

BRUTUS AND THE PUBLIC

By

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This paper deals with two major subjects in *Julius Caesar*. One is to investigate the motives behind Brutus' attempt of murder as well as his relations with the public, and the other is, with the result of the first investigation, to probe into the Elizabethan concept of a ruler. For the sake of convenience, I would first like to itemize the questions that will be crucial in the following discussion.

Brutus justifies his motive by appealing to the public that he murdered Caesar as he was ambitious and dangerous: then, (1) What are Brutus's criteria in his judgment that Caesar is ambitious and dangerous? Is his justification logically coherent and consistent? (2) To what extent is Brutus motivated by self-interest and to what extent by the public interest? Is his concern for the public interest based on a theoretical belief in a republican form of government or simply on his patriotism as a Roman? (3) According to what specific criteria did the men of Elizabethan time distinguish between the tyrant and the good ruler? (4) What did the men of Shakespeare's time consider to be the best form of government, a monarchy or a republic? These questions will be explicated in this paper.

I.

The first question is that what criteria Brutus has in his judgment that Caesar is ambitious and dangerous. Is Brutus's justification logical and sound? The play begins with a scene that the two tribunes, Flavius and Murellus, questions a few tradesmen. Already from the start of the play, symbolism is used to foretell some ill omen. A cobbler answers to angry Murellus:

Truly, sir, all that I live by is with the awl:
I meddle with no tradesman's matters, nor women's
matters; but withal I am indeed, sir, a surgeon to old shoes;
when they are in danger, I recover them.¹

The cobbler replies that he himself is "a mender of bad shoes," at which Murellus turns upon him. Murellus misunderstands what the cobbler said. Yet Murellus's misunderstanding is significant, because it implies a double meaning. The awl seems to hint at a dagger, and in the following scenes of the play Brutus's ignorance of his wife's warning comes to be underlined by the cobbler's words ("meddle with no women's matters"), and furthermore to mend souls is one of Brutus's pledged aims.

Hearing his reputation, the two tribunes reveal hostility against Caesar's surmounting overpower and pomposity. The audience begins to know the presence of antagonism against Caesar, and the appearance of Brutus is anticipated. Brutus first appears as blunt and gloomy, brooding over some care, concealed behind Caesar's splendor. Some care tingles Brutus's mind, but what it is is not clear to himself. "Vexed I am / of late with passions of some difference,"² he says to Cassius. Allured by Cassius who is envious of Caesar's success, Brutus comes to realize what has troubled his mind, and he begins to disclose some worry concerning Caesar's becoming a king. Brutus is afraid of Caesar's excessive pride and ambition. And yet, Brutus reveals some conflicting emotion caused by his love of and

fear for Caesar. Eventually, differentiating himself from Caesar, he places stress as his forte on being considerate of the public, and which he is assured is an important attribute for a ruler. He mentions that he can die for horror:

If it be aught toward the general good,
Set honor in one eye and death i' th' other,
And I will look on both indifferently;
For let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honor more than I fear death.³

Brutus asserts that he loves Caesar well, but he finally decides to choose honor prior to love. Brutus's claim for the general good makes him appear dedicated and unselfish, but he is not quite a saint, for he is self-righteous to some degree. He accosts Cassius thus:

What you would work me to, I have some aim.
How I have thought of this, and of these times,
I shall recount hereafter.⁴

Brutus joins the plot to remove Caesar, to kill him.

Now, what are the exact reasons and motives that urged Brutus to conceive an idea of murdering Caesar? Here are some possible answers:

(1) Caesar is becoming proud and ambitious; he may become a tyrant and destroy the nation. His speech and attitudes are assuming overconfidence.

(2) Cassius's two episodes of Caesar's weakness impairs Caesar's splendor and makes him equal to Brutus. The two episodes are

1. Caesar's near-drowning in the Tiber.

2. Caesar's shaking and groaning like a girl caused by fever.

(3) Cassius's prodding Brutus to maintain "honor."

(4) Cassius's encouragement that "men at some time are masters of their fates," and Brutus himself can manipulate his fate.

(5) The existence of hostility against Caesar, for instance, expressed

by the two tribunes, Flavius and Murellus, who disrobe Caesar's grand images.

