

Julius Caesar (Summer 2018)

If *Julius Caesar* is a political play, it is only because so many of its characters are politicians. Shakespeare shows minimal interest in the pros and cons of republicanism; the tragedies of Caesar, Brutus, and the rest have little to do with their respective governing styles, policies, or priorities (beyond a general aversion, on the part of the conspirators, to tyranny), and their historical significance as statesmen goes unexamined. (In this respect, Shakespeare's English history plays, from the three parts of *Henry VI* through *Henry V*, are much more political.) Watching or reading *Julius Caesar*, one would never know the Roman Senate by 44 BCE had become sclerotic and corrupt; that Caesar had already been appointed dictator-for-life; or that, regardless of who was in charge, the vast majority of Romans would have experienced nothing resembling the conspirators' notions of "Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement" [III.i.80].¹

Instead, *Julius Caesar* explores more general questions of human conduct: not whether violence can be an effective political strategy, but whether violence as a means to any end can be justified; not whether reason can persuade people of a particular idea, but whether it can truly persuade anyone of anything—long enough to withstand demagoguery, at least. Perhaps most crucially, whether professions to altruism and the public good—to simple friendship, even—can ever be untangled from one's secret, selfish motives. Every major character grapples with these problems, and none more desperately than its protagonist,

Brutus

¹ For a useful summary of the play's sociopolitical context, see Volume One of Isaac Asimov's *Guide to Shakespeare* (pp. 253–266 in particular).

Though I believe Brutus is the play's tragic hero, I hesitated just now to say it; his detractors are not difficult to find. Asimov is particularly scornful: arguing that "a close reading seems to show that Shakespeare is utterly out of sympathy with Brutus and makes him rather a despicable character" [264]; decrying Brutus's "colossal vanity" [272] and "egregious stupidity" [309]; dismissing him as "a vain fool" [272]. Harold Goddard has a useful reply to such contempt: "If this be true, it is a bit odd that almost everyone in the play seems to think highly of him" [310]. There is Portia, who proudly proclaims herself to be "[the] woman that Lord Brutus took to wife" [II.i.291–2]. There are the conspirators, who need Brutus because "he sits high in all the people's hearts, / And that which would appear offense in us / His countenance, like richest alchemy, / Will change to virtue and to worthiness" [I.iii.157–60]. There is Caesar himself, who famously acknowledges only Brutus before dying ("*Et tu, Brutè?*" [III.i.76]), as though this particular betrayal, more than the physical wounds, is what kills him.² Even Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar (soon to be Caesar Augustus, Rome's first emperor) praise Brutus after defeating his and Cassius's armies; Antony (also famously) describes Brutus as having been "the noblest Roman of them all" [V.v.67], and Octavius orders his dead adversary, "[a]ccording to his virtue," placed in Octavius's tent for the night [V.v.75–8].

Yet for all his virtue, Brutus botches things about as badly as a man can. Goddard again is perceptive: "Brutus is . . . a man who undertakes a role for which nature never intended him" [308]—by which I think he means not only the assassination of Caesar but

² The 1953 film, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, memorably stages the assassination so that James Mason's Brutus hesitates; he stabs Louis Calhern's Caesar only after Calhern reaches out for his help.

the whole project of defending a republic that no other Roman seems to care much about. What brings Brutus to this crisis? The immediate answer is his friend and “brother” [IV.ii.37, 39, and half-a-dozen other lines], Cassius. Yet even before Cassius can broach the topic, in the play’s second scene, Brutus suggests he has already been brooding on Caesar:

Cassius: Brutus, I do observe you now of late.
 I have not from your eyes that gentleness
 And show of love as I was wont to have.
 You bear too stubborn and too strange a hand
 Over your friend that loves you.

Brutus: Cassius,
 Be not deceived. If I have veiled my look,
 I turn the trouble of my countenance
 Merely upon myself. Vexed I am
 Of late with passions of some difference,
 Conceptions only proper to myself,
 Which give some soil, perhaps, to my behaviors.

[I.ii.34–44]

Thus encouraged, Cassius lays his trap. His preferred bait is flattery, and Brutus—in his own words, “with himself at war” [I.ii.48]—is sufficiently perceptive to be cautious . . . and sufficiently vain to be snared:

Cassius: Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?
Brutus: No, Cassius, for the eye sees not itself
 But by reflection, by some other things.

