

Humanities Institute
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Julius Caesar. 1599

Shakespeare

Overview. *Julius Caesar* is one of several plays Shakespeare wrote about true events from Roman history. (*Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are other examples; otherwise his history plays deal with early modern British history.) The play concerns the murder of Julius Caesar by the mid-first century B.C. Republican Conspiracy led by Cassius, Brutus, and number of prominent Roman senators. Or rather that is the history book description of the plot. In fact, though, this historical drama is primarily devoted to the psychological struggle of Brutus, one of the leading senators, to determine his attitude toward Caesar—even after having killed the man—and to thrash through a personal crisis among his senses of honor, patriotism, and friendship.

CHARACTERS

Julius Caesar. The triumphal returning military general whom many in Rome view as a potential threat to the republican tradition in their society. Hence, the victim of a conspiracy which forms the heart of the current drama, and on which the future of Rome seems to depend.

Calphurnia. The wife of Caesar.

Marcus Brutus. One of the conspiratorial senators involved in the assassination of Caesar; the most deeply portrayed figure in the drama. He loved Caesar, but he loved Rome more, a mindset that led him into violent action.

Portia. The wife of Brutus, and figure of a tragic end, which emotionally crowns her husband's inner struggles.

Cassius. Central co-conspirator with Brutus, in the assassination of Caesar. A persuasive orator and friend, who wins over Brutus to Cassius' state of panic.

Casca, Cinna, Metellus Cimber, et. al. patricians supporting Brutus and Cassius in the killing of Caesar.

Cicero, Publius, Popilius, Roman senators.

Mark Antony, Lepidus, Octavius, rulers of Rome in Acts Four and Five.

STORY

Julius Caesar is set in 44 B.C. as a conspiracy is forming in Rome, to obstruct the seemingly dictatorial intentions of Julius Caesar, who has returned as a triumphant military victor, to the city he has been defending from barbarian tribes to the north. The deep background to this conspiracy lies in the rooted Roman belief in the Republic—the res publica of the early Romans, which had delivered them from an

archaic period of authoritarian kingship—and their fear of military domination. The play itself, ironically, deals with a bitter interventionist act, designed to preclude autocracy, which instead proves to be a prelude to the autocratic Imperialism of Augustus Caesar. It is also worth renoting that although the play is named for the threatening autocrat, Caesar himself, the action of the play is chiefly concerned with the conspiracy, and particularly with the inner conflicts, hopes and fears of the conspirators, and particularly of Brutus.

Fickle. As the play opens, two tribunes are noting the crowd reaction to the return of Caesar, from defeating in battle the two sons of his major rival, Pompey; the crowd is thrilled with Caesar's achievement, and the tribunes berate the men and women on the street, for their fickle abandonment of their former idol, Pompei. As it happens, the folks on the street are fickle, and find themselves swayed first to Caesar's side, then, when the conspirators, whose plans have taken bloody effect, on the side of the conspirators, to the conspirators themselves. Of course the plots of the conspirators—Cassius. Brutus, Casca—are invisible to the masses, but succeed temporarily in swaying public opinion toward demonization of the murdered leader.

Funeral. Some of the most intense scenes of the play collect around the funeral of Caesar, for it seems that his true friend, Mark Antony, who has avoided the conspiracy, has gotten permission to address the crowd concerning his slain friend. The conspirators themselves have gravely miscalculated the effect of this concession to Antony, whose friendship toward the slain leader, and hatred for the conspirators themselves, is to electrify the crowd, and to generate the flight of the conspirators and the military stand off which will consequently dominate the final two acts of the play.

Brutus. Brutus has four times the number of lines that Caesar has. What does this indicate? Shakespeare is especially interested in the mind of this sensitive and intelligent legislator. The implications of Brutus's position, as traditionally rooted Republican and conspirator, are wide, and Shakespeare digs deeply into the ironies adjacent to the story he is telling. Like Brutus, Shakespeare sees the menace inherent in Caesar's power play to occupy Rome, and can create a convincing case for resistance, even murder. At the same time, but not like Brutus, Shakespeare can see the dangers, of anarchy, violence, and in the long run an even greater new autocracy, ready to express itself—as in Roman fact it did—on the far side of anarchy. In other words Shakespeare is keenly aware that the conspiracy against Caesar was likely to create an equal and opposite backlash, a new tyranny.

Conclusion. The conclusion of the play plunges us into a sequence of out of control seeming events which derive from the flight from Rome of the conspirators, and the bitter personal quarrel that breaks out between Brutus and Cassius, the two principal leaders of the republican faction. Their sharply militant opponents—the very Mark Antony who turned the crowds against the conspirators in the first place, and Octavius the future Emperor of Rome—beat the anti-Caesar idealists—both Cassius and Brutus die on their swords—and the author makes no verbal bones about his admiration for Mark Antony, who arguably emerges as the ripest understanding of the play, though no one surpasses Brutus, for ambivalence, self-interrogation, and complexity of perspective. The intensity with which the conspirators are caught, in a do or die situation involving their deepest political values, cannot fail to touch later historical game players—ourselves?—as part of the channel by which the political ultimately grasps us all.

