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Julius Caesar and Modern Criticism

Leonard F. Dean

Professor Dean's earlier Journal article on Macbeth and modern criticism drew such a favorable response that the editor suggested a companion article on Julius Caesar, probably the play most widely studied by high school students. Mr. Dean is chairman of the English Department at the University of Connecticut.

JULIUS CAESAR came into the curriculum in the days of elocution, formal rhetoric, the old school tie, and the British Empire. The Roman thing was presumably at home in that company, but the times now appear to be against it. "Strictly for the birds," says Holden Caulfield, contemplating a somewhat decayed exponent of the Roman thing, Pencey Prep, molder of men since 1888. "From Plutarch," says C. S. Lewis more suavely, "comes that almost oppressive crowd of generals, sages, courtesans, soothsayers, and noble dames. . . ." Mark Van Doren is more specific: "Brutus . . . the Roman conspirator has become an exemplary gentleman . . . the principal reason may be that Shakespeare has kept himself too conscious of a remote Roman grandeur. . . . *Julius Caesar* is more rhetoric than poetry, just as its persons are more orators than men . . . all its persons tend to talk alike . . . they are artists in declamation . . . Brutus addresses us through a wrapping of rhetoric, of public speech. . . . This is the noblest Roman of them all, and even in distress he keeps his distance. . . . The mistakes of Brutus are the mistakes of a man whose nobility muffles his intelligence . . . honesty in him is humorless and edgeless; it rings a little dully in our ears, and even a little smugly . . . it is virtue, it is true manhood demonstrating itself for the benefit of others." The play's nineteenth-century stage tradition, with its strong curtains, melodramatic tableaux, and its Roman Senate looking "like the cooling room of a Turkish bath," is in Harley Granville-Barker's mind when he asks: "Has not the vulgar modern conception of Rome, nourished in Latin lessons and the classic school of painting, become rather frigid? Are not our noble Romans, flinging their togas gracefully about them, slow-moving, consciously dignified, speaking with studied oratory and all past middle age, rather too like a schoolboy's vision of a congress of headmasters?"

Since there is no turning back to the days when schoolboys declaimed the famous orations to admiring audiences, but since the play remains a fixture of the high school program, teachers may properly ask if modern Shakespearean criticism has found anything in *Julius Caesar* which will appeal to the twentieth century. The answer, briefly, is that *Caesar* is now almost unanimously read as a problem play marked by political, ethical, and psychological ironies of a decidedly modern and painfully human kind.

The Character of Brutus

This modern interpretation appears first, as might be expected, in the analysis of the character of Brutus, and it takes form slowly through a progressive shift of critical tone and emphasis. This is clear if one takes his start at the beginning of the century with a still basic study of the play, Sir Mungo W. MacCallum's *Shakespeare's Roman Plays* (1910). A servant of the Empire, having gone out from Glasgow to Sidney, MacCallum writes firmly that in Brutus "Shakespeare wishes to portray a patriotic gentleman of the best Roman or the best English type . . . very much in the form of a cultured and high-souled English nobleman, the heir of great traditions and their responsibilities, which he fulfills to the smallest jot and tittle. . . ." After remarking Brutus' gentle qualities (his "winning courtesy," "affectionate nature," and "essential modesty"), MacCallum adds that they "are saved from all taint of weakness by an heroic strain, both high-spirited and public-spirited, both stoical and chivalrous." His only weakness, as MacCallum sees it, is a product of his virtue, and it comes out first through contrast with Caesar. Brutus is "recognized as no less pre-eminent in the sphere of ethics, than Caesar in the sphere of politics. . . . And in each this leads to a kind of pose." In Brutus the pose appears when "the cult of perfection becomes the assumption and obtrusion of it . . . a willingness to give a demonstration, so to speak, in Clinical Ethics." Furthermore, this "votary of duty cannot acknowledge a merely fugitive and cloistered virtue," and consequently "Brutus, who is so at home in his study with his book, who is so exemplary in all the relations of friend, master, and husband . . . sweeps from his quiet anchorage to face the storms of political strife, which such as he are not born to master but which they think they must not avoid."

