

“Trust not Trebonius” -- “Gentlemen all” in *Julius Caesar*

by

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Although **Julius Caesar** is in respect of theme, political and human relations and emphases on class differences a “modern” play, mediaeval Church doctrine regarding rebellion lurks behind some of the arguments, at least implicitly. The Church stated that rebellion was wrong because it upset divine order, so that it constituted an evil act to rise up against a ruler, no matter how unjust he might be. Sixteenth-century playwrights were inclined to accept this dogma, which was the basis of a strong desire for dependable civil authority. Hatred of civil unrest united the majority of renaissance authors and although it may now seem un-necessary to establish grounds for such an attitude outside those suggested by common sense, Tudor theologians called upon a trio of weighty authorities to explain the necessity for order. These were the Scriptures, the Church Fathers and the Roman Law of Nations as it was deemed to have evolved out of Natural Law.⁽¹⁾

Shakespeare was certainly a strong believer in good order as the basis of a virtuous life but he was no blind follower of doctrinal authority and he never failed to examine the human point of view. In **Julius Caesar** he asks if, under certain circumstances, it might not be right to rebel, to kill the tyrant. Brutus suggests that the tyrant must be killed even before he becomes one. The soliloquy beginning “it must be by his death” (II, i, 10-34) takes the metaphor of the ladder of ambition, “the base degrees” which the climber scorns once he has reached the top, and, Brutus argues, “So Caesar may; then, lest he may, prevent”. At the end of the scene he completes his private musings:

*Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream:
The genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.*

(sc.cit. 63-9)

The characterisation of Brutus is conditioned by inherited teaching.⁽²⁾ In the scene following the conspirators come to try to enlist him in their scheme and Brutus equates it with evil:

*O conspiracy,
Sham'st thou to show thy dangerous brew 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)

Later he overcomes some of his scruples and rationalizes his own position. By rejecting the swearing of a formal oath of mutual allegiance, he suggests that contemporary conditions -- "the sufferance of our souls, the time's abuse" -- ought to justify action against "highsighted tyranny". After further discussion he is ready to admit the killing of Caesar as a solution but wishes the deed refined - not the elimination of Caesar's supporters as well but only of Caesar himself, for the conspirators should not allow themselves to be reviled as murderers but praised as purgers. Brutus, the realist, sees only extremes but the choice, stated in practical terms, is not necessarily between monarchy and tyranny. The humanists saw it as agreement between rulers and ruled.

The conventional word to describe political murder is now "assassination", a word derived from the name of a group of fanatical Moslem killers, the Assassins, active in the 12th century.⁽³⁾ **Julius Caesar** is a trenchant analysis of this "extraordinary" type of murder. The assassin must not seem hostile if he is to get close to his victim without being detected. In real life such subterfuge may be of very short duration, a matter of seconds only so far as the target is concerned, but in the realm of dramatic art the time-span may be expanded to attract the interest of the audience. Thus **Julius Caesar** takes in the growth of the conspiracy, events immediately preceding the act itself and the unforeseen results. The actual deed is as quickly performed on the stage as in real life. Shakespeare followed Plutarch's account⁽⁴⁾ closely but by turning it into an original play exploring human tendencies to fall short of realising the noblest aims he found a means of uttering some general observations about human nature as a tragic entity trapped by its own limitations. Each assassin exposes natural flaws, deriving from the contemporary view of man as an aspiring failure.

Though the dramatic outcome is in accord with the Christian tradition of religious pessimism inherited from St. Paul and Augustine of Hippo,⁵ **Julius Caesar** is not in the least moralistic and for this reason it suits modern tastes. All that can be commonly said about political murder and its consequences may be extracted from this play and though the characters are historical in origin **Julius Caesar** is not historical drama in the category of *Henry V* or other nationalistic pageants about the kings of England. Henry V may be the playwright's ideal monarch, just as Richard III is his idealized king-villain, but neither is a historically accurate reconstruction, whereas his Caesar, together with the conspirators, seems a more earthy, more credible and far more complex personality.

