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CAESAR'S *COMMENTARII*: WRITINGS IN SEARCH OF A GENRE

The title¹, intentionally literary, is designed to engage readers of Caesar's *Commentarii* in a kind of detective story. Not a detective story of the Whodunit variety, for Latinists know the who, what and where of the story which begins with the words, *Gallia est omnis divisa in partis tris*. Rather the question concerns the genre of these writings and might better be stated: assuming that Roman writers believed that certain kinds of writing belong to certain genres—elegy, epic, lyric, history, biography, etc.—to what genre, Greek or Roman, do Caesar's *Commentaries* on Gaul belong? And related to this question is one that may interest those teaching Caesar, do the *Commentaries* on Gaul contain elements in common with any modern literary genre? Note that the *Commentarii* of the title refer primarily to the earlier work on Gaul and the years 58–52 B.C., and not to the later work covering the years 49–48 B.C. and the conflict with Pompey.

Concerning the question of ancient literary genres, the initial clue, as in a detective story, takes us off the track. For at first glance the answer seems all too obvious: the text tradition should supply the title Caesar himself gave to his work and, once ascertained, the title should indicate in which genre the author himself would classify his writings. But here we meet the first obstacle, for the manuscript tradition of Caesar's title, the text containing the exact title he assigned to his work, has been hopelessly corrupted.

If the nature of the general problem whets your appetite, let me try to define the problem more specifically. It makes a big difference when reading Caesar's accounts whether the reader believes that history is being encountered rather than a military account of wars. Most scholars, for example, refer to these works as the Gallic War or the Civil War and use the standard abbreviations, *BGall.* and *BCiv.*, *Bellum Gallicum* and *Bellum Civile* respectively, when citing from them. But are these titles and abbreviations inclusive enough for what Caesar writes? Do they account, by way of example, for what some critics believe is the most important part of the work on Gaul, the sections dealing with the Customs of the British in book 5 and those of the Gauls and Germans in book 6? And if the work is called the *Gallic War*, how does this title account for the two British expeditions in books 4 and 5 and the Rhine crossings in books 4 and 6? Viewed in this light the title Caesar himself assigned to his writings takes on added significance, for it should contain the key to how he thought of his writings and, more importantly, how he wished his readers to consider them.

F. W. Kelsey, writing in *TAPA* for 1905 in an article called, "The Title of Caesar's Work," argues persuasively that the original title given by the author

¹An earlier version of this paper was given at the annual meeting of the Classical Association of New England, Boston, Massachusetts, April 2, 1982.

to his writing was: *C. Iuli Caesaris commentarii rerum gestarum*, that is, *Gaius Iulius Caesar's Commentaries of His Historical Accomplishments*. Note that *res gestae*, deeds accomplished, is a Roman designation for historical writing. The main point to be noted, however, if Kelsey is correct, is that the phrases *de bello Gallico* and *de bello civili* are not part of the general title. Rather, these expressions were prefixed to each book either by Caesar or by a later hand. Since we know that Aulus Hirtius is the author of book 8 of the *Commentaries* and since it is widely believed that he is also the author of the *Bellum Alexandrinum* included in the *Commentaries* dealing with Pompey, it is not implausible to think of Hirtius or a later editor adding specific designations to individual books. For not only is the text transmission of the title corrupt, but there is a long tradition in the transmission of texts for later hands to assign titles, divide plays into acts, reorder lines and the like. The important point, to repeat, even if Caesar himself is responsible for these designations, is that the general name he gave to his work does not mention either the Gallic or Civil War, but it does contain a reference both to the *Commentarius*-form of writing and to *res gestae*, words which denote historical deeds or accomplishments.

As corollary to this point, the designation of these works by their subtitles, *de bello Gallico*, *de bello civili*, may cause us to think of these writings too narrowly as military accounts and in terms other than the author intended. I suggest as a first hypothesis that we misjudge the *Commentarii* if we refer to them other than by their original title or think of them only as military accounts.

Assuming that Kelsey is correct, what does the title mean? According to F. E. Adcock, in his book *Caesar as a Man of Letters*, the word *commentarius* was generally thought of in antiquity as an *aide-mémoire*, or notes made by an author and meant to inform more polished literary writing later on. We might think of *Commentarii* as notebooks kept by an author or as a scholar's notations. Its Greek equivalent is *hypomnemata*, or memory helps, and we know that Alexander the Great took with him on his expeditions writers who made notes of this sort, useful for the subsequent writing of more complete historical accounts. None of these *hypomnemata* have survived, but they are referred to by writers of the period.

The closest literary correspondence in Greek to Caesar's *Commentarii* is Xenophon's *Anabasis*, a third person account of the march into Persia led by Xenophon's hero, Cyrus, culminating in the battle of Cunaxa, and the journey back to the Black Sea, events in which Xenophon himself comes to play a not-insignificant part. For teachers of Greek this work, like Caesar's *Commentaries*, typically serves as the first continuous prose given to students and has a similar pedagogical purpose, namely, as an introduction to clear, unadorned, matter-of-fact prose of moderate difficulty. And like Caesar, Xenophon reports these events in the seemingly objective, third person singular form. It is sufficient to note that there was a tradition of Greek writing similar to the *Commentaries*, represented by the *Anabasis* and by *hypomnemata*, the former surviving, the latter not.

