

Caesar the Politician: Power and the People in Republican Rome

Of the many antique representations of Caesar that we possess, none is more familiar than the (very likely contemporary) portrait now residing in the Castello d'Aglié in Turin (Fig. 5). Middle aged, and showing the wear, but still chillingly handsome, this Caesar gazes at us in an expression that for some, like the young officer who composed the *African War*, was a look radiating energy and confident bonhomie. This was plainly not, however, the view of men whose sensibilities were less assured or more prone to jealousy – like the spirits of Marcus Porcius Cato or Cassius Longinus – to whom Caesar could only appear sardonic, contemptuous – and gloating. Which in turn left them feeling despised and despicable. Which is why they hated him, struggled against him and, ultimately, knifed him to death. The face itself will not give us the means to judge between these competing perceptions. Indeed, the ambiguity of this Caesar's visage, like the controversies attending his reputation, is provoking, and it remains sufficiently perplexing to induce a good deal of squirming in the soul of any modern student of the late Roman republic and the age of Caesar.

Not that past historians have registered many doubts. For them, Caesar was very much one thing or the other. From the moment of his death, he became a symbol. To the mob, he was their idol, literally, inasmuch as they began to worship him as a god. For the troops, he was their peerless leader. Amongst the political classes, he was now a concept to be deployed or to be reckoned with, be he tyrant or liberator or benefactor. And this engagement with the significance of Caesar was hardly limited to antiquity. In the Middle Ages, he was simply synonymous with empire, whereas, in the Renaissance, owing to the recovery of classical literature and its detailed portrait of late republican society, he emerged as a personality. As the man and his age became more intimately known, Caesar became complex as well as great. He appeared a man of decisive action, a brilliant soldier, a

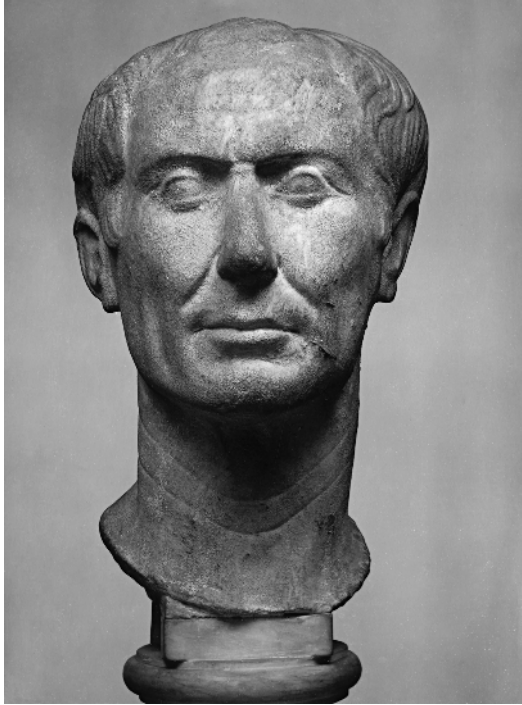


Figure 5 Caesar, a contemporary portrait. Castello d'Aglie, Turin, Italy. Photo: Koppermann, Neg. D-DAI-Rom 1965.1111.

ruthless conqueror, a politician of Machiavellian proportions, and a statesman of historic stature. His clemency, his erudition, his love affairs – here was inspiration for prince and poet alike. But there were unavoidable blemishes. The sheer scale of the historical Caesar's violence (his battles cost the lives of more than a million men), as well as his unrepublican tyranny, could only disturb the most sensitive minds of the Enlightenment. Goethe, to take a single instance, found Caesar repellent. He was no more attractive to the authors of the French Revolution, who found inspiration not in Caesar but in Spartacus, though Napoleon I thought otherwise, as did III, and Caesar's place in the symbolism of twentieth-century totalitarianism is too well known to require rehearsal here.

On the topic of Caesar, historians remain disputatious. For the greatest of all historians of Rome, Theodore Mommsen, the only classicist to win the Nobel Prize, Caesar was the culmination of Roman history, in his

words, “the sole creative genius produced by Rome, and the last produced by the ancient world.” For Mommsen Caesar’s every action, even in his youth, was calculated to raise himself to a station wherein he could rescue the destiny of Rome and of posterity. He united Greece with Rome, East with West, “he worked and created as never any mortal did before or after him.” Even for those who condemned the Roman, he remained a figure far larger than life. In 1901, to cite a single instance, Guglielmo Ferrero, though he acknowledged Caesar’s talents, described him as no statesman but rather “a great destroyer,” indeed, “the archdestroyer.” The controversy persists, though admittedly in this century, like the last one, it is the good Caesar who seems regularly to get the better of the dark one.

To no small extent this reflects the dominant position of Mommsen amongst all Roman historians, but it is also an effect of the most important and influential of modern biographies of Caesar, *Caesar: Politician and Statesman*, by Matthias Gelzer, first published in German in 1912, the English translation of which remains the standard account in our language. Gelzer’s admiration for his subject, although less hyperbolic than Mommsen’s, is never the less as unmistakable as it is unapologetic. This enthusiasm is shared by Christian Meier in his own massive contribution to Caesarian biography, which first appeared in 1982. Meier sees Caesar differently from his predecessors, however. In his telling of the story, the decline of the Roman republic was a process that generated *Outsiders*, none of whom brought a solution to the republic’s ills, but each of whom reacted against the baleful dimensions of the system into which they refused to be integrated. Caesar was the supreme Outsider, who not only despised the republic but struggled to replace it – with Himself. For Meier, it is impossible to think of Caesar as a “mere desperado.” He remains a colossus of world-historical proportions. Not that I want to give the impression that every continental historian has felt obliged to write about Caesar in characters so large and so cosmic. Herman Strasburger, who has written more than one good book about Caesar, remains unswayed by the legendary properties of his subject.

The urgency of this debate has generally been lost amongst Anglophone historians, who are mostly suspicious of ideological controversies and who tend to reject the very possibility of principled motives on the part of any ancient Roman inhabiting the late republic. We tend to view all politics, clearly if simple-mindedly, as sharp practice, it being assumed that no politician ever says what he really believes not least because he doesn’t actually believe in anything. The approach possesses an obvious appeal. However, it often results in a “just-the-facts-ma’am” approach to the past.

