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Title: *Julius Caesar*

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[A noted London ecclesiastic, Brooke was also a literary critic and historian, as well as an eminent lecturer and writer on English poetry. In the excerpt below, he is one of the earliest commentators to extensively analyze *Julius Caesar* as “a political play,” asserting that it dramatizes the principal reasons “why revolutions which are in the right do not always succeed against forms of government which are in the wrong.” Like similar uprisings, Brooke contends, this one fails because the conspirators bring down one government before carefully preparing its substitute and because they share no unifying ideals to hold them together once their personal motives come into conflict. The critic suggests that although Shakespeare appears to side with the idea of republicanism against that of autocracy, he also clearly shows that despotism is preferable to anarchy. Likewise, Brooke concludes, while the dramatist may endorse Brutus's political ideas, he also exposes his personal failings as an executor of those precepts, bringing to light his hero's inadvertent contributions to “the fall of Republicanism” and the triumph of Caesarism.]

The play of *Julius Caesar* is the form into which Shakespeare cast the materials he had collected out of *Plutarch's Lives* of Caesar, Antony, and Brutus. The subject was a common one. (p. 58)

Perhaps in 1562, certainly before 1579, and again in 1588, there were plays on the fate of Caesar. In 1589 a play with the title *Julius Caesar* was known, and was acted by Shakespeare's company in 1594. Then, after Shakespeare's play, that is, after 1601, a number of plays represented various portions and views of the same subject. Indeed, the matter has always engaged the thoughts of men, their passion and their genius. It is a political interest;—the natural war which has existed since the beginning of the world between the idea of Liberty and the force of Autocracy; and this play, where the two powers clash, where they are impersonated in Caesar and Brutus, has been, on many a stage, the means of giving expression to the anger and pity of those who, among a people degraded by the gratuities and coaxing of Imperialism, lived and died for the rugged liberties they could not win.

That interest has been seen and felt in this play. What has not been seen and felt in it—at least not to my knowledge—is that it puts, indirectly, into artistic form the two reasons why revolutions which are in the right do not always succeed against forms of government which are in the wrong: that is, why a struggle for freedom fails against a tyranny, or, if it should succeed for a time, as in the French Revolution, why it finally falls again under the power of a despotism.

The first of these reasons is—that the single idea which belongs to all the revolutionists is not kept apart, in each of them, from personal motives. Each man adds to it his own interest or his own passion; and these several interests or passions divide the men from one another. Then unity is lost, and with the loss of unity, force is dispersed. Of all the conspirators, only Brutus had a single aim uninjured by any personal motive. Shakespeare makes that plain. His Cassius, Casca, Cinna, and the rest, had each his own axe to grind, or his own personal envy of Caesar. Not one of them is ever able to conceive the impersonal, the unselfish attitude of Brutus. Brutus—and this is the deep tragedy of the play—far apart from the rest in his own ideal world, thinks, stands, lives, and dies alone.... The other conspirators have little bond of union except the desire to slay Caesar; no uniting ideal aim in which their individual selfishnesses are absorbed. Where that is the case ..., failure is certain. Even if, for the moment, they act together, as in the slaughter of Caesar, they fall asunder, each to his own interest, when the act is accomplished; and their want of union for one collective, ideal aim ruins their cause. The only thing which binds the conspirators together after the death of Caesar is that they are all proscribed, and have to fight for their lives. It is astonishing how clearly this comes out in *Julius Caesar*. It dominates the play till the death of Caesar. It is not neglected afterwards. Even the great and vital friendship between Brutus and Cassius is imperilled by the personal aims of Cassius. On the eve of the battle which will decide their fate, these two friends all but split asunder.

Again, a still more important reason why revolutions against Imperialism fail, is that their leaders have no settled form of government ready to replace that which they have overthrown; and no men, trained in official work, to use as means for carrying on a government. The consequence is, that after the outburst everything is at sixes and sevens; the various parties devour one another; and in the confusion the mere mob of the violent, unthinking, drifting people get the upper hand. Anarchy, then, makes every kind of human life and effort, and all property, uncertain; and then the steady body of the whole State, sick of disturbance, illegality, change, uncertainty, welcomes despotism again, because it governs. This was the career of the French Revolution.