The play derives its unity from a single theme -- concealment of true beliefs, of actual motives, of true knowledge of possibilities, of authentic information, of considered opinion and its corollary, isolation and ignorance. The patricians show contempt for the commoners in the very first scene and the ensuing exchanges make it clear that neither class ever arrives at intellectual or emotional truth. The commoners are celebrating Caesar's triumph which for them is a holiday, a display of public-spirited allegiance. The patricians, sympathetic to Pompey, see things in a different light, as an occasion for tears, not rejoicing. Neither understands the other. The puns with which the cobbler replies to Marcellus's abrupt questions convey the **motif** which is to run throughout four acts of the play, namely, dissembling, whether naively, as in this opening scene, or with darker motives. The all-pervasive atmosphere is one of mistrust and furtiveness, of cloaked collusion as summed up in the personage of older morality plays.⁶ The conspirators, arriving in the middle of the night, are described by Lucius as having

*....their hats... pluck'd about their ears,
And half their faces buried in their cloaks.*

(II,i, 73-4)

They talk in whispers, and hatch their plot. Brutus conceals his plans from Portia his wife but she insists that he reveal them to her

*You have some sick offence within your mind.
Which, by the right and virtue of my place,
I ought to know of; and upon my knees,
I charm you, by my once commended beauty,
By all your vows of love, and that great vow
Which did incorporate and make us one,
That you unfold to me, your self, your half,
Why you are heavy, and what men to-night
Have had resort to you; for here have been
Some six or seven, who did hide their faces
Even from darkness.*

(*ibid.*, 268-77)

This he does, thus laying a heavy burden on her conscience and her capacity to dissimulate.

*Ay me, how weak a thing
The heart of woman is!*

(*ibid.*, iv. 39-40)

a sentiment voiced in **Twelfth Night** and in **Hamlet**.⁽⁷⁾ Portia eventually commits suicide, faithful to the end, one outstanding example of fidelity in a world of treachery and double-dealing. Calphurnia, Caesar's wife, is another, though slighter, figure whose great love for her vaunting husband is shown as she urges him to stay at home and send Mark Antony to the Senate House in his place but the intrusion of Decius makes Caesar decide to ignore her advice, which he had previously agreed to take.

*How foolish do your fears seem now, Calphurnia!
I am ashamed I did yield to them*

(*ibid.*, II. 105-7)

These two are the only female characters in the play, both taken from Plutarch's account, and they serve to promote uneasiness -- Portia because she shares her husband's terrible secret, Calphurnia because she has had an insight into the future. Caesar has heard her call out three times in her sleep "they murder Caesar" and yet disregards her advice not to go forth from the house, which is based on omens and portents. Caesar is here the complete fatalist -- why should men fear death the inevitable? His attitude, expressed in the lines

*It seems to me most strange that men should fear.
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come*

(*ibid.*, 35-7)

looks forward to **Hamlet** and **King Lear**.⁽⁶⁾ Confirmation from the augurers is still insufficient to make him change his mind, but he suddenly agrees to take his wife's advice. To Decius he reveals that he has done this to humour her fears, based on her dream, but Decius places a favourable interpretation on the vision, concluding by informing Caesar that the Senate intended to give him a crown. It is this which finally makes up his mind for him.

In the following short scene Artemidorus the Sophist reads out a list of the conspirators:

Caesar, beware of Brutus; take heed of Cassius; come not near Casca; have an eye to Cinna; trust not Trebonius; mark well Metellus Cimber; Decius Brutus loves thee not; thou hast wrong'd Caius Ligurius. There is but one mind in all these men, and it is bent against Caesar.

