The Search for a Hero in Julius Caesar

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BRUTUS IS THE DRAMATIC HERO of *Julius Caesar*." [1] This forthright statement from the Introduction to the New Arden edition of the play sums up a long and generally accepted critical tradition,[2] but the very fact of its appearance is a commentary on the play. A similar statement would not be thought necessary or proper in the introduction to a critical edition of, for example, *Othello,* or *Hamlet,* or *King Lear.* At best, moreover, it is not a view which can be maintained without modification. Thus, we also find in the Arden Introduction the following: "There are four fully developed figures of absorbing interest in *Julius Caesar:* Caesar himself, Brutus, Cassius, and Antony. For each of them Shakespeare arouses in us some admiration and some degree of sympathy; in each he brings out some conspicuous defects of character. Caesar is the titular hero, Brutus the dramatic hero." [3] The statement about Brutus as the hero, in spite of its

1. T. S. Dorsch, Introd. to *Julius Caesar,* Arden edition (London, 1955), p. xxxix.

2. The principal critical approaches to the play are briefly reviewed by Mildred Hartsock, "The Complexity of *Julius Caesar*," *PMLA,* LXXXI (1966), 56–57.

3. Dorsch, Introd. to *Julius Caesar,* pp. xxvi–xxvii. G. Wilson Knight writes: "The play has, as it were, four protagonists, each with a different view of the action" (*The Imperial Theme* [London, 1931], pp. 63–64).

forthrightness, does not represent a self-evident fact; rather, it testifies to the existence of a problem.

There are persuasive reasons why the nomination of Brutus as the tragic hero of *Julius Caesar* has appealed to critics of the play. *Julius Caesar* initiates the series of great Shakespearean tragedies, and it is not unnatural to think of it as anticipating them in formal terms and in the idea of tragedy which they embody. Moreover, the understanding of a serious dramatic action is simplified if it can be approached through a central character; for, although it is one of the oldest of principles of dramatic construction that a play does not achieve its unity necessarily by virtue of having a single hero, a play seems easier to get hold of if the interest in the action is concentrated upon a single figure of stature and strong appeal.[4] Caesar, the title figure, is disqualified since he dies at the midpoint of the action, even though his spirit survives to plague and ultimately to defeat the conspirators. Brutus, on the other hand, does seem to qualify. He is prominent throughout, his death terminates the play, and the final eulogy by Antony is about him. But it is chiefly by virtue of what he is and what he foreshadows that he has been chosen for the role of tragic hero. In many ways he suggests kinship with Shakespeare's later heroes—in his initial vacillation, in his distress "between the acting of a dreadful deed and its first motion," in his high sense of honor, and in his participation in an act that tries his moral principles and involves him in disaster. Brutus has, in fact, been regarded as the first dramatic character since antiquity to represent the complexity and irony which we associate with tragic grandeur. This view of the character has been effectively set forth by Willard Farnham:

> Shakespeare's Brutus asks admission to the ranks of those creatures of poesy who work out some tragic destiny in the grand manner of profound irony, not as pawns of Fortune or the gods, nor as magnificently defiant sinners, nor as headstrong weaklings, but as men of heroic strength or goodness whose most admirable qualities lead them into suffering. They are often forced to take the wages of what has the appearance of evil action and yet is not to be called evil action in all simplicity because it is dictated by their nobility. This is so with

4. John Holloway observes: "In nearly all of Shakespeare's major tragedies the hero, the protagonist, has a very great and indeed a peculiar prominence. There is no parallel to this in Shakespeare's other plays. . . . Nor is it paralleled in all tragedies by other authors" (*The Story of the Night* [London, 1961], p. 22).

Brutus. Before his appearance we find no protagonist upon the English tragic stage in whom greatness of soul is thus linked with misfortune.[5]

This approach to the play is strengthened by the place of *Julius Caesar* in the canon as the first of the mature tragedies, but the chronological position of the play, coming as it does at the conclusion of the series of history plays, suggests the possibility of viewing it in the perspective of the earlier plays. The histories are the plays through which, concurrently with the comedies, Shakespeare mastered his craft, explored and gave meaning to human behavior, and manifested the originality of his powers. Had Shakespeare written nothing else after *Henry V,* he would command respect as one of the world's chief dramatists. *Julius Caesar* allows us to see how much of Shakespeare's first sustained effort in the composition of serious drama carried over into the later tragedies.

