Critical Survey

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A Survey of Critical Responses

[1] Reflecting on the decisive transition from neo-classical to Romantic criticism of Shakespeare, Jonathan Bate cites T. S. Eliot's comment that while we can never be right about Shakespeare, "we should from time to time change our way of being wrong." Bate's point is that "the Romantics were especially good at driving out assorted errors of Voltaire and Dr Johnson with new errors of their own" (*Romantics*, 3). A corollary of Eliot's insight is that one benefit of recognizing how Shakespeare has been understood in the past is to recognize better how we understand him ourselves. Though more comfortable and seemingly more natural than anything else, our view is not the right view; it departs from what preceded it but only at the cost of introducing new distortions that will in turn need to be corrected. In the process old ideas will be rediscovered and sometimes even repeated, while genuinely new insights will be introduced. The following discussion of how *Julius Caesar* in particular has been interpreted bears out Eliot's observation and aims to assist understanding of the play by a critical summary of historical views.

Criticism of Shakespeare began with a strong bias in favor of Renaissance Italian neo-classicism whose assumptions continued to dominate commentary for almost 200 years. *Julius Caesar* was assessed in light of criteria supposedly derived from the ancient critics, Aristotle and Horace, and by those criteria the play was generally found wanting. A reaction against neo-classical poetry in the late eighteenth century, especially by Wordsworth and Coleridge, quickly led to a reaction against neo-classical criticism as well, and Shakespeare emerged as the model of an innovative style. Viewed in this way, *Julius Caesar* elicited much greater admiration, especially for its leading characters, and a debate ensued as to which was in fact the greatest character—Caesar or Brutus—and why. Character criticism extended into the early twentieth century with M. W. MacCallum's *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Background*, which marked the end of a critical movement, even as it anticipated some of the twentieth century's most important insights about *Julius Caesar*. These included providential

imperialism, developed influentially as the "Tudor myth" by E. M. W. Tillyard, and self-deception, an informing assumption of postmodern criticism. G. Wilson Knight's *The Imperial Theme* moved criticism of *Julius Caesar* in another influential direction: the analysis of symbol and theme, which also continues into postmodern criticism of the play, especially in understanding imagery of blood and the body.

1. Horace and *Julius Caesar*

By a curious and unforeseeable coincidence, the critic who most strongly influenced the first two centuries of response to Shakespeare's writing in general, and to *Julius Caesar* in particular, was a Roman, Quintus Horatius Flaccus, who turned twenty-one in the year Julius Caesar was assassinated. Though Shakespeare could hardly have known it, Horace (the Roman critic's more familiar English name) joined Brutus and Cassius as a young officer after Julius Caesar's assassination and commanded a legion at the battle of Philippi in 42 B.C—the concluding event in Shakespeare's play. Eventually pardoned by Octavian for his opposition, Horace nonetheless withdrew from political life and became an influential literary figure after the senate declared Octavian "Augustus" in 27. Thus sidelined from military and political action, Horace unwittingly set the standard for later interpretation through a verse epistle, *Ars Poetica*, which he wrote early in the long political calm—eventually known as the *pax Romana*—following Augustus' defeat of Antony. Centuries later, Italian Renaissance critics came to regard *Ars Poetica* as a direct Latin equivalent to Aristotle's *Poetics* (Weinberg, 1.111-55), and the prestige of Italian criticism brought Horace to prominence in early seventeenth-century England. Shakespeare's contemporary, Ben Jonson rendered Horace's poem in English (published in 1640), probably from a copy of the *Ars Poetica* he owned in Latin, bound together with the Italian commentary of Bernardino Parthenio (1560), with "much of the second part . . . underlined" (Jonson, ed. Herford and Simpson, 1.266). (On Parthenio, see Weinberg, 1.145-47.) Moreover, Jonson largely followed *Ars Poetica* in the brief comments he penned on his fellow actor and playwright—the first critical response to Shakespeare and the first of many to interpret Shakespeare through a Renaissance Horatian lens.

One of Jonson's most Horatian passages appears in his commendatory verses for the Folio of 1623, "To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare," where Jonson acknowledges both nature and art in Shakespeare's writing. After praising nature, Jonson turns to art with emphasis:

> Yet must I not give nature all; thy art,
> My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part.
> For though the poet's matter nature be,
> His art doth give the fashion; and that he
> Who casts to write a living line must sweat
> (Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
> Upon the muse's anvil; turn the same,
> And himself with it, and that he thinks to frame,
> Or for the laurel he may gain a scorn;
> For a good poet's made as well as born. (55-64)

Horace's way of treating the *topos* of art vs. nature was especially influential in the Renaissance, and Jonson is indebted to *Ars Poetica*. The awkward parenthesis, "(Such as thine are)," in "To the Memory" (60) is deliberate. Referring back to "living line" (59), it inevitably refers to "sweat" as well, which it immediately follows—as if Jonson is saying that Shakespeare had to sweat out his lines. Indeed, that is precisely Jonson's claim, once the tangled syntax is straightened out: poetry did not come to Shakespeare merely by nature; he had to work for it, "For a good poet's made as well as born." Jonson's image of "the muse's anvil" is from Horace: "to the anvil bring / Those ill-turned verses to new hammering," in Jonson's translation (Herford and Simpson, 8.304-37, lines 627-8; 440-1 in the original Latin). That Shakespeare did not sweat or hammer out his verse on the anvil *enough* is a backhanded compliment in the commendatory poem, like the often-quoted qualifying clause, "though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek" (31). Horace's advice to Roman poets lies behind this clause: "Take you the Greek examples for your light / In hand, and turn them over, day and night" (396-7; 268-9). If Shakespeare had followed Horace's advice, Jonson implies, Shakespeare's poetry would have achieved a better balance between nature and art.

Horace's comments on nature and art underlie Jonson's other extended critical comment on Shakespeare, in which he mentions *Julius Caesar* in particular. According to William Drummond of Hawthornden, Jonson complained that "Shakespeare wanted [i.e., lacked] art" (Herford and Simpson, 1.133), and the complaint explains Jonson's reminiscence in *Discoveries* (1640):

> His wit was in his own power; would the rule of it had been so too. Many times he fell into those things could not escape laughter, as when he said in the person of Caesar (one

> speaking to him, "Caesar, thou dost me wrong"), he replied, "Caesar did never wrong but with just cause" and such like, which were ridiculous. (Herford and Simpson, 8.584)

Jonson uses "wit" in this passage with full awareness of its Latin counterpart, *ingenium*, meaning something like "imaginative intelligence," which places it in the domain of nature, rather than art, and his usage therefore anticipates the high neo-classical contrast between "wit" and "judgment" (Lewis, 90-96). His point about undisciplined wit in *Julius Caesar* refers to the moments before Caesar's assassination, when Caesar refuses Metellus Cimber's appeal on behalf of his brother, Publius Cimber. As printed in the Folio, Caesar concludes his refusal with a self-righteous assertion: "Know, Caesar doth not wrong, nor without cause / Will he be satisfied" (TLN 1254-5). Jonson remembered that Metellus had objected, "Caesar, thou dost me wrong," to which Caesar had replied, "Caesar did never wrong but with just cause." In the late eighteenth century, Thomas Tyrwhitt conjecturally reconstructed Caesar's lines as Jonson might have heard them: "Know Caesar doth not wrong, but with just cause, / Nor without cause will he be satisfied" (Steevens 2, 8.59n. 1). Tyrwhitt surmised that Jonson's criticism of the lines had reached Shakespeare, who undertook to rewrite them in response before publication of *Julius Caesar* in the Folio.

For present purposes, the point of Jonson's critique is its Horatian spirit, not the accuracy of Jonson's memory. (For further comments on that point, see the Textual Introduction). Jonson alludes to Horace again in his reminiscence to Drummond: "I remember the players have often mentioned it as an honor to Shakespeare that in his writing, whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out line. My answer hath been, 'Would he had blotted a thousand,'" citing the line from *Julius Caesar* as an instance. Jonson borrowed the metaphor of blotting from Horace, whose lines he had translated: "If you denied you had no better strain, / And twice or thrice had 'ssayed it, still in vain, / He'd bid, blot all" (625-27; 439-40). Jonson's whole critique of Shakespeare in *Discoveries* makes sense in light of the way Jonson had translated Horace's advice:

> A wise and honest man will cry out shame
> On artless verse; the hard ones he will blame,
> Blot out the careless with his turnèd pen,
> Cut off superflouous ornaments, and when
> They're dark, bid "Clear this," all that's doubtful wrote
> Reprove, and what is to be changèd note,

> Become an Aristarchus, and not say,
> "Why should I grieve my friend this trifling way?"
> These trifles into mischiefs lead,
> The man once mocked and suffered wrong to tread. (633-42; 445-52)

Aristarchus, a second-century B.C.E. Alexandrian and scholar of Homer, was famous for his incisive criticism, and Jonson images himself as such a critic to Shakespeare, assuming the Horatian persona of the supportive but alert reader—one whose art was required to curb the other's prolific nature (Martindale). If the players had not actually commended Shakespeare in the way Jonson claims they did, he would have had to invent them to create for himself the Horatian role he loved to play.

