

The Evil That Men Do

By Frank Kermode

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In ancient Rome, politicians saw murder as an extension of normal politics - and no one understood this better than Shakespeare, says Frank Kermode.

Even in our day, when we're told that schoolchildren don't know whose side the Germans were on, most people still have some idea who Julius Caesar was. In 1599, it was common knowledge. He had been dead for more than 1,600 years, but he was famous. Ordinary folk probably knew him as one of the Nine Worthies, along with the likes of Joshua, David, Hector, Alexander and Arthur. More privileged people, the gentlemen of the Inns of Court, for instance, may have seen Caesar acted at the universities - Polonius, in Hamlet, claimed that as a student he played the part of Caesar. And whereas even Alexander's fame depended heavily on a muddle of myth and tall tales, Julius Caesar was also remembered as a genuine historical figure. His assassination was correctly seen by serious people as a world-historical event.

Since the Globe theatre was designed as an image of the world, it could have been a deliberate choice to put on a new play about Caesar as the first tragedy ever performed there. This large building, erected on Bankside by Shakespeare and his company in 1599, was ready for use in the summer of that year. It could accommodate an audience of around 2,500, and boasted the best company of actors ever assembled in the admittedly short history of professional acting. A Swiss tourist named Thomas Platter saw the play on September 21 1599 and described it (in German) as "an excellent performance of the tragedy of the first emperor [Kaiser] Julius Caesar with about 15 characters". He was also very impressed by the jig, the display of dancing and tumbling that came at the end of the show.

Shakespeare had recently finished a long series of plays about English history. He was interested in the ways political power is achieved and used, with a special concern for the rights and obligations of monarchy. That was the form of government most Elizabethans believed, against what looks like quite a lot of

evidence, best suited to their needs. They were familiar with the principle that the power of a monarch, regarded as conferred by God, commanded absolute obedience, even though it was under the control of a mortal and fallible person. And this was naturally true of Caesar also.

Shakespeare made heavy use of the first-century Greek historian Plutarch, a writer to whom history was biography. To one so interested in the personalities of great men, the conflict between their political power and their human fallibility, the story of Julius Caesar and his friends and enemies made a great subject. Shakespeare shared this interest, and didn't fail to note Caesar's epilepsy, his deafness, his vanity, possibly his sterility. But these coexisted with his superhuman greatness. As Cassius in the play boasts after the murder, that event, its victims and its perpetrators, would be remembered for ever. Shakespeare even makes it sound as if the assassins had given the first performance of the play: "How many ages hence/ Shall this our lofty scene be acted over/ In states unborn, and accents yet unknown!" They try to convert the murder into a ritual sacrifice, to be perpetually re-enacted not in churches but in theatres.

Why was Caesar what Brutus calls him, "the foremost man of all this world"? He ended a destructive civil war (something the Elizabethans specially feared); he killed off the Roman republic, which had lasted five centuries since the expulsion of the hated kings. More important, he ensured that Rome, its territories enlarged by his military skills, would become an empire. That was why he could be said to have shaped the future of the known world.

Were the conspirators evil in killing this man? It depended where you lived, or where you stood. Dante, the imperialist, gave Brutus the worst place in hell after that of Judas Iscariot. Michelangelo celebrated his republican virtue with a heroic bust. This divided response to the idea of empire became possible when Caesar's death cleared the way for his heir Octavius to become, as Augustus, the first emperor.

Britain was part of that empire and London was a Roman city. The first Christian emperor Constantine had an English mother, Helena, and Elizabethan propagandists stressed the queen's imperial heritage, her place in a line that began with Julius and Augustus. There were more immediate, less glorious, parallels

between ancient and modern politics. The queen knew a lot about hostile conspiracies; Pope Gregory XIII, celebrated for reforming the calendar, had formally called for her deposition, and there were those who would have liked to bring it about by violence.

There was, however, an important difference between the situation of Caesar and that of Elizabeth. She was a crowned monarch, and Caesar wasn't, much as he would have liked to be. It is Brutus's fear of the change in Caesar that a ceremony of coronation might effect that finally persuades him to join the conspiracy. "How that would change his nature, there's the question." So far, says Brutus (ignoring much evidence to the contrary), Caesar has not abused his power; but this bit of magic might just encourage him do so. It might be more difficult to deal with him later, when benign autocracy turned into tyranny and murder into regicide.

