



Brutus: The Noble Conspirator by Kathryn Tempest.

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There has been a recent resurgence¹ of interest in Marcus Junius Brutus (85–42 BC), Julius Caesar’s most famous assassin. In *Brutus: The Noble Conspirator*, historian Kathryn Tempest (Roehampton Univ.) pursues further her interest in the Roman Republic.² She aims to use the relevant ancient evidence to go beyond the legend of Brutus created by Shakespeare and reveal the man in his historical context. Blending biographical with historical and literary analyses, she seeks to open a new perspective on factual details which, she admits, may not be novel in themselves (xi).

Besides an introduction and conclusion, the book comprises eight chapters equipped with illustrations, maps, and endnotes. There is an extensive bibliography and a detailed but not comprehensive index.³ Two appendices helpfully summarize the order and nature of the events of a hectic political period (88–42 BC). The author also compares the accounts of Plutarch, Appian, and Cassius Dio, the main ancient sources for the period.

Though Tempest claims not to be bound to a linear historical narrative (14), chapters 1–7 in fact track the details of Brutus’s life chronologically. This has merit, since deviations from a chronological plan can cause the narrative to lose clarity. That said, the author does enliven her linear format by including quotations of primary sources as well as summaries and clarifications of contemporary political circumstances as, for example, in her discussion of the situation young nobles faced in the senate in the wake of Sulla’s reforms in 81 BC (29–32). The author’s discerning discussion of such matters helps place Brutus squarely in his political context, a boon for nonspecialist readers.

The episodic nature of the extant sources for Brutus’s life and career, especially before Caesar’s assassination, dictates the structure of any account of his life. Tempest’s book is no exception, but she does nonetheless strive for something different (xi): thus, in chapters 1–4, she does, if only sporadically, analyze the source materials. When she does so, however, for example, in discussing the meaning of images on a coin minted by Brutus in 54 BC (41–42), she is at her best and most innovative. In fact, from the assassination onward (chaps. 5–8), she adopts this method more consistently and to good effect. Especially enlightening is her astute examination of the sources for Brutus and Caesar’s final encounter (100–104).⁴ The author’s clear prose style will help readers grasp more complicated matters, such as Brutus’s money-lending activities (44–49).

1. After a gap of over thirty years between Martin Clarke’s *The Noblest Roman: Marcus Brutus and His Reputation* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1981) and my *Brutus: Caesar’s Assassin* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2015).

2. Her previous work includes *Cicero: Politics and Persuasion in Ancient Rome* (NY: Continuum, 2011).

3. Missing, e.g., are the names of Lucius Staius Murcus and Lucius Tillius Cimber, who played key roles in Brutus and Cassius’s preparations for war against Antony and Octavian.

4. However, some of these illuminating digressions are indebted to the work of other scholars. E.g., the section on philosophy (94–97), as Tempest acknowledges, draws on D.N. Sedley, “The Ethics of Brutus and Cassius,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997) 41–53.

Chapter 8 diverges from the rest of the book with a succinct review of the reception of Brutus from antiquity up to the present. The narrative flow is somewhat unclear here, but in general explicates selected lines from Shakespeare that reveal aspects of Brutus's character, with comparisons to other evidence. As the book is chiefly a *political* biography, students of military history may miss more detailed accounts of battles. The Battle of Mutina (43 BC), between Decimus Brutus and Mark Antony, is not covered at all, and little is said of Cassius's movements. While this does not much detract from a biographical study of Brutus, the author might yet have cited more often the pertinent military histories in her extensive bibliography. And, too, cross references to subjects touched on more than once in the book are notably lacking, a problem particularly in the non-chronological portions of the narrative. The use of anachronistic popular terms—"networks" and public or political "profiling" (*passim*)—jars with both the otherwise serious narrative tone and the nature of the material itself. These quibbles aside, the book is a historically accurate and professionally finished treatment of its subject.⁵

Tempest declares at the outset that there are

big questions about Brutus's place in history which this book can pose, but it cannot conclusively answer. Still less can it pass moral judgment on Brutus or his deeds. Its aim in this respect is more limited: to expose readers to a range of points of view, to encourage them to enter into the debate themselves, and to review the historical evidence afresh for this complicated and complex character. (11)

This claim to a disinterested stance is repeated throughout: "it is not my intention, then, to offer my own judgement on Brutus or his legacy" (231). Nevertheless, Tempest's opinion of Brutus is patent. She casts him as a shameless self-promoter, trading on his legendary family heritage:

the name came with serious political cachet, and it gave Brutus an enviable advantage which he used to pronounced effect throughout his career.... He fashioned his own identity ... to position himself and become a Brutus for his age.... [He was] a pragmatist ... prepared to transcend personal differences for what he perceived to be the greater political advantage, ... an active manipulator with his own interests, an independent operator who knew what he wanted and how to get it. (19–20, 32, 39, 54)

Elsewhere, Tempest exaggerates certain details: though Brutus's role at the Battle of Pharsalus (48 BC) remains uncertain, she claims he "bore some responsibility for the mass of Roman bloodshed" (62). Of his defection to Caesar's side after Pompey's defeat, she contends that his "whole career displays a remarkable knack for political side-switching" (66). She deploys emotive language such as "terrorised" and "carnage" in narrating Brutus's bloody siege of Xanthus in 42 BC (179–85). Later, Brutus and Cassius are "bandits" and "cut-throat assassins" (223): "there was a clear sense that Brutus was becoming as much a tyrant as the man he killed" (205). While many of these judgments are valid, if overstated, they clearly reveal Tempest's opinion of Brutus, despite her claims to impartiality. The book would have benefited from a more direct and forceful argument for her true position, instead of simply concluding that "Brutus was an enigma" (237).

This caution extends to the author's interpretation of sources. Given that she usually urges a close reading of the primary materials, it is somewhat surprising when, for example, she accepts

5. I noticed some minor errors: stray parentheses at the end of a sentence (103); mention of Juvenal without relevant citation (230). On page 233 (concerning an image of Lucius Brutus on a coin), read Plate 5 for Plate 4. In the bibliography, page numbers for Kelly's essay should read 22–38, not 37–38 (300); and on page 312, read "Brutus's appointment as *quaestor*," not *quaetor*.

as fact a comment of Pseudo-Aurelius Victor, a late fourth-century AD historian,⁶ that Brutus rejected the chance to serve under Caesar in Gaul in the late 50s BC (43–44, 234), just a decade before the tyrannicide. This is just the type of detail fabricated by later, lesser historians to lend a false sense of inevitability to key events. Tempest is also atypically, if understandably, cavalier in filling gaps in our record of Brutus's life, suggesting, for instance, that, as a teenager, he would have witnessed Cicero pleading cases in the Forum (26).

Tempest belabors her points with frequent interjections, justifications of her methodology, lists of questions to be answered, and an overabundance of subdivisions. Many readers will, however, appreciate her avoidance of dry academic debates (xii). Though she is often caught between meeting the needs of both specialists and of general readers, *Brutus: The Noble Conspirator* is a fine, meticulous, and most welcome addition to the scholarship on an important Roman figure who deserves more attention.

6. Author of *De Viris Illustribus* (On Illustrious Men).