Considered together, the history plays give the impression of a completed grand design. *King John* aside, they dramatize an extensive, coherent period of English history, from the forced break in the medieval succession at the abdication of Richard II, through the ensuing strife in the Wars of the Roses, to the emergence of the Tudor dynasty. This rich panorama of events was not only a source of splendid dramatic materials, but also a kind of natural history of politics and statecraft and a proving ground for ideas about political behavior and for an understanding of the forces which animate and shape great historical events. The interest in this aspect of the material, already evident throughout the three parts of *Henry VI,* formed the basis for the design of the last five plays in the cycle. Beginning with *Richard III,* Shakespeare centered the action of each play on a distinctive aspect of political power and its relation to the condition of a commonwealth. In *Richard III* the protagonist has almost no legal claim to the throne except what he manages to create by force and guile, and he regards the acquisition of power as an end in itself, without regard to legal and human considerations or the good of the state,

5. Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley, 1936), pp. 418–419. Cf. also, Virgil Whitaker, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning* (San Marino, 1953), p. 240: "Brutus is the first of Shakespeare's superb tragic figures who fail through false moral choice"; and Ernest Schanzer, *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare* (New York, 1963), p. 68: "Its central character is Brutus, in whom the moral issue is fought out, and whose tragedy . . . is very much of the Shakespearian kind . . . the only person in the play who experiences any inner conflict."

as an amoral exercise of *Realpolitik*. In *Richard II,* the King owes his power to unquestioned and recognized legal right, but the kingdom suffers because he lacks the personal and political qualifications for the exercise of his power. In *Henry IV,* the King is astute and knowledgeable in the ways of power and possesses the personal and political qualifications to rule in a statesmanlike fashion, but he is hampered and his rule is marred by a lack of legal right to the kingship and by his destruction of the mystique of kingly power in forcing the abdication of Richard. In *Henry V,* the King's power rests on a strong *de facto* legality, and he has the personal and political qualifications to exercise his power with success. Thus in these five plays, the major variations of the basic theme are represented. This exhaustion of the possibilities of the theme is matched by the variety in the dramatic means employed. The plays reveal an extraordinary dramatic inventiveness. No two of them are identical in dramatic structure and in the method by which the materials are organized to maximize the effectiveness of the story and its reflection of the underlying political insight which gives meaning to the events and helps to illuminate the characters.

Julius Caesar owes a great deal to this creative effort. It reveals the same interest in the realities of political activity, the same brilliant insight into the behavior of men in the search for power, and the same artistic originality in translating political affairs into drama as do the histories.[6] Moreover, it shows some resemblance to them in the matter of organization. The similarities begin with a detail, the title. King Henry VI gives his name to three plays in which he is a cause or the victim of the events which surround him without being in a conventional sense the principal character. This kind of dramatic design finds its most successful realization in the two parts of *Henry IV*. King Henry IV is not, strictly speaking, the protagonist of the two plays which bear his name, just as in the later play Caesar is not the tragic hero although the play is called *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Henry is, however, the central figure—and the analogy with the later play continues—in the sense that all the events of the play find their meaning in relation to his position as king and usurper.

6. J. D. Wilson, who is mindful of the importance of the histories in this connection, refers to *Julius Caesar* as "perhaps the most brilliant and most penetrating artistic reflection of political realities in the literature of the world" (Introd. to *Julius Caesar,* New Cambridge Shakespeare [Cambridge, Eng., 1949], p. xv).

Henry is a brilliant politician who seized power in a deteriorating political situation, and he hopes to establish a new order in the state; but the uncertainty of his legal position provides the occasion for unrest. A conspiracy to unseat him is formed, and among the conspirators are those who once supported him and helped him to power. In both parts, the movement of the play is precipitated by conspiracies against the King. He never succeeds in bringing about the political order he had hoped to create, and he dies in the middle of the second play which bears his name, upon which occasion his son, once despised as being "given to sports, to wildness, and much company"—to borrow words applied to Mark Antony—takes over and at the conclusion of 2 *Henry IV* is accepted as a capable leader with every expectation of resolving the rebellious disorders and political uncertainties of the past.

The analogies with *Julius Caesar,* though they cannot be pressed too far, are sufficiently cogent to suggest the possibility of approaching the organization of that play on somewhat similar terms. Caesar is the center of all the forces in the play without being its protagonist; the determining principle of order and selection of the events is the political conspiracy against him, and the action comprises the initiation, growth, initial success, and final failure of that conspiracy.[7] The opening scene is, from this point of view, a masterly introduction. None of the principals is present; the effect of the scene is to suggest the state of political unrest and to point to Caesar's rise in power as the cause. It calls attention to the resentment of conservative citizens to Caesar, and it introduces the populace as a key element in the situation—they are the "growing feathers" by means of which Caesar "would soar above the view of men"—and it indicates that in making a bid for power against established traditions of political authority Caesar has courted the favor of the plebeians and encouraged their aspirations. It establishes also the instability of the crowd—"Knew you not Pompey?"—and thus prepares for the emergence of the plebeians

7. A recent study which supports this view primarily through consideration of imagery is that of R. A. Foakes, "An Approach to *Julius Caesar,*" *SQ,* V (1954), 259–270. Adrien Bonjour, *The Structure of* Julius Caesar (Liverpool, 1958), p. 24 writes: "Reduced to its simplest terms, *Julius Caesar* is the story of a political murder and a posthumous revenge." Bonjour, however, centers the discussion for the most part on Brutus, and in a chapter entitled "The General Structure of the Play," Cassius is scarcely mentioned.

