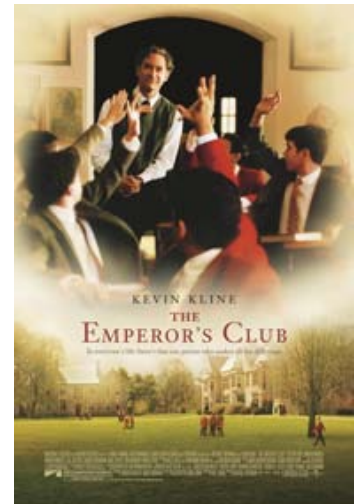


# THE EMPEROR'S CLUB

US, 2002, Michael Hoffman



The Emperor's Club is in the tradition of Dead Poets Society. The similarity is the setting in an ivy league high school where a teacher, dedicated to his students and his subject, transforms some of the boys. The Emperor's Club is set in the mid-70s and finishes in the present. Kevin Kline is the dedicated teacher.

One of the difficulties for many audiences in watching this story of educational privilege is that most of do not have this kind of experience. It is elitist. Expectations are that students with moneyed and professional backgrounds are the sole beneficiaries of this kind of education. Many of the students then assume that they are superior to others, take their privilege for granted. It is to the credit of The Emperor's Club that just when one might be exasperated by the behaviour of the students and the deferential treatment by headmaster and staff, the screenplay offers a more critical look at these attitudes. Before the end, it seems to reverse its stance to indulge the privileged only for a further change of stance in a scene where the son of one of the students overhears a confrontation between his father and the teacher, voicing a complete cynicism that is, unfortunately, too true of pragmatic authority figures.

A significant quotation about this issue is that "Privilege demands integrity". In fact, this is what the film is about: how does the education presented here foster responsibility and integrity in students? The central group of students are intelligent but are under extraordinary pressure from their parents' expectations: academic and career success. One is the son of an ambitious senator who summons Kevin Kline to tell him that it is not the teachers who will 'mould' his son's character. That is something he will do - which means that his emotionally neglected son will take it for granted that everything should be his even if it means lying and cheating.

Kevin Kline's subject is rather esoteric, Ancient Greek and Roman History, with classic references and the school's speciality, a competition in writing and a public quiz for the title of Mr Julius Caesar.

The movie is in the Mr Chips' vein, with a teacher who is not always popular but who wins the loyalty of his students, who is passed over for leadership in the school but who gives his life completely for his students.