Julius Caesar: The Life and Times of the People's Dictator. By LUCIANO CANFORA. Translated by Marian Hill and Kevin Windle. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2007. Cloth, $29.95. ISBN 978–0–520–23502–1. (Originally published in Italian as *Giulio Cesare: Il Dittatore Democratico*. Laterza, 1999.)

Studying the evidence for ancient history can sometimes feel like standing on a headland watching the fog come in. Much is largely obscured for much of the time, though many things are visible in outline a fair amount of the time, while every now and then come patches of bright sunlight or at least shafts of light burning through the gray. The task of the ancient historian is to work within the bits of light over time and so put together as best one can a composite map of the terrain beneath the fog.

In this new biography of Julius Caesar, Luciano Canfora (C.) at times demonstrates the bright spots in this metaphor very effectively. Some whole chapters bring masterful clarity to difficult terrain, such as why Caesar first turned to dictatorship during civil war (pp. 287–95) and why and how he was drawn into his Alexandrian War (pp. 188–208). Particularly striking is C.'s close attention to the evidence of Josephus—against the silence of the author of the *Alexandrian War*—that the Jews significantly contributed to Caesar's victory at Alexandria (pp. 209–17). What sources do and do not say is often highlighted: see pp. 128–9 on Caesar, *BC* 7.1, or 245–55 on the tangled evidence describing Octavian's first interactions with Caesar. Complex situations can be brilliantly handled in a few sentences, such as how Caesar could remain *pontifex maximus* while an enemy of the state (p. 161), or why the war against Cato in Africa was a republican war in ways that the war against Pompey was not (p. 230), or why the conspirators' failure to dispose of Caesar's body was the beginning of the end for them (p. 337). At points the language itself shines with insight: on the eve of civil war, "Caesar proved the extent of his pliability, a quality that is indispensable for the politician who has no intention of giving in on the main thing" (p. 132). Regarding Antony's antics at the Lupercalia, "everything is elusive when one tries to understand the behavior of political figures and supporting actors in a time of dictatorship" (p. 283).

Yet on the whole, C. still leaves his reader disoriented in the fog. Each of the distinguishing passages noted above can be matched with disappointing ones elsewhere. The flow of the book is hard to follow, and a clear overall picture of Caesar's career never emerges. For readers who know the terrain well already, this book is useful for the moments when it casts new light. But those not already familiar with what they are looking at will likely find it hard to understand what they are seeing in this book. Overall, it cannot be recommended as a primary or definitive account of one of Rome's most deservedly studied figures.

The main difficulty with the book is the lack of any overarching thesis about Caesar's life. The subtitle characterizes Caesar as the "People's Dictator," but C. never clearly defines what he means by this. Instead, the reader must formulate his own understanding by following how C. presents Caesar as a "party man" for the *populares* (pp. 3, 14) who then comes to realize the limitations of popular party politics (pp. 42, 50, 68) and so turns to the dictatorship to free himself of those politics while yet retaining the support of the people (pp. 152, 186, 287–95). Putting this story together takes work, and even then it is not sufficiently clear what is gained by characterizing Caesar as the People's Dictator. (Certainly no one would try to characterize him as the Optimate Dictator!)

C.'s book thus reads like a series of studies about aspects of Caesar's life and deeds more than a unified biography. The 348 pages of the main text are broken up into 42 short chapters, which often do not link together as well as they ought. Although the book is basically arranged chronologically, some chapters range widely. Chapter 5 (pp. 26–32), for example, although following a chapter on Caesar's election as *pontifex maximus* in 63, stretches to discuss social and economic issues connected with Caesar and Cato in 59, Brutus and Cicero in 51–50, and Caesar in 49. The reader who does not already know the significant events of those years and the issues at stake in those contexts will have a hard time determining what the chapter is trying to accomplish. The insights of the strong chapter on Caesar's first dictatorship in 49 (pp. 287–95) risk being lost because it is placed after the discussion of Antony offering Caesar the crown at the Lupercalia in 44 (pp. 281–6) and immediately before an analysis of the historical validity of Cassius' Epicureanism that hinges on his actions at and after Pharsalus in 48 (pp. 296–305). When I first read these three chapters in succession, I found them confusing; only when considered separately did the analysis of each emerge.

