Case study 1: *The Caesars* (1968)

As noted, the history of ITV programming has had mixed reviews and scholars have criticised that 'official histories of British broadcasting . . . have depicted the emergence and impact of ITV in rather damning tones', failing to acknowledge that 'the history of ITV programming is also one of innovation and experimentation' (Wheatley, 2003: 76). *The Caesars* is an excellent example of this. It not only demonstrates that ITV could indeed produce high-quality drama, but also features a number of innovative techniques successfully applied in later series, such as BBC's *I, Claudius*. Wheatley (2003: 79) also suggests a significant change in ITV programming during the period in which *The Caesars* was produced, from 'the entertainment culture . . . of the 1950s and early 1960s . . . to a journalistic culture in the later 1960s and 1970s'. I will argue that this 'journalistic culture' is also reflected in *The Caesars*, which can be read as a critical commentary of contemporary politics in addition to being an entertaining piece of historical drama. As mentioned in Part I, stories regarding the Roman Empire provided particularly ample scope for an allegorical critique of the politics of any given time and this case study is no exception.

The six-part television series *The Caesars* was produced by Granada Television for ITV, featuring as its subject matter the period between Emperor Augustus's death and Claudius's accession to the throne. Written by Philip Mackie, it draws heavily on classical sources, primarily Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars*. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, Mackie insisted that 'every happening was submitted to research with similar care' (Clayton, 1968a). The series was directed by Derek Bennett and aired in autumn 1968 on consecutive Sundays between 22 September and 27 October. The show was generally received quite positively at the time. For example, Sylvia Clayton (1968a) in the *Daily Telegraph* suggests that 'Mackie tells an absorbing story in an adult way', but criticises that he 'captures the dignity of Rome but not its dynamic.

These were violent men [yet] often they sounded more like classics masters reading from a Latin primer.' The *Daily Mail* (1968) described the 'Granada-produced prestige series' as 'a major triumph' that 'has brought acclaim for 41-year-old Freddie Jones playing Claudius'. This notion about 'prestige' indicates the significance of this programme for ITV and its growing reputation as an innovator. Given the critical acclaim that the show received at the time, it is maybe surprising that when looking at publications on screen antiquity, most writers do not mention *The Caesars*. This is particularly disappointing as the show has much to offer, both as a document of television history and in comparison with more recent works on TV antiquity. One of the reasons for this oversight might be that unlike later shows like *I, Claudius*, the programme has rarely been repeated and has only recently become widely available again when it was released on DVD in 2006. It is maybe more surprising that it is also rarely mentioned in histories of British television of the 1960s, considering it won a number of prizes, for example the top drama award at the Australian World Television Festival in Adelaide in 1969 and Actor of the Year for Freddie Jones at the Monte Carlo Television Festival. This apparent marginalisation of *The Caesars* may be due in part to the earlier mentioned duopoly in British television, where 'ITV has not been readily understood as a producer of "quality" programming' (Johnson and Turnock, 2005: 3). Another reason, as suggested by Richards (2008: 162), might be that BBC's '*I, Claudius*' blend of melodrama, gossip and soap opera was so successful that it banished the memory of the historically superior and far more accurate' earlier series. The fact that *I, Claudius* seems to have almost entirely overshadowed this earlier show is particularly surprising, as one could argue, as Angelini (2007: 1) does, that it was the 'huge popular success' of *The Caesars* at the time that 'reignited interest in this kind of historical output, paving the way for the [later] series'. Moreover, contemporaneous television reviews of *I, Claudius* actually drew on *The Caesars* for comparison, with the earlier show coming out more favourably, as I will explore further in case study 3.