(*ibid.*, iii, 1-5)

Artemidorus is mentioned in Plutarch as one "very familiar with certain of Brutus's confederates, and (who) therefore knew the most part of all their practices against Caesar". The soothsayer with his "Beware the ides of March" warning (in I,ii,18,23) appears before Portia in II,iv and repeats his warning at the beginning of III,i. Artemidorus tries to present his paper but Decius interposes his word;

*Trebonius doth desire you to o'er-read
At your best-leisure, this his humble suit*

(*ibid.*, III, i, 4-5)

and effectively blocks Artemidorus's intention -- Cassius tells them to present their petitions at the proper place, in the Capitol, not in the street.

Trebonius, one of the more shadowy of the eight named conspirators, appears in three scenes of the play and is mentioned in Plutarch as the conspirator entrusted with the task of holding Antony in conversation outside the Senate-house while the assassination is being carried out. Trebonius is not therefore one of the actual murderers, but instead an accessory before and after the fact and as such as culpable in law as the others. We never learn what his "suit" was about, but the few lines given to him make him appear a temperate member of the group for he supports Brutus when Cassius recommends Antony's death along with Caesar's.

*There is no fear in him; let him not die;
For he will live, and laugh at this hereafter*

(*ibid.*, II, i, 190-1)

However, his words to Caesar in the scene following put him clearly in the team of assassins, for although he does not stab the victim himself he is obviously as ready to participate as any of the others:

Caes. *Now, Cinna; now Metellus; what, Trebonius:
I have an hour's talk in store for you;
Remember that you call on me to-day;
Be near me, that I may remember you.*

Treb. *Caesar, I will: (Aside.) and so near will I be,
That your best friends shall wish I had been further.*

(II ii, 120-5)

He appears on the scene immediately after the assassination, his part completed, and answers Cassius's question "Where is Antony?" with the intelligence:

*Fled to his house amaz'd.
Men, wives, and children stare, cry out, and run,
As it were doomsday.*

(III, i, 97-8)

We come across his name once more in the play, when Antony, having recovered himself, makes his first move towards vengeance and shakes all the conspirators by the hand -- his **bloody** hand -- as he puts it.

*First, Marcus Brutus, will I shake with you;
Next Caius Cassius, do I take your hand;
Now, Decius Brutus, yours; now yours, Metellus;
Yours, Cinna; and my valiant Casca, yours;
Though last, not least in love, yours, good Trebonius.
Gentlemen all --*

(*ibid.*, 185-90)

Antony's ironic approach to the group collectively and individually is not understood by Brutus, though Cassius, who had wanted Antony killed and feared him as a "shrewd contriver" (II, i, 158) has no doubts as to how Antony's demeanour ought to be interpreted and urges Brutus not to allow the funeral oration. Antony's following soliloquy tells the audience what his real feelings are:

*O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers.
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times.
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!*

(III,i,254-8)

The play is called **The Tragedy of Julius Caesar** but the accepted tragic figure is Brutus, whose decline parallels Caesar's ascent. Posthumously Caesar's spirit dominates the action as the idealistic sentiments expressed by the conspirators before the assassination are gradually revealed in a different light. The ironic treatment of the words "honour" and "honourable" succeeds Shakespeare's use of it to denote a virtue. Brutus uses it first when he contrasts honour with death:

*Set honour in one eye, and death i' th'other,
And I will look on both indifferently;
For let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honour more than I fear death*

(I,ii,85-9)

and Cassius agrees with his estimate of himself. Later in the same scene, however, when Brutus is not present, Cassius has another interpretation:

*Well, Brutus, thou art noble; yet I see
Thy honourable mettle may be wrought
From that it is dispos'd; therefore 'tis meet
That noble minds keep ever with their likes:
For who so firm that cannot be seduc'd?*

(ibid., 306-9)

Cassius is Brutus's Iago, except that he does not accomplish his end by lying or by preying on his subject's gullibility. Othello too is obsessed by the abstract concept of honour for which he sacrifices love in return for death. Brutus's sacrifice is of honour itself and even from the start of Cassius' seduction he shows himself willing to be persuaded. "What you would work me to, I have some aim", he admits (161) and Cassius immediately knows that his hook has bitten:

