

# “That we shall die we know”: Historical Fetters and Creative Liberation in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*<sup>1</sup>

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*Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate*, Vol. 31 (2022): 133-59.

DOI: [10.25623/conn031-zirker-riecker-2](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn031-zirker-riecker-2)

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This article is the first entry in a debate on a contribution on “‘That we shall die we know’: Historical Fetters and Creative Liberation in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.” <http://www.connotations.de/debate/shakespeares-julius-caesar/>. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](mailto:editors@connotations.de).

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## Abstract

In his tragedy *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare builds largely on the 1579 translation of Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, usually referred to as *Parallel Lives*. Shakespeare’s rendering of the events around the assassination, however, diverges substantially from his source material. Nor does his tragedy end with the death of Caesar: it is located right in the middle of the play, and more than half of the action follows afterwards, with a focus on Brutus and his suicide. The very fact that the eponymous hero dies halfway through the performance and the focus shifts to one of his murderers, Brutus, suggests that this play has two heroes rather than one. In our paper, we take these reconfigurations as a starting point to reflect on the tension that arises from the collation of historical matter on the one hand and generic restraints of tragedy on the other. The tragedy is a double one, and the double constraint thus reveals itself to be a creative liberation from the fetters presented by history and the main source text: where in the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch sets up Julius Caesar in comparison the Alexander the Great, and Brutus in comparison to Dion, we find Julius Caesar and Brutus in the play posited as foils to one another and thus presenting another set of “parallel lives.” In Shakespeare’s play both characters are marked by fatal self-deception, which is underscored by structural parallels throughout the play. By showing the parallel moments of personal choice that lead to historical events, Shakespeare triggers a reflection on historical truth as well as tragic recognition.

*Julius Caesar*, perhaps the first of Shakespeare's plays performed at the newly-built Globe Theatre in 1599 (see Cox), lends itself particularly well to an exploration of "self-imposed fetters," since with Shakespeare's choice of subjects comes the challenge of avoiding "a mere repetition of what has been told a hundred times before" (Bauer 13): a tragedy<sup>2</sup> of this name will necessarily be concerned with the assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March by a group of conspirators including Brutus and Cassius.<sup>3</sup> Yet to regard the play as a mere retelling of historical events fails to acknowledge that the well-known subject matter "trigger[s] the author's [in this case Shakespeare's] inventiveness by turning a story into a means of communication for a new idea" (Bauer 13), despite his strict adherence to genre (tragedy), historical events and considerable debts to source texts. Most prominent among those is Thomas North's 1579 translation (reissued in 1595 and 1603) of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romanes* (from Jacques Amyot's French version), commonly called *Parallel Lives*. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, however, deviates substantially from what Plutarch and others have to say about Caesar's assassination and the surrounding events.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Shakespeare's tragedy does not end with or shortly after the assassination, but rather locates it right in the middle of the play, in Act 3, Scene 1: more than half of the action comes afterwards, with a focus on Brutus and his suicide. This is followed by a short but telling spotlight on Antony and Octavius, who would become central to the story of *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606). The very fact that the eponymous hero dies halfway through the performance and the focus shifts to one of his murderers, Brutus, suggests that this play has two heroes rather than one.<sup>5</sup>

Shakespeare, as is well known, generally transformed the sources he used, although there are some critics who claim that the "norm" in his plays is "considerable fidelity to historical material" (Whitaker 142). In the case of *Julius Caesar*, the changes are functional in the overall context of the play, to the effect of a structural re-configuration of the historical matter and, more importantly, the relation of the characters involved.

In what follows, we will explore the tension that arises from the collation of historical matter on the one hand and generic restraints of tragedy on the other. Shakespeare works with his source text in different ways to further his own creative agenda: he specifies and extends Plutarch's temporal references; he amplifies the role of prophecies; in some places, he also adds to the source text and changes speech attributions of characters. As a result of these various re-configurations, the tragedy turns out to be a double one, and the double constraint thus reveals itself to be a creative liberation from the fetters presented by history and the main source text: where in the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch sets up Julius Caesar in comparison to Alexander the Great, and Brutus in comparison to Dion,<sup>6</sup> we find Julius Caesar and Brutus in the play posited as foils to one another and thus presenting another set of "parallel lives." Shakespeare's focus, however, is different from renderings of the story so far: while history had written the subject matter as a political tragedy, in Shakespeare's tragedy both characters are marked by fatal self-deception, which is underscored by structural parallels throughout the play. Our hypothesis is hence a paradoxical one: the addition of restraints leads to creative liberation. In other words, Shakespeare, in this play, is out-Plutarching Plutarch in that he ties the fetters ever faster and thus eventually overcomes them to provide an innovative reading of the historical events. By showing the parallel moments of personal choice that lead to historical events, Shakespeare thus creates a sense of transpersonal historical connectedness.

### 1. Extending and Specifying Temporal Structure(s): Moving Towards the Ides of March

The historical events underlying the plot and action of the play provide an apt starting point to the discussion of Shakespeare's use of sources as well as their transformation. He partly diverges from, partly specifies Plutarch's order of events leading up to the assassination; overall, Shakespeare's treatment of time leads to an acceleration and temporal



daunger" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326; emphasis added), but does not go into further detail. Plutarch's "long time affore" is accordingly specified by Shakespeare: it is now more or less exactly a month before the Ides of March.<sup>9</sup>

With the beginning of Act 2, the play again moves forward in time: Brutus is sleepless at night and calls for his servant Lucius, whom he asks, "Is not tomorrow, boy, the first of March?" (2.1.40). The question is somewhat odd: why should Brutus (not) know the date? That Brutus brings up this question provides orientation to the audience, who will recognize the historical dimension of the unfolding incidents and anticipate the infamous event. It is all the more striking, then, when Lucius—after looking up the date in the calendar—does not confirm but correct Brutus: "March is wasted fifteen days" (2.1.59), pointing out that Brutus's sense of time was off by two whole weeks.<sup>10</sup>