Jonson was the first swallow in the spring of neo-classical criticism of Shakespeare on Horatian principles. For two centuries after Jonson, critics of Shakespeare positioned themselves on a Horatian continuum according to their preference for nature or art. Flatly contradicting Jonson's commendatory verses for the Folio that "a good poet's made as well as born," Leonard Digges asserts that "Poets are born, not made" in the opening line of his commendatory verses for Shakespeare's *Poems* (1640; Vickers 1.27-29), citing Shakespeare as proof that nature is more important than art. Digges thus originated in English an idea that was much later Latinized for the first time by Coleridge (Ringler 197n. 1). To make the point about Shakespeare, Digges compares him with Jonson, allusively contrasting Jonson's published *Works* (1616) with Shakespeare's book of poems, "where thou hast (I will not say, / Reader, his works—for to contrive a play / To him was none) the pattern of all wit, / Art without art unparalleled as yet" (7-10). Nature enabled Shakespeare to "play," not "work," Digges claims, and thereby to achieve the highest art—a commendation that has some similarities with Polixenes' evaluation of art and nature in *The Winter's Tale* (4.4.89-97), which is closer to Puttenham's *Art of English Poesie* (1589), as Harold Wilson argues, than to Horace. Digges subsequently contrasts Shakespeare and Jonson again with specific reference to *Julius Caesar*:

> So have I seen, when Caesar would appear,
> And on the stage at half-sword parley were
> Brutus and Cassius, oh, how the audience
> Were ravished, with what wonder they went thence. (41-44)

This, in contrast to Jonson's classical tragedies:

> When some new day they would not brook a line
> Of tedious (though well-labored) *Catiline*.
> *Sejanus* too was irksome; they prized more
> Honest Iago or the jealous Moor. (45-48)

"Well-labored" is a backhanded tribute to Jonson's art in his two classically correct and learnedly glossed tragedies. They are indeed "works," Digges implies, suggesting that Jonson had sweated at the anvil of the muses for too long.

Digges had been thinking about these issues for several years. His commendatory verses for Shakespeare's *Poems* in 1640 twice echo his earlier commendatory verses for the Folio of 1623: "half-sword parley" and "wit-fraught book." His praise of Shakespeare as "the pattern of all wit" uses "wit" in the same way Jonson uses it but draws the opposite conclusion—not that Shakespeare's wit needed curbing but that it was a model to every poet. Digges thus anticipates Milton's contrast in "L'Allegro" (1631) between "Jonson's learned sock" and "sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child / Warbl[ing] his native woodnotes wild" (132-4). Milton uses "fancy" to mean much the same thing Jonson and Digges mean by "wit" and thereby attributes Shakespeare's skill, again, to nature rather than art.

Less combative than Digges, Margaret Cavendish drew on Horace to defend Shakespeare's characters in particular. "So well he hath expressed in his plays all sorts of persons," Cavendish writes, "as one would think he had been transformed into every one of those persons he hath described" (Vickers, 1.43). Taken alone, this praise might be misconstrued as an assertion of imaginative identification on a Romantic model, but Cavendish wrote in 1662, and what she has in mind is Horace's admonition concerning the decorum of character, in Jonson's somewhat opaque translation: "Or follow fame, thou that dost write, or feign / Things in themselves agreeing" (169-70; 119-20). Jonson aimed to capture Horace's point about self-consistency, as the translator's subsequent lines make clear:

> If something strange that never yet was had
> Unto the scene thou bring'st, and dar'st create
> A mere new person, look he keep his state
> Unto the last, as when he first went forth,
> Still to be like himself, and hold his worth. (178-82; 125-7)

"Keep his state" and "hold his worth" accurately reflect Horace's concern with identity conceived in broadly stoic and social-class terms (Miles 31)—a point Cavendish makes in defending Shakespeare's "ingenious" and "witty" ability to create compelling clowns as well as kings (Vickers 1.42). The poet's aim should be to keep each character "like himself," in Jonson's translation—consistent, that is, with expectation as established by the classical three levels of style (high, middle, and low) in their presumed decorous correspondence to levels of society. Jonson himself construed this expectation differently, as his plays make clear, avoiding the mingling of social classes that is one of Shakespeare's hallmarks. Jonson, in short, would not have agreed with Cavendish, and later neo-classical critics agreed with Jonson.

Whereas Horace cites examples of self-consistent characters from classical epic and tragedy, Cavendish cites examples from Shakespeare, singling out those in *Julius Caesar* for particular admiration: "Certainly Julius Caesar, Augustus Caesar, and Antonius did never really act their parts better, if so well, as he hath described them, and I believe that Antonius and Brutus did not speak better to the people than he hath feigned them" (Vickers 1.43). Cavendish's praise of Shakespeare's characterization as "witty" and "ingenious" identifies it as the product of nature, rather than art, yet Cavendish argues that Shakespeare's characters meet Horace's requirements of artful self-consistency ("act their parts"). Her praise, in short, is very close to Digges's, without challenging Jonson as forthrightly as Digges had.

By the later seventeenth century, the Italian Renaissance conflation of Horace with Aristotle had become a widespread critical assumption in England: "Of that book which Aristotle hath left us," wrote John Dryden in 1668, "Horace his *Art of Poetry* is an excellent comment, and, I believe, restores to us that second book of his concerning comedy, which is wanting in him" (*An Essay of Dramatic Poesie*, *Works* 17.17). Horace was so familiar to Dryden that he seems to have quoted *Ars Poetica* from memory, judging from the slight alterations he sometimes introduces (Hammond). As a practicing dramatist himself, Dryden could not help admiring Shakespeare and others in "the giant race before the flood" (i.e., the dramatists before the civil war), as he writes in "To My Dear Friend, Mr. Congreve" (line 5; *Works* 4.432), but he was aware that the "giants" did not conform to neo-classical theory, and he was therefore inclined to defend them as inspired more by nature than by art. Indeed, Dryden's allusion to the "giant race" may actually be as arch as it is appreciative, judging from an allusion to the same giants thirty years earlier, in *Astraea Redux*, written to celebrate the coronation of Charles II. There Dryden had impugned anti-Royalists as antediluvian giants, who "own'd a lawless savage liberty / Like

that our painted ancestors so priz'd / Ere empire's arts their breasts had civiliz'd" (lines 46-8, *Works* 1.23). The contrast between "savage liberty" and imperial "arts" is a political judgment informed by the esthetic contrast between nature and art, and given Dryden's consistent political conservatism, the same judgment still seems to cling to Dryden's much later allusion to giants, including Shakespeare.

As the best of seventeenth-century critics, it is unfortunate that Dryden had little to say about *Julius Caesar*. (Some editors ascribe the prologue to a Restoration revival of *Julius Caesar* to Dryden [Vickers 1.141], and the ascription has in its favor the poem's praise of "artless beauty" that "lies in Shakespeare's wit.") Writing about himself in the third person, as Jonson habitually does in his dramatic prologues, Dryden glances allusively at the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius (4.3) in the Prologue to *Aureng-Zebe*, acknowledging his awe at Shakespeare's "nature," which nonetheless lacks art:

> But spite of all his pride, a secret shame
> Invades his breast at *Shakespear's* sacred name:
> Aw'd, when he hears his Godlike *Romans* rage,
> He, in a just despair, would quit the Stage;
> And to an Age less polish'd, more unskill'd,
> Does, with disdain, the foremost Honours yield. (*Works* 12.159)

If Dryden had written about *Julius Caesar* at greater length, he would likely have praised the plot, despite its failure to achieve the three "unities" of time, place, and action that were prized by Italian theorists and French dramatists, but Dryden would almost certainly have decried the mingling of plebeians with patricians, because it was perceived to violate Horatian decorum of character: "each subject should retain / The place allotted it, with decent thews" (124-25; 89). (Jonson uses "thews" to mean "traits" or "attributes," and he knew that "decent" and "decorous" have the same Latin root.) If Dryden had written a version of the play, it would almost certainly have had no commoners, i.e., no witty Cobbler, no rowdy plebeians, and no Lucius.

