

Julius Caesar

Introduction

Elizabethans viewed Rome through two historical lenses. On the one hand, Rome was for Elizabethans *the* great civilization of antiquity. They knew less of Greece than we do, and almost nothing of ancient Egypt or Babylon, much less China. When they traced their cultural genealogy, they traced it back to Rome rather than Athens. As Dartmouth scholar Peter Saccio has pointed out, Rome was more than a historical artefact for Englishmen. Ancient Roman history provided examples of morality and immorality, illustrations of honor and dishonor, parables of political triumphs and political catastrophes. Learning about Rome was part of an educated Elizabethan's moral and political education. It is no accident that American descendants of Elizabethans studied Washington, D.C., with Roman architecture, nor that Madison, Hamilton, and Jay adopted the Latin pen name Publius when they wrote the *Federalist Papers*.

On the other hand, Rome was a presence in Shakespeare's own world, not so much as a political power as a religious influence. A few years before Shakespeare's birth, English Protestants were still being martyred at the hands of Catholic authorities, and the stirring accounts of these martyrdoms were recorded in one of the biggest best-sellers in early modern England, John Foxe's *The Acts and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Days*, known to posterity as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. Under Elizabeth, the church of England established the Anglican "middle way" between Catholic liturgy and Protestant doctrine, but Catholicism continued to threaten England. England's victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 was a great patriotic moment in English history, but it was also crucially important because it secured England as a Protestant nation. For many Elizabethans Rome remained the "Great Whore of Babylon" from the Bible's book of Revelation (see Revelation 17-18), and the Pope was the great beast, the Antichrist (Revelation 13). Few Elizabethan theater-goers could watch a play about Rome, even if it was Caesar's Rome, without thinking how it compared to the Rome they knew and often hated. When *Julius Caesar* was first produced in 1599, the battle of 1588 was still very recent history.

In fact, for some Elizabethans the Roman Pope was little more than a Roman emperor by another name. Even the name was not all that different: Julius Caesar, after all, held the highest religious office in Rome, that of *pontifex maximus*, a title later adopted by Catholic Popes. Sir Thomas North, whose translation of Plutarch's *Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans* was Shakespeare's principal source for this play, translated the phrase as "chief bishop of Rome." (It is from this title, by the way, that we get the word "pontifical" as an adjective meaning "of or pertaining to the Pope.") Preachers and theologians also connected the Papacy with the Roman empire of antiquity. After 1595, the Geneva Bible included notes by Francis Junius, interpreted the Whore of Revelation 17 as the Catholic church and said that the beast the whore rides on is the Roman Empire, which arose "from Julius Caesar, in respect of beginning." William Fulke was even more explicit: The beast in Revelation "doth signifye the Empire of Rome, which was most ample and large under Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius" and was "raised up againe from hell by the popes and popish cleargie, which usurpe and chalenge to them selves the Empire over the whole world." Beginning in the high Middle Ages, Catholic Popes had claimed to be rulers over all kings, and Elizabethan Protestants saw this as nothing less than the resurrection of the ancient Roman Empire.

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* examines Rome from both of these angles. The concern with ancient Rome is obvious: The play is about the final days of the life of Julius Caesar and the aftermath of his assassination. Caesar was one of the gigantic figures of Roman history, indeed of all history, and his death was one of the great events of the past. Though he draws on the life of Caesar written by the ancient historian Plutarch, Shakespeare is not writing a biographical play in any narrow sense. Caesar dies midway through the play, and the play is as concerned about the other characters, particularly Brutus, Cassius and Antony, as it is with the title character. Shakespeare's play has, we could say, four protagonists, each of them a compelling character and important historical figure. Their struggles with each other, their love and hate for each other, make the play a profound dramatic treatment of how the rich and powerful live and die.

Equally important, Shakespeare's play is concerned with Rome itself. Behind the events and characters of *Julius Caesar* are conflicting ideas of Rome, its past and its future. The historical Brutus and Cassius were struggling to maintain what they believed was a traditional Roman system against Caesar's dangerous innovations. We cannot understand what Caesar represented to such men without knowing something about the history of Republican Rome. Until 509 B.C., Rome had been subjected to the Etruscans but in that year they overthrew the Etruscan king and became independent. By 250 B.C., they founded the Roman Republic, had become the dominant people of Italy, and were on their way conquering most of what today is Europe.