The dramatist thus constantly foregrounds the passing of time. Brutus was first taken into the conspiracy during the feast of Lupercalia by Cassius; apparently, he has been pondering on the matter since then and lost track of time over this: "Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar / I have not slept" (2.1.61-62). The text here simultaneously reminds its audience of the significance of the date to ground the action firmly in history/historiography, and it uses the discrepancy between Brutus's initial assumption and the actual date to emphasize his deliberations and to point to his not acting rashly at all but after some consideration and even hesitation.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the passage brings us up to speed with the fact that events have moved on to the eve of the Ides of March, which raises audience expectations as everybody knows what will inevitably happen next. The audience is left with a heightened sense of anticipation, since Lucius's news confirms that the pivotal moment in a tragedy about Julius Caesar—his assassination—is closer than originally thought: we are still only at the beginning of Act 2, and the greater part of the tragedy is yet to follow. In the course of the first act, incidents were considered that were months apart; and now they have once again moved forward and been speeding up, almost unwittingly, between Acts 1 and 2. The danger for Julius Caesar

becomes imminent, even more so as the action moves quickly from the first scene, with its focus on Brutus and Portia, to the second: the house of Caesar and his conversation with his wife Calphurnia.

## 2. Amplifying the Source Text: Prophetic Visions and Calphurnia's Dream

Simultaneous with Brutus's sleepless night before the Ides of March, the following scene (2.2) provides the audience with insight into the state of Caesar's household: set at night, its beginning is concerned with Calphurnia's prophetic dream. This dream harkens back to Caesar's assertion in 1.2 when he calls the Soothsayer a "dreamer" (1.2.24), which means, retrospectively, his ignoring the truth of both visions.<sup>12</sup> This second instance of a prophetic vision is preceded by a number of strange signs. Following Plutarch,<sup>13</sup> Caska (in 1.3) reports that "A common slave—you know him well by sight / Held up his left hand, which did flame and burn / Like twenty torches joined; and yet his hand, / Not sensible of fire, remained unscorched" (15-18).<sup>14</sup> Calphurnia also speaks of fiery elements, and Shakespeare thus takes up the fire imagery as used by Plutarch to foreground it through repetition:

Fierce fiery warriors fight upon the clouds  
 In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,  
 Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol.  
 The noise of battle hurtled in the air,  
 Horses do neigh, and dying men did groan,  
 And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.  
 O Caesar, these things are beyond all use,  
 And I do fear them. (2.2.19-26)

The doubling of instances in which fire visions are used as prophetic signs is part of the paradoxical liberation Shakespeare finds in letting himself be determined by his sources: he takes up the image from Plutarch with Caska but then moves on to repeat it in relation to Calphurnia; Caesar's neglecting and not taking seriously the warning signs is amplified, and the possible avoidance of his fate foregrounded. With

regard to the anticipation of the (known historical) events, this may further affect the perception of Caesar as a tragic hero<sup>15</sup>: his failure lies in ignoring the signs, even when their meaning is spelt out, in this case by Calphurnia, who comments that “[w]hen beggars die there are no comets seen; / The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes” (2.2.30-31).

As the scene continues, a servant tells of augurs that sacrificed a beast and found no heart in it (2.2.38-44), which is based on an episode in Plutarch, who, however, has Caesar make the sacrifice himself.<sup>16</sup> In presenting the signs preceding the assassination, the text overall remains fairly close to its sources and, apart from the repetition discussed, only implements minor changes. And yet, there is one feature that Shakespeare does significantly alter, namely, Calphurnia’s dream itself, described by Plutarch as follows:

For she dreamed that Caesar was slaine, and that she had him in her armes. Others also doe denie that she had any suche dreame, as amongst other, Titus Livius wryteth, that it was in this sorte. The Senate having set upon the toppe of Caesars house, for an ornament and setting foorth of the same, a certaine pinnacle: Calpurnia dreamed that she sawe it broken downe, and that she thought she lamented and wept for it. Insomuch that Caesar rising in the morning, she prayed him if it were possible, not to goe out of the dores that day [...]. (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326)

In Shakespeare, the dream has a slightly different quality that ominously foreshadows the play’s action beyond the assassination itself.

CAESAR

Calphurnia here, my wife, stays me at home.  
 She dreamt tonight she saw my statue,  
 Which, like a fountain with an hundred spouts,  
 Did run pure blood; and many lusty Romans  
 Came smiling and did bathe their hands in it.  
 And these she does apply for warnings and portents  
 And evils imminent, and on her knee  
 Hath begged that I will stay at home today.<sup>17</sup>

DECIUS

This dream is all amiss interpreted.  
 It was a vision, fair and fortunate.  
 Your statue spouting blood in many pipes

In which so many smiling Romans bathed  
 Signifies that from you great Rome shall suck  
 Reviving blood, and that great men shall press  
 For tinctures, stains, relics and cognizance.  
 This by Calphurnia's dream is signified. (2.2.75-90)

Rather than bring up an image of Caesar's lifeless body, Decius (who is one of the conspirators) redirects the attention to a monument erected in his honour, similarly to the "pinnacle" in Calphurnia's dream as reported by Plutarch. Yet Shakespeare does not merely depict a pinnacle breaking down; rather he gives the dream a more urgent spin when the statue starts running blood and people bathe their hands in it.<sup>18</sup> The religious dimension of this image becomes even more emphasized in Decius's (treacherous) interpretation of the dream<sup>19</sup>: he deems the blood "[r]eviving." On the extramimetic level of communication, the reference is to the image of sacred blood, as put forth in Rev 1:5 "Prince of the kings of the earth [...] washed us from our sins in his blood" (Geneva; cf. *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 224n83-89).<sup>20</sup> For the audience, the notion of the blood as "reviving" is linked to a religious dimension when it becomes a reinvigorating force for the Romans: it invokes the meaning that Jesus, through dying, took away death from the world; his death literally "revived" humankind in saving it from death perpetual.<sup>21</sup> The "[r]eviving blood" also has implications for the ruling of a country and monarchy, again referring to the extramimetic level: "The monarch as both father and nursing mother of the people was a Tudor commonplace" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 224n88). The bathing in the blood furthermore evokes images of martyrdom, and Decius expands on this association by mentioning "tinctures, stains, relics."<sup>22</sup> Decius's deceptive interpretation is hence ambiguous: intramimetically, it refers to both Caesar and his party as well as to the conspirators (see the "reviving blood" in 3.1.105-14). Extramimetically, Caesar is turned into a *figura Christi*, which foreshadows his later apotheosis.<sup>23</sup> And as Calphurnia speaks of her "fear" with regard to all the strange signs she notices, one may begin to wonder whether the audience are to fear for and perhaps even pity him, too, conforming to his role as tragic hero.



