

RE-IMAGINING THE CAESARS

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 By Dr Marco Angelini
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The recent DVD re-issuing of the television series *The Caesars*, Dir. Derek Bennett. ITV. 1968, presents an opportunity to revisit some of the background to the extraordinary recent interest in fictional and historical representations of ancient Rome, notably evidenced by the recent BBC/HBO lavish co-production of the television series *Rome*. Originally broadcast to great acclaim in 1968, *The Caesars* has since been almost wholly overshadowed by the BBC adaptation of Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* eight years later. This is a pity in some ways, because Philip Mackie's *The Caesars* represents the high point of a decade of ambitious and successful drama programming at ITV, centred on literary and historical adaptations such as *Saki* and *The Victorians*, and as such it perhaps merits a more distinctive place in the development of television drama. Viewers and reviewers at the time, in fact, sometimes mistook this six-part series for a BBC production, such were the elevated scope and comparatively lavish production values of the hour-long films. As well as being critically applauded, *The Caesars* was a huge popular success; it is not fanciful, then, to suggest it might have reignited interest in this kind of historical output, paving the way for the BBC's series.

The success of *The Caesars* should certainly be attributed in the main to Mackie's great care as writer and producer to ensure quality throughout the production. A uniformly strong cast from the ranks of British stage and television is led by outstanding performances from Roland Culver as Augustus, Freddie Jones as Claudius and Ralph Bates as Caligula; over fifty different sets were used for the series, which took over the entire space of Manchester's Granada TV Centre. Whilst the theatricality of the staging and acting owes a great deal to the dramatic conventions of the time, the choices to film in black and white and to concentrate on interiors certainly convey the internecine menace and claustrophobia of the political and personal machinations of the Julio-Claudians.

The production stands up remarkably well to contemporary viewing, due to its focus on the grim and pitiless realities of the exercise of political power that hold true for any period (despite the grainy quality of the picture, which is unavoidable in the absence of a better master copy). Indeed, in this sense *The Caesars* can be favourably compared with *I,*

Claudius for the more restrained version of Bates's Caligula, which is somehow more menacing compared to the histrionics of John Hurt's bravura show-stealer. Similarly, Culver represents a far more impressive and aristocratic Augustus when compared to the rough and earthy Brian Blessed; after all, Octavian did not become Augustus by virtue of being the last thug standing in the civil wars - he possessed political and organizational (if not military) skills that exerted an enormous weight on his contemporaries.

The success of *The Caesars*, however, as well as the consistent interest shown in this period, begs some broader questions about the relationship between these events and western culture and society. Generations of writers, thinkers and film-makers have been recreating the events and characters of this set of Romans: from *Carry On's* ludicrous 'infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me' to Shakespeare's a-historical 'Et tu, Brutel!', down to the arched personal and political character descriptions of Suetonius. More recently, there has been an explosion of interest in Rome, both in popular history and fiction; this should not surprise us - these figures and events are woven into the cultural fabric of the West, and represent an archetypal shorthand for key values and characteristics that we share: liberty, order, conscience, madness Cicero, Caesar, Brutus, Caligula. How else can we explain the non-historical use that these figures have been put to? George Bernard Shaw need not have chosen Caesar and Cleopatra to write his very modern eponymous play; Shakespeare wrote his *Julius Caesar* partly in order to make quasi-journalistic points about the Elizabethan political order; Robert Harris's just-published detective story *Imperium* features Cicero and other notable contemporaries, a telling literary choice that says so much about the way we seek to inhabit the past.

It helps of course, and is no coincidence, that we possess remarkable sources for these times: Cicero's letters, Caesar's war journals, the historical work of Polybius, Livy, and especially Suetonius; these were extraordinary times and the stakes could not have been higher - easily enough inspiration for ancient writers of all kinds. As a result, the political and institutional language of the modern world is deeply clothed in the language, custom and texture of the Roman world, all of which echoes so distinctly in *The Caesars*. The American revolution yielded a 'Senate', on 'Capitol Hill', with a presidency which increasingly takes on the aura of imperial deference (the recent US envoys to Iraq have been referred to as 'pro-consuls', without comment); whilst Italian Fascism was almost wholly indebted to the iconography and military symbolism of Rome. Napoleon went from 'Consul' to Emperor, whilst the German and Russian terms for 'emperor', 'Kaiser'

and 'Czar' respectively, owe a direct debt to the family name 'Caesar'.

So much for the universality of Roman imagery and institutional forms, but are they really immanent in the shaping of our history since those times? Are we so similar to them that it is reasonable for *The Caesars* to pass off as representative of that world? After all, the realities of life in Rome are not something most of us would bear lightly; Romans were fascinated by the physical spectacle of bloodshed, turning it into a popular entertainment, and the sexual mores of post-Augustan Rome would surely shock even a *Big Brother* audience. But this fault-line is not really the point, because, for example, what makes Graves's Claudius irresistible to us is not the historical accuracy of the Emperor's musings (of which we know nothing), but rather that he possesses a historical and literary sensibility that is thoroughly our own – thus he is a modern character who nourishes our hunger to bring the voices of these men and women to life; a paradox we cannot escape.

In the end there is enough of us in the Romans, and vice versa (to coin a modern phrase), to make these re-imaginings meaningful - at least to make the impulse irresistible. The distance and otherness will inevitably make any attempt at a connection incomplete but altogether necessary, because any attempt to understand ourselves must include those hundred years between the consolidation of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and its demise; a century that helped define the balance between order and liberty, and what it means to use power. Re-imagining these men and women will not tell us who they were; it tells us who we are.

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