While trying to refine the rude manners of pre-Restoration drama in his own plays, i.e., to create more artful drama, Dryden was also trying to protect himself from the judgment of a strict neo-classical critic, Thomas Rymer, whose censure of *Julius Caesar* is included in his *Short View of Tragedy* (1693). Dryden clearly stated his disagreement with Rymer in his draft "Heads of an Answer to Rymer," including notes for replying to Rymer's earlier book, *The Tragedies of the Last Age Considered and*

Examined (1678), but the notes remained unpublished (*Works* 17:185-93). Rymer was formidable not only for the narrow certitude of his theory but even more for his vituperative style. With Horace's decorum of character in mind, Rymer heaped scorn on the indignity with which Shakespeare "treats the noblest Romans. But there is no other cloth in his wardrobe. Everyone must be content to wear a fool's coat who comes to be dressed by him" (156). This reverses Margaret Cavendish's assessment and outflanks the objection that Shakespeare mingles patricians and plebeians by denying noble status even to his patricians. "For indeed that language which Shakespeare puts in the mouth of Brutus would not suit or be convenient unless from some son of the shambles or some natural off-spring of the butchery" (151). So indignant is Rymer with Shakespeare on the question of character decorum that he does not even address Shakespeare's violation of the three unities. He reserves that censure for Jonson's *Catiline*, which he also savages: as a classically trained playwright, Jonson should have known better (161). Rymer's view of art was so extreme and so narrow that it denied any art to Shakespeare, asserting that he drew ignorantly on nothing but nature and his own commoner's imagination, which "was still running after his masters, the cobblers, and parish clerks, and Old Testament strollers" (156).

Rymer's critical indignation had a large moral component, which he derived (or at any rate justified) from Horace's admonition that the best fictions mix "doctrine" (*utile*) with "delight" (*dulci*) (*Ars Poetica* 516; 360). Rymer was the first to infer that "doctrine" specifically required "poetic justice," that is, a presumed vindication of divine providence in a tragic plot by allotting a benign fortune to moral characters and a malign outcome to immoral ones. Using Rymer's criterion, all of Shakespeare's tragedies are failures, as John Dennis argued vigorously, if narrowly, concerning the "irreligious" *Julius Caesar* in particular. The killing of Caesar must be either "a murder or a lawful action." If it is lawful, then the deaths of Brutus and Cassius "are downright murder." But if Caesar's death is murder, then Brutus and Cassius "are justly punished for it," and Shakespeare is wrong not to show the other conspirators being punished as well, "which proceeding gives an occasion to the people to draw a dangerous inference from it, which may be destructive to government and to human society" (Vickers 2.147). Charles Gildon combined a critique of poetic justice in *Julius Caesar* with a complaint about its plot. "Brutus is plainly the shining and darling character of the poet," so the play is faulty either in its title or in not ending with Caesar's death, which would have made it "much more regular, natural, and beautiful. But then the moral must naturally have been the punishment or ill success of tyranny" (Vickers 2.256).

No less Horatian (in the neo-classical view of Horace) are Dennis's comments about Shakespeare's classical learning, which also address the question of the play's length and focus. Jonson's slighting remark about Shakespeare's "small Latin and less Greek" was inspired by Horace's admonition to Latin poets to steep themselves in Greek models, and in turn it seems to have inspired Dennis to claim that the failures of *Julius Caesar* are attributable to deficiencies in Shakespeare's classical learning: "Had Shakespeare read either Sallust or Cicero how could he have made so very little of the first and greatest of men, as that Caesar should be but a fourth-rate actor in his own tragedy?" (Vickers 2.288). Dennis certainly knew that Shakespeare drew his inspiration from Plutarch, so Dennis's complaint has less to do with Shakespeare's lack of reading than with his not reading the sources Dennis thought he should have read in order to write the play that Dennis thought he should have written. Applying similar strictures, Gildon complained that *Julius Caesar* failed to conform to the "unity of action, which can never be broke without destroying the poem." The play should have ended with Caesar's death; otherwise, the ending is arbitrary, and having thus failed to observe one unity, the play fails to observe others: "Natural reason indeed showed to Shakespeare the absurdity of making the representation longer than the time and the place more extensive than the place of acting" (Vickers 2.222). Awed by Rymer's extreme neo-classicism, Dennis and Gildon show how critical reason became increasingly naturalized to the particular strictures that critics had learned to associate with Horace and Aristotle.

The topics of the Horatian debate concerning *Julius Caesar* were thus well established in England by the early eighteenth century, and high neo-classical criticism repeated those topics with variations. Critics who believed art should follow putatively Horatian and Aristotelian rules found Shakespeare's departure from the rules a problem in *Julius Caesar*, as Dennis and Gildon had. In this category are failures in the decorum of character (imagining plebeians in the same play with patricians; not making patricians speak and act like patricians) and violations of the three unities, especially the failure to unify action and time. If the play ended with the death of Caesar, it would be very nearly continuous in time over the course of not much more than twenty-four hours, and it would not entail "extraneous" action involving Brutus's defeat, as well as Caesar's. Shakespeare's failure to meet the requirements of art was due, moreover, to his ignorance of classical models—his failure to study Greek and Latin as assiduously as his critics had.

On the other side, neo-classical defenders of *Julius Caesar* also used Horace as their authority, arguing that nature was Shakespeare's inspiration, rather than art, and thereby following (whether they knew it

or not) the example of Leonard Digges. "Nature" came increasingly to mean not only superior imaginative intelligence, described as "wit" or "genius," but also an ability to understand and convey the feelings of characters and even the advantage derived from Shakespeare's being a relatively unlearned countryman. Richard Steele conceded in 1709 that Shakespeare introduces Julius Caesar in his nightgown, but this shows that "genius was above . . . mechanic methods of showing greatness" (Vickers 2.205). Shakespeare depicts the "great soul" debating subjects of ultimate importance, "without endeavoring to prepossess his audience with empty show and pomp." What would have been a scandal to Rymer is a stroke of genius to Steele. One of Shakespeare's best early editors, Lewis Theobald, maintained that "particular irregularities" in Shakespeare do not matter, because "it is not to be expected that a genius like Shakespeare should be judged by the laws of Aristotle and the other prescribers to the stage" (Vickers 2.308). Theobald defends the quarrel of Brutus and Cassius by comparing it to aristocratic quarrels in *Iphigenia* by Euripides and in *The Maid's Tragedy* (1610) by John Fletcher, who had been generally regarded as more artful than Shakespeare since Dryden first said he was. Of the three, Theobald concludes, Shakespeare's treatment is "incomparably the best." Alexander Pope defended Shakespeare against the charge of being unlearned, observing that in *Julius Caesar* "not only the spirit but manners of the Romans are exactly drawn" (Vickers 2.407). Still, in his own edition of *Julius Caesar* Pope printed a dash for the word "hats" in the line, "their hats are plucked about their ears" (TLN 697), because Pope believed Roman patricians wore no hats. Theobald rejected the "hiatus" as "hypercritical": "Surely we make mad work with this or any other of our author's plays did we attempt to try them so strictly by the touchstone of antiquity" (Vickers 2.460).

The most thoughtful and incisive neo-classical defense of Shakespeare as "the poet of nature" was by Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his edition of Shakespeare (1765). Johnson used the phrase to mean that Shakespeare "holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (7.62). Developing an argument he had first tried almost fifteen years earlier (Vickers 3.434), Johnson wittily and cogently demolished arguments for the unities of time and place (7.76-80) and asserted that Shakespeare "has well enough preserved the unity of action," in that his plays have discernible beginnings and middles, "and the end of the play is the end of expectation" (7.75). To be sure, Johnson finds fault with Shakespeare, and in this he follows neo-classical precedent, starting with Dryden, though Johnson's most influential example was Henry Home, Lord Kames (Vickers 4.471-97). Indeed, Johnson enumerates faults in Shakespeare that are "sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit" (7.71-74). Among them is the violation of poetic justice: "he makes no just distribution of good or evil,

nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carried his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance" (7.71).

This echo of Rymer repeats the familiar neo-classical complaint that Shakespeare lacked art, so it is hardly surprising that "nature" and "natural" recur throughout Johnson's preface as terms of guarded praise. Shakespeare's "adherence to general nature has exposed him to the censure of critics who form their judgments upon narrower principles" (7.65); Shakespeare "indulged his natural inclination"; comedy was "a mode of thinking congenial to his nature"; his characters "are natural, and therefore durable"; "his characters are praised as natural" (7.69-70); "his power was the power of nature" (7.73). Johnson is not far removed, in his assessment of Shakespeare and "nature," from Margaret Cavendish: both critics draw ultimately on Horace and on the decorum of character in particular. Closer in time to Johnson, a similar position had been staked out by Gildon in 1703: "But if [poets] would study nature as much as Shakespeare did, their errors would be less visible and more supportable. But there is nothing more familiar with the ignorant decriers of the rules than to instance Shakespeare's pleasing without them, as in his characters, passions, etc.—the rules being only nature methodized—for sure nobody (I mean of sense) ever admired his conduct, the rules of which not being known in his time is his best plea for his offenses against them" (Vickers 2.8-9).