J.P.V.D. Balsdon's elegant and readable biography includes next to no discussion of Caesar's character or historical significance. The tale having been told, it is enough to observe that "his achievement was secure," by which Balsdon means mainly Caesar's conquest of Gaul. As to world-order, Caesar seemed ready enough to sweep aside the republic owing to its hampering uselessness, but, in the event, he mattered mostly because his career and its failures paved the way for Augustus. Similar sentiments pervade the recent and detailed view of Caesar's life by Adrian Goldsworthy. Again Caesar's attractions lie in the actions themselves: "few fictional heroes have ever done as much as Caius Julius Caesar." Indeed, "it is hard to imagine that in any way his life could have been more dramatic." Although Goldsworthy suffers from no illusions where Caesar's foibles are concerned, Caesar none the less emerges as "a patriot and a very able man" who "used victory for a wider good as well as his own." Even in the Anglophone tradition, then, after the ripping yarn has been retailed and the puzzles of the evidence have been satisfactorily solved, when it comes time to take in the larger picture, it is usually regarded as a good thing that the outmoded practices of the republic gave way under Caesar's pressure to the orderliness of the empire. This is regularly made clear to pupils. As H.H. Scullard put it in 1959, in what is still a standard university textbook on Roman history, "The days of the city-state were over. That Caesar's mind must have been moving toward monarchy as the only practical solution of the constitutional problem is obvious enough. But an outraged group of nobles prevented Caesar from revealing to the world the solution." This sounds a tad eerie nowadays. But you shouldn't suppose that British dons of the second half of the twentieth century were keen on autocracy. They just thought it was good enough for Italians and other Mediterranean types.

In this chapter I want to look at Caesar before he became a Great Man, when he remained at the early stages of his ultimately brilliant career and when it was by no means a certainty that he would manage to avoid failure or even to attain to mediocrity. These were the necessary, and in no respect automatic, phases through which any ambitious Roman was obliged to pass in his rise from office to office, all in the hope, for the most successful of the lot, of reaching Rome's highest and most splendid magistracy, the consulship. It was Caesar's accomplishment at this more or less mundane level, after all, that made possible his final elevation to superhuman status, be it good or terrible, which means that our understanding both of the man and of his historical moment requires an appreciation of the system in which he, despite the odds, made it – not yet to the top, but instead to his place amongst the other winners at the top reaches of Rome's political design.

In Rome a citizen's status, determined by a combination of his wealth and his reputation, was publicly proclaimed, and frequently contested, every five years, during the census, which means that everybody knew his place. The Roman hierarchy was unsubtle and transparent. At its top were the senatorial families, of which there were only a few hundred. The senators were rich men who had won their position by election to a high public office – the quaestorship – and who remained in public service as privileged advisors to Rome's magistrates and to the Roman people. The most energetic and capable of senators endeavored to rise to higher offices – the aedileship, the praetorship and, the final object of their career, the consulship. Of even the most able of senators, most would fail in the pursuit of the consulship (there were only two consuls in each year). Never the less, all senators had in common their tenure of a significant magistracy, the Latin word for which is *honor*, which will give you a hint of their attitude toward the electorate – and toward one another.

Below the senators were the *equites*, the knights, also very rich. A few equestrian types plunged into senatorial politics. Such a senator was called a new man, and his intrusion into higher offices could be resented by the senate and by the general public alike (who tended to believe that there was a place for everyone and that everyone should remain in his place). The bulk of the equestrian order, true to this principle, remained unwilling or unable to endure the costs or the exertions associated with sustaining a political career. The knights sought dignity, to be sure, and many of them sought profits. Although there was little, and in many instances nothing at all, to distinguish the wealth or the culture or the patriotism of a senator from an equestrian, in every instance, on account of the senators' lifelong commitment to public service, the equestrian order conceded the superior majesty of the senatorial order. After the knights came our aforementioned First Class (in whose number senators technically belonged), followed, in the typically imaginative Roman fashion, by the Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Classes. At the bottom were the *proletarii*, quite literally 'the baby-makers', too poor to offer society any other contribution.

By the first century BC, according to Cicero and to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, each of whom was an eye witness to the Roman assemblies in action, the lowest classes greatly outnumbered the higher ones (the First and Second Classes). The Roman multitude was a multitude of have-nots. At this point, it is perhaps worth observing that the city of Rome did not have a police force, even a tiny one. Nor were Roman citizens permitted to bear arms within the city. Nor, despite the impression made by Hollywood films, were soldiers allowed, except under very specific conditions, to enter

the city under arms. For me this is beyond question the most amazing thing about Rome. How could a city of perhaps a million inhabitants, most of them poor, manage without a well-equipped police force? Or at least a robust interpretation of the Second Amendment? In America, after all, we have to hire people and give them guns and insist that they shoot us in order to keep us from breaking the law. If you could eliminate the police from my home town and could assure me that my neighbors are unarmed (*I do* live in the USA after all), then I can promise you that I should possess a much nicer television and drive an infinitely more elegant car than is now the case.

So why, you are asking, did the poor not simply rise up, seize the wealth and keep it for themselves, not least in a society where swords constituted the cutting edge of weapons technology and in which there was, in any case, no police force to suppress the revolution? The answer is not merely bread and circuses, though the idea lying behind that expression is undoubtedly a part of it. Instead, we need very briefly to take up three gross but very useful over-generalizations about the Romans. Say what you will, gross over-generalizations are crucial for learning about other societies, and, in the tradition of their manufacture, I shall give you three of them.

First, Romans prized conformity. It was regarded as positively wicked to be different from everyone else. That was a situation crying out for *invidia*, the evil-eye, jealousy, hatred. In the Romans' mentality, consensus, pure and simple, was on its own a powerful argument for the veracity of any proposition. The lone voice, by contrast, was suspicious, and potentially dangerous. Now I don't want to push this too far. Just as we in modern societies value our commitment to individuality, we tend all of us to want to be individuals *together*. Amongst ourselves there is not in practice a significant degree of diversity in houses, cars, attitudes toward private property or fashion (most men still go to the office in jackets and ties and not in ball gowns). Likewise the Romans were not clones of one another, but they valued their tendency toward conformity, not least because it promoted social stability.

It was also instinctive for Romans, and this is my second gross over-generalization, to be deferential. Plainly this quality is not unrelated to conformity. Romans tended to do what they were told, when told to do it by someone in authority. This is the very opposite of our natural response (though, in reality, we usually *do* do what we're told, unless we can get away with it). For the Romans, this inclination toward deference was a source of strength. It was why, amongst other things, they made such good soldiers.

