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Review of: Caesar's Civil War by W. W. Batstone and C. Damon

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Batstone, W.W., Damon, C. 2006. *Caesar's Civil War* (Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature). Oxford, Oxford University Press. xiii, 225 p. Pr. £11.99 (pb).

The book under review is part of the series *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature*, which aims to provide a guide to a single work for those reading it in English. The editors' forward proclaims that such a reader may "need more guidance in interpretation and understanding . . . than can usually be provided in the . . . introduction that prefaces a work in translation" (v). Batstone and Damon have therefore attempted to provide a relatively brief but sophisticated introduction to the literary and political context of Caesar's civil war commentary. Because Batstone and Damon's text assumes a fairly thorough familiarity with the late republic, it may prove frustrating for its intended audience in spite of some very interesting content. I will first survey the main topics the authors cover and then close by explaining the difficulties this book might pose for the novice student.

The chapters are organized loosely around themes rather than chronology. Chapter One discusses the genre of the *commentarius* and Caesar's selection of material. Chapter Two describes how the narrative structure serves as a form of argument. Chapter Three touches upon Caesar's audience and then turns to the way he characterizes Varro, Curio, Pompey, Labienus, and Metellus Scipio. Chapter Four is concerned with Caesar's self-presentation and his emphasis on *fides*, while Chapter Five evaluates stylistic issues, including the third person voice Caesar employs. The whole is capped by an epilogue that describes Caesar's abandonment of the *Bellum Civile* upon recognizing that he was unable to win the personal loyalty of those whom he had defeated. Although Batstone and Damon individually wrote initial drafts of certain chapters, I will refer simply to 'the authors' throughout.

In the first chapter, "Choices: Genre, Content, Style", the authors describe the genre of the *commentarius*, both by considering Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* and by quoting what has been said about the lost commentaries of Cicero and Atticus. Their general approach is to provide a literary context for the *Bellum Civile* by juxtaposing Caesar's writing with other texts. Thus, they first turn to Cicero's letters about his activities in Cilicia to show the sort of reportage provided by a general in the field. Next, Caesar's account of Corfinium is compared to those provided by Appian, Plutarch, Suetonius, and Dio in order to highlight those features which are unique to Caesar's approach and those features which are commonplace in historical narration.

Chapter Two, "Structure as Argument in *Civil War I*", also discusses the *Bellum Civile* in terms of other texts. The authors cover some of the motifs used to provide closure in Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* and the way that his writing contrasts with that of Aulus Hirtius, who penned book 8. The yearly framework that dominates

the *Bellum Gallicum* is violated in the *Bellum Civile*. Caesar instead structures the latter around thematic (and political) concerns. This leads into a discussion of temporal violations in Caesar's account. The authors show how Caesar's re-ordering of events makes his march into Italy appear to be the remedy rather than the cause of the chaos in Rome.

A recurring concept that the authors describe in the second chapter is the contrast that Caesar establishes between *res publica* and *res privata*. In the *Bellum Gallicum* Caesar had presented his own actions and interests as coterminous with the interests of the republic. This emphasis remains in the *Bellum Civile*. The Pompeians, on the other hand, are portrayed as interested in administering the state for personal gain instead of for the public good. This conceptual framework is intelligently traced through the opening chapters of Caesar's work.

The third chapter, "Taking Sides, Making Sides", is bracketed by a list of senatorial concerns—e.g. the fear of proscriptions—and a discussion of the Pompeian position after Pharsalus. The voice representing these views is mostly that of Cicero. These comments confirm many of Caesar's portraits and provide a useful reminder that not all is tendentious in Caesar. The authors quote from a selection of Cicero's letters that betray his frustration with Pompey's leadership, which of course Caesar also criticized. The analysis of the various players rightly emphasizes the way that Caesar contrasts Varro's ready surrender to Curio's decision to fight to the death and anticipates the detailed discussion of *fides* that follows some forty pages later.

In the fourth chapter, "Mastering Victory", the authors show how Caesar presents himself as a "participant in relationships" (118). Paradoxically, Caesar's goal of saving the *res publica* from those who wanted to despoil it resulted in an emphasis on personal loyalty to Caesar. The *Bellum Civile* demonstrates the reciprocal (and sometimes retributive) nature of *fides* as Caesar distributes rewards and occasional punishments throughout the course of the work. Caesar implies that, after the battle of Pharsalus, his beneficence will continue for those senators who prove sufficiently grateful.

Style is the subject of the final chapter entitled "Writing Fighting War". In it, the authors treat Caesar's use of the third person in his narrative—an aspect alluded to in passing elsewhere in the book. The observations on style typically begin with a listing of the plain and efficient uses of a particular stylistic device and then finish with a description of its more tendentious uses. Among the topics touched upon are adjectives, abstract nouns, verbs, subordinate clauses, indirect speech, and ornaments including anaphora, chiasmus, and alliteration. The authors' attempt to draw attention to features that can be "appreciated in translation" (195 n. 1) is admirable but probably quixotic. Sadly, many of these items will perforce be obscured by the translator's art.

The series in which this book is published seeks to provide an accessible guide for the reader who may be encountering the work “for the first time” (vi). It is difficult to imagine this text, full as it is of Caesar’s narrative strategies, finding a place in a classical civilization class where Caesar is generally taught as history. From the second paragraph of the introduction, where the word ‘republic’ is glossed as “*res publica*, literally ‘the public thing’” (3), the audience being addressed is hard to place. Thus the book’s voice and level are occasionally mercurial.

Issues, sometimes trivial, sometimes more serious, will arise for the professor using this as an introductory text. For instance, this book will be of limited use until after the *Bellum Civile* has been read. To take merely the first chapter, the passages under discussion range from Corfinium, in book 1, all the way to the death of Pompey, and thereby the reader’s familiarity with the historical and narrative arc of Caesar’s work is simply assumed. On the trivial side, the entry on “Plutarch”, in the index of “prominent persons”, states that he is a writer of the “Flavian” period—an adjective that would be opaque to anyone unfamiliar with the imperial period (presumably most students taking a Roman history survey and only up to the late republic). Thus the book requires a professor to pad out certain terse explanations (e.g. *senatus consultum ultimum* is glossed only as the “final decree”) as well as to provide an overview of relevant texts such as the *Bellum Gallicum* and the corpus of Ciceronian letters.

Many of the ideas in the book will abundantly reward the attention of a good teacher. For instance, the comparison of different versions of the capitulation of Corfinium provides an excellent opportunity to engage students in a discussion of historiographical issues. The second chapter opens with a section-by-section analysis of the opening of the *Bellum Civile* that offers a compelling introduction to the hidden complexity of Caesar’s version of events. Such gems are scattered throughout the book. In my view, this text would be most useful as supplementary reading for a Latin class that is entirely devoted to the *Bellum Civile*. Such a class may best appreciate the many lucid observations on style and narrative that form this book. It will also profit a graduate level class despite a brief and highly eclectic bibliography. Batstone and Damon’s text will find its most enthusiastic audience amongst faculty who are searching for new ways to teach the *Bellum Civile* in their courses and want a fresh survey of the latest approaches in Caesarian studies. In sum, this is a welcome addition to the recent offerings on Caesar. Those familiar with the period will find pleasure in the keen insights, thoughtful readings, and perceptive analyses contained within these pages.

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