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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Queen Caesar (Suet. *Iul.* 22.2)?

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Abstract

Suetonius' *Life of Divus Iulius* is (i) rich in material on the sexual activities of Caesar and (ii) rich in material that transmits contemporary perceptions of Caesar by his opponents: chapter 22 provides an instance in which these two come together. Caesar boasted to a packed senate that, in the case of his enemies, *insultaturum omnium capitibus* ('he would come down on the heads of all of them'). This article presents a philological study of Caesar's initial insult and of the interjection of an unnamed senator that this would not be easy *ulli feminae* ('for any woman') and examines rhetorically Caesar's final response *in Suria quoque regnasse Samiramin magnamque Asiae partem Amazonas tenuisse quondam* ('in Syria too Semiramis had reigned and the Amazons had once controlled a large part of Asia'). Suetonius' overall presentation of Caesar in the *Life* is key to his inclusion and interpretation of Caesar's words, revealing a uniquely dark sense of humour for Rome's first emperor.

Keywords: Suetonius; Julius Caesar; sexuality; humour

In an important paper for modern Suetonian studies, 'Suetonius the Ventriloquist', Cynthia Damon has drawn attention to the sheer number of quotes that the biographer places in the mouths of his emperors, more than 250 in the twelve *Lives*, and has argued that, at the end of categories (i.e. thematically organised sections of material) or episodes, these quotations often take the place of the *sententiae* that are found in annalistic history.[1] They are, she argues, 'one of Suetonius' most distinctive biographical techniques', a powerful device for characterisation, a particularly vivid and direct way of encapsulating a vice or virtue: 'the Caesars are Suetonius' dummies, and what makes his act so very clever is that he puts *their own* words there' and successfully incriminates them from their own lips.[2]

This article focuses on one example of words placed in the mouth of Julius Caesar which can be considered as both deeply illuminating of Caesar's humour and of Suetonius' conception of Caesar. Relatively little has been written on humour

[1]Damon (2014) 52 for 'incrimination'.
[2]Damon (2014) 51, 57.

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in Suetonius. Bob Milns and Trevor Luke have discussed Suetonius' treatment of Vespasian's humour,[3] and more than thirty years ago Tony Reekmans devoted an extensive study to 'Verbal Humour in Plutarch and Suetonius' Lives',[4] but one that gives short shrift to Caesar's wit in the passage to be discussed here.[5] Just as little attention has been paid to Caesar's humour, as far as that can be ascertained from his own writings or from the sayings attributed to him in [Pseudo-]Plutarch's *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*.[6]

Before examining this particular example of (alleged) wit, it is necessary to place it in the narrative framework that Suetonius carefully provides, focusing on the events of Caesar's consulship.[7] The first part of the extant *Divus Iulius* is the extensive chronological survey of Caesar's life up to his crossing of the Rubicon. Suetonius emphasises heavily Caesar's ambition and ruthlessness in pursuit of his goal of world domination: this destiny was confirmed to him by a dream in Gades (7) and thereafter he strove by every means (legal and otherwise) to achieve it – means that included a planned massacre of the senate (9.1), bribery (13), and corruption (19.1). The final step in his progress through the *cursus honorum* was his election as consul for 59 (19.1), which came at the price of a sacrificed triumph because anonymous *multi* spoke against a concession permitting Caesar to declare his candidacy *in absentia*. Thwarted in their attempts to prevent Caesar's candidacy, the Optimates employed bribery on an unprecedented scale (justified even by the sanctimonious Cato) to ensure that he would have an obstructive colleague and attempted to frustrate his ambitions for future military glory by allocating a consular province, *silvae callesque* ('woods and drove-roads'), in which no significant military operations would be forthcoming (19.2). Suetonius, then, draws a picture of concerted, persistent opposition and obstruction by Caesar's political opponents, who deliver a series of slights (*iniuriae*),[8] which spur (*instinctus*) him to bring about the unlikely reconciliation of Pompey and Crassus.

Suetonius' extended account of the year 59 (20–22) is not structured chronologically, but has a logical arrangement and builds to a climax:[9] (i) the *lex agraria* and its consequences (20.1–2), (ii) the measures by which Caesar demonstrated his sole control and readiness to violate all procedures and precedents (20.3), (iii) the intimidation he employed against his opponents (20.4–5), and (iv) the measures taken to secure his position after his consulship and the arrogance to which that led (21–22.1). This fourth unit ends with Caesar's personal acknowledgement of his *regnum* to the senate

[3]Milns (2010) and Luke (2009-10) and now Power (2021) 171–3. Baldwin (1983: 511–13) offers a few short remarks; Cowan (2011) has brought out the humorous elements of a passage in *De viris illustribus*. Suetonius has been held to misunderstand his emperors' humour at times (Morgan 1997).

[4]Reekmans (1992).

[5]Reekmans (1992: 227 n. 112) comments that *Iul.* 22.2, Caesar's comments on Semiramis and the Amazons, 'cannot be considered a witty retort'.

[6]Maurach (2002) and Corbeill (2018).

[7]The compositional skill of Suetonius in his *Divus Iulius* has been recognised clearly in four German treatments (Hänisch (1937), Steidle (1951), Brutscher (1958) and Lambrecht (1984)) and somewhat ambiguously in one English discussion (Henderson (2014)).

[8]Suetonius' word (*Iul.* 19.2), but also consistent with Caesar's own narrative of his treatment by his political opponents leading up to the civil war (cf. Caes. *B Civ.* 1.7.1, 32.2).

