A Study of *Julius Caesar*
—Caesar’s Image Still Survives—

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Abstract

This paper is one attempt to analyse the structure of Shakespeare’s Roman Play *Julius Caesar* and to consider who the protagonist is and why the title is *Julius Caesar*. Some critics say Caesar is a titular hero, but Brutus is a real hero of this play. In the middle of the play Caesar is stabbed to death by the conspirators. After that Caesar does not appear on the stage except as the ghost, while Brutus is on the stage throughout the play. In the first part of the play Brutus plays a role as a hero who fights against the tyrant Caesar, but in the second part he plays a role as a usurper who killed Caesar with fallacious reason. There seems to be two different Brutus’ in the one play. Brutus stands in the opposite position in the play. This is because some critics say this play is divided or separated into two parts.

This play is said to be an early tragedy in Shakespeare’s works. It differs from the mature tragedies in many respects. It has the layout of the History, *Henry IV part I*, and it deals with famous Roman history which Elizabethan people knew well. Shakespeare adds some episodes to the original story, Plutarch, for example, Caesar is deaf in his left ear and is not a good swimmer, in accordance with what Elizabethan people liked. This mixed historical events with the myths of Caesar.

In Shakespeare’s early tragedy *Julius Caesar* we have a simple question of whether Caesar is a tyrant or a great man. We can get both views in this play. Those interpretations are neither settled nor conclusive. Shakespeare may subtly manipulate our response to the main characters in the play. It raises the question of who the protagonist is. Is the hero Caesar or Brutus? The same dispute has been and is still repeated by almost all of the critics. We begin with this well-known and quibble-like question.

It is certain that Caesar is a titular hero. It is Brutus who is the tragic hero of this play. We agree to these comments. This is a common recognition and a popular impression after we see this play, but we may admit that Caesar has a very important and unique role in Shakespeare’s plays. It could be said that Caesar’s spirit or image profoundly influences the characters in the play though he is killed half way through the play. There is a different image of Caesar for each character throughout the play. For some he is a good ruler, and for others he is a tyrant. There are many images of Caesar in this play, for example, Antony’s Caesar, Brutus’ Caesar, Cassius’ Caesar, and Roman people’s Caesar, and, in addition to those, the audience’s Caesar. Before he appears on the stage, we hear that many people make many approved or disapproved comments on Caesar.

Caesar really appears for a short time. But his short appearance makes a strong impression on us. Even after his death his spirit survives throughout the play. Caesar’s name and image continue to fill the play as much after his death as before. Jean-Pierre Maquerlot says that the truth about Caesar is to be found in every single reflection from these multifaceted mirrors. This dizzying kaleidoscopic review exists in many phases of this play.

When he appears on the stage, Caesar already has everything but a name of monarch. He has crossed the river of Rubicon. As a military leader he brings victory and triumphantly comes back to Rome. This image of the ruler is recognised and approved not only by the Roman populace but also by the Elizabethan audience. He has a quality of the majestic monarch. His use of the cosmic simile, like, “I am constant as the northern stars,” (III. i. 60), shows that he is not proud but he is represented as a
qualified man. Even if his pride, against which Cassius has resentment, might partially reflect his arrogance for others, it is a legitimate pride for the monarch in Rome. It is significant that he speaks of himself in the third person. All times he talks of his will. Though his body has been slain, his spirit manifests itself in many ways. The second half of the play is said to be dominated by Caesar’s spirit. So it is not surprising that the hero in this play could be Caesar, as the title shows.

Cassius hates Caesar because he is physically weak, has the falling sickness, and is a poor swimmer, though Plutarch tells us he is a powerful swimmer. Cassius clearly judges him not with his reason but with emotion. He cannot make a fair judgement from what Caesar has done. His judgement does not detract from the greatness of Caesar. It is distorted by his private motive for wishing to remove Caesar. Wily and malicious Cassius feels hatred, envy, and jealousy toward Caesar who suspiciously casts his cautious eyes at Cassius and thinks him dangerous. Cassius blames Caesar that

A man of such a feeble temper should
So get the start of the majestic world,
And bear the palm alone.

(Ⅰ. ii. 128-30)

He cannot stand that a feeble Caesar will be a ruler of Rome. He tells us much about the littleness of Caesar. He is obviously obsessed with his sense of inferiority to Caesar.

