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FATAL LOGIC IN "JULIUS CAESAR"

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Although some critics have argued that Julius Caesar is the real protagonist of Shakespeare's play, the critical position which makes Brutus the focus of interest as tragic hero has attracted the largest number of critics and the greatest variety of interpretations. Brutus's failure to deliver Rome from tyranny is obvious, but failure is variously caused, and the peculiar cause of Brutus's failure is the key to his tragedy. Four more or less exclusive critical attitudes regarding this problem exist: 1) Brutus fails because he lacks practical understanding of men and politics; 2) Brutus induces disorder in his own soul and in the state by committing himself to violence on insufficient evidence but on the highest abstract principles; 3) Brutus is trapped by Cassius and other lesser men into a fatal choice; and 4) Brutus is a cold, unappealing leader who refuses to heed the counsel of others.¹

The fourth critical position is the least substantial. It seems clear that Brutus is not a cold, unappealing leader. At the battle of Philippi his soldiers are intensely loyal and are appalled at the thought of slaying their leader. When asked by Brutus to kill him, Clitus replies that he would rather kill himself. And Daedanus and Volumnius are likewise grief-stricken at the prospect. Only Strabo has stomach enough for the task, but he will stab Brutus only after they have clasped hands one last time. Such loyalty and devotion are not evoked by cold, unappealing leaders.

It is true, however, that Brutus refuses to heed the advice of others. He does not refuse out of petulance or vanity, as proponents of this position argue,² but because his peculiar logical stance makes it impossible for him to recognize the common sense of others. Furthermore, Brutus's ceremonial orientation makes additional "sacrifices" after Caesar's death inconceivable. Brutus "sacrificed" Caesar because of what he might have become. He cannot "sacrifice" Antony, as Cassius and the other conspirators urge, because he presents no clear and present danger. Antony is Caesar's lackey, not a potential tyrant. Neither can Brutus refuse Antony permission to speak over Caesar's body. If Brutus is to restore freedom to the Romans he cannot begin by restricting the freedom of Antony. Besides, Brutus is certain that the justice of his action will recommend itself to the people. For him to deny to Antony the opportunity to speak would be tantamount to admitting that the people will not support the assassination.

The third critical position, viz., that Brutus is trapped by Cassius and other lesser men into a fatal choice, is likewise insubstantial. The strategy of Cassius and the other conspirators rests on the premise that Caesar is a tyrant:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs, and peep about
To find ourselves dishonorable graves. (I.ii.135-38)³

But Brutus fails to embrace Cassius's premise. He kills Caesar not because he is a tyrant in fact, but because he may become one. The arguments of Cassius and the other conspirators are focused on the past, those of Brutus on the future:

I have not known when his affections sway'd
More than his reason. But 'tis a common proof
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face. . . . (II.i.20-23)

And Brutus finally pictures Caesar as a serpent in the shell which must be destroyed before it is hatched.

Actually, Brutus's entire orientation toward Caesar is radically different from that of the others. They see Caesar as having achieved the ultimate in authority and power; Brutus sees him as just beginning his ascent to tyranny. They see a Caesar who will simply heap tyranny on tyranny; Brutus sees a Caesar who does not yet warrant the tyrant's label. They see a Caesar declining in years and in body; Brutus sees a young, vital Caesar who, if not stopped, will enslave Rome.

Finally, it is not Cassius and the other conspirators who trap Brutus into making a fatal choice. From Brutus's point of view, the fatal choices are made after Caesar's death, and for these he has only himself to blame. The conspirators fail because they do not hold tight to the reins of power. Cassius knows that Antony must die, but Brutus will not permit it. Cassius knows that Antony must not be allowed to speak at Caesar's funeral, but Brutus insists on it. Brutus, in short, makes the fatal mistakes by himself. If he had listened to Cassius and the other conspirators, he might have avoided them.

The first two critical positions, viz., 1) Brutus fails because he lacks practical understanding of men and politics, and 2) he induces disorder in his own soul and in the state by committing himself to violence on insufficient evidence but on the highest abstract principles, are actually two ways of attacking the same problem—the problem of Brutus's motivation. It may be true, as Virgil K. Whitaker argues, that *Julius Caesar* is the first Shakespearean tragedy in which the motivation is adequate,⁴ but its adequacy has

not discouraged critics from arguing over the exact nature of that motivation.

By "practical" critics imply Machiavellian, and Brutus does seem to be deficient in this respect. He apparently commits two gigantic blunders by permitting Antony to remain alive and to speak at Caesar's funeral. Or does he? What if Antony proves as disloyal to Caesar as did Brutus? Then Brutus's "blunders" will have been transformed into masterstrokes of political acumen. Cassius may know the quick and "practical" way, but Brutus may be wiser than we think in attempting to woo Antony to his cause. Besides, Brutus knows enough about "practical" politics to recognize the value of assassination as a political tool, and he knows enough about the "practical" understanding of men to insure the loyalty of his soldiers even in the face of certain defeat.

