

# Julius Caesar's Last Words

A REINTERPRETATION

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In his description of the events of Julius Caesar's assassination Suetonius offers his readers two versions of the Dictator's last moments (*Div. Jul.* 82.2). In his preferred version, Caesar dies without a word, emitting only a single groan at the first dagger-thrust (*atque ita tribus et viginti plagis confossus est uno modo ad primum ictum gemitu sine voce edito*). Suetonius follows this with an alternative account: *etsi tradiderunt quidam Marco Bruto irruenti dixisse: καὶ σὺ, τέκνον*, which is rendered thus in the Loeb translation: 'though some have written that when Marcus Brutus rushed at him he said in Greek, "You too, my child?"'<sup>1</sup> A similar choice of alternatives is presented by Dio Cassius (44.19.5), the only other authority for the events of the Ides of March to deal with the subject of Caesar's last utterance.<sup>2</sup> His first version, which he much prefers (*ταῦτα μὲν ἀληθέστατα*), has Caesar incapable of doing or saying anything because of the number of assassins (*ὥσθ' ὑπὸ τοῦ πλήθους αὐτῶν μήτε πράξαι τι τὸν Καίσαρα δυνηθῆναι*). To this he adds a second account of the episode in terms very similar to Suetonius's version: *ἤδη δέ τωες καὶ ἐκεῖνο εἶπον ὅτι πρὸς τὸν Βροῦτον ἰσχυρῶς πατάξαντα ἔφη "καὶ σὺ, τέκνον"*.<sup>3</sup>

Later historians have, on the whole, accepted the opinion of both Suetonius and Dio in rejecting the alternative version, either tacitly by simply omitting the incident altogether, or by supplying reasons for

<sup>1</sup> J.C. Rolfe (trans.), *Suetonius* (London 1914).

<sup>2</sup> The various sources for Caesar's murder are conveniently gathered by W. Drumann, *Geschichte Roms*, 2nd edn., III (Leipzig 1906), 655-7; also by A. Esser, *Cäsar und die Julisch-Claudischen Kaiser im Biologisch-Arztlichen Blickfeld* (Leiden 1958), 32-4, 212-3.

<sup>3</sup> There is general agreement that Dio used Suetonius's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* extensively. The full dimension of this debt is documented by Fergus Millar for the Augustan books (*A Study of Dio Cassius* [Oxford 1964], 85-7, 105).

relegating it to the realm of gossip.<sup>4</sup> Ferrero, for example, is as forthright as any in his dismissal of the story ‘... as for the invocation to Brutus . . . , it is merely a piece of sentiment tacked on to the fantastic legend which makes Brutus the child of Caesar . . .’<sup>5</sup> The legend, of course, alludes to Caesar’s affair with Brutus’s mother Servilia, and particularly Caesar’s supposition that led him to the belief that he was Brutus’s father.<sup>6</sup> As is often the case, however, the more sensational version generally scorned by serious scholars has captured the popular imagination, especially in the form *et tu, Brute*, a phrase already current in Elizabethan England and made immortal by William Shakespeare (*Jul. Caes.* III.i.77).<sup>7</sup> The Latin is essentially a gloss designed to embroider the original Greek phrase, the substitution of *Brute* for *τέκνον* being surely intended to reinforce the legend that Brutus was a love-child of Caesar. For dramatic purposes, of course, this reading of the original intensifies the poignancy of the occasion, though it is worth noting that Shakespeare himself was able to create a powerful scene without employing this apocryphal relationship. There is in fact no need to rely on such gossip to recreate the close emotional attachment that bound Caesar to Brutus. Caesar’s affection for Brutus is well attested, for Brutus certainly owed his life and prospect of