The notion of historical accuracy in the comparison between the two shows is also interesting here. As the above-mentioned review in the *Daily Telegraph* indicates, appeals to historical 'truthfulness' seemed to have been a selling point of the series. Indeed, there are sections of dialogue throughout the series that recite almost verbatim passages from Suetonius and Cassius Dio. For example, in episode 6 ('Claudius'), Caesonia (Barbara Murray) asks Caligula (Ralph Bates) why he married her despite being 'neither beautiful nor young, and the mother of three daughters by another man' (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Life

of Caligula, 25). Later in the same episode, Caligula tells his audience that Caesonia gave birth to their daughter Julia Drusilla only a month after their marriage, which is noted in Cassius Dio (*Roman History*, 28). However, other aspects of Suetonius's writing, such as Tiberius's alleged debauchery, which is referred to in great detail in *I, Claudius*, is almost completely absent from this series, the possible reasons for this I will explore later in this case study.

As indicated, regardless of prejudices, ITV was indeed a broadcaster that provided innovation and quality, both in terms of visual aesthetics and storytelling. With regard to aesthetics, director Derek Bennett 'pioneered the technique repeated in *I, Claudius* of eschewing spectacle, shooting entirely in the studio and depending much on close-ups to explore the interpersonal relationships', as noted by Richards (2008: 162). The programme takes a different route from *The Spread of the Eagle*, drawing on crime drama and even film noir for its aesthetic rather than the historical epics of the big screen. At times, the framing in *The Caesars* can be described as almost expressionist. For example, columns in the palace are often used to break up the screen or block off parts of it, creating a more claustrophobic atmosphere. In addition, the cinematography makes use of canted angles and oversized objects (palace doors, statues) that dwarf their human counterparts as well as deep shadows, in which people often hide. Marco Angelini (2007: 1) suggests that 'the choices to film in black and white and to concentrate on interiors certainly convey the internecine menace and claustrophobia of the political and personal machinations of the Julio-Claudians'. Thus, the show manages to make a virtue out of necessity by being more televisual in the sense that it focused on melodrama rather than trying to imitate the look of cinematic epics. Consequently, it presents the audience with an intimate character study of the key players in this troublesome period of Roman history.

The storytelling also offers a number of innovations and was significantly influenced by scriptwriter Philip Mackie's previous experiences. Norman Frisby (2003: 121), then press officer at the Manchester TV Centre, recounts that Mackie, after producing a number of more experimental anthologies of short stories in drama form, 'went on to apply some of the same flair . . . to a more sustained, if still unconventional, storyline in *The Caesars*', which he describes as among 'the bravest costume serials ever'. There is no instance of talking directly to the audience or off-screen narration as in *Up Pompeii!* and also later in *I, Claudius*. However, there are occasional metatextual references, such as when the dying Augustus (Roland Culver) asks his family to applaud the role he played, which Clayton (1968a) calls the 'most striking moment in the first play' or

when Tiberius remarks after Augustus's death that 'dying messages make convenient quotations'. In general, irony plays a big part throughout the episodes, which makes the show feel modern at times and connects them to the sometimes dark cynicism of contemporary television drama. Although Angelini (2007: 1) claims that 'the theatricality of the staging and acting owes a great deal to the dramatic conventions of the time', contemporaneous critics compliment the show, noting that the 'Granada Romans use a dignified, disciplined speech, free from historical fustian' (Clayton, 1968a). This is significantly different from the Shakespearean dialogue of *The Spread of the Eagle*. The serial format was also used more effectively in the ITV production, presenting in-depth character studies of Roman emperors rather than trying to mimic the scope of cinematic epics. In particular, the 'multi-episode format permitted the detailed exploration of the ruthless and labyrinthine dynamics of politics' (Richards, 2008: 163). The complexity of the political situation of the early empire is explored in great depth and reflected upon, mostly by Tiberius. Interestingly, in her reviews, Clayton refers to the episodes as 'a series of plays', suggesting that both viewers and reviewers were still caught up in the conventions of the single play, then regarded as the most likely format for high-quality drama. While it is certainly true that each episode has a particular focus, I would think it difficult to understand for example Tiberius's character and actions from just the episode entitled 'Tiberius', because much of his character development takes place in previous episodes, as would be expected from a television series.

