

## *Julius Caesar and Reified Power*

### *The End of Shakespeare's Machiavellian Moment*

#### **Reified Power and Machiavelli**

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, after Mark Antony's wildly successful speech to the multitudes at Caesar's funeral, he watches the resulting uprising with satisfaction and remarks, "Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot. / Take thou what course thou wilt!"<sup>1</sup>

Antony's remark provides a window into his thinking about a question much debated in both the ancient and the early modern period: how much of (what we call) history is in the control of agents who undertake actions to accomplish it, and how much is the result of chance and circumstance? I will come back to this question below in reference to Niccolò Machiavelli's celebrated remarks on this issue. But I bring it up here in order to highlight something of the political thinking Shakespeare was drawing on in writing his 1599 *Julius Caesar* (as well as other political plays): he recognizes that events have their autonomy, independent of the agency of those who set them in motion. Politics is no exception to this; indeed, politics is rife with such dynamics. Political power, Antony recognizes, is autonomous and follows its own logic. It is the outcome of a complicated, often indeterminable series of causes and effects beyond any one human's control. In short, power is a reified complex of circumstances, agency, and chance.

It is also a system in which means are put in the service of one overriding purpose: the attainment and retention of power as an end itself. This is a phenomenon that fascinated Shakespeare throughout his career. Its best-known theorist – and one well known in the political circles of Elizabethan and Jacobean London – was Niccolò Machiavelli. And that turns out to explain quite a bit about some of the peculiarities of Shakespeare's 1599 historical tragedy, *Julius Caesar*. That play – the last in the series of detached investigations of instrumental or reified politics begun by Shakespeare in 1594–95 in *King Richard II* – is a deeply pondered

investigation into the operations of a network of power resistant to the control of any of the play's agents. Power is itself the alienated (anti-) "hero" of this strange play.

### Situating *Julius Caesar*

For purposes of my argument, it is important to take into account the well-established dating of *Julius Caesar* to 1598–99 as the play Shakespeare composed immediately after *King Henry V*.<sup>2</sup> That play terminates the complexly textured study of power politics and political images and deception constituted by the four plays of Shakespeare's second historical tetralogy (1595–99). As I argued in *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne*, these plays were concerned with not only issues of power but also the dialectically connected issues of subjectivity and its resistance to (and at times complicity with) power. The plays of the tetralogy can all be interpreted as autonomous, self-standing plays, but they also connect through a number of their constituent elements, including a continuous historical narrative, characters continued from play to play, and similar themes explored over several plays.

One of the most crucial themes that emerges in all four plays is the idea that the pursuit of power in the early modern nation-state follows forms and rules that are independent of the subjective desires of the political actors caught up in their dynamics. For a time, in *1 Henry IV*, Prince Harry seems to keep everything in balance and preserves his playful subjectivity even as he pursues a remarkable act of Machiavellian *virtù* in emerging from the clouds of his prodigal-son image into the sunlight of his battlefield heroics at Shrewsbury. But in the next two plays of the tetralogy, this balance proves to be fragile indeed, and the playful prince disappears from view as his newly created political image waxes. In the final play, *King Henry V*, he is almost completely absorbed into the role of hero-king and conqueror of France, becoming an English version of a Tamburlaine-like war machine. The play in many ways attempts to induct its viewers and readers into a celebration of the conquest, and it has succeeded in this over the centuries with many. But for two hundred years now – at least since William Hazlitt – another substantial segment of critics has rejected this image and read the play as a critique of power politics and warfare. Over the last few decades, this view of the play has become the majority position among critics, if not in theatrical productions and films.

