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Introduction Further Readings about the Topic

Introduction

Julius Caesar contains elements of both Shakespeare's histories and tragedies, and has been classified as a "problem play" by some scholars. Set in Rome in 44 b.c., the play describes a senatorial conspiracy to murder the emperor Caesar and the political turmoil that ensues in the aftermath of the assassination. The emperor's demise, however, is not the primary concern for critics of *Julius Caesar*; rather, most critics are interested in the events surrounding the act--the organization of the conspiracy against Caesar and the personal and political repercussions of the murder. Shakespeare's tragedies often feature the death of the titular character at the play's end. Many commentators have noted that *Julius Caesar's* unusual preempting of this significant event--Caesar is killed less than halfway through the play--diminishes the play's power early in the third act. Scholars are interested in the play's unconventional structure and its treatment of political conflict, as well as Shakespeare's depiction of Rome and the struggles the central characters face in balancing personal ambition, civic duty, and familial obligation. Modern critics also study the numerous social and religious affinities that Shakespeare's Rome shares with Elizabethan England.

Shakespeare's ambiguous portrayal of Brutus and Caesar, the central figures of *Julius Caesar*, often complicates analyses of their respective roles in the play. Maurice Charney (1996) sees Brutus as an essentially sympathetic figure whose tragedy stems from sacrificing his private self to public concerns. Charney likens Shakespeare's portrayal of Caesar to the playwright's depiction of Richard II. Charney contends that Shakespeare attempted to control the audience's reaction to Caesar, portraying him first as an "insolent king" then, after his death, as a "tragic victim." Vivian Thomas (see Further Reading) finds both Brutus and Caesar flawed. Thomas contends that both men demonstrate poor judgment at critical moments, succumb to societal pressures, and ultimately become victims of faulty self-assessment. René Girard (1991) describes the relationship between Brutus and Caesar in different terms, likening Brutus to a lover who finds the object of his affection (Rome) with another lover (Caesar). Krystyna Kujawinska-Courtney (1993) argues that the play's treatment of Julius Caesar's character is focused on whether Caesar should be viewed as insolent, impious, and imperfect, or as sacred and idolized. Kujawinska-Courtney contends that Shakespeare's manipulation of his character "shakes the audience's confidence that either Caesar is the correct one." Mary Hamer (1998) compares Portia's role in *Julius Caesar* with that of Calpurnia, and examines the ways in which the education of women and the Roman conception of marriage contribute to the fate of the Roman wives. Hamer suggests that Portia's education, along with the expectation that she suppress it, contributes to her suicide, and finds that Calpurnia's lack of an education allows her a certain freedom of expression that Portia does not possess.

Julius Caesar's dynamic characters and political implications have inspired numerous stage and film adaptations. Anthony Miller (2000) examines Joseph Mankiewicz's 1953 film version of the play, which features Marlon Brando as Antony. Miller contends that the production is layered with political innuendo, and argues that Mankiewicz's adaptation cannot be classified simply as a cold war propaganda piece or as an anti-McCarthyist statement. The film draws parallels between the Roman Empire and the United States in the early 1950s, Miller maintains, in that both Rome and the United States can be described as classical republics and as centers of a worldwide empire. Bruce Weber (2000) reviews the 2000 stage production of *Julius Caesar* directed by Barry Edelstein. Like a number of other reviewers, Weber finds the production disappointing and unmoving. Weber praises only Jeffrey Wright's portrayal of Marc Antony, and contends that the other performances focused on obvious overt personality traits rather than internal emotional and psychological struggles. Charles Isherwood (2000) similarly applauds Wright's performance, describing the rest of the production as lukewarm at best. David Barbour (2000), on the other hand, praises the set design and finds the production as a whole swiftly paced and controlled.

