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THE COMPLEXITY OF JULIUS CAESAR

BY MILDRED E. HARTSOCK

FROM THE eighteenth century to the present, editors, critics, and directors have recognized special problems in the interpretation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Every major play has been extensively debated, to be sure, but discussions of this play have been marked by an unusual perplexity. There is little agreement about the most elementary questions. Is Caesar an egocentric, dangerous dictator—a genuine threat to Rome; or is he the “noblest man / That ever lived in the tide of times,” as Antony says he is?¹ Is Brutus the mistaken idealist, strong in abstract principle but weak in human perceptiveness; or is he, as Swinburne thought, the “very noblest figure of a typical and ideal republican in all the literature of the world”?² Is he the Aristotelian hero, noble but flawed, recognizing at last that he has erred? Or is he the willful egoist, embodying the very traits of Caesarism which he professes to hate? Is Cassius the dedicated republican that Brutus, Titinius, and many of his own speeches make him appear to be? Or is he the “lean and hungry” envious one who hates Caesar for merely personal reasons? These are only a few of the questions the play poses. Everywhere one turns, contradictions loom.

The most commonly held interpretations of *Julius Caesar*, however variously they are extrapolated, may be put into a few categories. First there is the view that Caesar is “hero”: hence the title of the play. Sir Mark Hunter is sure that Shakespeare considered the murder of Caesar to be “the foulest crime in secular history,”³ and Roy Walker agrees that we are supposed to admire Caesar and to see him as “a great and good ruler.”⁴ Otherwise, Walker argues, the triumph of Caesar's spirit at the end would be meaningless, as would the celestial portents preceding the final act. Frederick Boas, admitting some ambiguity in the characterization, nevertheless adopts a firm interpretation: Caesar is *not* made a laughingstock for the groundlings: “The infirmities of the dictator in the flesh are merely the foil to his irresistible might when set free from physical trammels.”⁵

In a recent article on the “Cinna” and “Cynicke” episodes, Norman Holland states that the murder of Cinna the poet “identifies Brutus' motives with those of the mob” and establishes the attitude of the play toward the assassination of Caesar: “That attitude is the traditional one that Caesar was ‘a great Emperour’ and Brutus a

vile murderer, an attitude represented by Dante's *Inferno*, Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis* . . . and Shakespeare himself.”⁶ Holland cites these lines from *2 Henry VI*:

Great men oft die by vile besonians.
. . . Brutus' bastard hand
Stabb'd Julius Caesar. (iv.i.134-137)

This view of the role of Caesar in the play would mean that the tragedy inheres in the death of a great and noble man. The dénouement, then, would be the working out of a just punishment for the offenders; and Stoll would be right when he calls Julius Caesar an “Elizabethan revenge play.”⁷

A second—and, in recent years, a more generally accepted—interpretation makes Brutus the focus of interest as tragic hero. Those who see him so, however, differ in their conceptions of his role. Macmillan describes Brutus as seeking moral perfection in a situation in which it cannot be relevant. Dover Wilson, convinced that Shakespeare would have accepted the Renaissance concept of Caesar as “a Roman Tamburlaine, a monstrous tyrant,” concludes that Brutus is the tragic figure. George Bernard Shaw believes that Shakespeare “writes Caesar down for the mere technical purpose of writing Brutus up”; and Thomas Marc Parrott feels that, though Brutus does make mistakes, “his high sense of honor and his sweetness of temper are such that he never forfeits our sympathy.”⁸ Anne

¹ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. T. S. Dorsch, New Arden Edition (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1955), iii.i.256-257. All citations will be to this edition.

² A. C. Swinburne, *A Study of Shakespeare*, 1880. In Augustus Ralli, *A History of Shakespearean Criticism* (New York: Humanities Press, 1951), II, 3.

³ Transactions of Royal Soc. Lit., x (1931), 136.

⁴ “Unto Caesar: A Review of Recent Productions,” in *Shakespeare Survey*, II, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1958), 128-135.

⁵ *Shakespeare and His Predecessors* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), p. 461.

