

REVIEW

WRITING FOR CAESAR

Luca Grillo and Christopher B. Krebs, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Writings of Julius Caesar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 396. Hardback, £74.99/US\$99.99. ISBN 978-1-107-02341-3. Paperback, £24.99/US\$32.99. ISBN 978-1-107-67049-5.

Vous vous en souvenez, vous, mes Compagnons, nous ne cessons
d'étudier les Commentaires de César, Turenne et Frédéric II ...
Alfred de Vigny, *Servitude et grandeur militaire*, pt. 3, ch. 1

nudi enim sunt, recti et uenusti, omni ornatu orationis tamquam ueste detracta
Cic. *Brutus* 262

Caesar was one of antiquity's most famous men, and an acclaimed writer. Yet subsequent ancient historians did not always turn to his accounts of either the Civil or the Gallic War (especially the former) and none of his extensive additional works survive even in a substantive fragmentary form. Today, Caesar is the inescapable presence in every account of the last years of the Republic, and there is no shortage of biographical accounts. His surviving literary works, however, were for long the bane of schoolrooms. *Gallia est omnis diuisa in tres partes* is perhaps Caesar's most famous written line but, outside the *Commentaries*, little is known and even that is rarely considered. And when it comes to the *Commentaries*, it is only fairly recently that after a breakthrough edited volume by Welch and Powell, works by Batstone and Damon, Riggsby, and Grillo have begun to move beyond the evidential importance of the texts to try to understand the way that Caesar constructed his account, his historiographical influences, and technique.¹

This is the most complete and up-to-date collection, and is of the highest standard. Anyone wanting to supplement Miriam Griffin's more biographically driven companion will naturally turn here.² The essays are accompanied by brief surveys of the field which end with a hint as to further work to be done, and a dozen or more doctoral thesis titles can be found here. The Caesar industry shows no sign of slowing down. But were we wrong, for so many years,

¹ Welch and Powell (1998), Batstone and Damon (2006), Riggsby (2006), and Grillo (2012).

² Griffin (2009). There is some overlap between the volumes.

to think that Caesar was a bluff soldier giving as good an account as possible of his wars? What gain comes from the focus on Caesar's literary persona?

Inevitably, most of the focus is on the *Commentarii*, ideologically, generically, and in their relationship with other historical works. Raaflaub makes the important point that once one accepts that the picture Caesar gives of himself is one which elaborates truth, and distinguishes himself from others in terms of his virtues, one can deduce a view of what a good Roman should be, or at least one view. This is surely right, and informs much of what follows. It may also reflect on a relationship which repeatedly comes back into view, that between Caesar and Cicero. Their complex political story aside, Cicero too was busy creating not just one but several personae during his lifetime, and there is an interplay between the two individuals which is fascinating. Cicero presumably had heard or read some version of the early *Commentarii* from Gaul when he spoke on Caesar's behalf in the mid-50s, and he praises them in the *Brutus*. Or does he? What does that strange phrase *nudi enim sunt, recti et uenusti, omni ornatu orationis tamquam ueste detracta* really mean? Did Cicero really think that Caesar's works were without ornament? *Venustus* is an elegant reference to Venus for sure, but what were you supposed to do with these naked books? Can you see straight through them?

Performance remains the biggest problem for understanding the dispatches from the front. Were they read out to the people? In the Senate? In full? How were they listened to or consumed?³ Were they perhaps read somewhere and then professionally summarised to a wider audience? Krebs asks all the questions, but the complete absence of any evidence of their performance, as opposed to more general references to historians read on street corners and in other contexts, often described disparagingly, is unfortunate. Without this critical information, the text is all, and Batstone mines it effectively for the development of what he calls *Césarité*. Batstone restates more forcefully Raaflaub's thesis; what Caesar creates is in a sense the concept of what Caesar ideally is—a force more than a person, an idea. The critical issue is how far this is an idea which is consonant with the Roman ideas. Is this Caesar capturing the notion of how to be a Roman, or redefining it, or is he simply exemplifying the lessons learnt over the decades and centuries of Roman military prowess?

We would have a better answer to that question had more autobiographies survived. Rüpke, Riggsby, and Johnston write well about Caesar's religious, geographical, and ethnographic interests. Caesar's own religion comes across very little in the surviving historical works; he avoided Sulla's clear obsessions with religion, although he discussed the cults of the Gauls and he wrote on stars, in the context of his calendrical reform. The question of whether other

³ Wiseman (1998) on Caesar; on performative culture more generally Wiseman (2015), which is not cited.

autobiographers more like Sulla or Caesar may be too blunt a distinction—Sulla too may have offered his own *intepretatio Romana* of the phenomena he met elsewhere. Now we have dissociated in our work on the fragmentary historians the general Catulus from the learned Lutatius, it is harder to see direct evidence for religion in his work, but there is surely no doubting Catulus' interests—this was after all the person who rebuilt the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus.⁴ Rutilius Rufus might well have reflected on his distant travels, as might Sulla. And the Cimbri and the peoples of the Black Sea offered ample opportunities for the sort of othering which Johnston attributes rightly to Caesar.