Many critics associate *Julius Caesar* and its treatment of Rome with Shakespeare's England. Although Northrop Frye (see Further Reading) cautions that Shakespeare's tragedies are reflective of Elizabethan society only to a limited extent, the critic finds similarities between the depiction of social order in *Julius Caesar* and the social order of Elizabethan England. Barbara L. Parker (1995) identifies a different connection between the play and Elizabethan England. Contending that Elizabethan Protestants viewed Rome as the seat of power of the Catholic Antichrist, Parker suggests that *Julius Caesar* may be read as a satire of Papal Rome, in which Caesar represents the Antichrist. Parker explains that Shakespeare seemed to imply that the mob's worship of Caesar closely resembles Roman Catholic worship of the Pope. Charney suggests reading *Julius Caesar* within the context of Shakespeare's English history plays, which he finds contain "a reflection of the realities of Elizabethan England." David Daniell (see Further Reading) concurs, arguing that the question of the morality of rebellion, which is a central concern of the English history plays, is treated in a more intensely dramatic way in *Julius Caesar*. In addition, Daniell lists several parallels between Queen Elizabeth I and Caesar the tyrant. Like Charney and Daniell, R. A. Yoder (1973) finds an association between Rome and England. Yoder maintains that Rome and the England of Shakespeare's history plays may be viewed as studies of disintegration and the progression of power, and finds that Shakespeare depicted both Rome and England as empty and wasted.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE TOPIC

CRITICISM

- Blits, Jan H. *The End of the Ancient Republic: Shakespeare's Julius Caesar*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1993, 95 p.

Book-length analysis of the demise of Roman Republicanism as it is depicted in *Julius Caesar*. Blits examines the play's treatment of masculinity and male friendship, the downfall of Republican Rome, Brutus's political failures, and the ambiguity surrounding Caesar's fate.

- Daniell, David. Introduction to *Julius Caesar*, by William Shakespeare, edited by David Daniell, pp. 1-148. Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, U.K.: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1998.

Surveys the political issues of *Julius Caesar*, arguing that the only concrete political opinion Shakespeare expressed in the play is that the consequence of usurpation is civil war. Additionally, Daniell asserts that the play dramatizes in extreme terms the moral issues of rebellion.

- Frye, Northrop. "The Tragedy of Order: *Julius Caesar*." In *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Julius Caesar: A Collection of Critical Essays*. 1965. Reprint, edited by Leonard F. Dean, pp. 95-102. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968.

Analyzes *Julius Caesar* as a social tragedy and surveys the relationship between Elizabethan society and the social order within the play.

- Harrison, G. B. Introduction to *Julius Caesar*, by William Shakespeare, edited by G. B. Harrison, pp. 15-21. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1956.

Offers a brief introduction to *Julius Caesar*, commenting on the play's composition, its early production and publication histories, and Shakespeare's adaptation of his sources.

- Taylor, Gary. "Theatrical Proximities: The Stratford Festival 1998." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (autumn 1999): 334-54.

Reviews the production of *Julius Caesar* presented at the 1998 Stratford Festival of Canada. The production, directed by Douglas Campbell, is assessed within the context of the Festival as a whole and found to be unsatisfactory. Taylor observes that, in his experience, the staging is one of the worst productions of *Julius Caesar* to be performed.

- Thomas, Vivian. "Images and Self-Images in *Julius Caesar*." In *Shakespeare's Roman Worlds*, pp. 40-92. London: Routledge, 1989.

Assesses the way Shakespeare drew upon his sources, particularly Plutarch, in developing the personal and political conflicts of *Julius Caesar*. Thomas stresses that the play's central political issue--whether or not Caesar's ambition is to destroy Roman democracy--is clearly demonstrated but never resolved.

- Weier, Gary M. "Perspectivism and Form in Drama: A Burkean Analysis of *Julius Caesar*." *Communication Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (spring 1996): 246-59.

Applies Kenneth Burke's theories regarding form and perspectivism to an analysis of *Julius Caesar*'s usage of rhetoric.

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