Political power plays

Against Thumin's earlier claim that historical serial dramas provided a politically neutral space, avoiding the concerns of a troubled present, Richards argues that *The Caesars* 'was part of the fascination of 1960s' and 1970s' television with power politics, whether in the contemporary board room . . . or in British History' (2008: 162–3). Richards's position here is consistent with the aforementioned 'journalistic' turn of ITV in the mid-1960s. More specifically, as I will outline shortly, *The Caesars* continuously and critically evaluates the role of politics and government. It is to the credit of writer Philip Mackie that he managed to outline 'the manoeuvrings and machinations of imperial power plays with impressive clarity and understanding' (Richards, 2008: 162). The focus on politics, or more specifically on drawing a parallel between the politics of the ancient and the contemporary world, is maybe the key selling point of the series. This is supported by a striking advertising campaign that

appeared in the *Financial Times*, *The Times* and *Sunday Telegraph* before the first episode went on air.[4] The quarter-page adverts feature a bold black background that announces in large white font 'SOME COUNTRIES WILL PAY ANY PRICE FOR INTERNAL SECURITY', followed by small print at the bottom in black on white:

> The Roman Republic, for instance, in the first century, after years of civil war. The Romans knew all about terror as an instrument of government; they had generations of practice. This is the world of the Caesars, when government was a court, the laws made by fratricide and assassination. In the name of the common good, of course. THE CAESARS is a series of six one-hour plays about power at the top, the ruthless struggles to achieve it, and the hazards of one-man rule. Starting Sundays at 10:10 p.m. on I.T.V.

This advert firmly places the show in the context of then-current politics, such as the Cold War, in particular the events of the Prague Spring earlier the same year, as well as the ongoing Vietnam War. According to Clayton (1968a), 'Tacitus describes [the time of the Caesars] as a black and shameful age, ruled by men made mad by awful, limitless, power', adding that 'Mackie, has made this power-struggle the central theme of his deliberate dramas'. In her review of the final episode of the series, Clayton (1968b) notes that this was 'one of the most brutally dramatic of the series, [but] also the most effective, illustrating most clearly the corruption attendant on absolute power'.

This focus on power and its corrupting effect is indicated by making Tiberius the central character of this narrative. Not only does this give us a view of the events from his perspective, which is unprecedented in screen antiquity, the series completely changes the way we perceive the character. In previous screen representations, as in most classical literature, he has been primarily cast as the villain, a recluse and gloomy tyrant, described by Pliny the Elder as 'the most unsociable of men' (*Natural Histories*, XXVIII.5.23). Such a negative portrayal can be found for example in films like *Salome* (1953), *The Robe* (1953) and *Ben-Hur* (1959). In *The Caesars*, André Morell (who incidentally also appeared in *Ben-Hur*, in the role of Sextus) plays Tiberius as 'brooding, sardonic, austere and mistrustful', as Richards (2008: 163) writes. Yet, this is contextualised with regard to the political and personal pressures that he faces. Overall, the series offers a more complex picture of Tiberius. He is no longer simply the brutal tyrant persecuting Jews and Christians, but also as a shrewd politician. I would agree with Richards (2008: 163), who suggests that this portrayal of Tiberius is 'altogether richer and more complex . . . than George Baker's admittedly more vivid but essentially single

