

Mary Beard, *Twelve Caesars: Images of Power from the Ancient World to the Modern*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. ix-376 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00.

The six lectures Mary Beard delivered for the A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts in 2011 are the foundations for *Twelve Caesars*, an impressive book published a decade after these lectures. *Twelve Caesars* quickly establishes the popularity of images of Roman emperors in the modern period as they have appeared in art and diverse products purchased by consumers of different classes. This popularity leads to the basic question of why such images were created and purchased, particularly given the dark and scandalous stories associated with many emperors, which segues to another pertinent question Beard addresses: what is the meaning of these representations for both creator and consumer? Aside from looking into this meaning, Beard also tries to ascertain whether some of these images have been correctly identified and whether we can accept some sculptures as being authentic ancient ones since forgeries have further muddled the waters of these representations. Experts in the field are still uncertain as to the correct identity of many sculptures since they still largely rely on centuries-old identification techniques to determine if they are a representation of an emperor and, if so, which one. Identification of these emperors becomes even more complicated as their sculptures were modeled off the image of Augustus to “look the part” (p. 72), leading to debates over who is being represented. Beard takes the reader through some of the debates that have revolved around potential forgeries, such as the “British Museum Caesar,” and potential misidentifications with such examples as the “Arles Caesar” and the “Tusculum Caesar” as both have been proclaimed at one point “the face of Caesar.” Beard utilizes Roman literature, particularly Suetonius’s influential text *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, and the images stamped on Roman coins to accomplish the task of identifying and discussing the representations of these emperors. Although there is clear deviation from depicting twelve emperors during the Renaissance,

Titian's *Eleven Caesars* being a notable one, Beard notes the idea of twelve during this period was very popular among artists even if some of the emperors represented were not the ones written about by Suetonius. For example, she identifies Renaissance representations of the Habsburg family that have used his notion of the "Twelve Caesars" in adapted forms and have made explicit links between the Habsburgs and Roman emperors to display "translatio imperii."

One of the strengths of *Twelve Caesars* is Beard's use of a wide selection of art and material culture to demonstrate the ways in which representations of Roman emperors were created, displayed, and utilized. As mentioned previously, coins have been important to identify Roman emperors, however, they were also considered the "physical embodiment of the lessons that Rome's history and its rulers could offer" and were represented in art and other forms of material culture (p. 83). Beard takes the reader through a variety of examples to show the degree to which images of coins influenced Renaissance art. Furthermore, her discussion of Roman portraits demonstrates how they have "underpinned the idea of modern portraiture" (p. 117) through the representations of kings and other historical figures that were modeled off Romans. Beard looks at some of the more influential representations of Roman emperors, including the afterlife of Titian's *Eleven Caesars* by discussing the copies that can be traced back in some fashion to his representations. She also takes the reader through some of the well-known spaces that contain these representations, including Hampton Palace Court and the "Room of the Emperors" as Beard details the movement and reidentification of sculptures at the Capitoline Museums.

Beard's investigation is not simply restricted to the Suetonius' twelve emperors or of men as she also engages in a discussion of Roman imperial women, including Messalina and the Agrippinas, by exploring how they have been represented, at times contradictorily, and for what

purposes. Furthermore, Beard notes it can be more difficult to correctly identify representations of these imperial women with certainty since there are fewer descriptors of them in Suetonius's text and on Roman coinage than what we have for their male counterparts. This discussion of Roman women allows Beard to analyze the identities of those in a double portrait by Rubens currently named *Agrippina and Germanicus* on the National Gallery of Art's website as she utilizes Suetonius to lend credibility to the theory that these images actually represent Tiberius and Vipsania Agrippina. That said, as Beard reminds the reader throughout her book, pegging down who was being represented can be far from straightforward, as she notes in this case, "[w]e are never likely to know for certain what Rubens had in mind..." (p. 273).

Twelve Caesars has an engaging style that invites the reader to continue their journey through the complexities of representations of Roman emperors and imperial women. Beard makes excellent use of Suetonius to discuss the identification and misidentification of some of the emperors, particularly in her examination of the Aldobrandini Tazze as the statuettes depicting some Roman emperors were attached to bowls that detailed the life of a different emperor. Even though Beard discusses the Aldobrandini Tazze in the 2017 publication *The Silver Caesars: A Renaissance Mystery*, it is still a welcomed inclusion to *Twelve Caesars* due to the artistic importance of the Tazze and provides Beard an opportunity to further demonstrate her valuable detective work. In *The Silver Caesars*, Beard poses a question that revolves around the "diagnostic signs of good or bad imperial rule,"¹ and although the essence of that question is still reflected in *Twelve Caesars*, the book also engages in broader and engaging question sets. Her questions related to those images that "blend" representations of goddesses and imperial women forces one to consider more broadly issues of representations, power, and imperial women. Although admittedly, some of the questions Beard poses cannot be answered at this stage of

research, if ever, they still force the reader to question these representations in different ways and may prove to be great jumping off points for further scholarship. Beard recognizes she does not engage in a broad discussion of Roman emperors in film; however, *Twelve Caesars* references a few films, including *Carry on Cleo* and *Gladiator*, and notes a “sequel” to *Twelve Caesars* should engage with this topic. Although it is not the images Beard has been examining, an analysis of representations of Roman emperors in novels may be a potential field of inquiry. To conclude, Beard has written an engaging and insightful text for scholars and non-scholars about the complexities of identification and representation of Roman imperial people and power and has clearly demonstrated her mastery in the field.

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NOTE

Mary Beard, “Suetonius, the Silver Caesars, and Mistaken Identities,” in *The Silver Caesars: A Renaissance Mystery*, ed. Julia Siemon (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017), 35.