



Un nome, mille volti: Giulio Cesare nel teatro inglese della prima età moderna.

Domenico Lovascio.

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If not a thousand, as the title has it, many are indeed the faces attributed to Julius Caesar in the several plays staging him as a character in early modern England. Domenico Lovascio brilliantly analyzes a selection of them in this learned and comprehensive book. Suspended between reality and myth, praised as valiant commander while being despised for his daring ambition, Caesar came to embody the ambiguity surrounding the idea of Rome itself during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Even though at the time, the adjective “Roman” primarily suggested a miscellaneous complex of virtues, such as *dignitas* and *integritas*, the early modern age also rediscovered and tried to come to terms with Rome’s other face: the often brutal, sometimes tyrannous, and even sadistic center of power of the classical world. In order to reassess the English reception of such “Roman matter” and to understand how the *Urbs*’s history started to function as a mirror for the complex sociopolitical changes taking place in early modern England, Lovascio chose to study the multifaceted figure of Caesar, which is a symbol of quintessential *romanitas*.

With Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* firmly in the background, the author focuses on seven minor plays, written and performed between 1594 and 1620. Before analyzing each work, Lovascio’s first chapter leads readers through the different stages of the character’s evolution from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. He shows how medieval Caesar’s legendary halo was later counterbalanced by the discovery of new, primary sources, which shed light on his ambitious and even cynical nature. This theoretical framework sets the stage for chapter 2, where Lovascio considers Thomas Kyd’s *Cornelia* (1593–94), a play portraying Caesar as the villain *par excellence*. Such bleak characterization, Lovascio convincingly demonstrates, is due to the echo of the debates on tyrannicide that were spreading in England at the time. Showing the likely influence of *Vindiciae contra tyrannum*, Kyd’s *Cornelia* comes to embody the suffering of republican Rome as a consequence of Caesar’s thirst for power. This influence also emerges from the anonymous *Caesar’s Revenge* (1595), focus of the book’s third chapter, even though neither condemnation nor apology for the debated issue of killing a tyrant really arises. Rather, the interesting point is the attention on Caesar’s effeminate behavior, a result of his lascivious relationship with Cleopatra. The primary cause leading to Caesar’s transformation into a tyrant and

the outbreak of a much-blamed civil war is here due to his uncontrolled sexual desire. If both these plays are somewhat biased against the main character, Lovascio deals with one offering a more honest and stimulating portrait in chapter 4: George Chapman's *Caesar and Pompey* (1599–1609). This chapter indeed showcases the truthful representation of a hero in which both positive and negative features coexist; a *faber suae fortunae* whose final judgment is ambiguously left to the readers. Lovascio ascribes such ambiguity to the parallelism that could be established between Caesar and James I's celebrated and promising heir, Henry Stuart. By making conscious use of historical context, not only does Lovascio underscore this implication, but he also shows the connections between Rome's conspirators and the dangerously powerful courtiers living at James I's court. More direct references to the new king are brought onstage in the play centering Lovascio's fifth chapter: William Alexander's *Julius Caesar* (1607). Here, the author highlights Alexander's desire to become the king's trusted advisor and thus orient his rule. Indeed, while all the other plays portrayed Caesar as a tyrant *ex defectu tituli*, a usurper, Alexander's novel reading stages him as a tyrant *ex parte exercitii*, a legitimate governor who turns tyrannical. Unsurprisingly, this play was published during the first years of James's reign, when qualms about his dreaded absolutist drift began to circulate. Portraying Caesar as a sovereign *de facto*, Lovascio demonstrates how this play significantly warns more against the possible degeneration of a monarchy, rather than the ruin of a republic. This last aspect is instead what Ben Jonson stages in *Catiline His Conspiracy* (1611), on which Lovascio focuses in chapter 6, where the author enables us to see Jonson's Machiavellian portrait of Caesar. While reminding us of its connection with the Gunpowder Plot and England's troubled historical context, Lovascio assembles abundant evidence to read Jonson's play as a remarkable evaluation of Rome's momentous years between Catiline's conspiracy and the dissolution of the republic. Against this background, the author advances the embraceable claim that Jonson's characterization of Caesar is indeed exceptional; placing him out of the spotlight, he portrays him as a lurking canker who slowly, but relentlessly, devours the *res publica*. Concluding his survey, Lovascio's final chapter is concerned with John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *The False One* (1620–21), where we find another effeminate Caesar who gives in to Cleopatra's sexual offerings. Taking his cue from England's unstable political situation, Lovascio continues exploring the multiple connections between Caesar and James I. Here, not only does Caesar's inaction reflect James's disapproved pacifism during the Thirty Years' War, but his greed for material goods also places this work, as Lovascio puts it, within the rising debates against the king's imperialistic aims. These were indeed seen as potential threats to the nation's internal peace and as likely triggers for new, much-dreaded civil wars.

Among the many merits of Lovascio's monograph are his meticulous close readings of the plays, as well as his firm command of Latin, history, and early modern literature, which allowed him to access an impressively wide range of primary and secondary sources. Thorough in its ambit, this volume makes a strong contribution to Renaissance studies, as it fills a significant gap in the field of the reception of one of Rome's major symbols. In short, it surely merits reading by scholars interested in the analogies, differences, and even shared aims emerging from minor, but noteworthy, early modern representations of Julius Caesar.