Cassius: ’Tis just;
 And it is very much lamented, Brutus,
 That you have no such mirrors as will turn
 Your hidden worthiness into your eye,
 That you might see your shadow. I have heard
 Where many of the best respect in Rome—
 Except immortal Caesar—speaking of Brutus,
 And groaning underneath this age’s yoke,
 Have wished that noble Brutus had his eyes.

Brutus: Into what dangers would you lead me, Cassius,
 That you would have me seek into myself
 For that which is not in me?

[I.ii.53–67]

The scene is interrupted by clamor offstage, and Brutus gives himself away:

Brutus: What means this shouting? I do fear the people
Choose Caesar for their king.³

Cassius: Ay, do you fear it?
Then must I think you would not have it so.

Brutus: I would not, Cassius; yet I love him well.
But wherefore do you hold me here so long?
What is it that you would impart to me?
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.

[I.ii.81–91]

Interesting that Brutus returns to the theme of eyesight, for in his rush to announce his virtue he misses the incoherence of his argument. Does he look on honor and death “indifferently” (that is, impartially, as his Stoicism teaches⁴)? Or does he “love” honor? Assuming the latter, Cassius assures Brutus that “honor is the subject of my story” [I.ii.94], then loses himself in a cranky tangent (which we shall analyze later) about his own perceived worth. Finally, he remembers his purpose is to flatter Brutus:

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.” . . .
Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods.
When went there by an age since the great flood,

³ Some context here is useful. As previously noted, Caesar was named dictator-for-life in 44 BCE, several months before his assassination, so the word *king* is crucial. As dictator, Caesar’s power ends with his death; as king, it passes to his heir; it endures. A coronation would therefore threaten freedom—at least for Roman elites, with their own sources of hereditary wealth and power—in a way that dictatorship does not. [See Asimov, 264–6.]

⁴ Shakespeare does not explicitly make Brutus a Stoic, but Cassius implies it when, following a quarrel, he advises Brutus, “Of your philosophy you make no use, / If you give place to accidental evils” [IV.ii.197–8]; Plutarch also implies it in his *Life of Brutus* [4.3], which Shakespeare used as a source for his play.

But it was famed with more than with one man?
 When could they say till now, that talked of Rome,
 That her wide walls encompassed but one man? . . .
 O, you and I have heard our fathers say
 There was a Brutus once that would have brooked
 Th' eternal devil to keep his state in Rome
 As easily as a king.

[I.ii.143–62]

This is a reference to Brutus's ancestor Lucius Junius, reputed to have helped overthrow the ancient Roman monarchy (the city did once have a king) and found the Republic. That Shakespeare's Brutus is acutely conscious of his own legacy is evident when, immediately following Caesar's assassination, he and Cassius—goading each other—allow their imaginations free rein:

Cassius: How many ages hence
 Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,
 In states unborn and accents yet unknown!
Brutus: How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,
 That now on Pompey's basis lies along,
 No worthier than the dust!
Cassius: So oft as that shall be,
 So often shall the knot of us be called
 The men that gave their country liberty.

[III.i.112–19]

For now, Brutus simply promises to find a more suitable time and place to speak further with Cassius, though again he seems to need little additional persuading:

What you would work me to I have some aim.
 How I have thought of this and of these times
 I shall recount hereafter. . . .
 What you have to say
 I will with patience hear, and find a time
 Both meet to hear and answer such high things.
 Till then, my noble friend, chew upon this:
 Brutus had rather be a villager
 Than to repute himself a son of Rome
 Under these hard conditions as this time
 Is like to lay upon us.

[I.ii.164–76]

When next we see Brutus, he is attempting one of the great rationalizations in Shakespeare. Like most speeches in this play, Brutus's first soliloquy seems, on the surface, a fine piece of rhetoric:

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 crowned.
How that might change his nature, there's the question.

[II.i.10–13]

How a crown *might* change Caesar . . . yet a few lines later, Brutus admits he has no evidence for believing King Caesar would be any different from Dictator Caesar, General Caesar, or Friend Caesar:

Th' abuse of greatness is when it disjoins
Remorse from power. And to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections swayed
More than his reason. But 'tis a common proof
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend. So Caesar may.
Then lest he may, prevent.