[9]For a detailed discussion of the year and an attempt to solve chronological issues relating to Caesar's legislative programme, see Chrissanthos (2019).

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(22) expressed in remarkable words at a meeting which was probably held on the Ides of June,[10] shortly after the senate had voted to add Transalpine Gaul to Caesar's existing command.[11] To underscore that Suetonius' account of 59 is not chronological, the culminating atrocity of Caesar's behaviour (22.2) predates the elimination of Vettius (20.5), which itself is presented as the climax of the series of intimidations perpetrated by Caesar in chapter 20.[12]

Suetonius' overriding theme is Caesar's abuse of the collegial magistracy through physical violence, ignoring legitimate forms of obstruction to his legislation and distributing public assets as he sees fit. Aiming to humiliate all his opponents and undo them by fraudulent incrimination, he does not even shrink from the elimination of his own agent Vettius. Aided and abetted by his new son-in-law Pompey and new father-in-law Piso, Caesar is out of control. So, we reach Suetonius' culminating *exemplum* in the chapter that he devotes to the military commands that Caesar secured, which is itself the climax to the account of 59 BC.[13]

> et initio quidem Galliam Cisalpinam Illyrico adiecto lege Vatinia accepit, mox per senatum Comatam quoque, ueritis patribus ne, si ipsi negassent, populus et hanc daret. (2) quo gaudio elatus non temperauit quin paucos post dies frequenti curia iactaret inuitis et gementibus aduersaris adeptum se quae concupisset, proinde ex eo insultaturum omnium capitibus ac, negante quodam per contumeliam facile hoc ulli feminae fore, responderit quasi adludens in Suria quoque regnasse Samiramin magnamque Asiae partem Amazonas tenuisse quondam.[14]
>
> At first, he accepted Cisalpine Gaul with the addition of Illyricum under the terms of the *lex Vatinia*, and then 'Long-haired Gaul' as well by vote of the senate, since the senators were afraid that, if they had said no, the people would have voted this too. (2) Carried away by joy at this he could not stop himself boasting

[10]For regular senate meetings held on the Ides during the Republic, see Coudry (2020) 32–4.

[11]The early chronology pressed by Meier (1961) has found few supporters.

[12]The simplest way to demonstrate Suetonius' divergence from chronology is to compare the sequence of events explicitly mentioned or alluded to in Cicero's contemporary correspondence for several key months of the year. The 'Vettius conspiracy' is a case in point: Cicero (*Att.* 2.24.2) records that Bibulus allegedly informed Pompey of the assassination on 13 May, but records that the senatorial and public enquiries began shortly before his detailed report to Atticus of the Vettius investigations sometime in August 59. Taylor (1950: 45–8) proposed a reordering of five Ciceronian letters to Atticus that would fix the senatorial hearing to 15–16 July, but the traditional order is secure and dates in August–September should stand (e.g., Seager (1965) 525 n. 1 and Shackleton Bailey (1965) 395). The investigation and death of Vettius thus took place two months *after* Caesar received command of Transalpine Gaul.

[13]Although Suetonius provides us with a clear historical context for which we can provide a plausible date, the historicity of the exchange of remarks is questioned by some (e.g., Butler and Cary (1927): 6 and Kelly (2011): 68). However, Gelzer (1968: 88 n. 1) regards it as historical and 'moderate'. Canfora (2007: 88–9) canvasses the options, before coming down firmly on the idea that Asinius Pollio is the guarantor of their historicity. For my purposes historicity is not crucial, as the focus lies on Suetonius' Caesar, the character that he presents in *Divus Iulius.* Drexler (1969) took Steidle (1951) and Brutscher (1958) to task for entertaining the idea that Suetonius was concerned to create a distinctive 'Caesar' rather than to present the historical Caesar, but the biographer cannot reasonably be denied the intention to produce a coherent and cogent account of Caesar's life.

[14]The text is that of Kaster (2016).

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> before a packed senate a few days later that, against the wishes and groans of his opponents, he had secured the things he had desired and so, on the basis of that, he would come down on the heads of all of them. When someone said insultingly that that would not be easy for any woman, he replied, as though he were kidding, that Semiramis had reigned in Syria and the Amazons had once controlled a great part of Asia.

Two linguistic clues mark Caesar's behaviour as problematic: *elatus*, used elsewhere in this sense of Nero's boast that previous *principes* had never realised what powers lay at their disposal when it came to killing (*Ner.* 37.3),[15] and *non temperauit quin*, a phrase which explicitly describes a failure of self-control.[16] *Paucis post diebus* reminds the reader that Caesar is not speaking in the heat of the moment after being awarded *Gallia Comata*, and thus adds another element to Suetonius' criticism. Before a packed senate, Caesar gloats over the inability of his opponents to prevent him achieving his desires[17] and rubs in the humiliation of their having to concede *Gallia Comata*, concluding with words that spark our humorous interchange. Presented in *oratio obliqua*, Caesar says, or perhaps boasts,[18] *proinde ex eo insultaturum omnium capitibus.* Commentators since the sixteenth century have recognised that *insultaturum capitibus* must have been capable of an obscene interpretation. The two words can bear straightforward or sexual meanings: (i) *caput* can be the human head or the glans of the penis (elsewhere only in poetry)[19] or, as will be the case here, the mouth, particularly when used for oral

[15]Cf. *Cal.* 54.1: *canendi ac saltandi uoluptate ita efferebatur ut ne publicis quidem spectaculis temperaret quo minus et tragoedo pronuntianti concineret* ('he was carried away by his passion for singing and dancing to such a degree that even at public performances he could not stop himself singing with the tragic actor as he delivered his lines'). The combination of a passive form of *effero* with *gaudio* can describe extreme joy without any negative connotations (e.g. Cic. *Rep.* 3.42, *Fam.* 10.12.2, Curt. 6.7.24, Sen. *Dial.*2.9.3), but in Latin historiography examples in which the victim of the emotion acts either arrogantly or rashly (Liv. 21.53.1, 26.51.12, 33.8.9, Curt. 4.6.26) seem to be the norm. Here the negative interpretation is underlined by the explicit language of loss of self-control (see n. 16).

