

# interpretation

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# interpretation

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# Shakespeare's Caesar's Plan

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Only one of Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays deals with an historical figure of the first rank. Coriolanus, Antony, Cleopatra, Henry V were of lesser greatness; Macbeth, Lear, Hamlet would have been lost in historical obscurity but for Shakespeare himself. With Julius Caesar, however, Shakespeare chose a man of almost unrivalled glory. Why Caesar and no other? Why four of ten tragedies about ancient Rome? What was Shakespeare's understanding of Caesar and Rome?

Designed in such a way as to mirror the complexity of their subjects, Shakespeare's plays were all bound to elicit a variety of interpretations and judgments. Parts stand out and speeches impress, but, as with the universe itself, the overall meaning remains elusive. To this common state *Julius Caesar* adds a complication deriving from the partisan political passions it provokes. Even *Coriolanus* is not its match in this respect, for the conflict between plebs and patricians is less profound than the conflict between one great man and the mixed republican rule of the few and the many that he overthrows. Because the rise of Caesar signified the ruin of the old republic and the establishment of the empire, those living in ages or societies capable of appreciating the difference between the two regimes tend to side with one or the other, thus mirroring the bitter and violent clash that originally took place between their supporters in Rome. In Caesar republicans see a prodigious tyrant deserving assassination, and in the conspirators mighty heroes even as they go down to defeat. To his own partisans, however, Caesar looms up as a great king—perhaps the greatest of all—whose prominent abilities alone could preserve justice, order, peace, civilization in a period of republican decay, and whose assassination was therefore as foolish as it was unjust and base.

It is mystifying to observe that Shakespeare seems to encourage both viewpoints, allowing Caesar's supporters to locate the tragedy in his assassination early in Act III, and his republican opponents to locate it in the suicides of Cassius and Brutus at the end of Act V. But is it not strange that a play named after Caesar should begin on the last day of his life and devote most

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Howard White, from whom I first heard about Shakespeare. It tries to make Allan Bloom's brilliant interpretation of Shakespeare's Caesar (in *Shakespeare's Politics*) more consistent by denying that Caesar, imprudently and in derogation of his own greatness, sought to become king of Rome. On the contrary, Caesar's true ambition, singular in its end and even more in its choice of means, is perfectly in keeping with the greatness Bloom attributes to him. My thanks to a group of friends who originally discussed this paper with me. A similar conclusion can be found in Michael Platt's *Rome and Romans According to Shakespeare*, pp. 193–213, as I was pleased to learn recently.

of its pages to events following his death? Does this disproportion, coupled with the final memorable depiction of republican heroism, indicate where Shakespeare's sympathies ultimately lay?

These difficulties are compounded by one more central, for it is hard to tell whether Shakespeare felt any admiration or sympathy for Caesar at all, or just what he meant by the portrait he presented. We get to know Caesar in the first part of the play through an intricately woven series of direct appearances and reactions by others. The direct appearances occur at and after the games of Lupercal (I.ii), in Caesar's home early the next morning (II.ii), and, finally, on his way to and at the senate house (III.i). Indirect impressions or reactions come from commoners, tribunes, conspirators, a sophist and a soothsayer, the lengthiest in speeches by Cassius, Casca and Brutus. The resulting portrait is well-nigh incomprehensible. Caesar seems imperious, superstitious, overconfident, inconstant, vainglorious and—above all—imprudent. He gives orders like an oriental potentate, credulously accepts old religious ceremonies, refuses to heed Calpurnia's and his own apprehensions of danger, bows to Decius' subtle flattery, boasts of his own unique and superlative constancy to the senate, and is easily murdered. His talking of himself in the third person as Caesar seems ridiculous. His claim to be fearless and more terrible than danger itself, together with his likening himself to the northern star, sounds like extravagant bombast. And here, at the height of his career, we watch him commit blunder after blunder, allowing a handful of conspirators to accomplish what whole armies, native as well as foreign, could not.

No greatness here, but there is another, less obtrusive side to the man with which many of these traits are completely at variance. He himself alludes to his great conquests, and the play opens with his return from a victory just won in open battle over the sons of Pompey. He already commands like a king rather than a republican official, and is obeyed as one. Not only do Mark Antony and the people love him, but also Brutus, the best of the conspirators. Even Cassius, his worst enemy, testifies to his colossal authority, and Caesar, in turn, understands the danger represented by Cassius perfectly. How, then, can a man so great, so successful, so astute be afflicted with so many serious defects and suddenly be led to his downfall? Had these defects been there all along, would they not have prevented his astonishing succession of military and political victories? Or was it the successes that engendered the defects—especially the vainglory? Did Shakespeare wish to depict still another example, perhaps the loftiest, of the hubris, the rash and insolent pride, that makes great men challenge the gods and come crashing down?

Only the latter alternative seems plausible, but the facts of the play will not allow it. Far from recently evincing a rash imprudence, Caesar has, after all, just returned from successfully ending the last open resistance to his hegemony within Rome. And his capacity for swift and ruthless self-protection shows itself to be very much alive in his reaction to the tribunes, instantly,

covertly and somewhat ambiguously (though ominously) “putting them to silence.” Besides, it can hardly be said that Caesar’s fate in the play is one of manifest downfall and defeat, for the second and larger “half” of the play demonstrates without question that his spirit, or its embodiment in Octavius Caesar and Antony, completely triumphs over the republican conspirators. Caesar, hubris or no, seems to prosper in death at least as much as in life. Finally, we must face the fact that Caesar could easily have avoided the rush of errors in his last days. He could have protected himself, and he could have assuaged rather than provoked the fears and suspicions of his ambitious intent. Or are we to believe that the great Caesar, the most astute politician of his time, had swiftly and unaccountably taken leave of his political senses on what was to prove the last full day of his life?

## I

Let us examine Shakespeare’s mystifying portrait further. In his first words Caesar commands Antony to touch Calpurnia in this “holy chase” and cure her sterility, as “our elders say,” commanding further that “no ceremony” be left out. This apparently confirms the view, expressed afterward by Cassius, that Caesar “is grown superstitious of late,” (II.i.195). But this great violator of Roman political traditions, this greatest of Roman innovators could hardly have been impressed by the sanctity of the “elders” in gathering supreme power to himself. Nor, contrary to Cassius’ claim, does he show anything resembling a regular course of superstition now. On the contrary, though perhaps unfortunately for him, he dismisses the warnings of both an unknown soothsayer and his own augurers, and seems utterly unreceptive to the dire omens Calpurnia cites to keep him from attending the senate. Moreover, unlike the plainly superstitious Casca, Caesar reacts to the stormy eve of the Ides of March without mentioning the gods and their punishments, and even his last speech about the most constant things in the universe cites only the northern star and himself without the gods. This distinction receives an astonishing confirmation almost immediately afterward, where Caesar’s sharp warning—“Hence! wilt thou lift up Olympus?”—actually refers to the prospect of his own rising from his chair in the Senate, and not to the gods as such. Such evidence inclines one to conclude that Caesar, far from being superstitious, might not have believed in the Roman deities at all.

On this supposition, Caesar’s opening expression of pious traditionalism before the assembled multitude must be viewed as nothing more than politic dissembling. Caesar knows full well that the people cling to tradition and love those who openly respect it. For reasons as yet unknown to us, he may, in fact, have recently taken to such public displays of piety much more than before, thus accounting for Cassius’ observation. But if Caesar understands

this attachment of the people to tradition, how could he fail to anticipate their devotion to the most hallowed of all political traditions in Rome—that of opposition to the Tarquins and all kings? They might accept—they did accept—his own king-like supremacy, but not the name “king.” Then why risk the suspicion and odium Antony’s offering him a crown not once but several times was likely to engender?

The people cheer when Caesar puts away the crown—that is, when he rejects it. It was equally predictable, but far more dangerous, that Antony’s offer should intensify the fear and anger of the remaining band of pro-republican senators. So great Caesar erred, it appears, not only in his estimate of the people but of the aristocrats as well. Yet the immediate aftermath of Lupercal nullifies this interpretation. Caesar has just been rebuffed over the crown, and is described (by Brutus) as leaving the scene angrily. His first words to Antony, spoken privately, therefore sound strange indeed, for they have no anger in them and seem oddly removed from the event that has just transpired. Observing Cassius in the crowd, Caesar tells Antony he is “dangerous”—a term he intensifies to “very dangerous” after Antony’s demurrals, and in conclusion to perhaps the finest thumbnail character sketch in literary history. We need nothing more than this assessment of Cassius, so true to what we have just learned from his conversation with Brutus about Caesar, to know how Caesar could attain the unrivalled supremacy Cassius acknowledges and envies. Caesar has an extraordinary comprehension of men and situations, and his present comments about Cassius show how little that unique capacity has declined. But our dilemma thereby becomes more obvious and more pressing, for how could a man of such acumen have just a moment ago committed such a blunder regarding the crown? There must be some connection between that event and his sudden comment on Cassius’ danger to him. Obviously, Caesar is aware of the possibility of a conspiracy against him—a conspiracy probably further aroused by Antony’s action. And how marvelous that Caesar’s attention should focus unremittingly on the one man who has already begun to foment and organize such a conspiracy!

