



The Truth about Julius Caesar

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Toward the end of George Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*, General Burgoyne is asked, "What will History say?" He replies, "History, sir, will tell lies as usual" (Complete Plays with Prefaces Volume III [New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1963], 338). In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare does something far more difficult—he tells the truth. Lies, of course, are easy: plots can be straightforward, characters one-dimensional, and issues simple to resolve. Shakespeare almost never takes such an easy way out, but in the case of *Julius Caesar* he probably felt he had to be even more clever than usual. Most members of his audience would have known the story of Caesar in detail, many of them from the original Latin sources they had read at school. Those who hadn't had such an educational opportunity or who were lackluster students had available Sir Thomas North's very popular English version of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. Not only do the lives of Brutus, Caesar, and Antony provide Shakespeare's plot, but he also in many cases had picked up North's words and dropped them, slightly changed, into his play.

Given such circumstances, what did Shakespeare have to offer to the playgoers at his theatre? Of course, his language was more powerful than that of any other version. Even what he stole from North was improved. As Joseph Rosenblum says, "The thievery is brilliant" (A Reader's Guide to Shakespeare [New York: Barnes & Noble, 1999], 166). And Shakespeare was more than a great writer of historical/tragical plays, he was also (minor anachronisms like clocks and pockets aside) a brilliant historian. "While he will blunder in the physical detail of daily life . . . when he comes to deal with a Roman suicide, as distinct from an English suicide, he leaves the average modern student light-years behind. In the study of history Shakespeare lacked the means to walk, but he saw a way to run and seized it. The more sophisticated conceptions of the later historians are easily within his reach" (A. D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality* [London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1983], 101).

What Shakespeare reached in *Julius Caesar* was a complex representation of historical truth. In the words of Harold Bloom, "The more often I reread and teach it, or attend a performance, the subtler and more ambiguous it seems, not in plot but in character" (Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human [New York: Riverhead Books, 1998], 104). To tell the truth about history means getting at the uncertainties, contradictions, and complexities of the people who lived it. Caesar and Brutus, Antony and Cassius, Portia and Calpurnia, all see the world in different ways. Nor are those different visions as easy to categorize as they are in some other plays. There is no Iago who announces his villainy or Claudius who half-repents his murder. Much as in real life, *Julius Caesar* is populated by people who see themselves as heroes, people who strive to do the best for themselves and their country. That they kill each other and precipitate a civil war in the process is true to history, and it is simultaneously an example of that larger Truth which fiction is supposed to provide when it explores the mysteries of humanness.

The very title of Shakespeare's play is a part of that mystery. How can *Julius Caesar* be the title character when he is dead before the play has run half its course? Part of the answer is in Caesar's power to dominate even though he is gone, and part of the answer is in Shakespeare's unwillingness to untie and untangle this Human Gordian knot. "We are given totally contradictory judgments of Caesar's character and intentions. The impression we receive . . . during his few appearances, credulous, aging, sick, arrogant but, still shrewd and powerfully authoritative, could support any of these views. His character is vital and complex, but by the time he is dead, we know him no more absolutely than anyone in the play does" (John Wilders, *The Lost Garden: A View of Shakespeare's English and Roman History Plays* [London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982], 92).

Caesar was in real life (and he is in Shakespeare's play) an extraordinary judge of character, a great repository of confidence (mostly in himself), and an unusually brilliant man with a wide range of abilities and interests. A. J. Langguth says of the historical Caesar, "Caesar hadn't been trying to charm Cicero when he wrote that extending the boundaries of the mind was better than expanding a nation's frontiers" (*A Noise of War: Caesar, Pompey, Octavia, and the Struggle for Rome* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994], 306).

Was Caesar the genius not only of Rome but for Rome? The right man to solve the problems of a republic becoming, inevitably, an empire? Or was he an opportunistic politician "who seemed to wish to hoard every title to keep it away from younger challengers"? (Langguth 300). Were all his wars merely forced marches on the road to kingship? Still more tantalizingly horrible is the question that Brutus poses to himself (in 2.1), might Caesar become dangerously ambitious as he becomes more powerful? Should he be stopped before he can reach a temptation that must prove irresistible?

Beyond Caesar is Rome itself and the nature of rule and rulers, people, politics, and politicians. Will the death of Caesar bring a release from the danger of dictatorship or will it unleash anarchy and precipitate an inevitable battle for absolute power? It is Shakespeare's great gift that he makes us see the struggles and confusions of these characters. This is history come to life, history turned to tragedy on the stage of Truth. Edith Hamilton describes this great Roman crisis as "a cruel and bitter war which had not brought even to the victors the high exultation of a great enterprise achieved" (*The Roman Way* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1984], 167). What Shakespeare gives us is the exultation of experiencing and understanding what these humans thought and felt, and in some sense, what it feels like and means to be human.