Americans think of a republic as a system in which the rulers are elected by the people and in which those who make and enforce laws are themselves subject to law. These elements were present in Rome but the Roman Republic differed in important respects from the American system. First, economic distinctions were central to Roman politics. Every citizen of Rome, to be sure, was a member of the General Assembly, but only the nobility or patricians could be members of the Senate and a man gained the status of patrician by having a certain amount of property. The Senate, dominated by the wealthy, elected the consuls who governed the Republic. Later the common people, called plebeians, were allowed to elect tribunes and these were eventually given the right to veto the laws of the Senate. In the final analysis, however, Rome was controlled by the rich patricians, supported by "clients" who promised to vote for their Senator and performed other services, while, in exchange, the Senator would use his position and power to protect his clients.

Another difference between the Roman and American systems lies in the conception of citizenship. In the United States, anyone born within the borders of the country is a citizen, and many people from other countries become citizens as well. Roman citizenship was much more restricted. Although it occurred during the time of the Roman Empire, an event in the biblical book of Acts gives evidence of how highly valued it was. As a Roman soldier prepared to whip Paul, the apostle told him he was a Roman citizen, which, to say the least, was troubling to the soldier (Acts 22:22-29). Various movements arose through the history of the Republic to extend citizenship to everyone in Italy, but through most of the Republican period only residents of the capital city could be citizens.

By the time of Caesar, the Republic had changed considerably. Many of the changes were "growing pains," the result of the Rome's expansion over about a century to Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Spain, North Africa, and Greece. The plebeians, most of whom were small farmers, were

enlisted into the army for wars of conquest, and returned home to continue farming after the war was over. As wars were fought further and further from Italy, many plebeians returned home to find their land had been confiscated for failure to pay taxes. The estates of the rich nobility were growing at the expense of smaller estates. At the same time, the Romans were bringing huge numbers of slaves into Italy, who took over jobs that had previously belonged to the plebeians. As a result, many plebeians, landless and without work, migrated to the capital. In Shakespeare's play, this discontented mob plays a crucial role. Control the mob, and you control Rome.

In 60 B.C., power came into the hands of what is called the "First Triumvirate," a group of three men -- Pompey, Caesar, and Crassus -- who together controlled the government of Rome. They were elected consul in succession and agreed not to attack each other but instead to fight together against the enemies of any one. In 56, at Luca, they agreed to split up the widespread holdings of the Republic. Pompey became governor of Spain but remained in Rome; Caesar continued his conquest of Gaul (France); and Crassus was sent to fight the Parthians in the East. This arrangement broke down when Crassus died fighting the Parthians. Up to that time, he had been able to mediate between the more ambitious Pompey and Caesar. Now, with Crassus out of the way, Caesar and Pompey went after each other. Civil war broke out in 49/8 B.C. In 49, the Senate ordered Caesar to disband his army. Since his relations with Pompey were already rocky, Caesar feared Pompey would attack him if he relinquished his army and returned to Rome. Rather than put himself at risk, Caesar, starting with only one legion, defied the Senate and illegally crossed the Rubicon and moved south from Gaul into Italy. At the time, he reportedly said, "The die is cast."

As he marched toward Rome, Caesar gathered troops and support. Because he adopted a policy of clemency, or generosity, toward former adversaries, and because he did not confiscate estates, he won support or at least neutrality from many in Italy. Pompey eventually fled from Rome, so that Caesar entered the capital unopposed. After clearing out pro-Pompey factions in Spain and Gaul, Caesar turned East and fought Pompey at Pharsalus on August 9, 48 B.C., winning a decisive victory despite being greatly outnumbered. Interestingly, Plutarch records that Brutus was captured by Caesar's army at this battle, and Caesar allowed him to go free, hoping that Brutus would feel obligated to support Caesar in the future. Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was killed. Caesar pursued him to Egypt and took the opportunity while he was there to have an affair with the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra. In 46/5 B.C., Caesar defeated Pompey's sons, thereby securing his position as sole ruler of the Republic. He had been appointed dictator in 49 and was reappointed several times afterward. Finally, in 44, he was proclaimed dictator for life, which effectively brought an end to the Republican period of Roman history, and inaugurated the empire.

