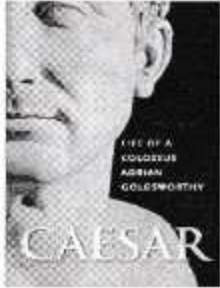


Good soldier, better politician, charming lover

Syed Badrul Ahsan*



Caesar: Life of a Colossus

Adrian Goldsworthy

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Julius Caesar disregarded warnings about the Ides of March. He believed, as Shakespeare would have us know, that he was more dangerous than danger itself. That precisely is what he told his wife Calpurnia when she tried to dissuade him from going to the senate because of the nightmares she had gone through during the preceding night. As he approached the senate, he came across the man who had warned him of the Ides of March. 'The Ides of March are come', said Caesar, almost in a triumphant vein. 'Aye, Caesar, but not gone', replied the soothsayer. On his way to the senate, Caesar was handed a scroll by the scholar Artemidorus, who apparently had some inkling of the plot against him. The dictator did not deign to read it. Moments later, he was dead at the foot of Pompey's statue inside the senate building. There were thirty three stab marks on his body. The last one, made by Brutus, was in his groin.

These are the facts that, thanks to Shakespeare, have kept the legend of Julius Caesar alive in history and across lands and time. And now we have an admirable account of the life of Caesar from Adrian Goldsworthy, who pieces together every detail of the Roman's career from his childhood right up to his death at the age of fifty six in 44 BC. And what emerges is a fascinating account, not merely of the life of Caesar but of the times he lived in as well. The work is, in a very broad sense, an analysis of Roman history as it had been shaped in the years, indeed decades and centuries, before Caesar emerged on the scene. Take the story of Sulla, the dictator who cast a long shadow over every Roman's life and

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as a matter of fact over Roman politics for a long number of years, until the advent of Julius Caesar. Sulla was an authoritarian as well as authoritative figure, one prone to handing out orders that could not but be obeyed. Those inclined to be dismissive about them inevitably faced Sulla's wrath. And yet, as Goldsworthy notes, it was a young Caesar who refused to divorce his first wife Cornelia as Sulla had demanded. The result was ostracism and exile. Caesar did not relent. He was, more tellingly, extremely fortunate in that he was not put to death by Sulla for his defiance. Contrast Caesar's rebellious streak with the pusillanimity of Pompey who, ordered by Sulla to end his marriage, promptly did so.

In Julius Caesar, beyond the simple tale of his assassination, lived a man in whom politics was the sole defining principle of life. As a soldier, he was incomparable. As an individual, he had great charm. But it was in his understanding of politics that he excelled, to a point where his enemies could never measure his abilities in handling crises. And be it noted that Caesar's enemies were legion. Or you could say that he hardly had a friend as he rose from such positions as aedile and praetor all the way to proconsul. The civil war that was to engulf him and Pompey in a battle to the death in 49-48 BC was prompted in large measure by Caesar's feeling that the senate, by asking him to abandon command of his armies without asking for similar action from Pompey, was positively being hostile toward him and would like nothing better than to see him emasculated as a man and as a politician. It was deeply disturbing, for both him and Pompey, considering that they had once been allies, along with Crassus, that they now were being forced into a parting of the ways. For Caesar, it was a simple matter of self-esteem. For Pompey, for all his sympathy for Caesar, it was the command of the senate that put him at the head of an army determined to bring Caesar to heel. The results were not to be propitious for Pompey. Even as the politicians in Rome backed him in his efforts to defeat Caesar on the battlefield and thereby uphold the authority of the senate, Caesar played the role that would in modern times be considered populist. His soldiers marched through villages and towns, some thought to be loyal to Pompey, without meeting opposition. In some places, they were cheered on by the local populace.

Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 48 BC. It was a move that stunned his enemies in Rome, for it was a brilliant tactical act that Pompey now scrambled to undo. In the event, Pompey did not succeed. Caesar now dictated conditions, which Pompey declined to entertain. In the inevitable armed hostilities that ensued, Pompey's armies were routed and the general himself was put to flight. Captured by men looking to curry favour with a triumphant Caesar, Pompey was murdered and his severed head was brought before Caesar. But Caesar looked away in disgust. There were, after all, the many and varied memories he associated with Pompey. Always a man fond of women, Caesar had bedded Pompey's wife Mucia while Pompey was away on his military expeditions. At a later stage,

Caesar's daughter had ended up being Pompey's wife. In effect, it was the father-in-law in Caesar, despite his being six years younger than Pompey, who was compelled into putting an end to Pompey's life.

There is little question that Julius Caesar was a charismatic individual. Unlike other Roman politicians and military leaders, he came across as compassionate and was unwilling to do anything that would pit citizens against him. In his moment of triumph over Pompey, he desisted from demonstrating the kind of bizarre spectacle which had characterised men like Sulla, who had the heads of his enemies hoisted on the Rostra in Rome. Caesar entered Rome in the manner of a politician returning from a long exile abroad. In the senate that so brimmed over with his enemies, he displayed little of hostility and indeed appeared to be eager to begin governing in a spirit of reconciliation. That would prove difficult, as the constant hostility of the senators would so amply show. Cicero, Cinna, Brutus and nearly everyone else resented the end of Pompey, for Pompey had been the senate's warrior sent out to quell the rebellious Caesar.

Julius Caesar loved the company of women. Sex was for him, as it was for other powerful men in Rome, an integral part of life's more pleasurable acts. But where he differed from other men was in his obsessive need for sex from women he believed were stimulating not only in conversation but also in bed. He married thrice. Cornelia was followed by Pompeia, whom he subsequently divorced on grounds of adultery! It was Calpurnia who was to outlive him after his assassination. But one woman Caesar loved for a very large part of his life and until the very end was Servilia, the mother of his assassin Brutus. The pair at times seemed to show off their passion in public, as when Servilia sent him a very suggestive note even as he was busy in serious deliberations in the senate. His fellow senators knew he was bedding their wives. They could do little about it.

And then, of course, there was Egypt's Cleopatra, Caesar's other love. On the day Caesar died, she and her retinue were in Rome, having arrived there months earlier as the dictator's guests. After the assassination, Cleopatra would make her way back to Egypt, where in time she would seduce, or be seduced by, an increasingly diminished Mark Antony.