⁶ “The ‘Cinna’ and ‘Cynicke’ Episodes in *Julius Caesar*,” *SQ*, xi (Autumn 1960), 443.

⁷ E. E. Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1960), p. 197. This view is also proffered by Ernest Schanzer in *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), and by Norman Rabkin in “Structure, Convention, and Meaning in *Julius Caesar*,” *JEGP*, LXIII (April 1964), 249-254.

⁸ Michael Macmillan, *Julius Caesar*, Arden Edition (London: Methuen, 1902). Dover Wilson, *Julius Caesar*, New Cambridge Edition, p. xxv. George Bernard Shaw, *Three Plays for Puritans* (London: Constable, 1925), p. xxx. Thomas

Paolucci sees Brutus as the true Aristotelian hero: "He comes to realize that in upholding the sacred cause of freedom, in protecting the republic from the violence of tyranny and dictatorship, he has broken the equally binding law of humanity." Her recent article speaks for those who have thought Brutus repentant at the end: "He understands at last that in judging Caesar as he did, he assumed the divine prerogative of God, mistaking his uncertain vision of the future for divine providence and his killing of Caesar for divine justice."⁹

Generally, the Brutus-image falls into one of four patterns: 1) Brutus as the Republican who fails because he lacks practical understanding of men and politics; 2) Brutus as the moral idealist who induces disorder in his own soul and in the Roman state by committing himself to violence on insufficient evidence but on the highest abstract principles; 3) Brutus as the "noblest Roman" who is trapped by Cassius and lesser men into a fatal choice which he finally repents; 4) Brutus as the essentially unappealing, cold, egocentric leader who, in his refusal to heed the counsels of others, comes close to a kind of Caesarism. In these, and other shadings of these views, the assumption is that the interest of the play is primarily in the characterization of Brutus. One detailed exegesis is the psychological study made by G. Wilson Knight, who sees the play as the tragedy of *two* men and their personal relationship: Brutus who fails because he loves too little and Cassius who fails because he loves too much.¹⁰ From this analysis emerges the feeling that Cassius is really at the emotional center of the play, a feeling also produced by John Gielgud's enactment of the role. In sharp contrast is Stoll's statement that, at least in the early part of the play, Cassius' role "verges upon that of a villain."

A third interpretation of *Julius Caesar* is that of Stapfer and, with some modifications, of Bradley and Stewart. The play, Stapfer says, is filled "not with the genius of a man but with a new era about to dawn—the genius of Caesarism." In like vein, John Uhler calls it a tragedy "not of a person but of Republica." Bradley comments that we can tell from the opening scene that "among a people so unstable and so easily led this way and that, the enterprise of Brutus is hopeless; the days of the Republic are done." J. I. M. Stewart sees an almost senile Caesar, "grown slightly ridiculous in the task of keeping physical and intellectual infirmity at bay." But, he adds, the spirit is no longer in that weakened body: it has gone out abroad over the

earth, and "on the field of Philippi is mighty yet." These views appear to suggest an irresistible fatalism that no leader and no action could hope to combat; and such fatalism is perhaps implicit in R. A. Foakes's idea that the real issue of the play lies in the inevitable discrepancy between public politics and private lives.¹¹

Certain critics indict the play for a basic failure of clarity. It is interesting to note that early eighteenth-century "improvers" of Shakespeare felt that there were defects in the play that needed to be remedied. G. Blakemore Evans points out that Sheffield, Dennis, Gildon, and Killebrew saw an unclarity in *Julius Caesar* which they hoped to rectify by emendations.¹² Coleridge, too, confessed a dissatisfaction: "I do not at present see into Shakespeare's motive, his rationale, or in what point of view he meant Brutus' character to appear."¹³ Allardyce Nicoll calls *Julius Caesar* "One of the most difficult plays rightly to assess"; and Boas describes it as an "amazing enigma." Stoll and Schücking deny the play any subtlety of motivation; Schanzer declares that it must be included among the "problem" plays; and Granville-Barker disposes of the whole matter by suggesting that, in 1599, Shakespeare was still fumbling for his proper dramatic means—that, in short, it is a badly constructed play.¹⁴

This prolonged rehearsal of divergent views gives some indication of the difficulty of the play. Every play has its problems; but here we

Marc Parrott, *William Shakespeare: A Handbook*, revised ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 156.

