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**The Lure of Leadership: Lessons from Plutarch on the Nature of an
Exceptional Statesman**

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of George and Zara Roberts, exemplars of exceptional statesmanship.

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Abstract

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In this paper, I show that Julius Caesar's character, appeal, and motivations (as seen in Plutarch's *Life*) were much more complex than most scholars believe. It is true that Plutarch's Caesar felt an irresistible ambition for power and that he often drew on his strategic brilliance to serve his own political interests. Yet power for power's sake was far from enough for him. Plutarch demonstrates, in fact, that Caesar's drive to become an absolute ruler stemmed not only from his longings for power and glory, but also from his desire to distribute benefits and justice to his subjects and to deserve the honor and gratitude they gave him in return. Caesar's overweening confidence in his ability to establish new, just orders was hugely attractive to the Roman people, who felt unfairly oppressed by the existing laws. Though Plutarch indicates that Caesar's self-assessment was unsupported by serious examination of questions regarding justice, he also suggests that Caesar's (and his people's) deep concern for justice played a key role in his rise to the throne.

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Introduction

Who was Plutarch's Caesar, and why is this question important? Why ask it rather than the more obvious—and more obviously relevant—question “Who was Caesar?”? After all, despite centuries of discussion of the great statesman's deeds, character, and lasting fame, “enduring problems in fathoming Caesar” remain: “the mystery of his intentions, and the controversies generated by that mystery” have in no way been resolved (Griffin 2009: 5). What was the nature of Caesar's ambition? Were all his decisions calculations of how best to secure his own power, or was he genuinely concerned with the good of Rome and its people? What role did love and friendship play in his life? What can his example teach us about the attractions and difficulties of political leadership? And although examining these questions requires us to turn to at least one primary portrayal of Caesar, why should we turn to Plutarch's in particular?

An answer appears at the start of Plutarch's companion to the *Life of Caesar*, that of Alexander. Here, Plutarch begs his readers not to denounce him for declining to treat all—or even some—of the famous feats of these figures extensively. His reasoning is that “I am not writing Histories, but Lives, and in the most remarkable deeds there is not by any means an explanation of virtue or vice, but a small thing like a phrase or a joke often makes a greater reflection of character than battles where tens of thousands die, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities.”¹ Plutarch then compares himself to a painter who shows who his subjects are through “the face and the looks of the eye” rather than the body, saying he focuses on “the signs of the soul” (I.2–3). With this statement, Plutarch casts himself not only as a reporter of historical events, but also as an analyst and judge of these events and especially of the people involved in them. As we will see, he does not often disclose these judgments explicitly. By

¹ Although the translations given in this essay are my own, I have benefited from those provided in the 1919 Loeb edition by Bernadotte Perrin.

purposely presenting his narratives in a certain way, however—by making inclusions and omissions that might, at first glance, seem strange—Plutarch invites us to judge the characters of his statesmen for ourselves and to piece together his own subtle teaching (cf. Stadter 2004; Liebert 2016).

In clearly separating himself from his fellow historians, then, Plutarch indicates how his project differs from theirs: through his descriptions of his subjects' lives, he is actively attempting to answer the kinds of questions raised at the beginning of this essay. He does not want to stop at narrating people's actions; he wants to understand and explain their deepest motivations. It is therefore likely that Plutarch's insights are especially relevant to questions regarding Caesar's character and intentions—and yet, though scholars generally agree that an investigation of Plutarch's *Life* is important to any comprehensive discussion of Caesar, hardly any in-depth arguments have been made about Plutarch's teaching in this work.

In one of the only full-length interpretations of the *Life of Caesar*, Gleicher (2002) concludes that “Plutarch's Caesar (in contrast, for example, to his representations of Pompey or Cicero) is not a study in complexity, but rather a man all of whose significant actions were functions of a single fundamental moral choice, and whose encounter with the right circumstances turned that choice into a destiny” (278). This choice, Gleicher suggests, was Caesar's decision always to serve his own ambitions rather than the common good. According to Gleicher, then, Plutarch portrays Caesar as essentially one-sided: “Even those incidents ... that might give him some depth and complexity are presented as plausibly susceptible to a one-dimensional interpretation” (274). Pelling (1979) claims that Plutarch refrains from making moral judgments about Caesar's life, then argues later (2009) that he offers a “polarized analysis” of Caesar's character, declining to discuss any event that contradicts his vision of the

“effective, determined man of success” (256). For these authors, Plutarch’s Caesar appears to be an almost completely unambiguous figure.

Other scholars are less certain. Griffin (2009) argues that Plutarch views Caesar with a combination of “admiration” and “abhorrence” (371), while Buszard (2008) claims that Plutarch presents “a complex portrait that praises Caesar’s personal virtues [of courage, strength, and general military brilliance] but also leads one to disapprove of his ambitious plans before learning what those plans will be” (197). Neither of these assertions, however, appears in an exclusive treatment of the *Life of Caesar*; Buszard is comparing this work to other *Lives* of Plutarch’s, while Griffin merely mentions Plutarch in her introduction to a discussion of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Pelling, too, compares many *Lives* in his first article and contrasts Plutarch with Suetonius in his second. Almost none of these scholars base their claims on a thorough and focused reading of the *Life of Caesar*, which means Gleicher’s argument—the only one of these that pertains exclusively to the *Life*—remains largely unchallenged. Without such a reading, it is near-impossible to bring out any kind of complexity in full.

In this paper, then, I use a detailed examination of the *Life* to maintain that Plutarch paints a portrait of Caesar that is far from one-sided. Though I agree with Gleicher that many incidents in the *Life* are “plausibly susceptible to a one-dimensional interpretation,” I demonstrate that more than one interpretation is usually possible, that at certain important junctures alternative interpretations are indeed more compelling, and that, rather than privileging one interpretation over another, Plutarch gives us the material to begin understanding for ourselves the many intricacies of Caesar’s character and situation. At the same time, taking these intricacies together allows us to formulate some thoughts on why outstanding leadership was so attractive to a man like Caesar—and why a man like Caesar was so attractive to his people.

Julius Caesar: First Impressions

The *Life of Caesar* begins unexpectedly in more ways than one. First, Plutarch gives none of his usual (and often quite detailed) preliminaries about his subject's lineage, birth, and childhood (contrast, for example, *Alexander* II–V and *Cicero* I–III). The general view, presented by the editors of the Loeb edition (1919), is that these opening paragraphs have been lost. Given Plutarch's aforementioned statement that he makes many purposeful omissions from his *Lives*, however, it seems a distinct possibility that he intentionally withholds his usual opening from the *Life of Caesar* (Gleicher 265)—but why do so? Perhaps Plutarch means to surround Caesar with a kind of divine mystique, as though he never did anything so human as being born and growing up. As Gleicher notes, however, Plutarch highlights Alexander's supposedly divine lineage at the beginning of the *Life of Alexander*, which raises the question of why, if Plutarch does wish to present Caesar as godlike from the outset, he does not simply use the same tactic.² Moreover, he states in the first sentence of Alexander's *Life* that “It is the life of Alexander the king, and of Caesar, who put down Pompey, that I am writing in this book” (I.1). This comparison of the two men makes Caesar, who receives in this introduction neither the title of “king” nor any mention of his countless accomplishments besides his overthrow of Pompey, seem inferior. Yet it is hard to tell just what Plutarch is trying to suggest, and it is clear that in order to investigate his intentions further, we must turn to the rest of Caesar's *Life*.

A closer look at the opening paragraph reveals its second unexpected feature: the first person Plutarch mentions directly is not the great man himself, but his wife, Cornelia. Cornelia, Plutarch explains, was the daughter of Cinna, who was an important ally of the populist leader

² And he had the source material to do so; Badian (2009) explains that “the claim of the Iulii to descend from Venus, via Aeneas and Ascanius, was well known among the [Roman] upper class” by the 170s BCE.

Gaius Marius.³ When Lucius Cornelius Sulla—Marius’ archenemy and champion of the nobles—seized total control of Rome in 82,⁴ therefore, he tried to make Caesar divorce Cornelia, not wanting someone so politically prominent to maintain such obvious connections to Marius. Yet Sulla, who had succeeded in making himself dictator of Rome, failed either to cajole or to threaten young Caesar into divorcing his wife. Clearly, Caesar could not be moved as easily as the ordinary person—but why? What gave him the strength to resist Sulla’s command?