In this way, Shakespeare, by aligning Caesar with Christ in a way that obviously could not have been warranted by Plutarch, puts forth conflicting options for evaluation. Caesar's sacralization is presented to be accepted (as dramatic fiction) or rejected (as blasphemous and inadequate). This invitation to an affective or critical response is enhanced by doubling the role of the tragic hero in Brutus.

The image of men bathing or washing their hands in Caesar's blood is essential to his role as tragic hero and his ongoing influence even beyond his death (e.g. when he appears as a ghost): it recurs three times overall and shows itself at its most momentous after the assassination:

BRUTUS

[...]

So are we Caesar's friends that have abridged  
His time of fearing death. Stoop, Romans, stoop,  
And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood  
Up to the elbows and besmear our swords.  
Then walk we forth even to the market-place,  
And waving our red weapons o'er our heads  
Let's all cry, 'Peace, Freedom and Liberty.'

CASSIUS

Stoop, then, and wash. How many ages hence  
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over  
In states unborn and accents yet unknown? (3.1.104-13)

Brutus and Cassius inadvertently allude to the dream of Calphurnia: once again, one item of the source is taken up and wound around other elements of the story; the acceptance of the restriction in his source texts thus paradoxically becomes a means for Shakespeare to be creative. In the *Life of Marcus Brutus*, Plutarch writes: "But Brutus & his consorts, having their swords bloody in their handes, went straight to the Capitoll, perswading the Romanes as they went, to take their *liberty* again" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 342; emphasis added). "Liberty" is the one item from the source that Shakespeare uses in his play; as he embeds it in the context of a metatheatrical comment ("this our lofty scene"), the reference reads almost like a comment on his own authorial strategy.

By referring to the historical event as a scene that is to be “acted over” again and again, Shakespeare via Brutus implicitly claims the event on stage to be completely determined by the original scene. But then Brutus’s claim is *not* shown to be true, as the scene we witness is very different from the one he envisages. The fetters history puts on drama are thus shown to be illusionary, since history itself will have to be reimagined, whatever the sources will prescribe. The event may nominally stay the same, but its evaluation will never do so. Accordingly, Shakespeare diverges from Plutarch in having Brutus and Cassius ask their fellows to literally “wash” their hands and swords in Caesar’s blood. This act is seen, by Brutus and Cassius, as a “reviving” of the Roman people in the sense of regaining their “Peace, Freedom and Liberty.”<sup>24</sup> Shakespeare invents this incident and, in doing so, points not only to the brutality of the act,<sup>25</sup> but on the extramimetic level once again joins the religious aspect with the political: the very fact that the characters want to believe the murder is a sacrifice, “or else it were a savage spectacle” (3.1.244), points again to the metadramatic reflection and invites the audience to evaluate history transformed to drama. As Antony will later note, Brutus and his companions have committed treason: “Then I, and you, and all of us fell down, / Whilst *bloody treason* flourished over us” (3.2.189-90; emphasis added). In their own perspective, however, their action of killing Caesar, the tyrant, is linked to one of cleansing, and they now want to wash themselves clean in Caesar’s blood as a symbolic act linked to their regained liberty, even extending to Cassius’s reference to grace: “Brutus shall lead, and we will grace his heels” (3.1.120).<sup>26</sup> Intramimetically, Cassius refers to Brutus’s new role as leader and their own subordinate roles in relation to him<sup>27</sup>; extramimetically, however, the audience (knowing the outcome of the play based on the fetters Shakespeare imposed upon himself), will be able to read this also as a cynical statement of religious hubris: not only is murder hardly graceful, but the conspirators even regard themselves as dispensators of grace.

Antony's funeral speech marks the final instance in which Caesar's "sacred blood" is mentioned, and another link to Calphurnia's dream is being established through repetition:

Let but the commons hear this testament—  
 Which, pardon me, I do not mean to read—  
 And they would go *and kiss dead Caesar's wounds,*  
 And *dip their napkins in his sacred blood,*  
 Yea, beg a hair of him for memory,  
 And, dying, mention it within their will,  
 Bequeathing it as a rich legacy  
 Unto their issue. (3.2.131-38; emphasis added)

The connection of the imagery from the earlier dream and the assassination shows that Caesar's death is not merely a political spectacle, but that his blood is repeatedly sanctified and brought in connection with redemption and grace. Antony's eulogy makes obvious that Caesar is (to be) regarded a martyr rather than a tyrant. And not only that: extramimetically, he once again consolidates the connection to Jesus Christ, foregrounded in the final act, when Octavius relates that Caesar suffered "three and thirty wounds" (5.1.52), as opposed to the less significant number 23 in Plutarch (see *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 301n52). While certain aspects of the source material are quite conventionally maintained as guidance (or, indeed, fetters), Shakespeare repeatedly adds new dimensions to them and extends elements he finds in Plutarch; he thus puts his own aesthetic stance onto the plot and achieves creative liberty by (literally) adding links to the chain of the fetters. In this instance, his changes and additions to the original dream vision of Caesar's wife establish a complex interplay of politics and religious/Christian symbolism.