⁹ Anne Paolucci, "The Tragic Hero in *Julius Caesar*," *SQ*, xi (Summer 1960), 332-333.

¹⁰ *The Imperial Theme* (London: Methuen, 1951), Chs. ii and iii.

¹¹ E. E. Stoll, *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* (New York: Barnes & Noble rpt., 1951), p. 144. Paul Stapfer, *Shakespeare et l'antiquité* (1879) as paraphrased in Augustus Ralli, *A History of Shakespeare Criticism*, II, 53. John Uhler, *Studies in Shakespeare*, Univ. of Miami Pubs. in English and American Lit. (Univ. of Miami Press, 1964), p. 120. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 56. J. I. M. Stewart, *Character and Motive in Shakespeare* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1950), p. 54. R. A. Foakes, "An Approach to *Julius Caesar*," *SQ*, v (Summer 1954), 259-270.

¹² "The Problem of Brutus: An Eighteenth-Century Solution," in *Studies in Honor of T. W. Baldwin*, ed. Don Cameron Allen (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1958).

¹³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures on Shakespeare* (London: J. M. Dent, 1951), p. 95.

¹⁴ Allardyce Nicoll, *Shakespeare* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), p. 134. Boas, p. 458. Stoll, *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare*, pp. 144-145, and Levin L. Schücking, *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: G. G. Harrop, 1919). Schanzer, p. 70. Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), II, 354.

cannot even agree upon who the central character is or whether, whoever he is, he is good or bad, or whether the play as a whole has any semblance of unity or clarity.

It is the contention of this paper that the ambiguities of *Julius Caesar* cannot be resolved and that Shakespeare's use of his source shows that he did not intend for them to be resolved. This is not to call the play a dramatic failure: its history on the stage is potent refutation of any such judgment. It is to say, however, that any director or any critic who tries to unify the play by resolving its paradoxes is choosing a bias and closing his eyes to a part of the evidence and to what may be a deliberate and permanent suspension of all issues in the play. One cannot settle the matter by looking at any one of the four principal people: the meaning of one involves the meaning of all. And the meaning of the whole is illuminated by an examination of Plutarch and the changes which Shakespeare made in his source.

Many readers have felt that the first half of the play belittles Caesar; that the second half restores him. Sidney Lee says that Shakespeare averts "the peril of dramatic anticlimax in relegating Caesar's assassination to the middle distance by the double and somewhat ironical process of belittling him in life and magnifying the spiritual influence of his name after death."¹⁵ Actually, it is not so simple. The point of interest here is what Shakespeare did with what he found in Plutarch. In Plutarch, Brutus had substantial reason for fearing tyranny in Caesar: "But the chiefest cause that made him [Caesar] mortally hated was the covetous desire he had to be called King: which first gave the people just cause, and next his secret enemies honest colour, to bear him ill-will."¹⁶

Both the Senate and the common people were offended when Caesar failed to rise as honors were brought to him; and, at that point, Caesar bared his neck to them to appease them (pp. 94-95). Moreover, Plutarch tells us that, after Caesar had Flavius and Marullus silenced for denuding the statues, "Hereupon the people went straight to Brutus" (p. 96). The people cast "sundry papers" into his chair of state; and only then did Cassius begin to prod Brutus. In short, Plutarch's Caesar *is* a potential tyrant—seen to be so by people and senate alike. Shakespeare, however, has Brutus say:

and, to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections sway'd
More than his reason. (II.i.19-21)

Then, too, Cassius fabricates the letters and thereby lessens the evidence for the tyranny

which is shown in Plutarch by the generally shared hostile attitude toward Caesar. In effect, Shakespeare took a fairly unified Caesar and made him a doubtful figure: neither clearly a tyrant nor clearly a patriot. Despite what Lee and others have felt, Caesar is not *consistently* belittled in the first half of the play. By indirection, Brutus' own admission that Caesar's affections have never swayed his reason could be interpreted as an unintended tribute. Moreover, just before the murder, Artemidorus, trying to save Caesar, gives a favorable view of him:

My heart laments that virtue cannot live
Out of the teeth of emulation.
If thou read this, O Caesar, thou may'st live;
If not, the Fates with traitors do contrive.