*I am glad
That my weak words have struck but thus much show
Of fire from Brutus.*

(*ibid.*, 173-5)

Cassius is careful to associate his "honourable-dangerous" scheme with noble sentiments. He tells Casca at the end of the Act that "three parts of him (Brutus) is sure already" (153-4) and both extol the man's worth. Casca's alchemical simile is presumably not spoken with ironic intent but the audience may so interpret it, since the transmutation of base metal into gold had never yet been accomplished. By the same token, the ideals of the conspirators, including Brutus, were unlikely to bring good results from an evil means. As several commentators have pointed out, this is one of the play's main themes. Henri Fluchère sums up its implications thus:

In this play what is involved is not merely a problem of Roman politics, the Roman character of which is merely accidental, it is, once more (though with what profound resources in Brutus), the theme of the conflict between order and disorder, good and evil, presented as a struggle between the sentiment of honour and the attraction of a crime committed for a 'noble reason'. It is mere chance that brings the words 'honour', 'honest', 'honourable' as often to the lips of the characters, sometimes in their positive meaning, sometimes negatively and steeped in accumulated and destructive irony... The whole tragedy is nothing but the slow degradation of Brutus's conscience, before and after the crime, although he does not forfeit our esteem and admiration.¹⁹⁾

The concept of honour looms large in each of the major tragedies, most specifically, in **Othello**, where it is associated with marriage and duty against a domestic background. In **Hamlet** the hero's honour is linked with his vendetta and the necessity to exact retribution; in **Macbeth** and **King Lear** it is weakened by stronger forces but never entirely destroyed. **Julius Caesar**, however, makes of honour an isolated, pure conception, reposing in the person of Brutus, whose individual tragedy this play portrays. Yet Brutus is torn by conflict from the start. His first speech explains his predicament:

*Vexed I am
Of late with passions of some difference,
Conceptions only proper to myself*

(I,ii,38-40)

and he goes on to tell the watchful Cassius that he is "with himself at war", meaning that he is caught between his feelings for Caesar and his attachment to political freedom. Fluchère's view of Brutus is the conventional one though an Elizabethan audience would probably have seen him in a different and less flattering light, tempted by morally objectionable means to achieve morally desirable ends. Caesar is a man and his nature is therefore flawed, something Brutus cannot accept.

To overcome his scruples, Brutus begins to dignify the proposed act and elevate it to a level where he can rationally accept it. Holding back at first he gradually enters more and more into the conspiratorial process. Shakespeare uses the metaphor of insurrection to describe this internal turmoil, which he likens to "a phantasma or a hideous dream" (II,i,65). Although cast as a man of disinterested "honour" and of the best motives, Brutus is tainted by politics and reduced to the level of the other conspirators--a shrinking which is illuminated in Antony's funeral oration in the lines:

*(For Brutus is an honourable man,
So are they all, all honourable men).*

(III,ii,84-5)

Elyot's reference to the motives of this league of gentlemen is direct. In **The Book Named The Governor**, he observes:

Example we have of Brutus and Cassius, two noble Romans, and men of excellent virtues, which pretending an honourable zeal to the liberty and common weal of their city, slew Julius Caesar (who trusted them most of any other) for that he usurped to have the perpetual dominion of the Empire, supposing thereby to have brought the Senate and people to their pristine liberty. But it did not so succeed to their purpose. But by the death of so noble a prince happened confusion and civil battles. And both Brutus and Cassius, after long wars vanquished by Octavian, nephew and heir unto Caesar, at the last falling into extreme desperation, slew themselves. A worthy and convenient vengeance for the murder of so noble and valiant a prince. ⁽¹⁰⁾