### 3. "Et tu, Brute?": Transforming and (Re-)Attributing Character Speech

The assassination scene contains one of the most famous quotations from Shakespeare's works that has been associated with the death of Caesar ever since: "Et tu, Brute?," the last words Caesar utters before

he dies (3.1.77). As Daniell notes in the Arden edition: “The famous phrase is in Suetonius in Greek καὶ σύ, τέκνον; (*kai su, teknon*) [...] meaning ‘and thou, child (or son)?’” (237n77). Daniell also comments that Shakespeare’s “Et tu, Brute?” cannot be found in classical sources; it has been assumed that the phrase goes back, most probably, to the lost Caesar-play by Edes (1582; see Wiggins 2: #723 and “Caesar Interfectus” in Lost Plays Database).<sup>28</sup> In Plutarch, by contrast, Caesar addresses another one of the conspirators: “O vile traitor Casca, what doest thou?” (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 329). In the *Life of Brutus*, this sentence by Caesar is taken up again (see *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 341). Shakespeare not only omits these words but adds “Then fall, Caesar” (77)<sup>29</sup> to the Latin tag. It is in this instance that the concept of *parallel lives*, in the middle of the play, overrules Plutarch’s having Caesar address Casca in his last moment. The sense of foregrounded personal interaction is highlighted even more in the repetition of two monosyllables followed by a proper name: “*Et tu, Brute?* / *Then fall, Caesar*”; the consecutive clause follows from the implied answer to the rhetorical question: “yes.” Caesar here intricately links himself and his fate to Brutus,<sup>30</sup> and this link is not merely established on the level of events but also on that of language and sound.<sup>31</sup>

This transformation of the source material in Shakespeare’s dramatic alterations is decisive for his moving within self-imposed fetters and going beyond them: in this instance of the assassination, he foregrounds the close link between Brutus and Caesar that is at the heart of the whole tragedy. And this tragedy, despite the death of its eponymous hero, is far from over.

#### 4. The Double Tragedy

The link between Caesar and Brutus has structural implications, too. Whereas the first half of the play has focused on Caesar, it shifts to Brutus as a second tragic hero and the events following upon the assassination for the remainder of the tragedy. So far, we have seen how

Shakespeare transforms the historical matter that he finds in his sources, especially in Plutarch, to his own artistic ends: he emphasizes plot elements and characters (as well as their constellations) and, in adhering to the fetters of his sources and amplifying them, finds liberation. These transformations may, in a next step, be linked to the genre of tragedy: the double fetters of history, on the one hand, and generic restraints, on the other, become a creative source. In the context of genre, the “double lives” presented by Shakespeare (in variation from Plutarch's) become a particularly efficient force as they introduce the doubling of the tragic hero. It is Cassius who first verbalizes the link between Caesar and Brutus, ironically when discussing with Brutus the necessity to cut down Caesar:

‘Brutus’ and ‘Caesar’: what should be in that ‘Caesar’?  
 Why should that name be sounded more than yours?  
 Write them together: yours is as fair a name:  
 Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well.  
 Weigh them, it is as heavy: conjure with ‘em,  
 ‘Brutus’ will start a spirit as soon as ‘Caesar’. (1.2.141-46)

Brutus and Caesar are to be seen as equals: they both incite “spirit” in men who will follow their lead in equal measure. Equality is of course the whole point of the conspiracy, to cut down the one who would be greater than the other (or others). Yet, the (literal and metaphorical) fall of Caesar<sup>32</sup> leads to the rise of Brutus,<sup>33</sup> and the dynamics of rising and falling, as well as doubling, is underpinned by the overall structure of the play as well as in a few exemplary instances: the arrangement of the scenes in which Portia and Calphurnia, the wives of Brutus and Caesar, appear in Act 2, in Mark Antony's funeral speech, and, finally, in the ending of the tragedy.

#### 4.1 Portia and Calphurnia

In the first and second scenes of Act 2, the wives of the two tragic heroes appear subsequently, and the scenes mirror each other in various

ways.<sup>34</sup> In Scene 1, the audiences witnesses Brutus's deliberating on the state of Rome, and his course of action; he finally decides to be part of the conspiracy and to act. Likewise, in scene 2, Caesar fatally decides to ignore Calphurnia's pleas and go to the Capitol after all, which ultimately leads to his death. We find both Brutus and Julius Caesar in their private rooms; both of their decisions take place late at night or in the early morning. The fact that these scenes immediately follow upon each other links the wives and contrasts them at the same time: in each scene, we see the men interact with their wives in matters directly pertaining to the conspiracy and assassination; what is more, Shakespeare also introduces similar imagery to link the scenes to one another.

After Brutus has reflected on the conspiracy and finally come to a decision (e.g. 2.1.169-71), Portia enters to ask what it is that Brutus has been concerned with for a while now: she convinces Brutus to share his plans as well as his conscience with her.<sup>35</sup> Whereas her begging—"upon my knees / I charm you" (2.1.269-70)—is futile, her last step towards persuading her husband to confide in her is by inflicting a bodily wound to herself (2.1.298-301).<sup>36</sup>

The physical act of self-injury is meant to demonstrate her (typically Roman) steadfastness. And while Brutus promises to share his "secrets" (2.1.305) with her, he is called away before he can do so, and their conversation ends. The audience is not to witness what passes between them: in fact, they never share another private moment together, as Brutus leaves immediately with Ligarius.<sup>37</sup>

The scene shifts to the house of Caesar, with him "in his nightgown" (2.2 SD) to indicate the simultaneity of events—and, quite literally, parallel lives—to the preceding scene. In the context of Calphurnia's prophetic dream vision, the significance of Portia's voluntary drawing of blood to convince her husband is highlighted<sup>38</sup>: blood is again used as a motif. Both women want their husbands' confidence as much as their safety: Calphurnia asks Caesar to stay at home, while Portia seeks her husband's trust. This means that, in both cases, blood (or its image) is used with the aim to persuade someone to act in a particular way. Calphurnia's dream is interpreted such that it acquires the opposite of her

intended (and, as we learn, correct) meaning, whereas Portia's "O Brutus, / The heavens speed thee in thine enterprise" (2.4.45-46) is directed at his success and his return home. The phrase is ambiguous in that "speed thee" may be read either as a wish for success and good fortune or as the desire that he return home as quickly as possible—because this is where he is safe. Whether Portia knows about the conspiracy at this point remains unclear; yet she clearly contextualizes herself socially in her bonds to the conspirators, both as Brutus's wife, and as Cato's daughter, that is in relation to the past (her father) and the present (her husband).<sup>39</sup>

Portia's anxieties in 2.4, speaking of her husband's "enterprise" and encountering the Soothsayer with suspicion about whether he knows that "any harm's intended towards [Caesar]" (2.4.35-36), admit the possibility that she has been brought into the loop in the interim, but the window of opportunity would have been small after the interruption of their conversation by Caius Ligarius in 2.1. It is only five hours later that the conspirators are with Caesar. If she had no time to talk to her husband and be let into the secret, then her following actions in 2.4 point to a foreboding similar to Calphurnia's.