[II.i.18–28]

Of course, simply naming something “a common proof” does not make it so; neither is “common” synonymous with “universal.” Furthermore, Brutus never considers how cold-blooded murder—is there a clearer example of remorse disjoined from power!—might change his own nature. Should the conspirators succeed and return power to the Senate, Brutus and Cassius—both senators—would again be atop the Roman “ladder.” Why should Brutus's “common proof” not apply equally to his own ambition? His conclusion proves only that he is arguing in bad faith:

And since the quarrel

Will bear no color for the thing he is,
 Fashion it thus: that what he is, augmented,
 Would run to these and these extremities;
 And therefore think him as a serpent's egg,
 Which, hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous,
 And kill him in the shell.

[II.i.28–34]

Fashion it thus . . . that is, disguise the truth (“the thing he is”) with images, assumptions—whatever will serve the purpose. Brutus does not even specify every charge in his indictment; he never bothers to explain what “*these* and *these* extremities” refer to. What’s more, he knows his aim is rotten:

Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar
 I have not slept.
 Between the acting of a dreadful thing
 And the first motion, all the interim is
 Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.
 The genius and the mortal instruments
 Are then in counsel, and the state of man,
 Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
 The nature of an insurrection.

[II.i.61–9]

Brutus’s first speech after joining the conspiracy is similarly revealing:

Brutus: Give me your hands all over, one by one.

He shakes their hands.

Cassius: And let us swear our resolution.

Brutus: No, not an oath. If not the face of men,
 The sufferance of our souls, the time’s abuse—
 If these be motives weak, break off betimes,
 And every man hence to his idle bed. . . .
 Swear priests and cowards and men cautelous,
 Old feeble carrions, and such suffering souls
 That welcome wrongs; unto bad causes swear
 Such creatures as men doubt; but do not stain
 The even virtue of our enterprise,
 Nor th’ insuppressive mettle of our spirits,
 To think that or our cause or our performance
 Did need an oath, when every drop of blood
 That every Roman bears, and nobly bears,
 Is guilty of a several bastardy

If he do break the smallest particle
Of any promise that hath passed from him.

[II.i.111–39]

None of the other conspirators says anything here to affirm Brutus’s ideals—their silence might even be funny, depending on how the moment is played, though Brutus is deeply serious. He needs to believe killing Caesar is indisputably—even self-evidently—necessary; swearing an oath would prove the opposite. Yet Brutus’s own arguments continue to thwart themselves. “Let’s be sacrificers, but not butchers,” he urges the conspirators (as though one corpse were better than another):

We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,
And in the spirit of men there is no blood.
O, that we then could come by Caesar’s spirit,
And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,
Caesar must bleed for it.

[II.i.166–71]

Goddard again:

Disentangle the syllogism underlying the verbiage in the first part of this speech and this is what we have: (1) The spirit of men contains no blood. (2) We wish to destroy the spirit of Caesar. Therefore (3) we must spill Caesar’s blood. . . . The tragedy is dedicated to demonstrating the absurdity of the conclusion. The true inference from the premises is obviously: Therefore it is useless to spill Caesar’s blood. Moral pride prevents Brutus from seeing it. [318]

Where does this “moral pride” come from? Let us grant that Caesar’s ambition disturbs Brutus; he is a proud Roman, a patrician, and the people’s veneration of Caesar—elevating a man above the city and its traditions—must be profoundly destabilizing. Yet I doubt he would have acted on such feelings without the firm push Cassius provides. At the risk of oversimplifying, Brutus is a thinker more than a doer. (He fits this stereotype better than Shakespeare’s next tragic hero, Hamlet.) Again, he has

been brooding on Caesar and Rome, on tyranny and ambition, since before the play began; his response to these dark thoughts has been, as previously quoted, to withdraw—to “turn the trouble of my countenance / Merely upon myself” [I.ii.40–1]. Unlike Cassius, Brutus expresses neither outrage nor envy—not even when another conspirator, Casca, describes what sounds like a genuine, specific threat to the Republic⁵:

Casca: Why, there was a crown offered him; and being offered him, he put it by with the back of his hand, thus; and then the people fell a-shouting.

Brutus: What was the second noise for?

Casca: Why, for that too.

Cassius: They shouted thrice. What was the last cry for?

Casca: Why, for that too.

Brutus: Was the crown offered him thrice?