In *Julius Caesar*, there is a recognizable continuation of the complex and nuanced critique of reified political power begun in the second tetralogy

and climaxed in the double-edged epiphanies of *King Henry V*. But it is important to see that the critique in no way depends on a reversion to the more or less black-and-white view of politics that prevailed in *Titus Andronicus* and *King Richard III*. Instead, a Machiavellian, secular-humanist view of history remains the containing intellectual framework of these plays, so that there is a meaningful sense in which we can speak of a Machiavellian critique of Machiavellian power, if we understand Shakespeare to be drawing from different aspects of Machiavelli's complex web of ideas at different points.<sup>3</sup> It is that critique I want to focus on in reading this 1599 Shakespearean masterpiece. It turns out to be related to the traditional debate over whether to see Brutus or Julius Caesar himself as the play's "hero." In this reading, both can be seen as victims of an autonomous system of power in which they are entrapped, and neither embodies the play's focal point.

It is also the case, I believe, that however plausibly some of Shakespeare's other history plays might be interpreted as responding to the Renaissance political crisis associated with the complex term "political theology," *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* are the two Shakespearean plays that most resist this contextualization because their republican institutions don't fit comfortably into Schmitt's system of concepts and because there is no trace of a theological residue within the terms of their politics. Both are among the most explicitly secular of the political plays, having little or no Christian dimension. *Julius Caesar* is drawn from Plutarch and, much more indirectly, from the Tacitean-Machiavellian strain of Renaissance political thought. There are supernatural elements, but they are Roman and pagan. As I have intimated previously, if we can speak of a faint utopian dimension within the play, it would be in those more-than-natural moments of the wild night before Caesar's assassination. We are told of "a tempest dropping fire" (1.3.10), a slave's hand on fire "like twenty torches" but unharmed (1.3.16–18), a lion outside the Capitol indifferent to surrounding humans (1.3.20–22), a group of women "transformed with fear, who swore they saw / Men all in fire walk up and down the streets" (1.3.23–25), and whizzing meteors or comets so numerous Brutus is able to read by them (2.1.44–45). Just as in the later *Macbeth*, but more fleetingly, they show us a nature that expresses a sense of distress at political upheaval and in that way suggest a kind of protest and the presence of an alternative moral space elsewhere. But none of this is further developed.

Beyond that, the play's intense focus on achieving power in a Roman republican context does not invite direct application to late Elizabethan

politics. Attempts have been made to connect it to the rise of the Earl of Essex as a challenger to Elizabeth's power, but there are no easy one-to-one analogies between the play's dramatic personae and the historical figures of the day of the sort Carl Schmitt proposed for *Hamlet* and the succession crisis (a crude reading in any case, I'd argue).<sup>4</sup> Rather, the play uses the drama around the assassination of Julius Caesar to examine the dynamics of political power, how it is achieved, and how it is contested in a populist-republican context. In that way, it achieves a presciently "emptied" representation of a full modernity-to-come without the dramatic epiphanies of disaster of the major tragedies – the Ghost in *Hamlet*, the storm scene in *King Lear*, the natural disturbances on the night of the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth*, or, in smaller ways, throughout *Troilus and Cressida*. It is in no way a dramatized *roman à clef*.

### Multiple Interpretations of the Historical Julius Caesar

The narrative dramatized in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* reproduced some of ancient Rome's best-known historical events – events also well known in early modern London among both the learned and, at least proverbially, the general audience. The play portrays the assassination of the great soldier and much studied author, an event that marked the final transformation of Rome from a Senate-controlled republic to a monarchical empire. Shakespeare refers to Julius Caesar in several other plays, and he had been preceded in dramatic treatments of the story by at least three other writers. For all that, however, there was no agreed on moral-political interpretation of these spectacular historical events, and Shakespeare's chief source for the play, Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, presents a characteristically "balanced" analysis of events and characters, displaying both the strengths and the weaknesses of the principal historical figures.