(6) Cassius's insistence on duty and patriotism and on the fact that an age and a nation are being moved by a single man. Cassius instigates Brutus thus:

Age, thou art sham'd
Rome thou hast lost the breed of the noble bloods!⁵

(7) A story from Casca about Caesar's seemingly hesitant declination of a crown and about his deceptive pretension of self-sacrifice.

In the middle of the play, a letter which is feigned to be from the public comes to Brutus and reinforces his conviction, though it is not quite clear to what extent he is moved by it. In any case, those above reasons are in Act I and can be thought to urge Brutus to fortify his will of murdering Caesar. At the beginning of Act II, Brutus thinks thus in his orchard:

It must be by his death; and for my part,
I know no personal cause to spurn at him,
But for the general. He would be crown'd:
How that might change his nature, there's the question.⁶

A troublesome question arises here. Is there not a jump in Brutus's reasoning that death should be given to Caesar only because he is proud and ambitious? Is death the only way to put a stop to a man's ambition? Furthermore, why do the public think simple-mindedly that Caesar is a tyrant and deserves death when they hear Brutus's reference to Caesar's ambition? In the minds of Brutus and the public, ambition is recognized as leading to tyranny. Therefore, Brutus thinks that Caesar must be sacrificed for the general good, and the best way is to let Caesar have an honorable death. Brutus attempts to use Caesar's death to support his justification for the good of the public. The last line of the above quotation evinces Brutus's fear that the change of Caesar's nature after assuming a kingship may turn him into a tyrant and, as a result, the public will suffer.

Brutus eventually believes that Caesar will become a tyrant. But why? Brutus has his own reason to think so in examining Caesar's nature. He thinks that Caesar is a man of hard reason and that ruled by reason, he would tend to ignore human warmth. Caesar may forget the lowliness of the public, and he would judge harshly, placing reason above emotions. Brutus says:

Th' abuse of greatness is when it disjoins
Remorse from power; and to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affection sway'd
More than his reason.⁷

Brutus sees little milk of human kindness in Caesar, and that is the rub. Brutus thinks that reason with little pity makes a bigot of power. He is worried that Caesar's callousness will not do good for the public interests. Here, politics is decided by human nature, since Brutus's apprehension about Caesar's probable tyranny depends solely on his interpretation of the latter's nature. Yet his interpretation has one weakness, which inheres in a simple assumption. There is no assurance that Caesar's ambition makes him incapable of compassion and prods him to become a tyrant. It is justly said, "Caesar may."

Brutus's assumption is superficial; therefore, it comes to be unpinned by such words as Cassius's:

I know he (Caesar) would not be a wolf,
But that he sees the Romans are but sheep;
He were no lion, were not Romans hinds.⁸

The audience comes to feel that the problem of Caesar is his pride. Likewise, Brutus thinks of Caesar's pride as dangerous. Despite his "feeble temper," Caesar is becoming too proud and despising the inferior.

The important question is to ask if Brutus's justification of murder logically coherent and consistent. Brutus bases his righteousness upon three main points: Caesar's cold reason, his ambition, and the

probability of his tyranny. Brutus's idea that Caesar's cold reason will cause tyranny especially when linked with ambition may be correct; yet it is not easy to fathom exactly the extent of Caesar's ambition. Brutus presents little evidence to support his assertion of Caesar's ambition. Brutus is, fundamentally, not very certain of Caesar's ambition. Originally, it is difficult to judge whether a man is ambitious or not. The judgment is subjective and ambivalent. Therefore, Brutus's disparagement of Caesar's ambition is later on reversed by Antony. Caesar's ambition was an instance of delicate nature, and it could be taken either as the ambition for the public evil like tyranny and as the one for the public good.

II.

The next question is, to what extent is Brutus motivated by self-interest and to what extent by the public interest? Is his concern for the public interest based on a theoretical concept in a republican form of government or simply on his patriotism as a Roman?