(II.iii.11-14)

Artemidorus hands his warning to Caesar, saying

O Caesar, read mine first; for mine's a suit
That touches Caesar nearer. (III.i.6-7)

But Caesar brushes him aside, with a note of self-abnegation: "What touches us ourself shall be last serv'd" (III.i.8).

In Plutarch, Caesar is unable to read the note because of the crowd that presses near him; he tries to read it but is physically prevented by the jostling multitude (p. 99). Shakespeare's only reasonable motive for making this change in his source must have been the desire to inject an uncertainty regarding Caesar's supposed tyrannical bent. The fact is that the Caesar of Plutarch provides clear motivation for tyrannicide. Shakespeare clouds the issue by refusing to avail himself of a ready-made tyrant already hated by the people. If the playwright had wished plainly to portray Brutus as republican hero, why should he have ignored the defensible motive for Brutus' act which he found in his source? On the other hand, Shakespeare does use the details of the weak Caesar found in Plutarch: the superstition, the wavering, the effect of epilepsy upon the "wits," the ungovernable emotion shown when the crown is offered, the "silencing" of the tribunes, the egocentric psychology (pp. 94-95). The use of the source, one must conclude, has a puzzling outcome: Caesar becomes, not more complex, but flatly ambiguous.

Many have felt, with Sidney Lee, that the Caesar intended by Shakespeare is clearly defined by Antony in the second half of the play. What can be said of the argument that the discrepancies are swept away by Antony's domi-

¹⁵ *A Life of William Shakespeare* (London: John Murray, 1931), p. 337.

¹⁶ Walter W. Skeat, ed., *Shakespeare's Plutarch* (London: Macmillan, 1875), p. 94. All citations will refer to this edition.

nation of the last three acts? It seems clear that the Caesar-image is not "saved" by Antony, nor the Brutus-image conclusively defined by him: he cannot perform these functions because we do not know the *truth* of him. Antony, too, is ambiguous.

The first impression of Antony comes from Caesar, who implies that he is outgoing, pleasure-loving, and wholly trustworthy. Cassius, on the other hand, calls him a "shrewd contriver" (ii.i.158). There is little evidence of any kind until after the murder of Caesar. At that point we hear that he has fled the scene in terror. Then he returns and the "contriver" appears as he pretends to "do business" with Brutus and Cassius. But, as he stares at the broken body of Caesar, he utterly forgets danger and really risks himself:

That I did love thee, Caesar, O, 'tis true!
If then thy spirit look upon us now,
Shall it not grieve thee dearer than thy death
To see thy Antony making his peace,
Shaking the bloody fingers of thy foes
(iii.i.194-198)

Cassius' comment shows that he and Brutus hear these words; and Antony, uttering this spontaneous elegy as a grieving friend, may well be jeopardizing his own safety. He enlists us further, both for himself and for Caesar, in his soliloquy, "O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth" (iii.i.254 ff.). Then, momentarily, there is a hint of the "shrewd contriver" as he directs a servant:

Thou shalt not back till I have borne this corse
Into the market-place; there shall I try,
In my oration, how the people take
The cruel issue of these bloody men;
According to the which, thou shalt discourse
To young Octavius of the state of things.
(iii.i.291-296)

This speech is an echo from Plutarch, who shows Antony in a consistently bad light. Antony, originally planning a real peace with Cassius and Brutus, changes his mind: "But now, the opinion he conceived of himself after he had felt the good will of the people towards him, hoping thereby to make himself the chiefest man if he might overcome Brutus, did easily make him alter his first mind. And, therefore, when Caesar's body was brought . . . he made a funeral oration" (p. 165).