Cassius seduces upright Brutus to join his conspiracy. He already grasps Brutus’ obstinate tendency to put his honour above anything, and encourages him to be involved in evil, referring to a mirror in which images are reflected in others’ minds. He forges a letter thrown into Brutus’ window, though the original tells us the letter was a real one Roman citizens wrote. He is anxious to obtain Brutus’ virtue which Roman people approve. He has a good understanding of the necessity of Brutus’ support. Cassius knows that if Brutus joined the conspiracy, its quality would be transformed. And it would surely become a deed of justice against the tyrant Caesar and the conspirators could bring freedom to Rome. As Casca wisely talks of the “richest alchemy” (Ⅰ. ii. 159), the alchemy image prevails over the conspirators. Cassius’ base metal of the plan to murder Caesar would change into the gold of the deed of justice. Kenneth Muir depicts Cassius as a Machiavellian tempter of the virtuous Brutus. Cassius is a realist in this play. His judgement in the political situation is acute and correct. He has no dreams in Rome. On the other hand, Brutus always has an idealistic mind. By making use of it, Cassius can strongly ‘whet’ Brutus against Caesar.

In the seduction scene, Cassius and Brutus talk heavy business on the stage, while, off-stage, Antony crowns Caesar but he refuses it three times and the crowds make their loud cries. The two men’s talk is interrupted by the distant shouts of people. Their shouts are heard twice on the stage when the two are secretly talking dangerous confidences. The two actions simultaneously take place in this scene. This is an excellent device and creates a good effect on stage because the audience becomes deeply involved into the private or secret matters of the political world in this play. The audience can have an exciting theatrical experience even now.

In this play some portents fluently tell us the sinister premonitions. By the warning “Beware the Ides of March” (Ⅰ. ii. 18), Calphurnius’ dream, the night of fearful prodigies, namely, the escaped lion which begets a baby, and panic stricken women, and the nocturnal storm, the audience may anticipate something sinister, namely, the assassination of Caesar. Shakespeare makes a careful preparation for the death of Caesar to the audience. And again, in the second half of the play, Cassius says that “two mighty eagles fled away” and “raven, crows, and kites” were flying over his head. Caesar’s ghost appears in Brutus’ tent before the battle. They are supposed to be a sign of the two men’s ominous futures.

Shakespeare produces another theatrical device. It is “double time.” The stream of time on the stage does not always correspond to the real clock time. The Lupercalia festival occurs on the Ides of February, and the assassination of Caesar on the Ides of March. The events seem to take place on two
successive days in this play. It is persuasive to our imagination. Some of the audience probably do not notice that Shakespeare joins the two nights together. In the play everything could be made simpler or clearer to our understanding so that it could happen in reality. The night and day rapidly progress as the plot develops. It makes us think of as if Brutus could not have a sound sleep. His sleeplessness reminds us of Macbeth, who is "trammelled up" (Macbeth I. vii. 3) in the darker and deeper side of evil, though the insight into the tormented mind of Macbeth is far deeper than that of Brutus. Night is designed to make us feel restless and uneasy in this play.

In his famous orchard soliloquy, we see Brutus has already determined to murder Caesar. In his soliloquy he does not doubt his decision to murder Caesar but eagerly seeks for reasons why he must kill Caesar, and manages to fashion them in his own way. He makes an assumption that he must give a persuasive reason for killing Caesar to the people in Rome. We see Brutus has little inner-conflict with the murder. He seems to abandon moral dilemma, from which the heroes always suffer in the mature tragedies. He has already decided to join the conspirators, though we cannot find in which scene or words he decides to do so.

Brutus honestly confesses that he fears not what Caesar is now but what he might become in the future. He takes him for an adder coming out of in the brightest day. But Brutus loves Caesar who is now thought of as a threat to Rome if he is crowned. This creates a complicated situation, which Brutus produces and, at the same time, is involved in. Brutus declared before the murder, "we all stand up against the spirit of Caesar". (II. i. 167) And he claims "Not that I loved Caesar less, but I loved Rome more". (III. ii. 22-23) These are the main reasons that Brutus elaborately fashions and colours. He will only attempt to kill Caesar's spirit which, he thinks, has no blood. But he cannot kill Caesar without bleeding. The discrepancy between his thought and behaviour or intention ironically echoes in the play. His words sound false to everyone, but he is absorbed in the political situation. So he does not fail to find the would-be political reason of murdering Caesar for himself.

In his soliloquy, it seems he is having an internal dialogue as if he is speaking to imagined others. The imagined others would surely agree with him. They would silently nod to him whatever he may plan to do and really does. Bertrand Evans severely criticises that Brutus is not merely dedicated to but addicted to honour. He would dare murder Caesar if the aim of the deed is thought of as noble and honourable. But, for the audience, whatever reasons Brutus finds, murder is murder, a cruel and bloody deed. It is absurd that Brutus punishes Caesar by death for his future crimes, not for the past. He seems to be completely blind to reality.

Brutus is truly a great man of Rome. And he is a brave warrior. He says

For let the gods speed me as I love
The name of honour more than I fear of death.