Casca: Ay, marry, was't; and he put it by thrice, every time gentler than other; and at every putting by, mine honest neighbors shouted.

Cassius: Who offered him the crown?

Casca: Why, Antony.

Brutus: Tell us the manner of it, gentle Casca.

[I.ii.222–34]

Casca proceeds to describe, in fussy detail, the “mere foolery” he observed [I.ii.236]: how each time Caesar refused the proffered crown—though “to my thinking he was very loath to lay his fingers off it” [I.ii.241–2]—“the rabblement hooted, and clapped their chapped hands, and threw up their sweaty nightcaps, and uttered such a deal of stinking breath because Caesar refused the crown that it had almost choked Caesar; for he swooned and fell down at it” [I.ii.244–8]. (This, we should note, is the same rabblement that Brutus shall earnestly strive to persuade of the assassination’s rightness.) To which Brutus, ever reasonable, and Cassius, ever resentful, reply:

Brutus: 'Tis very like: he hath the falling sickness.

⁵ I can say only “sounds like” because Shakespeare, cannily, has the entire sequence happen offstage; it is impossible to know whether Casca’s descriptions—never mind his inferences about Caesar’s motives—are accurate.

Cassius: No, Caesar hath it not; but you and I
And honest Casca, we have the falling sickness.

[I.ii.254–6]

Honest, gentle Casca grumbles for another 30 lines; when he finally exits, Brutus exclaims, “What a blunt fellow is this grown to be! / He was quick mettle when he went to school” [I.ii.295–6]. Is he unconsciously describing himself? Tyranny looms, and all Brutus can do is confirm it has seizures. Cassius’s reply at least sounds like a spur to action: “So is he now, in execution / Of any bold or noble enterprise, / However he puts on this tardy form” [I.ii.297–9].

What most spurs Brutus, however, is not Cassius’s or Casca’s bitter words, or his own tortured reasoning, but imagined greatness. In consecutive scenes [I.ii.315–20; I.iii.142–6], Cassius schemes to forge notes from anonymous citizens, pleading with Brutus to save Rome; following his specious soliloquy [II.i.10–34], Brutus reads one aloud:

“Brutus, thou sleep’st. Awake, and see thyself.
Shall Rome, et cetera? Speak, strike, redress.”—
“Brutus, thou sleep’st. Awake.”
Such instigations have been often dropped
Where I have took them up.
“Shall Rome, et cetera?” Thus must I piece it out:
Shall Rome stand under one man’s awe? What, Rome?
My ancestors did from the streets of Rome
The Tarquin drive when he was called a king.
“Speak, strike, redress.” Am I entreated
To speak and strike? O Rome, I make thee promise,
If the redress will follow, thou receivest
Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus.

[II.i.46–58]

When, prior to this conclusion, has Brutus spoken so ardently? Yet no sooner does he make this “promise” than he learns it is the ides of March (the date Caesar has been warned to “beware” [I.ii.20]); the conspirators—with “half their faces buried in their

cloaks” [II.i.74]—knock at his door; and he begins to lose his nerve. He describes his condition as “a phantasma or a hideous dream,” as we have heard, and moralizes to himself:

O conspiracy,
 Sham’st thou to show thy dang’rous brow by night,
 When evils are most free? O then by day
 Where wilt thou find a cavern dark enough
 To mask thy monstrous visage? Seek none, conspiracy.
 Hide it in smiles and affability;
 For if thou put thy native semblance on,
 Not Erebus itself were dim enough
 To hide thee from prevention.

[II.i.77–85]

The conspirators finally enter; Cassius resumes his flattery, and Brutus—all smiles and affability—again takes the bait:

Brutus: Know I these men that come along with you?
Cassius: Yes, every man of them; and no man here
 But honors you; and every one doth wish
 You had but that opinion of yourself
 Which every noble Roman bears of you.
 This is Trebonius.
Brutus: He is welcome hither.
Cassius: This, Decius Brutus.
Brutus: He is welcome too.
Cassius: This, Casca; Cinna this; and this, Metellus Cimber.
Brutus: They are all welcome.