Shakespeare makes Plutarch's Antony both better and worse. In what seems authentic grief, he moves us; he speaks the surest words for Caesar; he has the final interpretative word in the play. Yet at other times, he is more than a "contriver"; he is an incarnation of Caesarism in the worst sense. Of Lepidus he says:

And though we lay these honours on this man,
To ease ourselves of divers slanderous loads,
He shall but bear them as the ass bears gold,
To groan and sweat under the business,
Either led or driven, as we point the way;
And having brought our treasure where we will,
Then take we down his load, and turn him off,
Like to the empty ass, to shake his ears,
And graze in commons. (iv.i.19-27)

Octavius protests that Lepidus is a valiant soldier. Antony replies:

So is my horse, Octavius, and for that
I do appoint him store of provender.
It is a creature that I teach to fight,
To wind, to stop, to run directly on,
His corporal motion govern'd by my spirit.
And, in some taste, is Lepidus but so
.....
Do not talk of him
But as a property. (iv.i.29-34, 39-40)

In this scene Antony is prepared to murder relatives without a qualm, as he had been, also, in Plutarch (p. 169). On the other hand, there is the generosity of his tribute to the fallen enemy at the end of the play. Again, then, Shakespeare muddies the water. What is the *true* Antony? The one, it would appear, at whom we are looking at any given moment.

If Caesar and Antony cannot be finally defined, what of Brutus? Here, again, Shakespeare has taken a clear-cut Plutarchan figure—a genuine patriot—and deliberately blurred the image by his changes. In a general way, the playwright follows the account of Plutarch. There, too, Brutus appears noble; there Brutus makes errors of judgment; there he affirms at the end: "I do not complain of my fortune, but only for my country's sake" (p. 151). There are major changes in the play, however, which cast doubt upon the good Brutus. First is the addition of the soliloquy in Act II in which, with one stroke, Shakespeare alters the clarity of the motivation fully present and convincing in Plutarch. Second is the removal of Brutus from his direct contact with the Roman people, who, in Plutarch, seek him as a leader. Third is the different emphasis upon Brutus' errors in judgment. In Plutarch, Brutus does make the decision not to kill Antony. But, possibly because the decision is narratively recounted rather than dramatically presented, it does not seem a stubborn refusal to accept practical advice or a blind belief that one can commit murder without ugliness. The military mistake before Philippi is also made by Brutus; but, again, in Plutarch no stress is put upon it and it is not felt to illuminate the character of Brutus as it is in the play. Fourth is

Shakespeare's addition of the quarrel scene with Cassius. It is there, chiefly, that we see both the moral pride and the curious ethical quirk of Brutus' willingness to take money from Cassius even as he sternly rebukes the donor for condoning the bribery of Lucius Pella. In Plutarch the money-episode is mentioned but hastily passed over and not at all related to any characterizing of Brutus.

On the other hand, if the above changes blur the republican Brutus, the addition by Shakespeare of the tender scenes with Portia and particularly with Lucius speaks strongly for the good Brutus.

The deliberateness of the changes calls into question every unified interpretation of Brutus. He is an idealistic but a practically incompetent "liberal," we are told: good but dangerously ineffectual.¹⁷ Counter to this view are Shakespeare's addition of the moral sophistry and the near-Caesarism of Brutus' dealings with his colleagues. He is the Aristotelian hero, we are assured, who repents his tragic error too late. Such a view implies the nobility of Caesar and would entail Brutus' "recognition" of a wrong evaluation of Caesar. But there is not one line in the final act that suggests "recognition too late." The encounter with the ghost is marked by a singular lack of introspection:

Why, I will see thee at Philippi then.
Now I have taken heart thou vanishest.
Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.
(iv.iii.285-287)