Elizabethans would have understood this point, battered as they were by royal propaganda on the need for absolute obedience even if the monarch was a tyrant, which of course Elizabeth was not, except to the few malcontents who maintained the right to depose usurpers and tyrants. Brutus's dilemma would be of interest to the first audience, and one can see that although he might be wrong Shakespeare wanted him to be liked before he was condemned, adding to the portrait such sympathetic touches as his relationships with the boy Lucius and with Portia.

The other conspirators have various motives, less honourable and more straightforwardly political than Brutus's. Cassius is envious, complaining that it is ridiculous to treat this weak human being as a king or a god. The others are more lightly but still sharply characterised: witness Casca, the plain blunt man who, unlike Cassius, is superstitiously terrified by a storm. These hard-headed Romans are indeed a superstitious lot; yet they are also cunning and opportunistic, as we see from the success of Decius Brutus, playing on Caesar's superstition and vanity.

The business of the play is to offer plausible versions of these great, embattled, devious figures - to give us some idea of what is going on in their heads. And it must never be forgotten that they are Romans, even if fallible or corrupt. The verse of Julius Caesar was specially created for Romans; it is different from that of all the other tragedies. These Romans are engaged in a complex and vicious political struggle but they still have an antique dignity, a manner of speaking that seems

almost statuesque, as when they refer to themselves in the third person. Yet they are also ostentatiously manly and sometimes sentimental. Of course, there are many rhetorical deviations, but it is still true that we have not met with this style before and won't again.

These politicians understand murder as an extension of normal political activity, but their language is sober, anxious and quietly grand, at least until the ruthless Antony and Octavius take over the scene. Up to the moment of Caesar's death, Brutus is the centre of attention. He could have been represented as another greedy politician, but Shakespeare leaves out most of the evidence for that, and lets Brutus do the deep thinking. In so doing he attributes to Brutus a dilemma that obviously struck him as of special interest. This was the anguished critical interval between decision and action that dominates the early part of Macbeth. Brutus has this striking anticipation of the later play:

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 council, and the state of man,

Like to a little kingdom, suffers then

The nature of an insurrection.

He is in the restless gap between deciding to do something and doing it. In thinking about his need to choose, he enacts in his own mind the conspiracy and the revolt that will happen in a larger scale in the real world. This is a poetry of double crisis, personal and national.

Brutus would prefer a bloodless murder. When it happens he tries to evade its full horror by making ritual use of Caesar's blood. But then Antony arrives and at once

everything changes. (Shakespeare, not Plutarch or history, brought him on at this point.) The contrasting motives of Brutus and Antony are brought out in their orations to the crowd, not only by their content but by their rhetoric. Brutus supposes they will respond to reason; Antony is the unscrupulous demagogue. Shakespeare can write both contrasting speeches.

The rest of the play is about the fight between Antony and Octavius, and Brutus and Cassius, for control of the Roman future. The political toughness of the first pair is illustrated by the scene in which they list the men they want to purge ("Look, with a spot I damn him") before going on to work out how they can cheat Caesar's legatees. These Romans, however grand, keep their eyes on the material prizes; even the famous, sentimental quarrel scene between Brutus and Cassius is partly a row about money and seniority.

With the arrival of the poet, foolishly arguing for the cause of peace, Brutus's stoical reaction to the news of his wife's death, the music of the drowsy Lucius and the apparition of Caesar's ghost, we know, though we knew already, that these good guys are going to lose. Cassius goes on sentimentally about his birthday and Brutus speaks his famous farewell: "If we do meet again, why, we shall smile; If not, why then, this parting was well made." Cassius blunders into suicide and Brutus follows, to be eulogised by Antony, who can now afford to be generous, as "the noblest Roman of them all". The inexperienced but strong-willed Octavius does well in his first battle, and is on the way to seeing off Antony and becoming the emperor Augustus, the man who found Rome brick but left it marble.

Since Shakespeare is intruding into ancient Roman affairs, the poets in the play should perhaps have the last word. Cinna the poet is killed by a mob that mistook him for a politician. The other poet, the one who feebly pleads for peace at Philippi ("love, and be friends") is rudely driven away by the great men. The very thought of him makes Brutus furious.

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