Plutarch claims that this strength stemmed from Caesar’s virulent hatred of Sulla, which Plutarch traces back to Caesar’s separate connection to Marius. Marius, it turns out, was Caesar’s own cousin. Although the ambitious Caesar also felt politically snubbed by Sulla—a feeling that surely contributed to his resentment—Plutarch places the emphasis on Caesar’s familial solidarity. This emphasis, along with the decision to mention Caesar’s wife before Caesar himself, links Caesar most strongly to family affairs. He had a deep attachment to what he believed was his own—a key aspect of the phenomenon the Greeks called *thumos*, or spiritedness⁵—and it was this attachment, Plutarch suggests, that made him angry enough to stand firm against Sulla’s coercion (I.1–2). Though we are not used to thinking of Caesar primarily as a family man, perhaps Plutarch is hinting that by shifting our perspective, we can gain greater insights into who Caesar was as a statesman.⁶

³ For full discussions of the rivalry between Marius and Sulla (taken up by Marius’ son after his death), as well as the civil wars it caused, see Holland (2005), Sampson (2013), and Duncan (2017)—and, of course, Plutarch’s *Lives* of Marius and Sulla.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all dates are BCE.

⁵ See, for example, Plato, *Republic*, 423e4–424c6 and 428c11–430c6; Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1111a25–b18; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1378a31–1380b34.

⁶ Shakespeare, who used Plutarch as a main source for *Julius Caesar* (Clark 2009), seems to have the same interpretation. The first word Caesar speaks in the play is his wife’s name (at this time, he is married to Calpurnia, the daughter of the consul Piso), and the first concern he raises regards his superstitions surrounding Calpurnia’s fertility (I.2.1–11).

Sulla, of course, was far from pleased by the statesman Caesar was becoming. Telling his men that he saw “many Mariuses” in Caesar, he contemplated having the young man killed, demonstrating once again what a formidable force Caesar was already. When Caesar heard of Sulla’s potential plan, he went into hiding, traveling around the country and eventually getting captured by pirates. These pirates, not knowing who he was, commanded him to pay twenty talents for his freedom. Caesar, laughing in their faces, said he would give them fifty. Here, Plutarch shows Caesar exhibiting great pride in his status and in his name, as well as a desire to demonstrate the magnificent unconcern for money that would make that status clear (I.2–II.1).

While waiting for his men to secure the ransom, Caesar also showed a magnificent unconcern for whatever threat the pirates might pose to him. He told them to be quiet when he wanted to sleep, exercised with them, and read them poems and speeches of his own invention. If the pirates did not marvel at these writings, Caesar called them “uneducated barbarians” and, laughing again, threatened to hang them. The pirates were quite taken with him, assuming he talked this way out of “a certain simplicity and childish play.” But when the ransom came through, Caesar took immediate action against the pirates, imprisoning them, securing their money, and eventually crucifying them all, “just as he had often warned them on the island that he would do, when they thought he was joking” (II.1–4).

This chilling incident reveals much about Caesar’s character. First, he was not at all fearful; he seemed confident that he would not be harmed, though what exactly he thought would protect him—his fame, his men, his own strength and wit, or a combination of these things—was unclear. Second, he believed he was owed a large measure of recognition and admiration, and he would not hesitate to retaliate against those who refused to give it to him. Third, he had a playful

manner that both endeared him to others and made them mistake his all-too-serious intentions for mere jests.

Plutarch gives no indication of what lay behind Caesar's laughter, which makes at least two different interpretations of it possible. On one hand, Caesar could have been using his laughter for strategic purposes—making himself seem less dangerous than he really was in order to catch the pirates off guard, thereby ensuring their defeat. On the other hand, laughter, as Plato emphasizes in his *Republic*, can represent an attempt to change one's mood (388e6–8)—to shake off the severity of one's own indignation or despair. Caesar's laughter at those who were ignorant of his status and refused to admire his writings, then, could also point to the true depth of the anger he felt upon not getting the esteem he thought he deserved. Following this interpretation, Caesar's laughter would be indicative of a deep passion, while it would appear more pragmatic—demonstrative of Caesar's recognition that he had to use both guile and force to secure his power and freedom—according to the first one.

Caesar did at least seem to display a concern for just deserts after he returned to Rome in 77, which Sulla's waning power allowed him to do. The first thing he did when he arrived was to impeach the consul Dolabella for "ill-usage of his [Greek] district." When many of the Greeks then "supplied [Caesar] with demonstrations of favor," he "repaid their goodwill" by helping them prosecute another of their politicians for corruption. Though Plutarch stresses that Caesar considered himself more of a general than an orator, he also states that Caesar was "by nature the best regarding political speeches" and that he won widespread admiration on account of his "speech concerning advocacy." Furthermore, after the people granted Caesar a military tribuneship⁷ in 68, his first act was to give a public address in praise of Marius' deceased wife

⁷ This office gave its possessor command of a portion of the Roman army. A valuable resource for these definitions is Frank Frost Abbott's *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions* (1902).

Julia, and his second was to show images of Marius in Julia's funeral procession. This latter act was particularly daring, since Sulla had banned all such displays after seizing the dictatorship, and some political elites disapproved of Caesar's boldness. The people, however, loudly praised Caesar, especially since he made another unconventional decision: to pronounce a funeral oration over Cornelia when she died (at that time, it was customary to give such orations for old women, but not young ones). This third untraditional deed awakened the people's sympathies "so that they were fond of him, as a man who was gentle and full of moral character" (III.1–V.2).

Why did the people attach themselves to Caesar so quickly and with such fervor? He was, as Plutarch states, much more friendly and generous toward them than most of his peers were (IV.2–3). Caesar also spent such large amounts of money on public works, games, and theatrical events that "each [member of the people] sought new offices and new honors with which to repay him" (V.5). Yet this friendly generosity, though important, does not explain what Plutarch suggests was another of the people's key motivations. They saw Caesar as an advocate for the downtrodden—someone who not only recognized when the elites were mistreating their subjects, but also had the power and the desire to do something about it. They saw him as someone whose moral character would guide him to do what his feelings indicated was right, even if he had to defy his fellow nobles or break with custom to achieve it.

Caesar continued to break with custom as he honored Marius further. As Plutarch describes, Sulla's party had held complete control of Rome since Marius' deposition, while Marius' party had been crushed and disbanded, its members "living in abject fear." After being elected aedile⁸ in 66, however, Caesar not only charmed the general public with a host of feasts and performances, but also had elaborate pictures of and honors for Marius secretly placed in the

⁸ Magistrate responsible for public buildings and games, as well as the grain supply.

Capitol one night. Upon seeing this display, some people accused Caesar of trying to make himself tyrant, since he was “setting up again honors that had been buried by laws and decrees.” This flouting of the law, they argued, was meant as a test of the people’s loyalty—a trial run that would reveal whether the people loved Caesar enough to reject their old orders and follow his commands. The Marians, on the other hand, felt safe enough to show themselves in the Capitol for the first time in years, weeping with joy and praising Caesar as “the man who was, above all others, worthy of his kinship with Marius.” Though many senators expressed suspicion of Caesar, he managed to convince them that his intentions were pure, which made his supporters admire him all the more (VI.1–4).

Just how pure were Caesar’s intentions? Although Plutarch states explicitly that Caesar wanted the support of the Marians, he does not say why. He also notes only that Caesar “defended himself” against the charges of the senators, declining to comment on the sincerity of this defense. Once again, more than one alternative explanation seems possible.

It could be argued that Caesar was thinking only of how best to seize power. In this case, his decision to champion the oppressed party—and, more generally, to style himself as the defender of the people—would have been wholly strategic. Yet the way Plutarch first described Caesar, which he now recalls by mentioning Caesar’s “kinship with Marius,” raises questions about this judgment. As Plutarch said, Caesar’s relationship to Marius inspired his hatred of Sulla. It could be, then, that Caesar had a real desire to avenge his cousin. Perhaps he felt that one of his own had been unjustly treated, which meant that in a way, he himself had been unjustly treated as well. And as we have seen, Caesar had a heightened sense of what he deserved, one that may sometimes have filled him with a retributive spirit. Caesar might have wanted the Marians on his side because their fervent loyalty would be useful, but he might also

genuinely have wanted to right what he saw as wrongs. A third possibility is that Caesar felt both of these motivations, perhaps making one or the other his primary focus as circumstances required. Already, the complexity of his situation is becoming apparent.

Caesar the Manipulator

Plutarch deepens this complexity with his next two anecdotes. The first one begins with Caesar's decision to compete against two of Rome's most influential senators, Isauricus and Catulus, for the office of high priest in 63. Although the race was a close one, Caesar won, causing Catulus to blame Cicero for having previously given up an opportunity to have Caesar killed. This opportunity occurred after Catiline, having plotted to destroy the Roman constitution and government, was exiled from the city and, along with his fellow conspirators, sentenced to death by the senate earlier that year.⁹ Plutarch says it is "uncertain" whether Caesar was involved in the conspiracy or not; either way, however, he was the only senator to argue against the death sentence (VII.1–5).