From these premises, MacCallum traces Brutus' career through disillusionment and defeat to heroic martyrdom. He is less of a philosopher than he thinks, and his attempts to impose the reason of the study on practical politics show him "so besotted by his own sophisms that he will listen to no warnings." He is "doubly duped, by his own subtlety and his own simplicity in league with his own conscientiousness. . . ." The outstanding dramatization of Brutus' "education in disappointment" is the quarrel scene with Cassius, which "lays bare the significance of the story in its tragic pathos and its tragic irony." By the final act it is clear that Brutus' "attempt at remedy has resulted in a situation even more intolerable" for the reason that he has been "quite impractical and perverse, as every enthusiast for abstract justice must be, who lets himself be seduced into crime on the plea of duty, and yet shapes his course as though he were not a criminal." But at the end, according to MacCallum, when Brutus' "life-failure stares him in the face, he does not allow it a wider scope than its due"; he regains his form, and in "inward and essential matters his character victoriously stands the test. . . ." It is not surprising that at the conclusion of his chapter, MacCallum brings Portia back on the stage for a strong curtain of his own invention: "at the side of this rare and lofty nature, we see the kindred figure of his wife. . . ." Though Brutus "is drawn by his political, and she by her domestic ideal into a position that overstrains the strength of each," the final weight of the play, as MacCallum feels it, is on the side of the noble character of the Victorian-Roman husband and wife.

Seventeen years after MacCallum, a shift of critical emphasis can be detected in Harley Granville-Barker's *Preface to Julius Caesar* (1927, slightly revised before 1946). Barker acknowledges the compelling power of the portrayal of Brutus, and the human appeal of the

quarrel scene and his reaction to Portia's death, but he adds that Shakespeare, "having lifted his heroic Roman to this height, leaves him, we must own, rather stockishly upon it. . . . Now, when we expect nemesis approaching, some deeper revelation, some glimpse of the hero's very soul, this hero stays inarticulate, or, worse, turns oracular." In the final scenes, from Barker's view, Brutus "comes short of what we demand from the tragic hero" because his education is incomplete: "He is sent to his death, a figure of gracious dignity, the noblest Roman of them all, but with eyes averted from the issue still." Barker can only conclude that the Roman thing proved poetically indigestible for Shakespeare, that he could "in this last analysis *make* nothing of" Brutus.

Brutus and Ironic Satire

Twenty years after Granville-Barker, in John Palmer's *Political Characters of Shakespeare* (1948), the critical emphasis has shifted so far that Brutus is pictured as an object of ironic satire. The point and tone are established in Palmer's opening sentence: "Brutus has precisely the qualities which in every age have rendered the conscientious liberal ineffectual in public life." His career in brief is a "course of action which could only be justified by principles which had ceased to be valid for the society in which he lived and which entangle him in unforeseen consequences with which he was unable to cope." The details of this unsuccessful career are worked out through a series of contrasts: "Cassius, Antony, Caesar and the Roman crowd are in turn his foils." Cassius' initial attitude toward him is "just that blend of admiration and contempt felt by the practical man of affairs for the man of principle." Palmer asks us to "compare the candid simplicity with which Cassius sees and admits the truth about himself with the confused thinking of Brutus and his sharp divorce from political reality." Brutus on the one hand is too easily moved by the letters thrown in at his window, and on the other hand his recoil from the conspiracy illustrates that the "fastidious contempt of the shameful means necessary to achieve his ends is the constant mark of a political idealist."

Palmer admits that Brutus is never more likeable than in his scenes with Portia, but he adds deflatingly that it "requires no Shakespeare to discover that an ineffectual politician can be happy and enlightened in his domestic relationships. . . ." Having taken the plunge from private to public life, Brutus is "now to be shown as the professed, self-conscious stoic in action," and Shakespeare, according to Palmer, "warns us not to be deceived by the front of brass which his hero is about to assume after the high Roman fashion." After the assassination, Antony replaces Cassius as the foil who brings out Brutus' deficiencies. Brutus characteristically underrates Antony because of the very un-Brutus-like qualities of sociability (his "ready tongue and coarse humanity," his "genius in adapting himself to the moods of men") that mark him out as a most dangerous enemy, and all of this is fully demonstrated in the orations and the scenes with the mob.