In response to the open-ended nature of the play's implied (non-) judgments, much of *Julius Caesar*'s critical history is taken up by arguments – sometimes in formal terms, more recently in ideological ones – as to whether the play endorses the emerging monarchy of the Roman Empire as brought about by its title character or whether its sympathies lie with the republican conspirator Brutus and his comrades' violent attempt to preserve the ancient Roman republic.<sup>5</sup> By about 1960, most critics had come to accept the neutrality or ambiguity of the play's historical evaluations, and various schemas were proposed to account for this nonpartisanship. While this "divided" quality of Shakespeare's plays is

a familiar one in many ways, it is far from universal in Shakespeare's work – as can be seen, for instance, in plays like *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, in which there is a clear if nuanced division between good and bad characters. But plays of divided audience sympathy can be found in several periods of his career, from early works like *The Taming of the Shrew* to much later ones like *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Timon of Athens*. But in the “Machiavellian Moment” of 1595–1600, commencing with *Richard II* and continuing to the transitional case of *Hamlet*, virtually all the noncomic or “problem” plays composed at this time display the kind of dramatic ambiguity, productive of deeply divided audience sympathies, in question here. In this way, the new Machiavellian secular-humanist vision profoundly impacted on dramatic form, and *Julius Caesar* is an excellent example of this influence.

Shakespeare's use of a Machiavellian historical framework cannot be taken, however, as simply a neutral substitution of one historiographic theory for another. In relation to the older, Providential views of history, the new framework implies the disenchantment of the world, the evacuation from it of intrinsic value, and the creation of a new empty space and time, one in which, as Hamlet has it, “The time is out of joint.” It is through that effect especially that the Machiavellian view of history impacts as well on the form of the work. Social critic and philosopher Agnes Heller, in a book that deserves to be better known among Shakespeare scholars, rightly included *Julius Caesar* prominently in her study of Shakespearean histories and tragedies set in the new world, in a “time. . .out of joint”: “The time is out of joint for Brutus, Cassius, and all the conspirators. Their conviction that it can be put right with a gesture of tyrannicide has been proven wrong. They were the fools of history; the sacrificial ceremony was performed in vain.”<sup>6</sup> The motif of a time out of joint is perhaps less directly expressed in the play than it would be in its famous successor *Hamlet*, but such a devalued status is clearly implied in Brutus' celebrated soliloquy, which models for us a mind in the process of making an undecidable moral choice:

Between the acting of a dreadful thing  
And the first motion, all the interim is  
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.  
The genius and the mortal instruments  
Are then in a council, and the state of man,  
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then  
The nature of an insurrection.

(2.1.63–69)

The metaphoric reference to political division is Brutus' recognition that the times are out of joint, that a split between the ideal and the actual has widened, that action will be demanded of the virtuous man if he is to honor his civic responsibility. At the same time, the analogy has a more disturbing implication. It glances at the age's (now waning) premodern vision of an integrated, unified cosmos in which humanity is a microcosmic mirror intimately linked with the larger structures of state and the natural world. The portentous wonders that preceded the day of the assassination of Julius Caesar help signal this.

Such portents might seem to contradict the secular, amoral "Machiavellian" framework that so clearly dominates the political events of the play, but there are good reasons to question such a diagnosis. Precisely to address this apparent contradiction, historicist critic Andrew Hadfield argues that the reporter of most of them, the conspirator Casca, is probably exaggerating and that the main point of the episode is Cicero's rejoinder, "Men may construe things after their fashion / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves" (1.3.34–35), thus reading them essentially as a blank screen on which the decayed state of Roman republican culture can be projected.<sup>7</sup> But the foreshadowing of political disasters in natural phenomena is a favorite dramatic device of Shakespeare's, whether they are reported events like the self-consuming horses in *Macbeth* or directly staged ones like the great storm in Act 3 of *King Lear*. Even in so jaundiced and de-idealized a play as *Troilus and Cressida*, Ulysses evokes the disordered macrocosm as a mirror of political chaos and the decay of values among the encamped Greeks at Troy. Contrary to an older critical tradition epitomized by E. M. W. Tillyard, in none of these cases is the cosmos evoked as a transcendental order against which to judge the (temporary) political turmoil represented in those plays, an order that is the promise of a Providential God. Rather, they are fragmented allegories, evoked, in Walter Benjamin's apt phrase, as ruins of a defunct, meaningful world that no longer exists. There is, as I argued above, a utopian element in these briefly narrated incidents (which were, in *Julius Caesar*, taken more or less directly from Plutarch): the natural world perdures even as it too is shaken by the violence of assassination. But they are moments left behind as the riots and then the civil war between political factions sweep the play ahead.