Cassius is very dangerous, Caesar insists, but “I rather tell thee what is to be feared than what I fear; for always I am Caesar.” Cassius is to be feared, but Caesar does not fear him. Why so? Is Caesar unconcerned about living—is he incapable, perhaps, of dying? Or does Caesar at once act in such a way that he need not feel fear? As to the former alternative, Caesar is perfectly aware of his own mortality. Not only does he have certain physical afflictions (epilepsy, some deafness), but he later acknowledges in a famous speech that death will come to him as to other men:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;  
The valiant never taste of death but once.  
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,  
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,

Seeing that death, a necessary end,  
Will come when it will come.

This passage seems to express a curious fatalism about death, but does it forbid efforts to stay healthy or keep from being killed—a restraint hardly true of Caesar's past life? Or does it mean that men should not fear what they cannot ultimately avoid—a view perfectly compatible with taking careful precautions to protect oneself to the greatest extent possible? The valiant, by this interpretation, need not take unnecessary risks, or allow themselves to become the helpless victims of others.

What has Caesar done about the conspiracy he knows Cassius might be forming against him? Has he taken those simple precautions kings and tyrants have taken in all ages, even in less worrisome times? Does he have a body-guard? Has he set spies on the trail of Cassius and other malcontents? Surely a conspiracy about which at least two perfect strangers (Artemidorus and Popilius Lena) come to learn, and organized by this very Cassius, slinking through the night with a troop of accomplices, would not have presented a major problem to those forces of Caesar that had, in a twinkling, "put to silence" the two tribunes merely for removing scarves from Caesar's statues. We do not know why Caesar fails to take such steps, but it is impossible to believe he did not think of them. For he had given much thought to his death, and had taken other steps with it in mind. He had, for example, made an elaborate will, and named Octavius Caesar his son and heir. Moreover, and most peculiarly, he had already summoned Octavius back to Rome, thus accounting for the coincidence by which Octavius arrives outside Rome the very day of his funeral. Here Shakespeare deviates significantly from the account in Plutarch (p. 1113)\*, where Octavius hears of Caesar's death only after it occurs and while he is abroad, returning sometime later. By having Caesar himself summon Octavius, Shakespeare intimates that Caesar—*his* Caesar, not Plutarch's—had some purpose in wanting his heir on hand around the Ides of March. Could he have had some premonition or foreknowledge of his own imminent murder? Or is there some other bearing that this solicitation, invented but unexplained by Shakespeare, had for Caesar's future?

## II

To find our way through difficulties deepening on all sides, we must retreat to a vantage point that will permit us to appreciate Caesar's situation as he saw it. First and foremost, we must realize that the one-man rule he has, for some time, been engaged in establishing is not a harsh rule, not a simple tyranny, but something like what Aristotle calls a royal tyranny. How far he

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has come along this path Shakespeare does not tell us in detail, just as he omits all direct mention of Caesar's earlier political career. We never learn, as we do from Plutarch (p. 881), that Caesar has been made "dictator for life"—an extension of the limited emergency nature of dictatorship rendering the republic essentially inoperative during his lifetime and at his pleasure. Instead, Shakespeare makes sure we fully realize that somehow, within a framework still republican (for example, with tribunes and a senate), Caesar has managed to gain supreme power. And he leaves it to our own intelligence to realize that this could not have happened accidentally, or legally. Caesar must have engaged in a series of illegal and immoral acts, must have sought such power, must have defeated many rivals and opponents in the course of achieving it (as he has just defeated the sons of Pompey), and must have given considerable thought not only to the strategy that would make his quest successful but even more to the ultimate object of that quest.

Clearly, Caesar has made the common people the basis of his power, and it is with them that the play begins and in a way starts anew after Antony's Caesaristic funeral oration for Caesar. The people enjoy Caesar's benefactions, exult and share in his triumphs, glory in his command, and dote on his subservience. Caesar's enemies, the main defenders of the republic, come from the senatorial class, and against them he has had to use force—most recently against Pompey's sons. He is also capable, in an instant, of silencing the two tribunes, themselves supporters of the republican order. But he has not been harsh. Some of his former enemies, pardoned, still sit in the senate, and even the "very dangerous" Cassius is left perfectly free. This is why Caesar's rule could appear (if one did not look too hard, and forgot much) not severe and tyrannical but mild and just, thus accounting for the virtuous Brutus' amazing admission, in soliloquy, that: "To speak the truth of Caesar, I have not known when his affections sway'd more than his reason."

Why Brutus should have lost sight of Caesar's earlier usurpations (of which his recent triumph over fellow Romans and his treatment of the tribunes are lingering examples), or of the monarchical power already in his possession without the title "king," we do not yet know. But we must assume that the republic did not willingly vest Caesar with quasi-monarchical authority, that it yielded only what it had to under the pressure of some kind of necessity, coming either from him directly or from circumstances. Just as the senate now seems willing to grant him a crown abroad, it may previously have bestowed increasing levels of authority—simply to avert his seizing more. Nevertheless, this great usurper clearly seems intent on not being seen as one, on seeming more king-like than tyrannical, and hence on securing for himself first, the love of the people, and then the attachment of as many senators as possible consistent with their presenting no direct threat to his king-like authority—that is, with their willingness to surrender the old republican prerogatives of the senate itself. But if this has been and remains (as in his

will) Caesar's policy, what motivates it? Does Caesar love the common people, cry at the plight of the poor—as Antony claims in his oration? Is he a Roman patriot, devoted to the common good? Is he a gentlemanly lover of virtue? And what is his ultimate object?

It may not be entirely accidental that we never hear Caesar refer to virtue, Rome, the common good, justice or the people in his private discourse, and in some cases not even publicly. Of course, he speaks like a monarch rather than a tyrant, refusing to read Artemidorus' message because "What touches us ourself shall be last serv'd," and he inquires, as he opens the senate (*his* senate, he says), "What is now amiss that Caesar and his senate must redress?" But Caesar seems to have little genuine respect for the senate, as his imperious words to Decius beautifully indicate: "Have I in conquest stretch'd mine arm so far, To be afeard to tell greybeards the truth?"—the greybeards, of course, being the senators. Nor is there any clear sign of genuine love for the people, despite his slavishly prostrating himself before them at Lupercal and lavishly providing for them in his will, and despite Antony's eulogy citing the foreign monies he brought into the "general coffers" and the tears he wept "when the poor cried." Evidently Caesar did not put so much in the general coffers or care so much for the poor as to deny himself those enormous sums permitting his testamentary largesse to the people, and thus serving that very ambition Antony was at such pains to deny in him.

Much dissimulation masks the fact that Caesar's main—perhaps his sole—interest is himself, although his way of talking about himself in the third person and the qualities he lays claim to fairly shout it out. From Cassius we learn that Caesar dared him to swim the raging Tiber with him, and that he bade the Romans to "mark him and write his speeches in their books" He was, then, highly competitive, sought to do unusually difficult things, and wanted to be remembered long after his death. He clearly prides himself on his vast conquests, and even more, we may presume, on having succeeded in making himself master of Rome as well as of its farflung empire. Shakespeare even goes so far as to demonstrate before our eyes—though most unobtrusively—Caesar's perfectly remarkable capacity for ruling men, and for altering his demeanor from one audience to another. At Lupercal we see him first as lordly emperor, the next moment as self-abasing slave of the people. In one scene afterwards he is the gentlemanly equal of fellow aristocrats, welcoming them into his home that morning, and in the next not only the emperor or king again but the godlike man, like unto the northern star. Where else in literature are the manners befitting such different regimes manifested side by side in so short a space?

Caesar must enjoy this unrivalled and almost uncanny ability to suit style to occasion. But if he is already in fact Rome's king, what remains? If, as Cassius himself admits, he is now become a god, bearing the palm alone, and ". . . doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus," can he have further

ambition? The analysis given by Plutarch, at a place where the events contained in Shakespeare's play begin, is this:

Caesar was born to do great things, and had a passion after honour, and the many noble exploits he had done did not now serve as an inducement to him to sit still and reap the fruit of his past labours, but were incentives and encouragements to go on, and raised in him ideas of still greater actions, and a desire of new glory, as if the present were all spent. It was in fact a sort of emulous struggle with himself, as it had been with another, how he might outdo his past actions by his future.

