

‘IT’S CAESAR [KAISER/TSAR], NOT MR. KING.’ (MIS)UNDERSTANDING A CAESARIAN PUN (SUET. *IUL.* 79.2) AND ITS IRONIES*

Abstract: Caesar’s ambiguous riposte *Caesarem se, non Regem esse* allowed for various interpretations at the time but was most likely intended and received as a name pun—or so the comparison with Caesar Strabo’s discourse on *iocus et facetiae* suggests (Cic. *De or.* 2.216–91); Caesar may even have hoped for his words to take wing. Even if—just as humorously, but now rather ironically—he momentarily turned his name into a title, to interpret such an irony as the declaration that his cognomen was a title superior to *rex* represents just another instance of the teleological fallacy; then again, that an ironic joke should anticipate the name’s later titular function is itself a historical irony.

Keywords: *dictum*, *rex*, name puns, proverbial poetics, teleological fallacy, historical irony

Caesar failed—or so Suetonius tells us in his catalogue of evidence of Caesarian overbearance and royal airs—to quell fears of his desire for the title *rex*. When re-entering Rome (on 26 January 44) and faced with ‘a throng of people greeting him as king, he responded that he was Caesar, not king’ (*neque ... infamiam affectati etiam regii nominis discutere ualuit, quamquam et plebei regem se salutanti Caesarem se, non regem esse responderit et ...*, Suet. *Iul.* 79.2).¹ This riposte may well have caused—if only momentarily—the stunned silence Plutarch reports (*γενομένης πρὸς τοῦτο πάντων σιωπῆς*, *Caes.* 60.2);² a certain confusion would undoubtedly have attended its initial and most natural understanding, which might be paraphrased as ‘I am Caesar, but I do not hold the regal office’.³ But soon other understandings, contemporaneous and later,

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¹ On the date and circumstances, cf. Weinstock (1971) 319.

² Though Pelling (2011) 448 is right, of course, to remark that Plutarch ‘knows how to exploit the dramatic silence’. The episode’s historicity has not been called into question: the sources (Suet. *Iul.* 79.2; Plut. *Caes.* 60.2; App. *BC* 2.108; Dio. 44.10.1; Zonaras 10.11) are largely agreed (Morstein-Marx (2021) 519 discusses the minor differences), nor has the response been attributed to anyone else (as happens with famous *dicta*); cf. Saller’s (1980) discussion of the authenticity of anecdotes and Grazzini (2002/3) on the authenticity of famous Caesarian pronouncements.

³ Caspari (1909) 189, on whose paraphrase mine is based, is not alone in inverting the order of *Caesarem* and *regem*: “I am not king but Caesar” is equivalent to “I do not hold the

would have formed, and it is the purpose of this discussion to uncover them in order to argue that the riposte was most likely intended as a joke, as it meets all the contemporary criteria thereof; that Caesar would have stood to gain further from appearing capable of making such a joke; and that recently advanced interpretations of it as Caesar's confident use of his cognomen as the title it would become are no less ironic than fallacious.

To return to the Roman audience: surely, before too long, some of its members would have realised that Caesar 'apparently assumed' that the welcomers 'had tripped over his name' (*ὡς δὲ περὶ τὸ ὄνομα ἐσφαλμένοις*, *BC* 2.108), as Appian's explicatory remark on the episode in part runs. In other words, as M. O. B. Caspari was the first modern reader to spell out,⁴ they would infer from Caesar's responding with his actual name that he seemingly mistook their acclamation 'king' for the salutation '[Mr.] King' on the grounds of the word's ambiguous nature as name and title, *Rex* and *rex*. This ambiguity was not just well known but also often used for rhetorical effect: so, when Cicero taunted in response to Clodius' provocative 'How much longer will we suffer this king' (*quousque hunc regem feremus?*): 'you call me "king", when King did not as much as mention you' (*regem appellas, cum Rex tui mentionem nullam fecerit*, alluding to Q. Marcius Rex, who had not included Clodius in his will);⁵ or when, a few years later, Horace would similarly pun on the word in his seventh satire *Proscripti Regis Rupili pus atque venenum*.⁶ In fact, Caesar would have been all the better positioned to assume such a confusion, as he was, on his mother's side, connected to the Marcii Reges, as he himself had stated publicly in his funerary oration when honouring his aunt Julia in 69 (*Suet. Iul.* 6):

amitae meae Iuliae maternum genus ab regibus ortum, paternum cum diis immortalibus coniunctum est. nam ab Anco Marcio sunt Marcii Reges, quo nomine fuit mater; a Venere Iulii, cuius gentis familia est nostra.