note Gravesian caricature in *I, Claudius*'. By giving Tiberius a voice, the show presents 'an emperor reluctantly shouldering the burden of empire and endeavouring to secure the succession to ensure political stability and to maintain the peace without entanglement in foreign wars' (Richards, 2008: 163). For example, in *The Caesars*, Tiberius regularly questions his generals, his mother Livia (Sonia Dresdel) and his advisers if violence is really necessary. He is visibly troubled by bloodshed, even if he carries it out efficiently and ruthlessly in the end. Moreover, Tiberius appears visibly grieved at the death of Germanicus's son Nero Caesar, which is presented as ordered by Sejanus (Barrie Ingham) rather than Tiberius. He also reacts with shock when Macro (Jerome Willis) reports the killing of Sejanus's entire family. When discussing his failures as an emperor with his old friend Marcus Cocceius Nerva (Donald Eccles) in episode 3 ('Tiberius'), Tiberius remarks that 'the management of men which we call politics is a contemptable business'. Nerva replies that 'ruling is politics, politics are dirty. Every good ruler yet has been in muck up to his elbows and enjoyed it.' Tiberius in turn notes drily, 'You're right, I'm not a good ruler', offering another glimpse of the cynicism noted above. Tiberius's fault, it seems, is not that he is more violent than other Roman dictators and emperors, but that he does not savour his power in the same way. Towards the end of Tiberius's life, in episode 5 ('Caligula'), both men once again discuss Tiberius's rule. The emperor recounts all his achievements, such as twenty years of peace, a healthy and prosperous economy, solid laws. Yet none of this seems to have been enough, he complains, because he has not had the power to charm people. This is consistent with classic sources that generally treat Tiberius's reign dismissively. For instance, Suetonius bemoans that Tiberius never built any significant buildings or had any games put on. One might think Nerva's main criticism would be about all the people Tiberius has put to death, particularly in the last years of his reign when he grew increasingly paranoid. However, as Nerva notes, Augustus in his prime killed many more people than Tiberius 'and still managed to appear virtuous'. This is an interesting comment as it points towards a rather cynical appraisal of tyranny, which is not judged by the atrocities committed, but by overall popularity. Augustus, whose own reign is littered with bodies, is widely admired and worshipped as a god. Although by no means a hero, Tiberius is portrayed throughout the show not in a way that either glorifies or condemns him, but shows him as an ordinary man, daunted by the task at hand and with no other tools than bloodshed at his disposal.

It is scenes like this, which demonstrate that 'Mackie's script, intelligent, literate and sinewy, was an impressive study of realpolitik which

explored the dangers of absolute monarchy from the police state of Tiberius to Caligula's reign of terror', as Richards notes (2008: 162). Yet, it also highlights a certain kind of pessimism applied to politics more generally, as when Tiberius suggests that 'people can have either freedom or order and security and I gave them the latter'. This same notion is postulated in the advert mentioned earlier and is one that might make *The Caesars* equally relevant for audiences in the twenty-first century. It demonstrates clearly that serial television drama can be both political and entertaining. It is the distance of the historical past, however, that may make the lesson palatable.

Eccentricities and class

With the focus on Tiberius, other competitors for the throne are often portrayed as 'not fit for the job', presenting Tiberius as the most suitable candidate. This is already introduced in the first episode of the series when Augustus tests his grandson and potential heir Agrippa Postumus (Derek Newark) about what would be his first action as an emperor. Postumus's answer (killing the man who guards him, because he has shown disrespect) ultimately seals his fate as Augustus orders his death after his own passing. Similarly, Germanicus (Eric Flynn), although popular, is shown as a rather inept statesman and strategist, seeking constant reassurance from both his wife and his centurion and is often criticised by both. This is in stark contrast to *I, Claudius*, which continuously portrays these characters as more virtuous and suitable successors, murdered by Livia in order to install her own family line on the throne. *The Caesars*, however, shows first Augustus, then Tiberius as ruthless for the sake of preserving what they think is best for the state, in an environment lacking qualified rulers. This broader theme of good versus bad forms of government permeates the show and elements of it will reappear in *I, Claudius*. Notably, in *The Caesars* it is Tiberius, not the marginalised Claudius, who advocates a return to republican rule, even if it is not entirely clear if he is serious or simply pretending to be modest, as his critics assume. In a dialogue between Augustus and Tiberius that will reoccur in almost the same form in *I, Claudius* between Livia and Tiberius, Augustus explains to Tiberius why it is necessary that Rome is ruled by one man only. He makes a strong case against democratic rule, taking the civil wars of the late Republic as its justification. In *I, Claudius*, it will be Livia, who uses the same argument to justify her murderous pursuits, while first Augustus and then Claudius advocate a return to democracy. Tiberius not only hesitates

when taking over as emperor, but also suggests openly to the Senate a return to republican rule after his passing, especially once he has lost his son Drusus as his heir.