Shakespeare makes the lesson clear in this play. The pure political idealist, like Brutus, is absolutely at sea the moment he has destroyed the government of Caesar. And Cassius, Casca, Cinna, like Brutus, have nothing ready with which to replace it. They are all left, in ridiculous failure and confusion, face to face with the mob whom the embryo imperialism of Caesar has weakened and degraded by amusements and gratuities. Nothing can be better put than this is by Shakespeare in the blind, futile, inconsequent, disintegrated talk of the conspirators after they have slain Caesar. Brutus, their noblest comrade, is at this crisis the most amazingly foolish of them all. He loses his head. He shouts like an Anarchist. He thinks all Rome is on his side. He is absolutely ignorant of the people he has only conceived in his study. He thinks Rome will govern itself. He takes no measures to set any government on foot. He believes in Antony! He acts like a man in a dream. He makes a speech to the people, hands them over to Antony's seductive tongue, and walks home, as if he had done nothing and had nothing more to do, to talk the matter over with Portia. The inevitable follows; and he flies for his life with Cassius through the gates of the city he has, by his action, handed over to a more organised despotism than Caesar ever exercised.

Imperialism has won, Republicanism has failed, and Shakespeare, in the quiet apartness of the Creator, marks out, through the dramatic action and speech of his characters, what are the main points of the event. He records things as they are, and in the quarrel seems to take no side. This is

the proper position of a great dramatist. Yet, as in *Coriolanus*, where Shakespeare's sympathy seems, on the whole, to be on the side of the tribunes, so here, more probably here than in any other play, the personal sympathy of Shakespeare seems to emerge on the side of Republicanism. He has, as always, his 'good-humoured contempt of the mob.' But there is a heightening of his phrasing, an intensity of the soul he puts into his words when he speaks of Brutus or makes him speak, which draws me into the imagination that his sympathy was with the thoughts of Brutus, the republican. There is not enough on which to base any definite conclusion, but there is enough on which to base a suggestion. And this suggestion of his personal sympathy with the Republicanism of Brutus is perhaps buttressed by the strange and half-contemptuous sketch he makes of Caesar, the great imperialist. It is unlike any other image I know of Caesar. He is represented as subject to superstitions, as wavering to and fro, as led by the nose by his enemies, as vain even to insolence, as having lost his intellectual powers in self-sufficiency, as one thinks himself separated altogether from his fellow-men. His speeches are almost the speeches of a fool. Shakespeare seems to have gone out of his way to make this representation, this *dénigrante* [disparaging] representation; and it is very curious when we contrast it with the lofty, dignified, and beautiful representation he makes of the man who embodies Republicanism. I do not say that Shakespeare was a republican; that would be absurd. Nobody knows what he was; and he was not likely to openly sympathise with Republicanism, even of the kind then conceived, under the rule of Elizabeth. But he was likely to be opposed to despotism, to maintain the freedom which England had already won. And it is worth saying that when this play was written in 1601, Elizabeth had tried to enforce the Tudor despotism, to impose her own will on Parliament; and was successfully met and defeated by Parliament quietly insisting on its ancient liberties. She yielded with a good grace; but no Londoner, and least of all one of Shakespeare's vast intelligence, could be unaware of this struggle. A great contention of this kind steals into the thoughts and imagination of men, and consciously or unconsciously influences their work, even though the work have nothing to do with the struggle itself. I think it possible, then, that the representation of the contrasted political ideas of Brutus and Caesar, which Shakespeare (to the advantage of Brutus) makes so plain, was indirectly coloured by the struggle between Elizabeth and the Parliament—between the despotic will of the Queen and the ancient liberties of England.

But all this is scarcely an argument, much less an assertion. The common thing to say is that Shakespeare, on debatable matters, such as politics and religion, took no side himself. And one proof of this impersonal attitude is, that even if he sympathised with the political ideas of Brutus, he as plainly did not sympathise with his weakness in action, with his inability to govern or to manage men. His representation of Brutus both before and after the death of Caesar, is of a man totally unfit to handle events or to direct a State. Shakespeare may have thought it right to oppose despotism, but even despotism was better than anarchy. Brutus was a better man than Caesar or Octavius. But Brutus could not govern, Octavius could.