<sup>4</sup> A survey, by no means exhaustive, of biographers of Julius Caesar shows the following as omitting any mention of the incident involving the words *καὶ σύ, τέκνον* in their accounts of Caesar’s death: George Long, *The Decline of the Roman Republic*, V (London 1974), 448; W. Warde Fowler, *Julius Caesar* (London 1908), 377; M. Gelzer, *RE* 10. 991-2; T. Rice Homes, *The Roman Republic and the Founder of the Empire*, III (Oxford 1923), 343-4; Georg Brandes, *Cajus Julius Caesar*, II (Berlin 1925), 397; John Buchan, *Julius Caesar* (London 1932), 159-60; J. Carcopino, *César* (G. Glotz [ed.], *Histoire Générale* II:2) (Paris 1947), 104-7; G. Walter, *Caesar, A Biography* (New York 1952), 529; L. Pareti, *Storia di Roma*, IV (Turin 1955), 351; M. Gelzer, *Caesar, Politician and Statesman*, trans. P. Needham (Oxford 1968), 328-9; M. Grant, *Julius Caesar* (London 1969), 260.

The following reject the authenticity of the incident with some comment; J.A. Froude, *Caesar, A Sketch* (London 1886), 524; W. Drumann, *op. cit.*, 656 (‘die Erzählung aber, nach welcher der Diktator bei dem Anblick des letzteren ausrief; “auch du, mein Sohn?” und, vom Schmerze über dessen Ruchlosigkeit überwältigt, sich nicht mehr verteidigte, ist sugunsten der Sage eronnen, welche ihn den Vater des Brutus nennt’); G. Ferrero, *The Greatness and Decline of Rome*, II (London 1909), 353; Klotz, *RE* 10.257; E. Meyer, *Caesars Monarchie* (Stuttgart 1922), 450 n. 2 ad fin.; J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Julius Caesar, A Political Biography* (New York 1967), includes the incident amongst ‘a wealth of stories, some perhaps true!’

I can find only two recent historians who unequivocally record the incident as true: A. Duggan, *Julius Caesar* (New York 1964), 20 (‘His last words were, “You too, Brutus,” as though in realization of the emptiness of human affection.’), and S. Perowne, *Death of the Roman Republic* (New York 1968), 232.

<sup>5</sup> Ferrero, *op. cit.*, 353.

<sup>6</sup> Plut. *Brut.*, 5.1-2; App. *BC* 2.112.

<sup>7</sup> The earliest known appearance of the actual words *et tu, Brute* is in *The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke* (printed 1595, Praetorius Facs., xxi:53), but the evidence that the phrase was already in circulation some years before is summarized by T.S. Dorsch (ed.), *Julius Caesar* (The New Arden Edition) (London 1955), loc. cit.

a distinguished career to Caesar's generosity.<sup>8</sup> Indeed even those sources that do not include Caesar's last words are almost unanimous in identifying the betrayal of Brutus, upon whom he lavished so much favor, as the factor that ended Caesar's will to live. As Plutarch describes the scene, 'when Caesar saw that Brutus had drawn his dagger, he drew his toga down over his head and let himself go.'<sup>9</sup> That Caesar uttered something appropriate to this final act of treachery to accompany his gesture of resignation seems perfectly reasonable. The existence of a tradition that quotes these last words must therefore be taken seriously, despite the reservations of both Suetonius and Dio.

There are two major obstacles to the acceptance of the phrase *καὶ οὐ, τέκνον* as Caesar's last words. One is that a sentimental expression of affection on Caesar's part seems out of harmony with his personality and is, in the circumstances, downright banal. This sentimentality is compounded by the penchant of commentators on Suetonius's text to associate the word *τέκνον* with the demonstrably absurd tradition that Brutus was Caesar's child by Servilia.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the words were uttered in Greek is an equally serious obstacle. For even if the meaning of the phrase as commonly perceived is accepted, it strains the imagination that even a fluent philhellene such as Caesar could have been composed enough to voice his final grief in Greek. Never one for affectation at the best of times, Caesar is hardly likely to have indulged in it at the end. On the other hand, if it can be demonstrated that the phrase *καὶ οὐ, τέκνον* can signify something appropriate to the occasion and to Caesar's disposition, and that in addition the phrase had to be spoken in Greek to convey this meaning, then we shall be justified in believing that Caesar actually uttered these words before he fell at the base of Pompey's statue. I believe that a reasonable case can be made, and I offer it now as a token of gratitude to John Bishop for the many stimulating hours spent in his classes at Edinburgh University a quarter of a century ago.

