

7. *Julius Caesar*

Julius Caesar is a play in a new style. It is rich in plot, character, incident and description, but unusually spare (one might almost say, by Shakespeare's usual standard, unpoetic) in language. It is almost styleless, straightforward, conversational:

If we do lose this battle, then is this
The very last time we shall speak together.

There is nothing wrong with this, but does it need Shakespeare to write it? There are more lines in *Julius Caesar* that we could imagine ourselves having written than in any other mature play. This play comes between *Henry V* and the great final comedies - only a year or so before *Hamlet*. Shakespeare is at the height of his powers. The masterly construction of the play shows this. Therefore this spare language must be adopted deliberately. The simple style is not by any means all loss, for the play acquires a striking lucidity contrasting with the dense obscurity of style in *Timon* or *Macbeth*. Wilson Knight describes it as 'startling, picturesque, vivid'. Also it allows the play to proceed at a cracking pace.

There are few soliloquies because only Brutus has that kind of inner life, and Shakespeare wants to avoid making the play the tragedy of Brutus. Nor, despite the title, is it the tragedy of Julius Caesar, who is hardly more than a minor character. It is, of course, a history play, but the history does not, any more than in the other Roman plays, seem to be Shakespeare's main interest. If it has to be labelled, perhaps it would make most sense to call it a problem play. The main problem is to decide which of the characters, if any, are morally in the right. In the English histories Shakespeare usually takes sides quite unambiguously, and is not afraid of making characters black or white. Perhaps the greater distance of the Roman plays from specifically English concerns allowed Shakespeare to adopt a more complex, ambiguous and multiple moral perspective. In the days before critics came to terms with moral ambiguity, many critics did take sides, but half of them claimed that Shakespeare was justifying the assassination and the other half that he was condemning it.

Virtually every character is ambivalent. There can be no doubting Brutus' integrity, but much evil has been perpetrated by honourable men. Cassius' motives are highly suspect, but that still allows for the possibility that he might be doing the right deed for the wrong reason. In any case many of the moral and political questions posed are dilemma questions - that is, questions to which there never have been and never will be absolute answers: for example, whether the end justifies the means, and whether public loyalties should overrule private loyalties. These are questions Ibsen and Brecht were still asking centuries later, and to which they found opposite answers in consecutive plays, or in the same play.

Is it too harsh to suggest that Caesar is in the play only to be assassinated? He is all things to all men. We see Caesar through many pairs of eyes, and each is a different Caesar. At the two extremes there is the god-like Caesar presented by Mark Antony, and the weak yet megalomaniac Caesar belittled by Cassius. Caesar does not present a problem to Antony or Cassius, for each is aware of only one Caesar, but Brutus is aware of both and others between. For him Caesar the military hero, Caesar the perfect man, Caesar the tyrant and Caesar the loyal friend are indivisible.

It is impossible to tell whether any speech by Cassius is calculated or from the heart. Many critics have been convinced (should one say 'taken in') by him. Wilson Knight speaks of 'the rich worth of his emotional nature'. He is patently a manipulator and opportunist, yet Granville-Barker finds him, despite exasperating failings, less hypocritical and more lovable than Brutus. Neither seems to notice that when Cassius near the end says 'There is my dagger, / And here my naked breast' he is aping his hated Caesar ('he plucked me ope his doublet and offered them his throat to cut') and comes perilously close to Richard III's cynical playacting when he gives his 'sharp-pointed sword' to the Lady Anne

Which if thou please to hide in this true breast,
And let the soul forth that adoreth thee,
I lay it naked to the deadly stroke.

Antony is an equally ambivalent figure. His initial response to the murder of Caesar seems wholehearted and selfless, but he is quick to turn it to political advantage. Granville-Barker sits on the fence, reading the finds the great speech rousing the mob against the conspirators both as totally calculated and false and as an expression of his true feelings. Wilson Knight takes it to be perfectly sincere. Yet Antony is able to triumph over Brutus not by questioning Brutus' honour, but by dismissing the whole concept of honour as irrelevant. Nor does he ever ask what would be best for Rome. His initial concern for 'who else must be let blood' is devalued by his subsequent Machiavellian gloating over his success in loosing a blood-dimmed tide of indiscriminate violence. Antony can also sound like an arch villain:

Now let it work: Mischief, thou art afoot,
Take thou what course thou wilt.

What this means in human terms is vividly demonstrated in the murder of Cinna the poet – a scene which must never be omitted in production.