The outcome of their actions is very different, and this contrasts the wives as much as their husbands: while Portia succeeds in strengthening Brutus's determination, Calphurnia achieves the contrary, and though she briefly manages to wrest from Caesar his resolve to stay at home as she wishes him to do—"for thy humour I will stay at home" (2.2.59)—, her entreaties are ignored as soon as Decius Brutus enters the scene and offers his own interpretation of Calphurnia's dream. Caesar even comments: "How foolish do your fears seem now, Calphurnia? / I am ashamed I did yield to them" (2.2.109-10).<sup>40</sup>

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. The thematic and structural similarities of these scenes hence make possible a pointed look at the moment of decision for each of these characters as they settle their fate, for better or for

worse, in the intimate setting of their private rooms during the small hours. At the same time, this parallel arrangement leads to a contrastive relationship, similar to the dynamic of rising and falling, as the same motif is used for different ends, and the action is brought forward: Caesar leaves his home to be assassinated, while Brutus leaves his home to assassinate Caesar.<sup>41</sup> What is more, the private sphere of both protagonists is foregrounded in these scenes, while the public sphere and how they each relate to it, is represented by Mark Antony and, eventually, by Octavius.

#### 4.2 "The noblest Roman of them all": Mark Antony's Speech

Mark Antony's significance to both Brutus and Caesar is structurally highlighted by his re-entry after an absence since 1.2 to face the conspirators in the exact middle of the play, following the assassination: he thus strengthens the parallel lives of Caesar and Brutus. To the Plebeians, Antony asserts that "Brutus [...] was Caesar's angel" (3.2.193); an ambiguous remark that may refer to both Caesar's favouritism of Brutus, and Brutus's role in Caesar's death: Brutus accordingly doubles as Caesar's protégé and as his angel of death.<sup>42</sup> This particular ambiguity is indicative of the overall ambiguity and irony of the scene, in which Antony gradually empties the attribute "honourable" of meaning through repetition and by juxtaposing the "honourable" action with the actual deeds of Brutus and his fellow conspirators.<sup>43</sup> Antony's manner of speech in relation to the conspirators is deceitful, and this deceit (based on ambiguity) is also apparent in moments other than the forum speech. Once left alone with Caesar's corpse, Antony says of Caesar:

ANTONY

[...]

Thou art the ruins of the noblest man

That ever livèd in the tide of times. (3.1.256-57)<sup>44</sup>

Given their friendship and his true mourning, the eulogy (voiced in a soliloquy) is not surprising. The specific wording, however, the superlative and the attribute of being "the noblest man," is then surprisingly



repeated in the final scene, when Mark Antony is confronted with the body of Brutus, who has committed suicide:

ANTONY

This was the noblest Roman of them all:  
 All the conspirators save only he  
 Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.  
 He only, in a general honest thought  
 And common good to all, made one of them.  
 His life was gentle, and the elements  
 So mixed in him that nature might stand up  
 And say to all the world, 'This was a man!' (5.5.69-76)

In Antony's words, first Caesar and then Brutus are noble superlatives (which entails a semantic contradiction; see Zirker "Some Notes")—and this despite the fact that Brutus is one of Caesar's murderers. If we take Antony's claim over Brutus's being "the noblest Roman of them all" seriously, his saying that Caesar was "the noblest man" establishes their equality, if not even their identity. There is, however, good reason to believe that he is more serious with regard to Caesar, especially so as he speaks about him in a soliloquy.<sup>45</sup> Later, the repetition extramimetically opens the potential for ambiguity—in a sense very similar to the notion of "honourable" and its change of meaning in his earlier speech. This ambiguity, whether it is Caesar or Brutus, or either of them who are "the noblest man," is further highlighted in the context of an earlier statement of Mark Antony's in 1.2 in which he misjudges a character: the question accordingly is how reliable his character evaluations are anyway. In the earlier scene (1.2.202-03), Antony's "dismissal of Cassius"<sup>46</sup> (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 176n195-96) not only turns out to be a misjudgement but, in hindsight, also proves to be injurious. It is, in this case, Caesar who doubts Cassius's integrity: "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look: / He thinks too much: such men are dangerous" (1.2.193-94)<sup>47</sup>; later, he will reject similar warnings given by others, first and foremost Calphurnia's. Yet here it is Antony who gets things wrong,<sup>48</sup> and on the intramimetic level, at least, Antony remains an opaque, if not ambiguous, character<sup>49</sup>: whether he speaks in seriousness

at the end of the play in praising Brutus, in an attempt to make his peace with him, or whether this eulogy serves as an ironical send-off that deliberately echoes his reaction to Caesar's murder, remains unresolved.

## 5. Conclusion: Chiastic Dynamics and Parallel Lives

This ambiguity within one character and the resulting dynamics makes us (re)turn to the double tragedy of Caesar and Brutus: as noted above, the fall of Caesar leads to the rise of Brutus; yet, in a manner of speaking, the opposite is equally the case, and, after his death, Caesar continues to determine the fate of Rome, while Brutus moves towards his downfall. As early as in Antony's speech in the forum, immediately after the assassination, we witness him turning around public opinion; while Brutus had managed to appease the people in explaining how Caesar's demise should be to their benefit, Antony sways their judgement once more to Caesar's benefit and against the conspirators. This is dramatically epitomized in the brief yet poignant scene in 3.3. when the Plebeians kill Cinna the Poet for the sole reason that he shares the same name as one of the murderers. What follows the speeches in the forum is a period of civil war, and one of death, instigated by Antony's "Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot: / Take thou what course thou wilt" (3.2.251-52). The parallel lives and dynamics between the two heroes accordingly affect the life at Rome in a similar fashion: While the conspirators had claimed to act in order to protect the many over the one, they provoke greater turmoil than ever.