Plutarch goes on to say that Caesar planned to add to his glory at this point through a new campaign against the Parthians, an assortment of geographical improvements, and a new calendar, but

. . . that which brought upon him the most apparent and mortal hatred was his desire of being king; which gave the common people the first occasion to quarrel with him, and proved the most specious pretense to those who had been his secret enemies all along.

In Shakespeare's play only the last of these ambitions shows itself, and most directly in the crown-offering scene recounted by Casca. Why Antony offers a crown or coronet to Caesar at the Feast of Lupercal we are not told. Neither before nor after that scene do he and Caesar discuss the matter, and it is highly improbable that Antony—the Antony of “When Caesar says, ‘Do this,’ it is performed”—would undertake so important an action without Caesar's explicit direction or consent. We are told by Casca that Caesar put the crown aside reluctantly, and by Brutus (confirmed by Casca) that Caesar came away from the scene looking angry or sad. He seems to have wanted the crown very badly—a conclusion that spurs Brutus to join the conspiracy, and is also drawn by the senate as a whole.

Does Shakespeare's (not Plutarch's) Caesar really wish to become king? That he wants people to think so seems obvious. But what would he gain thereby? With the crown would no doubt come the opportunity to dispense further with republican forms, and perhaps the right to convey his authority either to a natural heir or, lacking that, to one of his own choosing. But a man with Caesar's love of distinction would also see certain disadvantages. Kingship, as traditionally and ordinarily understood in Rome, could never completely free itself from association with the Tarquins and hence from the obloquy in which it was held over many centuries. Moreover, it could hardly bring renown to Caesar as a novel system of his own creation, since its revival would be that of a very old system devised by others. This revived monarchy, finally, would depend on his receiving the consent of the senate and the people, and would, therefore, always retain something of this dependence.

From the viewpoint of a man of the highest ambition—of one of the very few who, according to Abraham Lincoln, belonged to the “family of the lion and the tribe of the eagle”—these were important defects, but how could they

be avoided? History provides the answer: Caesar must found a new regime to which he would give his name—the rule of the Caesars—instead. The only change Shakespeare makes is to attribute to Caesar's intention, and to a comprehensive plan, what historically seems to have come about without such a plan, even if by a kind of necessity. Unfortunately—though it will challenge him to a display of fortitude without parallel—Caesar cannot assure the success of this plan without submitting to, and indeed in some degree arranging, his own assassination, martyrdom and deification. Only on this improbable but not impossible assumption can we explain the paradoxes and inconsistencies into which we have otherwise fallen. Only in this way can we explain several subtle changes Shakespeare makes in Plutarch's account of the same events. And only in this way can we make sense of the play being named after Caesar, and of the necessary, rather than accidental, triumph of his spirit, embodied in the forces of Octavius and Antony, that constitutes the primary import and lesson of the second and larger part of the play.

### III

Fortunately, this conclusion can be shown to rest on more than circumstantial evidence. The scene that most fully reveals the working of Caesar's mind (II.ii) shows him first alone and then in extended discussion—his only one in the play—with Calpurnia, Decius Brutus and finally a group of senators, most of them conspirators. Just as in the immediately preceding scene Brutus had been shown walking in his orchard amid stormy exhalations, so here Caesar is first shown awake, in his nightgown, inside his house, amid thunder and lightning. Brutus was up, so he said, because thinking of the plot against Caesar kept him from sleeping, but we do not know why Caesar is up. Did the storm awaken him? Was he roused by Calpurnia's crying out in her sleep with the words he reports ("Help! Ho! they murder Caesar!")? Did he go to sleep at all? We do not know.

Caesar is determined to go to the senate house that morning but meets with strong opposition from Calpurnia. In arguing against his going, Calpurnia says nothing about any dream of hers, and he, on his part, does not tell her what he heard her cry out in her sleep. She cites a report from "one within" of "most horrid sights seen by the watch"—things "beyond all use." Caesar is unmoved: not only is any "end" purposed by the "mighty gods" inevitable, says he, but these unusual sights—these "predictions"—are as much for the world in general as for Caesar. To this retort Calpurnia objects, in turn, because by means of comets " . . . the heavens blaze forth the death of princes," not of beggars—a point Caesar does not try to deny. He asserts, instead, that death will come when it will come (no mention of the mighty gods here), and the valiant do not fear it. But the braggadocio of his first

response to Calpurnia (the things that threaten him have only looked on his back and vanish when they see his face) is not repeated: Caesar now seems willing to acknowledge that the death of this particular prince, meaning himself, may in fact come today but still should not be feared.

At this juncture Caesar's continued insistence on going to the senate house receives another setback, for the servant he sent to the augurers reports that they " . . . would not have you stir forth today": the omens support Calpurnia against him. But Caesar refuses to budge, giving the bad omen (a beast lacking a heart) a contrary interpretation: he would be such a beast—a coward—if he did not go forth. To support this view he returns to braggadocio in another form, claiming that Caesar is more dangerous than danger itself, and so he shall go forth. At this the frustrated Calpurnia can only lament that his " . . . wisdom is consumed in confidence," and her last resort is to replace her original command with a plea. On bended knee she begs Caesar not to go, and he at once relents. Apparently, what argument and the authority of the priests could not accomplish is accomplished by her lowly pleading—her "humor," as Caesar calls it. Much against his reiterated will, he consents to stay home: Marc Antony will tell the senate he is not well.

But Decius Brutus arrives first—the same Decius who had assured the conspirators he could again successfully flatter Caesar and assure his going to the Capitol. Cassius, you recall, had been fearful the lately superstitious Caesar might be deterred from going by "apparent prodigies, the unaccustom'd terror of this night, and the persuasion of the augurers." As it turns out, not one of these—and they are all present—succeeds with Caesar, thus proving Cassius wrong about his having grown superstitious. Nevertheless, Caesar does succumb to Calpurnia's plea and is thus, by a means Cassius did not foresee, to remain at home.

With Decius on the scene before Antony, Caesar could easily have accomplished his altered resolve. All he had to do was tell Decius (as he said he would tell Antony) that he was not feeling well and ask him to convey that message to the senate. But Caesar takes an entirely unexpected tack: tell the senate, he instructs Decius, that Caesar *will* not come down—not cannot, or dare not (which he explicitly denies), but *will* not. This, of course, constitutes a clear affront to both the senate and Decius, causing Calpurnia to intervene: "Say he is sick." She could put her thought in no other way than this because Caesar had just insisted, a moment before, that "Cannot is false"—in short, that he was not sick, contrary to what he was going to tell Antony. To the poor woman's open suggestion that Decius lie, Caesar now reacts with great indignation:

Shall Caesar send a lie?  
 Have I in conquest stretch'd mine arm so far,  
 To be afear'd to tell greybeards the truth?  
 Decius, go tell them Caesar will not come.

Of course, Caesar does not admit—and Calpurnia is in no position to point out in Decius' presence—that it was Caesar himself who had first said he would have Antony tell the senate he was not well—itsself a lie. And what he now tells Decius is of course a lie too—for it is not his will but Calpurnia's pleading that will keep him from the senate that day. Moreover, it is questionable whether Caesar would really have permitted Decius to bring such an assertion of arbitrary and tyrannical will to the senate. Minutes later he is the soul of gentlemanliness and friendliness to the senators who come as his escort to the Capitol. And even at the very height of his imperious pride in the senate house, where he treats not only the senators but all other men as grossly inferior in constancy, he asserts not his sheer will but his refusal to be sway'd by fawning and flattery rather than reasons: "Know, Caesar doth not wrong, nor without cause will he be satisfied."

Before dispatching Decius, Caesar could have found some way of blaming his absence on the auguries, or perhaps on Calpurnia's not feeling well. But by this false assertion of mere will he had practically compelled Decius to ask further: ". . . let me know some cause lest I be laugh'd at when I tell them so." In response Caesar seems to soften: though his willing it is enough to satisfy the senate, out of love for Decius, and for his private knowledge only, Caesar will confide his real reason for staying home. In this way Caesar makes Decius his partner in lying to the senate and keeping from it truth that somehow cannot be aired publicly. But the real truth is not what Caesar tells Decius: he does not repeat the gist of his conversation with Calpurnia, and how Calpurnia managed to persuade him to stay home. Instead he concocts an amazing and ingenious lie, greater than any before.