Julius Caesar was, as such things go, an energetic and wise politician and accomplished many useful things for the city and people of Rome. But the proclamation that declared Caesar a god and his appointment as dictator for life offended many who wanted to restore the old Republican system. On February 15, 44 B.C., at the feast of Lupercalia, Mark Antony offered a crown to Caesar three times, which he refused each time. Many, however, believed he intended to become king, a title that repulsed Roman Republicans (as it would repulse most Americans for a President to take the title of "king"). Shortly after Lupercalia, Cassius approached Brutus about an assassination plot, which they carried out in Pompey's Theater on March 15, 44 B.C. The assassination led to a civil war between the conspirators on the one hand and those who claimed

Caesar's mantle on the other. At the battle at Philippi in 42, both Cassius and Brutus committed suicide. With the conspirators out of the way, the victors began to fight among themselves and Octavius eventually emerged as the victor, taking the title of Augustus Caesar.

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* begins with the assassination conspiracy, portrays its aftermath, and ends with the battle of Philippi. Though the play bears his name, Julius has comparatively few lines and is killed near the beginning of Act 3. Instead of highlighting Caesar himself, the play concentrates attention on two groups of characters: the conspirators, led by Brutus and Cassius, and their opponents, led by Mark Anthony and Octavius. Throughout, he followed the account of Plutarch quite closely, even to various specific details of events and character and to specific lines spoken by the characters.

Though not as obvious, *Julius Caesar* is also concerned with Papal Rome. As noted above, Elizabethan theater-goers were largely Protestant and often despised Roman Catholics, and Shakespeare's depiction of Rome plays to these anti-Catholic sentiments. One sign that Shakespeare is not merely concerned with depicting ancient Rome is the fact that his Roman characters regularly speak as if they were Christians. Casca uses the Christian oath "Marry"; Portia reminds Brutus that they had become "incorporate" (one body), reflecting a Christian rather than a Roman view of marriage; other characters speak of "doomsday," the devil, and angels, none of which figured into Roman religion. Shakespeare's theological concerns become even more evident when his play is compared to Plutarch, his main source. He frequently adjusted the language and details of Plutarch's account in a way that highlights religious issues. In Act 2, for example, Calpurnia, Caesar's wife, dreams of his death. According to Plutarch, she dreamed that "Caesar was slain, and that she had him in her arms." In Shakespeare's hands, the dream suggests that Caesar's death will be for the salvation of Rome. Caesar summarizes the dream:

She dreamt tonight that she saw my statue
Which like a fountain with an hundred spouts
Did run pure blood; and many lusty Romans
Came smiling and did bathe their hands in it (2.2.76-79).

This rather grotesque image of a literal "blood bath" makes sense against the background of Christian imagery. For Christian theology, Jesus' blood cleanses from sin (1 John 1:7).

This is not an isolated instance, for Caesar is described in Christ-like terms in various ways in the play. When he comes to Rome, the people strew flowers in his path, as Jews put palm branches in the way of Jesus (1.1.45-46). Caesar is both divine and human: Cassius bitterly complains that Caesar is being treated as "a god," though Cassius knows that he is only a man, feeble as a "sick girl" (1.2.129, 141). Caesar is betrayed by one of his closest companions, his "angel," Brutus (3.2.178), as Jesus was betrayed by his own disciple Judas, and just before he goes to his death in the Capitol, Caesar invites his betrayers to share wine with him (2.4.126-127). In subtly hinting at these parallels, Shakespeare is following a precedent set by Dante and other medieval writers. According to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, at the bottom of Hell, chomped by the three mouths of Satan, are the three greatest traitors of history: Judas, Brutus, and Cassius.

Especially in his death, Caesar becomes a Christ-figure. Brutus thinks of the assassination

as a sacrifice that will restore and revive the Roman republic, and Calpurnia's dream draws on this same religious imagery. Decius's interpretation of that dream makes the Christian imagery even more explicit:

Your statue spouting blood in many pipes,
In which so many smiling Romans bathed,
Signifies that from you great Rome shall suck
Reviving blood, and that great men shall press
For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance.
This by Calpurnia's dream is signified (2.4.85-90).