Even Caesar has not left the action, nor the play, after his assassination and appears as a ghost to Brutus in 4.2, who continues to invoke him to the very last: in 5.3, upon finding Cassius dead, he exclaims: "O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet" (5.3.95). Brutus equally concludes his suicide with the invocation, "Caesar, now be still" (5.5.56), alluding to the continued influence and presence that Caesar has in the second half of the play. While Caesar's death has raised Brutus to become a leader and, as far as the play is concerned, also the protagonist, it is this

same event which causes Brutus's downfall as well as, one might argue, Caesar's apotheosis.

The double tragedy that results from this movement may once more be linked to the topic of "self-imposed fetters": Shakespeare moves within the fetters of history and genre as well as beyond them. Not only does he draw on the concept of the *Parallel Lives* and present two protagonists as mirroring each other, but he reflects on this structurally by combining parallelism and chiasmus in their portrayal: As Caesar falls, Brutus rises; as Brutus falls, Caesar rises. Unlike what we find in Plutarch, Shakespeare invests his play with the recurring theme of mirroring and a constant trade-off between similarity and contrast to bring Julius Caesar and Brutus closer to each another and dramatize the course of history. Most importantly, he does so by means of doubling: the doubling of protagonists, Brutus and Caesar; of parallel episodes and Portia's and Calphurnia's roles; of the private and the public; and the meaning of words and ambiguities that extend beyond the ending of the play. As the generic fetters of a double tragedy require a double peripety and a double downfall, the play not only introduces two heroes and parallels Caesar and Brutus but also augments them into chiasmic foils to one another. The self-imposed fetters of history and the source text result in artistic and aesthetic liberty, and even in the innovative generic twist of a double tragedy: he presents another set of "parallel lives" to enhance the tragic effect of each.

This transformation of the source material becomes possible through the fictional nature of the text, by its being "a play and not e.g. a chronicle" (Riecker). The audience knows the story of Julius Caesar and the civil war in Rome following his assassination; this knowledge, however, is changed throughout the play, and "their future remembrance of history" (Riecker) is altered. The aesthetic effect of Shakespeare's tying himself more thoroughly than necessary to his historical source and out-paralleling Plutarch's parallel lives is thus one of out-historizing history, possible in the realm of fiction alone (see Riecker). The historical overdetermination allows the dramatic fiction to present a critical

view of history itself. The audience realizes that the actions and characters they are presented with are idealized by the historical figures represented on stage, and since this is done in a double, parallel fashion, the impossibility of such an idealization is brought home to us: for example, two men cannot concurrently represent the identical superlative notion and both be “the noblest.” Shakespeare exaggerates the idealizing notions he finds in his historical source material, for example, when he has Brutus, after the assassination, claim that the mimesis will be determined by the original scene—but what follows turns out to be quite different from what Brutus had envisioned. Shakespeare’s self-imposed fetters of history and dramatic genre accordingly result in both restriction and liberation, and a reimagination of events that prompts us to reflect on the truth-claims of both history and tragedy.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>We would like to thank the participants of the 14th International Connotations Symposium in 2017 for their feedback as well as the reviewers, Matthias Bauer, and David Scott Kastan for reading and discussing the paper with us.

<sup>2</sup>The “Catalogue” of the First Folio lists the play as *The Life and Death of Julius Caesar* under “Tragedies”; see <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/shakespeares-first-folio>.

<sup>3</sup>The number of plays about Julius Caesar reflects on the matter’s popularity during the period: Wiggins records at least four prior to Shakespeare’s 1599 play. Two of them are concerned with the triumph of Caesar over Pompey (1580 and 1594), whereas the other two (of which one, in 1595, is a sequel to the 1594 *Caesar and Pompey*) deal with the murder of Caesar, most notably the 1582 *Caesar interfectus*, in which Brutus kills Caesar “with notable cruelty” (Wiggins 2: #297).

<sup>4</sup>Much of what Shakespeare says about the assassination in fact comes via Plutarch’s *Life of Brutus*. See Daniell in the Arden Introduction on historical transformations of the character of Julius Caesar (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 29-38).

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Paolucci who remarks on the title hero and his demise by the middle of the play: “In naming the play after Caesar, Shakespeare may have been suggesting that to understand the tragic denouement properly we must see it through the eyes of Brutus, who, with a mistaken sense of values, killed Caesar because he saw

in Caesar something more than was there" (330); in her view, Caesar is not the tragic hero (see 329) but serves as "the contrast between Brutus' idealized conception of Caesar as a 'hero' and the real Caesar, reminding us that it is this discrepancy which is responsible for Brutus's tragic fall" (330).

<sup>6</sup>"In Plutarch's *Lives* Brutus as a Roman is set against Dion, a Greek, who was also a tyrannicide" (Kullmann 168).

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g. Daniell's note on "Thunder and lightning" that opens 1.3: "The sudden huge noise [...] and lightning [...] come directly on Cassius's intention to *shake* Caesar, or *worse days endure* [in 3.2.321; the line concluding 1.2]" (184n0.1).

<sup>8</sup>All quotations in this paper follow the Arden edition of *Julius Caesar* by Daniell, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>9</sup>The feast of Lupercal is moreover symbolically significant regarding Caesar's ambition: it is associated with sterility (see *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 162n0.1). Antony's taking part in the race foregrounds another change introduced by Shakespeare: he makes "Calphurnia's curse of barrenness [...] dominant at Caesar's first entry. He has no legitimate son. He needs an heir. He is immediately vulnerable in his dynastic ambition" (163n9).