Brutus is ambivalent in a different way. There are no doubts concerning his true motives, ('our purpose necessary and not envious'), only concerning their validity. Brutus stabs Caesar because he is 'the foremost man of' all this world', Cassius because he is not. How strong is his case against Caesar? The play gives only one instance of Caesar's supposed tyranny or oppression. Casca (who is hardly objective) reports that 'Marullus and Flavius, for pulling off Caesar's image, are put to silence'. We have seen them doing rather more than that. They have tried to prevent the citizens from participating in the Lupercalia. 'Put to silence' may or may not mean executed. In any case, neither Brutus nor Cassius makes any comment on this news, and neither it nor any other instance of tyranny is ever mentioned again. Cassius' case against Caesar seems to be entirely on the grounds of his physical weakness. Brutus specifically states that Caesar has hitherto been faultless. Rather he fears the faults which absolute power might bring with it. The Roman ideal of a commonwealth must not be shattered by a king, good or bad. His intention is to bring Rome 'peace, freedom and liberty'. He brings exactly the opposite.

Despite his shiftiness, Cassius certainly seems less cold-blooded than Brutus. Brutus' first words in the play reveal him as something of a killjoy:

I am not gamesome: I do lack some part

Of that quick spirit that is in Antony.

Some vital part of himself has been suppressed, or has atrophied. It seems that the first victim of his inner conflict is love – love of his wife, his friends, even of life itself. If Cassius' reasons for wishing Caesar dead are too personal, Brutus' are too impersonal:

I know no personal cause to spurn at him,
But for the general.

He loves 'the name of honour' more than life or love. This 'honour' proves fatal to Caesar, the conspirators, Portia, Brutus himself; and there is no general good to set against these deaths. His preoccupation with honour and narrow, rather abstract definition of it, provides the chink in his moral armour that Antony is quick to exploit, until the term 'honourable man' comes to mean a man who can rationalize any atrocity as being for the general good. The bathing in Caesar's blood could only be suggested by someone whose humanity has been stifled by his principles. He sets himself apart, 'self-haloed', even from his wife, who can only get herself taken seriously by giving herself a serious wound.

Given the extent to which some critics have hailed Brutus as Shakespeare's version of a perfect man, there are surprising resemblances between Brutus and MacBeth. Each is divided against himself. Each projects his own inner disharmony upon the outer world 'and the state of man / Like to a little kingdom, suffers then / The nature of an insurrection.' Macbeth's thoughts 'shake so my single state of man'. Each admires the man he is to kill. Each is motivated by pride. Each justifies the act by sophistry. Each suffers loneliness and loss of sleep. Each loses his wife and receives the news without emotion. Each is visited by the ghost of his victim. Each dies an unspectacular low-key death.

There is, of course, far more to admire in Brutus than in Macbeth, yet he is a less tragic figure, because he never develops or comes to know himself. Macbeth acknowledges quite early in the play his own 'evil spirit', and has to live with that knowledge. When Caesar's ghost describes himself as Brutus' evil spirit, Brutus shows no sign that that means anything at all to him.

Though I described the language of *Julius Caesar* as less poetic than the other mature plays, there are, of course, important controlling symbols. Blood, for example, symbolizes not horror, as in *Macbeth*, but something closer to spirit. According to the beliefs of the time, blood was a magical substance which effected the crucial link between body and spirit. As Donne wrote:

Our blood labours to beget
Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need to knit
The subtil knot that makes us man.

The murder severs body and spirit, leaving Caesar a 'bleeding piece of earth'.

As the human body is related to the body politic, so that in turn affects the cosmos, and storm symbolizes 'civil strife in heaven'. This link between microcosm and macrocosm is what

gives significance to all the unnatural acts and phenomena in the play, and validates the omens and prophecies (every one of which is fulfilled). To ignore them is at best foolish, at worst evil. Disorder, in the individual psyche, in the family, in the state, or in the heavens, is unnatural. And disorder in any of these will invariably have repercussions in the others.

Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
Shall cumber all the parts of Italy.

This bond, this interdependence, is stressed by the frequency with which a description of one is in terms of imagery drawn from another, as in the phrase 'the unity and married calm of states' in *Troilus and Cressida*. Rome is not just a political entity. It is a community where, in peace, love in all its forms can thrive. Wilson Knight writes:

The two modes, personal and political, are unified in the symbol of Caesar: he is both person and state, and so the pouring out of his life-blood is accompanied by the rending of that body which we call nature, and the disclosure of the fiery blood of a spirit-order which should normally be housed in the arterial veins of peaceful life. Caesar is the 'heart' of the world. His death pours out the life-blood of communal life and order. [*The Imperial Theme*, 55]

It is no coincidence that at the time this play was written England stood on the brink of civil war. Elizabeth was obviously nearing the end of her life, and without an heir. It was difficult to see how, after her death, a complete collapse of all order could be avoided. The line 'Cry 'Havoc', and let slip the dogs of war' would have sent a shiver down the spine of any Englishman.

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