In what Plutarch calls a "carefully thought-out speech," Caesar claimed that "it did not seem to him customary or just" to execute men of such noble rank and birth without a trial. He recommended that instead of killing the conspirators now, the senators imprison them until the war against Catiline had been won, at which point they could reflect in a more measured way on each case. Because this judgment "appeared to be so humane" and because Caesar made his speech so "powerfully," many of the senators changed their positions and sided with him. Cato and Catulus, however, argued vehemently against Caesar and cast suspicion on him, eventually convincing their peers once again to put the conspirators to death. As Caesar was leaving the

⁹ For a full discussion of Catiline's actions and their consequences, see Sallust's *Catiline's Conspiracy*, trans. William W. Batstone (2010).

senate, some members of Cicero's bodyguard threatened him with swords, but Cicero stopped them from doing more, either "fearing the people¹⁰ or believing the murder would be wholly unjust and lawless" (VII.5–VIII.2). This was the missed opportunity to which Catulus referred.

The most obvious conclusion that comes to mind after reading this story is that Caesar had been involved in the Catilinarian conspiracy and that he was acting strategically to save his accomplices. Following this line of thought, we see that although Caesar himself clearly had no problem flouting custom and the law, his speech—the speech that Plutarch says "appeared to be" humane, leaving us wondering whether or not it really was—showed his awareness of the strong link his fellow senators saw between the customary and the just. By referring to the "dignity and brilliant lineage" of the conspirators as a reason for leniency, Caesar appealed to a belief or hope that many of the senators surely held: that "brilliant lineage" was not simply an indicator of wealth or an accident of birth propped up by hollow traditions, but a symbol of real merit that made its possessors deserving of trust. If Caesar was acting here in a completely calculative way, he was playing on that belief or hope without feeling it himself.

This conclusion, however, raises some questions. If Caesar had indeed been involved in the conspiracy, would not the most strategically intelligent move have been to distance himself from the condemned men as much as possible—to avoid attracting more suspicion at all costs? Now, he might have thought that casting himself as the voice of clemency—the adult in the room, as it were—would ultimately make that risk worth the political reward. But it could also be that Caesar, while manipulating his peers via their moral attachments, could not quite free himself from his thumotic attachment to his accomplices. Perhaps he felt compelled, despite the dangers, to defend his own, just as he had when he so boldly opposed Sulla. Perhaps he felt some

¹⁰ Plutarch says in the next paragraph that Cato, too, greatly feared an uprising by "the poor, who were inflaming the whole multitude with the hopes that they fixed on Caesar" (VIII.4).

real desire, as he had when defending the Marians, to champion the sufferers of what he saw as an injustice—to make a move that, although it may have benefited him politically, could not be called a simply strategic calculation.

And what if Caesar was innocent? In this case, his motives for defending the conspirators are even harder to unpack. Once again, he risked raising suspicion against himself, although he may have seen benefits to appearing more reasonable and humane than the other senators. At the same time, some part of him might still have cherished the very hope he used against his peers—the hope that high rank signifies real worth. We have seen, after all, how absorbed Caesar was with his own status and how harshly he took vengeance on those who did not recognize it. As Plutarch shows, Caesar felt that absorption from a young age, before achieving his many political successes. It is likely, then, that he took pride not only in his remarkable deeds, but also in his noble birth—and that he believed those of similar lineage deserved a certain amount of respect. Following this line of thought leads to the possibility that Caesar felt some genuine desire to defend the conspirators even if he was not one himself.

Whether or not Caesar was innocent, therefore, calling his motives purely calculative in this situation would be hasty. Yet it would be just as reductive to downplay too strongly the possibility of strategic calculation at work. By declining to comment on Caesar's involvement in the conspiracy, Plutarch prompts us to consider the different possibilities, what each one means for Caesar's character, and how his strategic cunning may have combined or competed with his less definable passions and hopes.

Plutarch does the same with his second anecdote, which concerns an event that happened after Caesar was elected praetor¹¹ in 62. Although he was not involved in any political scandals

¹¹ A position that ranked second only to consul, the highest office in the Republic.

during his praetorship, an outrageous incident did occur within his family. This event centered around Publius Clodius, a wealthy nobleman known for his “*hubris* and over-boldness.” Clodius was in love with Pompeia, Caesar’s current wife, and although she welcomed his advances, Caesar’s mother made sure to keep a close watch on Pompeia at all times. It was not until the festival of the goddess Bona, therefore, that Clodius and Pompeia were able to meet (IX.1–4).

During this nighttime festival, Plutarch explains, the women of Rome performed various sacred rites that the men were forbidden by law to witness. Clodius, who was still young enough to be beardless, formed a plan to sneak into Pompeia’s house by dressing up as a lute-girl. Pompeia, who had consented to the scheme, had her maid let Clodius in and tell him to wait for her, but he grew so impatient that he began roaming the house. Another maid discovered him, realized he was a man, and screamed, causing the rest of the women to panic. Eventually, they threw Clodius out and reported his behavior to their husbands. The next day, almost all the most prominent senators demanded that Clodius “give justice not only to those whom he had insulted, but also to the city and to the gods” and accused him of various other crimes, including incest with his sister. The people, however, opposed the senators and took Clodius’ side, ultimately bringing about his acquittal (X.1–7).

Why did the people defend Clodius? Plutarch gives no explanation of their actions, but a look at Clodius’ history and career provides some clues. In 59, three years after the incident with Pompeia, he was adopted into a plebeian family and elected tribune.¹² Given his position, he proposed laws meant to benefit the people, enacting (to take one example) a set of reforms “forbidding execution of a Roman citizen without trial” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). If the people had enough confidence in Clodius not only to elect him tribune, but even to accept him as

¹² Different from a military tribuneship, this office obliged its possessor to give voice to the concerns of the plebeians, to legislate on their behalf, and generally to protect them against possible harm from the nobles.

one of their own, he had clearly been angling for—and securing—their support for quite some time. It is likely that although the senators saw Clodius primarily as an unjust scofflaw, the people saw him primarily as their advocate, which led them to push for his acquittal despite the accusations against him.

And what did Caesar do about all this? In an even harsher blow to the nobles, he took a neutral stance on the affair. Strangely, he immediately divorced Pompeia, but then claimed at Clodius' trial that he knew nothing about the scandal and refused to pass judgment on it. When the prosecutor then asked him why he had divorced Pompeia, Caesar replied, "Because I believed my wife should not even be suspected." Plutarch concludes this anecdote with a characteristically ambiguous statement: he says some claimed that Caesar was being honest at the trial, while others held that he did know what had happened, but professed ignorance in order to stay on the people's good side (X.6–7).

It is hard, of course, to avoid the conclusion that Caesar did know about the affair—how could he not have known, or at least suspected?—and was once again acting strategically. To placate the people, he refused to condemn Clodius; to placate the senators, he appealed again to their attachment to custom and their belief that it represented justice, this time assuring them that he took matters of chastity and propriety as seriously as they did. And, as previously mentioned, Clodius was acquitted, for the judges were unable to resist the pressure put on them by the people.

Once again, however, Plutarch presents both possibilities relating to the trial without delivering a verdict, tempting us to speculate about what Caesar's ignorance of the affair would mean. In this case, his divorce and his statement that "I believed my wife should not even be suspected" would further confirm his attachment to his status, as well as his desire to reject and

punish those who refused to revere it appropriately. Given how central these feelings were to Caesar's character, however, it seems likely that he would have had them—that in some sense, he would have seen himself as the betrayed husband—in the first version of the story as well. It could be, then, that even if Caesar did know about the affair and was calculating how best to turn it to his advantage, a part of him was also seething with indignation against his wife.

On one hand, then, Caesar appears to have been a wily politician and orator who, knowing that his fellow senators viewed certain customs and laws as unquestionably just, simply used those views for his own benefit. On the other hand, Plutarch suggests that even as Caesar engaged in this manipulation, he may still have labored under the bonds from which he seemed to be so free. For Caesar harbored a strong sense of justice himself, exemplified in his feeling that he and those close to him deserved great honor.

Plutarch strengthens this suggestion with his next two stories, relating what happened after Caesar was granted command of Spain and traveled there with his soldiers. While crossing the Alps, the men passed a "small barbarian town." The soldiers mocked this town, jokingly asking whether the grand kinds of political contests that occurred in Rome could possibly go on here. Caesar, "being serious," replied, "I would rather be first among these people than second among the Romans." Just as with the pirates, Caesar was not joking, and this time, he was not even trying (or pretending) to joke; he saw his abilities and his status as too gravely important for that. Later on in the journey, he grew even more solemn, astonishing his men by bursting into tears while reading the history of Alexander the Great. When the soldiers asked Caesar why he was crying, he replied, "Does it not seem to you to be worthy of grief that while Alexander, at such an age, was already king of so many, nothing so brilliant has been done by me?" Here, Caesar not only refused to laugh at himself, but also bewailed his situation (XI.1–3).