Just so, Christians believe that on the cross Jesus shed His blood to bring life to the world. And in medieval England, it was quite common for Christians to seek "relics" of saints, some memento of the saint's life, believing that they contained miraculous power. Later Antony's speech at the Forum will pick on this religious theme, turning Caesar's body into an object of veneration. Decius's suggestion that Romans will "suck" life from Caesar hints that Caesar is also a mother to Rome, nursing his children at his breast. Even this has a Christian background, for it was common in late medieval Catholicism for Jesus to be depicted nursing believers and for Jesus to be compared to the legendary pelican who picks its own breast to draw blood to feeds its young.

Caesar is also Christ-like in the fact that his influence does not end with his death, but rather increases. Early on, Brutus says that the conspirators must "dismember" Caesar if they are going to "come by" his spirit. Brutus is unhappy that this must be so, for he wishes he could contain and control Caesar's ambition for power without having to kill his body. As it turns out, Brutus is dead wrong, for Caesar's spirit does not rest contentedly in the grave after his body is "carved." Literally, Caesar's spirit appears to Brutus in his tent before the battle of Philippi, and more importantly several of the other characters, especially Octavius, begin to act according to the "spirit of Caesar." The "cross" of Caesar's assassination is followed by his "resurrection" in Antony and a Pentecostal outpouring of Caesar's spirit. Caesarism, the drive toward empire and dominance, is stronger at the end of the play than at the beginning.

The parallels between Christ and Caesar, however, serve mainly to highlight important contrasts, which play into Shakespeare's Protestant depiction of Roman corruption. From the first scene, Rome is depicted in a way that would remind Elizabethans of Papal Rome, and overall it is not a flattering picture. Throughout Rome are images or statues, which have been decorated with ceremonious ornaments for Caesar's coming. Images were characteristic of Catholic worship, but Protestants attacked the veneration of images. During the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary in England, one English writer condemned the images that have been brought into churches, "decked with gold and silver, painted with colours, set them with stone and pearle, clothed them with silkes and precious vestures." Only Roman Catholics, moreover, would believe in the power of "relics," as the Decius says the Romans do. English Protestants would have none of that. Shakespeare's Rome looks a lot like the Pope's Rome, or like England under the Catholic tyranny of Mary.

Caesar's Christ-like qualities are eventually inverted, turning "monstrous." As David Kaula has written, Cassius's description of Caesar "as the prodigious, terrifying figure who thunders, lightens, opens graves, and roars like a lion . . . reveals a number of analogies to the

Protestant polemics against the Pope.” Far from being another Christ, Caesar is a parody of Christ, an Anti-Christ who mimics the true savior and king, much as the Beast of John’s Revelation mimics Jesus.

Shakespeare thus hints that there are similarities between the oppressive Rome of Caesar and the oppressive Rome of the Papacy. But this does not mean that he is sympathetic with radical Protestants. If Caesar represents the “papal” character of the play, Cassius is the “Puritan.” Puritans have been maligned and misunderstood for centuries. As a party within the church of England, the Puritans wanted the Reformation to go even further than it had. They believed there were still remnants of Catholicism in Anglican worship, piety, and government, and they wanted to “purify” the church in all those areas. Puritans were also interested in the reformation of English customs and manners to make them more Christian. Some were scandalized by plays and festivals that were common throughout England and tried to put a stop to them. Though the Puritans were as a group lively and energetic, quite open about sex, lovers of wine and song, they gained a reputation as a dour and humorless group. Already in Shakespeare’s day, long before the American journalist H. L. Mencken coined the definition, Puritanism was seen as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

In this sense, Cassius is the Roman equivalent of the Puritans. Like them, he wants to throw down the “bishop” Caesar, and return Rome to the purer days of the Republic. And he is a caricature of the Puritan in other ways as well: He has a “lean and hungry look” in contrast to the fat men who surround Caesar. He does not sleep, eats little, reads and thinks much, too much. He does not like games or plays, which would remind an Elizabethan audience of the Puritans. In Shakespeare’s own day, Cassius was most like the Puritans, at least the distorted picture that many had of the Puritans. In our day, Cassius is most like the gaunt thin-lipped, obsessive and humorless men who have been at the forefront of every modern revolution. He is an ascetic revolutionary. He is the prototype of Lenin.