The greater attention we are paying to autobiographies and memoirs is well represented in this volume. Both Noussek and Chassignet find themselves wrestling with the extent to which memoirs are history—the limitations, in other words, of biography as an example of a supposedly non-partisan account. But historiography is itself full of the personal—autopsy, family relations, personal involvement (think of Cato allegedly including his own speeches in the *Origines*). Noussek points out that Caesar's work responds to Cicero's anxieties over commemorating his own achievements, as expressed in his letter to Luceius, but that anxiety is itself at odds with the confidence of others, and may connect with the broader social reservations of a *novus homo* if it is not simply a rhetorical device to engage Luceius' sympathy.⁵

In other ways, Caesar is entirely in alignment with other writers—his use of speeches and his narratological skill (Grillo), or his borrowing of certain tropes and representations from earlier writers such as Thucydides and Polybius (Pitcher). How much is conscious and how much a product of Caesar's full participation in the highly literate world of his peers we cannot say. More clearly products of choice are his style (Krebs) and his wit (Corbeill). Caesar's choice of a particular way of writing, even though it changed over the course of the *Commentarii*, is a key feature of his work and must reflect deliberate thought, not least because style was also the subject of his learned but sadly lost works on language and grammar (Pezzini), and is sufficiently distinctive as to prove hard to imitate. This is part of the way we can differentiate the *corpus Caesarianum*, as Gaertner shows.

What is striking is the gap between the commentaries and the mordant wit and the violence of the *Anti-Cato* (Corbeill again). This is even in contrast to what we know (precious little, sadly) about his oratory (van der Blom). The sharpness of these exchanges suggests another Caesar. Is this where the mask slipped? Or should we rather assume that the naked style of the *Commentarii*

⁴ Flower (2014).

⁵ Cic. *Fam.* 5.12.8.

held its own power? After all, one of the consequences of *Césarité* is the occlusion of other voices. In public contests, this was harder to achieve.

Brief but helpful summaries of the exiguous remains of Caesar's poetry (Casali) and letters (Morello) conclude the comprehensive treatment of Caesar's own work. Again it is interesting to see that so much depends on comparison or engagement with Cicero. It is hard not to see a degree of competition here; Casali suggests Caesar improves on a Ciceronian verse in his comments on Terence (though there is just the hint that had we more Latin verse we should find more not less of the same).

Kraus, Joseph, and Thorne look for Caesar's influence in later writers. Kraus notes that Livy and others learnt from Caesar how to write a battle scene, whilst Tacitus' *Agricola* is directly in conversation with aspects of Caesar's writing. Joseph finds some echoes in Virgil, but the stronger argument is with Lucan, who clearly had thought hard about Caesar's writing. It is a surprise then that Thorne finds so many authors who look elsewhere. This might be a reflection of Cicero's nervousness about the reliability of the autobiographer, and it would have been interesting to see in more detail what Livy did with the material; the suggestion is that Pollio may have contributed to a different kind of story. After his death, Caesar could no longer control the narrative.

And yet. Of Pollio we know next to nothing; he is a ghost.⁶ Caesar survived, just. Recovered by Coluccio Salutati, his works went on to be hugely influential; Schadee's account is necessarily only partial, and I cited de Vigny at the outset for another author for whom Caesar was a pre-eminent ancient source. Such is the power of Caesar's unadorned style and historical example that he can only be compared with the very greatest; Napoleon now, not Cicero is the interlocutor.

In the boredom of post-Napoleonic France, de Vigny and his friends read their Caesar assiduously. He became a school text, and there is doubtless more to say about how Caesar influenced attitudes to war across Europe and beyond.⁷ In his own time, though, what was distinctive about Caesar? Surely more than anything else it is the energy that allowed him to compete across every field—not just warfare, but the writing of war; not just writing but the methods of writing, spelling, and grammar; not just methods but the implementation across history, poetry, letters. To our knowledge, only Cicero and Varro come close. And only Varro survived an untimely death, and that only barely.⁸ To return to and paraphrase Raaflaub's initial chapter, Caesar's extraordinary output is a statement of what a Roman should be, but also a

⁶ *FRHist* 56.

⁷ Schmitt (2013).

⁸ Varro was proscribed but escaped; see Marshall and Smith (forthcoming).

near-impossible one to match, which was surely the point. Following Sarah Stroup, the Republican culture of the text ‘replicate[d] the authority of the forum in the pages of a non-forensic text’.⁹ This perhaps offers another way of seeing Caesar’s writings, which are here viewed separately, as an individual’s attempt to replicate an overwhelming authority in the pages of a near-totalising textual performance. This too was part of *Césarité*. Augustus wrote his own story too, twice, once in an autobiography which also perhaps sought to silence or at least counter all other views, and once in a monumental inscription.¹⁰ He wrote poetry and plays and letters, but he had others too who could write for him, and he seems to have not needed to compete with them. Perhaps one could say that Augustus eventually was able to clothe the nakedness of his power, whereas Cicero had glimpsed the shameless beauty of Caesar’s undisguised ambition.

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⁹ Stroup (2010) 116.

¹⁰ *FRHist* 60.