

The personality behind power

Tom Palaima admires a new take on Caesar - the man, the general and the daring politician

August 7, 2008



To present Julius Caesar and his significance to general modern readers in 188 pages requires shrewd audacity of the kind that characterised Caesar himself.

In *Always I am Caesar*, W. Jeffrey Tatum gives us many Julius Caesars, beginning with Caesar's self-presentation in his own writings, enactments and building programmes. Other Caesars are found in the ancient biographical, historical and literary sources Tatum surveys.

There are many modern views of Caesar, too. Nobel prizewinning ancient historian Theodore Mommsen saw Caesar as "the sole creative genius produced by Rome, and the last produced by the ancient world", while Italian historian, journalist and novelist Guglielmo Ferrero called Caesar "a great destroyer".

In his Gallic campaigns alone, Caesar slaughtered a million enemy troops. He killed large numbers of women and children and sold a million captives into slavery. Such creative genius as a general gave him the money and the good reputation he needed to compete in what Tatum calls the "zero-sum game for wealth and influence" played in the narrow circle of elite power in Rome.

Modern literature, drama and movies shape our vision of Caesar, too. Here, most forcefully, Tatum counteracts the influence of Shakespeare by resurrecting James Russell's argument that Caesar's last words in Shakespeare, "et tu, Brute" ("You, too, Brutus?"), do not match the

Roman biographer Suetonius's "kai su teknon" ("Even you, child?") and are uncharacteristically sentimental.

Tatum guardedly wishes that Suetonius's words be interpreted, in line with Caesar's career-long, brutally pragmatic understanding of shifting personal and political allegiances, as a truncated curse: "And I'll see you in hell, punk!" As Tatum describes in his chapter on women in Roman Republican politics, after the death of Pompey's wife, who was Caesar's daughter Julia, in 54BC, Caesar did not scruple over offering to divorce his third and by all accounts good wife Calpurnia in order to make Pompey's daughter his fourth wife and thereby secure their continuing alliance. A politician so calculating would surely have foreseen the possibility of receiving some day "the most unkindest cut of all".

It is easy to see why this interpretation appeals to someone who understands, as Tatum clearly does, the film noir moral atmosphere of late Republican Rome. The real legacy of the Rome of Julius Caesar is not to be found in concrete highways, principles of law, word etymologies or even widescreen recreations of legionary battles and gladiatorial contests. It is the ruthless violence and high-stakes competition for what is called honour in *The Godfather* trilogy and *The Sopranos*.

Tatum rejects the "just the facts ma'am" approach of modern British and American ancient historians, for whom, he says, politics is so much about getting, maintaining and increasing personal and factional power that they treat all political ideologies and measures, including Caesar's, as disposable tools, not firmly held beliefs.

Tatum gives his readers a sense of the distinctive features of Roman society in the 1st century BC and of Caesar as a great figure within its peculiar nexus of familial, political, economic, military and religious forces. Caesar rose to power by being en route pontifex maximus, general, ladies' man, public works patron and a consummate and daring politician. He also had reserves of courage and practical sense that he used in all these roles.

While Tatum rejects the "great man" approach to history, he is not satisfied with assigning causation entirely to the larger forces he ably describes. If you don't believe that one man matters, he argues, imagine what our world would look like now if Al Gore had been awarded by the United States Supreme Court the election he won in 2000. Or, we might add, if Caesar on the Ides of March had anticipated the "unkindest cut".

Always I am Caesar

By W. Jeffrey Tatum

WileyBlackwell

198pp, £45.00 and £14.99

ISBN 9781405175265 and 75258

Published 21 March 2008