With Tiberius having taken on the role of commentator, Claudius in *The Caesars* is a more ambiguous figure here. Freddie Jones's performance of Claudius is superb, but he is shown in a less idealised light than in the later show. In the early episodes of *The Caesars*, he is mostly drunk and despite the occasional clever observation, there is little indication of his skills as a scholarly writer. As Clayton (1968b) writes, the 'irony of [Claudius's] survival, a slobber-tongued, stammering, drunken weakling among braver and more able men, was not lost on Claudius. Freddie Jones managed to convey both the strangeness of Claudius's behaviour and his self-preserving wisdom.' Often, he complains to both Tiberius and Germanicus about not having any tasks, the absence of which he credits with his drinking and general disorder. Most significant, though, when the Pretorian Guard declares him to be emperor at the end of the final episode, he takes on his role quickly and without hesitation. In the very next scene he is seen with two senators who ask him to reinstate the Republic. Claudius refuses the request in a haughty fashion, stating that he is the new emperor and offering his ring to be kissed. This is quite in contrast to *I, Claudius*, which features his lengthy attempt at refusing the role despite the efforts of the Praetorian Guard and his friends to put him in charge. Despite his physical disabilities, the Claudius of *The Caesars* remains aware of his noble birth and the elevated position that follows from it. As such, the portrayal is maybe more consistent with the more critical view of Claudius's reign in many ancient sources than the glorified hero of Graves's novels.

More generally, considerations of class and a person's place in society play a role throughout the show, reflecting many of the social debates of the 1960s. In episode 1 ('Augustus'), for instance, Augustus tells Agrippa Postumus that his family comes from a more middle-class background (rather than high aristocracy as Livia) and therefore needs to be more careful in their actions 'for the first hundred years'. Tiberius on the other hand, even though he is the offspring of Livia's allegedly more elevated Claudian family, continuously questions his own worth and suitability as an emperor, claiming he is more suitable as an 'accountant' rather than a ruler. These class conflicts still play a role in contemporary dramas like *Rome*, for example when Atia of the Julii disapproves of her daughter Octavia's connection with a wealthy merchant daughter or when Lucius's wife Niobe is discreetly mocked for her modest dress at Atia's party. However, they are likely to have been a more prevalent issue for audiences in 1960s Britain.

With the focus of the show firmly on politics, sex and decadence do not play as much of a role in *The Caesars* as they do in later series. Tiberius's depravity, which is so clearly emphasised in *I, Claudius* (see case study 3), is here only mentioned briefly when in old age, he admits to a friend his 'occasional debaucheries' of his youth. This is one of the few occasions, in which the script deviates from Suetonius's account, which revels in these excesses, although these details are not supported by other historical accounts, e.g. Tacitus or Velleius. In *The Caesars*, the primary vice seems to be drunkenness. For instance, in a later episode, Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius are all shown getting drunk together in Tiberius's villa on Capri, but no women are present and there is definitely no orgy. The latter is in fact entirely absent from this series.

