A visit to any museum with ancient images might prove confusing to those unfamiliar with antiquity. One can feel so overwhelmed by the statues and the busts that one simply ignores the art as a response. Even an expert like Mary Beard confesses, “It is true that most of us (myself included ...) tend to pass by the rows of emperors’ heads on museum shelves without much more than a glance” (p. 8). Fortunately, Beard provides more than a cursory gaze at the meaning, legacy, borrowing, and misappropriations (intentional and unintentional) of classical imagery. Her *Twelve Caesars* simultaneously provokes feelings of elation and confusion. It is an invigorating read due in equal parts to Beard’s erudition, the book’s accessibility, and the myriad figures, images, and tables that help the reader to literally and mentally “see” what the author argues. However, precisely because the book addresses false assumptions about the images by which power was projected, people might also find it challenging. It is a testimony to the book that its readers will never look at these images in the same way.

If Beard’s book were only a treatment of classical imagery, then it would nevertheless merit a read. Fortunately, it is so much more. She acknowledges that images of emperors have not only appeared throughout time but also that they have been appropriated for good and bad purposes. An observation serves as a thesis statement: “Far from being merely a harmless link with the classical past, they have also pointed to uncomfortable issues about politics and autocracy, culture and morality and, of course, conspiracy and assassination” (p. 9). The book thus seeks to probe the enduring appeal of ancient statues through the Renaissance and into the modern period.

The influence of Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (69-122 CE), commonly known as Suetonius, is never far from Beard’s treatment. Suetonius coined the term “Twelve Caesars” (so far as can be discerned), and the influence of Suetonius’s phrase affected literary production and statue collections centuries and even millennia after he composed his *On the Lives of the Caesars*. Decoding and understanding the messages in ancient images remains a highly interpretive enterprise. While Beard’s work is comprehensive in chronology, the scope likely necessitated word counts and tough choices about what to include and exclude; not everything can be covered. Notwithstanding word limitations Suetonius is a topic requiring greater explanation than pages 36-38.

Since this book is directed as much at nonspecialists as specialists, not everyone will fully appreciate that Suetonius remained far from a neutral observer. Beard rightly points out that many of our physical images of the emperors and their
most embarrassing moments derived from Suetonius. He loathed the early *principate* and sought to expose its horrors through a portrayal of (probably) exaggerated excesses of its central figures. Many of his criticisms sound familiar to anyone comparing any golden age (that never existed) with the extremes of the current age (designed to signify how far we have all fallen from the mythical past). Suetonius was also fortunate to flourish in the second century of the common era. He enjoyed the benefits of an empire governed by “good” emperors secure enough in themselves to tolerate muted criticism. A safe way to critique the current day is to exemplify the excess of the preceding era. Suetonius specialized at it.

One of the things that makes *Twelve Caesars* so compelling is that its author explains, without ever being pedantic, many of the reasons why modern science may be of little help in identifying images. Sample size helps, and regrettably the images that survive represent only a statistically insignificant number. Beard indeed observes, “Whatever the percentages of what has survived, it is tiny and not a representative sample of what there once was” (p. 10). One might think that in the case of statues the technique of various craftspeople throughout the ages would give tell-tale clues. Beard carefully explains, “The tools and techniques of sculptors remained more or less identical from the second century to the eighteenth, and they often produced more or less identical results” (p. 27). Since much of the marble was sourced at the same spot in Italy throughout history, a variety of quarries cannot help. Further complicating identification is the incomplete survival of imagery. Sometimes we possess only part of a statue or half an image, with no identification label. Sometimes ancient images were repurposed. Heads could be removed from the base, with the base serving as a resting place for a new head.

Beard’s *Twelve Caesars* demonstrates that our supposed clarity about identifications falls far short of what we hope we would enjoy. This fact will disturb some readers. People in “the West” particularly like knowledge in tidy boxes, but reality is far messier. The current tendency is to fully embrace technology. To be fair, technology continues revealing a lot about the ancient world that we previously did not know. However, it cannot solve everything. We think we know, for example, the bust of Caesar, but do we really? “It turns out,” Beard avers, “that we are not necessarily any better now at identifying emperors in ancient portraits than our predecessors were hundreds of years ago” (p. 46). It is therefore jarring to consider that the identities handed down by generations may not correspond to the ancient reality.

In the case of Caesar, only two pieces of evidence exist: 1) the descriptions of Suetonius; and 2) numismatic evidence. Caesar’s coins reveal a lined neck, prominent Adams apple, and comb-over to conceal baldness. Surely this must have represented Caesar? Again, it is not that easy. Beard suggests, “The truth is that there are other coins with heads—not of Caesar at all, but of characters from Roman myth and history—that show similar distinguishing marks on the neck and throat, not to mention coins depicting Caesar on which he looks decidedly different” (p. 51). The discussion about art history is helpful in reminding readers about the limitations of various media. Coins are two-dimensional while statues are three-dimensional. Images do not neatly translate from one medium to another. Beard’s inclusion of a diagram of hair locks on imperial portraits is particularly fascinating. Before declaring with complete conviction that a statue belongs to a specific emperor, one needs to consult the hair because, as the hair evidences, heads of hair on statues tended to look similar (p. 66). Thus, not all statues we assume are Caesar’s may in fact be of Caesar. Beard asseverates, “There is no sophisticated modern technique that can precisely pinpoint an image of Caesar. If you want to claim a particular sculpted head as his portrait, all you do is what has always been done: that is, try to match the candidate up to the canonical coin portraits and to the physical details
highlighted by Suetonius. It is a subjective process of 'compare and contrast,' relying as much on the rhetoric of persuasion ... as on objective criteria" (p. 51).