Building on the scene with the pirates, Plutarch now demonstrates more clearly the depth of Caesar's desires for excellence and recognition. The first story, which shows only that Caesar yearned to be absolutely superior to everyone around him, could be taken as evidence that all he wanted was power. Plutarch's second story, however, complicates what being "first" meant to Caesar. It reveals that he longed to be "brilliant" in the same way Alexander was—to do the dazzling deeds that would earn him the same level of admiration and remembrance. Caesar also felt these desires so intensely that they sometimes rendered him unable to control his emotions, even before men whose respect he surely craved. Plutarch implies, then, that casting Caesar as a purely power-hungry manipulator would be too simplistic. He needed to dominate in order to achieve his hoped-for status, but he wanted more than mere domination. He desired the delight of basking in people's esteem, not just the cruel satisfaction of crushing them—and he worried that if he did not achieve a certain level of success, he would stop deserving that esteem.¹³ Although Caesar could play on some of his peers' moral attachments (demonstrating his ability to separate himself, at least in some way, from those attachments), he could not separate himself from his own longing to keep attaining and meriting great honor. Furthermore, that longing was what drove him to reach for power, which means it is impossible to divorce even his most cunning maneuvers from his most ardent hopes.

Caesar was able to realize some of those hopes after his journey to Spain, where he and his army conquered various hostile tribes, established peace among warring cities, and enriched themselves and Rome. These deeds secured for Caesar the highest office in the land: the consulship. As soon as he returned to Rome in 59, then, Caesar "took on an act of administration that deceived everyone except Cato": he ended the ongoing feud between Pompey and Crassus,

¹³ This focus on meritorious deeds shows that however much Caesar's noble lineage factored into his assessment of his own worth, it clearly was not the only factor at play.

the two most powerful men in the city.¹⁴ By bringing them together and using their combined influence for his own gain, Caesar “got away with changing the government unnoticed, in an act that could be considered one of humane kindness.” At this point in the narrative, Plutarch makes a rare, explicit statement of his own opinion, reminding us of the nefarious side of Caesar’s actions. He says most people think the eventual enmity of Caesar and Pompey caused the civil wars that later occurred between their opposing factions, but these wars had an earlier catalyst: the statesmen’s friendship. Initiating this friendship helped Caesar depose the existing aristocracy, which gave him and Pompey total authority—an authority that neither statesman would ultimately be content to share (XII.1–XIII.3). Though Caesar’s quiet revolution “could be considered” an act of kindness to the people, then, Plutarch clearly signals that it was not really one—that, in fact, it set the stage for the horrors of civil war, despite how it may have seemed to the people in the moment.¹⁵

And, of course, it seemed spectacular to them, for Caesar instantly “proposed laws that were fitting not for a consul, but for a most overbold tribune of the people,” stating his intention to distribute land to the plebeians at a generous rate. The other senators’ opposition to these measures, Plutarch says, gave Caesar “the motive he had long needed” to bypass them and appeal straight to the people for support. Leaving the senate building, Caesar affected to throw himself on the people’s mercy, telling them the *hubris* and harshness of the senators had driven him there. With Crassus on one side of him and Pompey on the other, he asked the plebeians if they approved of his laws. When they said they did, he exhorted them to support him against his opponents, which they vowed to do. This incident constituted Caesar’s first direct petition to the

¹⁴ See Plutarch’s *Life of Pompey* for further details on this rivalry.

¹⁵ Plutarch also speaks more frankly about this revolution in the *Life of Pompey*, saying it “was noble and otherwise statesmanlike, but [Caesar] undertook it for a paltry reason and with the great cleverness of a plotter” (XLVII.1).

people at the expense of the nobles, and, understandably, the former were thrilled, while the latter were deeply worried (XIV.1–3). In this section, then, Plutarch once again brings the strategic side of Caesar to the fore, reminding us of his ability to use both his fellow nobles and the people for his own ends.

In order to gain an even firmer hold on power, Caesar continued to wield the influence of the more established Pompey. Though his own daughter Julia was already engaged, he re-engaged her to Pompey, then had Pompey's daughter—who, likewise, was already spoken for—re-engaged to an ally of his. Caesar also curried favor with Piso, another powerful noble, by giving him a consulship and marrying his daughter, Calpurnia. Observing the formation of these alliances, Cato, enraged, shouted that “it was unbearable that the political leadership was being bargained away with marriages and that men were bringing in districts and armies and other powers by means of women” (XIV.4–5). Now, it seems that Caesar would stop at nothing to get what he desired—that no personal relationship was off-limits if forming (or breaking) it would help him gain full control of Rome. As he reemphasizes Caesar's strategic abilities, then, Plutarch continues to highlight how what seemed established to the Roman nobles did not necessarily seem established to Caesar. He readily subverted laws that his fellow senators would never have dreamed of overturning. Furthermore, he saw that many of those laws disproportionately benefited the nobles themselves, a problem that had fostered resentment among the people and primed them to welcome any advocate with open arms. Caesar, therefore, took his opportunity to overthrow the Roman aristocracy, replacing its long-settled orders with his own promises and bolstering the people's hopes that they would finally get what they felt they deserved.

Caesar the Victor

At this point in Caesar's career, almost all of his peers had turned against him, even refusing to accompany him to the senate. But when he embarked upon his Gallic campaigns in 58, it was "as if he had seized upon another beginning and entered onto some other path of life and new deeds." This statement is noteworthy, for it is somewhat of a "new beginning" for Plutarch as well; suddenly, he begins to praise Caesar much more generously and much less ambiguously than before.¹⁶ Paterson (2009) describes Plutarch's presentation as that of "the standard model general" (138), but this is an understatement. Plutarch suggests that Caesar was a better soldier and general than any of those who preceded him, at least among the Romans: he claims Caesar's military achievements eclipsed those of men like Scipio, Sulla, Marius, and "even Pompey himself," emphasizing that Caesar not only fought more battles, killed more and stronger enemies, and acquired more land, but also showed more "reasonableness and mildness" toward his prisoners and more beneficence toward his own men (XV.1–3). Soldiers who seemed ordinary or lackluster under other commanders suddenly became "irresistible" under Caesar, inspired to fight boldly both by his example and by pride in the army as a whole. Plutarch gives a few examples of such soldiers, but one in particular is striking: the example of Granius Petro, who got captured by Scipio while sailing a ship of Caesar's around Africa. After executing Granius' men, Scipio offered to spare Granius himself—"but Granius, saying that it was the custom with Caesar's soldiers not to receive but to give deliverance, killed himself with a blow of his sword" (XVI.1–4).

This is the kind of "spirit and love of honor" that Plutarch says "Caesar himself stirred up and cultivated" within his soldiers. Caesar was able to do so, first, because he rewarded them in

¹⁶ "Notwithstanding his deep criticism of Caesar's ambition, Plutarch amply gives him his due on the score of courage, self-mastery, and technical skill" (Gleicher 272).

an “unsparing” way, showing that he was not trying to enrich himself through his conquests, but that he used the money “as a common prize for manly virtue ... and that he had no greater share in the wealth than he gave to the deserving among his soldiers.” Caesar also willingly entered into every danger that his men had to face and undertook every difficult task that his men had to bear. Plutarch explains that Caesar’s “love of danger” did not surprise his soldiers, since they were well aware of his “love of honor”; his ability to shoulder great physical burdens, however, astonished them, since he was a slender man with various health problems. Yet despite these problems, Caesar was able to push himself “beyond his body’s power of endurance.” He exercised constantly, excelled at horsemanship, and almost always confined his periods of sleep to times when he and his men were traveling. Even when he was resting, Caesar stayed in motion (XVII.1–4).

These descriptions of Caesar the general—and, as we recall, he thought of himself as a general first and a politician second—reveal much about his character and his effect on others. As we saw at the beginning of the *Life*, Caesar punished those who did not give him the honor he thought he deserved. Now, we continue to see Caesar craving that honor so much that he regularly reached beyond his physical limits in order to win it. His capacity for such reaching made him appear more than human, able to transcend the needs and defects of his body to the extent that they almost did not matter. Caesar’s desire for honor also drove him to transcend—or at least push aside—the fears that an ordinary human being would feel upon entering a battle. Moreover, Plutarch does not simply say Caesar was indifferent to danger; he says he loved it and, by stating that his soldiers “were not amazed at his love of danger because of his love of

honor” (XVII.2), suggests that the former stemmed from the latter.¹⁷ For Caesar, risking his life in battle was the best and most obvious way to gain what he so deeply desired.

As Caesar demonstrated during his Spanish campaign, then, he longed to be “first” (XI.3)—to push himself in ways that would prove his superiority and to win victories that would establish him as an unquestionable conqueror. The battlefield, where feats of extraordinary courage would undoubtedly rocket Caesar to the top, offered ample opportunity for such advancement. As we have seen, however, being “first” meant more to Caesar than simply achieving domination.