Shakespeare’s contemporaries often wrote theological allegories. The struggle between Protestant and Catholic is one of the main threads in Spenser’s overwhelmingly complex poetic tapestry, *The Fairie Queene*, the last half of which was published in the 1590s. Though it is perhaps misguided to read *Julius Caesar* as a consistent religious allegory, the exercise can be intriguing: Caesar, representing the power of the Pope and of Rome, overreaches himself and grasps for too much. Cassius, a radical Protestant, organizes a conspiracy to overthrow Caesar and to revive the Roman Republic. If we follow this allegory, it would appear that Shakespeare is showing that Papalism cannot be defeated in this way, for Julius Caesar is followed by the much more imperial (or pontifical) figure of Octavius. In the struggle between Papalism and Puritanism, Papalism wins, and Shakespeare comes out as an apologist for the Catholic church and the play is subtle Catholic propaganda. This is a highly implausible interpretation, given both the hostility of many Elizabethans to Catholicism and the unflattering way that Shakespeare presents Caesar. It is more plausible that Shakespeare was expressing his Humanist and somewhat skeptical opposition to *both* extreme Catholicism *and* extreme Protestantism, and he hints that extremism in religion is as ineffective as extremism in politics.

The political import of Shakespeare’s play is related to these religious themes. Caesar is publicly the center of attention, virtually a god to the people of Rome. In public, he is, as Cassius

puts it, a “Colossus,” like the great Colossus of Rhodes that was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. He has grown so great that he seems to fill the whole city of Rome, nearly bursting its walls. He is at the head of every procession, and when he speaks all others become silent. And yet, there are hints throughout the play that Caesar is privately a weak and sickly man. He has not been able to father any children, though he blames it on his wife’s sterility. He is deaf in one ear. He suffers from epileptic attacks, what Brutus calls the “falling sickness.” The contrast between his public role and image and his private person could not be starker.

Julius Caesar thus offers important insights into the relation of public and private life, of great historical events and the movements of individual conscience. The assassination of Caesar was a major event in the political history of Rome and of Western civilization, an event of enormous political consequence. Shakespeare, however, is also interested in the little twists and turns of private relations and internal argument that contribute to such great events. Brutus is especially important in this regard. In Act 2, Brutus debates with himself about whether he should get involved with the conspiracy, and this is followed by a discussion with his wife Portia. Great political events emerge from and in important ways depend upon these private wrestlings. (In a somewhat similar way, Tolstoy in *War and Peace* depicts important battles of the Napoleonic Wars as consisting of individual mistakes, cowardice, and incompetence.)

This contrast of public and private is one of the key themes of Shakespeare’s political plays, and has been described as the theory of the “king’s two bodies.” According to this medieval notion, which Shakespeare often employs in his English history plays, the king as individual man can be distinguished from the King (with a capital “K”) as the ruler of the people. When the king dies, the King does not; the king is dead, long live the King. This theory was used during the Middle Ages as a way of supporting and defending political power. Cassius raises a crucial political question: Why should a healthy, vigorous man bow and subject himself to another man, who is less vigorous? Why obey any authority? Medieval and Elizabethan Englishmen answered by saying that people are bound to the “King,” however weak and frail the “king” may be. But, this separation also makes it possible for people to oppose the “king” in the name of the “King,” that is, to remove the *man* in order to save the *office*. Plots against monarchs were not unknown to Shakespeare’s England, and by depicting an assassination and its consequences Shakespeare was raising issues of contemporary as well as historical importance.

As formulated in the medieval period, this theory is a thoroughly religious idea. The king is considered an image of Christ, and as Christ is both eternally divine and also human so the king is both eternally King and humanly king. And, like Christ, the king was considered to be the head of the kingdom, even the embodiment of the kingdom, just as Christ was considered the head of His church and one body with her. Here we get to the specific idea of “two bodies”: The king has a physical body, but the King has a corporate body, the nation. Because of this association, the king’s physical condition becomes a symbol of the King’s political body. If the king is sick, it is a sign of disease in the “body politic.” This notion too enters into *Julius Caesar*. Caesar’s physical ailments we have already noted, and this stands as a symbol of the condition of Rome herself, which is plagued by various forms of sterility and decay.