The author of this paragraph was in no doubt as to the justice of the outcome, which Antony had desired. Elyot cited this example as an illustration of "disloyalty or treason" in a section titled "Of faith or fidelity ... which is the foundation of justice".⁽¹¹⁾ He attributes the vengeance visited on the conspirators to "the just providence of God" in accordance with his introductory statement about order in the public weal reflecting divine order. In a later section Elyot describes "another vice following magnanimity, called ambition", which he says is a "vain and superfluous appetite"⁽¹²⁾ Caesar is again cited as an example of this undesirable quality to curb which Romans promulgated specific laws. Brutus talks of "young ambition's ladder" (II,i,22) and accounts for his part in the assassination by accusing Caesar of having been "ambitious" --

*As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate,
I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him; but,
as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears, for his
love; joy, for his fortune; honour, for his valour; and
death, for his ambition.*

(III,ii,25-9)

It is this self-justification which Antony uses as the ground of his denunciation of Brutus and so to plant the seeds of rebellion in the fickle Plebeians who, in a few minutes, shift from support of Brutus to violent opposition:

4. Pleb. They were traitors. Honourable men!
All The will! - The testament!

(*ibid.*, 155-6)

The detailed terms of Caesar's will he leaves to the very last, after their fury has reached a high pitch. With consummate skill he delays unleashing the mob, exciting them, tempting them to revenge and then calming them in alternating waves. Finally, he reminds them of the bequest -- seventy-five drachmas to each Roman citizen and private gardens for their recreation. Shakespeare shows his cynical contempt for the mass mind in this scene, which denotes how easily it may be controlled and bribed into employment as an instrument of destruction. Antony's purpose is clearly revealed in his aside after the Plebeians have gone out to "fire traitors' houses":

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

(*ibid.*, 262-3)

Brutus and Cassius flee Rome but Cinna the poet, who bears the same name as Cinna the conspirator, is caught by the mob and torn to pieces, protesting his innocence:⁽¹³⁾

3. **Pleb** *Tear him, tear him! Come, brands, ho! fire brands!
To Brutus', to Cassius'; burn all! Some to Decius'
house, and some to Casca's, some to Ligarius'. Away!
Go!*

(*ibid.*, iii,35-8)

The conspirator Cinna, as well as Metellus Cimber and Trebonius, is not threatened here. Cinna was one of the knife-wielders, Metellus Cimber occupied Caesar's attention while the others were making ready to stab him -- according to Plutarch it was Cimber who gave the agreed sign for the assault. As we have noted, Trebonius was not present when the crime was actually being committed but since Antony had himself met all the conspirators we are not to suppose that any one of them escaped identification and ultimate retribution.

Retribution is the theme of the rest of the play. Shakespeare is answering his implied question, suggested in the character of Brutus, regarding the rightness or wrongness of political assassination, but with no unqualified yes or no. Caesar is no tyrant -- Antony's summation of his qualities does not make him ambitious though by repeating **ad nauseam** the word "honourable" so that it comes to mean its opposite, he does accuse Brutus. Elyot's **Governor** allows Caesar many virtues:

Among the virtues which abounded in Julius Caesar, none was accounted more excellent than that in his counsels, affairs and exploitures, he omitted no time nor forsook any pain; wherefore soonest of any man he achieved and brought to good pass all things that he enterprised..after that he has the entire governance and dominion of the Empire of Rome, he therefore never omitted labour and diligence, as well in common causes as private, concerning the defence and assistance of innocents. Also he laboriously and studiously discussed controversies, which he almost daily heard in his own person⁽¹⁴⁾.

and Plutarch makes of him a man of more favours than faults, though with his share of enemies both public and private. They regretted that they had allowed him to grow too strong, to ascend "ambition's ladder" until he had climbed beyond their reach, particularly now that he wished to be called king -- a title which was anathema to republican sentiments.

