

Seminarians, Abstracts, and Papers: *Julius Caesar Seminar, SAA 2014*

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“‘Shrewdly to the Purpose’: Metacognition, Induction, and the Place of Practical Experience in *Julius Caesar*”

In Act 3 of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, after Brutus offers his fateful prediction of Antony’s future disposition toward the conspirators—“I know that we shall have him well to friend”—Cassius dissents: “I wish me may; but yet have I a mind / That fears him much; and my misgiving still / Falls shrewdly to the purpose” (3.1.143-46). In a play populated by “blocks” and “senseless things,” by characters unable to reflect on their choices or revise their opinions, Cassius’s moment of metacognition is more than proof that “he thinks too much” (1.2.195) in Caesar’s earlier observation; Cassius’s assessment of his own ability to anticipate danger is also a species of induction, as he works from the particular result or discovery up to the general observation to which it leads him. That Cassius’s capacity to learn from mistakes and to compare predictions with their actual outcomes turns out to be of little use in a world beset by prodigies and prophecies, in a play whose plot is haunted or overshadowed by the inevitability of its already well-known outcome, repeats in a minor key the main tragedy of the play.

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“‘Honourable Mettle May Be Wrought’: Brutus vis-à-vis Cassius”

Into what dangers would you lead me, Cassius,
That you would have me seek into myself
For that which is not in me? (1.2.63-65)

An idea of friendship between Brutus and Cassius does not easily square with Act One revelations from Cassius of his cool political mastery of an ingenuous Brutus. But there might be another side to this manipulation and to the play’s focus on this instance of the Roman brotherhood that so many of Shakespeare’s Romans celebrate. A more disingenuous Brutus can be seen to invite—passive-aggressively, in a way—Cassius’ manipulations, and so Brutus can be reciprocally, if obliquely managing Cassius from the start, as in the coy mastery that my quick quotation might suggest. My paper explores dramatic possibilities of this interpersonal rivalry that recede when Brutus gets played at the start as some version of Cassius’ dupe, cast for a part in Cassius’ plot. In contrast, what does Brutus have in mind? What is Brutus’ plot?

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“Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and the Medieval English Cycle-Play Augustus”

In this essay, I re-examine a feature of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* which figured prominently in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century criticism of the play, the discrepancy between Caesar as he appears in Plutarch’s *Lives* (dignified, politically astute) and Caesar as he appears in Shakespeare’s play (oblivious, comically obtuse). The most substantive extant explanation, dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century, holds that Shakespeare’s Caesar differs from Plutarch’s because he is modeled instead on Seneca’s Hercules. This hypothesis is flawed, however, insofar as it rests upon a misinterpretation of Seneca’s Hercules as a comic figure, a buffoon, a perspective which has been displaced in subsequent work on Seneca. Instead, I argue, a more likely source for Shakespeare’s characterization of Caesar is the conventional depiction of his successor, Augustus Caesar, in medieval English cycle-plays. Corpus Christi pageants were still produced in England until Shakespeare was in his late teens, and they seem to have typecast Augustus as a blustering braggart, much like Shakespeare’s Julius. Like Herod and “Pharaoh,” “Caesar” was one manifestation of what John Parker (2000) has identified as a “typology of Antichrist.” Two opposed typologies, one of Christ, and one of Antichrist, provide these plays’ most basic structure. Shakespeare, I propose, applies the convention of the comical, overreaching “Antichrist” to a figure slightly outside the usual tradition, Julius Caesar, rather than Augustus,

casting him, like the cycle-play Augustus, as a type of Antichrist. With this connection in mind, the play as a whole can be read as an inversion or photo-negative of a traditional Passion play. Or, it could be understood as a partial retelling of the cycle-play pattern: the story of the villain's fall, without the usual counterpoint of the hero's ascent. This complementary narrative is instead merely hinted at, through a strategic use of parallels and allusions. Jesus is Caesar's implicit foil; reading the story of Caesar's assassination, Shakespeare seems to have found it interesting to juxtapose that history with the Gospel narrative of Christ's Passion.

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“Slaughtering Caesar and ‘just causes’”

Both slaughtering Caesar and his “just cause” refusing Metellus Cimber's request determine moral values in action. The ambiguity of “causes” reflects the ethics of the tragedy. Subjective and objective dimensions permeate *Julius Caesar* more than any other Shakespearean play. Plutarch's Caesar uses pictures and numbers such as “like a wild beast in the toils,” and “they say he received three and twenty.” Henceforth I will use the term “slaughter” or “tyrannicide” rather than the term “assassination.” You can—whenever murder is concerned—compare it to fatal, horrible events like the many executions by the Rote Armee Fraction (RAF) in Germany (1970s, 34 murders). Both were celebrations and triumphs of an unbearably evil dimension. All in all, my research will concentrate on “just causes” from many sides. Caesar and Brutus primarily, Cassius and Octavius, our Baader-Meinhof inspired sociopathic proto-dictator, and even Antony in his anger, grief and duplicity.