[16]Good emperors exercise restraint and self-restraint (*Aug.* 42.3); bad emperors give in to passions and pressures (*Tib.* 72.3, *Calig.* 45.2, *Claud.* 41.1, *Vit.* 13.3). Emperors' sexuality and their ability to control their sexual activities is a significant element of Suetonius' evaluative strategy (see Gugel (1977), 73–95) and notably so in the *Divus Iulius*. Bremert (2021) provides a recent synthesis and discussion of material in the *Lives* of bad emperors.

[17]Perhaps this reflects closely the language that Caesar used, see Scantamburlo (2011) 147.

[18]Suetonius uses *iactare* in several senses: (i) of frequent sayings by emperors (*Aug.* 12, 25.4, *Tib.* 28, *Calig.* 30.1, 33, *Ner.* 20.1, *Galb.* 16.1); (ii) of claims made by emperors that appear to be dubious or inappropriate and were akin to boasts (*Iul.* 67.1, *Calig.* 34.2, *Dom.* 2.3, 13.1, 18.2) and (iii) of well-known or widely disseminated sayings or verses (*Iul.* 51, *Galb.* 6.2, *Vesp.* 1.4). In context here Caesar's words are certainly not laudable and could be a boastful threat.

[19]Adams (1982) 72. Adams produces only one other use of *insulto* in the latter sense (Arnobius *Adv. nat.* 2.45). In this case, if *caput* bears its sexual meaning, then Suetonius has Caesar threaten to suck his opponents' penises. This would be the role of a woman or *cinaedus* and thus is difficult to see how the threat works unless being fellated against one's will was considered humiliating (more than being the *fellator*?). Unwelcome sexual attentions such as having one's bottom kissed by a *cinaedus* (Petron. *Sat.* 21) or suffering *infandae urigines* from eunuch priests (Apul. *Met.* 8.29) are humiliating for the recipient, but in these instances Petronius' and Apuleius' abhorrence is directed more at the perpetrators. In fact, it seems that the shame of a mouth defiled by forced *irrumatio* does not appear in Roman political invective, rather

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sex;[20] (ii) *insulto* can mean physical dancing or jumping or be a verbal or other insult, even, as Jim Adams puts it, 'a humiliating or insulting sexual act'.[21] The only other extant combination of noun and verb appears in Virgil: the doddery Evander speaking to his son Pallas says of the cruel Etruscan king/tyrant Mezentius, *neque finitimo Mezentius umquam | huic capiti insultans tot ferro saeva dedisset | funera* ('nor would Mezentius, scorning this head of mine, even though I was his close neighbour, have produced so many cruel deaths by his sword').[22] Mezentius had been king of Caere before his expulsion for cruelty and Evander ruled the nearby Pallanteum on the site of the future Rome. *Insultans* describes some disregard of Evander by Mezentius, probably arrogance rather than a physical assault, and 'head' is synecdoche for the person.[23]

Caesar's interlocutor chooses to interpret *insultaturum capitibus* as a threat to impose *irrumatio*, to silence his critics.[24] Threats of oral rape reflect a brutal, extreme virility that emasculates the victim, rendering him weak and effeminate.[25] As Anthony Corbeill puts it, this is 'an assertive sexual posture' and a claim to a 'superior masculinity'.[26] Caesar, moreover, is not threatening just one rape but multiple – his masculinity is infinite and inexhaustible.

It is important to ask, even if any answer cannot be definite, whether Suetonius' Caesar deliberately used a sexual threat,[27] and, if he did, whether he meant it physically or metaphorically, or whether he used an expression that was taken in a way that

shame attaches only to voluntary *fellatores* (cf. Akar (2016) 295–308), just as being sodomised by pirates or the enemy did not result in the legal restriction imposed on voluntary *pedicati* (*Dig.* 3.1.1.6).

[20]Housman (1931: 406 n. 1) takes *Iul.* 22.2 in this sense and supplies six further parallels not noted at *TLL* 3.408.34–7 (including *Tib.* 45: *capitibus … inludere*). From the Republican period Cicero *Dom.* 83 and Catull. 88.8 confirm a contemporary use of *caput* exactly as Caesar's insult requires.

[21]Adams (1982), 200. Translating *insulto* in any way that can bring out the double entendre has proved impossible: Rolfe (1998: 63), Hurley (2011: 13) and Edwards (2000: 11) offer 'mount', Gelzer (1968: 88) 'jump', Taylor (1968: 185 n. 36) 'leap', Meier (1995: 217) 'dance', Cantarella (2002: 157) and van der Blom (2016: 172) 'stamp', Corbeill (2018: 151) 'pounce'; Ailloud (1931: 15) offers 'walk' and Flamerie de Lachapelle (2016: 15) 'jump with both feet' ['sauterait dorénavant à pieds joints']. Kelly (2011: 68) offers as an interpretative translation to bring out the double entendre 'I'm going to see them all down in the mouth'. My 'come down' lacks the direct energy of dance or jump, which is the root meaning of *insulto*, but aurally at least preserves the ambiguity of the original.