*Kai ou* is in fact a common and familiar phrase at all periods of classical antiquity and has a very specific application throughout the Greek speaking parts of the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> In its original form the phrase

<sup>8</sup> On at least three major occasions Brutus benefited from Caesar's generosity: (a) in receiving his pardon after Pharsalus for taking Pompey's side, (b) his governorship of Cisalpine Gaul in 46 B.C. and (c) his selection as *praetor urbanus* commencing 1 January 44 B.C. Plut. *Brut.* 5.1, 6, 7.1-4; *Caes.* 46.4, 57.3, 62.3; App. *BC* 2.117; Dio 41.63.6; Vell. 2.52.5.

<sup>9</sup> Plut. *Caes.* 66.6; also *Brut.* 17.3; App. *BC* 2.117.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Baumgarten-Crusius (ed.), *C. Suetonii Tranquilli Opera Omnia*, III (London 1826), 1330; J.H. Westmacott and E.M. Rankin (edd.), *De Vita Caesarum Lib. I-II* (New York 1918), 176; H.E. Butler and M. Cary (edd.), *C. Suetonii Tranquilli Divus Iulius* (Oxford 1927), 110, 149; H. Ailloud, (ed. and trans.) *Suétone, Vies des Douze Césars*, I (Paris 1967), 58 n. 1. Brutus, who was born in 85 B.C., was in fact far too old to have been Caesar's son (Cic. *Brut.* 230, 324; M. Gelzer, *RE* 10.1.974).

<sup>11</sup> On the formula *καὶ οὐ* in general, cf. D. Levi, 'The Evil Eye and the Lucky Hunchback' in R. Stillwell (ed.), *Antioch on the Orontes*, III, *The Excavations 1937-39* (Princeton 1941), 225-6; and J. Engemann, 'Zur Verbreitung magischer Übelabwehr in der Spätantike', *Jahrb. f. Ant. und Christ.* 18 (1975), 34-35.

probably appeared as *καὶ σὺ, ἔρρε* ('to hell with you, too!'), as is found in a mosaic from Rome.<sup>12</sup> The target of the imprecation is seldom named, but we can identify it from the talismanic symbols that frequently appear beside the legend as the Evil Eye, that timeless force of mischief inspired by *Invidia* (*Φθόρος*) that still haunts the lives of country-folk in Mediterranean lands. Thus from Akrae in Sicily the phrase is shown with a winged leonine monster with head and tail replaced by apotropaic phalloi.<sup>13</sup> At Antioch the formula is used in two successive mosaic floors decorating the vestibule of a building, accompanied in one case by an array of hostile agents attacking a large eye.<sup>14</sup> These include a raven, scorpion, centipede, serpent, trident, dagger and ithyphallic dwarf. A similar selection of malignant forces attacking the Evil Eye appears in a carved relief on a rock face near Burdur in Pisidia.<sup>15</sup> Here the accompanying legend reads *Βάσκανε καὶ σὺ* ('Evil Eye, to hell with you, too!'). The phrase by itself is also common in Syria where it is found on the lintels of houses and tombs to provide security from the evil influence of the omnipresent Eye.<sup>16</sup> The same two words appear also as a stamp on eastern Roman sigillata ware of late Republican and early Imperial date from a wide range of sites in the eastern Mediterranean, and are also found inscribed on gemstones.<sup>17</sup>

The phrase *καὶ σὺ* then, either by itself, or with some addition, was perhaps the commonest apotropaic formula in everyday use throughout the entire Greek speaking world. Travellers from Rome must frequently have encountered it and recognized its force, especially if, as was likely, it was accompanied by some gesture of the fingers or hands, or by the displaying of an amulet. During the late Republic in particular young Romans of noble family spent considerable time in the Greek east in the course of their education or early military and political careers, or, like Catullus, as hangers-on of a provincial governor. It would be natural for these young

<sup>12</sup> Levi, *op. cit.*, 226 n. 69.