### *Julius Caesar and Form*

And to mention Benjamin's theory of the allegory is to raise another crucial link in our understanding of how a Machiavellian secular vision

affected Shakespearean drama at the level of form. We have to speak here of form in a special sense, what Benjamin, following the Hegelian path of the early writings of Georg Lukács, called the work's "inner form," primarily the work's organization of its represented world, its major characters, and the relation of the characters' values to the values of the world. Benjamin thought that the term "tragedy" was unsuitable to describe the plays of Shakespeare placed under that category, even before the 1623 Folio. For Benjamin, "tragedy" was a word that belonged properly only to the singular works of the Athenian classical age because they were works whose form depended on the slow revelation that the tragic hero was in fact superior to the gods.<sup>8</sup> Such a form could not coexist with a dominant Christianity, and so the dramatists of the medieval and early modern periods were forced to invent a new form, which Benjamin – borrowing from the traditional appellation given to the German Baroque dramas of the seventeenth century that were (mistakenly, according to Benjamin) understood to be themselves forms of tragedy – called *Trauerspiele* (mourning-plays). The medieval forms, the mystery and morality plays, were one step in this direction, but the *Trauerspiel* proper, he thought, was an early modern invention, influenced by the Protestant Reformation but compatible as well with the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Its crucial feature was its representation of an empty world, devoid of intrinsic value, full of objects open to allegorical interpretations on at least two levels and profoundly resistant to organic unity, organized instead around a principle of incompleteness, fragmentation, and constant deferment of final meaning. And he thought that Shakespeare, along with Spanish Baroque dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca, was the master of the form, especially in his most famous work *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare's 1599 *Julius Caesar* can be seen as a *Trauerspiel* in the light of Benjamin's work (as I will discuss briefly below), but it was classified as a tragedy by the First Folio editors (like the other Roman plays). In terms of its structure, however, it could have been placed among the histories as one of Shakespeare's most explicit investigations of the idea of historical change and the role of individuals within it.

*Julius Caesar*, as noted, takes place in a world that, as Agnes Heller argued, is always "out of joint," just as in *Hamlet* and throughout the histories, tragedies, and even some of the comedies. Such a world, she contends, is the outcome of a severance between the subject and a sense of meaning, a permanent perception that things are not as they should be.<sup>9</sup> It is a perception that can be seen in Hegelian terms as the alienation of the subject from the objective world, in Marxist terms as arising from a society

dominated by the abstract values of fetishized commodities and/or reified power, or in Christian terms as the world after the Fall. As we read *Julius Caesar* in the twenty-first century, all of these interpretive frameworks are relevant, but I believe the most important of these will be seen to involve the theme of reified power.<sup>10</sup>

*Julius Caesar*'s resistance to the forms of classical tragedy has, of course, long been noted, though the many attempts to make of Brutus the missing tragic hero represent a rear-guard action to "save" the play as a tragedy.<sup>11</sup> In response, other critics point out the lack of a single, focalizing character in the play, the strength of Cassius and Mark Antony as foils to Brutus, and the strange case of Caesar himself, in many ways a minor character in the play bearing his name, but one whose spirit dominates the whole. This plurality of characters (as opposed to the usual practice of Greek and even other Shakespearean tragedies) is, however, a characteristic of Benjamin's *Trauerspiele*, and the play displays other *Trauerspiel*-like properties as well – particularly the character-type Benjamin called the "Intriguer," a political schemer following a Machiavellian agenda of masked intentions and political deception.<sup>12</sup> However, the Intriguers of *Julius Caesar* are not the machiavels of the earlier histories, nor those of *Othello*, *King Lear*, or *Macbeth*.<sup>13</sup> They are the morally gray, all-too-human figures drawn from an adoption of the secular-humanist historiography of Machiavelli, Tacitus, and (here) Plutarch.