Finally, then, we come to over-generalization number three: Romans were devoted to tradition, to *mos maiorum*, the custom of their ancestors.

For the Romans, all actions, including all innovations, must not merely defer to the manners and institutions of the past, they must actually be formulated as continuations or recoveries from the past. In Latin, *new* is something of a bad word. A new man was an oddball likely to attract *invidia*. *Res novae*, new things, signalized revolution in its scariest configuration. Again, the difference between them and ourselves becomes patent.

These principles can be seen in action in the Romans' own appreciation of their past. It is not insignificant that, when debating current affairs or seeking moral or political guidance, the Romans relied on exemplars from their national history. Roman heroes, not unnaturally, set the pattern for Roman excellence. One such celebrated model, from Rome's earliest history, was Titus Manlius Torquatus, three times consul, three times dictator, victor in a celebrated single combat against a gigantic Gaul, and triumphant general. During his third consulship, when Rome was at war with the Latins, Torquatus gave the order that no Roman should leave his post for any reason whatsoever. His own son, however, replicating his father's valor, left the ranks and defeated an enemy commander, again in single combat. For this violation of military discipline – what we should call this display of initiative – Torquatus ordered his son put to death, as a grim but salutary example for posterity. Here we see conformity, deference and tradition in earnest action. And for this unattractive demonstration of Roman constancy, Torquatus was celebrated in prose and in poetry, from the epic of Ennius to Horace's odes. Now one can learn a lot about a society from an examination of their heroes. The Romans did not lionize mavericks or revolutionaries or eccentrics. With unforgiving severity they prized men who kept intact the existing order. *Status quo* is a Latin expression, and that's no accident.

The Romans' habits of thought and action were inculcated and preserved in the basic forms of intercourse between the elite and the many. It was built into the regular routines of the urban poor, for instance, to visit and to seek material assistance from the powerful: the lowly Roman had his patron, and he could also seek aid from any grandee to whom he could find access. The most common circumstance for this was the morning greeting, the *salutatio*, when modest Romans would gather, before the first hour of the day, in the atrium of a great man's mansion (the homes of the elite, remarkably enough, were regularly kept open). There they awaited the appearance of their patron, who, after revealing himself, would wait to be greeted by his inferiors, who took their turn addressing him as *dominus*, seeking his advice and, especially, his aid – in exchange for which he was entitled to expect their gratitude, which was best delivered in the shape of energetic and loyal submissiveness. The mansions of the great were

monumental, and the scale and decoration of an atrium, filled with family trophies and representations of one's ancestors, each annotated with a resumé of his offices and glories, all combined to make a poor citizen feel very small indeed. He was inferior – that was the inescapable message – and he should count himself lucky to be received and supported, in however so modest a fashion, by a patron who was so magnificent.

This relationship was sustained in elections. Because Roman magistrates held office for one year only, elections were annual events, one result of which is that political campaigning was an almost constant activity. Candidates began their canvassing often more than a year in advance of standing, and it was essential for any successful campaign that a candidate demonstrate his popularity with Romans of all classes. After all, would-be magistrates had to persuade elite voters that they enjoyed the esteem of the masses (if only in order to perpetuate the deference that kept the public in line), so long as they could do so without matching the profile of a rabble-rouser. In order to beat their competitors, candidates plied voters of all classes with games, with presents, with banquets and with outright gifts of money – all in exchange for their votes but just as importantly, since the votes of the poor literally counted for less than the votes of the rich in the Roman constitution, for their attendance. Patronage and political campaigns rewarded deference, even as they inhibited the electorate from assuming a collective identity: patrons and candidates interacted with and helped *individuals* or, at most, small groups. The masses, then, were cultivated by an elite who offered them favors, designed to prompt personal gratitude, the exchange of which, by constant experience, enacted and enforced the inferiority of the people.

The people at least had the moral consolation of knowing that, in their assemblies, they were sovereign. In Rome, all offices – all honors – were dispensed by the people, and all legislation had to be passed in the assemblies. And yet in these undertakings the people were led by their magistrates and guided by the senate. No assembly could act without a magistrate's summons – as you might by now expect, grass root initiatives were not fostered in the Roman republic – nor could the senate convene on its own authority. Roman magistrates acted as military and judicial officers, and they managed the very limited government that Romans regarded as necessary to a free state. They did so without salary and at considerable personal expense. In fact, Roman senators were expected to lavish their own wealth on the community: this was the price of their superior honor. Aediles, for example, who were responsible for the celebration of public festivals and for repairing the fabric of the city, routinely reached into their own wallets

to pay for whatever that the state could not or would not afford. Magistrates possessed important legal powers, but in applying them they regularly heeded the instructions of the senate, the body of ex-magistrates whose collective wisdom and authority gave direction to the whole of the republic. For its part, the senate could neither legislate nor issue executive commands. In reality, however, an advisory decree from the senate – a *senatus consultum* – was freighted with so much majesty and clout that one could by no means ignore it with impunity.

In the *res publica*, literally “the public thing,” all citizens had a share, but not an equal share. One’s standing was determined by the extent of one’s individual contribution to the community of all Romans. Senators gave the most, so everyone agreed. Consequently, they got the most. Hence they could describe themselves as *boni*, good men, or *optimates*, really good men. Still, it was obligatory for them to give the people their due. The rights of the people and the sovereignty of the assemblies were essential, if frequently contested, principles, and no aristocrat could neglect them. There was even a responsibility to observe these rights and to go so far as to attend to the necessities of the ordinary populace. As Disraeli put in a different time but in a similar context, “the people have their passions and it is even the duty of public men occasionally to adopt sentiments with which they do not agree, because the people must have their leaders.” Politicians who tended to endorse popular rights were often denominated *populares*, whereas champions of senatorial prestige conceived of themselves as *optimates*.

These, then, were the twin foundations of the *res publica*: the authority of the senate and the power of the people. But it would be a mistake to imagine that Roman politics were dominated by two political parties – the *populares* and the *optimates* – as if these were ancient equivalents of Democrats and Republicans. In fact, Roman politics lacked parties altogether. Individual aristocrats competed for prestige and influence in what all perceived to be a zero-sum game. In certain situations and over certain contested issues, individuals might unite, and needless to say there were always some senators who were like-minded enough to be, in effect, a power block. But this tendency toward *ad hoc* conformations, this makeshift particularity, reflects the Roman norm. These individual struggles for superiority, which were played out within the poorly defined dynamic existing between popular sovereignty and senatorial prestige, yielded in their totality the untidy reality of Rome’s unwritten constitution – an amazing construction perhaps best described by filching Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s formulation of the British constitution as “that deformed and abortive offspring of perennial political fornication.”