THEMES

Conspiracy The key event in the play is the conspiracy, of a few prominent Roman senators, against the returning military hero, Julius Caesar. The conspirators, led by Cassius and Brutus, fear that Caesar will impose his absolute authority on Rome, and that there is need for immediate action, to arrest his movement. The decision to act secretly, and to murder the returned hero, is taken with great care; as was the Generals' plot to murder Hitler in 1944.

Authoritarianism Julius Caesar was a powerful and effective general, whose relation to the growing polity of Rome was tense; did he wish to protect the city from barbarian forces, or did he long to take control of the city? The conspirators who acted against him believed Caesar bore the earmarks of a dictator, and wanted to take no chances on his ultimate exercise of power.

Republicanism. Every Roman was aware of the early peripeties of his own history. A period of two hundred years was given to over to the monarchy which crowned the premodern development of Rome. Then, throughout the first four centuries of Christian Rome, a gradual development toward republican government enforced itself. With this movement, fear and hatred of autocracy rooted themselves deeply in the Roman consciousness.

Power By the time Caesar returned to Rome in 44 B.C., he was feared as a major source of power, popular with his men and much of the populace, as we see in *Julius Caesar*, where the tribunes are vainly attempting to remind people of their loyalties to Caesar's foe, Pompey. There was mystique around Caesar which, added to his ownership over a private army, made him a redoubtable figure.

Irony Irony runs deep through this play. A logical conundrum is central. In order to stop the rise of tyranny, which many in Rome feared, it was necessary—or so it seemed—to break the aggressive drive of Caesar, who was thought to have imperial ambitions. But to stop him it was necessary to counter him with equal power, which—in the form of Octavius and his army—proves in the end to be the case.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

BRUTUS

Character Brutus, who gets four times the number of lines given to Caesar, proves in the end to be the 'main character,' the person who accumulates in himself the widest understanding of the dangers posed by Caesar, and the implications of murdering this powerful figure. As the implications of this situation accumulate, throughout the first two acts of the play, we see Brutus—like Hamlet or Macbeth, who gradually realize where their thoughts are leading them—discovering inside himself the commitment of a regicide, certain at last that it is do or die.

Parallels There can be many motives for the killing of an errant or threatening power figure, male or female. Fear of an absolute dictator is one. That obscure fear arguably drives Brutus and Cassius—as does jealousy to maintain their own power. Ancient Greek myth deepens the instinct. Orestes is driven to kill his own mother, the queen, because she has betrayed his father. Oedipus 'accidentally' murders his own father, the ruler of Thebes. (This famed regicide became a model for the male drive to free itself from the superego burden of the father.) The historical reality of regicide, in modern times, has drawn attention in the west from the execution of Charles I in 1649 to the Von Stauffenberg generals' plot against Hitler, in 1944. Because action against high authority usually bring dramatic consequences, conspiratorial plots are often danger laden parts of the procedure of freeing oneself from a super heavy authoritarian burden.

Illustrative moments

Moody. In the second scene of the play, Cassius questions Brutus about his appearance of moodiness and distance.

'I turn the trouble of my countenance
Merely upon myself,'

replies Brutus, explaining that he does not want to be bothered; but in fact, he implies, he would not mind being drawn out.

Ambivalence. Having been brought out by Cassius, Brutus confesses that he has serious doubts about Caesar's motives. I would not want Caesar to be king, he says, 'yet I love him well.' With this qualification begins Brutus's effort to intimate his desperate fear of the threat of Caesar.

Revelation. By stages, in his earlier conversations with Cassius, Brutus intimates that he is on Cassius' side, nearly ready to act. But he is still being careful.

'Brutus had rather be a villager
Than to repute himself a son of Rome,
Under these hard conditions at this time.'

Turmoil. Having come in his mind to agree with Cassius' conspiratorial thinking, Brutus begins to suffer seriously from anxiety.

'Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar,
I have not slept.
Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.'

Soulful. Urged by Cassius, and the other conspirators, who have come for a final conference with Brutus, to swear an oath, Brutus objects:

'No, not an oath. If not the face of men,
The sufferance of our souls, the time's abuse—
If these be motives weak, break off betimes....'

Discussion questions

Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello: all these characters suffer in the mind. Hamlet and Macbeth suffer through a drawn out process, in the course of which their anxieties, doubts, and insecurities become too great for them, and death comes as a relief. Lear wanders into regions of dysfunctional outrage, where he obtains the temporary respite of insanity, while Othello is like lightning-blasted by the insinuations about his wife's infidelity, and can imagine no other recourse than to remove her from the equation. What kind of suffering does Brutus discover in his mind, when he has made the decision to join the conspiracy and to act? Does he want to relieve his mind from some intolerable burden?

What seems to be Shakespeare's own view of the historical irony that is central to this play? He helps us to see the victory of the forces of Antony and Octavius, and to glimpse an imperial Rome which will have been the fear of the conspirators against Caesar. Does he view that outcome as counter to expectation, or as precisely the opposite of expectation? Does Shakespeare conclude with respect for the original actions of the conspirators against Caesar?

Shakespeare's works are often divided among comedies, histories and tragedies. Would you consider the present play 'historical,' or is it about 'tragic issues'? Are there any comic episodes in the present

play? How is the man on the street represented? Do you know carpenters and cobblers who bubble with comic wit?