This night, he tells Decius, Calpurnia dreamt she saw his statue spouting blood from a hundred places, with many happy Romans coming to bathe their hands in it, and, taking this dream as an evil omen, she had begged Caesar on her knee to remain home. Now the most notable (and least noted) feature of this account is that Caesar has just invented it out of almost whole cloth. Calpurnia had indeed begged Caesar, but not because of this dream. Calpurnia herself had mentioned no such dream, though she had, as he remarks in soliloquy, cried out in her sleep about his being murdered. Her argument with Caesar had been based not on dreams but on publicly observed prodigies and the generally accepted significance of comets. She seems to have known better than to try to persuade Caesar with stories of personal dreams, whatever she remembered of her own that morning. She may even have observed how contemptuously he had dismissed the soothsayer the day before as nothing but a "dreamer."

The fictitious dream Caesar describes does not directly involve him, or his being murdered, but his statue, and it turns out to be an amazing prediction of how the conspirators later bathed their arms in his blood. But its tone is hardly optimistic, and its immediate import is to demonstrate, with perfect

clarity, how conscious Caesar was, that morning and that night, of the possibility—perhaps even the likelihood—of a conspiracy against his life. In responding, Decius fundamentally had two alternatives, each of which would tell Caesar something about both Decius and the situation Caesar was to face that day. An innocent Decius would be inclined to acknowledge how Calpurnia might well be frightened by such a dream, baseless as it was with Caesar so widely loved. Perhaps the peculiar happenings of the night brought it on, but in any case he could certainly understand Caesar's desire to keep his wife from worrying, and would be happy to tell the senate of Caesar's intended absence that day.

This is the response Decius failed to make. Instead, he gives a highly optimistic, wildly improbable, and extremely flattering interpretation to the supposed dream. Just as Caesar had earlier given an improbable interpretation to an evil omen because he was determined to go to the senate-house, here Decius gives another because he too is set on Caesar's going. So when Decius interprets Caesar's statute as supplying "reviving blood" to "great Rome" which "great men" come to collect for relics, Caesar voices no objection. On the contrary, eager to reverse his promise to Calpurnia, made unwillingly under duress, he proclaims the dream "well-expounded." And Caesar must have been confirmed in his suspicions by Decius' adding two further points: one, the promise of a crown from the senate (he says nothing about it being worn only abroad), the other the prospect of senate mockery. In short, Decius seems exceedingly anxious to get Caesar to go, and Caesar, recognizing the import of this anxiety, is as eager to go—the one to kill, the other to be killed; the one sure he had again successfully flattered, the other knowing he had seduced the flatterer into revealing his secret; the one intent with a small band of colleagues on freeing the republic, the other facing his greatest deed, "unshak'd of motion," and bent on his own immortal glory.

Now many otherwise inexplicable details in the play, including changes from Plutarch made by Shakespeare, become comprehensible. Caesar, having just defeated the last of his open opposition on the battlefield, knows that the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—of secret, conspiratorial opposition remains. He even knows who is most likely to foment such a conspiracy. He has decided that the culmination of his ambition requires the founding of a new sort of monarchy, and that this goal is best attained (and perhaps only attained) through a martyrdom at the hands of traitorous aristocrats that will permit the political system he has already initiated to be regarded as the product of a superhuman being or god. He returns from the battle with Pompey's sons on a holiday, the feast of Lupercal—a detail not stipulated in Plutarch and apparently forgotten even by the tribunes, who censure the artisans at the very opening of the play for being out on a working day rather than a holiday. The people will therefore be available both for his triumphal return and for the crown-offering Caesar arranges with Antony, the main object of which is

to stimulate and accelerate the conspiracy Caesar believes to be forming. Caesar, of course, must be made to look innocent and unsuspecting, hence no bodyguards and no spies—not even the discussion of guards reported by Plutarch and others (for example, Suetonius, sect. 86), with Caesar saying he will be protected by the love of the people instead of asserting the extreme fearlessness Shakespeare has him assert to Antony and Calpurnia. This is why the soothsayer is not asked his reasons for warning Caesar about the Ides of March, and why Caesar refuses even to try to read Artemidorus's urgent warning—whereas in Plutarch he tries very hard but unsuccessfully to read it (p. 892). For Caesar, we may presume, did not sleep the eve of the Ides, and the wild nature of the weather, with its preternatural manifestations, fitted perfectly with his plans and made him most anxious for the plot to come off that day. This is what accounts for his insistence on going to the senate house, and his finding a way out of his promise to Calpurnia even as he discovered from Decius that the Ides was indeed the day.

Caesar had done much to prepare for this occasion. His reference to himself in the third person, as if he were a being apart from himself personally, his bombastic language, more like that of a god than a man, even when speaking to Antony privately, his letters to Octavius, summoning him back from abroad directly so that he appears in time for Caesar's funeral, his will were all essential parts of this plan. And this plan is what forms the bridge between the first and second "halves" of the play, and makes not only necessary but intended the victory of Caesar's forces (his "spirit") over the conspirators, and ultimately even the victory of Octavius Caesar—the heir Caesar himself chose—over Antony presaged in this play and brought to pass in the next.

Caesar is most courteous to the group that assembled the morning of the Ides to escort him to the senate—all but one (Publius) being members of the conspiracy. Some among them, like Metellus Cimber and Caius Ligarius, obviously had little reason to love Caesar. Brutus is there, though Caesar remarks how unusual it is for him to stir so early and hardly treats him with the special affection one would expect for "Caesar's angel." But Cassius, as Caesar may have noted, did not appear, though it was he who had recommended to the conspirators that ". . . we will all of us be there to fetch him." Evidently Cassius spoke to make sure the others would all be on hand for the deed—a somewhat dangerous idea, considering Caesar's capacity to judge men—but decided against his own presence, knowing, as he did, that "Caesar doth bear me hard."

Observing this particular group of men, Caesar, while wondering about Brutus, must have had his suspicions confirmed, but he could not know precisely when or where they would strike. It is interesting, in observing his conduct at the senate that morning, how little it conforms to the expectations one might form on the assumption that he was burning to become king. In mentioning the senate's intention to give him a crown, Decius had carefully

avoided the qualification earlier heard from Casca that it was only to be worn “. . . by sea and land, in every place, save here in Italy.” But on that fatal day neither he nor any senator mentions it. Even more striking is the fact that Caesar hardly acts like a man who wants to avoid displeasing the senate in order to assure himself of the crown they are about to bestow. On the contrary, he reacts to Metellus Cimber’s kneeling before him not gently—as one would surmise from the friendly cordiality with which he had greeted the visitors at his home just before (and especially Metellus)—but most indignantly, and with words completely disproportionate to Metellus’ natural request in behalf of his brother. Since we cannot assume Caesar actually lost control of himself with so little provocation, we must conclude that his interest in the crown was hardly burning. He seems, indeed, to have expressed himself in language so highflown, monarchical and even godlike (in a speech completely invented by Shakespeare) as to goad the conspiracy into immediate action and leave a memory most in keeping with the idea of his divinity. And we must admit, in view of the deed then absorbing him, that the comparison to the northern star, “unshak’d of motion,” is not as exaggerated as it first appears.

On seeing Brutus join the entreaties for Cimber’s banished brother and close in with the rest, Caesar exclaims: “What, Brutus!”, and then, at Cinna’s approach: “Hence! wilt thou lift up Olympus?” To Decius, his “Doth not Brutus bootless kneel?” means that no one would be more likely to move him than Brutus, and is followed, after the blows of Casca, Brutus and others, by the famous “*Et tu Brute!* Then fall, Caesar!” This “And you, Brutus” (see Suetonius, sect. 82) is as much as to say: “I can see how these other men might enter this vile conspiracy, but how could you whom I loved and trusted so much?” Thus, in his last breath, Caesar draws attention to the benefactions he had heaped on Brutus—that is, to his own king-like magnanimity, his own goodness—in contrast to the base deception of the conspirators and Brutus’ basest betrayal of all. The memorial Caesar wanted to leave is now almost complete. Unlike Plutarch’s Caesar, who struggles mightily against his attackers, like an animal at bay (p. 893), Shakespeare’s Caesar will not struggle at all. And the finishing touch comes in his last words, entirely invented by Shakespeare. For Caesar acknowledges only that he will “fall”, not die, thus prefiguring the rise of his all-victorious spirit in the second half of the play.