The quarrel scene is read by Palmer as an illustration of his conviction that the essential business of Shakespeare's political plays "is to show how the private person comes to terms with his political duties, offices or ambitions, and the dramatic climax is always to be found when the protagonists come before us stripped of their public pretensions." The "high Roman fashion" in which Brutus reacts publicly to the news of Portia's death is in keeping with his double nature as it has been revealed step by step to this point: "Brutus may be playing a part, but it is one which springs from the fundamental lie in his character, the lie that impels him to substitute a public

figure for the natural man, that requires him to kill Caesar in order to live up to assumed principles, that drives him to play the statesman when he has no mind or quality for the vocation, that prompts him to offer reason to a mob with which he has no common ground of temper or understanding—the lie that sooner or later is imposed on any idealist who enters public life and must use means which he despises to achieve ends which have no true bearing on the political realities about him." Palmer sees Brutus and Cassius blundering through the remaining action to inevitable defeat, "weary and desperate men" who "desire a swift conclusion." The defeat, however, is a kind of therapeutic release for Brutus from the lie of the double private-public role. He "accepts his fate with a tired and wistful resignation," but as he sheds his unnatural political role, he regains the "assurance. . . of the man who can still be happy in the loyalty of his friends," and we see again, too late, the gentle, private Brutus. The final effect is therefore one of pathos.

The Character of Caesar

Many other essays on Brutus could be placed along the line which runs from MacCallum's Victorian stoic to Palmer's ineffectual liberal, and the same movement in criticism is to be found in discussions of other characters and aspects of the play. The character of Caesar is an obvious example. MacCallum acknowledges that Shakespeare depicts Caesar's weaknesses (his physical disabilities, his credulity, his self-deception, and his posing), but he concludes that the impression Caesar "makes on the unsophisticated mind, on average audiences and the elder school of critics, is undoubtedly an heroic one. It is only a minute analysis that discovers his defects, and though the defects are certainly present and should be noted, they are far from sufficing to make the general effect absurd or contemptible." Caesar's childlessness is one of the defects which MacCallum would have thought discoverable only by minute analysis, but it is dramatically obvious to recent critics. Maynard Mack, for example, prepares us to respond to Caesar's first speech (I.ii) with this question and answer: "As he starts to speak, an expectant hush settles over the gathering: what does the great man have on his mind. . . . What the great man had on his mind, it appears, was to remind his wife, in this public place, that she is sterile; that there is an old superstition about how sterility can be removed; and that while of course he is much too sophisticated to accept such a superstition himself—it is 'our elders' who say it—still, Calpurnia had jolly well better get out there and get tagged, or else!"

This new emphasis on a pathetic or defective Caesar alongside the older and more simply heroic Caesar (like the dual public and private Brutus) is interpreted by Ernest Schanzer in the following typically modern way: "the polarity of critical estimates of the characters of the main *dramatis personae*. . . bears witness to Shakespeare's success in making *Julius Caesar* a problem play." In fact Schanzer goes so far as to suggest that there are more than two Caesars, that "we are given a series of images of Caesar none of which bear much mutual resemblance," and that this multiplicity of images interacting with multiple meanings elsewhere serves the aim of the play by breeding problems in a Pirandellian fashion.