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“Conspiracy, Blood-Sacrifice, and Tyrannicide”

More than thirty years ago, in his edition of *Julius Caesar*, Marvin Spevack referred to the over “one hundred years of almost microscopic comparison” that literary critics have devoted to analysis of interrelations between Shakespeare's Roman dramas and North's translation of the lives of Caesar and Brutus. “Indeed,” Spevack continues, “all the nooks and crannies have been searched and illuminated.” It may seem impertinent, at best, to suggest that not merely a draughty nook or cobwebbed cranny but an entire unlocked room has been neglected. Yet I would like to propose that Plutarch's *Life of Publicola* is just such a room. In this life, Plutarch provides a narrative of the founding of Rome's republic that differs significantly from Livy's as well as a brief account of Publicola's legislation regarding tyrannicide. From these two sections of Plutarch's *Publicola*, I shall argue, Shakespeare creates a framework for dramatizing the assassination of Julius Caesar as a tyrannicide that is fundamentally misconceived. In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare transposes the story Publicola tells of the abortive conspiracy to assassinate the new republic's counsels—a conspiracy in which Brutus the Elder's sons take part—to the moment of the republic's dissolution, when Brutus the Younger and the other conspirators carry out the assassination of Julius Caesar. Many details of central speeches and actions—including the scene of ritualized blood-bathing in III.1.105-110, which editors claim to be without precedent—will acquire new significance when considered in the context of this transposition.

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“To Love Caesar While Striking Him: Political Betrayal and Friendship with the Dead in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*”

Attempting to justify his assassination of Caesar to both Mark Antony and the plebs, Brutus promises to disclose “the cause / Why I, that did love Caesar when I struck him, / Have thus proceeded” (3.1.181-83). I want to focus on the possibility that betrayal and fidelity can co-exist and that they are politically constitutive in the play. Using the Classical rhetoric of friendship—a discourse that recognizes betrayal and views it as advantageous under particular conditions—Shakespeare animates friendship as a viable political model. He adds to this discourse through Mark Antony's funeral oration, demonstrating how friendship with the dead and political mourning make possible a new set of affiliations that unravel traditional notions of honor and lineage. Through

this mechanism of friendship with the dead, betrayal becomes a constitutive political force and memory founds a new political order.

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“Historical Commentary, Feminine Propriety, and *Julius Caesar*”

Two loci in the Portia-Brutus interview in *Julius Caesar*, “charme” and “comfort” (TLN 912, 926), speak to editors’ apparent beliefs about Shakespeare’s “errors,” as well as to conceptions of reading communities and editorial competition. This is especially so for Enlightenment and nineteenth-century critics. My study of editors’ attempts to explain the meaning of this word suggests to me that many were strongly influenced by ideas of gender and their beliefs about women, especially notions of feminine propriety.

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“Subjectivity in Politics: Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* engaged by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud”

In this paper, I will use Karl Marx’s and Sigmund Freud’s textual engagement with Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* to show how Shakespeare raises questions of subjective politics and political subjectivity in his play. *Julius Caesar* is a precedent on which Critical Theory can build its model of subjectivity and society—a blending of Marxism and psychoanalysis. The fact that both Marx and Freud, the twin pillars of modern Critical Theory, quote from and allude to *Julius Caesar* many times in their writings suggests that the play has the potential to be useful for modern theory and that the roots of that theory is Shakespearean.

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“‘Obstinately Blind’: Wright, Hunter, Macmillan, and Their Editions of *Julius Caesar*”

Arguably, three of the finest single editions of *Julius Caesar* were produced within a quarter-century of each other: William Aldis Wright’s First Clarendon (Oxford, 1878), Sir Mark Hunter’s College Classics Series (Madras, 1900), and Michael Macmillan’s First Arden (London, 1902). Though the conservative editing in the three texts adheres closely to the First Folio, the fulsome running commentary on various passages that each editor provides proves to be much more adventurous. Many subsequent twentieth-century editions reproduce Macmillan’s notes almost verbatim, making his First Arden a kind of standard for his successors. Yet a remarkable number of his annotations seem to have had another purpose besides illuminating difficult passages. In forging his own scholarly path by the conventional incorporation of his predecessors, he appears to have been softening some of Hunter’s observations that, frankly, could be construed as attacks on the celebrated Wright. This type of negotiation—between his former master in India, an eminent forebear, and himself—helped Macmillan write excellent notes.

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“Demagoguery and Hypocrisy in *Julius Caesar*: *Plus Ça Change, Plus C’est La Même Chose*”

Julius Caesar is the quintessential political play, the House of Cards of fin de siècle 16th Century. The tactics employed by its principal characters are likely to remind an alert audience member or reader of similar behavior by recent political figures and (dare I say it) contemporary politicians. While my paper does not explicitly draw the parallels, they are there to be seen by observant readers who, no doubt, would argue vociferously over which modern politicians most closely match Antony’s populist demagoguery, Brutus’s hypocritical employment of his reputation for philosophical (read “religious”) orthodoxy, Caesar’s carefully honed gravitas and Cassius’s self-defeating flattery. Brutus is the particular focus of this paper, which focuses on the double revelation of Portia’s death in the Quarrel Scene as a deliberate ploy by him to appear, contrary to the fact, to be a dedicated follower of the dictates of Stoicism.