as the deciding factor in the fortunes of the conspirators and their fluctuation of loyalty first to Brutus and then to Antony. This lively introduction to the general situation is the setting for Caesar's first appearance: Caesar is shown already accepting the ceremonies and privileges usually accorded only to the supreme authority of a state, and we learn by implication of his wish for a male heir. There is also the first hint of a personal weakness, a latent superstitiousness. The scene between Cassius and Brutus acquires its meaning from these preparations. Cassius dominates this episode, with his fierce loyalty to the old republican traditions of Rome, his dislike of Caesar, and his skillful testing of Brutus, pouncing on his prey when the shouts betray Brutus into revealing his fear of Caesar's ambitions for a crown. The scene is interrupted briefly by the return of Caesar and his train from the games, an appearance that provides a hint of Caesar's fear, which like his superstition he does not fully acknowledge but keeps at bay ("I fear him not. / Yet if my name were liable to fear . . ."), and contains Caesar's characterization of Cassius with its contrast of the characters of Antony and Cassius. Later the contrast will be dramatically developed, but at the moment Caesar's speech has the effect of keeping the spotlight on Cassius. Before the scene ends, we are aware that Cassius has the conspiracy well under way and that Brutus will be a part of it.

The next phase of the action consists of the final consolidation of the conspiracy and the successful accomplishment of its purpose in the assassination of Caesar. For this portion of the action Brutus and Caesar become the center of interest. Brutus takes over the leadership from Cassius, almost imperceptibly at first with the objection to an oath, then in the rejection of Cicero, and finally in the fatal decision to spare Antony. Alongside this development, Caesar is dramatically prepared for his doom: he overcomes his physical infirmities, his superstition, and his fear, and in anticipation of the crown triumphs over his limitations to assume the posture of the imperial Caesar who is above other men; in this mood he refuses to look at Artemidorus' schedule and resists the pleas of the conspirators for Publius Cimber, thus giving them the public occasion to strike.

Once Caesar is dead, the interest then moves to the struggle for power—the effort of the conspirators to win over the senators, then Antony, and then the populace, climaxed by their inept loss of this key element to their success through the demagoguery of Antony. The action

now moves to the final phase. Antony takes the initiative, demonstrating an unexpected political shrewdness and ruthlessness; the conspirators flee Rome, and the outcome now rests with the test of arms. Shakespeare prepares us for the ultimate catastrophe. To the uncertainties of war Cassius and Brutus add the hazards of quarreling among themselves, failure to agree on a proper plan of battle, and personal dismay—in the case of Brutus the loss of Portia, in the case of Cassius, and more disastrously, the weakening of will through disenchantment and loss of faith in the enterprise which leads him to place the worst construction on Brutus' actions in the battle and to take his own life. The conspirators lose the battle, and Antony assumes power.

Approached in this way the play can be seen to have proportion, closeness of articulation, and a dynamic principle that drives the action steadily from the opening scene to the end. The common criticism that the play divides in the middle with the death of Caesar becomes less relevant. True, nowhere in the portion following the death of Caesar is there anything quite like the tense step-by-step mounting of intrigue and feeling that leads to the assassination, but there is certainly no loss of momentum, nor any lack of firm relationship between episode and episode. If there is a structural flaw, it is possible that our perception of it has been intensified and its importance exaggerated through an inadequate approach to the structure and meaning of the play.[8]

This view of *Julius Caesar* places in relief the affinity which it has with the histories in formal characteristics, specifically in maintaining a strong line of action and achieving unity while dividing the interest among several characters. However, the transitional character of the play is indicated by the way in which it at once resembles yet departs from the histories in the treatment of politics. The action of all the tragedies

8. For example, what happens between the death of Caesar and the appearance of Antony receives scant attention in productions. It becomes clear in this episode that the conspirators have planned for the act of assassination but for nothing else. They seem to be unaware that the death of Caesar will leave an appalling political void, and they seem unprepared for the next step. With the assassination accomplished, they shout slogans, propose announcements to the people, and talk philosophically about death and their readiness for it. And there is the ritual of dipping their hands in Caesar's blood, at the end of which Decius says, presumably with impatience, "What, shall we forth?" Productions usually pass over this significant and dramatically effective scene in huggermugger in order to get to the big entrance of Antony.

involves great affairs of state, and the ways of political power and the conduct of men caught up in public events are as brilliantly dramatized in them as in the earlier plays.[9] But the perspective from which the political aspects are viewed is somewhat different in the tragedies. In the histories, Shakespeare was dealing with English history, and, moreover, history that had a direct bearing on the political situation of his own day. The histories reveal in consequence a nationalistic bias which occasionally comes to the surface—for example in Gaunt's dying encomium to England in *1 Henry IV* and the Bastard's final speech in *King John*—and they imply a preference for a particular conception of the proper organization of the commonwealth and the source of ultimate authority and power in the state, a monarchical idea developed under the Tudors.