[22]Verg. *Aen.* 8.569–70. The translation is that of Frantantuono and Smith (2018). Vergil describes Mezentius as a tyrant (*Aen.* 8.483) who exercised a *superbum imperium* (8.481–2).

[23]Virgil uses *insulto* of human arrogance and insolence (*Aen.* 2.330 and 10.20), dancing (7.581), physical leaping upon (6.571) and of equine trampling (11.600, 12.339). Servius (*Aen.* 8.570: huic capiti insultans *ad curam enim viri fortis et viri boni pertinet, ne quid iniuriose fiat alicui homini: ergo et hinc contumeliam ducit, quod finitimos a tyranni iniuria non defenderit* ['**leaping on this head** relates to the responsibility of the brave man and the good man to prevent anything injurious being done to anyone: so here he considers it an outrage that he did not defend his neighbours from injury from a tyrant']) foregrounds the ideas of *iniuria* and *contumelia*, i.e. that nothing physical was suffered by Evander.

[24]Housman (1931) 406 n. 1, Adams (1982) 128, Krenkel (2006) 208 and Éloi (2007) 173–83 esp. 177–8.

[25]Richlin (1981) 43–4. For criticism and refinement of the 'penetration-paradigm', see Kamen and Levin-Richardson (2015) and for male–female polarity see Carlà-Uhink (2017) 5–9.

[26]Corbeill (2018) 151.

[27]Denied by Townend (1982) 158: 'Caesar did not intend any more than a general taunt' and Kelly (2011) 68 'Caesar made an unfortunate choice of words', but Canfora (2007: 89) plausibly posits a Caesar 'in a mood to be provocative'.

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he had not intended. Suetonius' overall picture of Caesar will suggest strongly that the threat was issued deliberately in sexual terms by one who was highly sensitive to criticism of his masculinity. Jim Adams rightly thinks that Caesar's words should be understood metaphorically: such threats, whether intended or inferred, 'were so banal that potential acts of *irrumatio* had become something of a joke', a way of expressing aggression 'but no real intention on the user's part'.[28] This is undoubtedly true as far as threats of *irrumatio* in general are concerned and nothing in Suetonius' wider portrayal of Caesar paints him as an *irrumator*.[29]

Logically what follows is to ask *why* Caesar would use such sexual language. Suetonius presents us with lots of material that sheds light on the language of political discourse in 59.

> missa etiam facio edicta Bibuli quibus proscripsit collegam suum Bithynicam reginam, eique antea regem fuisse cordi, nunc esse regnum. quo tempore, ut Marcus Brutus refert, Octauius etiam quidam ualitudine mentis liberius dicax conuentu maximo, cum Pompeium regem appellasset, ipsum reginam salutauit.
>
> I also ignore the edicts of Bibulus in which he publicly denounced his colleague as 'the Queen of Bithynia' and as previously having had his heart set on the king but now on a kingdom. As Marcus Brutus reports, at this time a certain Octavius, who was somewhat free with his words because of his mental condition, after calling Pompey 'King' before a very large gathering, greeted Caesar as 'Queen'.

In the powerful circumstantial case that he builds in chapter 49 relating to the rumours of Caesar having sacrificed his *pudicitia* to Nicomedes,[30] Bibulus' first insult carries the same message as those of Dolabella and Curio Senior, but the second goes further in a way that is consistent with Suetonius' developed picture of Caesar. Firstly, he claims that Caesar had not been the innocent victim of an elderly predator but actively wanted a royal mate and secondly that Caesar's ambitions had grown and were dangerous to the state – his current desire in his consulship was to establish himself as a 'king', the same charge in the same terms (*regnum*) as Suetonius has demonstrated was made by Cicero, *Caesarem in consulatu confirmasse regnum de quo aedilis cogitarat* (9.2:

[28] Adams (1983) 313. Cf. Plaut. *Amph*. 348–49, Catull. 16.1, 14, 74.5–6, Mart. 3.96.3, 14.74, *CIL* 4. 2360 and Sen. *Ben*. 4.31.4. Baehrens (1893), 214 understands the similar idea in Catullus of irrumating 200 people as figurative and witty.

[29] In the extensive discussion of Caesar's reputation (*fama*) and practice in sexual relationships with men and women (*Iul.* 49–52), it is striking that the only same-sex material involves Nicomedes of Bithynia and the implied criticism is that Caesar had willingly been penetrated. Later, in the context of offices and commands that Caesar awarded without regard to due practice (*Iul.* 76.3), Suetonius alleges that Caesar gave command of three legions to Rufio, the son of his freedman, *exoleto suo.* That term, which has very negative connotations for Suetonius (cf. *Tib.* 43.1, *Calig.* 24.3, *Galb.* 22.1, *Tit.* 7.1) refers to a former *puer delicatus* (Butrica 2005: 223–31), thus most likely that Caesar played the active role with him, as L. Antonius also alleged regarding the young Augustus (*Aug.* 68.1).