Antony offers him the crown in symbol -- not an actual crown but a coronet and he thrice refuses it, both in Plutarch's account and in Shakespeare's play. At the funeral oration Antony tells the crowd that it was a "kingly crown". Plutarch had described it as "a laurel crown... having a royal band or diadem wreathed about it, which in old times was the ancient mark and token of king"⁽¹⁵⁾. Though Caesar really wants it, he makes a show of refusal and it is then evident that he will not always reject such an offer. In the play, Decius tells him he is indeed going to receive the crown, according to a decision by Senate, and it is this intelligence which tips the scales in favour of his leaving his house, in spite of Calphurnia's dream. Caesar is determined not to risk missing an opportunity which may not be repeated and he at once accepts Decius's optimistic interpretation of the bleeding statue and reacts against the latter's suggestion that absence might be construed as fear. Caesar is very anxious not to be thought fearful -- as we know from his earlier discussion of Cassius's character with Antony:

Ant. *Fear him not, Caesar, he's not dangerous.
He is a noble Roman, and well given.*

Caes *Would he were fatter! But I fear him not:
Yet if my name were liable to fear,
I do not know the man I should avoid
So soon as that spare Cassius*

and *I rather tell thee what is to be fear'd
Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar.*

(I,ii,193-8, 208-9)

Caesar again distinguishes himself from ordinary men when he observes to his wife Calphurnia in the lines previously quoted:

*Of all the wonder that I yet have heard
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come*

(II,ii,34-7)

and his dismissal of Metellus Cimber's suit bears the same imprint of arrogance, designed by Shakespeare to increase his audience's support for the conspirators' cause. Plutarch notes that Caesar denied these final petitions, one after the other. The high point of the drama, the actual killing of Caesar, is reached very suddenly when Casca, shown to be the most blatantly treacherous of the conspirators, a

frustrated malcontent whose character is at various times clearly delineated by Antony, calls "Speak hands for me" (III,i,76) whereupon they all stab their victim. Plutarch provides a mere detailed description of the action, saying that "it was agreed among them that every man should give him a wound, because all their parts should be in this murder".⁽¹⁶⁾ Plutarch reports that the conspirators crowded in on one another in their eagerness to have a cut at Caesar and refers to twenty-three wounds on the body. Display of the violated body in the market-place helped to inflame the crowd present at Antony's funeral oration:

Ant. *Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through;
See what a rent the envious Casca made:
Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabb'd*

(III,ii,176-8)

and this, observed Antony, "was the most unkindest cut of all" (185).

It is this line which marks the alienation of Brutus from the others and from the audience. "Caesar's angel"⁽¹⁷⁾ had fallen and become a devil. Antony focusses his scorn on him and when he points at Caesar's wounds the 1st Plebeian urges the burning of Brutus's house (233).

Having reduced Brutus, Shakespeare now has to re-engage the audience's sympathy for him. The minor conspirators have served their dramatic purpose and are not seen again, though Antony reminds Brutus of their villainy and insincerity as they prepared to kill Caesar:

*You show'd your teeth like apes, and fawn'd like hounds,
And bow'd like bondmen, kissing Caesar's feet;
Whilst damned Casca, like a cur, behind
Struck Caesar on the neck.*

(V,i,41-4)

Of the original band, only Brutus and Cassius are left in focus. Shakespeare skilfully builds up Cassius in the quarrel-scene in IV,iii and for a short period he commands our respect even as Brutus forfeits it. Cassius's description of himself "I am a soldier, I" (30) brings Brutus to employ childish abuse and trivial insult, suggesting envy of the theorist for the practical man of action and revealing Brutus, near the end of his tether, descending to a new low level. This is Brutus's nadir, marked by Cassius's amazement at 1.50, when he responds to Brutus's attack with "Is it come to this?" When Cassius later offers his naked breast to Brutus's dagger and tells him to "Strike, as thou didst at Caesar" (104) Brutus recovers himself. Cassius generously attri-

butes his fellow's uncharacteristic behaviour to his recent bereavement though the fatalistic manner in which he comments on Portia's death to Messala who announces it at 1.188 separates his public from his private image.