(I. ii. 87-88)

Brutus believes that he is acting from the purest patriotic motives. But the audience knows that it is a kind of sophism, which Brutus is not aware of and does not innocently intend. We cannot find the justice in murdering Caesar. But he has to find it by any means of justification. It is depicted as an ironical situation.

After murdering Caesar whose last words are "Et tu, Brute?" (III. i. 76), we see the conspirators perform a strange, grotesque ritual. Brutus wants the other conspirators to stoop down and bathe their hands in Caesar's blood, though he refused the oath of the conspirators before killing Caesar. This scene merely inspires disgust in us. Their cry of "peace, freedom, and liberty" seems to be out of place. We cannot conclude whether Brutus values the rite or not. Is not the rite considered as an honourable ceremony? Brutus is too rigid to see everything.

Brutus refers the evil, crime and danger of the conspiracy (II. i. 77-79). He has deeply noticed his own crime before. Why does Brutus decide to join the conspirators and kill Caesar? Does he deceive himself? Nicholas Grene tells us that self-deception has been detected in Brutus' effort to sanitise the murder, in his refusal to accept a secret oath. We can
say that when Brutus wants to do anything, he must find an honourable reason. Brutus cannot live without honour. We may think that Brutus makes some mistakes from the political point of view. We might slightly notice his plight as a tragic hero.

Antony, in the first part of this play, is silent and obedient, but after the death of Caesar, he changes into being talkative and active. Caesar's death brings out the strength and greatness of Antony though Brutus thinks of him as a playboy or prodigal man. It is Antony who dramatically changes in this play. He smilingly shakes hands with conspirators after the assassination of Caesar without revealing his true mind. He considers them not as sacrificers, though Brutus believes they are, but as butchers. He seems to be an opportunist. After the assassination, he sends his messenger with soothing words to Brutus. Antony's honest-seeming message is smoothly accepted by him. It shows Antony's cunning and cleverness. He has to hide his true mind.

In the oration scene, we can find the illustration of the sharp conflict of opinion between Brutus and Antony on how to persuade people. Brutus' way of appealing to reason seriously contrasts with Antony's appeal to emotion. We notice abstract things versus concrete. Here Brutus' habit of thinking in metaphor, which could be found in his orchard soliloquy, can be found again.

When Brutus begins with his words, "Censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses, that you may the better judge." (III. ii. 15-18), he appeals to the reason of Roman people. And his appeals continue to be to honour, patriotism and freedom in Rome. Brutus believes his speech is surely effective to them. Brutus emphasises his sense of duty to the republic rather than his loyalty to Caesar.

On the other hand, Antony actually shows to the Roman people Caesar's wounds from which Caesar's blood runs out, and Caesar's mantle slashed by Brutus' and the conspirators' swords. He appeals to their emotion at the cruel and bloody sight before the statue of Pompey which causes them to feel pity for Caesar. Before this scene begins, we notice that revenge resonates in Antony's words.

And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,

With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war,
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial.

(III. i. 270-75)

It seems that Antony seeks vengeance for his friend's death and wants the recovery of order in Rome (and power for himself). In the funeral oration, the aim of Antony's speech is to confirm the reestablishment of Caesar's name and fame, concealing his true intention of revenge. Antony can control his outburst in any scene.

After Brutus leaves the market place alone with his self-satisfaction saying "let me depart alone," (III. ii. 57), Antony begins his oration. Antony repeats the same phrase, "Brutus is an honourable man. And he says Caesar was ambitious." four times in the 35 lines in his speech. It is like a couplet. He blends emotion with mocking irony well. And he skillfully uses a rhetorical device, which is called litotes or occupatio. It effectively works on the people in the market place. We see Antony's elaborate rhetorical strategies in his speech. By using refrain phrases, he tries to have people understand that what he says is different from what he means. And he dares to say that he would have been satisfied if Caesar had deserved to die. He plays upon Brutus' vanity. It inspires the rage against the honourable men. He tries to show it to the Romans. He has a far better understanding of their mentality and what the situation requires than Brutus does. He can grasp the mind of people who early cried and craved that Brutus should be the next leader of Rome when Brutus finished his oration. Antony succeeds in transforming Brutus' ritual deed to cruel behaviour. Antony disturbs Brutus' honourable deed. Here it suggests that the alchemy image again works well. The word 'honourable' reminds us of the word 'honest' which Iago repeats when attacking Othello in the temptation scene. Antony wins people's sympathy for himself, and for Caesar.

It is true that, as Nicholas Grene says, Antony's performance is a brilliant improvisation, disrupting and undermining the ritual play. But Antony
calculates how his speech sounds to the fickle populace. His speech is not only improvisation but is calculation based on the supposition on how to get a favourable response from the people.