Beard’s treatment also helps readers to appreciate myriad levels of complexity in the production of these images. She suggests that despite an amazing resemblance of Caesar statues around the Roman Empire, it is unlikely that Caesar took much time for posing: “I very much doubt that Caesar patiently posed for battalions of sculptors; maybe none of the portraits were done from life in the strictest sense of the term” (p. 49). She hypothesizes that a composite image of Julius Caesar emerged during his life and then over time, deriving from various sources: literary, numismatic, and statues. While questioning the accuracy of the composite, she thinks there must be some resemblance: “My guess is that they would roughly have signaled ‘Caesar’ to Roman viewers too” (p. 63).

For the nonspecialist, disputes over realistic portraiture and misidentification might represent little more than arcane quibbles among quarrelsome specialists were it not for the fact that history has witnessed various people attempting to appropriate classical imagery. Continuing with the thinking about Caesar’s image, people have sought to exploit it: Italian dictator Benito Mussolini (pp. 52-53); British author and hymn writer Sabine Baring-Gould (p. 56); Thomas Rice Holmes (p. 56); and diplomat, author, and classicist John Buchanon (p. 57), to name just a few. It turns out that Caesar’s image evokes meaning in the present as well as in the past. Beard’s overall argument is a good one. Various people have tried to portray themselves as if they possessed the same qualities of, say, Caesar, Augustus, or some other person. It was a process that accelerated by the 1500s: “To oversimplify ... the European Renaissance ... was a time when Roman emperors ceased to be portrayed as if they were modern rulers, and modern rulers started to be portrayed as if they were Roman emperors” (p. 113).

Another reason why this book’s topics matter is because they relate to education and our understanding of the past. If, as the medievalist Lynn White once said, “history is a means of access to ourselves,” then it is important to approximate history as closely as possible. Perhaps we never get it “right?” It is not easy to even approximate the past, possibly because there is a dialogue between past and present. “At stake were changing answers to questions of how the present and past were to be envisaged,” Beard observes, “and how similarities and differences between the ancient and modern worlds were to be expressed” (p. 113). It is difficult to analyze the present if the past seems less secure to us.

A bust of the Roman emperor Commodus makes Beard’s point abundantly clear. The Getty Museum acquired it in 1992 with every expectation that it had purchased a sixteenth-century imitation. In Beard’s account (and this is publicly accessible knowledge which the museum divulged in the press), it was not an intentional forgery. Nobody attempted to pass it off as an original. Therein lies a delicious irony because it may be an “original.” The Getty *Commodus* later found itself evaluated as an eighteenth-century piece. Recently, it was reevaluated as a product of the late second century, roughly the time when Commodus either co-reigned or ruled alone, 176–92 CE. Each reevaluation necessitated changes at the Getty itself. Beard captures the confusion and diligent work that the Getty Museum’s researchers must have experienced: “Since being acquired by the Getty, Commodus has moved around the museum: sometimes on show alongside, ancient, sometimes alongside modern works, according to the prevailing curatorial view of his date, and occasionally left out of sight altogether in the twilight of the storeroom” (p. 27).

It is easy to imagine readers finding themselves confused in the details of later historical figures appropriating both the message of earlier images (if they can ever be recaptured) and the con-
temporary status of images. Later aristocracies liked to display the images as a way of evidencing their own virtues. With that said, this reviewer is not entirely certain how to suggest an improvement. Beard’s book is good at what it does. There are so many rabbit holes of potential digression that one can only marvel at Beard’s self-discipline in avoiding them. Perhaps one possible help would be to say something in the text. A random example might be something akin to this statement: “For those looking for just the propaganda messaging of ancient imagery, consult Paul Zanker’s *The Power of Imagery in the Age of Augustus*.” That would be helpful, but one could also imagine continued references like this would interfere with what Beard aims to accomplish. The end notes are a good start, and readers would do well to consult them.

A final strength of the book is its treatment of women, especially in the early modern period. This ought not to surprise those familiar with Beard’s work because women’s history has informed her scholarship. Of particular interest is her investigation of the “twelve empresses.” Artists sought to create something analogous to Suetonius’s Twelve Caesars, but it was impossible based on the paucity of sources. That has not prevented artists throughout history from trying. Beard’s inclusion of the seventeenth-century artist Aegedius Sadeler and his empresses is particularly sobering (p. 251). One might describe them as a Jungian archetype, except that archetypes usually possess more distinctives. What makes Sadeler’s pieces so compelling as displayed in *Twelve Caesars* is that they lack anything unique. Beard captures the look perfectly when she observes, “All but one of these women in their flouncy frocks look more or less identical, with none of the individuality—either in features or dress—of the corresponding emperors” (p. 252). It is a curious irony that in the Renaissance, which celebrated individuality, Sadler’s empresses looked so similar.

*Twelve Caesars* would serve well in an advanced undergraduate class on art history. It would similarly suit graduate-level courses in classics, art history, history, and other disciplinary areas. For that matter, the general public would enjoy it. As long as readers understand that certitude is less than certain where images are concerned, they will enjoy and find edification in this book.

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