

Maria Wyke, *Caesar in the USA*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012. Pp. xii, 306. ISBN 9780520273917. \$39.95.

As soon as the cover of Maria Wyke [W]'s new book, *Caesar in the USA*, comes into focus, one gets the joke: this is the boss. The afterlife of Caesar is a paradigm for the perils of authoritative biography, but also a warning to anyone assuming that meaning can be closed down. Caesar is the ultimate ancient Roman survivor *and* the first historical man-turned-god product of Roman imperialism (let's leave Romulus out of this).

The cover art is at once (un)comfortable and strident: it riffs on Bruce Springsteen's iconic Reagan-era album (*Born in the USA*, 1984), and W's Caesar (here) very much *is* born in the USA. Like Springsteen's album, he typifies a moment in history within which challenging shifts in politics and society were colliding with new ways of consuming culture, and culture-heroes. Caesar rocks, but not always in expected ways.

W's elegant observations and formation of a new kind of canon for Caesar makes for an enormously rich resource, one that will shape future interest in the impact of Caesarism on the USA's long twentieth-century. It also builds on, while adding substantial depth to, W's previous work on post-Classical Caesars ([ed.] *Julius Caesar in Western Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006; *Caesar: A Life in Western Culture*. London: Granta, 2007).

Inevitably, there are omissions—every reader will have their own pet instances of Caesar's eruption (or ooze) into the US political frame (e.g. personally I would have liked a little more detail on how Caesar's development through his *Gallic War* in the educational curriculum filtered directly into American politics, popular culture, and morality in the late nineteenth century), yet the breadth *and* gaps, together, demonstrate W's acuteness in the choices she has made. W doesn't promise encyclopedism, but delivers comprehension. Readers leave primed to work on other materials through understanding of indicative ideas in play.

W opens with a rich introduction (1–18), whisking us from the modern American nation's eighteenth-century beginnings to the end of the nineteenth century. We enter a world in which, for example, the State of Virginia, in its first seal, had displayed a portrait of King James on the obverse, and on the reverse, a crown atop the heraldic arms of the Stuarts. This, clearly, would not do in the world of the revolution.

Quickly, with the Roman Republic embraced as the 'highest model of civic virtue' (1), iconography was revised. The new obverse image finally approved by the general assembly would parade the Roman goddess Virtus as the embodiment of the new Commonwealth, treading on Tyranny, a man prostrate on the ground with a fallen crown beside him, a broken chain in his left hand, a flaccid whip in his right. Beneath, '*Sic semper tyrannis*'. An amazonian woman triumphs over a distinctly Roman military

man. And the killer blow: the motto is said to have been the words spoken by Brutus when he killed Caesar in 44 BCE.

It must always have been problematic that Caesar was at once a part of the cultural wallpaper of the Old World, the world which the new colonists were attempting to escape, and also emblematic of the march of civilisation and progress towards some unspecified future ideal world. As a civilising force, Caesar was a powerfully charged icon, and for those settling a 'new' world, the Caesar icon was at once to be distrusted and deployed.

For this reason, W explains, Caesar became embedded in the American curriculum yet at the same time, American educators and intellectuals felt what W terms a 'lively suspicion' that Classics was of no use to them (2). 'Reading, writing, and speaking Latin opened up a path for the children of the elite straight into college and then positions of rank in the state or the church' (2). So, Caesar at once reminded new Americans of Old World ranks, inequities, aristocratic and entrenched positions, while also continuing to be a force for democratisation.

The role of the Roman Republic in the early political philosophy of the Founding Fathers is well-known (W. L. Vance's monumental two-volume study does peer over W's shoulder: *America's Rome*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). Yet W's close focus on American *Caesar* makes a subtle point, perhaps a little below the sightline of Vance's magisterial gaze. What does one do when the role of the Republic is at once a role which symbolises the power of the people yet also prefigures a movement toward tyranny? For American citizens, a President lurks somewhere in the conceptual shrubbery. This would, as W discusses, become especially vivid on Lincoln's assassination (4–6).

Chapter 1 ('Maturation', 21-46) explores the educational curriculum and *de Bello Gallico*, opening an important phase in the embedding of Caesar in American culture. Pausing in the early years of the twentieth century (1900–1914), as W puts it, 'Julius Caesar encroached on the lives of many young Americans' (21). This was in particular through the second year of Latin study, the 'Caesar Grade', or the 'Caesar Year' (21). This was the year when fifteen-year-old Americans embarked on their intermediate phase in Latin, reading Caesar's *Gallic War*. Education, very much a technology of government in these years (12), became a way of modelling future citizens. If you 'got' Caesar, you got the key to becoming President too. Caesar delivered the American Dream. Caesar's 'perfect Latinity' (12) in this context is key to his utility as the ideal man, supercharging his authority as ideal military and political figure.