[30] Scathingly Archilochean, the edicts attracted large crowds of would-be readers as soon as they were posted up (Cic. *Att.* 2.20.4) and then were circulated widely, see Rosillo-López (2017) 108.

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'during his consulship Caesar had established the tyranny he had been planning when he was aedile').[31]

Next Suetonius sets out as the first of a further four pieces of evidence the report of M. Iunius Brutus, the future conspirator, that at some stage in 59 a certain Octavius, 'after calling Pompey "King" before a very large gathering, greeted Caesar as "Queen"'.[32] That there was some mental issue with Octavius does not detract from Suetonius' argument, which is to show that Caesar's reputation was widely compromised, here publicly before a large audience by someone who would appear to be an ordinary citizen, and thus not in possession of privileged information.[33] Later in the same chapter Suetonius cites a witty interjection by Cicero in a senatorial debate, which is probably best dated to 60,[34] and thus further useful information about the currency and ubiquity of the rumours about Caesar's manliness: *quondam etiam in senatu defendenti ei Nysae causam, filiae Nicomedis, beneficiaque regis in se commemoranti, 'remoue', inquit, 'istaec, oro te, quando notum est, et quid ille tibi et quid illi tute dederis'* ('Once when Caesar was defending Nysa, Nicomedes' daughter, and was recalling the favours that the king had done him, he said "No more on that subject, I beg you, since it's well known what he gave you *and* what you gave him!"'). I suggest, then, that in June 59 Caesar, with an eye on the slurs against his manliness, deliberately taunts his opponents with a sexual insult painting them as his (future) queens. I think this is more appealing (and thoroughly consistent with Suetonius' characterisation) than to have Caesar simply making a slip.[35]

To return to the interchange that ensued in June 59: the unnamed interlocutor understands, or chooses to understand, that Caesar has issued a threat in sexual language and insultingly (*per contumeliam*)[36] retorts 'that won't be easy for any woman'

[31]A letter was paraphrased at *Iul.* 9.2

[32]In 59 Brutus was in Rome, probably serving as a *triumvir monetalis* (*MRR* 3.112). He hated Pompey because he had killed Brutus' father in 77 and he would not even greet Pompey (Plut. *Pomp.* 64.3, *Brut.* 4.2), so his readiness to record criticism of him is not surprising. *Refert* indicates a written work (cf. *Iul.* 9.2, 30.4, 56.2), perhaps a letter, or a speech whose text was securely preserved (cf. *Iul.* 6.1, 49.4).

[33]Octavius says publicly to Pompey what the likes of Cicero and Curio were saying in private in spring 59 (*Att.* 2.8.1, 12.1, 13.2, 17.1).

[34]The date and context of Caesar's *Pro Bithynis* are disputed, e.g. a trial conducted before M. Iunius Iuncus in his province (Canfora 2007: 11), the trial of M. Iunius Iuncus for extortion (*repetundae*) after the death of Nicomedes (Dahlmann 1938) or that of M. Aurelius Cotta in 70/69 (Russo (2015) 103–7) or during the discussion of Pompey's settlement of the east in 60 (*RE* 17.1630). Only the last is compatible with the senatorial location specified by Suetonius and with the weight that he attributes to Cicero's quip: if it was made in the 70s, it came from a junior senator, but in 60 with all the weight of the former consul who had saved the state.

[35]Nonetheless, the most skilful of politicians can sometimes let slip words that can be taken the wrong way: in praising her long-time colleague Willie Whitelaw on 7 August 1991 Mrs Thatcher famously said, 'every prime minister needs a Willie'.

[36]Cf. *Aug.* 7.1, *Ner.* 41.1, *Vesp.* 2.2, all to do with insulting naming or calling.

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(*negante … facile hoc ulli feminae fore*).[37] Commentators have said nothing on *ulli*; translators render it as either as an indefinite article or more forcefully as 'any'.[38] An emphatic sense would align best with Suetonius' usage,[39] perhaps with the implied idea of 'let alone for a woman like you'.[40] While it receives no praise from Suetonius,[41] I credit the interlocutor with a delightfully sarcastic retort that cruelly, but unsurprisingly, brings up the most difficult episode of Caesar's past.

The final element of the interchange is Caesar's response, in relation to which Suetonius assists the reader with an explanatory phrase, *quasi adludens*. Suetonius' English translators do not know what to make of *quasi* and tend to ignore it;[42] the French are more successful.[43] 'As if' (*quasi*) adds an important layer of meaning: Caesar's immediate audience perceived Caesar's response as humorous and may even have appreciated his use of a common rhetorical device for deflecting and disarming a critic, but the reader understands that behind the apparent wit lies a harsh reality.[44] Perhaps also the *quoque* that follows is not a variation of 'both … and', balancing the reference to Amazons, but means 'in Syria *too* a woman (Semiramis) has reigned'. If so, then Caesar retorts that he is no ordinary woman (*ulla femina*), but one who reigns in Rome. Suetonius has prepared the ground for this by earlier quoting a letter written by Cicero to the senator Q. Axius that in 59 'Caesar had established the *regnum* he had been planning when he was aedile' (9.2). So, rather than denying the allegation, a manoeuvre he was to adopt disastrously in 46 after the Gallic triumph,[45] Caesar turns the logic of the interlocutor back against him and his senatorial supporters as a pointed insult: 'if you think being subject to a king is bad, what does it say about you that are subject to a woman, a queen?'