After this, the play comes to concentrate more and more on Brutus's inevitable progress towards death. His fatalistic speech is self-justifying:

*There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune:
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.*

(IV,iii,217-20)

sentiments which reject the comfortable Senecan Stoicism, that untragic view of life which encouraged resignation to whatever the gods happened to put in a man's way -- good fortune or bad. At this point Brutus shows his tragic dimension -- rather late in the play it is true and with no heroic potential. Brutus is not a "hero" in the sense that Macbeth, with whom he may be directly compared, shows himself in every way to be. He keeps up a front, remains proud, defiant, prepared for the worst and open to whatever is in store:

*O, that a man might know
The end of this day's business ere it come!
But it sufficeth that the day will end,
And then the end is known.*

(V,i,123-6)

When he hears of Cassius's death he calls him and Titinius "the last of all the Romans", elevating them to a high place in his own estimation and immediately addressing himself to the next battle, the result of which he leaves to Fortune (*ibid.* iii. 110). In sc. V he has given up hope; he tells Volumnius:

*The ghost of Caesar hath appear'd to me
Two several times by night: at Sardis once,
And this last night, here in Philippi fields,
I know my hour is come....*

(18-21)

and, in response to Volumnius's reassurances:

*Our enemies have beat us to the pit.
It is more worthy to leap in ourselves
Than tarry till they push us.*

(23-5)

His suicide, Roman-fashion, by running on his sword, is Brutus's dignified exit from his own idealistic world, prefaced by his own idealistic observations:

*My heart doth joy that yet in all my life
I found no man but he was true to me.
I shall have glory by this losing day
More than Octavius and Mark Antony
By this vile conquest shall attain unto.*

(34-8)

Strato refers to his master as free from bondage and as self-conquered:

*...Brutus only overcame himself
And no man else hath honour by his death,*

(56-7)

a statement consistent with Brutus's description of the enemy's victory as "vile", showing that he still considered Caesar's death to have been necessary in order to preserve freedom, now to be destroyed by the new regime. Antony has the last word and separates Brutus from the other conspirators:

*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 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"!*

(68-75)

and Octavius orders him to be buried like a soldier "honourably" (79) as befits his virtue.

Antony's statement is apparently magnanimous. Shakespeare based it on Plutarch but, in terms of the play, it may be read as somewhat disingenuous, since Brutus is not a wholly admirable character, and

Antony's earlier estimate of this self-appointed chief conspirator has already reduced him for it is obvious that after the assassination Antony never thought Brutus truly "honourable". Nor is it true that "all conspirators save only he" were motivated by envy of their proposed victim. Casca falls into that category but Cassius is a hater who according to Plutarch "even from his cradle could not abide any manner of tyrants" and in the play his envy is subordinate to his hate, as is Iago's.

Octavius's "according to his virtue let us use him" may be compared to the Octavius of **Antony and Cleopatra** tidying up loose ends at the end of that play. "His virtue", in Octavius's view, is that of the soldier, which Brutus himself would have acknowledged. In Octavius's eyes, this is a quality for which he can be forgiven -- witness his testimonial to Lepidus, whom Antony calls a "slight unmeritable man" (IV,i,12).

Shakespeare's creation of Brutus endows him with the upright virtues and with the vanity that goes with them in such a character. His tragedy is that of a rebellious man, a repetition of the myth of the Fall, in which Adam and Eve's rejection of tyrannical commands led to banishment from paradise. Brutus too is betrayed by Cassius's flattery, in I,ii, into thinking that his own logic and judgement are infallible and his rationalization in II, i, 10ff marks him with the stigma of pride, the first of the Deadly Sins.

NOTES

All quotations and textual references to **Julius Caesar** relate to the Arden edition, ed. T.S. Dorsch (London 1955: edn 1965).