<sup>13</sup> J. Judica, *Le antichità di Acre* (Naples 1819) 117, pl. 16. Phalloi appear also with *καὶ σὺ* in a mosaic from the heated basin in the baths at Kôm Troughah in Egypt; cf. Abd El-Mohsen El Khachab, *Ann. Serv. Ant. Egypte* 54 (1957), 118.

<sup>14</sup> Stillwell, *op. cit.* (see note 11), 7, 24-5, figs. 26-27; D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton 1947), 28-34, pl. 4; *IGLS*, nos. 874-875.

<sup>15</sup> G.E. Bean, 'Notes and Inscriptions from Pisidia 2', *Anat. St.* 10 (1960), 98, pl. 12e; Engemann, *op. cit.*, 30, pl. 12e.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. *IGLS*, nos. 387, 576. The formula also appears in the form *καὶ σοὺ*, probably to be explained by confusion of *σὺ* and *σοὺ* as a result of iotacism: *IGLS*, nos. 396, 409, 446, 476.

<sup>17</sup> Examples of sherds from Tarsus (Cilicia), Antioch, Hama (Syria), Samaria (Palestine), Coptos (Egypt) may be cited; cf. J.H. Iliffe, 'Sigillata Wares in the East', *QDAP* 6 (1936), 37; H. Goldmann, *Excavations at Güzlü Kule, Tarsus*, I (Princeton 1950), 284-5; F.O. Waagé, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes*, IV: 1, *Ceramics and Islamic Coins* (Princeton 1948), 34-5; A. Oxe, *Germania* 21 (1937), 137. The forms *καὶ σὺ*, *κὲ σὺ* and *καὶ σοὺ* are all attested, but an apotropaic force may be assumed in each case, conveying an imprecation against any dangers or harmful substances that might insinuate themselves into the drink contained in the vessel so inscribed. For the same formula on gems, cf. F.H. Marshall, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Greek, Etruscan and Roman in the British Museum* (London 1907), no. 513.

men to adopt a colorful phrase such as *καὶ οὐ* along with other expressions from the argot of the streets, much as students today readily affect the slang of the day when residing in a foreign country. It is well known that words and phrases acquired during one's impressionable years have a habit of remaining part of one's speech patterns for the rest of one's life. The result of this process is particularly evident in the correspondence of Cicero which is liberally sprinkled with Greek words and idioms that could only have been acquired from a first hand acquaintance with the language of everyday speech.<sup>18</sup> Indeed probably at no other time in Rome's history did the use of Greek in the ruling circles reach such a degree of fluency as in the late Republic.<sup>19</sup> There is ample evidence to suggest that both Caesar and Brutus were quite typical in this regard, both having lived in the east for lengthy periods as young men.<sup>20</sup> The use of a phrase in common parlance like *καὶ οὐ* by Caesar, and the immediate recognition of its significance by his assassins need therefore occasion no surprise. I suspect indeed that the words were as instinctive to Caesar and his contemporaries as the exclamation *gesundheit!* when prompted by a sneeze, or *ciao* as a standard greeting amongst the sophisticated today. Nor should the word *τέκνον* present any difficulty. Although in literary Attic it has a faintly poetic ring to it, the evidence from other dialects and of inscriptions and papyri from all over the Greek world establish it as perhaps the commonest and most general word for child.<sup>21</sup> With this meaning it can embrace both the closest blood ties and the neutral notion of a person of tender years. In this latter sense *τέκνον* was a perfectly appropriate term for Caesar to use in addressing Brutus, a man fully fifteen years his junior and to whom he had demonstrated considerable fondness.<sup>22</sup> This was in fact not the only occasion during the events surrounding Caesar's murder when Greek was used. A few seconds previously, during the opening struggle, Casca had appealed to his brother for help with the words, *ἀδελφέ, βοήθει*.<sup>23</sup> Was it any less natural for Caesar, therefore, when confronted so unexpectedly by Brutus's treachery to let slip the standard