<sup>10</sup>While it says "first" in the Folio, since Theobald this dating has often been emended by editors to "Ides" (see Kermode 1100). One may even go so far as to suggest that Brutus's sense of time is off politically as well: Rome may just not be ready for his Republican idealism. The temporal confusion may even point at a joke directed at the audience: Brutus's losing track of the date may possibly also be regarded as a reference to the calendar reform in Europe, instituted by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 (but not officially introduced in Britain before the mid-eighteenth century). As David Scott Kastan reminds us: at least some people in the audience or reading the play were aware that dates differed on each side of the channel. A great example is the assassination of King Henry IV of France on 14 May 1610. At almost the same time, "News from France" reporting the event was registered with the Stationer's Company in London. The date was 10 May 1610. The joke is of course that Brutus seems to stick to what in Shakespeare's time was the "Julian" calendar (i.e. Caesar's). See also <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/almanac-for-1585>.

<sup>11</sup>See Kullmann, who notes that Brutus's "torment of mind foreshadows that of later tragic Shakespearean heroes about to go wrong," including, for example, Macbeth (172).

<sup>12</sup>Daniell comments in his note on 1.2.24 that "attention to this [first] 'dream,' as to Calphurnia's (2.2.2-3) would have saved Caesar's life and changed the history of the world" (164n24).

<sup>13</sup>"But Strabo the Philosopher wryteth, that divers men were seene going up and downe in fire: and furthermore, that there was a slave of the souldiers, that did cast a marvellous burning flame out of his hande, insomuch as they that saw it, thought he had bene burnt, but when the fire was out, it was found he had no hurt" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326).

<sup>14</sup>See Plutarch (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326): “Certainly, destinie may easier be foreseen, then avoided: considering the straunge & wonderfull signes that were sayd to be seene before Caesars death. For, touching the fires in the element, and spirites running up and downe in the night, and also these solitarie birdes to be seene at no one dayes sittinge in the great market place [...]”

<sup>15</sup>From the beginning, his charisma is undermined: in 1.2.1-2, his address to his wife is followed by Caska’s sycophantic half-line completion; then he is “turned to hear” the Soothsayer (1.2.17), but we learn that he is deaf in one ear (212-13).

<sup>16</sup>“Caesar selfe also doing sacrifice unto the goddess, found that one of the beastes which was sacrificed had no hart: and that was a straunge thing in nature, how a beast could live without a hart” (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 326).

<sup>17</sup>This gesture is doubled: in 2.1 Portia was begging of her husband not to leave the house, even “upon her knees” (2.1.269). On further parallels between the two wives, see subsection 4.1 below.

<sup>18</sup>See Kirschbaum 519-24 on the stage effect of this scene.

<sup>19</sup>See, e.g., Charney; and Starks-Estes.

<sup>20</sup>See also Daniell, who refers to the “drinking of the blood” here as well as in “sacramental references throughout the New Testament” (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 224n85-89).

<sup>21</sup>See Zirker, *Stages of the Soul* 136-37. On the analogy of Jesus Christ and Julius Caesar see, e.g., Bradley; Geddes 46, 54; Sohmer 27-28, 136, esp. 139-41; see Tobin for Shakespeare’s references to *Christ’s Tears over Jerusalem* by Thomas Nashe; Hunt also refers to “the fact that both men’s names begin with the same initials” (112). Kaula reads “Caesar as Antichrist” (201).

<sup>22</sup>Daniell here refers to a commentary in the Oxford edition: “sacred tokens coloured and stained with the blood of martyrs” (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 224n89). See Donne’s sermon “Preached at Hanworth” where he calls martyrs “the twice-baptized [...] (baptized in *water*, and baptized in their owne *blood*)” (4: 6.176). See also Gray.

<sup>23</sup>What is more: Decius’s words can also be interpreted as announcing Caesar’s martyrdom, but he does so on the intramimetic level of communication. If read as such, it appears as if, in a strange way, Decius was in two minds about the assassination: for he *actually* speaks about relics and veneration intramimetically, not just by the application of an external context such as the Bible.

<sup>24</sup>Lüdeke and Mahler emphasize the performativity of this scene: “The meta-theatrical framing of Cassius’s speech makes clear that, as a consequence of the performative weakness of discursive empowerment, the current and newly established Roman order will from now on invariably depend on theatre-like enactments, or ‘performances’” (216).

<sup>25</sup>See Antony’s reference to “brutish beasts” (3.2.105) that puns on Brutus’s name as presented in Knappe and Winkler.

<sup>26</sup>Daniell comments: "Cassius uses the word for the men who have just butchered Caesar and bathed in his blood. It is a question how far they have convinced themselves of the virtue of the act, and how far the word is cynical" (214n120). See also Brutus's use of the word in 3.2.58: "Do grace to Caesar's corpse and grace his [Mark Antony's] speech."

<sup>27</sup>See *OED*, "grace, *v.*" 3.a.: "To lend or add grace to (a person or thing); to adorn, embellish, set off. Hence (more loosely): to furnish, array"; and 5.ta.: "To confer honour or dignity upon (a person or thing). Also: to do honour or credit to. *Obsolete.*" 8. has a particularly strong religious connotation—as befits the context: "To endow or favour (a person or thing) with (divine) grace."

<sup>28</sup>Wilson, in his edition of *Julius Caesar*, has a slightly more detailed note on the origin of the phrase: "Prob. orig. derived from Suetonius (*Div. Julius*, S2)—'tradiderunt quidam, Marco Bruto irruenti dixisse: καὶ σὺ, τέκνον...'. The Latin form, almost certainly post-classical if not renaissance, is first found in *The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of York* (1595), a 'reported' text of 3 *Hen. VI*; but since the words are an addition by the 'pirate' (*True Trag.* 5.1.53=3 *Hen. VI*, 5.1.81) the tag must have then been familiar to the stage. Mal. conj. that it first occurred in a Latin play, *Caesar Interfectus*, by Richard Edes, acted in 1582 and now lost (*Eliz. Stage*, III, 309). But if so, its appearance in *True Trag.* suggests that it reached Sh. through an intermediate source, and one may note that 'What, Brutus too?', found in *Caesar's Revenge* (c. 1594) is virtually a translation of it (v. *Intro.* p. xxvi). There is no hint of Brutus's supposed sonship to Caes. in Sh., but that the story was current is proved by 2 *Hen. VI*, 4.1.137, which speaks of Caes. being stabbed by 'Brutus' bastard hand'" (151n77). See also the editions by Dorsch 67n77 and Spevack 122n77. Most editions comment on this phrase. [Update 8 Sept. 2023: Martin Wiggins has pointed out in personal correspondence that it is unlikely that Shakespeare had access to the earlier play (which was unpublished, in Latin, and, so far as we know, only performed in Oxford in 1582, a few months before Shakespeare's eighteenth birthday).]