Efforts have been made to fit *Julius Caesar* into the Tudor political bias by representing Caesar as the embodiment of kingly power and the play as a commentary on the evils of conspiracy against royal authority even when it is inspired by the most idealistic motives.[10] This view of the play does not hold up very well. Caesar is not a king; the power he exercises has no legal or traditional sanction and has not yet received official approval. He is in fact represented as manipulating circumstances to achieve this goal and in the process undermining an established and traditional form of government and cultivating the power of the masses as a volatile force which he can employ to compel acceptance of his aims. On this last point, his tactics would not have appealed to conservative political opinion in Shakespeare's day, since the deliberate use of the populace as a means to power by ambitious politicians was viewed with considerable fear. But if the play does not present Caesar with the awesome divinity of an anointed king destroyed by rebels, or create any special sympathy for his effort to centralize political authority in himself, neither does it imply condemnation of him as a vile usurper or a rebel against constituted authority. But for that matter, it does not create any greater sympathy for the republicanism of Cassius and Brutus, even though they are trying to

9. Two recent books in which the political aspect of plays other than the histories forms the center of interest are Allan Bloom and Harry Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York, 1964); and Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary* (New York, 1964).

10. For a critical study of such views see Irving Ribner, "Political Issues in *Julius Caesar*," *JEGP*, LVI (1957), 10–20.

preserve the established order and the honorable traditions of the past. And certainly the victory of Antony cannot be construed as the triumph of honor, or legality, or right rule as, for instance, is the victory of Richmond in *Richard III.* If there is a political bias in *Julius Caesar,* it is implied so subtly as to render its existence disputable.[11] The play appears to be neutral with reference to the political aims of the different parties to the conflict. Each of the four major figures reveals some defect or weakness or unamiable quality, yet at the same time each is endowed with extraordinary powers and human virtues which make a claim on our sympathies or at least elicit respect and admiration. It is not surprising that comprehensive critical appreciations of the play often end up containing analyses about equal in length of each of the four major figures. The change from English to Roman history thus brought about certain distinct if subtle changes in the approach to the dramatization of political events. The Roman world aroused interest and admiration, but not patriotic sentiments nor a sense of immediate relationship to the kind of political order or theory involved in the situation.[12] In consequence, the merit of

11. Vernon Hall, *"Julius Caesar:* a Play Without a Political Bias," *Studies in the English Renaissance Drama* (New York, 1959), pp. 106–124, discusses critically attempts to demonstrate a political bias.

12. The attitudes toward the civil wars and the principal figures involved in them have been surveyed by Ernest Schanzer, *Problem Plays of Shakespeare,* pp. 11–23; and J. Leeds Barroll, "Shakespeare and Roman History," *MLR,* LIII (1958), 327–343. This material is sometimes appealed to for clues to particular interpretations of the play: for examples see Vernon Hall, *"Julius Caesar,"* pp. 125–126; Virgil Whitaker, *The Mirror up to Nature* (San Marino, 1965), pp. 125–126; J. D. Wilson, Introd. to the New Cambridge edition, pp. xxi–xxiii. No agreement emerges from such studies as to any given way in which these events necessarily impressed themselves on audiences of Shakespeare's day. Ben Jonson, who might be considered an important test case, provides no support for the notion that a Christian audience familiar with medieval and Renaissance writings on Roman history and brought up on Tudor political theory would be unsympathetic with Brutus and Cassius and would regard their destruction as merited. In *Sejanus,* Arruntius, a choral character, lamenting the decline of the Roman virtues, says, "'Tis true that Cordus says, / Brave Cassius was the last of all that race" (I.i.102–104). The historian Cordus, accused by the Sejanus faction of defaming the present by praising Cassius and Brutus, defends himself by pointing out that Livy names "the same Cassius, and this Brutus too, / As worthiest men—not thieves and parricides" (III.i.420–421; see also ll. 456–460). Schanzer (pp. 25–36) argues effectively that Shakespeare made dramatic use of the

the characters as men is not related directly to the success of their efforts to bring about a healthy political order in the state, and the moral dilemmas in which they find themselves are dealt with sympathetically without reference to their preference for a particular form of political order.[13]

This distinction must, however, be made with reservations. The moral aspects of power enter into the characterizations in the histories also. One source of the complexity and richness of the history plays is the more than implicit awareness of the inherent paradox—or better, the irreconcilable contradiction—at the center of all political involvement. Political power gives a man the opportunity to concern himself with the well-being of society—"power to do good is the true and lawful end of aspiring," as Bacon said—and since it is directly concerned with actions that affect others it lies within the province of ethics; but political action considered as a science or art is as non-moral as engineering, and men deeply committed to a political course, though they may believe that its aims are of the highest merit, cannot always enjoy the luxury of being morally fastidious in the means. Bolingbroke in *Richard II* is perhaps the most conspicuous example of this dilemma among the characters in the histories. His accusations against the King (presented indirectly through his challenge of Mowbray) are just, and he finds support from others who are dismayed by the evils of Richard's rule. His inheritance is unlawfully seized, and he is encouraged by the nobles to use the occasion to help them secure better government, and so, though ostensibly returning from exile to reclaim his lands, he seems willing to be used by them to replace Richard. Yet once started on this course, he finds it necessary to do all manner of things that are morally reprehensible, from political slyness to the murder of the lawful king. He is no Richard III to exult in his political virtuosity and his mastery of the ruthless art of gaining and using

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conflicting attitudes available in the writings about these men by "playing on his audience's varied and divided views of Caesar" to create an enigmatic character who presents a different image to each of the other principal characters, and in the process creates "his own image of himself."