Though his constant conquests and exhibitions of bravery elicited awe from his soldiers and fear from his foes, Caesar craved a recognition that went beyond fear or even awe. Plutarch’s statements about Caesar’s notable gentleness and generosity (both to his own men and to his enemies) are unambiguous, indicating that Caesar wanted to be not only a supremely courageous leader, but also a supremely beneficent one. Yet Caesar’s beneficence was not indiscriminate, for he gave the greatest shares of his spoils only to the “deserving among his soldiers”—the ones who had displayed the most “manly virtue” in battle (XVII.1). His focus on distributing appropriate rewards for virtue, combined with his desire for honor, demonstrates Caesar’s deep concern for justice. He longed to become a vastly powerful ruler, but he also longed to use that power to reward those he saw as virtuous and to punish those he saw as wicked. And in exchange for ruling in this way, Caesar felt that he deserved large amounts of appreciation and praise.

¹⁷ Cf. XX.4–5, where Caesar responded to the unexpected onslaught of sixty thousand enemies by seizing a shield and charging forward by himself. His men, “by means of Caesar’s courage ... fought beyond their powers, as the saying is.”

It would be inaccurate, then, to describe Caesar as an entirely selfless benefactor of the just, although many of his people may have seen him as one. As Granius, who saw himself as a representative of Caesar, indicated, he thought he should always be giving deliverance rather than receiving it (XVI.4). Yet Caesar did believe he was owed something in return for what he gave, and he became indignant with those who kept it from him. Once again, then, the question of his deepest motivation arises. What did Caesar see as the ultimate peak of his leadership—benefiting the virtuous among his people (often at his own expense) or gaining the honor that he felt was central to his own flourishing?

Plutarch provides no answers to this question here, but continues to narrate Caesar's military and political achievements. As his campaigns continued, the prestige and admiration he received only grew. After subduing many different parts of Gaul, he was lauded for trying to conquer the island of the Britanni, which marked his first attempt to expand the Roman rule beyond the settled world (XXIII.2–3). When the Gauls revolted, Caesar, being “naturally able to best use all the things of war, especially its crucial moments,” led his forces against them once again and, after many difficult battles, triumphed (XXVI.1–XXVII.5). Having achieved so many brilliant successes, it was inevitable that Caesar would eventually decide to stop using Pompey's influence, to overthrow him, and to seize sole control of Rome.

Pompey, Plutarch states, had held Caesar in contempt until recently, believing he could easily crush the man who had ridden to power, so to speak, on his coattails. Caesar, however, “had formed this purpose from the beginning,” building his reputation in the Gallic wars in order to gain the status necessary to compete against someone like Pompey (XXVIII.1–2). Here Plutarch begins to highlight Caesar's strategic cleverness once again, showing him lobbying for another consulship and for more time in which to maintain control of his provinces. Furthermore,

he began to appeal both to the people and to his fellow nobles by making freely available the large amounts of money he had won in the Gallic wars. Witnessing these machinations, Pompey grew uneasy; he tried to have a successor to Caesar appointed in Rome, and he sent word to Caesar that he required the return of the soldiers he had lent him for the wars. Caesar readily sent them back, but had the officers who accompanied them flatter Pompey's vanity by falsely telling him Caesar's army wanted to defect to him. Pompey, enchanted by these lies, then failed to arm himself appropriately, leaving himself open to Caesar's impending attack. He also continued to provoke Caesar and his men by making speeches and getting bills passed against Caesar in the senate. As Plutarch describes, when one of Caesar's centurions discovered that the senate would refuse Caesar an extension of his term of rule, he struck the handle of his sword and said, "But this will give it" (XXVIII.1–XXIX.5).

The demands Caesar initially made of Pompey, however, continue to suggest that he wanted more than simple, forceful domination. He argued that he and Pompey should both relinquish their arms and become private citizens, and he himself claimed that he would surrender all his provinces except Cisalpine Gaul and Illyricum. Plutarch dryly states that these demands "had a splendid pretense of fairness" and that Caesar "seemed to be moderate," indicating that these actions were primarily strategic—after all, Caesar's stipulations had the benefit of making him look decent and reasonable, and it was unlikely that Pompey would actually accept them (XXX.1–XXXI.1). At the same time, it is surprising that Caesar, with all his longings for honor, even gambled on the possibility that he might have to return to private life, especially when he and his men could have overpowered the unprepared Pompey. Caesar's willingness to take that chance certainly demonstrates his political cleverness, but it also shows

that tyrannical oppression was not enough for him. He wanted to awe people with his strength and superiority, but he also wanted to elicit their grateful esteem with his generosity and justice.

Upon hearing Caesar's offers, the other senators signaled that they might be able to see their way to a compromise—until Lentulus the consul, a strong opponent of Caesar's, profusely insulted some of Caesar's advocates and “dishonorably” forced them from the senate. This deed gave Caesar what Plutarch ambiguously calls “the most seemly of his motives” or “the most specious of his pretexts” (εὐπρεπεστάτην ... τῶν προφάσεων). Caesar incensed his soldiers by showing them how these nobles, simply because they had supported him, had had to dress up as slaves and flee Rome out of fear. Was Caesar acting out of real indignation at this moment—as we recall, nothing angered him like a slight to those he saw as his own—or was he simply calculating that firing up his soldiers would get him what he wanted? Or were both motives working within him? Either way, Caesar seized the opportunity, ordering his men to occupy the large Gallic city of Ariminum. Later that night, Caesar rode toward Ariminum himself. But when he reached the Rubicon—the river that separated Cisalpine Gaul from the rest of Italy—he hesitated (XXXI.2–XXXII.4).

Plutarch says that at this moment, Caesar realized more fully the magnitude of what he was about to do. He lingered for a long time at the riverbank, debating within himself and changing his decision with every passing minute. He also discussed his confusions with his friends, “calculating what great evils for all mankind [would] result from the crossing, and how great a reputation of it they [would] leave to posterity.” This is, in fact, the only moment in the *Life* at which Plutarch shows Caesar not only reflecting on something for a sustained period of time, but also relating his thoughts to others to solicit their opinions. Yet it was after this last point—the consideration of how great and lasting their fame would be—that Caesar abandoned

all reflection, suddenly acting “with a certain *thumos*, as if casting aside calculation and giving himself up to destiny.” He said, “Let the die be cast”—the phrase with which, Plutarch claims, people usually prefaced “their advance into difficult and daring fortunes”—and quickly crossed the Rubicon, riding at full speed into Ariminum. At the end of this description, Plutarch presents a striking anecdote: that on the night before crossing the river, Caesar had the “unlawful dream” that he was having incestuous relations with his mother (XXXII.5–6). As Perrin (1919) notes, Suetonius claims that Caesar had this dream as a quaestor in Spain in 67, almost two decades before the crossing of the Rubicon in 49. This discrepancy demonstrates that Plutarch’s placement of the dream is both purposeful and important.

Through this passage, Plutarch highlights Caesar’s passion for immortal glory, his willingness to go to any lengths to get it, and his simultaneous feeling that he was committing a terrible transgression. On one hand, Caesar recognized that if he rested content to remain within the bounds of the law, he would not be honored in the great and lasting way he wanted to be. To gain what he desired, he had to go beyond what the law deemed appropriate; he had to shatter existing conventions and create his own, making himself the people’s new arbiter of what was good and just. By placing the incest dream at this juncture, then, Plutarch reemphasizes Caesar’s need to transcend the orders of his city to achieve his goals, often in shocking and generally unthinkable ways.

On the other hand, Plutarch also underscores the extent to which Caesar was shaken by his decision, a feeling of which the incest dream could be the clearest indicator. His hesitation, reflection, and deep uncertainty at the riverbank show that he understood what damage his actions could do. Although the thought of such damage was ultimately insufficient to counteract Caesar’s longing for eternal fame, a significant part of him recoiled from this thought. Once

again, Plutarch shows not only that Caesar's ambition was far from simple, but also that it was far from simply indifferent to justice—and that his choices, though decisive, were not supported by full examination and acceptance of his own conflicting concerns.

As usual, however, Caesar did achieve his main objective. Plutarch writes that after the crossing of the Rubicon, it was as if “the laws of the city were confounded together with the boundaries of the province.” The upheaval was so great that it did not simply seem that people were hurrying through the streets; it seemed that the cities themselves had risen from the earth and were running back and forth. People were no longer “easily obeying a leader or listening to reason,” for “conflicting and violent uproars prevailed everywhere.” Some were rejoicing in Caesar's takeover, while others, including Pompey, were seized with an all-pervasive fear. Though his own army was still larger than Caesar's, Pompey had now lost his fellow citizens' trust, and, terrified and confused, he deserted Rome and ordered the senate to follow him. The consuls and most of the senators, therefore, also fled the city “without even making the sacrifices which are customary before departure,” haphazardly grabbing whatever they could find of their belongings “in a sort of robbery ... as if it belonged to another.” Even some of Caesar's supporters within the senate, who were happy about what he had done, took leave of their senses in the moment and went with Pompey (XXXIII.1–XXXIV.2). Through this description, Plutarch makes clearer how Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon led to the abandonment of laws that the Romans had heretofore seen as fundamental. The senators, who were supposed to be the primary upholders of the law, acted like criminals and neglected their sacred duties, and the city itself seemed to have been uprooted from its foundations.