Brutus repeatedly refers to the importance of general interest: for instance, "if it be aught toward the general good," "but for the general," and "not that I lov'd Caesar less, but that I lov'd Rome more." It is most likely that he is eager to pursue the general interest; yet does he not have any self-interest? It becomes necessary to analyze Brutus's character minutely. First, he is not a profound thinker. He merely judges human character superficially. Impressions and rumors are his measures, and he is too gullible in believing Caesar's surmounting hubris and future disaster. Second, Brutus is an idealist. He believes that he can die for the public interest, and he tries to eliminate his self-interest and incites his conspirators:

If not the face of men,
The sufferance of our souls, the time's abuse—
If these be motives weak, break betimes,
And every man hence to his idle bed.⁹

Objecting to swearing an oath, Brutes stresses that they are not murderers but purgers and that for the name of the public good they have a sound *raison* for murder. Brutus trusts man's heart and believes, somehow simple-mindedly, that people can unite in pursuit of a common goal. His psychological understanding of humans is superficial. This superficial understanding probably comes from his naive and tender heart, and this is the third point. He is a man of integrity and pure heart, and he admits no wickedness in principles. Particularly, honor is the most important moral value for him, and he tries to maintain his honor. For instance, he quarrels with Cassius about bribes:

What? shall one of us
That struck the foremost man of all this world
But for supporting robbers, shall we know
Contaminate our fingers with base bribes?¹⁰

All in all, there is very little indication that Brutus is motivated for murder by self-interest. The public interest is the first and foremost thing for him, and he tries to act in the "name of honor." In his idea, Caesar must die with honor, and Brutus himself must be honored. The striking difference between Brutus and his conspirators is that Brutus thinks of the public good with pure heart, whereas they intend to destroy Caesar simply for their personal reasons.

Though dedicated to the public good, Brutus does not seem to have a clear vision of his future nation. He uses the word "commonwealth" for the first time in his speech to the public, asserting his righteousness for murder, but does he fully understand the meaning of commonwealth?:

Here comes his body, mourn'd by Mark Antony, who,
though he had no hand in his death, shall receive the
benefit of his dying, a place in the commonwealth, as
which of you shall not.¹¹

Does Brutus have a theoretical idea of the republican form of government? The answer is no. His major concern was the elimination of probable tyranny, and he was not equipped with any systematic idea of the form of commonwealth. He devoted himself to the ideal principles of the Roman pride and patriotism.

III.

The next question is interesting: what specific criteria did the men of Shakespeare's time have to distinguish between the tyrant and the good ruler?

In the play, Brutus makes up Caesar as a tyrant by pointing out his increasing ambition. An ambitious man is dangerous, Brutus says, and this idea is likely easy to accept for most people. In his speech to the public Brutus does not mention the part of Caesar's cold reason but emphasizes his risky ambition which almost becomes God-like. Brutus asserts that Caesar is incapable of taking the public interest into consideration as he lacks in compassion. Brutus tries to move the emotional part of people who are sensitive to pride and freedom. Brutus throws a question to them:

Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves,
than that Caesar were dead, to live all freemen?
. . . but, as he was ambitious, I slew him.¹²

People are afraid of enslavement and of losing their right of free citizen. The word "ambitious" has a weighty meaning in Brutus's speech, because the people immediately begin to take Caesar as being a dangerous tyrant. Ambition is easily linked with the characteristic of a self-righteous ruler. However, Antony brilliantly reverses Brutus's claim of Caesar's dangerous ambition and shows Caesar as an honorable statesman. Antony gives solid evidence to prove Caesar's innocence. Caesar was not ambitious, because he declined a crown three times; Caesar had also compassion, as he wept when the poor wept; he truly thought of the public interest, because he

distributed ransoms to people, and in his will he ordered to divide his assets to them. In Antony's speech, Caesar begins to assume the fine characteristics of a good ruler, never an ambitious man. Thus, a good ruler is considered to be selfless, compassionate, and generous. These three elements were probably thought to be important for becoming a good ruler in the Elizabethan time.

According to Sir Thomas Elyot, the Elizabethan author of *The Book Named The Governor*, a good ruler must first have a great concern in the public interest. He says:

the best and most sure governance is by one king or prince, which ruleth only for the weal of his people to him subject; and that manner of governance is best approved, and hath longest continued, and is most ancient. For who can deny but that all thing in heaven and earth is governed by one God, by one perpetual order, by one providence?¹³

Elyot continues to assert that what is dangerous to the public is a ruler's ambition, and the reasons are:

- (1) a ruler in authority and pre-eminence may happen to be separated from others that no man should control or warn him of enormity, and becomes a tyrant.
- (2) an ambitious ruler tends to be greedy of treasure in order to maintain his vain honor, and does wrong to find the ways to pursue the treasure. A good ruler must be stoical.

