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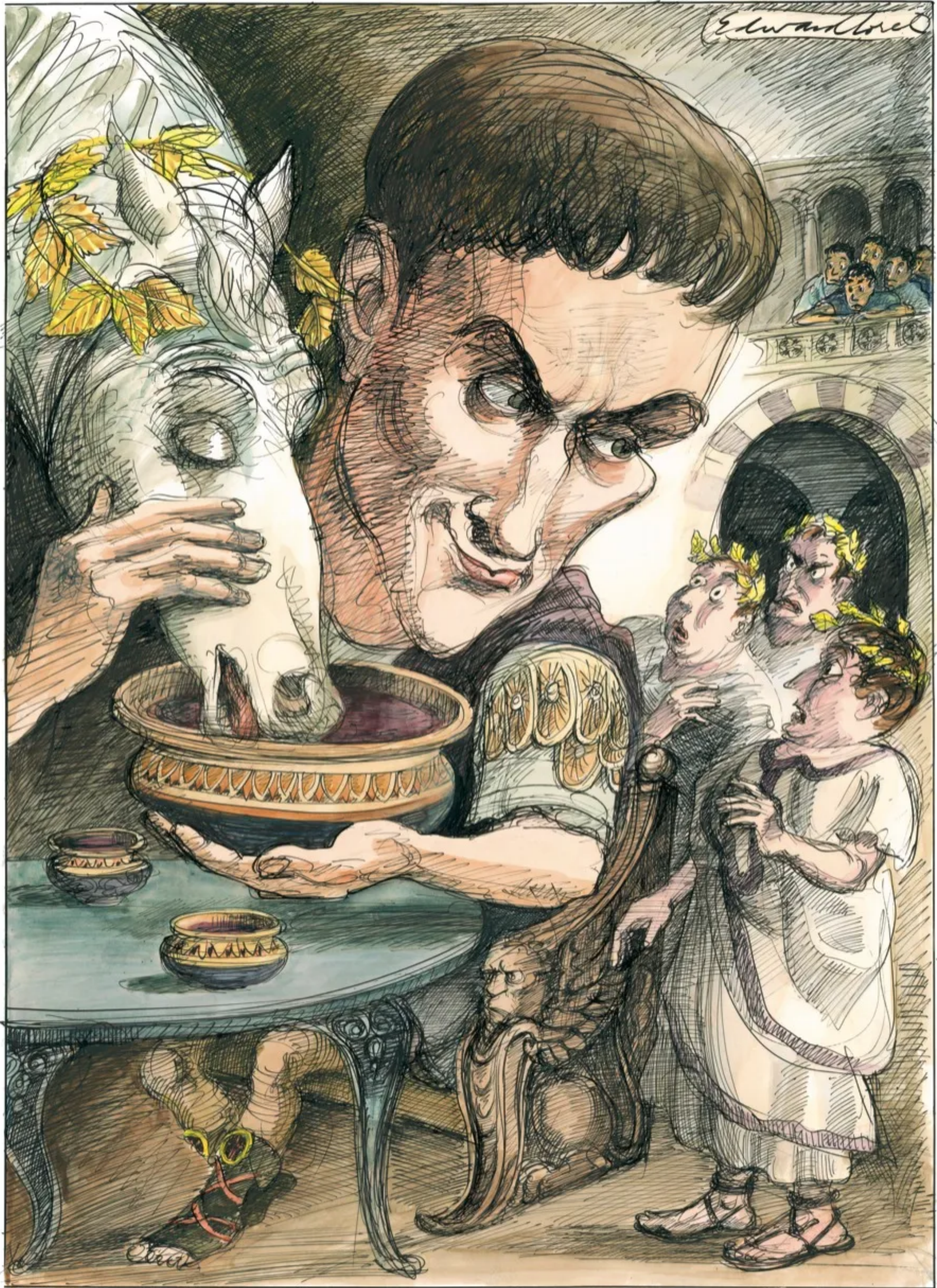
Edward Sorel

The Empire Strikes Back

By Adam Kirsch

[…] Aloys Winterling, in his new biography, "Caligula" (California; $34.95), seeks to rehabilitate one of the most infamous Roman emperors, commonly believed to have been deranged. He begins with a recitation of the charges that historians have levelled against Caligula, who reigned from 37 to 41 A.D.: "He drank pearls dissolved in vinegar and ate food covered with gold leaf. He forced men and women of high rank to have sex with him, turned part of his palace into a brothel, and even committed incest with his own sisters. . . . He considered himself superhuman and forced contemporaries to worship him as a god." Yet the title of Winterling's introduction is "A Mad Emperor?," and it becomes clear that his answer to the question is no.