What is more interesting to note is the reference to both the *Commentarius*- and *res gestae*- forms of writing that Caesar includes in his title. Adcock

suggests that Caesar wants his reader to think of these writings as falling halfway between historical notes, *commentarii*, and more polished historical writing, *res gestae*, that is, as more than notes in content, but as less than finished history in style. Kelsey, on the other hand, thinks that the *res gestae* of the title are intended by Caesar less to mean historical writing than as historical facts, that is, that the *Commentarii* are a record of Caesar's actual historical accomplishments in *hypomnemata*-, or notebook-, form.

Another way to interpret this combination of *commentarius* and *res gestae*, I suggest, is that Caesar intends his reader to think of both simultaneously, that is, as notes taken in the field, *commentarii*, and as polished, finished historical writing, *res gestae*, in need of no further literary embellishment. The second hypothesis is that Caesar intends by his title to raise the *commentarius*-form of notetaking to the level of historical writing, *res gestae*, and that in his capable hands, notetaking has become finished history, *commentarius* equals *res gestae*: a new literary genre has been created by him.

Having briefly considered the ancient tradition, I now turn to a consideration of modern literature. The general thesis in the following analogy is that ancient literary forms have their counterparts in modern literary genres, although the ancient genres may not be immediately visible to the modern reader. The third hypothesis, one that I have used with some success in my own classroom, is that Caesar's *Commentarii* contain many of the same characteristics found in the genre of the literary Western in this country. Let me explain.

When I speak of the Western as a literary genre I am not referring to the film versions of these stories that became so popular in our culture with the advent of the moving pictures in the 1930s, but rather to the literary predecessors of these popular culture forms. Here is the 1983 *Encyclopedia Britannica* definition of "Western."

An original American genre of popular fiction and film whose formulaic content has many resemblances to the heroic literature of older civilizations. The time and locale of the western are always the same—a mythic West whose great beauty and promise must be defended from evildoers by simple people, who derive their dignity from this responsibility. The hero is the classical American hero—a man alone, pitted against the Wilderness. The Wilderness is usually defined as a rude outpost of civilization, but whether this town is called Tombstone or Yuma or Carson City, it is the same town of one broad street where the hero will eventually confront the evildoer in a showdown.

Three writers, James Fenimore Cooper, Owen Wister, and Zane Grey, have made important contributions to the literary tradition of the American Western. As a literary form the Western owes its origins to Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, five novels written between 1823 and 1841, of which the best known are *The Last of the Mohicans*, published in 1826, and *The Deerslayer*, published in 1841. Essentially these are stories of the Mohican Indians in upstate New York—Cooperstown, New York, was founded by the

author's father—and they feature the deeds of Cooper's hero, the woodsman and leatherstocking, Natty Bumppo, a character loosely modeled on the life of Daniel Boone.

The literary basis of the modern Western is owed to Owen Wister, a Philadelphian by birth, whose best-selling novel, *The Virginian*, published in 1902, sold over two million copies. *The Virginian* built on the Leatherstocking Tales of Cooper, combining with them the image of the cowboy-hero of the western plains, specifically Wyoming. This novel helped to shape the romantic conception of the cowboy and the West as much as any other work of fiction.

Wister is, in turn, followed by Zane Grey, probably the most popular writer of Western stories, whose super-romantic heroes and extravagant prose made him one of the best-selling authors of this genre. Grey, from Zanesville, Ohio, a town named after one of his ancestors, was trained in dentistry at the University of Pennsylvania and visited the West only after his early novels became popular. Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* was published in 1910 and his last book, *Shadow on the Trail*, appeared in 1946, several years after his death.

Grey's works are of cultural importance, as Wister's and Cooper's books are important for their literary qualities. Note that the dates for Cooper's works follow the Lewis and Clark expedition, 1804–1806, by about twenty years, and are contemporary with the westward expansion associated with the covered wagon, while Wister and Grey, both early twentieth-century writers, postdate the heavy western migrations caused by the Homestead Act of 1862 and the completion of the coast-to-coast railroad in 1869. By 1890 the process of westward movement found established settlements in all the western states. Increases in population soon followed and with that development came the popularity of the American Western.

Literary Westerns share the following characteristics:²

1. a particular setting.
2. a prescribed cast of characters who have easily recognizable and clearly delineated functions in the story.
3. a plot which allows a limited number of lines of development.

Let me analyze each of these elements and show how Caesar's *Commentaries* exhibit these same characteristics.

Setting:

The American Western always takes place at a meeting point, the frontier, where civilized values conflict with non-civilized or less-civilized mores. The setting may not always be the Western Plains, as it is not, for example, in Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales; but the upstate New York locale of these stories is on the frontier where the values of the hero, Natty Bumppo, impinge on those of the Mohican Indians, and their values, in turn, conflict with his. Owen Wister's and Zane Grey's stories take place on the western frontier, be it Kentucky or the far west, but at the crucial juncture where two sets of

²See John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, no date) 34 ff. and, by the same author, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (Chicago, 1976) 192 ff.

conflicting values meet, those of civilization, and those of the outlaw, or Indian.