My aunt Julia, on her mother's side, descended from the kings, while, on her father's side, she was related to the immortal gods. For the Marcii

regal office, but my family name is Caesar". But the original (Latin) order arguably matters (see further below).

⁴ Caspari (1909) 189. But as Deutsch (1928) 397 points out, this interpretation can already be found in W. K. Drumann's *Geschichte Roms* and Francis Bacon's even earlier *Advancement of Learning*. Curiously, few of the modern hermeneuts appear to have realised the full implications of the passage in Appian (further discussed below).

⁵ *Cic. Att.* 1.16[16 SB].10, with Shackleton-Bailey *ad loc.* Further on the provocation: Sillett (2022) 269.

⁶ The most significant lines are *Persius exclamat, 'per magnos, Brute, Deos te | oro, qui reges consueris tollere, cur non | hunc Regem iugulas?'* (*Serm.* 1.7.33–5, with Matthews (1973) 23).

Reges—her mother’s family name—reach back to Ancus Marcius, while the Iulii—the clan to which my family belongs—[reach back] to Venus.

So someone *might* have mistaken him for a (Marcius) Rex instead of a (Iulius) Caesar.⁷ What M. E. Deutsch, who was the first to make that connection to the Marcii Reges, forewent observing is that within the just quoted passage Caesar’s speech already moves from the title (*ab regibus*) to the Name (*Marcii Reges*), just as he would move from the (proffered) title to the (pretended) name upon his return from the Alban hills.⁸ Put another way, Caesar was quite familiar with the word’s ambiguous nature, whereof he took advantage quick-wittedly.

‘Quick-wittedly’ insofar as there can be little doubt—as Appian’s full explanation, in point of fact, emphasises—that the riposte was ‘ingeniously crafted’, as it merely *pretended* that the welcomers ‘had tripped over his name’ (*εὐμηχάνως εἶπε τοῖς ἀσπασαμένοις ... ὡς δὴ περὶ τὸ ὄνομα ἐσφαλμένοις*, *BC* 2.108).⁹ This realisation of Caesar’s witty pretence must have been shared by a substantial number of his audience: not only was he all-too-well known to assume that anyone might confuse him with anyone; the Romans also had a particularly fine ear for puns on names,¹⁰ the humorous potential of *rex* was mined before and after, and Caesar both enjoyed a reputation for sententiousness and had a notorious taste for *dicta* (which he was known to have collected since his youth, perhaps).¹¹ He thus more than likely trusted

⁷ Corbeill’s interpretation ((1996) 84)—that ‘the plebs are doing more than attempting to bestow the kingship on Caesar. They are appealing to the name Rex in Julius Caesar’s family line. The name is its history and that history includes Ancus Marcius. Julius Caesar earns the title *Rex* [sic!] not simply through his actions but through family right’—improperly infers the plebs’ reasoning behind their address from Caesar’s response. Put differently, this interpretation of the plebs’ salutation would not have occurred to anyone without the riposte.

⁸ Deutsch (1928) 394–5. He may also (396) make too much of the presence of *καλεῖσθαι* in all Greek sources (below, n. 27), given its frequent use in the sense of *εἶναι* (LSJ s.v. ‘καλέω’, II.2).

⁹ *δὴ* is ‘connective’ and ‘marks the progression from one idea to a second of which the consideration naturally follows’ (Denniston (1954) 239); in other words, it adds the explanation (i.e., the pretended misunderstanding) to the adverbial characterisation of the answer as *εὐμηχάνως*. This adverb is well chosen, as the comparison with Plat. *Crat.* 408b reveals, where Hermogenes, confronted with various etymologies, has to admit, that ‘[he is] certainly not skilful in contriving words’ (*οὐκουν εὐμήχανός γέ εἰμι λόγου*).

¹⁰ On ‘names and *cognomina*’ as sources of laughter, Corbeill (1996) 57–98.