There is no hint of guilt here; no sign of deep inner confrontation.¹⁸ In Act v, Scene iv, a speech surely attributable only to Brutus, though not marked by a speaker's name in the First Folio,¹⁹ shows his sense of his flawless patriotism:

And I am Brutus, Marcus Brutus, I!
Brutus, my country's friend; know me for Brutus!
(v.i.7-8)

When asked by Cassius what he will do, Brutus exclaims:

think not, thou noble Roman,
That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome;
He bears too great a mind. But this same day
Must end that work the ides of March begun
(v.i.111-114)

Here is no changed perception of his mission. And in the last scene, dying, he cries out:

I shall have glory by this losing day
More than Octavius and Mark Antony
By this vile conquest shall attain unto. (v.v.36-38)

If, as Miss Paolucci thinks, Brutus understands that he "has broken the . . . law of humanity,"²⁰

why should he expect honor for it? Rather, it would appear from his lines that he considers himself a martyr to a just cause: he *and* that cause have been defeated simply by naked power which they cannot meet.

Brutus, mistaken and doomed, never forfeits our sympathy, we are told. Are we, then, to admire cold-blooded murder with no clear-cut evidence for its necessity? Surely we cannot admire the cold pride of:

There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats;
For I am arm'd so strong in honesty
That they pass by me as the idle wind,
Which I respect not. (iv.iii.66-69)

There is more than a taint of moral Caesarism in that speech, as in his whole handling of his co-conspirators. Gordon Ross Smith lists fourteen instances of the egocentric willfulness of Brutus.²¹ The point is not that Smith is wrong: the episodes cited do show Brutus exercising a kind of Caesarism. The point is that as many instances can be adduced to show that Brutus is not willful or egocentric. The fact is that one responds to Brutus *in partibus*, not *in toto*, and this difficulty of assembling Brutus as a living, complex human being is not found in Plutarch.

The character of Cassius offers similar problems of interpretation. Plutarch tells us that some thought that Cassius hated Caesar "privately more than he did the tyranny openly"; but we are quickly assured that this is a wrong judgment: "for Cassius, even from his cradle, could not abide any manner of tyrants" (p. 112). Both views appear in the play. Antony calls envy the motive of Cassius; Caesar describes him as "lean and hungry" and dangerous, though in Plutarch these words apply to both Cassius and Brutus (p. 163). There are speeches

¹⁷ See John Palmer, *Political Characters of Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1957), pp. 22 ff.

¹⁸ Shakespeare does make a change in the character of the ghost. In Plutarch, it is not Caesar's ghost. The identification of the apparition as Caesar's spirit might suggest that it comes to stir the conscience of Brutus, except that Brutus shows no stirring of conscience. The ghost seems merely to portend the defeat at Philippi. Brutus responds very scantily to it. In Plutarch, his words to the spirit are almost the same but they are followed up later with an expression of concern which Cassius successfully allays (p. 136).

¹⁹ *Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies, A Facsimile Edition of the First Folio*, ed. Helge Kökeritz (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955).

²⁰ Paolucci, p. 332.

²¹ "Brutus, Virtue, and Will," *SQ*, x (Summer 1959) 367-381. Opposing evidence may be found in *J.C.* ii.i.116-140; ii.i.288-303; ii.i.229-233; ii.iii.127-129; iii.ii.12-37; iv.iii.112-122; iv.iii.239-240; v.iv.98-105; v.v. Norman Rabkin (see n. 7) recognizes the points of similarity between Caesar and Brutus, but does not develop a convincing theory as to reasons for the parallelisms.

—particularly the “I see / Thy honourable metal may be wrought” speech (i.ii.301 ff.)—that suggest the “contriver”; the Lucius Pella episode points to a compromise with honor. Yet Cassius’ friends—including Brutus—always regard him as a high-minded Roman; and most of his utterances bear out this judgment. It is interesting that the Cassius of Act v represents the emotional peak of the play. His suffering, his death, the responses to it of those who loved him—these involve us more emotionally than anything else in the play. Yet, actually, Cassius cannot be finally defined except as we are able to define Caesar, Brutus, and Antony. He, too, remains a shifting image.