Caesar did not hesitate to take advantage of the turmoil he had created. As he marched from Ariminum to Rome, he commandeered every levy of Pompey's he could find. It did not

take him long to build up an army that he deemed strong enough to attack Pompey himself, but Pompey, unwilling to face Caesar, sailed away from Rome before Caesar could overtake him. Since Caesar had no ships with which to pursue his rival, “he turned back to Rome, having in sixty days and without bloodshed become master of all Italy” (XXXIV.3–XXXV.2).

Caesar the Benefactor

Though Caesar shed no blood during his takeover, he readily demonstrated his willingness to do so during the first moments of his rule. He did speak to the remaining senators in a “fitting and companionable manner,” even asking them to begin the process of reaching a settlement with Pompey—another risk of his own power that, in its similarity to the one Caesar took by suggesting that he and Pompey become private citizens, continues to highlight Caesar’s unwillingness simply to dominate without regard for his fellow men. Caesar’s agreeable tone, however, fell on deaf ears, either because the senators still feared Pompey or because they doubted that Caesar meant what he said (XXXV.2–3). When the tribune Metellus tried to keep Caesar from dipping into the city’s reserve funds, therefore, Caesar assumed a more imperious and threatening air. Metellus claimed that taking money from these funds went against various laws, and Caesar replied that “arms and laws have not the same season”:

“But if you have a difficulty with what is being done, get out of the way now, for war has no need of free speech; but when I have come to an agreement and laid down my arms, then, being present, you will curry favor with the people. And in saying these things, I surrender my own just rights; for you are mine, you and all those of the factions against me whom I have captured.” (XXXV.3)

Having made this speech, Caesar ordered the treasury door to be broken down. Once again, Metellus tried to stop him, and this time, Caesar threatened to kill him, saying Metellus had to know that “it is more troublesome for me to say it than to do it.” Hearing these ominous words,

Metellus finally departed in fear, and no one else opposed Caesar in his preparations for the fight against Pompey (XXXV.4).

Caesar's speech to Metellus is a striking one, and interpreting it is complicated. First, Caesar indicated that during this crucial time, he had purposely cast law aside. He implied that at this moment, his power was total and his judgments regarding each situation were subject to no higher standard; they were final. When he needed to enforce them, then, he would do so not by appealing to law or custom, but by referring to the armies that he could mobilize at whatever time and for whatever reason he liked. The old order had gone, and whatever new order now existed was based entirely on the decisions of Caesar himself.

Yet Caesar also told Metellus that "arms and laws have not the same season," suggested that he would eventually restore the power of the law, and acknowledged that even now, he would give up certain "just rights" of his own in leaving Metellus unmolested. Now, it could be argued that these words were strategic, meant to placate Metellus and the others and to trick them into thinking Caesar was still law-abiding at heart. It seems unlikely, however, that Caesar would have felt the need for such measures now that "you are mine, you and all those of the factions against me whom I have captured." The power was unquestionably his, and, as he demonstrated, threatening his opponents with force proved more than effective. It seems more plausible, then, that Caesar really did believe he was only relying on that force for now. He believed he had "just rights" that he was surrendering in this hour of need, which means he believed in some system of right and in some justice that was greater than himself—some higher standard that dictated what he and each of his fellow citizens deserved. It may have been that in Caesar's mind, his seizure of Rome and the turmoil that ensued were merely means to an end: the goal of a new order based on laws that, precisely because they came from Caesar himself,

accorded more fully with the requirements of true justice—requirements that Caesar felt he knew and could implement better than anyone else—than the old one.

In the next phase of his rule, Caesar did seem to be more focused on the justice he could enact than on anything else. Having secured the money he required, he traveled to Spain, where he subdued all the armies and provinces that Pompey had previously held (XXXVI.1). Caesar was subsequently made dictator by the senate, during which time he recalled exiles to Rome, returned civic rights to the children of those whom Sulla had punished, forgave many people's debts, and performed "a few other administrative acts of such a sort." After eleven days, Caesar gave up the dictatorship, made himself and a supporter of his (Servilius Isauricus) joint consuls, and continued to wage his campaign against Pompey (XXXVII.1). During that eleven-day stint, therefore, all of Caesar's notable acts must have been seen by those who benefited from them as restorative justice. Furthermore, though enough years had passed since Sulla's reign that the children of those he harmed were now adults—and Caesar had gained enough power and support that he had surely stopped needing the Marians—the old desire to get revenge on Sulla, which Plutarch highlights at the beginning of the *Life*, clearly still lingered in Caesar's heart, driving him to keep bestowing on Sulla's victims the justice he felt they deserved. Having used his eleven days as dictator purely to implement these acts of retribution and to help the downtrodden, Caesar then relinquished sole power temporarily in order to focus on eliminating his greatest competitor for it.

After a long and difficult fight, he won the war against Pompey (XXXIX–XLVII). Yet Caesar did not gloat over his victory or use force against those he had conquered—quite the opposite. When he was presented with the head and seal-ring of Pompey, who had fled to Egypt and been killed there after realizing he had lost the war, Caesar accepted the ring, but turned

away from the head in affliction. He cried over the ring, then extended kindness and favors to all the friends of Pompey whom he had captured. As Plutarch relates, Caesar then wrote to his friends in Rome that “this was the greatest and sweetest benefit he enjoyed from his victory, always to save those of the citizens who had fought against him” (XLVIII.1–2).

This passage is both striking and somewhat surprising. More clearly than he had before, Caesar now showed that although he could not hold himself back from pursuing his ambitions, these ambitions were not uncomplicated. Pompey had stood in the way of Caesar’s goals, which meant Caesar had had to crush him—and yet a part of Caesar clearly regretted hounding what he thought was a genuinely admirable man to the death. Furthermore, Caesar indicated to his friends that the “greatest and sweetest benefit” he derived from victory was not the power he gained or the money he collected, but the feeling he got from relenting toward the people he had conquered. Now, it is possible that Caesar did not mean what he said—that he was writing in this way merely to bolster his image as a benefactor. But it is also possible that Caesar was serious, in which case he wanted that power and money in order both to arrange everything as he saw fit and to merit what the people he defeated, who were not expecting to be saved, would surely give him: recognition of his vast superiority and grateful acknowledgment of his unnecessary magnanimity.

Plutarch reemphasizes Caesar’s strong sense of his own deserving in another telling passage, which, in preceding the one about Pompey’s death, may also shed light on Caesar’s emotional reaction. In this anecdote, Plutarch shows Caesar contending with a violent storm off the coast of Brundisium, which he was trying to reach by boat. The captain of the boat, unable to make headway, ordered the sailors to turn around. Caesar, however, took the man by the hand and said, “Come, noble man, have courage and fear nothing; sailing together with them, you

carry Caesar and Caesar's fortune." Though these words inspired the sailors to forget the storm and try even harder, the weather ultimately made it impossible for them to follow Caesar's command, and he was forced "very reluctantly" to admit that the captain had been right (XXXVIII.1–4).

With this story, Plutarch continues to highlight a characteristic of Caesar's that first appeared in the scenes with the pirates: the overweening confidence that, despite great adversity, he would somehow be protected. This confidence allowed him to face danger after danger tirelessly in the fight against Pompey, pushing himself and his men so hard that they began to resent him. They wondered if Caesar would ever realize that he "command[ed] mortal men," telling one another that "it is not possible even for a god to constrain the season of winter and the occasion of a storm at sea; but this man takes risks just as if he were not pursuing enemies, but fleeing from them" (XXXVII.3–4). Unlike his soldiers, Caesar had no problem believing that they could transcend not only their physical limits, but the limits nature imposed on their expedition.

As the scene in the storm shows, of course, "Caesar's fortune" was not as certain as he thought; no universal or divine power ended up changing the forces of nature to help him.¹⁸ Caesar may have felt, however, that the risks he was taking gave him the right not only to honor and glory, but also to security. As Dio Cassius writes about this scene in his *Roman History*, "Indeed [Caesar] had such great spirit and such great hope, either from some prophetic power or otherwise, that he felt firm assurance of his safety, even contrary to the appearance of things" (XLI.46.3). Perhaps he trusted that for someone as admirable and just as he believed himself to

¹⁸ The specific character of this power—and what Caesar may have consciously thought or felt about it—is unclear. As Wardle (2009) emphasizes, historians disagree on the nature and extent of Caesar's religious convictions, and Plutarch reveals nothing explicit.

be, it was not really possible to fail. And perhaps part of his sadness over Pompey's death lay in its evidence that although Pompey, like Caesar, had been noble, courageous, and generous to his people, those qualities had not been enough to save him in the end. If Caesar was indeed aware of this fact—that, more generally, virtue does not guarantee security—he surely did not want to recognize it fully; it might be called one of the intangible “enemies” that he fled by pursuing his tangible ones in ever more daring ways. Once again, then, Plutarch implies that Caesar's tremendous confidence—the confidence that was so dazzlingly inspiring to his soldiers and his people—rested on grounds that were shakier than they appeared.