Elyot's caution of ambition, doubtlessly reflecting the political form of the monarchy of his time, is surprisingly identical with the idea of ambition expressed by Brutus.

In the same manner, Machiavelli comments on what is essential to a good ruler. He shows the comparative elements of the nature of a ruler between praise and blame:¹⁴

A good ruler may be praised as being liberal, willing to give, piteous, faithful, bold and spirited, humane, chaste, sincere, easy of access, grave, religious, and the like.

A ruler may be blamed as being
miserly, rapacious, cruel, a breaker of faith, effeminate and
pusillanimous, proud, lascivious, selfishly astute, harsh, ir-
responsible, skeptical, and the like.

According to these comparative elements, Machiavelli also touches
upon the murder of Caesar by Brutus:

Caesar was one of those who wished to attain the principate of
Rome, but if, when he had attained it, he had survived and had
not become more temperate in his expenses, he would have de-
stroyed his empire.¹⁵

What is striking is that in Machiavelli's explanation of a ruler there
appears no word "ambition." The closest word to ambition in the
above is rapacious, yet the two words are slightly different in mean-
ing. Rapaciousness is predatory, whereas ambition is ambiguous.
It is ambiguous because there is an ambition for the public good
and one for self-interest. The play of *Julius Caesar* rightly centers
upon this interpretation of this word between Brutus and Antony.
Shakespeare's idea of a good ruler seems to indicate a ruler with
less ambition. In *Macbeth* he names the main characteristics of a
good ruler:

The king-becoming graces,
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude.¹⁶

In these elements lowliness seems to be most the opposite of am-
bition, and it is interesting that Shakespeare thus thought the nec-
essary characteristics of a good ruler.

IV.

The next question: what did the men of Shakespeare's time consider to be the best form of government, a monarchy or a republic? The question itself is too large to be treated here fully. Some examples of commentary will suffice.

With respect to the form of government, Leonard F. Dean says, "in the historical story of Julius Caesar the issue is between the two forms of government, an absolute monarchy and a republic. But the concept of a republic was alien to Elizabethan England, and Shakespeare utterly discounts either its possibility or desirability in his play."¹⁷ I also do not believe that in Shakespeare the story of Julius Caesar is simply a choice between a monarchy and a republic. Shakespeare describes the psychological drama of men obsessed with ambition, and for him the form of government is only a theatrical element. Yet, there are some men who thought of the desirable form of government in the Elizabethan time. Thomas More, for instance, in his *Utopia*, which was sent to Erasmus in 1516, shows some glimpses of what he considered is the best governmental form:

the Utopia at least touches on the movements which are said to characterize essentially the height of the Renaissance (approx. 1492–1520); the consolidation of absolute monarchy in kingdoms and principalities; the establishment of dynasticism as the controlling factor in international affairs; the decline in the power and prestige of the Catholic clergy . . . and the triumph of humanism.¹⁸

Utopia advocates the form of commonwealth as an ideal governmental form. Its political theory is, simply put, communism: "to be of one mind, to think the same thoughts, so that they 'may all have one heart and one mouth.'¹⁹ This utopian idea is valuable in itself in the point of having introduced the possible ideal of human society, however unachievable it may be. As Dean states, a utopian commonwealth was unthinkable at the age of the immense monarchical

power of Elizabeth. Besides, just as in *Julius Caesar* Brutus evinces no practical theory of commonwealth, in *Utopia* the core of its assertion is not based upon any systematic philosophy. Utopian ideas are founded upon religious communalism rather than upon theoretical and ideological one. Ironically and interestingly, in *Julius Caesar*, the ideas of commonwealth and the equal share of the public interest that Brutus seeks for are carried out by Caesar's will—that is, the equal distribution of his wealth, and the conveyance of his assets to the public.