Still, Johnson's Horatian thinking about Shakespeare and "nature" goes beyond character to include what might be called "untrained originality." "The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity" (7.81), Johnson believed, so for Shakespeare "the greater part of his excellence was the product of his own genius" (7.87), since he lacked the example of art. Johnson was easily persuaded by the conventional neo-classical argument that Shakespeare was "natural" in the same way as Homer: "Perhaps it would not be easy to find any author except Homer who invented as much as Shakespeare, who so much advanced the studies which he cultivated, or effused so much novelty upon his age or country" (7.90). With "genius" as the explanation of Shakespeare's accomplishment, Johnson's summary judgment about *Julius Caesar* in particular is easier to understand. Johnson was not moved by the play, and he therefore thought it exhibited less of Shakespeare's natural gifts than other tragedies did: "his adherence to the real story and to Roman manners seems to have impeded the natural vigor of his genius" (8.836). As the great poet of nature, in Johnson's estimation, Shakespeare did less well when it came to classical material, with its greater suitability to treatment as

art, in which Shakespeare was deficient.

2. Romantic *Julius Caesar*

The straitjacket that neo-classical critics had tied around themselves by means of Horace and Aristotle was at last thrown off by critics writing under the influence of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century. To be sure, neo-classical criticism is subtler and more various than Romantic critics made it out to be for their own polemical purposes, and their innovations sometimes seem continuous with it. Leonard Digges's deliberately anti-Horatian (and anti-Jonsonian) assertion that "Poets are born, not made" was given Latin form for the first time by S. T. Coleridge in the early nineteenth century: "*Poeta nascitur, non fit*" (Bate, *Romantics* 148; Ringler, "*Poeta*" 497). Moreover, the "organic form" championed by both A. W. von Schlegel and Coleridge was arguably a carry-over from neo-classical criticism—an attempt to assert unity in Shakespeare's plays where the three neo-classical unities were manifestly inapplicable. Again, the character criticism that became a hallmark of Romantic commentary had been anticipated by Margaret Cavendish, as noted above. Still, unlike Digges, Coleridge was not reacting against Jonson in his declaration about the poet being born, not made (though he undoubtedly knew the Horatian allusion, he had something else entirely in mind); the assertion of organic unity was not merely a repeated commonplace but was so new and so persuasive that it persisted as a critical assumption until the second half of the twentieth century; and the new character criticism was much more than Cavendish's variation on the Horatian decorum of character. In short, Romantic critics set off in a genuinely new direction, which made an impact on the understanding of *Julius Caesar*, as well as other plays.

The new direction was marked by character criticism in particular, which became the favored means of understanding Shakespeare's plays until well into the twentieth century. "The unity of character pervades the whole of his dramas," Coleridge asserted, closely linking character with "the unity of feeling," in deliberate contrast to the neo-classical three unities (Bate, *Romantics* 129), which represent merely mechanical coherence, imposed from without, rather than "organic form" (128). Schlegel had earlier offered a version of this distinction (4-5), as Coleridge duly acknowledges. The Romantics were probably not indebted to Steele's contrast, noted above, between Shakespeare's "genius" and "mechanic methods," but Steele's comment suggests greater continuity between neo-classical and Romantic assumptions than the Romantics themselves wished to acknowledge. Coleridge applied his idea most

influentially to *Hamlet*, where he saw the character of the Prince driving events, so that character actually determined the form of the play (136-7). "In all his [Shakespeare's] various characters," Coleridge observes, in his clearest linking between character and organic form, "we still feel ourselves communing with the same human nature, which is every where present as the vegetable sap in the branches, sprays, buds, blossoms, and fruits, their shapes, tastes, and odours" (159-60).

The consequence of Shakespeare's "communing . . . with human nature," in Coleridge's estimation, is that Shakespeare was "myriad-minded" (147, 156), a point that especially impressed Hazlitt in his own assessment of Shakespeare's characters. In this point, too, Coleridge and Hazlitt were preceded by Schlegel, who observes of Shakespeare that "It is the capability of transporting himself so completely into every situation, even the most unusual, that he is enabled, as the plenipotentiary of the whole human race, without particular instructions for each separate case, to act and speak in the name of every individual" (97). Shakespeare "seemed scarcely to have an individual existence of his own," Hazzlitt maintains, "but to borrow that of others at will, and to pass successively through 'every variety of untried being'" (166). "Each of his characters is as much itself, and as absolutely independent of the rest, as well as of the author, as if they were living persons, not fictions of the mind" (184). Margaret Cavendish had exclaimed of Shakespeare that "one would think he had been transformed into every one of those persons he hath described," and Hazlitt makes a similar claim: "The poet may be said, for the time, to identify himself with the character he wishes to represent, and to pass from one to another, like the same soul successively animating different bodies" (184). The difference is that Cavendish was thinking in terms of Horatian character decorum, while Hazlitt was thinking of Romantic feeling and the animating force of character in a plot that is character-driven. Even when Shakespeare imagines a wholly new character, like Caliban, Hazlitt argues, he creates a unified world around the character, and that world is the play's unity. "The whole 'coheres semblably together' in time, place, and circumstance" (182). In this point, too, Schlegel anticipated Hazlitt—even in using Caliban as an example: "These beings, though existing only in the imagination, nevertheless possess such truth and consistency, that even with such misshapen abortions as Caliban, he extorts the assenting conviction, that were such beings they would so conduct themselves" (98).

Though the Romantics' emphasis on character was continuous with neo-classical admiration for Shakespeare's characters, the Romantic argument linking characterization to a new conception of unity in the plays was genuinely innovative and influential. Indeed, it is still evident in the New Variorum

Edition of *Julius Caesar*, published in 1913, which devotes the first two-thirds of its critical summary to "The Character of Caesar" and "The Character of Brutus" (386-420). Schlegel pointed the way in this direction with his declaration that "Caesar is not the hero of the piece, but Brutus" (Bate, *Romantics* 374), a point on which critics differed repeatedly, setting off a debate about the "hero" of the play. Neo-classical critics had noticed the imbalance of attention to Brutus in *Julius Caesar* (see Gildon's comment above, for example, that "Brutus is plainly the shining and darling character of the poet"), but the debate reflected in the New Variorum is rooted in nineteenth-century character criticism. Coleridge was frankly puzzled by Brutus: "I do not at present see into Shakespeare's motive, his rationale, or in what point of view he meant Brutus' character to appear" (Bate, *Romantics* 375). Hazlitt, however, thought "the whole design of the conspirators to liberate their country fails from the generous temper and overweening confidence of Brutus in the goodness of their cause and the assistance of others" (377)—in other words, Brutus's character drives the plot. William Watkiss Lloyd agreed that "it is Brutus on whom the interest and sympathy of the play converge and become continuous throughout its course, making him thus, in a certain sense, its hero" (Variorium 387), and Gustav Freytag agreed: "Brutus, the warm-hearted youth, the noble, the patriotic, is hero" (Variorium 427). "It is indeed true," echoed H. N. Hudson, "that Brutus is the hero" (234).

Georg Gottfried Gervinus, argued, on the contrary, that the play "does not bear [Caesar's] name without a reason," because the civil war that commences with his death is carried on in his name (721), and variations on Gervinus' argument were offered by Albert Lindner and Edward Dowden. "As Caesar lives, he is a weakling," wrote Lindner, "a phantom with many infirmities; after his death, a spiritual power, more fearful than even in life" (Variorum 387). Dowden cited the acknowledgment of Antony, Cassius, and Brutus in *Julius Caesar* concerning the posthumus power of Caesar and concluded that "With strict propriety, therefore, the play bears the name of Julius Caesar" (288). These comments by no means settled the long-running debate; they merely illustrate how the debate originated in the Romantic assumption that the characters of Shakespeare's plays are the most important thing about them.