The two *exempla* that Caesar cites in support of his position should give the interlocutor and the audience much to worry about: Caesar is a warrior queen. Although we

[37]Corbeill (2002: 207) translates 'that would be hard to do to a woman', seemingly missing the point but most recently (2018: 151) he translates 'that would be tough for a woman to do'.

[38]Peck (1893), Butler and Cary (1927) and Scantamburlo (2011) say nothing. Translations as 'a', cf. Ailloud (1931) 13, Martinet (1997) 45 and Scantamburlo (2011); as 'any' cf. Rolfe/Hurley (1998) and Flamerie de Lachapelle (2016).

[39]See Howard and Jackson (1922) 254, e.g. *Iul.* 82.3.

[40]Cf. the interpretative translation 'too much for a woman like Caesar' by Kelly (2011) 68.

[41]By contrast Cicero's sexual pun on the 33 per cent discount Caesar gave Servilia for the use of her daughter Tertia, another example of sexual innuendo in senatorial debates, is called *facetissime* (*Iul.* 50.2).

[42]Rolfe (1998: 63): 'in the same vein', Hurley (2011: 13): 'with a joke'; Edwards (2000: 11): 'taking up the joke'; Corbeill (2018: 151) rightly translates 'as if joking' but does not explore the consequences of this formulation; Webber (2015: 12) understands it to signal 'a mild witticism'; Corbeill's (2002: 207) 'in an allusive manner' appears to paraphrase.

[43]Ailloud (1931: 13): 'en ayant l'air de plaisanter' and Flamerie de Lachapelle (2016: 15): 'sur le ton de la plaisanterie'; only Scantamburlo (2011: 78) 'quasi scherzando' directly brings out *quasi*. In German Martinet's (1997: 45) 'um darauf anzuspielen' also misses the mark.

[44]Reekmans (1992) 227 n. 112: '*In Syria … quondam* cannot be considered a witty retort; that is probably the reason why Suetonius wrote that Caesar made that reply *quasi adludens*'. Reekmans, it seems, cannot fit Caesar's words into ancient theories of humour.

[45]Dio 43.20.3–4: πλὴν καθ' ὅσον τὴν συνουσίαν τὴν πρὸς τὸν Νικομήδη διέβαλλον· ἐπὶ γὰρ τούτῳ πάνυ τε ἐδυσκόλαινε καὶ ἔνδηλος ἦν λυπούμενος, ἀπολογεῖσθαί τε ἐπεχείρει καὶ κατώμνυε, κἀκ τούτου καὶ γέλωτα προσεπωφλίσκανεν ('in so far as their abuse concerned his intercourse (συνουσίαν) with Nicomedes, this annoyed him very much and he was obviously upset; he attempted to defend himself and denied it upon oath, as a consequence of which he incurred ridicule'). See Kelly (2011) 70–1.

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think primarily of Amazons as a mythical race of warrior women who appear from the earliest Greek literature, for Romans in 59 they were a historical fact, whose existence had been confirmed just a few years earlier by Pompey. He had even displayed some specimens in his triumph in 61.[46]

It is harder to surmise what the senatorial audience in 59 BC knew about Semiramis, although the Greek historical tradition from Herodotus onwards presents her as a female ruler who performed most of the roles associated with men, notably major infrastructure projects and military campaigning.[47] That she was a figure known to the educated may be confirmed by Cicero's insult to Gabinius in 56 as *Semiramis illa*;[48] and Valerius Maximus uses her as an exemplar of *ira* (9.3.ext.4). If it was known at the time, one story that Diodorus relates might have been particularly worrying (2.20.4–5): Semiramis persuaded her husband to hand over his power to her for five days, during which time she won over the armed forces, had her husband arrested and went on to a long, successful solo reign.[49] Through the *lex Vatinia* queen Caesar had been entrusted with an army for five years and the senators had just exacerbated the problem by handing over Transalpine Gaul with another legion. Caesar's *regnasse* taunts the audience with their worst fears of what Caesarian dominance might be. For Suetonius, then, Caesar's apparent humour is deadly serious (and powerfully prophetic – his current *regnum* is nothing compared to that of his dictatorships).

Is the Caesar that emerges from this reading of Suetonius any different from that of other modern scholars? Judith Hallett, who so often offers exemplary studies of Roman sexuality, appears to be a poor reader of Suetonius when she claims,[50]

> Caesar was comfortable with publicly acknowledging his sexual inadequacies, in his case adopting the passive, penetrated role rather than failing to achieve erection, including them in his qualifications to serve as a military and political leader. While we can only speculate as to why he admitted to these sexual failings, it seems most likely that Caesar wished to communicate that he shared concerns and experiences with the ordinary men he led in battle.

This 'reading' first appears to ignore the rhetorical situation and to take what was a debating position that in effect turned the tables on his opponents, characterising them as even less manly than they had characterised him, as a confession of real male inadequacy; on this one occasion Caesar did not fight the insinuation, but his general practice cannot be extrapolated from that. Secondly, Hallett appears to focus on only

[46]Theophanes, who accompanied Pompey to the east in the 60s, records their current location next to the Scythian Gelae and Legae (*FGrH* 188 F 4). Appian (*Mith.* 103) relates that the Romans discovered that the bodies of some slain enemy warriors were female and that they were thought to be Amazons (ἐδόκουν Ἀμαζόνες εἶναι).