The ideal senator, the ideal politician, was the man who knew how to cultivate both constituencies, the masses and the elites. A politician who wielded influence with the people had clout amongst his senatorial peers. A senator who commanded respect amongst the mighty attracted a following amongst the masses. This was the essential basis of *dignitas*, a concept that combined prestige with power. As one ancient writer put it:

The senate must believe, on the basis of your past conduct, that you will be the guardian of its authority; the Roman knights and the prosperous classes must believe, on account of your past actions, that you will be a supporter of peace and stability; the multitudes must believe, because you have championed their interests, at least in your speeches in public meetings and in court, that you will not be hostile to their entitlements.

The Roman republic, then, was, from the aristocratic perspective at least, an arena for competition the aim of which was to excel all others in preserving the senate's prestige, domestic stability and popular rights – “there honour comes.”

Let us turn, then, to the senatorial aristocracy. What did *they* want? For the best of the best – the nobility – we can find the answer in the earliest of extant Roman funerary inscriptions, the epitaphs of the great family of the Cornelii Scipiones. Two specimens, each from the second century BC, will practically speak for themselves:

Lucius Cornelius Scipio, the son of Gnaeus.

Lucius Cornelius Scipio Barbatus, begotten by Gnaeus his father, a brave man and an intelligent one, whose physical beauty matched his courage. He was consul, censor and aedile amongst you. He captured Taurasia and Cisauna from the Samnites. He subjugated the whole of Lucania and carried back hostages.

This man's son left behind a similar claim to fame:

Lucius Cornelius Scipio, the son of Lucius, aedile, consul and censor.

Everyone agrees that this man was by far the very best of all the good men at Rome. The son of Barbatus, he was consul, censor and aedile amongst you. He captured Corsica and the city of Aleria. He dedicated a temple to the Goddesses of Weather.

An obvious pattern emerges, and it is made fulsomely clear in a passage preserved by the elder Pliny that touches upon another noble family:

Quintus Metellus, in the panegyric that he delivered at the funeral of his father, Lucius Metellus, who had been pontiff, consul twice, dictator, master-of-the-horse, and land-commissioner, and who had celebrated a triumph, left it in writing that his father had achieved the ten greatest objects in pursuit of which wise men devote their lives: he had made it his aim to be the best in war, the best orator, the bravest general, to be in charge of the most important undertakings of the state, to enjoy the highest office [*which also means: "to enjoy the greatest honor"*], to be supremely intelligent, to be deemed the most important member of the senate, to obtain great wealth in an honorable way, to leave many sons and to have gained the greatest glory in the state.

Now while we cannot admire Metellus's lack of neatness in constructing pigeonholes, his speech, along with the Scipionic epitaphs, make it absolutely clear that, for the aristocrat, the purpose of life was to exercise one's superior talents in the service of the state, service actualized in waging war, holding magistracies and directing the senate.

Key to the realization of these ambitions was the office of *consul*, the highest office in the republic. Obtaining the office of consul ennobled a family, and the consular families, the *nobiles*, guarded the office jealously. It was very rare for a non-noble, however well established in the senatorial aristocracy, to attain to the consulship. At the same time, it was imperative for the sons of the nobility that they overcome all obstacles in order to make the grade. Not to do so was a dismal failure and a signal disgrace. Hence the personal intensity of aristocratic politics. And hence the abundance of failure: over the course of the republic, very few families sustained their place in the nobility. Some died out. Some could not preserve the wealth required of an elite senatorial career. Many, however, simply lacked the industry and talent to match the achievement of their fathers. This is why the very few families who endured possessed such formidable prestige, families like the Metelli, the Claudii and the Aurelii Cottae. These families contrasted sharply with flashes in the pan, or with ancient houses fallen into eclipse. One such lapsed family were the Julii Caesares.

We know next to nothing of Caesar's childhood: the biographies of Suetonius and Plutarch are both of them missing their earliest chapters. But the circumstances of Caesar's boyhood are well documented. When he was 12, there occurred the first outbreak of the civil war between Gaius

Marius and Lucius Cornelius Sulla. Marius, a new man, a municipal aristocrat of inconspicuous social standing, had risen to become the greatest general in Roman history. Six times consul (ultimately seven before his death), a record no noble could dream of matching, he had, through his valor and organizational genius, saved Italy from invasion and the senate from revolution. No man was more popular with the common people of the city, all of whom, like their betters, admired military brilliance the way modern types worship stars of pop, film or sport. Sulla, on the other hand, having spent his youth in dissipation, had now, rather late in the day, arrived at the consulship and at his chance for glory. Sulla drove the Marians from Rome, then departed to fight the Mithridatic War in the east. His absence allowed Marius and his ally, Lucius Cornelius Cinna, to become masters of the city. This was the state of affairs when young Caesar emerges into the historical record, at the age of 15, shortly after the sudden death of his father.

Caesar began his career with more than one handicap. Although the records of the fifth and fourth and even third centuries were adorned by the presence of Julii, and the Julii were one of the original patrician families of Rome, the family had, in the intervening years, collapsed. In response to their decline, the Julii had preserved their patrician heritage scrupulously, leveraging their social cachet into profitable alliances with socially ambitious equestrian families. The family remained ambitious. Of Caesar's grandfather we know nothing, save that he married a Marcia, daughter of the ancient house of the Marcii Reges, allegedly descended from the kings of Rome. This marriage produced a son and a daughter, though it is just possible that the consul of 91 BC, Sextus Julius Caesar, was our Caesar's uncle. In any case this man seems to have perished very soon after holding office, and he is never in our sources associated with Caesar or with Caesar's father, who must have seemed a promising fellow. After all, he married an Aurelia, very likely the daughter of Lucius Aurelius Cotta, the consul of 119 BC. His death in 85 BC naturally put an end to his career, but, inasmuch as his praetorship came only in 92 BC, he had already fallen behind. Caesar's aunt, and here we return to the political crisis of Caesar's youth, had been married off to a rich equestrian whom her discriminating father must have realized was a good bet: Gaius Marius. Now Marius died in 86 BC, but Cinna was to remain the master of Rome for several years. Something had to be done about young Caesar, whose aunt and whose mother were too well connected to ignore.

