

Historical Fetters and Creative Liberation in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: A Response to Angelika Zirker and Susanne Riecker

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For further contributions to the debate on “‘That we shall die we know’: Historical Fetters and Creative Liberation in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*,” see <http://www.connotations.de/debate/shakespeares-julius-caesar/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract

The authors describe Shakespeare's double tragedy of *Julius Caesar* and of *Brutus* as a creative liberation from the constraints imposed by a historical source. They note that Shakespeare christianizes Calpurnia's nightmare about her husband's assassination, and he invents parallels between Caesar and Brutus and their wives. But what makes *Julius Caesar* a tragedy? The Folio sometimes calls it a “tragedy” and sometimes “The Life and death of Julius Caesar.” In fact, a good case can be made that *Julius Caesar* is a Roman history play. Shakespeare came to it fresh from writing nine plays about English history, and generically *Julius Caesar* resembles a history play more closely than a tragedy. It consists of a struggle for power. It is open-ended, like all Shakespeare's history plays, starting in the midst of unexplained action and ending inconclusively. This is the form for secular history that Shakespeare invented in the 1590s.

The historical fetters of the authors' title are provided by Shakespeare's source, Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by Sir Thomas North and published in 1579. Shakespeare drew on this source for much of what he imagines about Caesar himself, Brutus, Antony, and Cicero. By 1599, when the play was likely written, Shakespeare had used another historical source, namely, Edmund Hall, for both of his historical tetralogies and *King John*—nine plays in all. Given this dependence, one won-

ders if “fettters” is the right image. Might not “inspiration” be better? Shakespeare seldom chose to work without a source, and his sources invariably seem to have animated his genius, firing his imagination by supplying a basis for selection and invention—sometimes even for his wording.

The authors observe that “the tragedy is a double one” (133), that is, the play imagines the death not only of Julius Caesar but also of Brutus, the patrician who leads the conspiracy to kill Caesar. Plutarch had proceeded by comparing and contrasting a Greek hero and a Roman one, so Shakespeare’s conjoining of two Roman citizens in the late Republic both nods to Plutarch and departs from him at the same time. The authors also observe that the play differs from its source in its preoccupation with time, most especially with the ides of March. *Julius Caesar* locates itself in the temporal continuum of Roman history by recalling the political dominance of Pompey, by depicting the death of Caesar, and by anticipating the rise of Antony and his conflict with Octavius, who will eventually emerge as “sole sir o’ th’ world” (*Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.150) in Cleopatra’s phrase.

Zirker and Riecker emphasize Shakespeare’s anachronistic christianizing of Calpurnia’s nightmare about her husband’s assassination. Their point is that the dream offers “conflicting options for evaluation” (141). It can either be accepted along with other imagined events in the play or rejected as blasphemous. The authors note that imagery from the dream reappears in Antony’s funeral oration, which is the last appearance of the phrase “sacred blood” (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.134; Zirker and Riecker 143).

The authors strikingly compare and contrast the wives of Caesar and Brutus as parallels to their powerful husbands: “Through the parallel arrangement of the episodes with Portia and Calphurnia, Shakespeare not only extends the concept from Plutarch even to the women but moreover allows insight into the private spheres of Brutus and Caesar” (147). Finally, Zirker and Riecker explicate Antony’s orations for the deaths of both Caesar and Brutus, noting that “on the intramimetic level, at least, Antony remains an opaque, if not ambiguous, character” (149).

I should like to frame my response to this fine essay by commenting on the authors’ first phrase, “In his tragedy, *Julius Caesar*” (abstract, 133). What makes the play a tragedy? Most obviously, the First Folio does: it calls the play “The Tragedie of Ivlivs Caesar” in its “Catalogue” and in its running

title, and its title page includes *Julius Caesar* among “tragedies,” which it distinguishes generically from “comedies” and “histories.”

But the First Folio’s authority is self-contradictory in this case. For one thing, its title for *Julius Caesar* on the volume’s title page is “The Life and death of Julius Caesar.” What happened to “tragedy”? Moreover, the list of tragedies on the Folio’s title page includes “Cymbeline King of Britaine.” Does that make *Cymbeline* a tragedy? Besides, Shakespeare had nothing to do with the printing of the First Folio; that momentous task was undertaken several years after his death by his fellow actors, John Heminge and Henry Condell. We owe them an incalculable debt, but the First Folio is the product of their judgment, not that of the one who wrote the plays.