The play is a political play, and of a kind different from that of any other in his works, even from that of *Coriolanus*. It is concerned with affairs of State throughout, and when the ordinary passions of human life enter into it, they come as episodes. The domestic and personal life of Coriolanus is more important for that play than the affairs of the State. But in *Julius Caesar*, on the contrary, the relation between Portia and Brutus, the friendship between Brutus and Cassius, are extraneous; do not affect the dramatic conduct of the drama, or the catastrophe. They are relieving interludes of great charm, and made more charming still not only by the invention of

Lucius, who in his happy youth has nothing to do with the storm of events around him, but also by the gentle and gracious relations between the boy and his master Brutus. But none of these things interfere with the main action—with the contest between Caesarism and the old Republicanism of Rome, between a worn-out Past and a living Present. Brutus is defeated; Caesar conquers; and the play is rightly named *Julius Caesar*.

Some have said it ought to be named by Brutus's name, and that he is the true hero of the drama. But great as Brutus is in the drama, and apparent master of its action, Caesar is in reality the cause of all the action and its centre. His spirit dominates the whole. But in the first part it is not the Caesar of the play who dominates, it is the Caesar who *has been*; the life, the doings, the spirit of the Man who in the past has bestrid `the world like a Colossus' [I. ii. 135-36]. What Shakespeare has made of the existing Caesar is what a man becomes who having been great, thinks his will divine, even the master of Fate; and falling into that temper which the Greeks called Insolence, becomes the fool of Vanity and the scorn of the gods who leave him to relentless Destiny. Shakespeare's picture of Caesar resembles the picture drawn by the Greek tragedians of the chiefs who, isolating themselves from their fellow-men, equalised themselves to the gods in their self-opinion, and placed themselves—as the gods did not—above eternal Law. But his present folly does not lessen Caesar's past greatness; and Shakespeare takes pains to show how great he was, and how great he still is in the minds of men. The play opens with his triumph over Pompey. Brutus loves him, while he hates his idea of Empire. Cassius, Casca, while they cry him down, exalt his image in our eyes. When they slay him, they are like men who have murdered a world. Even the starry powers, in Shakespeare's imagination, emphasise his greatness. The whole heaven, when Caesar comes to die, is racked with storm; lions roam the streets, the dead rise from their graves. And when he is dead, all his vanity and folly are forgotten instantly. Rome rises to drive out his assassins. His spirit broods over the rest of the play in executive power. It is Caesar who wins the battle of Philippi, who plants the sword in the heart of Cassius and of Brutus. The theory of government, because of which he died, defeats the theory Brutus held; the new world he initiated disperses to all the winds the old world that Brutus, in vain, tried to reanimate. Caesar is lord of the play; Brutus is in the second place. (pp. 60-6)

Though the image of Caesar dominates the play, and Caesarism conquers in it, yet its main subject is the working out of the fate of Brutus as the last hero of Roman liberty; and the fall of Republicanism in his death is the true catastrophe of the Drama. The representation of this might have been made more impassioned. But, even in this, passion was excluded, because Brutus, being a Stoic, his law of life excluded passion. Shakespeare was forced then to keep his representation of Brutus quiet. And nowhere is his careful work as an artist more remarkable, more close to his conception of a Stoic student pushed into the storm of great affairs, than in his slow, restrained, temperate development of the character of Brutus. Again and again we expect a high outburst of poetry. The events seem to call for it from Brutus. But Shakespeare does not choose him to rise above the level of his Stoicism; he does not even permit the tide of his own emotion, as he writes, to erase the stern lines of the character he has conceived. Twice only (after Caesar's slaughter, and during the battle), Brutus is swept out of his self-restraint.

Nevertheless the position of Brutus, though it is marked by this self-quietude, is a noble subject for dramatic poetry. It is the struggle of the hero who belongs to a past world against the

victorious pull of the present world. And since Brutus is high-hearted, and his idea morally right, and the world he fought with ignoble and unmoral, his overthrow does not lower him in our eyes. He is conquered by circumstance, but his soul is unconquered. He becomes more fit for lofty tragic poetry when, as the play moves on, he stands alone in his nobleness, apart not only from his enemies, but in the purity of his motives from his friends. And the tragic in him is lifted into splendour of subject when we see clearly that which he did not see till he came to die: that the death of Caesar—the means, that is, which he took in order to bring back to Rome the freedom that he loved—was the very event which riveted on Rome the Imperialism which he hated. Few situations are more poetic. The ghost of Old Rome stands on the threshold of Imperial Rome, and fades before its worldly splendour. But as the phantom fades away, we follow it with praise and honour. It will rise into life again when Imperial Rome shall have fallen into the helpless ruin it deserved. The spirit of Brutus can never die. (pp. 69-70)

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