Caesar the Lover

Plutarch continues to explore Caesar's passions and their effects through his description of Caesar's subsequent war in Egypt. Some said, Plutarch explains, that this war was both unnecessary and caused by “Caesar's *eros* for Cleopatra,” while others blamed the party of the Egyptian king, particularly the eunuch Pothinus. They cited the fact that, when Caesar and his army arrived in Egypt to collect the debt owed them by the king's father (though Caesar had already forgiven some of this debt, he now needed more money to support his soldiers), Pothinus treated them with unbearable rudeness, giving them the worst grain and making them eat off dishes made of wood and earthenware. Assuring Caesar that he would get his money, Pothinus then ordered him to leave. Caesar, however, decided to try another way of taking what he was owed: negotiating with Cleopatra, whom Pothinus had recently driven out of Egypt due to a conflict between her and her brother the king (XLVIII.3–5).

Being a fugitive, Cleopatra took precautions so as not to be noticed approaching Caesar's quarters. Taking only one of her friends with her, she had him wrap her in a bed-sack, tie it up,

and carry it to Caesar. Plutarch writes that it was this tactic of Cleopatra's that first attracted Caesar, for she appeared charming and piquant. After spending more time with her, he eventually brokered a reconciliation between her and her brother. In the next sentence, however, Plutarch moves on to describing Caesar's suppression of Potheinus' plot against him, as well as his successful battle with the Egyptian king. At the end of this story, Plutarch briefly circles back to Cleopatra, saying that Caesar placed her on the Egyptian throne, that he left for Syria after doing so, and that she bore his son a bit later (XLIX.1–5). Plutarch never mentions Caesar's relationship with Cleopatra—or indeed, his *eros* for any other person—again.

On one hand, then, Plutarch goes out of his way to highlight two vital passions within Caesar: *eros* and the aforementioned *thumos*. He indicates that Caesar's *eros* for Cleopatra might have caused him to start an unnecessary war that was “inglorious and dangerous for him,” but he also suggests that the cause could have been Caesar's indignation at the “invidious and insolent” treatment that he and his men had received from Potheinus (XLVIII.3). No matter which passion really stood at the forefront, Plutarch underscores the strong possibility that Caesar's desires—for either some true and lasting good (cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 205a6–208b6 and 209d1–e5) or for retributive justice—outweighed his strategic abilities at this moment.

On the other hand, Plutarch devotes hardly any space to Caesar's and Cleopatra's romance, and he declines to discuss at all any of Caesar's other affairs, which historians such as Suetonius describe in detail (Beneker 2012; cf. Pelling 1979). Perhaps, as Beneker suggests, Plutarch means to show that although Caesar did possess strong erotic longings, they were linked more to his love of political and military victories than to specific people. Plutarch has told two other anecdotes that could possibly relate to *eros*: the one about Caesar's use of marriage alliances to gain political power and the one about Caesar's incestuous dream. In the first story,

Caesar's romances with his various wives became tools of his political ambition; in the second, his forbidden *eros* for his mother represented the shocking break with the law that would win him the glory he so deeply craved. Plutarch makes no judgment on how Caesar really felt about Cleopatra, but it seems likely that his *eros* for her was bound up with his *eros* for glory as well; after all, he called on her in order to get help conquering Ptolemy, and it was through her that he gained control of Egypt.

After leaving Cleopatra on the Egyptian throne and traversing Syria, Caesar continued into Asia, in one of whose countries (Lesser Armenia) he pronounced his famous phrase "Came, saw, conquered." He then returned to Rome after having been made dictator again—for a year this time, the longest anyone had ever held the office—but did not stay long, deciding to march into Africa against Cato and Scipio. Upon learning that Scipio's men felt safer because an ancient oracle had told them the Scipio family would always conquer in Africa, Caesar either "scorned in some jest the Scipio who commanded the enemies, or appropriated the omen for himself in seriousness, it is hard to say which" (L.1–LII.3). In another of many ambiguous statements, Plutarch continues to leave open the question of Caesar's religious beliefs—of exactly what power he, like Scipio's men, believed was protecting him. Yet Plutarch also continues to emphasize Caesar's desires for honor and gratitude with his next anecdote, which concerns an exchange between Caesar and Cato.

Having won the battle against Cato and Scipio, Caesar had hoped to take Cato prisoner, but learned he had committed suicide. Plutarch says Caesar was "clearly annoyed" by this turn of events, "but it is unclear for what reason." In what seems like an explanation, however, he then states that Caesar told Cato, "I begrudge you your death; for you begrudged me your deliverance." This remark, Plutarch says, initially seems strange, for Caesar went on to write an

impassioned treatise against Cato that “does not seem to be a sign that he was in a gentle or reconcilable mood.” How, Plutarch asks, could Caesar have wanted to save Cato’s life when he was evidently so angry at the man? Yet Plutarch infers in the next sentence that, given Caesar’s generous treatment of so many enemies, he could not have written the treatise against Cato out of real hatred, but out of “political ambition.” Cicero, Plutarch explains, wrote a great praise of Cato after the latter’s death, which quickly became famous. This treatise irked Caesar, who thought Cicero’s commendation of Cato was really “an accusation of himself.” Consequently, he decided to write his own denunciation of Cato (LIV.1–3).

This episode is another revealing one. First, Plutarch declines to state explicitly why Cato’s suicide galled Caesar, but provides at least one reason in the very next sentence: that because Cato was already dead, Caesar was deprived of a great opportunity to show mercy to a defeated enemy. It must have been especially vexing to Caesar that Cato had taken his own life, for it seemed almost as if Cato knew Caesar would want to save him (the same way he saved the other people he conquered) and deliberately deprived him of the satisfaction. Furthermore, though Caesar did not condemn Cato out of anger at the man himself, Plutarch shows that Caesar’s motivation was anger of a kind: perceived indignation that as Cato was being praised, he himself was being unjustly maligned. This feeling drove him to cut Cato down—to try to ensure that he, Caesar, maintained the status and the honor he thought he deserved.

Despite his victorious return from Africa, however, it now became harder for Caesar to hold onto his cherished position. Almost immediately, he made another expedition into Spain against the sons of Pompey, who were threatening him with large armies. This war was the last one that Caesar undertook and, of course, won—but his triumph “grieved the Romans as nothing else had done.” All of Caesar’s other triumphs had commemorated his defeats of kings and

generals from other countries; this one, however, commemorated the destruction of the sons of one of Rome's foremost citizens. It was ignoble, the Romans thought, for Caesar to celebrate such a deed, "priding himself upon actions that had not one defense before gods or men except that they had been done out of necessity" (LVI.1-4). At this point, Plutarch is no longer saying the nobles had one opinion of Caesar, while the people had another; he simply says "the Romans" were beginning to distrust Caesar, implying that he had gone too far even for the people. This moment, then, marked the turning point of Caesar's career.

But why should the people suddenly have thought Caesar had gone too far? Did they not previously want him to shatter conventions, defying the old Roman orders for their benefit? Perhaps so, but these actions were different, for the people could see no justification for them "except that they had been done out of necessity." With this statement, Plutarch reemphasizes that until now, Caesar's supporters had seen him as noble—as someone whose deeds, despite and even because of their unlawfulness, had had a legitimate "defense before gods or men": the thought that Caesar was focusing primarily on the good of his subjects rather than on his own ambitions. In the people's view, Caesar's initial seizure of power had occurred in the service of true justice—the retributive justice enacted against the aristocrats and their oppressive ways. His continued destruction of his own countrymen, however, seemed like nothing more than a tactic to secure that power—and his blatant celebration of it seemed like a celebration not of his justice, but of his prowess. In this moment, then, the people's vision of Caesar as a virtuous and noble ruler faded, and they began to feel betrayed.

Yet this new resentment of Caesar was not enough to keep the Romans from bowing before "the good fortune of the man" and appointing him dictator for life, figuring that this move would at least give them some stability. This reign, says Plutarch, "was admittedly a tyranny,"

for Caesar, who had long since stopped being accountable to others, now held permanent power. At the same time, Plutarch claims that Caesar “showed himself blameless” during his rule and that “it is certainly not thought inappropriate that the temple of Clemency was voted a thank-offering on account of his gentleness.” In his usual fashion, Caesar pardoned many of his opponents and even granted honors and titles to some of them. Seeing that the statues of Pompey had been torn down, Caesar ordered them re-erected. When his friends urged him to form a bodyguard and offered him their services, he refused, courageously stating that “it was better to die once and for all than always to be expecting death.” Finally, he gave feasts and grain to the people, colonies to his soldiers, and promises of more honors and titles to the other nobles (LVII.1–LVIII.1).