13. L. C. Knights, "Shakespeare's Politics: With Some Reflection on the Nature of Tradition," *Proceedings of the British Academy,* XLIII (1957), 118: "In *Julius Caesar,* freed from the embarrassments of a patriotic theme, and with the problem projected into a 'Roman' setting, Shakespeare examines more closely the contradictions and illusions involved in political action."

power, and so he cannot repress his awareness of the harsh contradictions in his role. Seeing the dead body of Richard II he exclaims, "Lords, I protest my soul is full of woe / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow." The contradiction between his political aims and his political means pursues him in the Henry IV plays, and his remorse breaks through in his dying speech of advice to Hal: "God knows, my son, / By what by-paths and indirect crook'd ways / I met this crown."

In *Julius Caesar* all the principal characters confront this dilemma, but it is Brutus and Cassius who are viewed continuously and directly in relation to it. It is as though the contradiction which Bolingbroke is unable to resolve within himself is factored out, and the two parts assigned to Brutus and Cassius respectively. In the opening scenes, Brutus stands out for his explicit concern over the moral issues raised by the conspiracy and his desire to preserve his own high principles while meeting its demands; Cassius, on the other hand, acts as a political realist who attempts to guide the course of the conspiracy by political considerations alone. It is in large part because of this impression of moral earnestness that critics have been attracted to the idea of Brutus as the first of Shakespeare's characters to be conceived in the new tragic mode and hence as the tragic hero of *Julius Caesar;* and once this point of view is adopted Cassius must necessarily suffer at the hands of the critics in consequence. However, the primary distinction between them, so effectively presented at the outset, is only the beginning of a complex development which depicts what happens when an intense political crisis places the ultimate demands upon these two—both equally patriotic but differing in character and political methods—as political agents and as men. In the course of the action, the initial outlines take on subtle shadings, and at the end of the play it is no longer easy to maintain the same simple kinds of sympathy and moral judgment that are generated by the opening scenes.

The original decision which binds Brutus and Cassius in the conspiracy is identical for both of them: the choice as they both see it is between the death of republican Rome and the death of Caesar. Both men, moreover, seem agreed that the patriotic preservation of the old Roman order represents an obligation which makes superior moral claims on them over the principle which forbids murder. It is not, however, the agreement on political principles and moral choice which stands out but rather the

disparity between the two men, since our impression of this decision is colored by the differences in temperament which operate in each case. Cassius is more demonstrative emotionally than Brutus, unable to repress his personal feelings in any circumstance, as he acknowledges late in the play when he speaks of Brutus' practice of stoicism with awe upon learning of Portia's death: "I have as much of this in art as you, / But yet my nature could not bear it so." The contrast is established during the initial scene between them. Cassius does not conceal his dislike of Caesar, nor the fact that this dislike colors his decision to thwart Caesar's bid for power. The two feelings merge into one. He is as passionate in the expression of his desire to preserve republican Rome from the power of one man as of his detestation and contempt for the man who has become a dictator and aims to become emperor. Brutus, on the other hand, deliberately separates his personal feelings about Caesar from the grim political decision which he believes he is forced to accept as a matter of principle and honor. Cassius is not, any more than is Brutus, motivated by any ambition for power, nor can it be maintained that he kills Caesar out of envy, though Antony and some critics would have it so. Nevertheless, Brutus' reserve and conspicuous high-mindedness weigh heavily in his favor. Initially, therefore, these temperamental differences serve chiefly to provide an impression of the quality of mind and spirit that is involved in each case in making the same choice.

During the first part of the play, through the scene of the assassination, the contrast in character serves largely to enhance the stature of Brutus, at the expense of Cassius. The skill with which Cassius works on Brutus in their first encounter arouses suspicion of his sincerity and, accordingly, sympathy for Brutus as a possible victim of a political schemer. Caesar's remarks to Antony about Cassius' lean and hungry look have the effect of reinforcing this impression. When Cassius goes out into the storm, baring his "bosom to the thunderstone" and rounding up the conspirators, it is not so much his daring and dedication that stand out as his restless stirring up of trouble. Brutus meanwhile arouses compassion as he broods over the most awful decision of his life. And though Cassius succeeds singlehandedly in creating the conspiracy, no one comes to him, as does Ligarius to Brutus, and begs to devote himself to his cause with no further knowledge than that he heads it. When Brutus imperceptibly takes over the leadership of the conspiracy from Cassius, it is in the

manner of a man who assumes that his nobility of mind gives him this right and that it is to be expected that it will be respected by others. But this clear-cut distinction does not survive the enlargement of understanding provided by the course of the play, and the grounds for the reassessment are laid quite early. Brutus agrees to take part in a desperate and violent political enterprise, but its physical and practical aspects offend him. He is shocked at his first view of the faction, heavily muffled to wait upon him clandestinely at night. He regrets the need to shed Caesar's blood, since it is the spirit of Caesar that he opposes, "And in the spirit of men there is no blood." He thus conceives of the act as a sacrifice and is convinced that once this simple act of pious surgery is over he can become morally fastidious again. Cassius knows from the start that what they are planning to do is "Most bloody, fiery, and most terrible" and that the assassination will not absolve them from further ruthless and unpleasant acts. In spite of his passionate emotional involvement, Cassius is able to see things honestly and realistically. Brutus, though impressive in the deliberate separation of his feelings from the demands of principle and duty, is wrapped up in his preoccupation with his honor, and his confidence in his own self-esteem beclouds the realities which confront them and leads him to make one error after another. In two of the great scenes of the play, the consequences of the unique virtues of Brutus as they manifest themselves in these critical political times are brought into dramatic focus. The disaster of the orations brings to a climax his political ineptitude. The quarrel with Cassius exposes openly for the first time the limitations of his sense of moral superiority.