He knows what the people want to do. He can steal their hearts by his speech. The crowd comes to carry the argument of illogical ambiguity whether Caesar was ambitious or not. He can produce the disoriented or strained atmosphere in which people easily change into a frenzy mob. He is sure to raise a serious riot by making use of uncontrolled masses. Surely the violence of the riot which leads to the slaughter of Cinna the Poet is the most horrible scene that Shakespeare has ever written.

And when the mob blindly moves to destroy houses in Rome, Antony says that

Now let it work. Mischief, thou are afoot,
Take thou what course thou will!

(III. iii. 262-63)

This means that Antony consciously uses the fickleness of the populace for his own purpose and makes them revolt against Brutus. After the riot begins, he stands as if he were an observer of the riot. He tries very hard to suppress his pleasant smile. We doubt whether he is qualified to be an admirable leader of Rome. He also shows his coldness in the fourth act. His way of picking up the names in the list of execution shows his coldness and relentlessness with his cynical smile. Mendilow and Shalvi clearly point out that Antony's cold, calculating hypocrisy is proved by the contempt with which he speaks of old Lepidus and plots to get rid of him once Lepidus has served his own and Octavius' end. Lepidus who is a "triple pillar of the world" again appears in Antony and Cleopatra in which he suffers from the same indifference as he does in this play. Antony does not think much of him in either play.

The character of Brutus brings an interesting contrast with that of Antony in the play. Brutus is very gentle to his wife, who died before the battle. Their relationship in which Brutus' wife Portia is keen to share the husband's heavy burden is admirable in this play, and has a similar framework to the relationship of Hotspur and Kate in the History, Henry IV. We have to notice that Brutus does not change his character but his role in this play. In the first part of this play he intends to fight against the tyrant Caesar and murders him for the good of Rome, and in the second part he fights as a treacherous man against Antony for a fallacious reason. He stands in two different positions in the same play as the plot develops. It is an extremely opposite position of which Brutus is not aware. His self-awareness must be shallow and thin. His sense of honour blurs him to see the reality in Rome. He cannot achieve self-recognition as tragic heroes do in the mature tragedies. Brutus is still a good man even before the battle. In the fourth act, he gently gives kind and concerned words to the boy Lucius who had a mild slumber in his tent in spite of being ordered to sing and play his instrument. Brutus' words are absolutely poignant to him.

Throughout the play Cassius is a realist. He knows better than Brutus. Cassius gives Brutus some advice and makes some proposals to have Cicero join their conspiracy, to kill Antony, Caesar's limb, with Caesar, not to give permission to Antony to speak at Caesar's funeral and not to fight at Philippi. Brutus refuses all Cassius' advice and proposals. Cassius vainly raises his prudent objections to Brutus' decision. After he says to Brutus "Have not you love enough to bear with me" (IV. iii. 118), Cassius clearly becomes under the power of Brutus and becomes more likable in the second part of the play, although it was his power that persuaded Brutus to join the conspiracy in the first part. And we know that Cassius' judgement is right, and Brutus' is wrong in the political situations. It also shows Brutus' ineptness in political and military situations. Brutus cannot recognise reality. At an infant-like conflict with Cassius, in a quarrel for money, we can see the constant Brutus who only wants to do what he accepts or approves as noble and honourable. He insists on his self-righteousness. He hates the vile means to obtain money. It is against his ideal belief, though his nobility is useless in this play.

In the battlefield, Cassius' and Brutus' suicides take place to avoid humility in capture by the enemy when they know the battle is lost. Caesar's revenge is accomplished in this way. Caesar's image or spirit is
still vivid in the latter part of this play. Their suicides would be accepted as a noble and honourable behaviour in Rome, though Cassius completely misjudges the situation in the battlefield. We can find an irony when he bravely decides to kill himself. His bravery drives him into the wrong direction. And Brutus kills himself with his dignity. There is an interesting mixture or juxtaposition of two codes about suicide, one is a Roman code and other, a Christian code. There is a double standard concerned with the suicide in the play. Of course, suicide is a Christian sin. But a pre-Christian code exists, and for the Christian audience in Elizabethan age, it allows the acceptance of suicide in order to avoid humility in Rome.

Shakespeare does not judge whether suicide would be approved or not, neither in this play or others, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and so on. He deliberately does not give the answer nor the conclusion in the play. It may depend upon the judgement or the appreciation of the audience. We can say that both murder and suicide appear in an ambiguous light in this play. Shakespeare’s detachment from the characters may be one of the factors. So both interpretations could be correct in Shakespeare’s plays. For the characters in the play Shakespeare arouses in us some admiration and some degree of sympathy. And at the same time, he brings out some defects of characters. In Shakespeare’s play we can meet many heroes who are flawed yet noble. It demands us a divided response to them.

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