#### IV

If Caesar has surrendered his life in order to attain lasting influence and glory after his death as the divine founder of the Roman Empire, Shakespeare leaves little doubt, by the end of the play, that his plan is well on its way

to succeeding. At Caesar's funeral, Antony's entirely Caesaristic oration releases "Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge," crying havoc ". . . with a monarch's voice," which not only expels Brutus and Cassius from Rome but presides over their defeat and suicide at Philippi. What is more, Shakespeare goes so far as to suggest the coming preeminence of the young man bearing Caesar's name, and hence the beginning of the rule of the Caesars. Even when Octavius first comes to sight he is, despite his youth and inexperience, immediately made one of the triumvirate, simply because Caesar chose him to be his heir. And at a certain point Antony himself begins calling the young man Caesar instead of Octavius (v.i.16, 24), thus tacitly acknowledging his own inferiority and presaging his own defeat. Finally, to consummate this impression it is Octavius Caesar rather than Antony who speaks the last lines of the play, commanding, without contradiction from Antony, that Brutus' bones shall lie in *his* tent. In all these respects Shakespeare seems to suggest some unstated and unexplained inevitability leading from Caesar's death to the solitary rule of Octavius as Augustus, the first of the long line of Caesars.

Could Caesar have foreseen his own posthumous triumph and planned for it? Or, if the conspirators had only avoided a series of blunders (most of them due to Brutus), could the republic have been saved for good? If Cicero had been enlisted, if Antony had been killed along with Caesar, or at least forbidden to speak at Caesar's funeral, or if Brutus and Cassius had only followed Cassius' cautious policy and won at Philippi instead of Antony and Octavius, could the mighty force of Caesarism have been repressed indefinitely?

Certainly the conspirators themselves had proceeded on the assumption that all the republic needed for its healthy restoration was Caesar's death. One is struck by the absence of any deeper reflection on Rome's decay and of any comprehensive plan for its reformation. This is particularly remarkable in Brutus' long soliloquy, where he admits to finding nothing wrong—nothing, in fact, short of admirable—in Caesar's past and present conduct, and nothing awry in the condition of the republic as it stands. Solely preoccupied with the future threat of kingly power, would anyone hearing him realize that Caesar was already a king in fact if not in name, and the republic already dead?

Over some time forces must have been at work in the republic to concentrate power in the hands of one man, and in such a way as to occur almost imperceptibly and leave the impression of inevitability. The play opens with Caesar's triumphant return from a war with Pompey's sons—a reminder that great generals (Pompey, Sulla, Marius) had long been contesting for sway in republican Rome. From this contention Caesar has emerged victorious, with powers almost unlimited—even daring to celebrate a triumph over fellow Romans rather than foreign peoples. And after Caesar's death, power again seems to move inevitably from the triumvirate to one man, with republican rule practically disappearing from sight.

Shakespeare makes it clear that the republic has lost its inner vitality in

other ways as well. Over a long period of time the people have slowly changed from citizens to subjects: they glory in Caesar's rule, have utterly no desire to participate in politics or war, and no longer regard themselves as needing the protection of elected tribunes. So far has this decay in popular republican spirit proceeded, that immediately upon Caesar's death the people want nothing more than to make Brutus Caesar. Even the senate, after Pompey's defeat, seems completely subordinate to Caesar, who publicly calls it "his" senate. But behind everything is the vast empire, fostering enormous concentrations of wealth and power, particularly in the hands of conquering generals who were now stronger than the republic itself. Of Caesar's army we learn little in this play, but of his enormous wealth his own will speaks conspicuously. Even more openly do his three successors display not only rampant avarice but an eagerness to murder or sacrifice men of prominence, including close relatives, for their own ambitious ends. Once the proscriptions of the triumvirate are completed, and the forces of Brutus and Cassius defeated, we hear no more of efforts to keep the republic alive. Even Brutus and Cassius have nothing to say of the republic in their dying breath, and the only mention of republican sentiments in the succeeding play, *Antony and Cleopatra* (II.vi.15ff.), comes from Sextus Pompey—a man quite willing to become the sole master of the world if only the triumvirs could be murdered by hands other than his own.

If the facts of both plays show that one-man rule was all but inevitable in Rome, and if Caesar stands out as by far the best of those seeking such rule (compare, for example, his mildness and civility with his successors' proscriptions), then the conspiracy against him is hard to justify. Harder still once one realizes the conspirators were themselves motivated by envy and ambition at least as much as by republican virtue, and that they played directly into Caesar's hands by giving him the one thing he could not give himself—the martyrdom necessary to founding a new imperial order.

This is not to suggest that good men, even in times strongly favoring despotism, should desert the republic rather than attempt to prolong its life. But once the situation has degenerated as far as it had here, and when the person actually holding monarchical power has Caesar's qualities, the case for assassination is not compelling. In fact, one can scarcely believe that the conspirators themselves, had they known beforehand of the long train of evils their action would engender—the senatorial proscriptions, the defeat of their own forces, the rule of the triumvirs, the struggle between Antony and Octavius, and Octavius' final reassertion of martyred Caesar's rule—would have persisted in their effort to kill Caesar. They assumed they would succeed, not fail, in restoring the republic, and justified their recourse to violence solely by this prospect.

Only two alternatives to conspiracy receive any attention in the play. One—Cato's suicide after a life of open opposition to Caesar in the senate and on

the battlefield—occurred before the play begins and is referred to only through Brutus' mentioning the suicide itself. The other is that of Cicero, perhaps the highest ranking member of the senate. He is clearly in the opposition to Caesar, though Brutus and Cassius differ about his aptness for the conspiracy. There is some question, however, whether Cicero (Shakespeare's) would have joined if asked, as he was not. Tolerated in the senate by Caesar, and pursuing philosophical studies at the same time (signified in the play by the report of his speaking Greek), Cicero tries to preserve his humor and equanimity in a losing cause. Unable to frustrate Caesar's ambition, he at least suggests by his absence from the senate the day Caesar was to be given a crown that he will not directly cooperate in furthering that ambition, regardless of personal consequences. In short, this policy—frequently at variance with that of Plutarch's Cicero—presumes the doom of the republic. As it turns out, Caesar's death precipitates Cicero's, since the triumvirs, lacking Caesar's forbearance, have him murdered.

From the picture Shakespeare paints, the cause of republican government in Rome was actually doomed, and no one would be more likely to appreciate this fact than Caesar himself. Only one question remained—whether a solid and enduring replacement for the republic could be devised—and constructing its elements became Caesar's greatest ambition. He must have concluded that a new form of monarchy, anchored in both popular passion and popular piety and attached to the name Caesar, would prove superior to every alternative, including, of course, all efforts at restoring the republic. Thus, Caesar could not know that his death would be followed by Antony's stirring oration and an immediate reversal for the conspirators. He could not know Brutus and Cassius would lose at Philippi: they might have won. But he could and did know that the period of republican revival after his death would be short-lived, and that a struggle between the republican and Caesaristic forces, ensuing almost immediately, would of necessity, at some point, lead to the victory of those proclaiming his name and his precedent. His secret collusion with the conspiracy against him was therefore more than a wild and risky venture: its outcome could be foreseen and depended on.

Why should Caesar willingly surrender his life at the very height of his political power, and for an end his very action would prevent him from enjoying? After defeating the sons of Pompey in the field, why not easily fend off Cassius' conspiracy and enjoy unchallenged monarchical rule for some years, with all its pomp and adulation? We must put ourselves in Caesar's mind, recalling Plutarch's view that he was constantly seeking new glory from greater and greater deeds. Caesar was not one for quietly enjoying past accomplishments. Moreover, there was already some sign of his physical power flagging. Brutus says Caesar has the "falling sickness," but there is no evidence in the play that he has always had it. A second infirmity, this one invented by Shakespeare, is a loss of hearing in one ear that must have occurred recently, since

Caesar takes pains to instruct Antony to speak to his other side. Not that he is ill, or in generally failing health: of this there is no sign, and no expectation on the part of Calpurnia, Decius or anyone else. Still, Caesar may have sensed the onset of physical disabilities much more than the average man, and worried particularly about retaining his extraordinary mental powers as the years went on. He would want then to culminate his ambition as soon as he could, availing himself of opportunities that might otherwise never return, and hence using the conspiracy for his own purposes.

## V

Despite the intrinsic superiority, upon reflection, of the case for Caesar, or at least against assassinating him, the net surface impression left by the play heavily favors the conspirators. In the last half of the play, after Caesar has left the scene, attention focuses mainly on Brutus and Cassius, who are shown becoming in some ways even more admirable and attractive than before, and whose suicides at the end constitute memorable refusals to bow to victorious tyrants. By contrast, Caesar lingers on only as a shadowy and enigmatic spirit, however victorious, and those supporting his cause seem clearly inferior not only to him but to the republicans whose destruction they seek and achieve.