The Romantics linked an innovative notion of dramatic unity not only to their emphasis on character but also to an idea about purpose in history that affected their criticism of *Julius Caesar* in particular, because Shakespeare's best known Roman play was thought to anticipate the historical teleology that Romantics themselves believed. Their own self-designation, "Romantic," derives from an understanding of European history that distinguished the "classic" heritage of Greece and Rome from the Germanic

heritage that replaced it. Aiming to distinguish the supposedly timeless rules of neo-classical "art" from the art he admired, Coleridge constructed a polemical history of Europe based on the commonplace that Latinate Germanic languages were called "romance" languages, "to which term, as distinguishing their Songs and Fabliaux, we owe the word and the species of *romance*—the romantic may be considered as opposed to the antique, and from this change of manners, those of Shakespear take their colouring. He is not to be tried by ancient and classic rules, but by the standard of his age. That law of unity which has its foundation, not in factitious necessity of custom, but in nature herself, is instinctively observed by Shakespear" (Bate, *Romantics* 129).

In short, the reason Coleridge thought that the mechanical rules of neo-classical criticism were inapplicable to an artist like Shakespeare is that Shakespeare fulfilled the purpose of history by drawing on his "romantic" heritage. Schlegel similarly understood Jonson's Horatian response to Shakespeare not only as Leonard Digges had understood it but also as essentially foreign to Shakespeare: "Ben Jonson, a younger contemporary and rival of Shakespeare, who laboured in the sweat of his brow, but with no great success, to expel the romantic drama from the English stage, and to form it on the model of the ancients, gave it as his opinion that Shakespeare did not blot enough, and that as he did not possess much school-learning, he owed more to nature than to art" (Bate, *Romantics* 89). Hazlitt agreed that neo-classical critics "made criticism a kind of Procrustes' bed of genius"—Shakespeare's genius, in particular (Bate, *Romantics* 177). Behind this view is an unstated idea of history itself unfolding organically, with the "romantic," personified by Shakespeare, inevitably supplanting the "classic," despite the attempts of critics from Ben Jonson to Samuel Johnson to resist the supplanting by defining art narrowly in Horatian terms. Only with the Romantics had Shakespeare come into his own as the perfect flowering of English culture. "O what great men hast thou not produced," exclaimed Coleridge, "England! my country! truly indeed—" (Bate, *Romantics* 152).

The Romantics' triumphalist idea of history has some continuity with the Enlightenment idea of progress, but it took on a life of its own, not only informing literary criticism but also anticipating nineteenth-century nationalism (as Coleridge's exclamation suggests), opposition to French cultural hegemony with attendant memories and fears of political rivalry (Bate, *Romantics* 10-13, 16-20, 24-25), the music of Richard Wagner, much of Tennyson's poetry, and even the teleology of biological and social evolution. The idea affected criticism of *Julius Caesar* in that Shakespeare was thought by some Romantics to have divined the nineteenth-century idea of history in his Roman history play. "One and

the same thought is reflected by the fall of Caesar," wrote Hermann Ulrici, "in the deaths of Brutus and Cassius, and in the victory of Antony and Octavius," and this "thought" is "the course of history" (Variorum 429-30). Caesar was really overthrown not by the conspiracy but by a disembodied "oligarchical principle," represented by the triumvirate that replaced the conspirators. "It conquered because it had the right of the immediate present on its side" (430). Such an understanding of history sees whatever happens as happening by necessity, as the inevitable unfolding of an irresistible process, which produces "the right of the immediate present." Hegel's influence on this conception may be operating in D. J. Snider's claim that "Caesar is the real hero" in *Julius Caesar* because he represents the "World Spirit" that finally triumphs: though opposed by Cassius, it is ultimately vindicated by "the restoration and absolute validity of the Caesarian movement" (Variorum, 432). "Spirit" is Hegel's term for historical movements, and Snider may have been thinking in quasi-Hegelian terms, seeing Caesar's thesis as opposed by Cassius' antithesis, ultimately to be replaced by a synthesis of both. Hegel's interpretation of tragedy explicitly informs A. C. Bradley's emphasis on "conflict or collision" in tragedy, in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (69-95), which is the likely source of A. R. Humphreys' assertion that *Julius Caesar* belongs to the category of "Hegelian tragedy" (Oxford 7, 34).

3. History and Providence

Romantic assumptions about both character and history achieved their most magisterial expression early in the twentieth century in A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, which effectively culminated the Romantic tradition. Bradley attended to just four plays, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth*, so he had little to say about *Julius Caesar*, but it was enough to register his view in the long-running debate about the hero: Shakespearean tragedy "is pre-eminently the story of one person, the 'hero,'" and in *Julius Caesar* "Brutus is the 'hero'" (7). Writing shortly after Bradley, M. W. MacCallum treated the three plays Shakespeare derived from Plutarch in the vein of Bradley's character criticism, though MacCallum struck a balance in the Romantic debate about the "hero" of *Julius Caesar* by proposing a solution akin to Snider's. On one hand, MacCallum agreed with those who thought the "spirit of Caesar" (TLN 800) is present from first to last (214), even when Julius Caesar himself is not, and this "spirit," which eventually prevails in Octavius, the future first emperor, is the Hegelian "spirit of Empire, the spirit of practical greatness in the domains of war, policy, organisation" (241). Brutus, on the other hand, is both "the model republican, the paragon of private and civic virtue" (233) and "the spirit of loyalty to duty" (241). Like Caesar, Brutus imperfectly represents the ideal he stands for, and the gap between

spirit and human embodiment accounts both for personal inconsistencies on Caesar's and Brutus's parts and for Brutus's ultimate failure.

Coming at the end of a critical tradition, MacCallum was easy to dismiss as old-fashioned and out of touch, as J. C. Maxwell made clear in his mid-century summary of writing about the Roman plays (6). MacCallum anticipated two major movements in twentieth-century criticism of *Julius Caesar*, however, and for that alone he deserves acknowledgment. For one thing, his perception of Caesar's place in history is consistent with a critical tradition concerning Shakespeare, history, and politics that gathered strength and endured well past the time of Maxwell's summary. MacCallum pointed to two passages in North's translation of Plutarch that supported a providentialist reading of Caesar's rise (215-16): Caesar represented "the absolute state of a monarchy and sovereign lord to govern" Rome (Plutarch 493), and Caesar seemed to be a "merciful physician, whom God had ordained of special grace to be governor of the empire of Rome and to set all things again at quiet stay" (Plutarch 864). MacCallum was impressed with these passages, because he thought they explained Shakespeare's view of Julius Caesar as "the spirit of Empire." In retrospect, MacCallum's own historical situation in the British Empire in the first decade of the twentieth century (especially as an expatriate Scot in Australia) illuminates his reading of both Plutarch and *Julius Caesar* better than North's providentialist translation illuminates Shakespeare's play. Even the weaknesses that Shakespeare invented for Caesar, MacCallum maintains, are "spots in the sun." Shakespeare is not concerned with them but rather with "the plenary inspiration of Caesar's life, the inspiration that made him an instrument of Heaven and that was to bring peace and order to the world" (230). The plenary inspiration that MacCallum identifies would seem to have as much to do with the early twentieth-century British Empire and the Romantic idea of destined national self-fulfillment as with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

MacCallum's notion that Caesar was a divine instrument in history acquired increasing solidity in the first half of the twentieth century. Writing at about the same time as MacCallum (though he published his essay much later), F. C. Kolbe thought *Julius Caesar* embodied "some high moral teaching" concerning "the conception which the Greeks called *Nemesis*" (154). This conception involved "the embodiment of divine wrath and jealousy" in history, manifesting itself first in Brutus's reaction against Caesar's ambition and second in retribution by Caesar's spirit (156). Kolbe was less enamored of Caesarian imperialism than MacCallum, but Kolbe's providentialist reading of *Julius Caesar* complements MacCallum's, and Kolbe finds a classical precedent for it. Both imperialism and nemesis

appear in Mark Hunter's essay, first read as a paper shortly after the general strike of 1926 and possibly in reaction against it. Shakespeare's attitude to politics, Hunter maintained, "was that of a Tory, the term being understood in a sense highly honourable," and in Shakespeare's plays "the principle which renders ordered society possible is said to be, not liberty, but obedience" (110-11). "The principle of the rule of the single person" was, for Shakespeare, "the norm of all manner of earthly power" (119). Hunter takes a dim view both of "the lower social orders" (117) in *Julius Caesar* and of those who conspire against Caesar. Providence enters Hunter's argument in his analysis of Antony "as the instrument of retributory nemesis" against the assassins (139). J. E. Phillips acknowledged both MacCallum and Hunter in outlining a theory of political order that Phillips thought Shakespeare shared with his contemporaries. This theory involves "a stratified, integrated political society in which all the parts function for the welfare of the whole under the administration of a single, sovereign governor" (4). Violation of this order inevitably results in political chaos, which Phillips argued is what happens in *Julius Caesar*: "we see, in the successful government of the title figure, the advantage of monarchy, and in the disastrous consequences of his assassination the evils of multiple sovereignty" (172). The assassins "function out of their degree and do violence to the state by taking justice into their own hands" (176). For Phillips, the "spirit of Caesar" is "the concept of unitary sovereignty," and it becomes "the nemesis against which Brutus' efforts, however highly motivated, are of no avail" (188).

