

5-2013

## Maria Wyke, Caesar in the USA.

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### Recommended Citation

Haynes, Holly (2013) "Maria Wyke, Caesar in the USA.," *New England Classical Journal*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 2 , 151-152.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol40/iss2/12>

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Maria Wyke, *Caesar in the USA*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 306. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-520-27391-7) \$39.95.

In her study of Julius Caesar's reception in the U.S.A., Maria Wyke ably shows the power the ancient dictator has exerted in this country over the shifting ideologies of the past century. Her book is a meticulously documented history of the uses to which he has been put in the areas of education, political theory and commentary, and entertainment. The picture of Caesar that emerges is fractured and complex. Wyke's interweaving of multiple sources draws out a Caesar who can be a good and bad guy not only alternately, in successive generations, but simultaneously in a single one. Particularly striking is her analysis in the chapter entitled "Totalitarianism" of Caesar's significance in the Cold War era, when different representations of his life and death made the analogy not only between him and Stalin (warning also of totalitarian aspirations in U.S. leaders), but also between the conspirators and Communist uprisings. Thus Caesar becomes both the leader of a hated regime and the old-regime victim whom the new rule deposes. Similarly in "Presidential Politics" she demonstrates the ways in which the detrimental analogy between the end of the Roman Republic and contemporary U.S. politics in the mid-twentieth century was co-opted by both the Left and the Right. The latter interpreted leaders such as Roosevelt and Kennedy as charismatic demagogues who gain power by corrupting the masses, the former as principled leaders challenged or overthrown by tyrannical ideologues like McCarthy or treacherous assassins blind to the genius and moral good of a strong leader.

Wyke arranges her wealth of material accessibly, using a straightforward chronological narrative. She partitions the book between accounts of the educational grounding of American culture in the story of Caesar (part 1: Education) and the ways in which that foundation informs its vision of politics (part 2: Political Culture). Finally, her chapter titles succinctly convey the ideological thrust of successive eras' interpretive stance toward Caesar. The progression of these titles encapsulates a narrative of a fledgling nation asserting independence and the moral parameters of human freedom and dignity within which it will live. As the U.S. grows in strength and global influence, so too does its struggle to define the nature of its own power within its borders and abroad. Thus the first three chapters, "Maturation," "Americanization," "Militarism," follow a double trajectory of Caesar's influence over American consciousness: that of the schoolchild's (read mostly "schoolboy's") education into good citizenship, and that of the nation's emerging awareness of its identity vis-à-vis both the Old World from which it rebelled and the contemporary one in which it quickly established its power. The following four chapters, "Dictatorship," "Totalitarianism," "Presidential Politics," and "Empire," move through the important roles assigned to Caesar in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' considerations of the causes and effects of war on a global scale and the parameters of U.S. leadership in domestic and foreign relations.

Caesar's rise and fall has invited compelling comparisons with the social and political events of nearly every generation, both because of the ease with which it fits into narrative and dramatic archetypes and the importance of

Roman republican political structures in the shaping of our own. In each chapter Wyke chooses examples from a wide variety of both highbrow and lowbrow media, literary, journalistic, historical, and popular, to illuminate the malleability of Caesar's image, which has been made to authorize an array of perspectives on the uses and abuses of power. Of particular importance in the shaping of America's vision of itself as or against Caesar are Caesar's own accounts of his military activities in Gaul (*De Bello Gallico*) and Shakespeare's eponymous play. These texts have been splintered, transformed, and co-opted by media ranging from Latin textbooks to comic books that often redact or excise significant portions of their originals better to emphasize certain political or moral points. The results are texts far less ambiguous than the originals. The famous crossing of the Rubicon is a case in point: Wyke's final chapter, "Empire," draws out the numerous analogies made during the first and second Bush administrations between the two presidents' decisions to go to war with Iraq and the ancient dictator's decision to march against his own people. All three to varying degrees pushed the boundaries of legality and good faith among allies and compatriots, but Wyke is quick to point out the major differences between the two political situations that were elided in these comparisons, as well as the contradictory tangles created by some of these interpretive efforts. She might also have pointed out that Caesar's own text is far more cagey about this major maneuver, never mentioning any river crossing and simply turning up in Ariminum without remarking on the fact that he has just committed the illegal act of marching into Italy with a legion (BC 1.8.1). Ambiguity, however, is not on modern agendas that wish to authorize or decry political action by recalling famous ancient precedents.

Though she does not explicitly say so, Wyke's account implies that the rich possibilities for reconstructing Caesar derive from the realness of his existence on the one hand, reinforced by his own accounts of the history that he made, and on the other the compelling fantasy created by Shakespeare. As primary chosen texts for schoolchildren *De Bello Gallico* and *Julius Caesar* introduce a figure whose reality invites fiction, and whose fictional representations carry the *frisson* of reality. He lodges so vividly in the American imagination because his story and history merge more seamlessly than those of perhaps any other historical figure. He can satisfy our desire both for the real and the fantastical. This satisfaction is the captivatingly achieved mission of the HBO series *Rome*. As Wyke points out, reviews of the series show that its interest lay not so much in the kinds of groundbreaking topics, narratives, and characters that HBO had previously introduced in series such as *The Sopranos* and *Deadwood* as in the look and feeling of reality with which it infused its ancient subject. This was its primary claim to success with its audience.

Wyke presents the materials of a fascinating study. Her discourse remains firmly that of a classical scholar, which serves well the purpose of convincingly packing together so many sources. Sometimes it lacks a deftness that would help the reader *unpack* the many instances of analogy she brings up, but that will perhaps be another book. Such rich and carefully documented material certainly calls for more interpretive study. In the meantime Wyke has done a masterful job of confronting the American public with the contradictions and antagonisms inherent in its own Caesarean self-image.

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