<sup>18</sup>The wide extent of Cicero's Greek vocabulary is summarized by H.J. Rose, ('The Greek of Cicero', *JHS* 41 [1921], 91-116): 'a very large percentage of the vocabulary is Hellenistic: not a few words are unexampled elsewhere, i.e. formed part of the current vocabulary of his day' (p. 116). A particularly vivid and relevant example of Cicero's use of Greek appears in his letter to Atticus (*Att.* 13.52), where he conveys in two concise phrases the literary tone of the dinner conversation during his visit with Caesar in December 45 B.C.: *σπουδαῖον οὐδὲν in sermone, φιλόλογα multa*. Indeed it is hard to escape the impression that much of the conversation on that particular occasion was conducted in Greek.

<sup>19</sup>E.E. Best Jr., 'Suetonius: The Use of Greek among the Julio-Claudian Emperors', *CB* 53 (1977), 39-45.

<sup>20</sup>For Caesar, *Suet. Div. Jul.* 2.1, 4.1-2; *Plut. Caes.* 1.8, 2.2-5, 3.1; *Vell.* 2.41-43. For Brutus, *Plut. Brut.* 2-3.

<sup>21</sup>*LSJ* s.v. *τέκνον*; Preisigke, *Wörterbuch der Griechischen Papyrusurkunden* (Berlin 1927), 584, s.v. *τέκνον*.

<sup>22</sup>The generally accepted date for Brutus's birth is 85 B.C.: *Cic. Brut.* 230, 324; Gelzer, *RE* 10.1.974; Meyer, *op. cit.* (see note 4), 450 n.2; Drumann, *op. cit.* (see note 2), IV, 21 sqq.

<sup>23</sup>*Plut. Caes.* 66.5; Nicol. Dam. *FGrH* 90 F 130.89.

cliché picked up in his youth to ward off the Evil Eye, *καὶ σὺ, τέκνον* ('to hell with you too, lad!') at the same time drawing the fold of his toga over his face to escape in vain its blighting influence?

This strange little incident was remembered long enough to find its way into at least one contemporary account, which is probably where Suetonius encountered it.<sup>24</sup> We can reconstruct the rest. The conscientious biographer, with a knowledge of Greek more bookish than practical, missed the technical sense of the expression.<sup>25</sup> Yet it seemed worth preserving for all that; and so, interpreting *καὶ σὺ* in a literal sense, he appended it to his version of Caesar's assassination, in the process sowing enough doubt to convince all his successors that the words *καὶ σὺ, τέκνον* were apocryphal. We may never know for certain the truth of Caesar's last words, to be sure, but we should recognize that popular tradition, right or wrong, as recorded by both Suetonius and Dio does preserve the interesting possibility that in using this apotropaic expression Caesar died with a curse on his lips.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup>In his *Divus Iulius* Suetonius quotes authors of the time of Caesar only, which leads Weinstock 'to the probable, though not certain, conclusion that he did not use any later source either' (*Divus Iulius* [Oxford 1971], 343). This point is also made by M. Haupt in *Opuscula*, I (repr. Hildesheim 1967), 72.

<sup>25</sup>The degree to which Roman writers of the late first century after Christ were 'less Greek' than their late Republican predecessors is demonstrated in A. Gwynn's comparison of Cicero and Quintilian (*Roman Education from Cicero to Quintilian* [New York 1964], 226-30).

<sup>26</sup>I am grateful to my colleague, Professor A.A. Barrett, whose helpful comments on this paper have been most valuable.