Perceptions of historical providentialism in *Julius Caesar* that go back to MacCallum received their greatest impetus from E. M. W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* in 1944. Tillyard was part of an influential reaction against Romantic character criticism, turning instead to the history of ideas and the presumed assumptions of Shakespeare's audience. Still, Tillyard's continuity with MacCallum on some points is evident. Henry VII and his dynasty fostered a "Tudor myth," Tillyard argued, concerning their progenitor's accession and marriage to Elizabeth of York as "the providential and happy ending of an organic piece of history" (29). Tillyard thought the driving force behind this myth was a sense of historical cause and effect that first appeared in the Tudor chronicler, Polydore Vergil (35). Henry IV's violation of divinely appointed royal rulership in his overthrow of Richard II more than a century before Henry VII's accession was an originating cause that "shows the justice of God punishing and working out the effects of a crime, till prosperity is re-established in the Tudor monarchy" (36). A dynamic historical principle thus complemented a static image of hierarchy, which Tillyard described with copious contemporary references in *The Elizabethan World Picture*, also published in 1944. The point of intersection for history and image was the idea of *order*, the title of Chapter Two in *The Elizabethan*

World Picture, where Tillyard cites Ulysses' speech on "degree" in *Troilus and Cressida*, as Phillips had done earlier (5-6). Order manifests itself both in the smoothly running monarchy (including legitimate succession) and in the obedience, deference, and degree of cosmic and political hierarchy. As Graham Bradshaw notes (1-8), critics almost immediately pointed out that Tillyard represented only the outlook of privileged power; in effect, as Hunter claimed of Shakespeare himself, the attitude Tillyard described "was that of a Tory." It is hard to imagine Tillyard assuming any other attitude at a time when the British Empire was under severe strain from its conflict with Nazi Germany and Japan.

Though Tillyard had little to say about *Julius Caesar*, his ideas soon became dominant in Shakespearean criticism, and their impact on subsequent interpretation of *Julius Caesar* is evident. Citing Phillips (765n. 1), Brents Stirling outlined a case against Brutus based on "a flouting of unitary sovereignty, that prime point of Tudor policy" (765). J. Leeds Barroll brought enormous erudition to the task of showing that Shakespeare's contemporaries inherited a tradition of seeing providence in Roman history in much the same way they saw it in English history. Augustus' "beneficial unification" of Rome after the civil wars was thus directly analogous to "the Tudor myth itself" (328). Derek Traversi agreed that Shakespeare saw "the necessity of order in public affairs" in both the English history plays and the Roman plays, and Traversi thought that "this order rests in some sense upon Caesar's exercise of power" (12). In *Julius Caesar* in particular, "a tragic sacrifice" produces chaos and mere calculation until "a new Roman order rises to replace that which has been so wilfully destroyed" (21). Ernest Schanzer took a different view of the play, but his view required him explicitly to reject the providentialist reading, thereby confirming its importance in contemporary criticism by default. Schanzer thought *Julius Caesar* was a "problem" play because it focuses on a moral problem—namely, the sacrifice of "personal loyalties" "to political ideals" (*Problem* 68). He therefore disagreed that "the spirit of Caesar in the sense of 'Caesarism', the absolute rule of a single man, informs the second part of the play" (35), and he took issue with J. E. Phillips on this point in particular (36n. 1). Believing that *Julius Caesar* is "one of Shakespeare's few genuine problem plays" because it avoids "giving a plain and clear-cut answer" to the problems it raises (70), Schanzer necessarily opposed the moralism and providentialism of MacCallum, Tillyard, and others.

The providentialist reading of Julius Caesar reached its high-water mark in J. L. Simmons's book, *Shakespeare's Pagan World*. Simmons argued that the plays derived from Plutarch "are more genuinely Roman than is usually recognized" because they antedate Christian revelation and therefore offer a

genuinely "pagan world," devoid of the moral clarity that one finds in the English history plays (7). Acknowledging Barroll's essay for this view (8n. 21), Simmons traced it to the Augustinian idea of history, which he thought was evident in Thomas North's translation of Plutarch, specifically in the Epistle Dedicatory to Queen Elizabeth. Simmons also acknowledged, however, that Augustine's view is not one of providential triumphalism, and Simmons's reading of *Julius Caesar* followed suit. Citing the same passages on providential Caesarism from North's Plutarch that MacCallum had cited, Simmons argued that "practical politics and providence" alike "urge the necessity of one-man rule" (72). In other words, a strong man is necessary to prevent political chaos, but Simmons offered minimal assent to the strong man himself, emphasizing both Shakespeare's invented character weaknesses in Caesar and the play's sympathy to Brutus. "The play develops a conflict between the good of Caesar (political order, stability, and glory), flawed by his potential evil, and Brutus's ideal of a world in which no Caesar is necessary, flawed by the nature of man" (86). Simmons's complex and ironic analysis may respond to his own historical context toward the end of the Vietnam war, and his emphasis on Caesar's weaknesses tests the providential reading about as strongly as it could be tested and still hold together. With the rise of new historicism and cultural materialism in the next decade after Simmons's book appeared, reaction against Tillyard in particular became so strong that providentialist interpretations virtually disappeared from the critical record. John Drakakis's introduction to the collection of essays called *Alternative Shakespeares*, for example, explicitly challenged Tillyard (14-15), and Alessandro Serpieri's analysis of *Julius Caesar* in that collection is entirely semiotic (126-34).

4. Self-Deception

The second point in which MacCallum anticipated twentieth-century critical developments concerning *Julius Caesar* was his recognizing strong inconsistency in the characters of both Caesar and Brutus —inconsistency so strong that MacCallum referred to it as self-deception. Noting Caesar's fear of supernatural signs, MacCallum acknowledges "a touch of self-deception as well as of superstition in Caesar, and this self-deception reappears in other more important matters," such as Caesar's repeated insistence that he is not afraid (220-21). (Gervinus had anticipated MacCallum on this point: Caesar "speaks so much of having no fear, that by this very thing he betrays his fear" [720].) As for Brutus, MacCallum thought he was "doubly duped, by his own subtlety and his own simplicity in league with his conscientiousness . . . and such self-deception avenges itself as surely as any intentional crime" (255). Despite these canny insights, MacCallum was so impressed by Caesar's superiority as an imperial

ideal that he played down his own observation and understated the extent to which Shakespeare had made Caesar and Brutus resemble one another.

Though MacCallum was a neo-Romantic critic, his recognition of self-deception resonates strongly with postmodern criticism, because self-deception is a key expression of what Paul Ricoeur calls "suspicion" in postmodern thinking. The formative thinkers for postmodernism, Ricoeur points out, are Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, who all recognized a disjunction between conscious intention and unconscious motivation, thereby challenging the emphasis on rational consciousness that had prevailed in western thinking since Descartes ("I think, therefore I am"). Marx called this disjunction "false consciousness," but all three of Ricoeur's "masters of suspicion" acknowledged it in various forms. Using Ricoeur's key word, "suspicion," in describing Caesar's self-deception, MacCallum anticipates postmodern analysis when he writes of Caesar that "if anything could make us suspicious, it would be his constant harping on his flawless valour" (221). Paradoxically, however, the most thoughtful expounders of self-deception in Shakespeare, Stanley Cavell and Harry Berger, have not addressed *Julius Caesar*, and the topic has been discussed since MacCallum principally in historical terms, as a product of Shakespeare's reflection on neo-stoicism and skepticism.

Passing references to self-deception are made by Brents Stirling, who sees it as a characteristic of Brutus alone (765), and by R. A. Foakes, who mentions it as one of many examples of things coming full circle in such a way as to create unity among the play's diverse elements. Brutus's "self-deception, an obsession with names and an ignorance of reality," defeats his idealistic effort to find liberty from Caesar's supposed bondage (270). But MacCallum's understatement of his own insight concerning self-deception was most importantly corrected in an article by Norman Rabkin, who was at the forefront of many postmodern developments in Shakespearean criticism. Rabkin pointed out close parallels between two consecutive scenes in *Julius Caesar* (2.1 and 2.2), with the argument that Shakespeare invented the parallels in order to emphasize similarities between Caesar and Brutus. Brutus's soliloquy in 2.1 shows "a capacity to be deceived by analogies of his own making" (244), and Caesar's insistence on his fearlessness in 2.2 "degenerates immediately from magnificence to bluster, culminating in inflated self-adulation ironic in the context" (245). A peculiar "balance of perception and self-righteous blindness" is apparent in both men (246), and the point of their "wishful self-deception" (249) is that "the spirit of Caesar" is avenged in the destruction of its mirror image, so that the play becomes, in effect, a revenge tragedy, in which Brutus's "crime against established order" (251) is punished. (Foakes had also seen the

play "as a kind of revenge tragedy" in its cyclical character [263].) Rabkin thus preserved a vestige of the providential reading, even referring to "Nemesis" (251n. 11), while emphasizing an ironic reading of character in *Julius Caesar*that would have been impossible for MacCallum. In his revision of the essay for *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*, Rabkin identified *Julius Caesar* with the history plays that precede it: "The tragedy of the historical plays is based increasingly on Shakespeare's psychology, which sees human ideals and the virtue of reason set hopelessly against the fact of the human drive for power" (120).