Even in the earlier Acts, Shakespeare had been careful to keep Caesar's most obvious accomplishments out of direct sight, and to mix in enough seeming arrogance and quite ordinary defects to make him somewhat repellent or at best perplexing, but certainly not simply or mainly admirable. And from the outset the perspective with which the audience is made familiar, and sympathetic, is that of the conspirators—that of Cassius, Casca, Brutus and Portia rather than Caesar, Antony and Calpurnia. On the other hand, it must also be admitted that Shakespeare has taken pains to keep Caesar from appearing morally repulsive by withholding almost all references, indirect as well as direct, to the wickedness by which the real Caesar, as depicted by Plutarch and others, actually sought ever-increasing and sole power—that is, to the corruption he induced in the body politic and the various wounds he inflicted on it in an active effort to reduce the republic's capacity for self-government. Indeed, compared to Plutarch, Shakespeare has removed all the blackness and almost all the dark shadows, so that his Caesar hardly evokes, even in the virtuous Brutus, anything like the detestation Plutarch's Caesar evoked in Brutus' father-in-law, Cato. Why did Shakespeare decide on arranging this peculiar effect, mixing a favoring of the republican conspirators against Caesar with a muting of Caesar's evil? Why did he choose to keep Caesar's immoralities, illegalities and injustices almost completely out of sight if he also played down his greatness and generally sides with his opponents? Why not present the republican case, the case against Caesar, full strength?

This would not be the only time Shakespeare has seen fit to alter Plutarch for his own ends. His *Coriolanus*, for example, gives voice much more fully than Plutarch's to aristocratic and antidemocratic views, and is more extreme in avoiding public honors, refusing to show his wounds, and resisting the pressure of those urging him to conciliate the aroused plebeians. In *Antony and Cleopatra* he invents Lepidus' participation in the peace-making with Pompey, greatly expands the role of Eros (Antony's armorer), introduces a number of remarks adumbrating Christianity, and invents apparently unnatural deaths for two of the characters (Enobarbus and Iras). But nowhere does the difference between Plutarch and Shakespeare become as vast as in the presentation of Caesar himself, with Shakespeare omitting the whole ugly under-carriage of Caesar's career. This could not be from incapacity or repugnancy, for, as *Richard III* attests, Shakespeare is perfectly capable of describing the villainies of a usurper when he wishes to. Of course these two usurpers differed markedly. Greater by far, Caesar had a broader and deeper ambition, a keen sense of the dangers and defects of tyranny, and a natural astuteness and power of command unsullied by any perverse taste for evil. Richard was mean, cruel, vindictive, whereas Caesar's love of the greatest honor and his desire to be a godlike founder seemed to engender a certain high-mindedness in him. Such a man might derive some little enjoyment from outsmarting Decius and would doubtlessly exult in exercising the self-control his final plan required, but he would not take pleasure in having his own brother drowned in a butt of malmsey.

Caesar might not have been cruel, but he was hardly good either. Shakespeare leaves it to the reader to imagine the means by which Caesar came to power initially, and also the moral consequences of his plan. For while it may or may not be moral to permit one's own assassination, it is certainly immoral to plan a series of events necessitating prolonged civil war, and leading ultimately to a settled despotism of Caesars who not infrequently would turn out to be monsters. By concealing, or leaving to inference, this side of Caesar, Shakespeare makes him less repellent and tempts us into a greater openness to the mystery of his power and charm, acting as his hidden partisan rather than his critic.

On the other hand, it can justly be claimed that Shakespeare ignores the evils of the republic to an equal degree, omitting clear signs of the countless moral, political and social disorders with which it had long been afflicted. He makes it almost seem as if Caesar could have appeared on the scene at any point in the republic's long history—as if changes in the spirit, structure and operation of republican institutions have no bearing on the Caesaristic possibility. Certainly this is how the conspirators considered the matter, and why they thought that simply removing Caesar would restore the republic to full health. Thus Shakespeare, unlike Plutarch, tries to give the impression that the republic is not subject to internal illness and decay—or, from the other

side, that its allowing or not allowing a man like Caesar to dominate it is mainly a function of its will, or the will of its leading members, rather than of political conditions generally. The republic, Shakespeare seems to suggest, must think this way if it is to prevent usurpers from making its supposed decay their greatest public excuse.

Much to our confusion, Shakespeare apparently favors the republic in some ways, Caesar in others. Let us step back and see if all features can be explained. Certainly the overall tone of the play is republican, from beginning to end, giving the impression that republics are superior to tyrannies, or even monarchies. But it is also true that republics can grow sick beyond republican remedy, and that despotic rule of some sort may then become inevitable—necessities that must, for the republic's own good, be kept hidden from it, and which lead Shakespeare to omit any direct description of republican decay. If Caesar is the best available despot at a time of inevitable despotism, this teaching must be conveyed covertly in order to avoid giving encouragement to Caesaristic movements, and to protect republics against rash and unnecessary assaults on their freedom.

Yet this minimal case for Caesar hardly exhausts or explains the way the play treats him. For what does Caesar signify? In the play as well as historically, Caesar can lay claim to being the greatest hero of pagan antiquity, in a Rome that can lay claim, as well, to being the greatest society of antiquity. The Roman Republic had always encouraged its leading men to enter into emulous competition with each other for the public good. But as the empire grew, the link between ambition and patriotism dissolved, for the first time leaving the natural love of one's own power, influence and glory free from the apparently artificial constraints of virtue and the public good. Here then was a great arena for ambition, and—as Shakespeare portrays it—for a man who could be modified (by the poet-philosopher's magic) to embody the highest of all political talents. This man might therefore warrant being called not only the greatest Roman, or the greatest hero or pagan antiquity, but the greatest political man as such—and, if ambition is the very hallmark of humanity—perhaps even the greatest man as such. He might even bear comparison with Christ himself (see the attention to wounds in III.ii and V.i), seeking his own martyrdom not for the love of others but of himself, and establishing a worldly kingdom whose glory and duration have never been exceeded in the West, and in the confines of whose universal peace would arise another martyr with another purpose and another kingdom.

Now we can begin to appreciate the complexities facing Shakespeare as he designed the play. Within an overall framework strongly republican, Shakespeare cautiously reveals a confusing and somewhat repellent Caesar, who only under the most careful scrutiny shows how he could come to rule the world and what he intends in his last days. To stimulate a sympathetic interest in this man, Shakespeare is willing to conceal his infractions of law and morality,

and to allow his awesome ambition to grip the mind and entrance the soul. At its core, this is what Caesar's "spirit" means in the second half of the play, and Shakespeare himself (as well as the readers he has seduced) must either bow down to this great god or discover its subordination to something else.

## VI

There must be some relation between Shakespeare's understanding of Caesar as the perfection of political or honor-seeking man and the fact that the play pays an unusual and even unique attention to certain philosophies of classical antiquity. By his own admission, Cassius is a follower of Epicurus, and the bookish Brutus (without the name being used) a Stoic. Moreover, Cicero, the only character of some historical renown as a philosopher, is clearly linked to philosophy, first, by Casca's report that he spoke Greek at Lupeal, second, by the way he takes issue with Casca's superstitious interpretation of the storm in his one direct appearance of the play. Now it also happens historically that Cicero had made it his life-work to bring Greek philosophy and philosophizing to the Romans, devoting his most comprehensive moral work, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, to what he took to be the three main alternatives—Epicureanism, Stoicism, and the philosophy of Aristotle (not essentially different from Plato's) to which he himself was closest. Shakespeare does something similar in the play, showing by the words and deeds of Brutus and Cassius particularly not only what their philosophies expected but wherein they were defective. Before examining the details, let us explain why the serious interest in these philosophies should appear explicitly in this play alone.

In *Coriolanus*, at the beginning of the Roman republic, life was guided by dominant and unchallenged moral custom, and in accordance with this custom Cominius could say, "It is held that valour is the chiefest virtue and most dignifies the haver . . ." (II.ii.88). Here there were no philosophers or philosophies, and no essential differences in appraising life's goals. By Caesar's time, however, after the vast growth of the empire and the spread of Greek philosophy, significant differences within the ruling class had become manifest. Plutarch's life of Cato the Censor describes how the Roman conquest of Greece led to the introduction of Greek philosophy at Rome during the diplomatic visit of Carneades the Academic and Diogenes the Stoic (155 B.C.). Despite initial resistance led by Cato himself to protect the Roman way of life against this subversive and divisive influence, the Greek schools made headway in Rome, so that a century later Cicero could combine being one of the republic's leading statesman and its leading orator with being the foremost philosophical writer of his day.