*Julius Caesar*, then, though it lacks the knotted Baroque style and dark atmosphere of major tragedies like *Macbeth*, is in its dramatic structure like one of Benjamin's Baroque *Trauerspiele*, and it follows hard in its order of composition on the four similar histories of the second tetralogy, sharing many of their qualities: an abundance of characters, a dependence on historical events and sources to form a dramatic arc, and a focus on the workings of political power. The play is, in fact, one of Shakespeare's consummate explorations of the interactions of personality, impersonal forces, politics, and historical change. In that way it continues the Machiavellian focus of the other plays of this period – adhering as well to another characteristic of the *Trauerspiel* that Benjamin noted as deeply separating the form from Attic tragedy: its dependence on and reproduction of history rather than myth. Like the *Trauerspiele*, *Julius Caesar* is historical and political, and its unifying theme is the dynamics of power politics.

In the titular character, Julius Caesar, we see the potential but not (yet) the reality of tyrannical power. What is staged in early scenes that convince Brutus that Caesar must die is a "calling" to power that has parallels with



that which the Weird Sisters perform for Macbeth, but unlike Macbeth, Caesar never lives to grasp it. Power is a prize contended for by a crowd of powerful aristocratic men who are defined by their attempts to wield it. Agency is extremely ambiguous in this dynamic; there is a real sense in which power itself is autonomous and has its own agency in the form of the exigencies that its would-be masters have to follow to attain it.

This quality of reification helps explain why the play is so merciless in its deflation of its celebrated historical figures and, as has often observed, especially in its treatment of its title character, who is presented as physically impaired and politically unsavvy, easily manipulated by the conspirators into coming down to the Capitol despite his wife's prescient dream and the soothsayer's warning. In a kind of arrogant sense of invulnerability, he ignores plain warnings and outwits himself in his eagerness not to seem like other powerful men:

These couchings and these lowly courtesies  
Might fire the blood of ordinary men  
And turn preordinance and first decree  
Into the law of children. Be not fond  
To think that Caesar bears such rebel blood  
That will be thawed from the true quality  
With that which melteth fools – I mean, sweet words,  
Low-crooked curtsies, and base spaniel fawning.

(3.1.36–43)

Caesar is here merely amplifying in his words the observation about him made by the conspirator Decius Brutus the night before the assassination:

  he loves to hear  
That unicorns may be betrayed with trees,  
And bears with glasses, elephants with holes,  
Lions with toils, and men with flatterers.  
But when I tell him he hates flatterers,  
He says he does, being then most flattered.

(2.1.203–08)

In short, Caesar is presented in the play as a political image-creator who manipulates and is manipulated – and ultimately is overcome in a game of power politics he fails to master, despite his reputation as the peerless commander. While all the play's characters (except Cassius) speak of and believe in Caesar's preeminent position and capabilities, what the audience sees of him in action in Shakespeare's play is much more negative. As in the above dialogue with Decius Brutus, he seems vain and shallow rather than truly heroic. It is as if the man himself is less important than the

image he has created and the position he holds in a network of power. He is at its center, but he is not, as directly represented in action in this play, a charismatic character.

At the same time, the motives and values of the conspirators are themselves treated as far from the ideals of republican virtue that they claim for themselves. Their leader Cassius is transparently motivated almost purely by envy, not patriotism. Rather than speaking of the evils of monarchy or the danger to republican liberty in Caesar's ascent to power, Cassius emphasizes Caesar's mere humanity and his shared rank with the other patricians:

I had as lief not be as live to be  
 In awe of such a thing as I myself.  
 I was born free as Caesar. So were you.  
 We both have fed as well, and we can both  
 Endure the winter's cold as well as he.