The hope offered by the last of the four critical positions likewise proves illusory. We know from his own statements that Brutus induces disorder in his own soul and in the state by committing himself to violence on insufficient evidence. He realizes that Caesar has done nothing to warrant execution. In fact, he praises Caesar for his reasonableness:

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

Brutus realizes, also, that the conspiracy lacks any kind of real sanction:

O conspiracy,
Sham'st thou to show thy dang'rous brow by night,
When evils are most free? O then, by day
Where wilt thou find a cavern dark enough
To mask thy monstrous visage? (II.i.77-81)

It is, therefore, difficult to entertain the notion that Brutus commits himself to violence on the highest abstract principles.

But, perhaps we have been asking the wrong questions. If we grant that Brutus's enthusiasm for republican ideals is real and that he genuinely believes that unless Caesar is stopped he will destroy freedom in Rome, must we also sanction the method employed by Brutus and the other conspirators? That is, in order to check Caesar is it necessary to kill Caesar? The answer to this question may resolve some of the problems posed by critics as well as provide a key to Brutus's motivation. It will also explain the function of the other Brutus in the play—Decius Brutus. It will show, in short, that Marcus Brutus's failure stems not from a lack of "practical understanding" or from adherence to the "highest

abstract principles” or even from his nobility or egoism, but from a failure in logic and common sense.

“It must be by his death . . .” (II.i.10). With these words Brutus reveals the cause of his failure and the tragedy which springs from it. Such a disjunctive proposition as *either* Caesar must die *or* Rome will suffer the yoke of tyranny is characteristic of Brutus’s stern but illogical approach to life.⁵ That there may be a middle position between these extremes is inconceivable to Brutus—but not to Shakespeare’s audience.

Shakespeare clearly intends for us to see the fallacy in Brutus’s logic. The evidence is most apparent in the very scene in which Brutus commits himself to Caesar’s destruction (II.i.). Shortly after Brutus enunciates his inflexible conclusion that Rome can be saved only by Caesar’s death, the play offers a different, less violent solution; one which gives the lie to Brutus. It is not coincidental that Decius Brutus begins to assume importance in this scene, for his main function is to illustrate how Caesar can be manipulated to ends not entirely his own.

Plutarch says very little about Decius Brutus, but he does emphasize Caesar’s special love for him:

. . . in the meantime came Decius Brutus . . .
 in whom Caesar put such confidence that
 in his last will and testament he had
 appointed him to be his next heir. . . .⁶

In Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, however, Decius Brutus is not mentioned as Caesar’s heir; he is simply one of the conspirators. Why Shakespeare departed from his source is curious, since he stresses Brutus’s love for Caesar in order to emphasize the theme of personal loyalty—and personal treachery—which figures prominently in the play. By stressing Caesar’s special love for Decius Brutus, Shakespeare could have made this theme even more poignant. He chose not to do so, however, for Decius Brutus was to play a more important role elsewhere.

The play clearly shows that Decius Brutus can easily manipulate Caesar. Were Decius Brutus especially close to Caesar, his manipulation would be of less significance. Friends often do what we ask of them. It is precisely because in the play Decius Brutus has no intimate relationship with Caesar that his actions are of crucial importance.

Decius Brutus’s function becomes apparent shortly after Marcus Brutus commits himself to Caesar’s death. As the conspirators express concern that Caesar may disappoint them by failing to appear in the Senate, Decius Brutus, with a confidence born of experience, virtually guarantees Caesar’s appearance:

I can o'ersway him; for he loves to hear
 That unicorns may be betray'd with trees,
 And bears with glasses, elephants with holes,
 Lions with toils, and men with flatterers;
 But when I tell him he hates flatterers
 He says he does, being then most flattered.
 Let me work;
 For I can give his humor the true bent,
 And I will bring him to the Capitol. (II.i.203-11)

This speech is important not only because Decius Brutus is true to his word and delivers Caesar to the assassins but also because of the confidence with which he issues it. Decius Brutus is certain that Caesar can be swayed by flattery.⁷ And he is, of course, right. There can be no other reason for the speech, except to show that Caesar is susceptible to flattery. Plutarch says only that Decius Brutus persuaded Caesar to accompany the conspirators to the Senate—the speech is pure Shakespeare. It is clear, then, that what Decius Brutus can do in this way, Marcus Brutus, Caesar's favorite, could do also.