Overall, even in the episodes featuring Caligula, the focus is on the excesses of power rather than sexuality, focusing on his 'capricious cruelty allied to absolute power [which] produced an atmosphere of sheer terror and madness' (Clayton, 1968b). Although Caligula is portrayed as sexually promiscuous and extremely selfish, he is also seen as clever and calculating in his actions. When taking over the reign, he very clearly outlines his strategy to establish power and to be loved by the people, for example by burying Germanicus's and Agrippina's ashes in Augustus's tomb. He is not shown as being responsible for his father's death when a child, as he is later in *I, Claudius*, thus giving him a less inherently evil persona. The Caligula in *The Caesars* is cold, calculating and cruel, but not as frivolous and insane as in later versions. In the scene in which he kills his sister Drusilla (Pollyanna Williams), he is shown accidentally strangling her during sex. This is shocking, but not to the same extent as her deliberate and brutal slaughter in *I, Claudius* (more on this in case study 3). His 'madness' is even presented as a calculated political strategy, for example when he explains to his guests that he 'invented uncertainty'. In episode 6, Caligula claims that 'the secret of being a successful emperor is to have everything depend on one's whim so that no one will know what will happen until the emperor says this or that . . . so that everyone must seek to please me without knowing what will please'. To which his friend Lepidus (Sean Arnold) replies, 'I drink to a most successful ruler'. Like his predecessors, he ruthlessly disposes of potential rivals to the throne. When he kills or blackmails wealthy Roman aristocrats this is not simply done on a whim but to support his precarious finances. The more outrageous events of Caligula's reign are narrated by others rather than actually shown. For example, Claudius recounts Caligula's command to have his army collect seashells when they reached the English Channel (as noted in Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Life of Caligula, 45). Yet, having Claudius

tell the story already moves these episodes into the realm of legend, instantly raising some questions about their veracity. This is similar to the way in which Odysseus's narration in the *Odyssey* puts into question some of his more fantastic encounters, as I will discuss in the next case study. Only shortly before Caligula's assassination is his insanity emphasised, such as when he claims to make love to the moon goddess. Consequently, his murder becomes politically justified.

Strong women at the margins

Elley (1984: 88) argues that when it comes to the cinematic epics of the 1950s and 1960s, in 'Imperial Rome the sexual imagery becomes more related to power . . . Rome . . . takes on a "masculine" identity – more specifically, extremes of masculine qualities which find qualification and redemption through "feminine" contact'. Although *The Caesars* exemplifies this focus on the masculine, it offers little opportunity for redemptive women. Yet, interestingly, 'villainous' women as the ones dominating *I, Claudius*, are also sparse throughout the show. It is, therefore, worthwhile looking at the female characters that do feature in *The Caesars* and how their portrayal varies from later series.

With both Augustus and Tiberius shown as clever and calculating in their own right, the role of Livia as the chief manipulator is somewhat diminished in *The Caesars*, especially in comparison to the centrality of her character in *I, Claudius*. Nevertheless, Clayton (1968a) compliments Sonia Dresdel for her portrayal of the Empress Livia, who convinced her 'absolutely that she would poison any enemy in her path'. Although Livia still attempts to influence the state and admits to 'a number of poisonings in her time' (episode 2, 'Germanicus'), she is not blamed for all possible deaths that occur. Especially, she is not shown as responsible for Augustus's death and seems genuinely distraught at his passing. Therefore, she appears much less monstrous than in the later show (see my discussion of Augustus's death scene in *I, Claudius* in case study 3). In *The Caesars*, Livia is primarily portrayed as an 'ex-empress' who has lost the power to rule. This becomes very clear in a dialogue in episode 2, when Tiberius tells her that he 'never thought that women should meddle in politics, they are too much swayed by personal feeling'. An outraged Livia tells him that 'Augustus took my advice and was glad for it' and then asks him: 'Are you trying to deny me any part in ruling this empire?' Tiberius answer is a resounding 'yes'. This patriarchal take on politics may be read as influenced by the attitudes of the times in which the show was made, indicated by the fact that in the UK by the

