

The Pen is Mightier Than the Sword:

The Literary Legacy of Caesar's *Commentaries* and Grant's *Personal Memoirs*

Separated by almost two millennia, Julius Caesar and Ulysses Grant may not seem at first to have much more in common than being famous generals. However, the remarkable achievements of Caesar and Grant demonstrate both skillful leadership in war and a solid prose style in their memoirs. Both were praised by eminent writers of their day for their style and skill, with Caesar being praised by Cicero, and Grant by Mark Twain. In a dialogue between Brutus and Atticus, Cicero has Atticus remark of Julius Caesar's *Commentaries*:

“they are like nude figures, straight and beautiful; stripped of all ornament of style as if they had laid aside a garment...but men of sound judgement he has deterred from writing, since in history there is nothing more pleasing than brevity clear and correct.”¹

Twain's assessment with respect to Cicero's has the advantage of evaluating the two narratives side-by-side:

“I had been comparing the memoirs with Caesar's *Commentaries*... I was able to say in all Apologetic forms that the same high merits distinguished both books - clarity of statement, directness, simplicity, manifest truthfulness, fairness and justice toward friend and foe alike and avoidance of flowery speech...Grant's book is a great, unique and unapproachable literary masterpiece. There is no higher literature than these modest, simple Memoirs. Their style is at least flawless, and no man can improve upon it.”²

I argue that both Caesar's and Grant's language share an important feature in common: a tradition of personal historical narrative that engages their audience on many different levels in similar content and form. Because Caesar's prose style is such an enduring example of the

¹ Cicero, *Brutus*. 75. 262.

² Paine, ch. CLV; Fatout, 226-227.

clarity and power in Latin literature, I would like to compare Grant's effort alongside Caesar's as being equally worthy. In doing so, I have limited the comparison to two representative narratives: Grant's Vicksburg campaign and Caesar's siege of Alesia. Given the parallels in content and form, we might even speculate Caesar's Commentaries to have been a blueprint for Grant's narrative. The strategic and tactical similarities in content also extend into the practical military prose style that both generals share. Select quotes from each will be discussed as brief examples of the narrative sentence form and tone they share as well.

For example, in addition to being temporarily cut off from communicating with his subordinates, Caesar also realized that the success of the siege could not depend on continued communication with Rome: "Caesar was aware that the enemy were superior in mounted troops and that, as all the lines of communication were interrupted, he could in no wise be assisted from the Province and from Italy."³ Grant also acknowledges the necessity of taking similar risks: "I was now in the enemy's country, with a vast river and the stronghold of Vicksburg between me and my base of supplies."⁴ I would proceed to show how the tone of both quotes shows keen assessment, confidence in the soldiers' abilities to meet the challenge, and overall resourcefulness in solving the problem. Neither Grant nor Caesar shows any reluctance to face the situation. Instead, they draw on all the advantages they possess. Their prose style supports their action.

Although the original aims of each literary work are most likely different, their legacy is evidence of clear, first-hand, personal accounts of significant historical events. Both Cicero and Mark Twain have recognized the importance of these writings to both history and literature. Although the record of these narratives as historical evidence is itself valuable, the enjoyment

³ Caesar, 473.

⁴ Grant, 321.

one may get from reading these accounts (as well as being a lesson in practical written expression) continues to keep pace with, and even outlast the military victories themselves. Both Caesar and Grant are significant figures on the world stage of history and have had much written about them. However, all second-hand accounts of their achievements must first ‘do battle’ with these authors’ own writings before they can be received with confidence. While both men’s actions have certainly shaped history, Caesar’s *Commentaries* and Grant’s *Memoirs* continue to shape history. For these two generals, the pen is indeed mightier than the sword.

Works Cited

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