It is necessary, finally, to see how the role of *res publica* differs in Plutarch and Shakespeare. The Roman people, too, are a part of the problem of *Julius Caesar*. In Plutarch’s “The Life of Julius Caesar,” we are told that Caesar was “mortally hated” because he wished to be king; we see the people angered because Caesar should so “lightly esteem . . . the magistrates of the commonwealth” (p. 95). In the play, they are shown lightheartedly rejoicing at the triumphal return of Caesar. When Flavius and Marullus rebuke them, they slink wordlessly away. In Plutarch they are joyful when the Tribunes tear the diadems from the images of Caesar. They hail the Tribunes as “Bruti” (p. 96).

In “The Life of Marcus Brutus,” the people, following the murder of Caesar, give Brutus “quiet audience”: “howbeit, immediately after they showed that they were not all contented with the murder” (p. 120). Antony finds it easy, as in the play, to move them first to compassion and then to the rage that destroys Cinna the poet. Shakespeare’s changes, however, create a markedly strengthened impression of volatility. In the play the people are less consistent, less thoughtful; they have no part in the seduction of Brutus into the conspiracy; they respond in a wholly emotional way to whoever verbally assaults them. They are the palimpsest: upon them are the varieties of meaning impressed.

The outcome of a close examination of *Julius Caesar* is the discovery that no theory of the meaning of the play or of its major characters can unify the dissident elements. The critic who, it would appear, has most nearly perceived this fact is Ernest Schanzer. He believes that the play is deliberately kept problematical. Like everyone else, however, he cannot finally resist a “view.” Schanzer argues that Brutus is the tragic hero because he is “disillusioned”; his beloved *res publica* has “gone a-whoring with Antony,” and his act of sacrificial murder has hurt, not

helped, Rome.²² Despite this firmly stated theory of Brutus as hero, Schanzer admits the contradictoriness of the evidence and insists that *Julius Caesar* must be considered a “problem play.” For Shakespeare’s confusing of the issues, he coins the strange phrase “dramatic coquetry”; but nowhere does he hazard an opinion as to why the “coquetry” should be used. It is more convincing to say that *Julius Caesar* is not a problem play, but a play about a problem: the difficulty—perhaps the impossibility—of knowing the truth of men and of history.

The truth seems to be that there is no one *truth* in the play: no possibility of a single unifying approach. We believe Brutus when we hear him speak; we like or dislike Caesar as his image shifts; we are torn between Cassius the schemer and Cassius the suffering man and doughty Roman; we respond to Antony’s rhetoric and cringe before his opportunism and perhaps leave the theater “sure” that his final estimate of the action must be the true one. We are fully committed at every point in the play to *someone*. Ironically, we have something in common with the Roman mob: we believe what we hear as we hear it, only to be involved in one emotional or intellectual partisanship after another. Two possible reasons suggest themselves for Shakespeare’s obviously careful attempt to leave all issues in suspension. First, he may have wished to stimulate serious thought concerning the moral and political problems of the action and the characters. If such were his wish, the technique would be that of a dialectic intended to lead his audience to a close scrutiny of evidence on each side of a carefully balanced scale. It is a technique which he may have been using in another “problem play,” *The Merchant of Venice*, where the “divided” characterization of Shylock suggests a balancing of the traditional Elizabethan view of the Jew with a view critical of the traditional. A second explanation must be considered. Perhaps Shakespeare was playing a bitter “modern” trick and, in the spirit of Pilate’s embarrassing question, implying that the truth cannot be known. As the divergent and contradictory and relative “truths” play about us, we may be constrained to wonder whether Shakespeare, on the brink of his deepest explorations of the difference between appearance and reality, may have considered, momentarily, that perhaps the difference cannot be known.

²² Schanzer, pp. 63 ff. T. S. Dorsch points out the contradictory elements in the major characters but concludes that Brutus *is* the tragic hero and that Shakespeare finally “buries Brutus’s crime in his virtues.” *Julius Caesar*, New Arden, p. xliv. Cf. pp. xxvi–lv.