These philosophies were taken seriously by the men who followed them.

They were presented, and understood, as a substitute for piety and custom, relying solely on reason to determine the summum bonum or the good for man by nature. The Epicureans contended that pleasure was the only good and pain the only evil, the Stoics that virtue was the sole good, and the Aristotelians that virtue was the chief but not the only good, and vice the chief but not the only evil. To place these views in artful but unobtrusive juxtaposition, Shakespeare arranges for five different reactions to the storm occurring on the eve of the Ides of March. First comes the superstitious Casca, with his traditional view that the gods in their anger made the storm, and his credulous belief in prodigies. These interpretations and reports Cicero then rejects, insisting that “. . . men may construe things after their fashion clean from the purpose of the things themselves.” But Cicero shows no interest in arguing with or instructing Casca further, and his parting remark that “. . . this disturbed sky is not to walk in” views the storm as a natural evil obviously to be avoided if possible. Not so to Cassius, the third, who berates Casca for his superstition and attributes the storm not to the gods but to the defects or qualities of the matter found on earth, which, he implies, is in the skies and everywhere. Cassius stalks about in the storm baring his bosom and daring the thunder and lightning to strike him. Here then is the materialist Epicurean whose philosophical capacity is not so great that he trusts reason alone and who must therefore prove that Zeus does not exist by his failure to destroy those, like Cassius, who combine insolence with impiety. Next comes Brutus with a perfect display of Stoic apathy, so completely the master of his fear that he can stand in his orchard reading a letter by the light of “exhalations whizzing in the air.” The last to judge the night (apart from Calpurnia, who sounds much like the superstitious Casca) is Caesar himself. Inside his house, viewing the thunder and lightning outside, his comment is brief: “Nor heaven nor earth have been at peace tonight.” This is neither superstition, nor Epicurean bravado, nor Stoic rigor. Surprisingly, Caesar sounds most like Cicero—not fearing any gods, or seeing anything but a severe if somewhat unusual storm, though not as plainly taking his guidance from nature.

By including Caesar in this comparison, Shakespeare seems to indicate the need to add the way of life he represents to the alternative philosophies considered by Cicero. This does not imply that Caesar was a philosopher, but only that the alternative of personal ambition, followed to its greatest heights, is of sufficient seriousness to be weighed with the others, and that it naturally shows itself most fully when they do. In the play the case for ambition or honor is presented almost immediately, “Well, honour is the subject of my story.” In that speech, Cassius appeals to Brutus’ love of honor much more than to his love of the honorable or the virtuous, and displays his own envy of Caesar’s honor as well. As we learn from Cicero if not from the originals, however, neither Epicureanism nor Stoicism allow for this ambitious love of honor, the former rejecting the artificiality of honor and the anxieties associ-

ated with the political life as such, the latter making virtue completely independent of honors and all other rewards. But according to the play, they seem to underestimate a vital element of human nature, and the one most closely linked to politics. For Cassius' appeal to Brutus' love of honor—to his ambition—proves only too true. In joining the conspiracy devised by Cassius, Brutus at once takes over and makes himself its head, despite his persistent intellectual inferiority to Cassius. In short, both share the love of honor which is Caesar's dominant passion and therefore considerably strengthen the claim that he embodies the perfection of human nature.

Why these four alternatives and no others? Prior to their emergence, human life is dominated by custom directed at inculcating the duties required by society. Once custom breaks down and is replaced by recourse to reason and nature, the alternatives are set by the elements readily thought to inhere in human nature. Now for the first time the natural allure of pleasure can be fully attended to, and the selfish interests of the body made the prime starting-point. But by necessity this view leads to a depreciation both of politics, which depends on ambition and honor, and of morality, which now becomes instrumental to the enjoyment of selfish pleasures. To this view Stoicism is the polar opposite, insisting that duty and virtue are irreducible to hedonistic calculation and that they have their root in the nature of man, which requires the rule of reason over the passions and devotion to the right for its own sake.

While Stoicism seems to revive the sense of duty so long preserved by ancestral custom, its viewing the wise man as completely independent of all external influences also estranges him from political life, which loses some of its importance and even its necessity. The love of honor, as ordinarily understood, must not motivate the wise man, and he must be capable of perfect happiness regardless of his own and his city's fortunes. From this vantage point, Stoicism shares with Epicureanism a certain apolitical character—hence the need for a third philosophy that regards the citizen as essential to the man. This, Cicero claims, is the distinguishing characteristic of the Peripatetics, and of Plato and the older Academy as well. Unlike the Epicureans, they refuse to make pleasure-pain the primary principle, but unlike the Stoics they insist on man's natural place in the polis, and do not try to establish for the wise man so radical an independence from politics and from the ordinary goods and evils of human life. In allowing for such external goods as honor and wealth, they come closer to the real aspirations of political men while at the same time containing them within the limits set by the moral virtues. And having tied mankind to a political base, they can also allow for a contemplative life, involving the fullest use of reason, that admittedly was higher still—another hold on proud honor (*Ethics* IV, 3).

The Stoics and the Peripatetics both consider man essentially rational, social and moral. This view is challenged not only by the Epicureans but by the position Caesar represents, according to which ambition or the love of honor

is the distinguishing feature of man, and the key to his happiness. This way of life implies that man is essentially political, rather than private or cosmopolitan, and engaged in an endless competition for superior distinction, power and glory. Morality here is an instrument of ambition rather than good in itself, and it may have to be violated if ambition so demands. Judged by his own standard, of course, Caesar seems easily to run away with the prize in the play. No one was as great a conqueror, no one could keep him from subduing the republic and all rivals internally, no one could keep his spirit from dominating the empire for centuries to come. Pompey, Cato, Pompey's sons, Cicero, Brutus, Cassius all fall victim to his irresistible power.

Before determining whether Shakespeare accepts Caesar's standard, let us discover his attitude toward the three philosophies formally described as such by Cicero. The ones he directly examines are the polar opposites—Cassius' Epicureanism and Brutus' Stoicism. Now it is clear, first of all, that Shakespeare took both Cassius and Brutus to be disciples of philosophers rather than philosophers themselves. Neither has a philosophical mind, and so it is that the Cassius who dares Zeus to strike him dead during the storm has already lost his atheism by Philippi and begun to believe in omens—that is, in the superstition shared by Casca and Calpurnia. In a similar manner, Brutus, who first blames Cato for taking his own life rather than allowing himself to become Caesar's captive, is immediately brought to reconsider by Cassius' picturing his being led in triumph through the streets of Rome. These facts suggest that both Brutus and Cassius might have been better guided by an ancestral custom they would not have to pretend issued from the evidence of human reason and nature.

In general, it can be shown that the standpoint from which Shakespeare views both Epicureanism and Stoicism is that of Plato and Aristotle, as presented by Cicero in *De Finibus*. The crucial defect of Epicureanism is that it cannot account for the natural attractiveness and strength of ambition, for the devotion to others found in love and friendship, and for the sense of the just and the noble. Cassius commits suicide after Titinius (whom with exaggeration he refers to as his best friend) is captured on a mission for him: "O, coward that I am, to live so long to see my best friend ta'en before my face!" He dies, in other words, reproving himself for a moral vice and for inadequacy as a friend—neither intelligible by any hedonistic interpretation.

If (Bloom tells us) Epicureanism makes men think too poorly of themselves by its failure to comprehend certain higher elements of life, Stoicism makes men think too well themselves. Brutus cannot recognize the ambition in himself, and what he says in criticism of Cicero—"he will never follow anything that other men begin"—at least in part applies to himself, judging by the way he immediately takes over the conspiracy begun by Cassius and dominates Cassius to the very end. Brutus is puffed up with his own virtue: he conceives of himself as the perfectly wise man depicted in Stoic litera-

ture. He therefore underestimates the power of the passions not only in other men but in himself, and also gives too little credit to them as such. This is why he presents a stiff and weak oration at Caesar's funeral, in contrast to the passionate and mercenary appeals employed by Antony. This is also why he fakes Stoic apathy at the news of Portia's death (which he had already heard and lamented), and why at first he thinks it absolutely wrong to commit suicide: the wise man, according to Stoic doctrine, is happy in all circumstances, including ignominious captivity (Bloom, pp. 103ff.).