Aside from a label in the First Folio, what makes *Julius Caesar* a tragedy? The assassination of the man for whom it is named? He dies in the eighth of eighteen scenes and in the third of only three scenes in which he appears. Is the play a tragedy, then, because Brutus dies in the end? Should it be called “The Tragedy of Brutus”? Perhaps so—but it is not.

For what it is worth, I would like to suggest that *Julius Caesar* might more profitably be thought of as a history play rather than a tragedy. Our best notion of its date of composition is 1599, culminating a decade in which Shakespeare had written two tragedies that might be thought of in various ways as false starts: *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*. He had also, in the 1590s, written nine history plays: the two tetralogies and *King John*. If we include 1599 itself, the decade also comprises *Hamlet*, but is *Julius Caesar* more like *Hamlet* or like almost any of the history plays?

For one thing, as Angelika Zirker and Susanne Riecker emphasize, *Julius Caesar* has a double focus, portraying the death not only of its title character but also of the man who leads the conspiracy against him. In broad outline, this double plot is reminiscent of *Richard II*, except that Richard’s challenger does not die in the end: he successfully seizes power. For present purposes, the important point in common between *Richard II* and *Julius Caesar* is that both plays consist principally of a struggle for power.

But they have more in common than that. Both are open-ended in that their action has started before the play begins, and it promises to continue after the play ends. As David Kastan pointed out many years ago, this open-endedness imitates the shape of history itself, which is a continuum

rather than a sequence of events with a defined beginning and end, like comedy and tragedy (see Kastan). *Richard II* begins with a quarrel between Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray whose origin lies somewhere in an unexplained past. *Julius Caesar* similarly begins with a contest between two tribunes and a crowd of commoners, with political tension in the background that is confusingly alluded to but not explained.

The unanswered questions that mark the beginning of *Richard II* are complemented by a new set of questions at the end. What does Bolingbroke's triumph mean? Does it confer legitimacy on him? If it does not, can he secure his succession and hope to make his heirs legitimate? Can he survive psychologically, i.e. can he live with himself, given the momentous implications of what he has done to an anointed king? *Julius Caesar* also ends with questions unanswered. With Cassius and Brutus both dead, is the hope of the conspirators dead as well? Will the Republic be restored, as Brutus had hoped? Having cooperated to defeat Brutus, how will Octavius and Antony manage the tension between them? How will Rome fare, if Octavius and Antony cannot resolve their competition? If their competitive spirit becomes violent, what will the outcome be? Amid the uncertainty, Brutus expresses a vain wish that every soldier and every politician must share at some point: "Oh, that a man might know / The end of this day's business ere it come" (5.1.123-24).

To be sure, understanding history merely as political struggle is simplistic, but if we ask what Shakespeare inherited as a way of staging history, we can better appreciate what his history plays consistently do. The only history Shakespeare knew on stage was salvation history, and he almost certainly knew it firsthand because his hometown was close to Coventry, where one of the great cycles of salvation history was regularly staged, until it was shut down by government order in 1580, when Shakespeare was sixteen. He may perhaps have been remembering staged biblical history when Henry V threatens the defenders of Harfleur with mayhem like that imposed by Herod:

Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
 Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
 Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
 At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen. (*Henry V*, 3.3.38-41)

Though Shakespeare almost certainly knew what salvation history looked like on stage, his own history plays eschewed it. From the beginning, he wrote secular history, that is, plays about history as a contest between politically powerful men and women to maintain and increase their power.

Julius Caesar would therefore seem to be a Roman history play—the only one Shakespeare wrote. The conspirators compete with Caesar for power, though Brutus naively construes the competition as a bid to restore republican liberty. Having defeated Caesar, Brutus goes on to compete with Antony and Octavius, and after they defeat him, they seem to be preparing to compete with each other: the possibility of that struggle is what makes *Julius Caesar* open-ended as its action ceases. Aside from its title, Heminge and Condell may have understood *Julius Caesar* as a tragedy because it focuses on the deaths of two great men. What Shakespeare's first editors did not see is the many ways in which *Julius Caesar* is more like Shakespeare's history plays than his tragedies.

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