[47]If historical, Caesar's reference would be the earliest known mention of Semiramis in Latin. She is based on Sammu-Ramat, a queen who exercised power in Assyria most prominently as regent between the death of her husband and the coming to power of her son, Adad-nirari III. A stele from Pazarcik celebrates her as campaigning across the Euphrates with her son (Dalley 2005: 12–13). For her many infrastructural projects and major wars, see Truschnegg (2021).

[48]Cic. *Prov. cons.* 9; cf. Grillo (2015) 128–9.

[49]See Stronk (2017) esp. 120–1.

[50]Hallett (2015) 417.

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one aspect of Suetonius's treatment of Caesar's sexual activities, ignoring the chapters (50–52) devoted to Caesar's heterosexual enterprises that spanned much of his adult life and culminated in his relationship with Cleopatra, from which sprang a son whom (Suetonius notes) Caesar allowed to bear his name.[51] While these chapters begin with rumour, they end powerfully with Suetonius' own asseveration of Caesar's love for Servilia, Eunoe, and Cleopatra. Modern historians may suspect that Caesar was impotent, judging by his failure to father children by his last two wives,[52] but Suetonius entertains no such ideas: Caesarion was his child (52.1). Although Suetonius' Caesar does not complain about his troops' songs at the Gallic triumph, which seem to have made as much of his numerous heterosexual affairs in Rome and the provinces (51) as they did of his being Nicomedes' lover (49.4), he is grievously hurt by Catullus' poems on his alleged sexual relationship with Mamurra, which, he claims, left 'indelible marks' (*perpetua stigmata*) on his reputation (73).[53]

Eva Cantarella suggests that Caesar 'was ... a real man, and could afford to be passive if that was what he wanted'.[54] She gives due weight to the heterosexual Caesar, but like Hallett fails to appreciate the rhetorical nature of Caesar's words: his actions in 46, namely an angry public denial of the allegations under oath (κατώμνυε), as opposed to an argumentative strategy adopted on the turn in 59, indicate that Caesar could not afford to be seen publicly as passive,[55] even if behind closed doors that was a role he had on occasion played. Suetonius' very carefully constructed argument in chapter 49 on the ubiquity and longevity of the allegation regarding Nicomedes in fact does two things – it proves the power and the danger of the allegation throughout Caesar's career and demonstrates that there was no evidence to prove conclusively that Caesar had surrendered his *pudicitia* to Nicomedes or to anyone else.

Over more than twenty years Anthony Corbeill has argued that Caesar, from the earliest stages of his career, portrayed himself as 'an individual transgressing normative elite values',[56] and that on this occasion, no doubt dressed in his usual distinctive toga and loose tunic (a visual embodiment of *mollitia*), *embraces* 'the charge – a move almost never encountered in contemporary invective'.[57] There is, I would suggest, a key difference between embracing and refusing to deny; the latter indeed is an acknowledged technique for deflecting the argument of one's attacker especially when combined

[51]Suetonius also discusses the later controversy between M. Antonius and Octavian (*Iul.* 52.2).

[52]E.g. Balsdon (1958) 86–7.

[53]Poem 57 calls both Mamurra and Caesar *cinaedi*, pathics; both are marked with stains (*maculae*) that cannot be washed off which came from voluntary mutual fellation (Frantantuono (2010) and Blonski (2016) 315–19). If *perpetua stigmata* reflect accurately Caesar's own words, then Caesar exaggerates Catullus' language (e.g. Konstan (2007) 76): stains (*maculae*) that cannot be washed out become in Caesar's mind tattoo marks (*stigmata*), such as were done on criminals' faces as punishment and humiliation, and they are especially apposite for the marks of oral sex.

[54]Cantarella (2002) 221, cf. 158: 'a man who was such a he-man that he could afford to turn passive once in a while'. Williams (2010) 378 n. 23 rightly criticises her over-literal interpretation of 'the banter of the powerful'. For a very recent study of *cinaedus* as an insult, see Ormand (2023).

[55]His soldiers' songs at the Gallic triumph forced him to act, see Dio 43.20.4, quoted above in n. 46.

[56]Corbeill (2018) 150. Cf. Corbeill (1996) 196–7 and Corbeill (2002) 206–8.

[57]Corbeill (2002) 207: 'his response on this occasion would have surprised his teachers of rhetoric'. The idea of embracing is taken up also by Ruffell (2003), 48 and Hawkins (2017) 135. More measured is Webber (2015) 150, 'to some extent admitting it'.

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with a retort that puts a telling twist on the original accusation. Corbeill's comment, 'by embracing the charges Caesar focuses attention on them in order to expose them to ridicule',[58] rightly identifies ridicule as important but does not identify that the ridicule falls on Caesar's opponents themselves rather than on the charges, because the further implication is that they are even more 'woman' than Caesar by being 'her' subjects; Caesar says rhetorically, 'Well, if you think that, then …'

In his Johns Hopkins thesis on 'Wit as Argument in Cicero and Beyond', Robert Webber argues that Caesar compared himself to an Assyrian queen because that was 'something so outrageous as to be dismissed outright'.[59] For Suetonius at least, Caesar's comparison was all too true. Whereas Webber writes (2015: 158) 'whether or not it was intentional, the Semiramis comparison was slightly absurd, and it had the effect of both deflecting the criticism and insulting the Senate at the same time', I have suggested that it was (in Suetonius' eyes) intentional and not absurd; we do not know the effect of the comparison on the senatorial audience, but we can recognise that (in Suetonius' eyes) Caesar intended to insult the senate (or at least his opponents) by pursuing the logic of the interlocutor.