(1.2.96–101)

Although Cassius tells Brutus that “honor is the subject of my story” (1.2.94), envy is its clear motivation. In fact, in the climax of his exhortation to Brutus, envy of greatness is made the central republican virtue:

Now in the names of all the gods at once,  
 Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed  
 That he is grown so great? Age, thou art shamed!  
 Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods.

(1.2.149–52)

Nor are the survivors of Caesar's party – and especially their leader Mark Antony – made into moral paragons in their opposition to what they take as unjustifiable political murder. They are themselves skillful Machiavellian politicians with the same willingness to use power, deception, and violence as their foes to achieve their ends. We see this clearly in scene 4.1, which opens with Antony's declaration, “These many, then, shall die. Their names are pricked” (4.1.1). Here the objectified and impersonal nature of Machiavellian political power is pointedly enacted for us. “Look, with a spot I damn him,” Antony says of his nephew Publius, traded in exchange for the death of Lepidus' brother (4.1.2–6).

These are chilling words, and they violate communal norms against murder and for family loyalty, but they are no less egregious than the politically motivated slaying of Caesar we have witnessed. Neither of the two parties, I would argue, is singled out as the primary violator of ordinary morality in this play. What is implicitly indicted is the reified

logic of political power struggles that necessitates these violent actions, as Machiavelli had spelled out. In this play, Shakespeare has moved from a more or less neutral acceptance of the exigencies of Machiavellian *Realpolitik* of *Richard II* and *1 and 2 Henry IV* to a more distanced and critical stance toward such necessities.<sup>14</sup>

Machiavelli himself had tried to define the force of political necessity at several points of *The Prince* and elsewhere, but he famously coupled the acceptance of necessity with the realization that choice and human agency had a sphere of activity limited by, but autonomous from, the sphere of necessity. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in one of the most famous sections of *The Prince* – one that simultaneously recognizes both the fatality of chance and, more importantly, the opening up of a limited but real opportunity for political agents to change history:

I think it may be true that Fortune is the arbiter of half of our actions, but that she still leaves the other of them, more or less, to be governed by us. And I compare her to one of these destructive rivers that, when they are raging, flood the plains, destroy trees and buildings, take up earth from this side and place it on the other. . . And although this is how they are, it does not follow, therefore, that men, when times are quiet, cannot make provision against them with dikes and embankments, so that when they rise again, either they would go into a canal, or their impetus would not be so wild or so destructive.<sup>15</sup>

This passage – or thoughts much like it – seems to have been on Shakespeare's mind as he began to work out the arrangement of agency and change in the world-historical events of *Julius Caesar*. He puts an image and a concept very like Machiavelli's in the mouth of Brutus:

There is a tide in the affairs of men  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves  
Or lose our ventures.

(4.3.218–24)

Putting aside the irony of Brutus' making this argument to justify a military tactic that proves disastrous – leaving their favorable position on higher ground in order to attack directly – we can note how generally apt it is for many of the events of this play – though in every instance, we see how crucial contingency is. The conspirators' bold act, taken at the high flood just before it seems Caesar is about to be crowned monarch of Rome,

proves unworkable while Caesar's successor Mark Antony in an equally bold move, succeeds in seizing the political high ground that Brutus' oration had seemed to guarantee the conspirators.<sup>16</sup>

Shakespeare seems to adopt this Machiavellian concept of a limited historical voluntarism and a world of fortune and contingency as a general principle (at least starting in 1595), but he applies it differently in different plays. King Henry V seems able to burst out of the systemic cycle of rebellion his father was entrapped in with his bold invasion of France. But Macbeth is unable to do so after his initial success and seems a prisoner of the fatality he first thought was on his side. In *Julius Caesar*, I would argue, Shakespeare's consciousness of the efficacy of reified power – created in human social interactions, but under no one individual's control – becomes the crucial historical determinant, even in the face of such powerful subjective agencies as Cassius, Brutus, Antony, and Caesar himself. And in this play, we see clearly how cruel and bloody its workings can be, as in the aftermath of Mark Antony's celebrated funeral speech, discussed previously.