As the scene of the orations marks the turning point in the political fortunes of the conspirators, so the scene of the quarrel marks the turning point in the relations of its leaders. It marks also an alteration of attitude toward them.[14] The failure to appreciate this change as one of the important aspects of the dramatic development is one of the likely casualties of approaching *Julius Caesar* as the tragedy of Brutus. The orations

14. A similar development takes place in *Richard II*. As Richard is debased and humiliated and as he begins to awaken to his failings, sympathy swings to him and diminishes the unpleasant impression left by the ruthless actions and the grandstand monarchizing of the early scenes. Simultaneously, Bolingbroke, the champion of political justice and the unfairly disinherited heir, acquires tarnish as he becomes more and more enmeshed in the unpleasant demands of power politics.

confirm the consistent rightness of Cassius' political judgment; the quarrel provides the first conspicuous opportunity to view him sympathetically as a man. From this point on Cassius appears often in a favorable or at least humanly appealing light. The comparisons between him and Brutus no longer always give the immediate advantage to the latter. Cassius is the first to concede in the quarrel—"I said an elder soldier, not a better. / Did I say 'better'?" He backs down and accepts Brutus' plan for the battle, although as he later confesses to Messala he knows the decision is fatally wrong. Though a disciple of Epicurus, he now broods over omens he once scoffed at. He notes with a touch of sadness that the day of the battle is his birthday, and in the conviction that his "life is run his compass" places the wrong interpretation on the events of the battle and commands his bondman to take his life. The high point in the enhancement of Cassius' human stature in the play is the tribute of Titinius at Cassius' death and the loyalty that prompts Titinius to take his own life:

> But Cassius is no more. O setting sun,
> As in thy red rays thou dost sink to-night,
> So in his red blood Cassius' day is set!
> The sun of Rome is set. Our day is gone;
> Clouds, dews, and dangers come; our deeds are done.
>
> (V.iii.60–64)

This speech will stand comparison with any of the noble benedictions which Shakespeare has provided for his dead heroes. Even more striking is Titinius' speech as he kills himself: "Brutus, come apace, / And see how I regarded Caius Cassius." That Titinius should address himself to the absent Brutus is surely not without significance. The implication of the speech is, in effect, that neither Brutus nor the other characters, nor indeed the auditor, can continue any longer to assume that only Brutus possesses the human qualities that can inspire such total devotion and loyalty. It is as though a claim is being entered for Cassius' right to some share in the sentiments inspired by the representation of the death of men of great spirit in the performance of great actions.

Inevitably, any melioration in our impression of Cassius must affect our view of Brutus and reflect on the initial picture of him. In the quarrel scene, the studied cultivation of nobility of mind and conduct which sets Brutus apart from the other characters and commands their reverence manifests itself in a form that is less than admirable. The illogical

contradiction in his attitude toward Cassius in this scene has been often noted. His grievance is that Cassius did not send him money when he requested it—"For I can raise no money by vile means," he explains—yet he threatens Cassius with punishment for trying to raise money by the only means now available to them in the terrible extremity in which they find themselves. Cassius, trying to save a desperate situation, pleads with Brutus, "In such a time as this it is not meet / That every nice offence should bear his comment," and receives the retort, "The name of Cassius honours this corruption, / And chastisement doth therefore hide his head," leaving Cassius helplessly bewildered with no reply save, "Chastisement!" In the concluding episodes, Brutus reveals at times a singular incapacity for awareness. He does not sense the contradictions in his reproaches to Cassius in the quarrel and is insensitive to the cutting harshness and even moral snobbery of his rebukes. He never realizes the extent to which his lack of judgment has doomed the conspiracy, and he can still set aside Cassius' advice on strategy as though to an underling whose experience and wisdom in such matters cannot be seriously entertained. And in the light of everything that has happened, there is an air of unreality and obtuseness of perception about his proud remark to his few remaining followers after the defeat:

> My heart doth joy that yet in all my life
> I found no man but he was true to me.
>
> (V.v.34–35)

This incapacity to confront reality and to see himself is, in fact, one important respect in which Brutus does not measure up to the tragic heroes which follow. He lacks the final full realization of himself and the meaning of his catastrophe, the tragic anagnorisis, which, with the possible exception of Coriolanus, is a distinguishing mark of the Shakespearean tragic hero. This lack of awareness may well be one of the reasons why Brutus does not command throughout the full measure of sympathetic acceptance we grant to the major tragic heroes of Shakespeare.[15]