¹¹ *quis sententiis aut acutior aut crebrior?*, Cicero asked Cornelius Nepos rhetorically (*ap.* Suet. *Iul.* 55). The nature of Caesar’s *dicta collectanea* (Suet. *Iul.* 57) is unclear, as is their relation

that his audience would realise that he was sententiously joking; if, however, Plutarch's 'stunned silence' is accurate and captures more than an initial reaction, he was mistaken. Of course, '[t]he history of laughing is ... about those who don't (or won't) get the joke as well as about those who do'.¹²

But such a jocular intention (and reception) appears all the more likely as the response can be identified readily as a *bonum dictum*, 'a witticism',¹³ according to the categories Cicero had Gaius Julius Caesar Strabo discuss in *De oratore* (2.216–91). An instance of 'what is [said] contrary to expectation' (*quod est praeter expectationem*, 2.284), it more specifically rests on an ambiguous term (cf. *ambigua sunt in primis acuta*, 2.252) and derives its wit from misconstruing the other side's statement (*acutum etiam illud est cum ex alterius oratione aliud excipias atque ille uult*, 2.273),¹⁴ with Caesar 'appearing to not understand what [he] does [in fact] understand' (*etiam non uideri intellegere quod intellegas*, 2.275). By choosing such a kind of humour, especially *in respondendo*, Caesar might have hoped not just to benefit from its advantageous effects but also from appearing as someone *capable of making* such a joke (2.236).¹⁵

est plane oratoris mouere risum; uel quod ipsa hilaritas beneuolentiam conciliat ei, per quem excitata est; uel quod admirantur omnes acumen uno saepe in uerbo positum maxime respondentis, non numquam etiam lacescentis; uel quod frangit aduersarium, quod impedit, quod eleuat, quod deterret, quod refutat; uel quod ipsum oratorem politum esse hominem significat, quod eruditum, quod urbanum, maxime quod tristitiam ac seueritatem mitigat et relaxat odiosasque res saepe, quas argumentis dilui non facile est, ioco risuque dissoluit.

It assuredly falls to the orator to provoke laughter; either because good cheer itself secures good will for the person exciting it, or because all admire a quick wit, as often comprised in a single word, and especially when given in response, sometimes even when given on the attack; or (else) because it trumps the adversary, or trips him up, or makes fun of

to the *uolumina ... apophtegmatorum* mentioned by Cicero in 46 (*Fam.* 9.16.4). Caesar's *dicta* and *sententiae* lack a proper treatment (Preiswerk (1945) needs an update).

¹² Beard (2015) 15.

¹³ Cf. Cic. *De or.* 2.222: *haec scilicet bona dicta quae salsa sint; nam ea dicta appellantur proprio iam nomine.*

¹⁴ Cf. also Cic. *De or.* 2.255: *sed scitis esse notissimum ridiculi genus, cum aliud expectamus, aliud dicitur: hic nobismet ipsis noster error risum mouet: quod si admixtum est etiam ambiguum, fit salsius.* Cicero is, in fact, quite concerned with joking *ex ambiguo* in the digression (2.250, 253–6).

¹⁵ Cf. Cic. *De or.* 2.230: *omnino probabiliora sunt, quae lacesciti dicimus quam quae priores, nam et ingeni celeritas maior est, quae apparet in respondendo, et humanitatis est responsio.* See further Corbeill (1996) 28–30.

him, or intimidates him, or refutes him; or [else] because it demonstrates that the orator himself is a man of taste, of learning, of refinement; but first and foremost because it eases and relaxes the severe gravity [of the situation], and often, by way of a joke or laugh, dissolves offensive circumstances, which cannot easily be dissolved by arguments.