Their solution was a surprising one, and suggestive. It was determined that Caesar should be nominated to fill the vacant priesthood of Jupiter,

the office of *flamen Dialis*. Now I should say at once, though we shall deal with this more thoroughly in a subsequent chapter, that priesthoods in Rome typically went to aristocrats with political ambitions. Roman society recognized no barrier between church and state. Quite the contrary. Civic life was suffused with religious observances, and the senate functioned as the ultimate arbiter of religious controversy. Caesar himself, as we shall see, went on to become *pontifex maximus*, and that is undoubtedly the greatest political achievement of his early career. The ancient office of *flamen Dialis*, however, was a vocation of a very different order. The *flamen Dialis* had to be a patrician who was married to a patrician by way of *confarreatio*, an ancient and restrictive species of Roman marriage. Consequently, Caesar, who was engaged to a very rich equestrian named Cossutia, was obliged to break it off. He was then married to Cornelia, the daughter of Cinna. Afterwards, the elaborate process of inaugurating Caesar as *flamen Dialis* could begin. Now this was a dubious honor, to say the least.

It is true that the *flamen Dialis* was automatically entitled to sit in the senate and enjoyed considerable prestige. Never the less, unlike the other priestly offices in Rome, the *flamen* labored under numerous taboos: he could not mount a horse, he could not sleep outside the city for more than three successive nights, he could not gaze upon a corpse, he could not view an army drawn up in battle formation. In other words, he could not have a military career, a condition that was anathema to any ambitious Roman politician. Still, this post, necessary for Roman religion, also had an obvious social use: it was a natural repository for well-born losers. For example, the son of the great Scipio Africanus, the conqueror of Hannibal, was a weakling. Because he was anointed *flamen Dialis*, however, he was thereby able to sustain the family's prestige and to evade the complaint that he lacked the merits of his father. Appointments on these terms seem to have been fairly commonplace. Which raises the question: why Caesar? Modern historians tend toward two explanations: either to shield him from the dangers of these turbulent times (though it is worth noticing that the post had become vacant in the first place because its holder had committed suicide) or because, *from the very beginning*, Caesar's menace to the republic could be discerned. And as to the taboos, Gelzer's verdict is typical: "later he surely would have found a way round these obstacles." This, however, is to invoke super-Caesar, and demonstrates the peril of retrospection.

But a more obvious answer suggests itself. This must have been judged the best Caesar was likely to do. If Caesar's epilepsy had begun to manifest itself during his teenaged years, and epilepsy was a disease that frightened the Romans to the degree that a seizure at an assembly cancelled all public

business for that day, his aunt and mother may have despaired of his future. One could add to this the fact that his family's track record had not been that good for centuries. And this is really the point to be emphasized: Caesar did not start out with many advantages – in terms of the aristocratic world in which politics took place. The flamine, then, was surely seen by Cinna as a plum for his new son-in-law and more than satisfactory for Julia and Aurelia. And it could well have marked the very end of Caesar's career.

Except that Sulla returned, routed his opposition, declared himself dictator and either prevented Caesar's final inauguration or actually stripped him of his flamine (the priesthood remained unfilled for the remainder of the Roman republic). The new dictator, who purged many of his enemies, offered young Caesar an opportunity for safety – *if* he divorced Cornelia, whose father, by then dead, remained odious to Sulla. Caesar refused, at the risk of his life and at the price of his wife's ample dowry. This, too, is important. Whatever deficiencies Caesar suffered in health, prospects and station, he possessed, and for the whole of his life displayed, abundant physical courage. Sulla had executed hundreds of senators, and thousands of equestrians, and there was no serious stigma attached to divorce in Rome. Sulla was making him an offer he couldn't refuse. None the less, he did. Why one cannot say. It was certainly not an intrinsic hostility toward Sulla, his family or his new regime. As a matter of fact, Caesar immediately placed himself under the command of Sullan officers, and, after Cornelia's death in 69 BC, he married Pompeia, Sulla's grand-daughter. What we can say is that Caesar's apparent loyalty to the cause of Cinna and, especially, to the memory of Marius was to become the vehicle that would carry him to the success so long denied his own family. But we are not there yet.

It is sometimes suggested that Caesar had to flee Rome to escape Sulla's wrath. In fact, however, he joined the military staff of Marcus Minucius Thermus, a staunch Sullan who was proconsul of Asia. At once, Caesar distinguished himself in diplomacy by representing Roman interests in the court of Nicomedes IV Philopater, the king of Bithynia. This cannot but strike us as impressive, but I should add that it was also a perfectly normal activity for a young aristocrat in service abroad, as were Caesar's robust exertions in combat. Here Caesar was a standout. In recognition of his saving the life of a fellow citizen during the final assault on Mytilene, Caesar was awarded the civic crown, a signal distinction. In 78 BC Caesar transferred to Cilicia, where he served under Publius Servilius Vatia, who had been consul in the previous year and was another Sullan ally. What we see

here is fairly typical for young men of the aristocratic mold: service abroad in order to demonstrate competence in soldiering and diplomacy under the command of senior figures who, if suitably impressed, can become future supporters. And all of Caesar's activities took place under the auspices of the Sullan establishment.

When Caesar returned to Rome, he immediately tried another traditional tack to a public distinction. He prosecuted, on a charge of extortion, Gnaeus Cornelius Dolabella, consul in 81 bc and a recent *triumphator*. He lost the case, but he published his speeches against the man anyway, in the hope of advertising his rectitude (prosecutions like Caesar's were voluntary actions against corrupt public figures) and to make a lasting display of his eloquence, itself a vital source of political power in Rome. Undaunted by his failure, Caesar went on to prosecute a second noble, although again unsuccessfully. Still, public prosecutions were almost a duty for young men on the make. Not only were they proof of good citizenship, not only did they allow one to demonstrate his oratorical gifts, they also provided a legitimate social and political space in which to make enemies.