It may be that Cicero sets the real tone of the play when, confronting the ominous signs and portents, he says that

men may construe things, after their fashion,
Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.
(i.iii.34-35)

The purposes of the "things themselves" are not accessible to us. We respond as the segmented excellences of individual passages command us to respond: to the political, rhetorical, and personal forces that appear and disappear.

It can be said that the only important characters in *Julius Caesar* about whom there is no question are the two poets and the soothsayer: the word-men. It is significant that Phaonius the Cynicke in Plutarch becomes simply "a poet" here. In the source, Phaonius is a madman, a Cynic "dog." It has been said that Shakespeare uses him to differentiate further the characters of Brutus and Cassius: Brutus shows anger at his interruption; Cassius laughs at him with a human tolerance. However, the episode only confuses us again, for we have been told earlier that Cassius never laughs and we have seen Brutus' tolerant tenderness for the boy Lucius. The poet's real function here is rather to express a mature wisdom: what can come of the generals' quarreling? The poet cries out and no man listens.

The first poet, Cinna, is the victim of political madness. Surely one of the most moving scenes in the play is the "tearing" of Cinna as his desperate self-identification falls upon hate-deafened ears (iii.iii). The horrible action does not, as Norman Holland maintains,²³ establish the sympathy of the play for Caesar or for Antony who directly incited it. The action establishes sympathy for the poet, the pointless victim of the confused motivations of politicians. The poets, Cicero, and the "truth-sayer" who simply warns that catastrophe will come—these are the men to whom nobody listens.

Readers who doubt that, in 1599, a playwright would be expressing a twentieth-century concept of relativity might claim that here, at the dawn of his tragic period, Shakespeare was trying, but failing, to achieve the rich ambiguity that marks the greatest art: the kind of ambiguity that one feels in *Hamlet* to partake of the complexity of life itself. The critics, to be sure, do not agree about *Hamlet* either. But there is a vast difference between the ironic segmentation of *Julius Caesar* and the felt complexity of *Hamlet*. One is

a *demonstration* that the truth of character cannot be known; the other is a depth-penetration of character that conveys the margin of mystery in a man. This is not to derogate *Julius Caesar*: it is to call it a special kind of play concerned more with idea than with realism of characterization.

When Casca describes the seizure of Caesar in the market place and Brutus reminds him that Caesar had the falling sickness, Cassius ironically insists that it is they who have it. Whereupon Casca says:

I know not what you mean by that . . . If the tag-rag people did not clap him and hiss him, according as he pleas'd and displeas'd them, as they use to do the players in the theatre, I am no true man. (i.ii.254-258)

Like the groundlings and like the Roman mob, we clap and hiss Brutus, then Caesar; Cassius, then Antony; then the mob itself. We sway with the oratory; we respond to the beauty and power of individual passages; we make some arbitrary empathic identification. And we are brought to realize that the truth is what one decides it is. History is a "construct," and only the poets can be believed.

If, indeed, *Julius Caesar* is a dramatic statement about the relative nature of truth, it demands an unusual honesty on the part of any director who aspires to a faithful production. The play *works* on the stage—powerfully. But what usually works is not the playscript, but the director's choice of a "view." He directs a heroic Brutus, a bleeding-heart Cassius, a noble or an ignoble Caesar. Any version, indeed, may be effective. But the director has the obligation to present Shakespeare's play with all its contradictions kept intact. Clifford Leech has said, rightly, that "where 'coherence and unity' do not exist in the original play . . . the director should not try to impose them but should allow the unresolved contradictions of the playwright to emerge freely in the performance."²⁴ Particularly is scrupulous neutrality necessary when the real point of a play seems to subsist in its intellectual relativism. Critic and director alike must resist over-simplified resolutions when the very heart of the play is its irresolvable paradoxes.

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²³ Holland, p. 441.

²⁴ "The 'Capability' of Shakespeare," *SQ*, xi (Spring 1960), 135.