If Shakespeare criticizes the Epicureans and Stoics from the vantage point of the Peripatetics, much as Cicero had done in his own chief writing, our attention must shift to Cicero in the play. As we have seen, his one direct appearance, amid the storm, confirms the conclusion just drawn: in contrast to god-defying Cassius, the Epicurean, and apathetic Brutus, the Stoic, he displays the common sense of the Peripatetics. As for the indirect references to him, the first comes from Brutus, who reports how those leaving the games at Lupercal looked: Caesar angry, the rest chidden, Calpurnia pale, Cicero looking "with such ferret and such fiery eyes as we have seen him in the Capitol, being crossed in conference by some senators." But this hardly squares with the impression conveyed by Casca, who, in response to Cassius' asking whether Cicero said anything at the crown-offering scene, answers that he spoke Greek, and that those who understood him "smil'd at one another and shook their heads." This does not suggest an angry man: it suggests a joke made at Caesar's expense, perhaps something ironical, but implying that not much can be done to keep limits on Caesar's power. It also gives some sense of the state of affairs under Caesar—far from desperate, but where criticism has to be veiled. Far from desperate also is the tone of Cicero's chance meeting with Casca (shortly afterward in the text) that evening, where his inquiries about Caesar seem quiet and ordinary enough.

After recruiting Brutus for the conspiracy, Cassius claims that Cicero "will stand very strong with us" and should be sounded out. Three others agree, with Metellus drawing special attention to Cicero's age, judgment and gravity. Only Brutus disagrees, contending that Cicero would not join them—would not follow something begun by others—and he easily carries the day. This dislike for Cicero which seems to characterize Brutus' remark here as well as at Lupercal does not follow Plutarch's account in his lives of Cicero and Brutus, where Cicero becomes an adulator of Caesar toward the end, where he is spoken of as Brutus' main confidant, and where the reason given for not including him in the conspiracy was his generally-conceded timorousness (pp. 1065–65, 1192). Shakespeare seems to have altered Plutarch in such a way as to make Brutus look worse and Cicero better. The play leaves little doubt that Cicero opposed Caesar's increasing authority, but he seems to believe little can be done about it. At any rate, no remark proposing some course of action is attributed to him. All we do learn is that Cicero, having asked

Casca about Caesar's plan for the next day, and learning he will go to the Capitol, does not go there himself. On the contrary, he is present neither among those who attend Caesar at his house nor among those who are with him at the Capitol that fatal day. We do not know why. Perhaps he had learned of the senate's intention to give Caesar a crown, perhaps of the conspiracy. In any case, he is not mentioned again until the shocking news of his death, along with that of many other senators proscribed by the triumvirate, reaches Brutus and Cassius in the field (IV.iii.171).

There can be little doubt that the conspiracy would have fared better with Cicero in it, and would have made fewer mistakes afterward. But apart from the confidence expressed by Cassius, there is no evidence Cicero would have joined if asked, and some evidence he would not have. He seems to regard Caesar as an inevitable evil whose play-acting before the people is a proper object of derision, but whose power, vast and unchallengeable, has been exercised with the kind of tolerance or highmindedness that allows a critic like Cicero to retain a prominent place in the senate. When Cicero is not busy politically, we may presume, he is occupied with philosophy and philosophical writing. He may well have been permitted to die a natural death under Caesar; he is almost immediately destroyed by Caesar's successors after the assassination.

While Shakespeare treats Cicero sparingly, he presses us toward the conclusion that the ultimate conflict of philosophies in the play is between Cicero and Caesar, or—in view of Cicero's own admission—between Plato and Aristotle, on the one hand, and Caesar, on the other. Who in fact would be better rivals to pit against each other than the greatest philosophers of antiquity and the greatest political man of antiquity, the former resting human happiness mainly on virtue, the latter on ambition? Does the play supply evidence allowing a decision to be made between the two? The question is not whether anyone could have beaten Caesar—whether even a younger Cicero endowed with Caesar's own talents could have beaten Caesar in those circumstances. Using victory as a criterion is already making the crucial concession to Caesar's view, but the true view may not be physically, militarily or politically the strongest. For Caesar also had with him the times—the forces that over a long period had enfeebled the republican spirit and institutions in Rome—and the evidence from the play is that no human power could have brought health out of this decay.

The essence of Caesar's position is that great deeds of conquest, usurpation, domination—over extensive areas, all kinds of men, and vast periods of time—constitute the height of human achievement and the chief good. With other men weak, fearful, changeable, Caesar prides himself most on his constancy: his speech linking himself and the northern star seems more than a panegyric for the occasion. But his constancy shows itself in a fixed ultimate aim and a resolute will rather than in the means he employs or the appearances he presents—judged by which he would be one of the most changeable and least constant of

men. This is because ambition makes him peculiarly dependent on those from whom he seems most independent. His influence is influence over them and hence determined by *their* nature. Nor can he escape the inevitable fate of all human things, which at some point must dissolve and leave no trace of individuals or their influence. The metaphysical tendency of ambition is to enthroned contention or war as the ruling principle of the universe, thus compelling even the visible universe, in which the northern star (and, among men, Caesar) holds its constant place, to be at best a temporary and perhaps illusory harmony rather than an assured cosmos. For allowing a permanent harmony in the universe would make peace rather than war the dominating principle, and would give added support and strength to those social harmonies of man and those internal harmonies of the soul that are guided by a peaceful rather than a contentious power.

Caesar's position underrates the internal nature of philosophy, understood as the search for the eternal causes of things (even while presuming its disbelief in the ancestral gods), and underrates too the glory attaching to philosophy's greatest names. Philosophy, which may first seem merely to consist in the contention of opposing sects, entails the rational search for truths that correspond to the subtle complications of reality, by necessity yielding to what it tries to know rather than subduing it. Certainly, by his manner of criticizing the Epicureans and the Stoics, Shakespeare goes a long way toward engendering confidence in philosophical reason, including its capacity to face the kind of challenge posed by Caesar. In his own life as a philosophical poet, moreover, he already indicates his conclusion that philosophy and its influence are superior to ambition and its influence. Nor need we believe that Shakespeare and his Cicero are less constant than Caesar. In a way they are more so, since the knowledge they pursue links the mind to the eternal, lifting it above the flux of things, uniting it with other minds, and proving (as Plato showed) that in the universe the last word belongs to peace and order rather than to war and disorder.

Caesar also permits his ambition to dehumanize him—a point illustrated not only by some of the contrasts between him and others in the play, but by the kind of interest in men generally shown by Shakespeare the poet-philosopher as compared to Caesar. In the play, much attention is given to personal and political relationships involving love, trust, loyalty and affection—for example, of Brutus to Portia and Lucius, Cassius to Brutus, both Brutus and Cassius to their own friends and to the republic. Despite the selfish elements and other complications inherent in many of these, they also contain elements that cannot be reduced to self-interest and on the preservation of which the fullness of human nature depends. But a man like Caesar lives alone—he has no friends, strictly speaking, and shares his deepest secrets with no one. In the play, neither Antony nor Calpurnia can be considered Caesar's friends, and Brutus, "Caesar's angel," according to Antony, would hardly have any intrinsic attrac-

tion for him. Caesar's isolation exceeds even that of the poet-philosopher himself—in some ways no less secretive—for he is not tied to other human beings by bonds of affection. He enjoys seeing through and outdoing them: he does not find their good good for him.

As he is lacking in these social affections, so is Caesar lacking in justice—that is, in fairness and concern for the common good. Thus, in the interest of his ambition, he can begin by subverting the republic and end by contemplating coolly the necessity of a prolonged period of civil war leading to the ultimate victory of Caesarism. Hence also the impossibility of applying to Caesar the words Antony—perhaps uncandidly—applies to Brutus at the end, proclaiming him the only conspirator motivated by justice:

He only, in a general honest thought  
 And common good to all, made one of them.  
 His life was gentle, and the elements  
 So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up  
 And say to all the world, "This was a man!"

For we must remember Antony's mood directly after the assassination and his talk with Brutus:

O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,  
 That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!  
 Thou art the ruins of the noblest man  
 That ever lived in the tide of times.  
 Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!

This is Antony calling Caesar "the noblest man," not Shakespeare, who did not separate nobility from justice and human affection, and did not think political distinction and glory higher than philosophy. Caesar had great and perhaps unmatched abilities—a penetrating intelligence, a remarkable self-command and flexibility—but they served ambition only, with a consequent distortion of his nature. This is why Caesar is most closely associated in the play with Antony and Octavius rather than Cicero and Brutus, and why, ultimately, he could sacrifice all for a regime that would exalt the divine authority of the Caesars and permit, along with an occasional imitation of his own highmindedness, not only calculated infractions of morality like his own but some of the most corrupt and barbarous rule the world has ever seen.