Make enemies? The necessity of making friends will be obvious to anyone with a shred of political instinct. But how do enemies fit into it? A Roman's public figure was defined by his accomplishments, his supporters (of whom he should have an abundance), his friends (not *too* many of these because you cannot be a reliable friend to too many people) and his enemies (not too many of these either because you can't hold out against too many enemies). Even today it is difficult to admire someone who has never offended anyone, and in Rome there was no fame to be attached to keeping silent or avoiding conflicts. Powerful enemies, so long as you did not have too many of them, created the impression that you, too, were powerful – what Tacitus called *ipsa inimicitiarum gloria*, the sheer glory of enmities. This mattered in a society in which vengeance was a moral obligation. Sulla's epitaph, as a single illustration, is supposed to have read, "I surpassed all men in doing kindness to my friends, and harm to my enemies." Gentle Romans.

Despite all these efforts, Caesar cannot have been doing very well in terms of public estimation. In 71 bc he reached his first elected post, the office of military tribune. Now in ancient days, the position had mattered quite a lot. By Caesar's time, however, it was useful only for small fry struggling along in the hope of making it into the senate in the first place. Even a new man like Cicero couldn't be bothered. That Caesar deemed it necessary to come before the people in order to acquire this paltry office is nothing short of astonishing.

Why was Caesar not coming along better than he was? It may well have been that his civic crown was small consolation for his failed prosecutions (the Roman public, after all, tended to assume that all aristocrats, civically crowned or not, were valorous). Or it may have been Caesar's lifestyle that others found disturbing. Roman aristocrats of a traditional ilk eschewed fancy clothes and excessive elegance, opting instead for a homelier look, replete with bushy eyebrows and conventional homespun garb – all the better to identify themselves with their unspoiled and unimpeachable ancestors. Caesar, by contrast, was fussy about his appearance. He dressed in swanky, natty clothes that many of his contemporaries found too fine, if not actually a bit effeminate. He also displayed too much care about the looks of his body, plucking hair from here and there, and he was so disturbed by his early baldness that he made it his habit to comb his hair straight down in order to get maximum coverage. He was Rome's first metrosexual. Or maybe not. It was rumored that, while in the court of Nicomedes, Caesar had entered into more than backroom negotiations with this eastern and Greekified monarch. And then there were the women. The man was already notorious as an adulterer. And he lived with this sort of abuse for the whole of his career. Years later, for instance, when Caesar had become a powerful politician, one wit once referred to Pompey as the king of Rome and Caesar as its queen. Again, in a senatorial debate, he was attacked as "every woman's man, and every man's woman." Whatever the reason for Caesar's standing for such a trifling public office as military tribune, joining the ranks of desperate men on the make, it remains all too clear that Caesar was not yet a terrific hit with the Roman public.

His standing was sufficient, however, to elevate him to his first real magistracy (and to win him his ticket into the senate) in 69 BC, when Caesar was elected quaestor at the appropriate age of 30. Given that the Romans elected twenty quaestors each year, this election, although necessary for a senatorial career, was hardly a splendid attainment in itself. The year of Caesar's quaestorship, however, was truly consequential for the fashioning of his public image and for his subsequent rise in popularity.

It began with the death of his aunt Julia. A woman of her years and standing was entitled to a funerary procession and a public funeral oration. These events were grand affairs that attracted big crowds, which naturally turned them into opportunities to celebrate the rich history of the family whose private loss the Roman public assembled to grieve (Fig. 6). Caesar, who delivered his aunt's funeral oration and who arranged for the procession itself, seized the occasion to add a bold wrinkle to the solemnities. In addition to the trophies and death masks of the Julii, which everyone will



Figure 6 Funerary procession in a relief from Amiternum, 1st century AD. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Aquileia, Italy. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

have expected to see, Caesar added those of his uncle Marius. This proved to be nothing short of sensational. The people were thrilled and delighted to see their champion restored. Taking the cue, when his wife also died later in the same year, Caesar arranged to give her a public funeral as well (something less common for a woman so young, but Caesar knew he was on to a winner), during which her father, Cinna, and by extension Caesar's own association with Marius, were again objects of display and speechification.

Suddenly, Caesar stood for something – not a cause but instead something far more resonant in Roman society, a value. Caesar was emerging as an embodiment of *pietas*, loyalty to one's family, and in this instance not just any family (and not actually Caesar's own family) but *Marius's* family, a move that combined gestures toward two of the Romans' core principles, familial devotion and militarism. Perhaps this young patrician – or so an ordinary Roman, ill-versed in logic, might be forgiven for believing – carried in himself something of the great plebeian's charisma! Hence the

tradition of early Marian sympathies and Sullan hostilities. For Caesar, retrospective interpretations of his career began early.

Thereafter a more popular Caesar kept himself before the people to whatever degree that he could manage. He secured the post of curator of the Via Appia, the kind of banal-sounding job that in fact allowed its holder generate lots of benefactions beloved of the people and likely to acquire widespread enthusiasm amongst voters (so Cicero tells us in a letter to his friend Atticus). Furthermore, and more important for enhancing his reputation with the electorate, as aedile Caesar spent a fortune on the public works and the festivities required of that office. Not his own fortune, mind you. He seems to have run through that. The curatorship and the aedileship, done in style, forced Caesar to borrow heavily. During his aedileship he also held, at his own expense (by which of course I mean at his creditors' expense), funeral games in honor of his father's memory, at which he displayed the most fabulous gladiatorial show Rome had yet seen. *Pietas* – and fun for the entire family (one must remember that in Rome public entertainments were free, for the audience at least). Caesar also took advantage of his aedileship to restore all the statues, inscriptions and trophies of his beloved Marius, a gesture that secured his reputation for familial loyalty and cast him as the great man's political heir. By now, Caesar enjoyed massive popularity. It was time for him to take a chance.

In 63 BC the head of public religion in Rome, the *pontifex maximus*, died. His name, by the way, was Metellus Pius, called *Pius* not for his religiosity but for his profound loyalty to his father (*pietas* again). At this point in Rome's history, the high priesthood was an elected office. There were three candidates, two of them ancient and noble ex-consuls, while the third possibility was Caesar. The novelty of Caesar's candidature has been exaggerated by scholars – there are plenty of instances of men becoming high priest before being elected consul – but its sheer boldness has not. By Roman standards his competitors were more deserving, and there was a strong senatorial sentiment that Caesar's bid was presumptuous. Which means there was elite resistance, which forced Caesar to borrow heavily, campaigning with every degree of bribery and favoritism Roman custom would allow. Naturally, he will have pushed his Marian connection very hard. But the race remained close, and it was viewed by Caesar as decisive for his future. When he left his home on the day of the election, he remarked to his mother, "I shall return as *pontifex maximus*, or not at all." He won. It was a sensational outcome and a striking demonstration of the depth of Caesar's personal popularity with Roman voters (Fig. 7).