In my reading of the passage Suetonius grants Caesar intentionality in his threat to irrumate his opponents (metaphorically) and in the striking comparison of himself with Semiramis. While Caesar's initial invective may not count as wit or humour (at least if we impose the canons of Cicero and Quintilian in relation to double entendre and obscenity for the orator), the interlocutor does provide a good retort that turns the opprobrium back onto Caesar. Caesar responds with what Suetonius and his readers know was darkly true: the Caesar who had jokingly threatened to crucify his pirate-captors (and had done so) now jokingly talks of his reign, perhaps underscoring the present reality of 59 BC but also foreshadowing what was to come.

Addendum

One of the journal's readers suggested that the key to understanding Caesar's *insultaturum omnium capitibus* lies not in an obscene insinuation of *irrumatio* but in a humorous allusion by Caesar to lines written by Meleager of Gadara in his *Corona.* If correct, this would provide the earliest extant allusion by a Roman speaker or writer to Meleager, whose influence on Catullus later in the 50s BC is undoubted.[60] A six-line epigram, preserved in the *Greek Anthology* (12.101) is at issue:[61]

Τόν με Πόθοις ἄτρωτον ὑπὸ στέρνοισι Μυΐσκος
ὄμμασι τοξεύσας τοῦτ' ἐβόησεν ἔπος·
"Τὸν θρασὺν εἶλον ἐγώ· τὸ δ' ἐπ' ὀφρύσι κεῖνο φρύαγμα
σκηπτροφόρου σοφίας ἠνίδε ποσσὶ πατῶ."

[58]Corbeill (2002) 207.

[59]Cf. Webber (2015) 150: 'slightly absurd'.

[60]See Gutzwiller (2012) for Meleager's profound influence on Catullus, signalled for example in the opening and closing epigrams of Catullus' *liber.*

[61]Gow and Page (1965) no. 103 for the text. My translation draws on Höschele (2011) 21, Gutzwiller (2015) 34 and Ficklin (2021) 37.

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τῷ δ', ὅσον ἀμπνεύσας, τόδ' ἔφην· "Φίλε κοῦρε, τί θαμβεῖς;
καὐτὸν ἀπ' Οὐλύμπου Ζῆνα καθεῖλεν Ἔρως."

Shooting me, unwounded by Desires, under the breast with his eyes, Myiscus shouted thus: 'I have captured the overconfident one! Look, I trample with my feet that arrogant snort of sceptre-bearing wisdom on his brows.' But I, with what little breath I had, answered him: 'Dear boy, what's so astonishing about this? Eros brought down from Olympus even Zeus himself.'

The object of the poet's affections, the boy Myiscus, a human manifestation of Eros, proclaims his victory over the poet, whose arrogant wisdom is trampled under the lover/god's feet.[62] Caesar, the reader suggests, 'may well have said that he would impose his will against his opponents just like Eros Tyrant compels his victims – he is irresistible', and as a consequence the sexual aspects would be implicit but not the crude note of invective. If we imagine that Caesar evokes general recollection of this poem, while he would indeed be Ἔρως τύραννος, and the audience might well recall his powerfully proclaimed descent from Venus,[63] he would also be evoking identification with Myiscus, the ἐρώμενος. While Caesar was prepared to embrace a pejorative identification as a woman to turn back his interlocutor's quip, I do not believe that he voluntarily and deliberately opened himself up to ridicule for the notorious Nicomedes episode by portraying himself as an ἐρώμενος, however paradoxically powerful. One might, however, counter this by arguing that if Caesar did indeed lose control, then he may have uttered something that was logically not in his interest. If the incident is to be considered historical, the reader's argument requires that the allusion to Meleager be understood by a significant part of the audience. Certainly the audience was well-attuned to any hint of the Nicomedes slander, as we have seen from Suetonius' detailed presentation of the evidence, but it is certainly questionable whether Hellenistic love poetry was as widely known or as capable of producing a response: Henriette van der Blom has confirmed to me that the database of the Fragments of Roman Republican Orators Project (*FRRO*) does not contain any quotations of, or allusions to, Hellenistic love poetry. In itself this is not conclusive, but it is indicative.

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[62]There is no question but that Meleager's poem was well known to Propertius, who adapted numerous elements from it into the programmatic elegy of his *Monobiblos*, see e.g. Höschele (2011) 20–4 and Gutzwiller (2015), 34–6. The image of trampling by Eros occurs also in *Greek Anthology* 12.48 (Κεῖμαι· λὰξ ἐπίβαινε κατ' αὐχένος, ἄγριε δαῖμον. | οἶδά σε, ναὶ μὰ θεούς, καὶ βαρὺν ὄντα φέρειν· | οἶδα καὶ ἔμπυρα τόξα. βαλὼν δ' ἐπ' ἐμὴν φρένα πυρσούς, | οὐ φλέξεις ἤδη· πᾶσα γάρ ἐστι τέφρη ['I am down; stomp your foot on my neck, fierce demon. I know you, I swear by the gods, and that you are heavy to bear: I know also your fiery arrows. But if you set your torch to my heart, you will no longer burn it; for already it is all ash']) where the poet resignedly submits to Eros' control.

[63]Set out starkly by Suetonius (*Iul.* 6) in Caesar's funeral oration for his paternal aunt Julia, but also underscored by his honouring of Venus Genetrix in his forum/temple complex (e.g. *Iul.* 26.2, 78.1; see also Weinstock (1971) 17–18).

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