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**Edward J. Watts, *Mortal Republic: How Rome Fell Into Tyranny*. New York: Basic Books. 2018. xi, 336, figs. 17. ISBN 978-0-465-09381-6 (Hbk). \$32.00.**

*Reviewed by Alexander Moore.*

Through *Mortal Republic*, Watts aims to provide a new perspective on the decline of the Roman Republic and explain why the state ‘traded the liberty of political autonomy for the security of autocracy’ (p.7). Covering a vast and complex era (beginning with Pyrrhus’ invasion in 280 BCE and ending with Augustus’ establishment of the Principate), he argues that ‘no republic is eternal’ (p.8) and Rome is the perfect example. For Watts, the republic “fell” once politicians stopped accepting its ‘laws and norms’ (p.8), and citizens ignored (or even condoned) their leaders’ ‘corrosive behaviours’ (p.10). Therefore, Watts hopes to use the Roman Republic as a cautionary tale for his readers, emphasising that fragile modern republics are equally subject to the same fate unless these lessons are adequately learned. However, despite its brief but notably accessible overview of the Late Republic’s key events, figures, and themes, the detail and historical analysis present in similar works (for example: Brunt, 1988; Osgood, 2006; Flower, 2009; Welch, 2012; Steel, 2013; Mouritsen, 2017) is unfortunately lacking. This is perhaps unsurprising given Watts’ primary focus (and especially his attempt to recount such an extensive period in a limited quantity of pages), but nevertheless he offers a thought-provoking discussion into the supposedly ‘mortal’ nature of a republic and whether it truly ‘lives only as long as its citizens want it’ (p.8)

Establishing the book’s main premise, Chapter One (Autocratic Freedom) claims from the outset that ‘the Roman Republic teaches the citizens of its modern descendants the incredible dangers that come along with condoning political obstruction and courting political violence’ (p.10). The historical narrative then begins in Chapter Two (The New World Order) with Roman victory against Pyrrhus of Epirus and in the later Punic Wars. Here, Watts acknowledges the importance of political consensus, Rome’s network of Italian allies, and the significant realisation that following their imperial expansion, it became increasingly difficult to regulate individual commanders and their legal power.

Swiftly moving on to the Second/Third Macedonian and the Third Punic wars, Chapter Three (Empire and Inequality) effectively details the second century BCE's socio-economic disparity, created from a rapidly expanding Roman economy due to an influx of wealth from conquest. Chapter Four (The Politics of Frustration) expands on these themes before using the tumultuous careers of the Gracchi brothers to successfully illustrate how violence permeated political disputes as senatorial competition met with growing civil discord. Following a similar narrative pattern in Chapter Five (The Rise of the Outsider), Watts explores how Marius prominently emerged from the Jugurthine War, while continuing to show the increased use of political violence (involving military veterans and general public alike) under Glaucia and Saturninus. After suitably summarising the Social War, Chapter Six (The Republic Breaks) argues that the Republican system was fundamentally changed (with political failure becoming potentially fatal) once commanders utilised armed force to further their ambitions.

Chapter Seven (Rebuilding amid the Wreckage) emphasises how private individuals (such as Pompey) entered the political arena after raising an army outside senatorial control and granting support to contenders in civil war. Largely descriptive in nature, Chapters Eight (The Republic of the Mediocre) and Nine (Stumbling Toward Dictatorship) set the scene for Caesar's and Pompey's civil war, outlining their gradual dominance over Republican politics and the eventual destabilisation of their political allegiance. Watts' chronological journey continues quickly throughout Chapter Ten (The Birth and Death of Caesar's Republic) as he succinctly depicts the major incidents of Caesar's civil war, the political anxiety surrounding his victory, and the legal ambiguity of his assassination. The key developments leading up to the Second Triumvirate and later civil war between Antony and Octavian fill Chapter Eleven (The Republic of Octavian), epitomising numerous previously highlighted themes and demonstrating how leaders vied for supremacy in an intensely unstable political environment. Finally, Watts concludes in Chapter Twelve (Choosing Augustan Liberty) that 'Augustus was anything but inevitable' (p.279), believing the Republic could (or should) have survived if not for the political squabbling of a few powerful individuals.