Figure 7 Obverse of a denarius of 44 BC representing Caesar as *Pontifex Maximus* and as *Pater Patriae* (Father of his Country). British Museum, London, England. Photo: ©The Trustees of the British Museum.

Caesar's family was at once removed to the official residency of the high priest, the *Domus Publica* or People's House, located in the forum, near the Regia (the formal offices of the *pontifex maximus*), and the Atrium of Vesta, the home of the Vestal Virgins – in sum, the religious and political center of the city. Now that was a glamorous address! And with this election Caesar could well believe his future success, his elevation to the consulship, was secured. No *pontifex maximus* in Roman history had failed to gain the office when he stood for it. In this same year, Caesar was (by now unsurprisingly) swept into the praetorship. And when his creditors threatened not to allow him to leave to take up his province in Spain, his bills were paid by the richest man in Rome, Marcus Licinius Crassus, consul in 70 BC. Crassus was an extraordinarily shrewd politician, who knew a good investment when he saw it.

Let me say a little more about this. Indebtedness, in general, is not a good thing, and it especially was not a good thing in Rome. Bankruptcy in Rome meant total and permanent ruin: all of a man's property could be seized and he himself sold into slavery. Anyone who risked disaster on this

scale could only be viewed as dangerous, so desperate must he be to preserve his fortune and public standing. Which is why the accusation of bankruptcy rubbed shoulders in Roman invective with insults like parricide or child molester. Nothing could be more wicked. There were, however, further political dimensions to the matter of Caesar's indebtedness. From Crassus's perspective, by salvaging Caesar's finances, he had secured himself a valuable political ally. He could certainly expect this support for a likely future consul to pay off. From Caesar's point of view, on the other hand, the sheer extent of his indebtedness to Crassus meant that Crassus must continue to invest in Caesar's political future – if he ever wanted a proper return on his money. Caesar was too much in Crassus's debt not to have a certain hold over the man. Their relationship, born of opportunism, was a lasting one, and their alliance remained a constant of republican politics until Crassus' death in 53 BC.

Having alienated the traditionalists in the senate who found his election as *pontifex maximus* hard to stomach, Caesar wanted to establish strong political connections with powerful but less hostile figures. In addition to Crassus, he cultivated the absent but overshadowing Pompey the Great. As his name suggests, Pompey was the leading man of the day: a brilliant general, who triumphed before he was even a senator and who was elected consul (in the same year as Crassus) by special dispensation at an age when he was legally too young to hold the office. He was now extending Rome's domination of the east, and, as was regularly the case with glorious generals in Rome, he was the people's darling. Which meant naturally that the residue of the oligarchy resented him as much as they feared his singular stature. Caesar was one of Pompey's earliest advocates in city politics, despite the fact that Crassus and Pompey loathed one another and although, by doing so, he ran the risk of offending the nobility. Caesar's speeches and legal proposals in Pompey's behalf will not have escaped the Great Man's notice – not least because the Great Man, who returned to Rome at the end of the sixties, soon found that he, too, needed political allies.

The arrogant Pompey had arranged Rome's eastern affairs without seeking any form of traditional senatorial cooperation, and he had promised pensions to his troops. He expected a compliant senate to leap to the ratification of his requests without demur or discussion. He had not reckoned on an aristocracy that preferred to cut everyone down to size. All his enemies insisted on a full debate of every issue, and Crassus, working behind the scenes, found many ways to frustrate his enemy. Crassus, however, had problems of his own. He had invested heavily, and possibly illegally, in the operations of the tax-farmers, the rich equestrians who

collected Rome's taxes for a hefty fee (borne mostly by the taxpayers in the provinces, I should add, and not by the public in Rome and certainly not by the government). These were the *publicani*, the publicans of New Testament fame, an early example of the false economy of out-sourcing. The *publicani* had recently overbid for the taxes to be collected in the province of Asia – and they wanted a rebate. The senate, convinced that profiteering equestrians were poor candidates for public charity, refused, and the result was deep hostility between the government and the tax-farmers. For Crassus, it was a personal matter but also a political one. His reputation depended on his ability to deliver for the *publicani*.

This was the political state of affairs in 60 BC, when Caesar was to be a candidate for the consulship. Although he was an odds-on favorite to win a place, his enemies were none the less lining up against him. This became clear immediately upon Caesar's return from Spain, where he had waged unprovoked war against various local tribes, on the basis of which activities he applied to the senate for permission to celebrate a triumph. This action necessitated a further request on Caesar's part, to the effect that he be allowed to submit the formal announcement of his candidacy (what the Romans called *professio*) in absence (for technical reasons Caesar could not enter both the city and preserve his eligibility to celebrate a triumph, yet it was obligatory to make one's *professio* in the forum). This was a reasonable request on Caesar's part, but it was refused owing to the exertions of Marcus Porcius Cato.

Cato, despite his relative youth (he was five years younger than Caesar), had emerged during the sixties as the leading spokesman for the most distinguished and invidious segment of the nobility, an elite and admired group whom we sometimes refer to by the shorthand expression *optimates*, the best of men, which is certainly how they regarded themselves (though this term was nothing like so narrow in republican usage). Swaggering in his protestations of old-fashioned probity, stubborn in every dispute and unafraid of giving offense, Cato was nothing short of a moral force – within the confines of the senate. His nobility of birth and his uncomplicated exploitation of traditional principles more than compensated for his lack of intelligence or his subtle opportunism. It was he who had blocked the rebate to the *publicani*. Cato had also repulsed the friendly advances of Pompey the Great: after his return from the east, Pompey had proposed a marriage alliance uniting his family with Cato's. Cato would have none of it, and he cooperated in the senate's resistance to ratifying Pompey's eastern acts. Now it was Cato who compelled Caesar to choose between a triumph and standing for the consulship.