Yet the statement that the decision about the temple “is certainly not *thought* inappropriate” (emphasis added) is ambiguous, and Plutarch once again uses these passages to question how “blameless” Caesar really was. Plutarch relates that when Caesar re-erected Pompey’s statues, Cicero said that “in setting up Pompey’s statues Caesar maintained his own.” Just after the passage about the refusal of the bodyguard, Plutarch also says Caesar granted everyone benefits in order “to surround himself with goodwill as the noblest and at the same time the securest safeguard” (LVII.3–5). Perhaps Caesar set up Pompey’s statues simply to curry favor with his wavering subjects—and perhaps he made his grand statement about the bodyguard not only out of bravery, but out of calculation that the people’s support provided better protection than an assigned defender ever could.

By highlighting Caesar’s thought that this protection is “the noblest and at the same time the securest,” however, Plutarch once again shows how the desires for noble risk and personal gain were inextricably intertwined in Caesar’s heart. As Plutarch says, Caesar “aroused hopes in

all” by promising them powers and honors, “since he ardently desired to rule over willing subjects” (LVIII.1).¹⁹ The word for “ardently desired” (μνηστέω) literally means “to seek in marriage.” Plutarch, then, continues to emphasize Caesar’s erotic longing for glory, honor, and even popular love, saying explicitly that Caesar always felt “an *eros* for new honor,” no matter how many victories he won. And although he undoubtedly calculated that the admiring respect of the people would form the cornerstone of his political power, an important part of him also saw his deeds as genuinely noble endeavors that greatly benefited his subjects, thereby justly winning their gratitude and esteem. Caesar’s confidence that this virtue would afford him protection, combined with his generous distribution of those benefits, inspired high hopes within the people—hopes that they, who had been oppressed for as long as they could remember, might finally receive deserved protection and rewards as well.

Conclusion: Caesar’s Death and Legacy

“But the most open and deadly hatred toward him,” Plutarch writes, “was produced by his *eros* for the kingship.” For the people, this *eros* was a “first cause” of hatred; as we have seen, most of them had wholeheartedly supported Caesar until now, when they started to think his ambitions were too selfish for comfort. For others who had been waiting for a reason to oust Caesar, this was it. Yet there were still some who wanted to hail Caesar as king and who tried to find omens suggesting that they should. This behavior, Plutarch relates, made Caesar “grieved.” Now, it could be that he was simulating this grief in an attempt to stay on the people’s good side. But it is also possible that, although he clearly desired and held sole power, the name of king, with all the grim connotations it carried in republican Rome, still bothered Caesar more than it

¹⁹ See XX.2 and XXI.4 for further discussion of the hopes with which Caesar filled the people.

attracted him. His discomfort may suggest that, at bottom, he did not actually see himself as the kind of king the Romans abhorred—that he imagined himself not as a tyrant, but as a great leader who was as just and beneficent as he was powerful.²⁰ Caesar, therefore, resisted the attempts to call him king for some time, but his efforts were not enough to placate the now-suspicious people, who eventually “turn[ed] toward Marcus Brutus” (LX.1–LXII.1).

It was not so easy, of course, to convince Brutus to conspire against Caesar, for Caesar had showered him with gifts, favors, and his own esteem. Yet when the people and other conspirators provoked him, causing his “love of honor” to awaken, Brutus agreed to involve himself in the plot (LXII.1–5). Before the assassins completed their task, Plutarch writes, “they say” that a number of omens heralded Caesar’s fate: lightning and fire, portentous visions, and, of course, the famous “Ides of March” soothsayer. Caesar himself was disturbed by these signs, especially when, on the night before his senate meeting, Calpurnia dreamed she was holding his murdered body in her arms and begged him not to attend. Never having noticed any “womanish weakness” in Calpurnia before, Caesar ordered his seers to perform sacrifices, saw that they boded ill, and decided to stay home (LXIII.1–7).

It was his own love of honor, however, that again changed his mind. Another of the conspirators, Decimus Brutus, scolded Caesar for his supposedly ridiculous superstition, saying he had opened himself up to mockery from the other senators and disrespect from his enemies. How could he reveal to others that his choices turned on something so foolish as his wife’s dreams? With this tactic, the conspirators convinced Caesar to appear before the senate after all—and, of course, he was killed, stabbed twenty-three times by his once-trusted peers.

²⁰ See LX.5 for further evidence of this possibility.

According to Plutarch, some writers say that Caesar fell against Pompey's statue and soaked it with his blood, making Pompey seem victorious over his old rival (LXIV.1–LXVI.7).

Yet as the *Life* draws to a close, Plutarch makes clear that in many ways, the conspirators did Caesar more of a favor than a disservice. As Bloom puts it, they “have made [Caesar] into a god. They have saved him from the errors of humanity and its weaknesses. The position he had created was too great to be filled by a man, even Caesar; but Caesar's spirit, once released from his body, ranged over the wide world” (Bloom 1964: 91). Plutarch relates that Caesar's murder filled both the senators and the people not with satisfaction, but with “confusion and helpless fear.” In an attempt to lessen the turmoil and mollify everyone, the senators voted not only to distribute prizes to Brutus and his men, but also to grant Caesar divine honors. When it transpired that Caesar had left each Roman citizen a generous gift in his will, however—and when the people caught sight of Caesar's mangled body—they “no longer held themselves to order or discipline,” building bonfires in the forum and vowing to burn down the houses of the conspirators (LXVII.1–LXVIII.1). In death, Caesar attained the status of both a god and a martyr. His murder, combined with his final act of beneficence, secured anew the honor and love of the previously wavering people in a way that nothing else could have done. He had succeeded in creating a new order, one whose dependence on him became even clearer when it collapsed at the moment of his death. Could it be argued, then, that Caesar ended up getting everything he wanted, though he did not live to enjoy it?

Plutarch makes an ambiguous statement on this matter, saying that “of the power and domination that he pursued all his life through such great dangers, and barely achieved at last, of this he reaped no fruit but the name of it only, and a glory looked upon with envy by the citizens” (LXIX.1–2). Suddenly, the power and glory for which Caesar had such intense longings

seem hollow—entailing a great reputation, to be sure, but one that brought its possessor no real reward. As Plutarch has shown, however, Caesar believed there was much more to that reputation than an empty name. He thought that the nobility, generosity, and courage that brought him such honor would not only protect him, but also make him a more just, beneficent, and revolutionary leader than his predecessors. This honor, which Caesar saw as the ultimate assurance of his own excellence—and of the fact that he deserved appreciation and security—was therefore the linchpin of his efforts and achievements. By suggesting that the goods Caesar desired were more ephemeral than he believed, then, Plutarch prompts us to wonder if Caesar even knew what he wanted, let alone got it. Perhaps Caesar’s motivations are so difficult to untangle largely because he himself did not understand them. Was he working ultimately for his people’s advantage or for his own? The answer may be that Caesar felt he could do both—that risking his life to reach the peak of power and glory would secure just and lasting benefits both for his people and for himself—and that he was unable or unwilling to consistently recognize and reflect upon his own incentives. He could not fully face up to the fact that his own good and that of his people often diverged, and he could not firmly decide which good he prioritized.²¹ Furthermore, he could not confront the problems within his great hope that his virtue would ultimately protect him. Given these possibilities, it is unsurprising that Plutarch ends his *Life of Caesar* the same way he began it: by praising the great statesman less than we might anticipate.

At the same time, it is impossible to ignore that the legacy of Caesar has not only survived, but also thrived over the past centuries. Despite his lack of self-examination, there is something dazzlingly impressive about Caesar—something that makes people remember and

²¹ Plutarch does show Caesar engaging in this kind of reflection at the Rubicon—realizing that what best served his own ambitions would, in fact, wreak significant damage on the Romans—but demonstrates at many other points in the *Life* that Caesar was not usually this honest with himself.

revere him even now. His great strength and courage, of course, must contribute to this legacy, for they are hard not to admire. Yet I will suggest that there is another key component to it, one that the last few pages of the *Life of Caesar* bring to mind.

The ending of the *Life* is somewhat strange, for Plutarch no longer seems to be commenting on Caesar himself, but on what happened to the conspirators after his death. He writes that “[Caesar’s] great *daimon*, of which he made use throughout his life” became “an avenger of his murder,” eventually punishing every one of the men who brought it about (LXIX.2). In mentioning Caesar’s *daimon*, Plutarch is most likely referring to his great genius (one of the meanings of the word). Plutarch’s statement that Caesar’s *daimon* avenged him, however, prompts us to think of another meaning: the fortune or divine power that many people believe guides their lives. People often invest high hopes in this mysterious force—hopes that it will protect them for acting virtuously and avenge them by punishing those who treat them unjustly. By bringing thoughts of such a *daimon* to our minds, Plutarch recalls not only Caesar’s great confidence in his own status and security, but also the inspiration that his people drew from it. The Roman people loved Caesar, welcoming his break with the old order, because they felt unjustly treated under that order and wanted someone to champion them. Caesar, with his gifts, his promises, and his assurance that justice would be served, raised hopes in them that were undoubtedly hard to forget. Though these hopes reflected Caesar’s own limitations, their illusive beauty still illuminates him today.

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