Caesar thus stood to gain from the joke and its performance. A closing consideration in support of this interpretation: *risum mouere* was a well-known strategy not just in generally tricky situations; it was an especially welcome medium in interactions between the powerful and the powerless across ‘class and social lines’—as was the exchange between the throng of saluters and the saluted.¹⁶

Did the jokester hope for more? ‘rex sum’ served proverbially to express absolute power and utter contentment: ‘I am a king, if I lure the guy to me today’ (*rex sum, si ego illum hodie ad me hominem adlexero*, Plaut. *Poen.* 671), Lycus says in Plautus’ play.¹⁷ If Caesar’s actual response (in direct speech) was a variation of *Caesar sum; rex non sum*, he may have hoped to send out into the world a memorably humorous and readily repeatable political meme. Curiously, Suetonius’ indirect rendition *Caesarem se non regem esse* possesses the stylistic polish of the proverb and shares several of its transcultural characteristics:¹⁸ antithetic, isocolic (4+4), and trochaic in rhythm, it is garnished by a noticeable *homoeoteleuton*, as *-emse* and *-e(n)se* (the result of aphaeresis of *-em + [es]se*) would have sounded alike, if the letter was in fact pronounced nasalised (cf. Quint. 9.4.40).¹⁹ *Caesarem se, non rege(n)se* certainly makes for a ditty; we shall never know about the specific direct form.

Further complications arise, however, as yet another understanding remains. If ‘rex’ could function as both name and title, why should not ‘Caesar’? ‘I am a Caesar, not a king’, the man named Caesar would then be understood to be saying, as Luigi Bessone has most recently argued.²⁰ This, in turn, would allow for two interpretations. Playfully turning his cognomen into

¹⁶ Laurence–Paterson (1999) 188; they also stress the affinity of the bon mot to the theatre. On ‘le pouvoir des bons mots de César à Auguste’, see now Montlahuc (2019) 145–275.

¹⁷ Cf. Otto (1890) and Tosi (1993) (s.v. ‘rex’) for further instances.

¹⁸ On the ‘poetics of the proverb’, see Rothstein (1968).

¹⁹ Allen (1978) 31; Adams (2013) 128–32.

²⁰ This had, actually, already been suggested by Sihler (1912) 221. Many others come close: cf. Sordi (quoted below, p. 49); Rawson (1975) 149: ‘These titles [sc. *imperator, triumphator, dictator perpetuo*], as we shall see, both evoked and outdid kingship. “I am not Rex but Caesar”, indeed.’

a title,²¹ Caesar would dismiss the salutation with disarming modesty: ‘I am (just) a Caesar, not a king’. Such a dismissal may have sounded ironic to some and in spirit similar to Socrates’ philosophical stance, who belittled his own wisdom while attributing it to others.²² Quintilian’s discussion of speech features alerting an audience to an ironic meaning may well pertain: ‘[Irony] can be discerned from either the (speaker’s) delivery, or his character, or the circumstances. For if any of these stands in conflict with his words, it appears that his speech intends something different’ (*quae aut pronuntiatione intellegitur aut persona aut rei natura; nam si qua earum uerbis dissentit, apparet diuersam esse orationi uoluntatem*, 8.6.54–5). Caesar’s words certainly conflict with the situational circumstances, which may well have provoked audience members to search for their meaning and find it in this—still humorous but now rather ironic—dismissal.²³

Yet, this is still a far cry from the second, much bolder interpretation (and the one favoured by Bessone, as his title ‘No re ma Cesare’ itself suggests) that might be rendered as ‘I am a Caesar, not (just) a king’, with the speaker intending to make his name a title superior to king.²⁴ This would have been a bold statement, indeed, and its author would have been well advised to package it in such an ambiguous way, when ‘one thing is said, another meant’ (*cum alia dicuntur ac sentias*, Cic. *De or.* 2.269).²⁵ ‘I am a Caesar!’ would thus hide behind ‘I am not Mr. King’.

While all of these interpretations are more or less possible, most likely, by far, is that Caesar intended to evade the choice of accepting (silently) or rejecting (awkwardly) the odious title by way of a rather common and

²¹ Syme (1958) 173 identifies in ‘the predilection for the aristocratic cognomen’ a cultural condition of that transformation. ‘Caesar’ may have been a praenomen originally (Kajanto (1965) 178).

²² Cic. *Brut.* 292: *ego, inquit, ironiam illam quam in Socrate dicunt fuisse, qua ille in Platonis et Xenophontis et Aeschinis libris utitur, facetam et elegantem puto. est enim et minime inepti hominis et eiusdem etiam faceti, cum de sapientia disceptetur, hanc sibi ipsum detrahere, eis tribuere inluentem, qui eam sibi adrogant.* Cf. *TLL* VII.2.381.45–56 [Stiewe]; Opsomer (1998) 4–14.