<sup>29</sup>"Then" has been read as ambiguous: Daniell notes that it may mean either "... (a) because my dearest friend (even son) has betrayed me; (b) because I must deserve to die if Brutus thinks so. It is of course the play's stroke of genius to limit personal interaction between the two to this inarticulate moment" (237n77). See Yu more generally on ambiguities in the play.

<sup>30</sup>Further instances of such a link can be found in the structural parallels between 2.1 and 2.2 (see below); as well as in Brutus's speech at 5.1.123-26 and by Caesar himself at 2.2.26-27.

<sup>31</sup>The notion of falling becomes almost a leitmotif in the course of the play. Early on, in a foreshadowing, Cassius, Brutus, and Caska talk about Caesar's fainting: "CASSIUS But, soft, I pray you: what, did Caesar swoon? / CASKA He fell down in the market-place, and foamed at mouth, and was speechless. BRUTUS 'Tis very like: he hath the falling sickness. CASSIUS No, Caesar hath it not; but you and I, / And honest Caska, we have the falling sickness" (1.2.250-55). Similarly, Antony later

speaks of the moment when “great Caesar fell”: “O what a fall was there, my countrymen! / Then I, and you, and all of us fell down, / Whilst bloody treason flourished over us” (3.2.187-90).

<sup>32</sup>Both meanings are implicit when he says, at the moment of his death, “Then fall, Caesar” (rather than, for example, “Then die” or “Then go” etc.).

<sup>33</sup>See also Whitaker, who links this aspect of JC to the double tragedy of sorts in R2: “the life and coronation of Bolingbroke” and “death of R2” (147).

<sup>34</sup>Daniell, for instance, comments on the structure of the play (Introduction 75-79) and in particular on Jones’s notion of “structural rhyming” (77, see Daniell 75); Jones, however, merely refers to the fact that “the two parts of the play have like endings” (77).

<sup>35</sup>There are some striking resemblances to the interaction of Kate and Percy in the earlier *1 Henry IV*: “O my good lord, why are you thus alone? / For what offence have I this fortnight been / A banished woman from my Harry’s bed? / Tell me, sweet lord, what is’t that takes from thee / Thy stomach, pleasure and thy golden sleep?” (2.3.36-40); “O, what portents are these? / Some heavy business hath my lord in hand, / And I must know it, else he loves me not.” (61-63). His reaction is, equally, similar to that of Brutus in *Julius Caesar* 2.1: “Whither I must, I must, and, to conclude, / This evening must I leave you, gentle Kate. / I know you wise but yet no farther wise / Than Harry Percy’s wife. Constant you are / But yet a woman; and for secrecy / No lady closer, for I well believe / Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know. / And so far will I trust thee, gentle Kate” (2.3.101-08). As David Scott Kastan reminds us, this parallel is suggestive of how Shakespeare uses his own works as a “source” as well.

<sup>36</sup>For an analysis as regards the semiotic significance of the blood drawn by Portia, see especially Marshall.

<sup>37</sup>Portia appears again in 2.4, and her nervous behaviour may be explained as an effect of her forebodings.

<sup>38</sup>Hogan moreover points out the “technique of emotional intensification” (39) that he repeatedly finds in Shakespeare, with “the death of the usurper’s beloved, often through suicide, and usually at a moment of particular conflict and suffering” (39). He cites the news of Portia’s death to Brutus as one example.

<sup>39</sup>Cato was an ally of Pompey’s and committed suicide before allowing Caesar to capture him.

<sup>40</sup>Ironically, Caesar is convinced to go forth into the Capitol by the misrepresentation of a conspirator, which is another parallel with Brutus, whose reflections about what he must do are propelled by Cassius’s forged handwritten notes.

<sup>41</sup>See Zirker, “Performative Iconicity,” on the function of parallelism and chiasmus in Shakespeare.

<sup>42</sup>The following line: “Judge, o you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him” arguably also shows an ambiguous addressee, since Antony both calls on the ultimate judges—the Gods themselves—but also functionally addresses the Plebeians, whose judgement he wishes to evoke here. The function of this ambiguity might



double with the conspirators' quasi-godlike actions, in their tyrannicide, which are to be judged accordingly.

<sup>43</sup>For an analysis of Antony's speech with regard to rhetoric and ambiguity, see especially Knape and Winkler. See also Pestritto, and Kullmann on notions of honour in *Julius Caesar*.

<sup>44</sup>The phrase will be echoed by Brutus in 4.3.216-22: "There is a tide in the affairs of men [...] / And we must take the current when it serves." Brutus (unwittingly) establishes a parallel between Antony's words about Caesar and his own words about himself (and his party).

<sup>45</sup>On seriousness in soliloquies, see Zirker, *Shakespeare and Donne*, ch. 8, esp. 173-83.

<sup>46</sup>His last words before leaving the stage are about Cassius: "Fear him not, Caesar, he's not dangerous. / He is a noble Roman, and well given" (1.2.195-96).

<sup>47</sup>Misjudgement is a recurring theme in the play; Caesar equally says about Cassius that he is a "great observer" who "looks quite through the deeds of men" (1.2.201-02), but then, later, Cassius says about himself "my sight was ever thick" (5.3.21), Pindarus misjudges the battle, and Cassius kills himself in the name of Roman honour.

<sup>48</sup>Daniell refers to the similarity of this scene with a later one: "Antony's speech, almost his first, expresses a misjudgement of Cassius that parallels Brutus later (3.1.231-53)" (*Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell 176n195-96), namely when Cassius warns Brutus of allowing Mark Antony to speak in the forum.

<sup>49</sup>On the ambiguity of Antony, see Zirker, "Some Notes."

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