Turning to the *Commentaries*, if one looks carefully at a map of Gaul, beyond the Transalpine province assigned to Caesar, almost all of Gaul where Caesar spends the major part of his time campaigning is west of the three provinces assigned to him, Transalpine Gaul, Cisalpine Gaul, and Illyricum. Further, the first encounter with the migrating hordes coming down through Switzerland and passing near to or through his territory is at the northwestern limit of his province. Clearly, this is the frontier, and two sets of values, those of civilization, represented by Caesar and the Romans, and non-Roman values, as evidenced by these migrating hordes of Helvetians, meet here on the edges of civilization. This is Caesar's first encounter with the *barbari* in the *Commentaries*, and it takes place at the crossing of the Saone River. Caesar, the Roman general, acting with dispatch, mobilizes his troops and easily overcomes the Helvetians. The battle takes place in the land of the Segusiavi, the first tribe, Caesar says, *extra provinciam*, (*BGall.* 1.10.5), that is, territory outside his legally defined province of Transalpine Gaul and on the far side of the Rhone River. Caesar's first battle takes place on the fringes of the Roman world, just beyond his own province.

Cast of Characters:

The American Western has three essential roles, those of the townspeople on the edge of the frontier, the cowboys or Indians who threaten this group, and the hero, or the man in the middle who, while representing many of the same qualities or skills as the cowboys or Indians, is fundamentally committed to the townspeople.

It is easy to identify these three groups in the first book of the *Commentaries* on Gaul. The townspeople on the edge of the frontier are the provincial inhabitants of Transalpine Gaul, whose interests Caesar claims to protect; the second group is the Helvetian tribe, which attempts to make its way through this territory, or near it, and consequently represents a threat, according to Caesar, to the Roman province and its inhabitants; the hero is of course, Julius Caesar, who, by his quickness, intelligence, and military ability, and ably assisted by *Fortuna*, turns back these barbarous hordes with enormous losses on their side, and with only a minimal loss of Roman troops.

Character Portrayals:

In the American Western the hero representing civilization is the man wearing the white hat and mounted on the white steed; his opponent, representing outlawry and uncivilized ways, is dressed in different clothing from him. If he is a cowboy he is dressed in black, if an Indian, not only in different clothing—moccasins and a loin cloth, for example—but he is of a different color from the hero.

At the end of the first book of the *Commentaries* (*BGall.* 1.30 ff.), Caesar confronts the German chief Ariovistus. Note that Ariovistus is a tribal leader, one who dresses and speaks differently. Note too that the reason, according to Caesar, why Ariovistus does not engage the Romans in battle is that the wives in his camp practice divination. They declare, Caesar continues, that should the Germans engage in battle, since it is not yet the full moon, they are

doomed to lose. The differences between Roman and non-Roman values could not be stated more clearly.

Book 7 ends with the battle of Alesia, where Caesar confronts and defeats the Gallic leader Vercingetorix, a brilliant military victory for Caesar deep in the heart of Gaul near the source of the Seine River. The last sentence of Book 7 states that a public thanksgiving is decreed at Rome for this victory, a typical ending for many books of the *Commentaries*. Caesar, the hero and Roman General, defeats his non-Roman German and Gallic adversaries. This same pattern can also be observed in the American Western.

Plot Line of the Western:

The American Western typically ends with a showdown between the hero and his adversary, and this final encounter usually takes place in the main street of the town, with the wide open spaces of the West serving as backdrop for the clash. Note that it is only the hero and his adversary who meet in this encounter, while their forces stand on the sidelines and observe the action. Variations on this final encounter may include a pursuit scene, or the outlaws or Indians may lie in wait for the hero at the pass. But the narrow limits imposed by this genre permit only this final shootout, with the hero always winning. What could be clearer in the *Commentaries* on Gaul than this same kind of final scenario, described above, at the beginning and end of the account? Caesar meets and overcomes Ariovistus at the end of Book 1, and Vercingetorix, the Gallic chieftain, at the end of Book 7.

Summary and Postscript:

In conclusion, the title Caesar gives to his *Commentaries* on Gaul is meant to suggest an *aide-mémoire* elevated to the level of history, *res gestae*, and this genre has features in common with the Greek *hypomnemata* tradition and Xenophon's *Anabasis*. Caesar's *Commentaries* and his role in them also share many characteristics with the American Western literary tradition, beginning with the works of James Fenimore Cooper, and those of Owen Wister and Zane Grey.

The approach outlined above was used in a class in Caesar's *Commentaries* on Gaul in a course at the University of Massachusetts, fall term, 1982. In addition to extensive reading in the *Commentaries*, students read and reported on the novels listed above and compared them with Caesar's writings. The results led the class to question how much, other than superficially, these works do have in common—additional study of the significant differences is required. Yet I remain convinced that the seeds of the Western genre can be observed, though subsequently much changed, in Caesar's *Commentaries* on Gaul. And one conclusion was indisputable—the focus on the idea of the Western made the course more enjoyable for all, teacher and student alike.

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