Another dimension of this political/bodily symbolism might be noted. The relationship between a ruler and his people is not only described as a relation of head and body, but of a

relationship of man and woman. Just as Christ is the Husband and head of His bride, the church, Elizabethans believed, a ruler was the husband of his bride, the people. This sexual dimension of the political situation arises in many ways in *Julius Caesar*. Cassius believes in a Republic in which all men are horizontally related to one another, without any single man rising to headship, and berates Rome, including himself, for being so “womanish” as to tolerate Caesar’s power (1.3.88-89). He knows that Caesar himself is not such a masculine figure, since he has seen him feeble as a sick girl during an attack of fever (1.2.128-144). The solution, he thinks, is to subdue Caesar’s body, to subject Caesar to the power of the conspiracy. Thus, Caesar’s body, pierced and torn by the daggers of the conspirators, becomes a passive object, blood flowing from each wound. The problem is, once the conspirators have decided to take the masculine role and subdue Caesar, they become rivals striving for leadership and headship of Rome. Cassius and Brutus are subdued by Antony, and later Cassius pleads pathetically like an unloved wife with Brutus. The conspirators want to be men, but they want to be men in such a way that masculinity is ruled out, a manifest impossibility.

This background helps to explain some of the strange sexual symbolisms of the play. Few Shakespearean plays use the word “love” more often than *Julius Caesar*, yet in the play “love” never refers to a man’s affection for a woman but invariably for one man’s affection for another. Cassius wonders whether or not Brutus still loves him, Brutus loves Caesar and Caesar Brutus, and Antony publicly professes his passionate loyalty and love for the fallen Caesar. These men, moreover, commonly display of their affection for one another. Tears flow freely, handshakes seal bargains, and the men verbally express their love in public and are proud of their passions. The whole play, for all its concern with the masculine world of politics and war, is soft and sentimental, lit in sepia hues.

Shakespeare frequently returns to the dramatic possibilities of the conflict between male love and romantic heterosexual love. *Much Ado About Nothing* is set up as a contrast and conflict between martial love between men and the disruptive love of men for women. In *Julius Caesar*, however, there is no balancing romantic love; Caesar and Brutus both have wives who appear in the play but there is not a breath of passion between them. In fact, part of the political tension of the play is the ability of men to “seduce” or “woo” other men from their wives. Brutus is convinced by Cassius to join the conspiracy, a decision to become “incorporate” with the conspirators instead of remaining loyal to the wife to whom he was already “incorporate” (1.3.145; 2.1.272-273). Caesar too is wooed away from Calpurnia to the Capitol by Decius’s clever interpretation of Calpurnia’s dream.

The prominence of the language of “love” highlights another important factor in Shakespeare’s political vision: For him, and at least for some of his characters, politics is always personal. It is about personal loves and loyalties, as well as hates and betrayals. Cassius understand this well, and is a discerning politician as a result. Brutus, by contrast, is in the grip of abstractions, guided by ideas and ideals of honor and of “Rome,” and Brutus is always making political blunders. As G. Wilson Knight pointed out, Brutus, Cassius and Antony can be gauged and compared by their attitudes toward Caesar as man and as hero:

Antony

Brutus

Cassius

Caesar the man	loves	loves	hates
Caesar the hero	loves	fears	Caesar is not a hero

The characters' various actions in regard to the living Caesar and in reaction to his death are guided by their personal bonds of love and loyalty to Caesar.

Seduction plays an important political role in the treatment of the Roman mob, which is almost as important as any individual character. The play begins with a scene on the streets of Rome, and there is conflict between the patricians and the plebeians. Moreover, the response of the people to the funeral orations of Brutus and Antony is at least as important as the speeches themselves. In the last scene of Act 3, Cinna, a poet, is killed by a mob that wrongly assumes he is Cinna the conspirator. Shakespeare knew history well enough to realize that power often flows to the politicians best able to manipulate the passions of the mob, and that, for certain kinds of politicians, mobs are exceedingly easy to control.