Chapter 2 ('Americanization', 47–67) delves into the role of a Shakespearian, tragic Caesar. It is this sense in which the Caesar of the *Gallic War* will always inevitably be moving toward the tragic fall of Shakespeare's Caesar which creates particular resonance in the years around the first World War. I found fascinating the story of how the film industry built on particular instances of popular dramatic productions to deploy Caesar as a high cultural guru whilst at the same time milking his role commercially for all it

was worth. (Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* could have built a bridge to political reframings across the pond; N. W. Slater, in Wyke [ed.] 2006, had a go, but there is much still to be said.) As W teases out, this Caesar seems to have been at the forefront of the marketisation and monetisation of Classical culture, a tragedy always waiting in the wings; he was also (as becomes especially clear later in the book) in the vanguard of a Hollywoodising bricolage of popular and high culture.

Chapter 3 ('Militarism', 68–97) takes us to changing perceptions of Caesar directly associated with WWI — and the rather belated entry into the conflict by the US. Here, vividly sketched, are the ways in which a changing perspective on the French also led to a changing perspective on Caesar. No longer was Caesar the victor over a group of barbarians (the Gauls), civilising the savage north; instead, he was a man who had trampled on an heroic people who only now, as history's cycles turned, were getting their own back. In this way, the actual Latin qualities of Caesar's account of the Gallic War became irrelevant. Or at least only tangentially relevant to the cultural connotations of the figure. This harks back to the world mapped in Chapter 1, where W explored how educators and presidents-in-waiting such as Woodrow Wilson tried to chart contexts in which Caesar could be made fascinating to unwilling ears. In Chapter 3, instead, we see how the delights of the Latin text have become so contaminated by the content that the linguistic highlights themselves become surplus to the school curriculum.

Chapters 1–3 form Part 1, and I have lingered here on the less familiar material. Chapter 4 (101–129) opens Part 2: we move (in effect) from a dialogue between notions of individual and community in receptions of Caesar, to studies homing in on his emblematic quality as the autocrat *ne plus ultra*. Here, Caesar makes the jump from schoolroom Svengali to a(n almost) free-floating signifier. This second half of W's book runs from the 1920s (aka, the rise of fascism, and Caesar's 'reincarnation' in Mussolini), through to a revitalisation of *de Bello Gallico* via the American AP curriculum, and the lushly powerful perspective of the HBO/BBC television series *Rome* (a 2008 finale). There's a pleasing design to this scheme. The story of Caesar, Phase 2, is less unified (inevitably, more postmodern) yet W draws together a challenging and stimulating array of materials to support her overarching argument that die though he might, and must, Caesar will be back (237). As 'Caesar' increasingly and explicitly signifies contemporary concerns, his afterlife and role as embodiment of classical tropes becomes ever-more omnivorous and potent.

W's pithy chapter titles sum Part 2 up: Dictatorship, Totalitarianism (130–166), Presidential Power (167–202), Empire (203–238). These elegantly detailed chapters show how a tropic Caesar can deliver a dazzlingly mix-and-match palette, from (e.g.) Orson Welles' prescient staging of Old World tyranny frighteningly revitalised in his *Julius Caesar* (1937), to the human, thoughtful, painfully moral Caesar of Thornton Wilder's *The Ides of March* (1948). From the 'playfully kitsch classicism' (184) of Caesars Palace, to Theodore H. White's *Caesar at the Rubicon: A Play about Politics* (1968), backchannel commentary on Democratic political drift, and on to satirical journalism's reinvention of America (and its Commander in Chief) as the new Empire of record (Figs 32, 33). This

is only an appetite whetter for the breathtaking scope of what might initially have seemed likely to offer only a limited range of material.

Rightly, W does not attempt to draw a line between Caesar the historical figure, author, husband, commander, and Caesar the multivalent and metatextual sign. Returning to Springsteen's *Born in the USA*, W's book-cover, with its ambiguously 'Caesarian' silhouette (Caesar? Or some other ancient or modern wannabe? [As Bill Jennings (@Caecilius) has reminded me, George S. Patton, memorably saluting in front of the flag in Schaffner's *Patton* (1970), makes for a provocative intertext: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Patton1.jpg> .] W has given us so many to choose from!), works through a darkening of the American Dream that late (Roman) Republican commentators might have recognised.

Springsteen tracks such as 'Glory Days' give life to the different people we all become as time passes, but it's the album's closing track, 'My Hometown', with which I want to end. Civil war, belonging and alienation, a sense that meaning has been lost and the ruins of an old, compromised world, have to be waved goodbye to; this is not, despite the cover art, about 'the rhetorical deployment of the Roman general' to prove a point about looming tyranny (235), it's about a seismic societal shift, inscribed indelibly on individual experience, in the shadow of which 'utilizing the vocabulary of new Rome and new Caesar' (235) just might subject American politics to productive redemocratisation. As Sgt. Flaherty says to 'Little' Caesar (in the 1930 movie): 'So, somebody finally put one in you'; 'Yeah', he replies, 'but they just grazed me'.

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