Acknowledging Rabkin (12) but moving in another direction entirely, John Anson cited neo-stoicism in the 1590s to explain Shakespeare's characterization of Caesar and Brutus in an anti-stoic manner, and Anson emphasized the self-deception of Brutus in particular: "the love of country that leads him to murder his dearest friend clearly serves to conceal an envy of Caesar so great that he cannot afford to admit it. To do so would be to admit that his whole sense of self was shadowed by an intolerable comparison with Caesar" (25). Rene Fortin's emphasis on skepticism in *Julius Caesar* is as strong as Rabkin's, and Fortin also focused on the play's most noble characters, Caesar and Brutus, who are nonetheless "enveloped by the mists of error, victims of deception and self-deception" (342). So pervasive is the lack of self-knowledge that Shakespeare seems "to involve the audience in the fallible judgments of the characters," so that the play becomes "an exploration of man's epistemological situation" in the manner of Montaigne (346). Marvin Vawter acknowledged Anson (173) but focused exclusively on Brutus, because of Brutus's reputation as a stoic, which Shakespeare acknowledges in *Julius Caesar* (TLN 2132-33, 2442). (For a rebuttal to Vawter's argument about Brutus's stoicism, see Monsarrat, 139-44, especially 141-42n. 2). For Vawter, the human situation in *Julius Caesar* is not defined by skepticism, as it is for Fortin, but by the implicit affirmation of "an inseparable composition of mind and body," and Brutus errs in trying to espouse "the self-sufficiency of virtue-reason" at the expense of his body (177). So severe is the disjunction that Brutus is "unable to see himself" (180), and he misjudges everyone, including himself: "his sick mind is brutalizing his body with the result that there is nothing 'wholesome' about him" (181), even though, ironically, "he believes himself incapable of misjudgment or moral error" (188). Far from being a flawed nobleman, in Vawter's view, Brutus is so deeply self-deceived that critical attempts to reserve a shred of dignity for him are misguided (173).

The most perceptive discussion of self-deception in *Julius Caesar* is by Geoffrey Miles, who is the play's most careful historical critic. In an argument that bears some comparison to Foakes's (267-68),

Miles acknowledges that "my greatest debt is to Simmons" (2n. 2), though he sets Simmons's providentialism aside and illuminates Simmons's point that Shakespeare's Rome is a "world apart" by emphasizing the distinctive interdependence of individual identity and social identity—both emphatically "Roman." Miles proceeds by tracing two traditions of stoic constancy, one Ciceronian and the other Senecan, that he thinks are especially important in Shakespeare's Plutarchan plays. A "flaw" in both traditions, Miles maintains, "is the failure of self-knowledge" (138), which marks all the characters in *Julius Caesar*, but especially Brutus. Though Brutus appeals to republican idealism, he "seems unaware how far his decision to kill Caesar is motivated by personal and family pride" (131-32). In other words, he is self-deceived about his motives, and Miles draws an appropriate postmodern conclusion: "The play has an almost Freudian sense of how emotion can work all the more powerfully because it is repressed" (132).

5. Imagery

An important twentieth-century development in criticism of *Julius Caesar* that MacCallum did not anticipate is study of the play's imagery, which has also, like the study of self-deception, been readily adapted to postmodern criticism. In this vein, the first important name for *Julius Caesar* is G. Wilson Knight, though the most influential critic of Shakespearean imagery was Caroline Spurgeon. Eschewing character criticism, because "the 'character' cannot be abstracted from those imaginative effects of poetry and poetic-drama of which he is composed" (19), Knight nonetheless reinvented another Romantic emphasis, which he called "imaginative interpretation" (1-31). He believed that imagery is "essentially transmitted imaginatively to the imaginative consciousness" (1), and he revived Schlegel's and Coleridge's sense of organic form in asserting that "imaginative criticism judges rather by results, by the tree's fruits, not its roots" (21). Distinguishing his approach to imagery from Caroline Spurgeon's in a 1951 Preface, Knight noted that Spurgeon had found *Julius Caesar* "poor in 'imagery,'" whereas he thought "no single work of Shakespeare so tingles with vivid, fiery and—to use Masefield's word—'startling' life" (viii). Taking a more expansive view of imagery than Spurgeon, Knight introduced the idea of the "theme" in close reading (1), an idea that would become influential in New Criticism, and he traced a number of themes through *Julius Caesar*, beginning with "animal-suggestion" (also noticed by Spurgeon but less broadly) and "metals" (33).

Word association was important for Knight, including associations between his own words to describe

Julius Caesar. He summarizes a long list of animal images, for example, as having "a single quality: vivid and picturesque perception," and he links it with metallic imagery through "the flash of metals" (34). "Vivid" and "flash" both involve sight imagery, but the imagery is Knight's, not Shakespeare's, and Knight does not relate it to problems of seeing and perception that are pervasive in *Julius Caesar*, presumably because they are a prominent part of the play's literal texture and therefore do not appeal to the "imaginative consciousness." Over-generalization and solipsism mark Knight's writing about imagery in particular, though a characteristic inability to define "imagery" was pointed out by Lillian Hornstein in an early critique of Spurgeon's book as well. Nonetheless, Knight's observations are often acute, and his influence on subsequent criticism is hard to overestimate. He is perceptive about "body-references" (37-48), including eyes, ears, hair, lips, throat, nourishment, sleeplessness, illness, and especially blood (45-48). Not surprisingly, his summary of "all this imagery" is that it is "all visual, vivid" (48), thus coming back to his own opening generalization in a markedly impressionistic manner: "So we have a clear train of ideas: man's body, visually, almost erotically, observed; thoughts of physical weakness and sickness; emotion, blood, the heart's passion—the life forces encased in the body; finally, spirit, fire, the fine essence of vitality, the human spirit in all its resplendent power and beauty, housed as it may be in a frail tenement of flesh" (53).

Leo Kirschbaum developed Knight's remarks about the body in *Julius Caesar* in an essay on blood, though Kirschbaum addressed staging rather than language. (Knight was an actor, as well as a critic, and he insists that "stage representation" is "necessary, where, if the production be careful and correct, the purely imaginative effects of Shakespeare may be extremely powerful" [20], yet he attends entirely to poetry, not to dramatic representation.) Noting that Shakespeare's plays call for no less stage blood than those of his contemporaries, Kirschbaum points out that bloody deeds in *Julius Caesar* are "not metaphorical at all. They are naturalistic stage effects *coram populo* deliberately meant by Shakespeare for actual production and undoubtedly achieved at the Globe" (520). His primary example is Brutus's urging the conspirators to bathe their hands in Caesar's blood after the assassination—a bold and horrific scene that Shakespeare invented (523). Its effect, Kirschbaum, argued, is to present in the most concrete possible way the horror of Brutus's actual deed in contrast to the idealism with which he undertakes it. Moreover, the blood that he smears on himself "is the symbol and mark of the blood and destruction which is to flow through the rest of the play" (524). The conspirators may drain the blood from Caesar's body, but they are unable, as MacCallum and others had pointed out, to destroy his vengeful spirit. Also focusing on Brutus's attempt "to dignify assassination, the means, by lifting it to

the level of rite and ceremony" (765-66), Brents Stirling pursued an interpretative strategy closer to Knight's than Kirschbaum's, finding "the theme of incantation and ritual" throughout *Julius Caesar* as a structural principle (767). R. A. Foakes's essay is also reminiscent of Knight's criticism, which Foakes acknowledges (259n. 3). Raising a question about the play's "unity" at the outset, Foakes answers it in a Romantic manner that is indebted to Knight, finding a consistent theme in things coming full circle (260), but incidentally tracing other "themes," such as blood, fire, and sickness.