end of the 1960s, there were still only twenty-six female representatives in the House of Commons (out of a total of 630 members). While this suggests a rather more negative view on women in politics, assessing the treatment of women in *The Caesars* is somewhat more complicated. Although women are clearly more marginalised here than in later shows if you look at screen presence, they are also not as villainised as, for example, in *I, Claudius*. For the most part, the women in the series do adhere to the clichés of manipulative Roman elite women as suggested by Ragalie (2006). However, while women in *The Caesars* are overall just as power-hungry and scheming as men and as calculating as in later shows, they are not sexualised in the same way. Even Macro's wife Ennia (Wanda Ventham), who in agreement with her husband seduces Caligula, is shown in relatively few licentious scenes. The most promiscuous women of later shows, such as Tiberius's wife Julia or Drusus's wife Livilla do not feature at all or have very minor roles. Moreover, Claudius's notorious wife Messalina (Nicola Pagett) is only introduced towards the end of the series, so that her alleged sexual conquests, which are so boldly portrayed in *I, Claudius*, do not feature in the series. Her brief appearance in the show is nevertheless interesting. When we see her entering the throne room, both Caligula and Claudius comment on her beauty, but she is by no means simply sexualised as both men seem intimidated by her. In the previous scene, we saw her rebuke Claudius for being such a coward and not having the courage to assassinate Caligula before voicing her disappointment that there is no man in Rome brave enough to take on the corrupt emperor. In fact, shortly afterwards she is the only one at court bold enough to openly defy Caligula when, unlike Claudius, she refuses to kiss the emperor's foot when commanded. Rather, she turns and leaves the room. Other female characters have similarly brief but confident appearances. After Caligula's death, it is his wife Caesonia who *commands* a reluctant officer of the Praetorian Guard to take her life thus actively choosing to die rather than becoming a helpless victim in the aftermath of her husband's assassination.

As far as violence is concerned, very little of it is actually seen. Some of it is still based on stage conventions and appears a little silly now, such as when Agrippa Postumus is first stabbed by the guard and rather obviously clasps the sword under his arm. Nevertheless, the lack of graphic violence does not mean that the show lacks shocking moments. The cold and passionless reporting of atrocities throughout the series, for example, is no less troubling than the more explicit violence of later shows. In episode 4, after the fall of Sejanus, Tiberius receives a report of the atrocities committed against Sejanus family, such as

the rape and subsequent strangulation of his young daughters (raped first because the law forbids killing virgins). What makes this scene so chilling is the 'bureaucratic' style of the reporting and simple reference to customs and necessities, reminiscent of Nazi distancing strategies in the Holocaust.

This general focus on unemotional matter-of-factness may also be a reason why religion in all forms is almost entirely absent from *The Caesars*. Telling the story from the Roman perspective means that Tiberius's role in the persecution of Jews, which is the main reason for his inclusion in most of the cinematic epics mentioned earlier, does not appear in *The Caesars*. This is nevertheless surprising as one might assume that because the character had previously been established in that way, the producers would attempt to offer their audience some link to the well-known films. There is also little evidence of Roman religious practices in the show, apart from Caligula declaring himself a god in the later period of his reign. The one element that could be considered within this context is Tiberius's reliance on his astrologer Thrasyllus, which is consistent with historical sources.[5] Interestingly, Kevin Stoney plays the astrologer in both *The Caesars* and *I, Claudius*, although the relationship between Tiberius and Thrasyllus seems more pragmatic in the earlier series, where Thrasyllus displays a more critical attitude. On the surface, we could argue that Tiberius's confidence in astrology is somewhat at odds with the level-headed strategist that I described earlier. Yet, Tiberius frequently emphasises throughout the show that to him astrology is a 'science' rather than something mystical or magical. In fact, he condemns the apparent superstition of both Augustus and Germanicus, who believed in divine signs and curses. While this distinction may seem odd from a contemporary point of view, we need to keep in mind that in the ancient world, astrology was perceived as a legitimate science.

In summary, *The Caesars* offers an insightful drama that shines a critical light on the machinations of politics both ancient and modern. Its minimalist style, at times reminiscent of film noir, is in stark contrast to the rich visuals offered in later shows. Nevertheless, as Angelini (2007: 1) notes with regard to the recent DVD release, the 'production stands up remarkably well to contemporary viewing, due to its focus on the grim and pitiless realities of the exercise of political power that hold true for any period'. One might hope that its rerelease will eventually mean that more scholars of television antiquity will consider this work, not just in comparison to *I, Claudius*. Having already noted a number of similarities and significant differences between the two shows, I will return to this in my analysis in case study 3.