²³ Montlahuc (2019) 3 is right to warn against attempts at over-categorising forms of wit: ‘En effet, les Modernes ont souvent tenté de différencier les catégories du rire et de distinguer l’ironie de la raillerie, la caricature, la parodie, le sarcasme, etc. Cette volonté louable de préciser les catégories d’analyse se heurte à l’impossibilité de différencier nettement, dans la plupart des textes anciens, les divers registres du “faire rire”.’

²⁴ Bessone (2011) 153: ‘Cesare volle conferire al proprio cognomen quella valenza di superiorità in assoluto che il pronipote e figlio adottivo escogiterà poi assumendo il titolo di Augusto’.

²⁵ Cicero’s contemporaneous definition of rhetorical irony, which he translates as *dissimulatio*, runs in full: *urbana etiam dissimulatio est, cum alia dicuntur ac sentias, non illo genere, de quo ante dixi, cum contraria dicas, ut Lamiae Crassus, sed cum toto genere orationis severe ludas, cum aliter sentias ac loquere.* Cf. *TLL* VII.2.381.57–67 [Stiewe]; Opsomer (1998) 14–18.

transparent pun on the ambiguous *R/rex*.²⁶ The word order supports this too: by mentioning his own name first (*Caesarem se*), the rejected title-turned-name second (*non Regem*), he clearly indicates how he (mis)understood the people's salutation just as such a name (it would be rather different with formulations such as *se non regem esse sed caesarem* or even *regem se non esse sed caesarem*).²⁷ However, it is also just conceivable that he meant to dismiss the acclamation by jokingly parallelising his cognomen with the title. But the beguiling interpretation of Caesar's grandly intending to turn his name into a title would hardly have occurred to anyone at the time; in fact, it is ultimately just another instance of that 'teleological perspective that (often insidiously) dominates our narratives of ... Julius Caesar's political career'.²⁸ For his cognomen would, of course, become part of the imperial nomenclature (cf. e.g., *Caesarem et Augustum et omnia principatus uocabula*, Tac. *Hist.* 2.80.1), only to then ultimately live on in the titles of 'Kaiser' and 'Tsar' (not to mention other languages).²⁹ It is history that makes Caesar's ambiguous response 'paradigmatica e, in un certo senso, quasi profetica', retroactively making it into 'I am a Caesar, not (just) a king'.³⁰ And if indeed it was intended (and most likely also received) as a joke, the historical irony of that later transformation would be rather profound.

Then again, how ironic would it be, if the 'people' had simply meant to address Caesar as their 'patron' (*OLD*, s.v. 'rex' 8), and the patron had—tellingly?—mistaken their salutation for an acclamation? But then, it does not seem to have occurred to any of his later readers either.

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²⁶ 'Yet hated as it was, there was still a splendour that played about the name, and it had been a recognized temptation to great men', as Rawson (1975) 159 rightly qualifies. Curiously, this interpretation of Caesar's engaging in wordplay in such a politically charged situation sits well with Morgan's interpretation ((1997) 25) of Caesar's infamous *dicta—nihil esse rem publicam, appellationem modo sine corpore ac specie. Sullam nescisse litteras, qui dictaturam deposuerit* (Suet. *Iul.* 77)—as evidence of 'rather trivial analysis of meanings of individual words'.

²⁷ All the Greek sources have this order: *οὐκ ἔφη βασιλεύς, ἀλλὰ Καῖσαρ καλεῖσθαι* (Plut. *Caes.* 60.2), *οὐκ εἶμι Βασιλεύς, ἀλλὰ Καῖσαρ* (App. *BC* 2.108), *καὶ αὐτὸς μὲν οὐκ ἔφη βασιλεύς ἀλλὰ Καῖσαρ καλεῖσθαι* (Dio 44.10.1), *οὐ βασιλεύς, ἀλλὰ Καῖσαρ ἔφη καλεῖσθαι* (Zonaras 10.11). But given that Caesar's response was in Latin, I deem Suetonius' version more dependable.

²⁸ Morstein-Marx (2021) 2.

²⁹ Levick (2009) 218–22 sketches the important steps.

³⁰ Sordi (2002/3) 211.

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