Through the complex interplay between them and the changing im-

15. For example, Whitaker, *The Mirror up to Nature,* p. 132: "The most serious weakness of the play from the point of view of moral exposition is undoubtedly Brutus' own failure to recognize the enormity of his mistake. . . . we miss the great speeches in which Othello or Lear or Macbeth confess their mistakes and survey the tragic consequences."

pression which they create during the course of the action, the characters of Brutus and Cassius acquire depth and provide the clues for an understanding in human terms of their downfall. For there are two notable failures. That of Brutus has chiefly occupied critics, and has been often dealt with, but the failure of Cassius is also dramatically significant and developed in considerable detail. It was his energy and passion and skill that brought the conspirators together in a common enterprise. In every circumstance his judgment of the proper steps to take and those to avoid proves to be politically right. Yet he regularly allows Brutus to overrule him, seemingly overawed like everyone else by Brutus' nobility. But there is more to Cassius' relations to Brutus than that. Caesar's description to Antony notes Cassius' inwardness and his lack of an easygoing temper, which seem to isolate him from ready access to others. But Cassius is not a cold man. His dedication to his cause, his passionate outbursts of feeling reveal qualities that render him deficient in the role of political virtuoso in spite of his political skill and wisdom. Moreover, in his isolation he reveals a deep need for companionship and unexpected human warmth. "Have you not love enough," he asks of Brutus at the end of the quarrel,

> to bear with me,
> When that rash humor which my mother gave me
> Makes me forgetful?
>
> (IV.iii.117–119)

And he is all eagerness and gratefulness in his acceptance of the cup of wine in which Brutus offers to "bury all unkindness":

> My heart is thirsty for that noble pledge.
> Fill, Lucius, till the wine o'erswell the cup;
> I cannot drink too much of Brutus' love.
>
> (IV.iii.158–160)

It is just after this that Cassius once more lets Brutus override him, this time in the crucial matter of the plan of the battle. No difference in moral attitudes is involved in this decision, as in the earlier one of sparing Antony; it is simply a matter of military judgment. Cassius presents his plan briefly. Brutus begins his more lengthy proposal with, "Good reasons must, of force, give place to better," and when Cassius in the course of Brutus' exposition interposes—"Hear me, good brother"—Brutus prevents him from developing his thought and with "Under your pardon" he

continues. There is nothing explicit offered to explain Cassius' quiet submission: "Then, with your will, go on." But the entire scene of the quarrel and the news of Portia's death lie behind this episode and color it. Can Cassius risk another serious argument over a difference of opinion? In the background hovers the memory of that unfortunate remark about being a better soldier—or was it elder soldier? No matter. Nothing is worth the risk of endangering the pledge of love, more important to Cassius now than the battle which he is confident they must lose.[16]

It is left ambiguous in the opening scene between the two whether Cassius' need for Brutus was entirely political or whether it was also to some extent sincerely personal. How are we to consider his opening gambit?

> Brutus, I do observe you now of late;
> I have not from your eyes that gentleness
> And show of love as I was wont to have.
> You bear too stubborn and too strange a hand
> Over your friend that loves you.
>
> (I.ii.32–36)

Is this anything more than the blandishment of a skillful political manipulator getting to work on his victim? The first scene does not answer the question, but it raises skepticism about the purity of Cassius' motives. There is no question, however, about the genuineness and sincerity of Cassius' sentiments when, "aweary of the world: / Hated by one he loves," he exposes his innermost feelings to Brutus:

> I, that denied thee gold, will give my heart.
> Strike as thou didst at Caesar; for I know,
> When thou didst hate him worst, thou lov'dst him better
> Than ever thou lov'dst Cassius
>
> (IV.iii.103–106)

Now, the political need is clearly unimportant and the personal almost desperate. To have succeeded, Cassius needed the total calculation devoid

16. The importance of love and friendship as they color the political world of *Julius Caesar* has been noticed in recent studies: for example, Adrien Bonjour, *The Structure of* Julius Caesar, p. 132; Schanzer, *Problem Plays of Shakespeare,* pp. 41–42, and especially G. W. Knight, "The Eroticism of *Julius Caesar,*" in *The Imperial Theme,* pp. 63–95. In this respect *Julius Caesar* marks a change from the histories, in which the personal and human aspects of an individual's political relations are normally measured by reference to a concept of honor.

of all human considerations which is the mark of the true Machiavellian. His human qualities rendered him unfit for the conspiracy just as surely as Brutus was rendered unfit by his political naïveté, his strong conviction of his own nobility, and his fastidious moral sense. Each man in his own way loses out in the opposition between the remorseless demands of involvement in a political crisis and a capacity for moral rectitude and submission to human feelings and values.