Aside from being a useful (though brief) overview of the whole period, the final few chapters contain the book's more notable strengths as Watts' narrative delves

deeper into the Late Republic's significant political developments. For example, by neatly recounting Pompey's and Crassus' ascent in Chapter Seven, he demonstrates that the constitution (though functionally intact) fundamentally struggled to prevent the regular use of the military and political violence. This is further appreciated in Chapters Eight and Nine as he highlights (though it could have been more greatly stressed) how those controlling nearby armies or veterans increasingly determined politics through the threat of their potential intervention. Furthermore, when discussing the notorious "oath" sworn by Italy to Octavian in Chapter Eleven, Watts questions the relevance of 'political norms' (p.269) as the Republic and its varying individuals prepared for yet another civil war. While this realisation would have been welcome throughout his work (rather than regrettably receiving little development beyond this), it is important for historians to equally acknowledge the fluidity of state identity and the importance of political self-representation within such contexts.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Watts appropriately notes in Chapter Twelve that after decades of consecutive political conflict, Octavian's success lay in his ability to present the Republic as functioning within an evolved framework. Yet, this slightly contradicts his claim that 'the Republic was finished' and the 'empire ready to begin' (p.270) as such language implies that the Republic had a definitive and readily identifiable "end".

Indeed, this reflects a key issue running throughout his work: in trying to prove that the Republic 'died because it was allowed to' and 'its death was not inevitable' (p.281), Watts oversimplifies a largely complex historical issue. By presenting it as a conscious and entirely avoidable process, readers should be aware that Watts is primarily concerned with emphasising the vulnerability of a republic, rather than substantially detailing the intricate reasons behind Rome's gradual transition to the Principate. This predetermined approach to Late Republican history is particularly illustrated by Watts' continued reliance on and acceptance of our ancient sources. For instance, in Chapter Four he defines Tiberius Gracchus as a populist who inflamed political violence and pushed 'the Roman political system in a new and troubling direction' (p.86). Tiberius may have unconventionally outmanoeuvred senatorial opposition, but Watts fails to consider, as noted by Wiseman (2010: 26-27) and Armitage (2017: 82), the existence of a popular literary tradition (found in

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<sup>1</sup> See Gruen, 1974: 373; Osgood, 2015: 1684; Cornwell, 2017: 48; Westall, 2018: 8.

Varro, Sallust, Cicero, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Velleius Paterculus, Florus, and Appian), which used the Gracchi to conveniently identify a divergence from the supposedly harmonious state and explain the onset of successive civil wars. Conversely, Chapter Eight contains the scrutiny unfortunately missing elsewhere, as Watts recognises (when narrating the early careers of Caesar, Cato the Elder, and Cicero) the difficulty of differentiating between literary constructions and the historical reality of such prominent figures.

Moreover, despite being largely informative, Watts' narrative suffers from its fast-paced approach, as he often overlooks the significance of certain events and merely accepts the ancient testimony before moving on. In Chapter Ten, he observes the threatening nature of the mutiny in 47 BCE but presents it as easily resolved by 'money and charisma' (p.230), a view identified by Chrissanthos (2001) to plausibly originate within Caesarian propaganda that aimed to minimize its genuine threat and challenge to his authority. Likewise, in Chapter Eleven, Watts claims that the 'personalized, dynastic civil conflict' of Octavian and Antony was 'new' (p.254). Certainly, familial connections were a powerful tool in civil war, highlighted by Welch (2012: 190-192) who emphasises Sextus Pompeius' use of this tactic. However, it was not a new phenomenon as Plutarch (*Vit. Pomp.* 6), Appian (*B.C.* 1.80), and Dio (33.107) note how Pompey (decades before) utilised his father's reputation in Picenum to recruit his own force. Additionally, throughout this chapter Watts illustrates the growing tensions between Antony and Octavian, but there is little attempt to rationalise the former's actions in the East, or question the emotive claims of the latter's propaganda, resulting in a largely-one sided (though otherwise constructive) overview.

Nonetheless, Watts has ultimately succeeded in offering a new perspective to the study of the Late Republic by encouraging readers to consider how the state might have developed had Octavian failed or if his predecessors acted differently. Within such discussions, it is interesting to think about the Republic as an entity which "lives" and "dies", but in doing so it is crucial to remember that its "death" was unlikely to be predictable or necessarily identifiable to contemporaries. Furthermore, while it is useful to consider our relationship with the past and its influence on the present, *Mortal Republic* suffers from an oversimplification of complex issues and an overt acceptance of our sources without proper scrutiny of the contexts of their

production. Consequently, although Watt's primary argument is flawed, its chronological narrative is recommended for any undergraduate or general reader unfamiliar with the Late Republic, serving as a brief introduction to the period's key themes and characters.

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