1. Strongly emphasised by Richard Hooker in **The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity** (1594-7). Hooker stated that the Law of Nature required "some kind of regiment" (*op. cit.*, I,x) if the collapse of government were to be avoided. **Troilus and Cressida**, I,iii, contains Ulysses' famous speech on "degree" (rank, order of precedence) which reflects contemporary, conservative opinion. It was accepted by humanists that failure to establish the support of the divine order produced disorder arising out of the loss of man's free will. See the chapter "Degree, High and Base" in B.L. Joseph, **Shakespeare's Eden** (London 1971). Shakespeare's **Richard II** maintains the order in practice although his own sanction is limited and temporary because not absolute. (cf. M.M. Reese, **The Lease of Majesty** (London 1961), viii & *passim*).

2. Plutarch's historical Brutus is kept apart from the atmosphere of moral turpitude that surrounds the other conspirators. Shakespeare did not have Plutarch's perspective but the Renaissance tradition of Christian humanism in which he worked influenced him to seek a balanced assessment and probe his subject's complex motives in terms of coherent human experience. Brutus as a "tragic figure" draws far less sympathy from modern critics who are more inclined to concentrate on the inevitable irony which his dilemma involves. (cf. J. L. Simmons, **Shakespeare's Pagan World: the Roman Tragedies** (Virginia University Press 1973, 66).
3. **Assassinate** - to kill by treacherous violence (1618), a word derived from the Arabic for a hashish-eater and applied to the Ismaeli sectarians. First recorded 1259 (cf. **Macbeth**, I, vii, 2 and see **OED**).
4. **Lives of Caesar, Brutus and Mark Antony** (Plutarch's **Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans**, trans. Sir Thomas North (1579)).
5. In England traceable more directly to St. Thomas Aquinas and shown in the writings of all the English reformers from Langland to Tyndale.
6. e.g. Skelton's **Magnyfycence** (1516), wherein Cloaked Collusion is one of the four tempters who cause the central character to fall from prosperity to adversity.
7. c.f. **Twelfth Night**, II,ii, 30-1; **Hamlet**, I, ii, 146.
8. cf. **Hamlet**, V, ii, 218-2), **King Lear**, V, ii, 9.11, **First Folio** (1623).
9. Henri Fluchère, **Shakespeare: dramaturge élisabéthain**, trans. Guy Hamilton (5th impression, London 1967) 206-7.
10. **op. cit.**, ed S.E. Lehmborg (Everyman's Library edn 1962), 178-9 (Book iii, vi).
11. Shakespeare knew Sir Thomas Elyot's **The Book Named the Governor**, Cato's biography of Cicero, Kyd's **Cornelia** and **Caesar's Revenges** and "university" plays such as North and Sackville's **Mirroure for Magistrates** (11.401-08). Relevant extracts are printed in G. Bullough, **Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare** (8 vols, London and New York, 1957), V, 25;33-5). Plays about Caesar were not composed before Shakespeare's lifetime.
12. **ibid.**, 198 (Book III, xvi)

13. Though painful in the extreme, this scene is too often insensitively played as a knockabout comedy. It is fully reported in Plutarch.
14. **ed. cit.** 188 (Book III, x).
15. "Caesar", a proper noun used 211 times in the play, does not mean "emperor" as in Kaiser or Tsar, though these latter titles are derived from it. **Caesar**= Lat. **Imperator** or military leader. It was a surname of the early Roman emperors which, after the reign of Hadrian in the 2nd century AD, became the title of the junior emperor as distinct from his senior colleague the Augustus. Octavian, Julius Caesar's adopted son, took the name Augustus after 44 BC, the year of his father's assassination. The name of Caesar is itself of Etruscan origin and thus of undetermined linguistic affiliation. Confusion as to its meaning is of long standing and may be traced back to a repeated error in translation first credited to Thomas Platter in the 18th century. "King" is in any case less powerful than "emperor". Shakespeare does not try to bring out a strong republicanism which indeed did not exist at that time. His scene is based on Plutarch.
16. Dorsch's edition (Appendix A) reprints the relevant passages of Plutarch where the assassination is described in detail. Bullough's **Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare**, V also contains a reprint. Appian, **Civil Wars** II, 118-48 contains the fullest account of events after the murder. He states that only one of the wounds was mortal.
17. A phrase from Plutarch.