CHAPTER 5

Julius Caesar,
the Orator of Paradox

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In the preface to the lives of Alexander and Caesar, Plutarch states: “The most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations...”

In the same attitude I myself will make use of sources concerning Caesar’s private life, including his sex-life, in an effort better to understand his enigmatic personality and the astounding influence he exercised on his fellow men. The biographies of Suetonius and Plutarch will provide my starting points. I hope that this will enable me to avoid the beaten tracks in one of the most hackneyed subjects in ancient history.

That Caesar was extremely fond of women is not remarkable in itself. Most men are fond of women, and most powerful men are powerfully fond of them. There is apparently a close link between power and sex. However, what is remarkable in Caesar’s case is the wide range and the nature of his conquests and the fact that in exploiting them he gratified at the same time his lust for power and his lust for lust. In chapters 50-52 of his biography Suetonius gives us an enumeration of Caesar’s lovers, including a number of the noblest women in Rome, some married to leading politicians of his day. Caesar himself first married Cornelia, daughter of the popularis Cinna, and after her death Pompeia, the woman whom

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2 Suetonius names “many illustrious women, among them Postumia, wife of Servius Sulpicius, Lollia, wife of Aulus Gabinius, Tertulla, wife of Marcus Crassus, and even Pompey’s wife Mucia... But beyond all others Caesar loved Servilia, the mother of Marcus Brutus” and her daughter Tertia.
he divorced since “Caesar’s wife should be above suspicion”—my first, but by no means my last example of the almost unbelievable cynicism of which Caesar was capable. Finally, he married the faithful and devoted Calpurnia. However, his most remarkable love affair was that with Servilia, stepsister of his enemy Cato and wife of M. Brutus senior. Later she married Silanus who as an ex-consul in the Catilinarian session of the senate first supported the death penalty for the conspirators, proposed by Cicero, who was consul, but changed his mind after Caesar’s intervention in favor of a lifelong imprisonment. Cato spoke against Caesar’s sententia so forcefully that the senate authorized Cicero to kill the Catilinarians.

Less known is a curious incident that happened during the session; it is recorded by Plutarch in his biography of M. Brutus (5). A little note was handed to Caesar from the outside, whereupon Cato cried that Caesar was obviously receiving instructions from the conspirators, with whom he was indeed suspected of being in league. Amidst the tumult Caesar handed the letter to Cato, who found to his dismay and fury that it was a wanton bit of writing from his sister Servilia, Silvanus’ husband; “So notorious was Servilia’s passion for Caesar,” Plutarch concludes. In the same context he tells us that their affair had already started much earlier, when they were both fifteen years old, in the very year of Servilia’s marriage with Brutus senior. Plutarch adds that Caesar had some grounds for believing that M. Brutus was in fact his own son. We shall come back to this later. According to Suetonius, even Servilia’s own daughter was involved in this reckless and lasting passion, which was not impaired by Caesar’s numerous liaisons with other women of the same social circles—and with many foreign women as well, among them Cleopatra, who called their son Cae­sarion, and Eunoe, queen of Mauretania (50–52). Caesar’s promiscuous affairs with married women in Gaul gave rise to the famous lampoon sung by his soldiers during the triumphal procession of the victorious army: urbani servate uxoribus: moebum calvum adducimus (Suet., Caes. 51). “The bald adulterer”: That does not sound like a Casanova!

What did Caesar look like? What was the secret of his charm? Suetonius tells us that he was tall, handsome, with lively eyes; but his constitution was not strong (45). Plutarch contrasts his fits of weakness and epileptics with the extreme hardships to which he often subjected his body (17). Suetonius also tells us how he suffered from his baldness, which he tried to cover up by carefully arranging his remaining hairs and by wearing the laurel wreath that the Roman people had given him the right always

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3 This phrase, which has become proverbial, is based on Plut., Caes. 10.