Building on Knight's and Kirschbaum's insistence that poetic imagery and stage imagery complement each other in a play, Maurice Charney focused on three "image themes" in *Julius Caesar*: storm, blood, and fire (42). Each of these themes is ambiguous, he urged, because their interpretation depends on whether one favors Caesar or the conspirators, though the play favors neither one. Charney traced the "blood theme" from its introduction in Brutus's conversation with Cassius in TLN 799 ("Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers") to Titinius's lament for Cassius in TLN 2545-48. Following Kirschbaum, Charney emphasized stage action, pointing out that blood imagery keeps Caesar's assassination before the audience by having Caesar's body on stage for most of 3.1 and 3.2, including the "fearful blood ritual" in which Brutus leads the conspirators (52). Blood and hunting dominate Antony's oration in such a way as to stress "butchery rather than the sacrifice Brutus hoped for" before the assassination (55). Cassius's death by the same sword that he used to kill Caesar "is the reciprocity of blood for blood" (59).

Two critics publishing simultaneously in *Shakespeare Studies* took their discussion of *Julius Caesar*'s imagery in the direction of Elizabethan religion, prompted by Stirling's comments about ritual in the play. Naomi Conn Liebler emphasized the possible influence of Plutarch's *Life of Romulus* on *Julius Caesar* and on Shakespeare's way of imagining the feast of Lupercal in particular, since Plutarch describes the Lupercal in greater detail in *Romulus* than in any of his other biographies. Where blood imagery is concerned, Liebler points out that "the cutting up of the sacrificial *pharmakos*, whose blood is then smeared upon the flesh of the priestly celebrants, is one of the central events in the rites of the Lupercalia," and she compares the ritual to Brutus's "insistence on the semblance of a ritual as a pattern for Caesar's assassination" (183). Elizabethans would have responded to the ritual aspects of Shakespeare's play, learned from Plutarch, because their own lives were full of "Lupercalia-like rites" (189). David Kaula's interpretation of religion in *Julius Caesar* addresses the reformation context in particular. Adoration of Caesar in the play "is something akin to Roman Catholic worship" (199), just as

Cassius's satirical description of Caesar's weaknesses is akin to Protestant attacks on the Pope (200). Blood imagery makes Caesar "a redeemer who voluntarily sheds his blood for the spiritual sustenance of his people," and Decius's crafty description of Calpurnia's dream imagines Romans competing for "relics" of Caesar as Catholics in England sought relics of their martyrs to Elizabeth's regime (204-5). Following this train of thought, "we might even see a moderate form of Protestantism reflected in Brutus's self-conscious Stoic virtue" (206).

The imagistic and thematic interpretation that Knight introduced to criticism of *Julius Caesar* marked the heyday of New Criticism in particular, from the 1930s to the 1970s. The movement was named for John Crowe Ransom's book, published in 1941, but the method was practiced in England as well, by Knight himself and especially by F. R. Leavis. New Critics theorized a way of reading that eschewed literary history and the history of ideas, practiced by critics like Tillyard, in favor of what W. K. Wimsatt called "verbal icons," emphasizing "a verbal image which fully realizes its verbal capacities," both pictorially and as "an interpretation of reality in its metaphoric and symbolic dimensions" (x). Cleanth Brooks declared that it is "heresy" "to refer the structure of the poem . . . to something outside the poem," including history (184). Despite its appeal for several decades, this way of reading eventually ran its course as competing interpretations of the same kind increasingly proliferated, suggesting that no standard could be applied for preferring one reading over another. "My Theme Can Lick Your Theme" is the facetious title of a serious article by Richard Levin on the circular reasoning of thematic interpretation, when the thematic critic begins by assuming what he or she is going to find in the text and then proceeds to find it. Levin's 1979 book effectively rang the death knell of thematic criticism for *Julius Caesar* as Knight originally conceived it.

With the advent of postmodern criticism in the 1980s, however, the study of imagery took on new life and new forms. Postmodern commentary on imagery of the body in *Julius Caesar* depends on a perceived disjunction between conscious intention and unconscious motivation—a disjunction that is frequently described in terms of a suspicious false consciousness, as in the case of self-deception (discussed above). The assumption of gender hierarchy (with male superior to female), for example, often appears both consciously and unconsciously in writing from the past and is often perpetuated in critical commentary about past writers, including Shakespeare. Gail Kern Paster addressed this particular assumption in her comments on blood imagery in *Julius Caesar*, pointing out that Mikhail Bakhtin distinguishes "the grotesque, essentially medieval conception of an unfinished, self-

transgressing open body of hyperactive orifices" from a "classical body" that is relatively complete, closed, and therefore perceived as more nearly perfect (285). Paster argues that this distinction is not only historical (early modern as opposed to medieval) but also gendered, with the "open" body being female and the "closed" body male. With this distinction in mind, she reads the body images of *Julius Caesar* as a complex attempt on the conspirators' part to make Caesar female (a vulnerable, bleeding body), countered by Antony's attempt to "recuperate Caesar's body for his own political uses by redefining Caesar's blood and Caesar's bleeding" (286). Paster draws on and acknowledges Charney's and Kaula's essays in particular, but her emphasis and interpretation are quite different from theirs—not to trace the workings of Shakespeare's creative imagination but to find traces of unconscious patriarchal bias in the play's language, imagery, and action. Paster affirms Kaula's reading of Decius's reinterpretation of Calpurnia's dream, for example, as influenced by the medieval cult of the Holy Blood (294), and she points out that "Decius Brutus specifically allegorizes Caesar as a lactating figure" by using the verb "suck" to describe the action of Romans who gather for nourishment at Caesar's bloody fountain (295). This strikingly original interpretation of blood imagery in *Julius Caesar* opened up new possibilities of understanding the play, both textually and historically.

Writing at the same time as Paster, Mark Rose took blood imagery in the direction of still another form of postmodern analysis, New Historicism. Caesar's assassination is "conspicuously ritualized," Rose points out, in the conspirators' smearing of Caesar's blood on themselves—a ceremony Brutus imagines being performed in future theaters (298-99). Caesar's bloody death thus becomes the paradoxical basis of his historic monumentality, which Shakespeare's play celebrates as "a kind of political Mass"—a point Rose compares to Kaula's analysis of Caesar as a political redeemer modeled on Christ (301). What Caesar redeems is Roman political order, which he initiates as the de facto first emperor and the founder of an imperial tradition that the Tudor monarchs frequently invoked as the basis of their own authority (302). "Drained out of the official religion," Rose observes, "magic and ceremony reappeared not only on the stage, but in the equally theatrical world of the court" (302). Though Rose seems unaware of Stephen Greenblatt's essay on exorcism, first published five years earlier, Rose's interpretation of the bleeding Caesar is fully compatible with Greenblatt's ideas, which became the basis of New Historicism's positing of a historical false consciousness about religion, art, and political power. The Elizabethan theater was crucial, Greenblatt argues, in England's transition from a sacred to a secular culture. Shakespeare's plays evoke sacred signs but consistently secularize them in a form "drained" of "institutional and doctrinal significance," so that "the official position is *emptied out*, even as it is

loyally confirmed" (125-26). What had once been spiritually literal became merely literary, as the culture took "a drastic swerve from the sacred to the secular—in the theater" (126). Both Rose and Greenblatt use the image of "draining" to describe late Elizabethan secularization; both see the theater as crucial to the process; both see the process as unavoidably political, given the theatricality of the court.

In a complex argument that effectively combines feminism and New Historicism, Coppèlia Kahn addresses the blood imagery of *Julius Caesar* in the context of republican competitiveness, which Shakespeare calls "emulation," both in *Julius Caesar* (TLN 1141) and in other plays. False consciousness appears in the idealism that hides republican emulation from those engaged in it, especially Brutus: "in their vision of the republic, these patricians represent to themselves an imaginary conception of their real relation to the Roman state" (86). But parallel false consciousness also appears in the conception of the republic as "a distinctively masculine sphere in which debate and action, the exercise of reason and freedom, make men truly virile" (83). Moreover, Kahn compares imagined Roman false consciousness to contemporary Elizabethan emulation at court (92-93). Roman *virtus* thus defines republican virility over against female submissiveness, and Kahn interprets the contrast in much the same way as Paster. Portia's self-wounding is the oppositional counterpart to the conspirators' wounding of Caesar: the first is a woman's attempt to imitate a man's constancy (101), and the second "resoundingly feminizes Caesar" (104), after Decius successfully construes Calpurnia's predictive dream of the assassination as a nurturing image, which "recalls the legend of Romulus and Remus who, suckled by the she-wolf, were thus enabled to found the Roman state" (103). By attending carefully to both ancient Roman and Elizabethan texts, Kahn freshly illuminates suspicion of power in *Julius Caesar* where competitive Roman patricians and Elizabethan aristocrats are both concerned.

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