All the sources—especially Suetonius, whose "Twelve Caesars" is the basis for this catalogue of horrors—may portray Caligula as a raving madman, but Winterling puts this treatment in the context of classical history writing, which had a habit of charging those who had fallen from power with outrageous villainies. "The accounts of Caligula surviving from antiquity pursue the clearly recognizable goal of depicting the emperor as an irrational monster," he writes. "They provide demonstrably false information to support this picture of him and omit information that could contradict it."

To understand what Caligula was really up to, Winterling insists, we must understand the political culture of the early Roman Empire. When Augustus Caesar established the Empire, he was widely beloved for putting an end to generations of devastating civil wars. At the same time, however, Rome's senatorial aristocracy could not easily let go of the Republican traditions that gave them a privileged place in the state. Augustus finessed this situation by wielding power quietly: he lived on a modest scale, treated other senators as peers, and allowed the façade of the Republic to cover the reality of autocracy.

But Caligula, who, at the age of twenty-four, became the third Roman emperor, was unable to maintain this delicate balance. What embittered Caligula, Winterling argues, and has ruined his historical reputation, was the enmity of the senators, who chafed against his rule and plotted to end it. Instead of meeting this opposition with suavity, as Augustus had, Caligula turned a withering, bitter sarcasm on Rome's aristocracy, and was intent on humiliating them and reminding them of their servitude. "His aim," Winterling writes, "was to destroy the aristocratic hierarchy as such and expose it to ridicule." Seen in this light, some of Caligula's pranks become more understandable. Notoriously, for instance, he wanted to make his favorite horse, Incitatus, a consul—on the face of it, an insane thing to do. But Winterling suggests that this was never a serious plan, merely a way to mock the aristocrats, for whom the consulship was the crown of a career in politics: "To equip the emperor's horse

with a sumptuous household and destine it for the consulship satirized the main aim of aristocrats' lives and laid it open to ridicule."

Caligula's madness, in other words, was a deliberate exercise in political showmanship. This principle allows Winterling to explain another baffling episode in Caligula's biography, when he supposedly declared war on the English Channel. According to Suetonius, the emperor was in Gaul planning a campaign in Germany when he changed his mind and marched his legions to the French coast, facing Britain. He set up his artillery facing the ocean, and "no one knew or could imagine what he was going to do." Then he abruptly ordered the troops to collect seashells as booty from their "victory" over the waves, and gave them the bonus payment customary after triumphs. For Winterling, this story sounds insane only because it was distorted by the historian. What probably happened, he writes, is that Caligula was planning a genuine invasion of Britain, when his troops—fearful of going to a place that at that time was terra incognita, outside the bounds of the civilized world—mutinied and refused to go any farther. In this scenario, Caligula's order to collect shells was another form of elaborate sarcasm, a way of humiliating the soldiers "who had assembled at the edge of the sea but refused to fight."

Winterling grants that "there is no knowing what actually happened in any detail," but he prefers this explanation to the one Suetonius offers, which is that Caligula was simply psychotic. After all, "if Caligula was mad," Winterling asks, "why wasn't he removed from public view, and placed under the care of a physician—just as was done when rulers in later European history became mentally ill?" It sounds like a reasonable enough argument—until you remember, for instance, that Hitler's orders were followed until the very end, even when they were plainly mad and cost millions of lives, including those of his own soldiers. From Stalin to Mao to Idi Amin, the twentieth century surely gave plenty of proof that psychotic leaders are not necessarily "removed from public view," and can sometimes infect whole populations with their madness. At certain times, and the Roman Empire may be one of them, reasonableness is not a reasonable approach to history.

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