In addition to the structure of the book, there are too many exaggerations or errors to make me comfortable recommending it to those without a ready library to check the citations. Some of my concerns involve only excessive language, such as describing Sallust's *Catiline* as a "pro-Caesar … hagiography" (p. 47) or Caesar's assassination as "the terrorist option" (p. 319). But there is also some sloppiness about matters of evidence and occasional lapses of fact. On successive pages, a scene from a play of Bertolt Brecht substitutes for any direct ancient evidence (p. 27) and a whole paragraph that merely paraphrases Plutarch is cited incorrectly (p. 28, "Fearing more than anything…" is a rendition of *Caesar* 8.6–7, not 8.1). Cicero, not Cato, had the speeches of the Catilinarian debate recorded (p. 55: the passage cited, Plutarch, *Cato the Younger* 23.3, makes this clear). As one of Plutarch's best known narratives also makes clear (*Cato* 58–70, this time not cited), Cato did *not* kill himself "as soon as he received word of the defeat" at Thapsus (p. 235). It is a more significant distortion to say that after Caesar's attempt to blockade Pompey at Dyrrachium, "Pompey broke through the blockade and retired towards Macedonia. Caesar gave chase until finally the two armies faced each other…" (p. 177). It was, rather, Caesar who fled a perilous defeat, and Pompey who gave chase (see Caesar, *BC* 3.67–77). But because of Pompey's delay on this occasion, Suetonius (one of C.'s favorite sources) reports that Caesar declared that Pompey did not know how to win (*Caesar* 36). For C. to flub the consequences of Dyrrachium so significantly undermines his credibility regarding the whole Pharsalus campaign, one of the central events of Caesar's life.

Perhaps most worrisome are places where C. too easily adopts a modern perspective that denies the complexity of the evidence. When discussing Caesar's election as *pontifex maximus*, for example, C. explains Caesar's engagement with Roman religion thus: "Being an Epicurean in his intellectual sympathies, Caesar … realized full well that false notions concerning the gods had generated fear, and that this fear had produced a false religion, a cult which rested on an almost commercial relationship with the gods" (p. 23). The actual practices and beliefs of Roman religion are never discussed, and the reader is thus given no reason to believe that any other view of Roman religion holds intellectual weight. Another example comes from C.'s loaded characterization of Caesar's motivation for his Gallic War. "It was all for one end: it is clear that the protagonist and instigator of the venture cynically used the genocide in the political struggle at home" (p. 118). C. then tries to defend this position by invoking Pliny, *Natural History* 7.91–9, which he calls "a 'Black Book'—to use a modern expression—of extraordinary harshness, in which Caesar's crimes are set against the vastly different balance sheet of Pompey's long political and military career" (p. 120). Pliny is indeed more celebratory of Pompey than of Caesar in that passage, but 7.99 ends with the point that, compared to the review of Pompey's achievements, a review of Caesar's would be infinite, involving the whole world. Pliny also claims in 7.99 that Caesar appeared greater than Pompey (*qui maior illo apparuit*), a remark that deserves interpretation and not to be swept away as part of "a 'Black Book' …

of extraordinary harshness." Novice students of Roman history deserve better guidance, and scholars deserve more careful writing.

Readers also deserve a current and complete bibliography. C. is fond of commenting on heavyweights like Napoleon Bonaparte, Theodor Mommsen and Ronald Syme, but he does not engage with much recent work. He shows a preference for Italian scholarship, which is fair enough, though one misses fundamental work such as Peter Brunt, *The Fall of the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1988), which offers a significant challenge to notions of party politics at Rome but which C. seems simply to ignore (so also the question of friendship in politics, on which Brunt's volume contains a superb essay; compare 159–64). The notes at the end of each chapter are mostly citations of ancient sources (also true in the well annotated Chronology at 349–69), the editions for which are discussed at 370–4, leaving only 374–6 for a highly selective and idiosyncratic review of "Modern Sources." On the enormous topic of Caesar's death, for example, C. points to only three items (p. 376): a 1958 article by J.P.V.D. Baldson, "some chapters" of a 1996 monograph by U. Gotter and the first chapter of J. Bleicken's 1998 biography of Augustus. To be fair, C.'s Italian edition was published in 1999, so such recommendations were more relevant then, but more of an effort should have been made to annotate the bibliography for its English translation. Lastly, more of an effort to choose or commission modern translations of the ancient sources would be beneficial. Why, for example, does Plutarch sound so much like Shakespeare: "Impious Casca, what doest thou?" (p. 330, *Brutus* 17); "Nay, Brutus, if thou hast a purpose worthy of thyself, I am well" (p. 309, *Brutus* 11)? Because the Loeb translations were used without revision (p. vii).

In sum, C.'s biography meanders and frustrates as much as it clarifies and enlightens. It should not be a reader's first encounter with Caesar, nor will it be the last word about Caesar's career.

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