This view of the play appears to be contradicted by the concluding speech of Antony. It has the effect of placing the focus on Brutus and reestablishing his moral preeminence:

> This was the noblest Roman of them all.
> All the conspirators save only he
> Did that they did in envy of great Caesar;
> He only in a general and honest thought
> And common good to all, made one of them.
> His life was gentle; and the elements
> So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
> And say to all the world "This was a man!"
>
> (V.v.68–75)

The speech asks us, in effect, to reject any complicating and ambivalent impressions made by the latter portions of the play, to pass judgment on Cassius ("in envy of great Caesar"), and to restore to Brutus the idealized image of him which dominates the early episodes ("the noblest Roman of them all . . . 'This was a man!' "). Its rhetorical force is strengthened by its position as the last utterance. Its finality would be endorsed by those critics of Elizabethan and especially Shakespearean drama who accept all such dramatic conventions as soliloquies, asides, and formal concluding statements at their face value, as clues provided by the dramatist to establish lines of characterization, moral value, and the like, and to straighten out the ambiguities of a not always logical or tidy dramatic development. It is open to question, however, whether such critical principles can be applied consistently to Shakespeare without damage to his subtlety. When, for example, Iago states in soliloquy his conviction that Desdemona is in love with Cassio, no one is likely to allow this confidence from the stage to alter the impression of what Desdemona says and does; the more likely result is to wonder what is troubling Iago and to become uncertain about what he says of Othello. And we do not leave *Macbeth*

with the impression of having witnessed the story of a "dead butcher, and his fiend-like queen" simply because that is the final sentiment expressed about him in the last speech of the play. It is a proper judgment coming from Malcolm, who expresses the sentiments of a nation rescued from a nightmare, but it is not precisely our verdict. On the other hand, the sentiment expressed by Fortinbras in the concluding speech, that Hamlet, "was likely, had he been put on, / To have prov'd most royal" will receive assent, not only because Fortinbras is a shadowy figure with no previous direct involvement in the action and hence appropriately choral but because—and much more to the point—the qualities which Hamlet has manifested were such as might have proved worthy of kingship under happier circumstances. But even in this instance, though it seems proper for Fortinbras to have four captains bear Hamlet "like a soldier," and this gesture provides a splendid closing theatrical spectacle for the play, we know that Hamlet was also a courtier and scholar and a man troubled by such doubts as have brought upon him the distinction of having become the classic symbol of those who find their world shattered, their familiar values insecure, and themselves in isolation.

The concluding speech of Antony raises its own difficulties. If the eloquent benediction spoken over the dead Cassius, "the sun of Rome," is to be discounted because Titinius speaks as a devoted friend and Antony's eulogy given increased merit because it is spoken by an enemy, does it then become relevant to consider that Antony and Cassius are sharply opposed throughout the play, beginning with Caesar's description of Cassius, and that it is more likely that Antony will find words for Brutus but not for Cassius? Moreover, is the Antony who destroyed Brutus by shattering through innuendo the image of "The noble Brutus" as "an honourable man" ideally suited to assume the choric role and speak the formal lines which restore his claim to those proud titles? And what of Brutus' own eulogy of Cassius?

> The last of all the Romans, fare thee well!
> It is impossible that ever Rome
> Should breed thy fellow.
>
> (V.iii.99–101)

These doubts may be irrelevant; the speech may indeed be choric, and its function to provide a clear and unmistakable perspective on the intent

and meaning of the play. In which case Shakespeare wrought more subtly than he knew. The momentary impression of Antony's formal speech should not weigh against the total complex impression made by a sophisticated dramatic art using all the resources of the theater and language. We may be skeptical of the final authority of the shorthand expository devices of the theater, the expected rhetoric of formal dramatic moments, and the dramatic conventions of a particular theater when they reduce the riches of a great play to simpler terms than the art of the play warrants and thus stand in the way of perceiving or appreciating them.

Even for the most admiring of its critics, *Julius Caesar* has not seemed to be as fully realized as the tragedies which follow. Farnham, whose opinion of Brutus as the first distinctively tragic figure in Renaissance drama has been cited, describes *Julius Caesar* as "a play in which [Shakespeare] clearly stands poised between immaturity and maturity in tragic perception."[17] It may be equally appropriate to view it as poised between the great tragedies which follow and the history plays which precede, a play retaining some of the methods and insights which Shakespeare developed in his dramatizations of English history while anticipating those which became the distinctive features of the plays which follow. From this perspective, the play is less likely to appear as an imperfect realization of the qualities and powers of the major tragedies—a conclusion true enough and important in its own way—and more likely to appear as an unusual and original work, unique among the plays of Shakespeare, with its own distinctive artistic merits. The various concepts which we apply to literature offer a means whereby we can come to terms with particular works, appreciate their qualities, understand their art, and comprehend their meaning. The test of the appropriateness of one or another concept as an approach to an individual work is the completeness with which it enables us to bring together all the elements in it into an intelligible and coherent relation with one another, and the effectiveness with which it enables us to examine its distinctive effects exhaustively. *Julius Caesar* is indeed a tragedy, and it is the first of Shakespeare's plays in which the characteristics of the later tragedies are clearly foreshadowed, but to measure the play by applying to it rigorously an idea of tragedy derived from the tragedies which follow it has the effect of obscuring some of its interesting features and of calling attention to its limitations

17. Farnham, *Medieval Heritage,* p. 368.

rather than to its special merits. In particular, the attempt to find the source of its unity and to identify its special powers through the centripetal effect of a dominating protagonist analogous to Othello or Lear or Hamlet tends to distort the structure and in some respects to impoverish the play. It is very doubtful whether the most fruitful way to approach *Julius Caesar* is as the tragedy of Brutus.