There was a clear purpose to Cato's obstruction. Another of the candidates for the consulship that year was Marcus Calpurnius Bibulus, who was also Cato's son-in-law. Now Bibulus and Caesar had a long history: they had been colleagues as quaestors, aediles and praetors. The two men had little affection for one another and it was especially galling to Bibulus that at every turn Caesar's magisterial performance had surpassed his own in the view of the Roman public. Which is not even to mention Caesar's unexpected rise to become *pontifex maximus*. Bibulus did not look forward to facing Caesar yet again, and the circumstances of this election were complicated by the presence of yet another candidate, Lucius Lucceius, who enjoyed the strong backing of both Caesar and Pompey the Great. This is why Cato now deployed his constitutional rectitude in the hope of tripping up Caesar. He was certain that Caesar would postpone running for consul until the next year, after he had basked in the glory of a coveted triumph, a decision that would thus remove any impediment to Bibulus' election.

Cato entirely (and not for the last time) misjudged Caesar, who abandoned his triumph in order to stand. But the senate's refusal to balk at Cato's obstructionism was enough to make it plain to Caesar that his support amongst the senators was less than enthusiastic, which can only have been worrying. In reaction to this, Caesar pressed his old friends, Crassus and Pompey, for every ounce of support they could lend to his campaign, including the traditional emoluments for winning over Roman voters (viz. bribes). This was their intention anyway. Granted they were each of them committed to Caesar on account of his past associations, their connection to him was intensified further by their desire to defeat a common adversary, Cato. Consequently they threw themselves behind the candidacies of Caesar and Lucceius. For their part, Bibulus and Cato quickly sank to any depths to win. The ever-upright Cato even countenanced spending lavishly if shamelessly on bribes in order to bring the voters to the optimate cause – anything to elect Bibulus and to keep out Caesar.

At the end of this hard-fought election, Caesar was elected consul for the year 59 BC. Thus, he had renewed the lapsed nobility of his family and he had done so at his earliest opportunity. He was an unqualified Roman success. And he had reached the top of the greasy pole by means of a calculated combination of boldness and conventionality. *Pietas* and *gloria* were hardly exceptionable values, but, in Caesar's case, they gave traditional cover to his innovative exploitation of the virtues and popularity of his aunt's husband and his wife's family connections – a move that compensated for the fallen condition of his own family's reputation.

Caesar had also risen to the consulship owing to his connections to two formidable figures, Crassus and Pompey, to each of whom he remained under an obligation. These relationships were complicated, however, by the antipathy that existed between Caesar's two friends. How much more effective they could be in cooperation with one another was all too obvious to Caesar, and it is another of Caesar's real achievements that he managed to persuade Pompey and Crassus to put aside their mutual loathing and to be reconciled with one another. Caesar was able to persuade his allies that, in the teeth of inevitable optimate opposition, it was in the interests of all three of them to combine their resources. Insofar as their assets went, Caesar actually brought the least to this arrangement, but it was he who, as consul, had to be the one to supply the constitutional and executive muscle necessary to get any of their business through the senate. And it was Caesar who had to be the one to take the heat for it all. It was obvious to all three that the going would not be easy, not least because Caesar's colleague in the consulship would not be the friendly Lucceius. Instead, it was to be none other than Bibulus.

Now this state of affairs invites a comment about the gap between senatorial politics and the motivations of Roman voters. As we have seen, there was a strong personal animosity between Bibulus and Caesar, one that was exacerbated by constant association. They were different sorts of men, with quite different political affiliations. Bibulus had been the candidate of the senators who hated Caesar and hated his friends, Crassus and Pompey. It tells us a lot about Roman voters, each of whom was allowed to cast two votes for the two vacant consuships, that both Caesar and Bibulus were elected in the same year. The mechanics of Roman consular elections make it inescapable that most voters voted for both men. However strong the passions and acidities within the aristocracy, the people of Rome saw politics very differently. They, too, looked at individuals, and they cast their ballots in terms of their own requirements regarding individual merit and their own expectations of magisterial leadership. Their voting habits were not decided by the factionalism of the senatorial order. This disconnection between the perspectives of the public and the feuds obtaining within Rome's political class must never be allowed to slip from our notice.

It was the opinion of later Roman historians that the fall of the Roman republic and its replacement by the empire could be traced back to the deal cut in 60 BC, whereby Caesar, Pompey and Crassus united to become what their critics dubbed the Three-Headed Monster and what modern scholars inaccurately call the First Trimvirate. Perhaps, in a sense, that's true. But the destruction of the republic was hardly what any of the three had in

mind at the time. Crassus, Pompey and Caesar, each had his own immediate agenda, which for none of them included toppling the state. The year of Caesar's consulship, each of them knew in advance, would be a struggle for high stakes, but stakes of an entirely conventional if elevated nature.

And then what? A man in Caesar's position could, if he wished it, look forward to a life that was sweet and relatively undemanding. After all, he had made it to the consulship. No more was really expected of him. Once retired from office, he could luxuriate in his prestige, speak in the senate with authority, reflect on his splendid rise or even enjoy leisure without guilt, what Cicero described as *otium cum dignitate*, honorably earned inactivity. As everybody knows, that prospect did not enter, even momentarily, into Caesar's designs. Neither Crassus nor Pompey had taken up the Roman equivalent of shuffleboard – nor was Caesar likely to lapse into obscurity if he could escape it. He had claimed the mantle of Marius, who had won seven consulships and had garnered them on the basis of his military glory. Caesar's further ambitions lay along those lines. To prove himself the equal of Marius, much less of Crassus or Pompey, he needed a war, even one that was entirely contrived for his benefit. This was exactly what Caesar manufactured – in Gaul.

Further Reading

A superb account of the history of historians writing about Caesar can be gotten at in Yavetz 1983. More recent and more exhaustive (for readers fortunate enough to be comfortable with German) is Christ 1994. The mentality of the Roman nobility is a fascinating topic best approached by way of Earl 1967 and Flower 1996. The experience of ordinary Romans is naturally harder to get at, but MacMullen 1974, Whittaker 1993 and Atkins and Osborne 2006 are good starts. The political institutions of Rome are given concise and authoritative treatment in Lintott 1999. Of the biographies referred to in this chapter, the most accessible are Balsdon 1967, Gelzer 1968, Meier 1982, and Goldsworthy 2006 – to which list one might add Kamm 2006 (designed to be entirely introductory). Each of these offers a detailed account of Caesar's early career. The remaining relevant works cited by author in this chapter are: Mommsen 1894, Ferrero 1933, Strasburger 1938 and 1968, and Scullard 1959 (Strasburger's are exclusively in German).