Individual characters shape events by influencing the mob, and they influence the mob through rhetoric, by means of speech, by a kind of verbal seduction. This theme is especially prominent in the great funeral orations in Act 3, in which Brutus and Antony exhibit very different styles of rhetoric with very different results. But the political use of language is a more pervasive concern. Throughout the play Brutus describes events in terms favorable to himself and the conspirators. He insists that the conspirators are "sacrificers, but not butchers" (2.1.166), and others announce the assassination as an act of liberation (3.1.78-81). In the events of its latter half, the play raises the question, Does calling a murder an act of liberation make it so? Long before the advent of modern communications, Shakespeare was aware of the centrality of propaganda in political life; he knew that a great deal in politics depends on what labels you use. His insight is as relevant for us as it was in Elizabethan England or ancient Rome. Much of the abortion battle in the United States hinges on the words we use. Call abortion a "procedure" and the baby a "foetus," and it sounds like a harmless operation; how can anyone object to a woman exercising her "free choice"? This is America, after all, the land of the free! Call it "killing" and the baby an "unborn child" or "human being," and the act takes on a very different character. Debates about words may seem merely "symbolic," but such symbols are the very substance of politics.

Language is one means of attaining political power, and manipulation or definition of symbols is another. Here, Brutus is wholly insensitive to the desires of the Roman mob. He provides a reasoned speech in favor of the assassination, and it goes over so well that some people want to make him Caesar. Or, maybe not so well, since the whole point of his speech was that *any* Caesar is dangerous to Rome. The contradiction between Brutus's argument and the crowd's reaction shows how completely he fails to communicate. Antony, on the other hand, wins over the crowd not with arguments but with drama, symbols, relics, stirring gestures. He brings the body of Caesar into the Forum, and at the climactic moment unveils it. He weeps publicly. The twin formula for political success in Rome is: Control the mob and you control Rome; *and*, Control the symbols and you control the mob.

Manipulating signs is a way to power. But interpreting signs is equally important in the play. Reasons for acting one way rather than another may be good or bad, well-considered or ill-considered. The pitfalls that surround human action preoccupied Shakespeare. In *Macbeth*, he shows insistently that human actions cannot be without consequences, however much Macbeth

wishes they could be. In *Julius Caesar*, the conspirators do not, like Macbeth, wish that they could act without suffering ill effects. Experienced politicians, they know full well their assassination of Caesar will have results. Since no one can know the future, however, the problem for the conspirators is to calculate what those results will be. Thus, the play is full of references to various techniques of divination, of foretelling the future: soothsayers predict disaster, augurers read the entrails of sacrificial animals, characters understand changes in weather and the stars as signs of political events. Other characters try to discern the future with more rational kinds of calculation. Brutus, in the soliloquy in Act 2, tries to anticipate whether or not Caesar will attempt to make himself king and how the new title and position would change Caesar. All of these methods of calculating the future are fallible, and the play is largely about the consequences of wrong decisions and mistakes, mistakes that frequently arise because the characters are overly confident of their own power to control the future.

The most monumental miscalculation in the play is the conspirators' hope that assassinating Caesar will establish a new order of justice and freedom. Assassinations were the subject of considerable discussion among Elizabethan writers. For some, biblical examples showed that assassinations were not always wrong, and can bring relief from tyranny (see Judges 2:15-31). (In Nazi Germany, some Christians came to similar conclusions and participated in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler.) Most of the assassinations in Scripture are, however, roundly condemned (e.g., 2 Samuel 4:1-12), and most conspiracies in history have failed to deliver what they promised. Even when an assassination becomes a grim necessity, it is important to recognize that it will not usher in a perfect world. For Brutus, however, calling Caesar's assassination an act of sacrifice is not merely a piece of political rhetoric, not just an effective way to speak. He really believes that killing Caesar is an act of religious devotion to the ideals of the Republic and to Rome, a sacrifice that will restore Rome's former greatness. Revolutionaries in the modern world have likewise asserted that man and society can be re-made through violence; they preach a religion of revolution. Shakespeare's play belies this naive belief. *Julius Caesar* shows that revolutionaries are no more capable than other men of fully predicting or controlling the events their violence unleashes, and that they are in constant danger of misconstruing everything. And it shows that efforts to establish liberty with the sword not only fail to destroy tyranny, but normally make it a good deal worse.