The question of what the men of Shakespeare's time thought to be good governmental form, a monarchy or a republic or others, thus reveals a complicated issue. Frank Kermode touches upon a delicate problem as to the choice of the form of government. He shows the historical growth of consciousness questioning the righteousness of royalty in England. He also explains the various interpretations of the status of Brutus:

In Shakespeare's day there was a growth of interest in the problem of royal status. Later this became a matter of a contest between genuine Divine Right theory and active republicanism with its insistence on the right of tyrannicide; to Hobbes, for instance, tyrannicide was only a long word for regicide—and incidentally he wanted to forbid the study of Republican Rome—while to Milton Brutus was a noble exemplar Shakespeare treats him (Brutus) with delicate sympathy, but cannot have thought his act a right one.²⁰

Shakespeare was not immune to politics; rather he was consciously committed to it in his plays, but his politics is not governmental but psychological. In a sympathetic character like Brutus, he tried to describe the naked and raw feelings and thought of humans. Furthermore, it is difficult to consider that he was not sensitive to the thought of his age, and he probably knew well the meaning of putting on a play like *Julius Caesar*, which is in a sense risky because its subject is nearly regicide. Though being well aware of the thought of his age, he persisted in describing the psychological drama of human fate.

V.

In the play, there appear many references to time and the spirit of age, which naturally indicates Shakespeare's consciousness of the movement of his age. What is important is that Shakespeare regards the relationship between age and man as crucially important. For instance, in the play, Cassius says, "age, thou art sham'd," personifying and calling his age as humiliated, because no brave man appears to change the situation of the age which is being threatened to decay. What impact have these words upon Brutus! To these words Brutus answers, agreeing with Cassius and implying his disgust: "under these hard conditions as this time." Comparing the present age with the former one, Brutus worries about the situation of his age that Rome will be dominated only by one man—rather by his ambitious spirit.

Shakespeare is very conscious of the persisting presence of man's spirit (thought), which may influence ages. And in the play, though Brutus succeeds in dispatching Caesar before his spirit has complete sway over Rome, he begins to be tormented by the almost personified and concrete spirit (ghost) of Caesar. Brutus therefore says to the ghost of Caesar, "O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet!" For Brutus, the spirit of Caesar has already become a gigantic enemy even before his death, and Brutus feels that it is absolutely necessary to get rid of it. In this case, the spirit of Caesar appears to be a menacing monster, and Brutus a soldier destroying it. Brutus says, "we all stand up against the spirit of Caesar." It is in this instance if Brutus's heroic aspect can be witnessed. Caesar is, as Brutus criticizes him, partly to blame for his pride. Caesar's pride almost makes him feel that he is more than a man. For instance, his hyperbolic words go:

I could be well mov'd, if I were as you;
 If I could pray to move, prayers would move me;
 But I am constant as the northern star . . .

But there's but one in all doth hold his place.
So in the world: That unassailable holds on his rank,
Unshake'd of motion; and that I am he.²¹

Brutus's murder of Caesar, besides for the public interest, is a very important decision to determine the "choice and master" of the age. The spirit of a man may decide the nature of a particular age, and it may be considered that Brutus's struggle with Caesar was an effort to prevent it. Yet time never stops, and ages continue to assume their particular ideas and ideologies.

Notes

¹ "Julius Caesar," *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. B. Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974). I. i. 21-24.

² *Ibid.*, I. ii. 39-40.

³ *Ibid.*, I. ii. 85-89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I. ii. 163-65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I. ii. 149-50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, II. i. 10-13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, II. i. 18-21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I. ii. 104-106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II. i. 114-17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV. iii. 21-24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, III. ii. 41-44.

¹² *Ibid.*, III. ii. 21-26.

¹³ Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named The Governor*, Edited with an Introduction by S. E. Lehmborg (London: Everyman, 1962), p. 7.

¹⁴ Allan H. Gilbert, *Machiavelli's Prince and Its Forerunners* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1968), p.78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ "Macbeth" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*. IV. iii. 91-94.

¹⁷ Leonard F. Dean, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Julius Caesar"* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 109.

¹⁸ Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz, S. J. (New Haven: Yale University

Press, 1964), p. xi.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. xv.

²⁰ Frank Kermode, "Introduction to 'Julius Caesar,'" in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, p. 1104.

²¹ *Julius Caesar*, III. i. 58-70.

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