The Structure of the Play

When modern critics turn from the parts of *Julius Caesar* to the play as a whole, they tend to find a structure which in its ironic contrasts parallels and supports the ambiguous, problem-breeding nature of the characters. Brents Stirling, for example, looking beyond

character and plot to the basic organization of the play, finds a series of analagous scenes which have in common "the bringing of serious ritual into great prominence, and of subjecting it to satirical treatment." The central scene of this kind is the assassination, which Brutus sets out to dignify by "lifting it to a level of rite and ceremony," but which is obviously a murder rather than a pure sacrifice. The opening scenes have prepared us to take this ironic view of the assassination, because in them, too, ceremony is mocked. In the second scene, for example, "a multiple emphasis on ceremony is capped by Casca's satire which twists the crown ritual into imbecile mummery." And after the assassination, we are reminded of its flawed nature not only by events but also by Antony's insistence on the real butchery of the act. Leo Kirschbaum had earlier argued against the critical tradition which since the eighteenth century has tried to remove the blood from the assassination scene, and particularly from the noble hands of Brutus. Kirschbaum reminds us that Shakespeare "invented the blood-bath, deliberately gave the proposal for it to Brutus, and followed it with the invention of the bloody handshaking action with Antony." Shakespeare, according to Kirschbaum, deliberately shocks us into seeing that all "murder is in the act savage and inhuman," and that "whether or not killing ever justifies the doctrine of a bad means serving a good end, the merciless rending of a man is an obscene performance."

The interpretation of the political pattern and meaning of *Julius Caesar* has also moved in the direction of the problem play, although topical one-sided productions are still probably best known. The recording of Orson Welles' 1937 version of the play as an attack against dictatorship (in which Welles of course played Brutus) will give one a striking sample of the democratic slanting of the assassination which runs back to Hazlitt and has been recently re-emphasized by Dover Wilson. The 1956-1957 Stratford (England) production, as described by Roy Walker, illustrates the conservative, Caesar-centered interpretation of which MacCallum is one of the early twentieth-century spokesmen: "Shakespeare makes it abundantly clear that the rule of the single master-mind is the only admissible solution for the problem of the time." Accepting this interpretation, Glen Byam Shaw raised the curtain on his Stratford production to show a "larger-than-life statue of Caesar, raised on a tall plinth in the centre of the stage"; and he lowered his final curtain on a scene in which the "dead body of the tragically deluded liberator lay in the centre of the stage, not in Rome but in the wilderness he had helped to make of Rome, and high above him shone out the star of whose true-fixed and resting quality there is no fellow in the firmament."

The balance characteristic of the problem play is maintained, however, in L. C. Knights' interpretation of the political meaning. He extends the idea of the dual Brutus and the dual Caesar into the play's structure by stressing the contrasts it offers between the public world of politics and the occasional glimpses of personal life. "The distance between these two worlds," he suggests, "is the measure of the distortion and falsity that takes place in the attempt to make 'politics' self-enclosed." The attempt, Knights adds, is common to both sides: "Caesar constantly assumes the public mask," and "Brutus, who loved Caesar, wrenches his mind to divorce policy from friendship." The play's political lesson, therefore, is not partisan, since it tells us "that human actuality is more important than *any* political abstraction" whether from the left or the right.

Criticism and Cultural Change

As one reviews the interpretations of *Julius Caesar* from late Victorian times to the present, he is struck by the responsiveness of criticism to cultural change. That *Caesar* should now be read as a problem play does not seem surprising given our strong sense today of the theatricality of politics, our knowingness about the images and the image-makers of public life, our feeling that the real person is the one behind the mask, and our experience with a cold war reality of mixed right and wrong and of patched-up measures which breed more dilemmas. All of this raises an awkward question: to what extent are the critics reacting to the play and to what extent to their times? In trying to answer that question, we are obliged, fortunately, to go back to the play and rely on our own taste and skill. We may very well conclude that the high Roman thing in the play is frequently no better than stereotyped writing calling for a stock response. And we may also conclude, on the other hand, that some of the problems which recent critics have found in the play are simply the product of Shakespeare's uncertain control of tone. Where the tone is firmly controlled and the writing is truly dramatic, as in the quarrel scene between Brutus and Cassius, critics from Samuel Johnson to the present have responded unanimously in praising those effects which are as old as drama and which we now associate with the so-called problem play.

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