward idea of “great general” or “world-conqueror”: above all, one needs a narrative. Narratives have beginnings and endings – indeed, one reason that life-narratives work particularly well is that the beginnings and endings are unusually clear-cut. And the question of Caesar’s end, and what it means, becomes a critical issue.

Take Napoleon I, the great Bonaparte.\(^5\) His précis of Caesar’s Gallic Wars shows not merely interest, but also considerable critical thought (the military observations are still very much worth reading); that thoughtfulness is even clear in its version of the first words, “all Gaul was divided into four parts” – not in fact one of the great mistranslations of all time, for Napoleon knew that Caesar was not including in his “three parts” southern Gaul, already a Roman “province.” For Napoleon too it was the end that mattered most in the story, as the emperor was stirred to fury by Caesar’s assassination. For him it was a “cowardly and impolitic” deed
Judging Julius Caesar

(not quite the “foul” deed that it is for Shakespeare’s Antony: Napoleon, the man of statecraft, thinks politically). It was an “absurd and calumnious charge” that Caesar was aiming at monarchy: he could not possibly want monarchy, any more than his successors could for six hundred years; he did not wish to rule in any way other than as consul, dictator, or tribune. Why want to be king? Absurd, for kings thronged the vestibules of Roman magistrates. And it was equally absurd to think that he wished to become king of the provinces, for would the East feel any more respect for a Roman king than for their own princelings of the past? . . . Who is Napoleon talking about there? About Caesar, or about himself – the great man of Europe, but the man who had ruled a country which had removed its kings so disrespectfully? And the man who had ruled as first consul, then as emperor, and who in his final days expressed his wish that his bloodline would spend as little time as possible at the court of kings; let them marry and live in Republics, especially in the United States of America?7

For in those days the hearts of the two great radical and revolutionary nations beat closely together. In spring 2003 Julius Caesar could also be a way of thinking about how history could change.

Telling the Story

So once one starts turning Caesar into a story rather than a slogan, the death becomes central: that was already the case in the ancient texts. But it works differently depending on whether it is told as a Brutus story or as a Caesar story. As a Brutus story, concentration on the death naturally becomes an issue of right and wrong: is this really the right thing to do? One can figure that in terms of regicide and its justifications: we have seen a little of that already in more modern versions. The ancient way was to see it in more personal terms, as a question of ingratitude. When Brutus and Cassius had been treated so well, could it ever be justifiable to turn against their benefactor?

The greatest charge they lay against Brutus – that he was saved by Caesar’s favor, was allowed to save as many of his fellow-prisoners as he wished, was regarded as his friend and was favored above many others, then became the assassin of his savior . . . (Plutarch, Comparison of Dion and Brutus 3.4)10
Country or friend? That issue is there immediately after the killing, and not just with Brutus and Cassius. There is the letter of C. Matius in autumn 44 BCE, when Cicero has gracelessly criticized him for grieving for Caesar:

I am well aware of the criticisms which people have levelled at me since Caesar’s death. They make it a point against me that I bear the death of a friend hard and am indignant that the man I loved has been destroyed. They say that country should come before friendship – as though they have already proved that his death was to the public advantage. But I shall not make debating points. I acknowledge that I have not yet arrived at that philosophical level. It was not Caesar I followed in the civil war, but a friend whom I did not desert, even though I did not like what he was doing . . . (C. Matius to Cicero [Oct. 44 BCE], *Fam.* 11.28 = 349, trans. Shackleton Bailey)

So: friendship ahead of cause. There he is, the anti-Brutus, deciding the other way: and in this dilemma, it is already clear that the tyrannicides do not have all the best tunes.

If it is made a Caesar story rather than a Brutus story, then the death shapes it differently: it comes at the end rather than in the middle, and, if there is a moral to be drawn, it no longer focuses on Brutus’ own dilemma. Once it is a Caesar moral rather than a Brutus moral, the point becomes rather different: *This is what happens to people like that.* One way or another, Caesar had it coming.

“One way or another . . .” – and the ways can indeed vary, with different sorts of moral interest. Let us start from Aristotle, who in the *Poetics* firmly declares that there is nothing tragic in the case of a good man who is simply struck down (ch. 13). That depends on what we mean by “tragic,” of course. If we are looking for a “tragedy of Caesar” himself, then Aristotle has a point. If we decide that the assassination was *not* a good idea, that it was all a vast moral mistake, then Caesar’s own story stops having much ethical interest: it is not usually a tragedy when a person is destroyed without having done anything to deserve it, it is just a pity. But there may be wider points to make, just as there were wider points with the downfall of the Hector of the *Iliad* or the Iphigeneias or Andromaches of tragedy, points about the ways of a pitiless world, the circumstances that overwhelm a good person and leave him or her nowhere in this life to go. If it was in this way that Caesar had it coming, that reflects on the political climate more than on the man himself.
Judging Julius Caesar

