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Review

DOMENICO LOVASCIO, *Un nome, mille volti. Giulio Cesare nel teatro inglese della prima età moderna*. Pp. 207 (Lingue e Letterature Carocci, 192; Serie AIA Book Prize, 2). Rome: Carocci, 2015. Paperback £22.00 (ISBN 978 88 430 7541 6).

SHAKESPEARE depicted Caesar as one who 'doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus'. This was literally true in the English Renaissance: about one in ten of all the plays written between 1558 and 1642 dealt with Roman history. Even quite apart from his historical context and biography, Caesar was a symbol; it was the name—or the character—not necessarily the man, which was ubiquitous in the literature and culture of Renaissance Europe. England was no exception.

As this informative and well documented volume shows, here as well on as the continent, the very complexity of Caesar's figure was magnetic for dramatists. Clearly, this derives from the classical tradition as known in the Renaissance. Material was abundant even then. Widely-read authors such as Cicero, Catullus, Horace, Ovid, Sallustius, Livy, Pliny, Suetonius, Plutarch (and a plethora of other authors including Cassius Dio and Valerius Maximus) presented, especially when compared with one another, a rather ambivalent picture of the Roman hero. While praised for his military competence, his vigour, eloquence, and charisma, Caesar was also considered cruel, lascivious, irreligious and—above all—ambitious to the point of being willing to start a civil war for power (see 15–28 and 29–31, which, incidentally, add important elements to some articles published by Clifford J. Ronan between 1985 and 2005).

Quite correctly, Lovascio points out that the theatre is the supreme catalyst of these contradictions. On the stage, Caesar finds his ideal dimension: an appealing, controversial figure which goes far beyond an *exemplum* (31). Hence the decision to explore Caesar's presence in seven early modern English plays: Thomas Kyd's *Cornelia* (1594), the anonymous *Caesar's Revenge* (*c*. 1595), William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599), George Chapman's *Caesar and Pompey* (1604), William Alexander's *Julius Caesar* (1607), Ben Jonson's *Catiline His Conspiracy* (1611) and John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *The False One* (*c*. 1620). Interestingly, Shakespeare's tragedy, while frequently cited, is dealt with mostly in the prologue and in the introduction, thus acting as a point of reference to understand the other, often neglected, works, and place them firmly within the political and cultural debate of the period.

The analysis, in fact, helps the reader understand the multi-layered dimensions of the representations of this most famous son of Rome. In Kyd's *Cornelia*, Caesar's portrayal as a tyrant *ex defectu tituli* (i.e. an usurper), for example, is seen against the background of the Elizabethans' fears that a new war of succession might erupt at the death of the childless queen—which provides a key to understand the play's favourable, if somewhat blurred, view on tyrannicide. The anonymous *Caesar's Revenge* (dealt with in the last chapter) is found to be informed by similar fears. Here Caesar appears, again, as an usurping tyrant. More importantly, however, he is a man at the mercy of his own uncontrollable passions, as evident from his affair with Cleopatra. It is precisely this lack of self-mastery that turns him into a tyrant, and brings about his fall. Moving onto the Jacobean era, such a theme, as the book shows efficaciously, is also relevant to Fletcher and Massinger's *The False One* (Chapter 7). In this work, political concerns are intertwined with gender issues, and the condemnation of intemperance is even harsher than in *Caesar's Revenge*. The playwrights, the book contends, also seem to foreground Caesar's excessive attraction to material riches in order to voice scepticism about the potentially ruinous consequences of British colonization of the New World.

Chapman's Caesar (Chapter 4) is a character which, at first, may appear merely as a Machiavellian schemer. However, he will prove to be *faber suae fortunae*, a hero capable of mastering his own fortune. The play, however, seems to deliberately refrain from the creation of an idealized character in order to offer a 'realistic' portrayal of Caesar. Significantly, Lovascio associates Chapman's imperialistic (and almost 'colonialist') overtones with Prince Henry's 'universalistic aspirations' (cf. 101–2). In a way, Chapman prefigures the quintessential

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Machiavellian Caesar, the future destroyer of the republic appearing in Jonson's *Catiline* (which Lovascio has translated into Italian as *La Congiura di Catilina*, Genoa: ECIG, 2011), perhaps the most negative representation of Caesar in early modern English drama (Chapter 6).

An altogether different portrait is the one emerging from Alexander's play (Chapter 5), where Caesar is not an usurper, but a tyrant *ex parte exercitii* (i.e. in practice). In this respect, this work appears to be informed by the anxieties that spread in England in the early years of James I's reign: that the Scottish King might begin tampering with England's institutions and show himself to be a tyrant.

Un nome, mille volti provides a lucid analysis of these materials, and the comments on the quoted excerpts are frequently illuminating. This book proves that the English Renaissance theatre offered a much more radical (and negative) image of Caesar than hitherto argued by modern scholars. Caesar was always an ambiguous figure, vividly and continually present in the cultural life of the Renaissance and on the English stage; he accompanied and was inextricable from the political discourse of the Early modern period.

It is a pity that the book lacks an index of names, which would have provided a useful tool to help scholars to engage with the topic more easily. However, Lovascio's analysis of the contemporary concept of tyrannicide (and, implicitly, regicide) is particularly interesting to anyone interested in the history of Republicanism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After reading this volume one sees quite clearly that, for the English Renaissance dramatists, the ides of March were not gone at all.

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