The lie is thus given to Brutus's *either . . . or* proposition. It need not, in fact, be by Caesar's death. There is a more political, not to mention civilized, way to check Caesar's power. As a political tool, flattery has had a long and illustrious history throughout Western civilization, so much so, in fact, that Machiavelli felt compelled to warn his ideal prince against flatterers.⁸

Brutus fails, then, not because he lacks "practical understanding" or because he is a "cold, unappealing" leader or because he commits himself to violence on the "highest abstract principle." He may be "trapped," as some critics claim, but not by Cassius and other lesser men. If Brutus is "trapped," it is by the extremes of a disjunctive syllogism. His failure is, in short, a failure of logic.

Brutus's personal failure is accompanied, moreover, by structural flaws that tend to blur the tragic quality of the play. These flaws are clearly seen when *Julius Caesar* is contrasted with *Macbeth*, a later tragedy with which it shares many similarities. Macbeth murders his friend and kinsman, and does it in his own house at that, yet few critics deny that Macbeth is the protagonist of his tragedy.

In *Macbeth* Shakespeare makes his intentions clear, something he does not always do in *Julius Caesar*. It is clear, for example, that Duncan is a good king. It is clear, also, that Shakespeare is principally interested in the concept of the virtuous murderer. Like Caesar, Duncan dies early in the play (II.ii), but most of the play's action is focused on the effect which the murder works on the

sensitive soul of Macbeth. Of the nineteen scenes subsequent to the murder, eight concentrate on Macbeth's spiritual disintegration. It is, in short, Macbeth's play. He had killed a friend, a kinsman, a king, and we share in the experience which results when guilt presses down upon the soul of this sensitive man. Pity and fear are evoked through the spectacle of spiritual ruin which culminates in Macbeth's final realization that his existence is meaningless.

In *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare's failure to concentrate the action after Caesar's death, as well as his indecisiveness in portraying Caesar, blurs the total tragic vision. Like Macbeth, Brutus kills a friend and a master, but, unlike Macbeth, is denied the luxury of a soul-destroying grief. Time and again, before the murder, Brutus looks into the murky depths of his soul, trying to pluck from it the heart of its mystery. But in the last two acts the battlefield replaces the soul, and inner strain gives way to outer action. In the first three acts there are five crucial soliloquies;⁹ in the last two acts there are none. In fact, after the assassination Brutus appears concerned only with the practical military effects of the slaying. That he has killed his friend and his master, even if justified, makes little impression upon him, even when Caesar's ghost appears to him before the battle of Philippi. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare displays the tragic hero in eight scenes of increasing grief, culminating in the "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" speech in V.v, after which there is for Macbeth "nothing." Brutus, however, is denied even a single scene of soul-searching grief after the assassination, although it becomes clear that Caesar was not "sacrificed," as Brutus wanted to believe, but butchered.

The action in *Julius Caesar* through Antony's funeral oration (III.ii) is taut, compressive, fraught with tragic irony and emotional intensity. The subsequent action is digressive, epic rather than tragic. Only at the end is the sense of tragedy restored, but at the expense of the point of view. Brutus's restoration to the tragic heights is accompanied by a corresponding decline in consistency. Whatever recognition or self-awareness might have come to Brutus after he slew his friend and master and let slip the dogs of war in Rome is dissipated in the incredulity of his final boast:

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)

Although *Julius Caesar* suffers by comparison with *Macbeth*, it nevertheless represents a significant advance in the development of Shakespeare's tragic vision. The play is infused with feeling, a quality missing from *Titus Andronicus*, and concerns men operating in a complex universe, not children caught between the pass

and fell incensed points of mighty opposites, as is the case in *Romeo and Juliet*. The world of *Julius Caesar* is the world that Shakespeare came to find most congenial for the revelation of tragic character. It is a world in which destruction hovers over the heads of important men—kings, generals, triple pillars of the world—whose decisions and errors affect not only themselves but society at large. It is a world, in short, in which men act and die, and by their death give testimony to their frailty.

NOTES

1. Mildred E. Hartsock, "The Complexity of *Julius Caesar*," *PMLA*, LXXXI (1966), 57.

2. *Ibid.*

3. All citations from *Julius Caesar* are to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Hardin Craig and David Bevington (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1973).

4. Virgil K. Whitaker, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1953), p. 246.

5. This disjunctive proposition appears later, slightly altered, in Brutus's funeral oration: "Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?" (III.ii.22-25).

6. Plutarch, "The Life of Julius Caesar," in *Shakespeare's Plutarch*, ed. T. J. B. Spencer (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 89-90.

7. John W. Draper, "Flattery, A Shakespearean Tragic Theme," *PQ*, XVII (1938), flirted with the truth about Decius's function in the play, as did John Palmer, "Decius," in *Political Characters of Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1945). Neither, however, connected Decius's flattery with Brutus's "either-or" proposition.

8. Although he will not flatter Caesar, Brutus does flatter the citizens in his funeral oration (III.ii.13ff.).

9. I.ii.312-26, II.i.10-34, II.i.61-69, II.i.77-85, III.i.254-75 (the three middle entries constitute one interrupted soliloquy).