There is something of that in the account of Appian. It is not that his Caesar is particularly likeable: his ambition is catastrophic, even if it is a feature he shares with Pompey (2.77.320–4); he does make some misjudgments in power which give his enemies their chance (2.108.453–109.454). But this Caesar is still uncontroversially a great man, a match for Alexander (2.149.619–154.649), and his murder is an “impiety” (2.118.494). His dictatorship had cowed opponents, and all faction stopped until Brutus and Cassius killed Caesar, driven by envy for his great power and yearning for the ancestral constitution. They cut him down in the Senate-house, this man who had been the biggest friend to the people and the most experienced of rulers. Certainly the people immediately missed him most intensely, and they went round scouring the city for his murderers... (Appian, BC 1.4.16–17)

Not that it was just the fault of Brutus and Cassius: indeed, the conspirators do not come off at all badly in Appian’s portrayal, even if their cause is misguided. The reason Caesar falls is more because of the growth of strife, the divided Senate, the jealousies gathering against him, the degenerate mongrel mob (2.120.503–7) who will not do anything to preserve their champion but then turn against the Senate too. That is a point about the development of Rome, and the character of Caesar plays a function within that greater story. “What had to happen to Caesar was what had to happen” (2.116.489). It is a pity that he is destroyed, but if the story is told this way it is Rome’s tragedy more than his own.

What Aristotle looks for in his ideal tragedy is, famously, the case when someone is destroyed who is better than us rather than worse, but nonetheless falls because of some hamartia of his own. This is not the place to enter the old debate whether hamartia “really” means moral flaw or simply error or miscalculation; nor even to suggest that it is untrue to Aristotelian conceptualization to phrase the issue in those terms. But as it happens that debate is useful here, for both the “moral flaw” and the “miscalculation” are possible ways of telling Caesar’s story.

First, the “moral flaw”: the bad man – or more specifically the bad tyrant – brought low. This may be a matter of punishment for presuming to be tyrant in the first place, or just for taking up arms against his country: that is an emphasis one can already see at the time of the events themselves, especially in de Officiis and – even before Caesar’s death – in the philosophical works which Cicero dedicated to Brutus. Or it can be
more what we get in Suetonius, a commentary on Caesar’s acts in power. After listing many good qualities and great achievements, Suetonius’ transition to the final scenes reads: “nonetheless Caesar’s other deeds and words outweigh [those good things], so that he is thought to have abused his power and to have been justly cut down” (Diu. Iul. 76.1). This, then, is the fate of the bad tyrant – *morally* bad; and Caesar, despite all Suetonius’ admiration for his good qualities, still counts as bad rather than good. There is more to it than this, and Suetonius’ moral tinge is in part a transitional device to move into those bad actions; the wording anyway concerns the appropriate verdict to pass on his killing – “so that he is thought . . . to have been justly cut down”\(^{15}\) – rather than explaining the motives of the killers. But the moralistic emphasis is undeniably there,\(^{16}\) and in what follows we do move closer to explanation, with a stress on the unpopularity that came from precisely the acts which count as “abuse of power” – excessive honors, arrogant verbal outbursts, insults to Senate and magistrates, and so on. This is a useful technique in the first of twelve Caesar-lives, introducing categories for judging and analyzing Caesar’s successors as well as Caesar himself:\(^{17}\) so there is already an eye on the future too, just as the future will so often turn an eye back upon Caesar. But for the moment the justification question – “was assassinating the tyrant the right thing to do?” – is not developed to become a moral *issue*: it is not problematized in the way that it is when part of Brutus’ story. What is problematized in Suetonius is whether Caesar aimed at tyranny all his life or whether he was driven by circumstances or his enemies to extreme steps (Diu. Iul. 30), a matter more concerned with the Rubicon than the Ides, and one that – at least in Suetonius – is not explicitly connected with his fall.\(^{18}\) Nor is there any discussion of whether Caesar was corrupted by power or just revealed a lifelong disposition, the sort of problem that interested Tacitus in treating the last days of his Tiberius (Ann. 6.48.2–51.3). Now that Suetonius has made the moral emphasis dominate, questions of understanding Caesar’s mentality in his final days are less important. It is humanly difficult to condemn and to understand at the same time.\(^{19}\)

Or the story can be told as one of the mistakes of rule: Caesar falls not for being a bad tyrant but for making mistakes. Sometimes what counts as a “mistake” here is different from what would count in the more moralistic register. Take, for instance, his mercy, sparing those enemies who eventually did him down. Is that good or bad? *Morally* good, surely, however double-edged the concept of “mercy” or “clemency” might be.