### Julius Caesar as Trope

The play's depiction of reified power may offer a clue as to its title. Many critics have thought that it is misnamed, that Caesar is nothing like a traditional tragic hero, and they note that his role is, in fact, a relatively secondary one. But what justifies the use of his name in the title is his metonymic/synecdochal role: he stands as a figure for the system with which he is so closely associated and of which he forms a crucial part, the system out of which his political image has emerged. He represents the larger network of power that has developed independently of any individual's will out of the political crisis of the Roman republic. Caesar is as much a creation of power dynamics of Roman politics as he is an active agent shaping them.

As noted previously, as a conventional Shakespearean character he is a disappointment, almost a caricature. We learn nothing of his interior life, his motivation, his sense of self, as we do of Brutus. Nor do we see him displaying heroic character traits vividly through his actions and words, as is the case for Cassius, Antony, and even the impersonal Octavius. Instead, as indicated above, we learn of his physical weaknesses, represented to us pointedly in the reference to his deafness in one ear and in Cassius' famous narrative of Caesar's near drowning after vaunting of his courage to Cassius. And we see nothing to contest Cassius' account of the man's flesh, blood, and weakness.

As I have argued as well, for all of the play's adoption of a Machiavellian recognition of power as a system that works through rules fundamentally

different from those of communal morality, it does not depict reified power in a completely value-free, amoral manner. As Walter Benjamin emphasized, the empty world of the *Trauerspiel* is subject to mourning, and that is one reason why Antony so uncharacteristically ends the play in funereal praise of his great enemy Brutus. Brutus may have been a self-deceiving and vain soul never aware of the extent that he was being used, his self-image skillfully manipulated by Cassius to provide the needed idealistic face and name for their plot. But like Cassio in *Othello* (a play also centered on instrumental persuasion), Brutus had a daily beauty in his life that made others ugly. The assassination, this play shows us, was indeed an ugly, brutal thing, falsely portrayed by its agents as a sacrifice in an obvious act of self-deception. But the counter-blows struck against the conspirators were themselves events cut from the same cloth. The Machiavellian world of objectified power depicted in the play is not glorious but empty. It is the outcome of purely human actions that must be remedied, if they can be at all, by purely human actions – of course actions that are never depicted, nor concretely imagined, in this play. In its classical restraint, *Julius Caesar* leaves the space of utopia a blank one, like so much of Machiavelli's own work.

*Julius Caesar* forms part of a significant Shakespearean arc of dramatic development on the way to *Hamlet* (and then the other middle tragedies), but not just because of its emphasis on the internal dialogue of an intellectual character, as previous generations of critics argued. It is also because of the play's theme of objectified political power as theorized by Machiavelli. In both plays – though more deeply and pervasively in *Hamlet* – the world of politics is revealed as empty, a mechanical power struggle destructive in its very essence, covered thinly by a veneer of worldly glory slowly revealed to be empty as well. Towards the end of Shakespeare's Machiavellian Moment of 1595–1600, both time and the world seem radically out of joint, with no immediate remedy for this forthcoming. We are left in the negativity of critique, but that in itself is an accomplishment of a significant order in that, as we will see, it creates a space in which the utopian can be developed. And it sets the stage both for the tragedies to come and the tragicomedies that conclude Shakespeare's remarkable career.

## Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. Andrew David Hadfield (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007), 3.2.256–57. All subsequent quotations from the play are from the same edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (New York: Norton, 1997), 121. In the more recent *The New Oxford*

- Shakespeare: The Complete Works: Modern Critical Edition*, eds. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), the editors also assert that 1599 is “the most probable” date but give a two-year range for its possible date of composition, 1598–99 (1610). They agree, however, that the play follows *Henry V* in order of composition.
- 3 Cf. Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43–49.
  - 4 Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of Time Into the Play*, trans. David Pan and Jennifer R. Rust (New York: Telos Press, 2009).
  - 5 The debate over whether to see Brutus or Caesar as the play’s true tragic hero goes back at least to the eighteenth century. The ideological debate began in earnest in the twentieth century in a wide array of essays, with the central conflict of interpretation described in many different opposing terms. See for example, J. Leeds Barroll, “Shakespeare and Roman History,” *Modern Language Review* 53, no. 3 (July 1958): 327–43, who argues that the assassination of Caesar was widely understood to have been catastrophic and so sympathy is drawn away from the conspirators; and Irving Ribner, “Political Issues in ‘Julius Caesar,’” *Journal of English and German Philology* 61, no. 1 (January 1957): 10–22, who sees Caesar as a potential tyrant and Brutus as a heroic defender of liberty. Wayne Rebhorn, “The Crisis of the Aristocracy in *Julius Caesar*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990): 75–111, however, in a pioneering new historicist reading of the play, sees it as referencing and investigating the social contradictions in which Elizabethan aristocrats were involved. Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 167–83, reads this play, like several others, as based in pro-republican sentiments, but he thinks it portrays both sides of the conflict as antirepublican. Similarly, Lauren Leigh Rollins, “‘Republicans’ Behaving Badly: Anachronism, Monarchy, and the English Imperial Model in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*,” *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 30 (2017): 165–80, writes that “perhaps the only consistent feature of Shakespeare’s Roman ‘republicans’ is that they are not republicans at all” (168). And Philip Goldfarb Styrt, “‘Continual Factions’: Politics, Friendship and History in *Julius Caesar*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 286–307, emphasizes the role of factional politics in the construction of the play, seeing it as more about process than tragedy.
  - 6 Agnes Heller, *The Time Is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 320.
  - 7 Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, 169.
  - 8 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 106–110. He was drawing on the theory of tragedy of Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern des Erlösung (The Star of Redemption)* (Frankfurt, 1921); cited in Benjamin, *Origin*, n. 20, 243. For a very lucid discussion of what Benjamin took from this *apologia* for Judaism by

- Rosenzweig, see Stéphane Moses, "Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig," in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 228–46. An English translation is available: Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1970).
- 9 Heller, *Time Is Out of Joint*, 1–11. Heller is drawing from a similar diagnosis in more esoteric terms made in the 1928 classic by Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.
- 10 This passage draws from my essay, "Moral Agency and Its Problems in *Julius Caesar*: Political Power, Choice, and History," in *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*, ed. Michael Bristol (New York: Continuum, 2009), 5–28.
- 11 The critical tradition is rich in such attempts, and it would be impossible to list them all. A classic example is Virgil K. Whitaker, "*Julius Caesar* and Tragedy of Moral Choice," in his *Shakespeare's Use of Learning: An Inquiry into the Growth of His Mind and Art* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1953), 224–50, which assumed Shakespeare to be a monarchist but one admiring Brutus' virtue even in his making an incorrect choice that causes a tragic downfall.
- 12 Benjamin, *Origin*, 95–6, 125, 127, 228.
- 13 Cf. Heller, *Time Is Out of Joint*, 311: "There is not a single wicked character in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Virtues and vices, passions and calculations, over-determine one another or clash; none of the characters determines to become a villain, none carries the desire for revenge to the extreme, none is daemonic."
- 14 My interpretation differs here from Rollins, "Republicans' Behaving Badly," despite her focus on the importance of Machiavellian power in the play, because she sees Shakespeare in this play as accepting instrumental politics and so sees Mark Antony as the play's most positive character, albeit one not without certain flaws (174–77).
- 15 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and Other Writings*, trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), 105.
- 16 See my complementary analysis of *Julius Caesar* in Grady, "Moral Agency and Its Problems in *Julius Caesar*," which focuses on the side of agency rather than objectified power in the play but acknowledges the important role of the latter and so overlaps with this chapter, including some common quotes and arguments, at specific points.