[II.i.89–97]

Cassius now pulls Brutus aside for a private word; Shakespeare gives no hint of what they discuss, but were I playing Cassius, I would promise Brutus here that he shall be the uncontested leader, with everyone else in his debt and at his disposal. For the moment he rejoins the others, Brutus behaves in precisely this way, making decision after unilateral decision—as sure as any king, despite mounting evidence of his incompetence. His first order sets the tone for what follows. “But what of Cicero,” Cassius asks,

believing the great orator “will stand very strong with us”; the others all agree—“for his silver hairs / Will purchase us a good opinion, / And buy men’s voices to commend our deeds” [II.i.140–5]—except Brutus. “O, name him not!” he insists. “Let us not break with him, / For he will never follow anything / That other men begin” [II.i.149–51]. Cicero is a very minor character in the play, and Shakespeare gives us no reason to believe the conspirators would have succeeded had only Cicero been one; nevertheless, in rejecting Cicero, Brutus unwittingly reveals his own ego. Lending the conspiracy sound judgment and a respected name is supposed to be *his* job. Instead, he single-handedly undermines the effort, time and again refusing to follow advice, and always with calamitous results.

Let us count Brutus’s unforced errors:

1. He vetoes Cassius’s proposal to kill Mark Antony along with Caesar, lest these patriotic murderers “seem too bloody.” “For Antony is but a limb of Caesar,” Brutus argues, “[and] he can do no more than Caesar’s arm / When Caesar’s head is off” [II.i.162–83]. Antony repays Brutus’s pragmatic mercy by vowing, over Caesar’s corpse, to “let slip the dogs of war, / That this foul deed shall smell above the earth / With carrion men, groaning for burial” [III.i.276–8].
2. He allows Antony to show Caesar’s body in the marketplace and speak to the assembled crowd, provided Antony promise not to blame the conspirators [III.i.246–7]; Antony then delivers a demagogic masterpiece that, without technically blaming anyone, whips the crowd into a deadly rage; in Shakespeare’s compressed timeline, Brutus and Cassius flee Rome on the same day they assassinate Caesar [III.ii.260–1]!⁶

⁶ In real life, Antony’s famous speech happened five days after the assassination.

3. For no apparent reason, following his own speech to the plebeians, Brutus does not remain onstage to hear Antony's. "I do entreat you," he urges the crowd, "not a man depart / Save I alone till Antony have spoke" [III.ii.60–1]. What could he possibly have to do that is more important than ensuring Antony stays on message?! This more than anything is evidence of Brutus's massive ego—to believe he need only speak and all will be well.
4. Following their flight from Rome, Brutus and Cassius gather armies and prepare to battle Antony and Octavius, Caesar's nephew and heir. Though Cassius wants to remain encamped at Sardis (in present-day Turkey), forcing Antony and Octavius to journey east, Brutus insists on marching west to meet their foes. "There is a tide in the affairs of men / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune," he argues, mistaking metaphor for strategy. "On such a full sea are we now afloat, / And we must take the current when it serves, / Or lose our ventures" [IV.ii.270–6]. In Shakespeare's telling this is not necessarily an error, for when the two sides meet, at Philippi (in Greece), Brutus and Cassius claim the high ground . . . and promptly abandon it:

Octavius: Now, Antony, our hopes are answered.
 You said the enemy would not come down,
 But keep the hills and upper regions.
 It proves not so; their battles are at hand.
 They mean to warn us at Philippi here,
 Answering before we do demand of them.

Antony: Tut, I am in their bosoms, and I know
 Wherefore they do it. They could be content
 To visit other places; and come down
 With fearful bravery, thinking by this face
 To fasten in our thoughts that they have courage;
 But 'tis not so.

[V.i.1–12]

Antony assumes Brutus and Cassius are of one mind in this gambit, but no: later in the scene, Cassius insists “that, against my will, / As Pompey was, am I compelled to set / Upon one battle all our liberties” [V.i.73–5].

5. Of course Cassius’s foreboding proves right, and by day’s end both he and Brutus are dead. But even this outcome turns on one last misstep by Brutus. Initially the battle is a draw: though Cassius’s army retreats from Antony’s, Brutus’s army scatters Octavius’s. Brutus then orders all his men to pursue, “for I perceive / But cold demeanor in Octavio’s wing, / And sudden push gives them the overthrow” [V.ii.3–5]. Alas, this leaves no one to help Cassius. “Brutus gave the word too early,” an ally cries. “His soldiers fell to spoil, / Whilst we by Antony are all enclosed” [V.iii.5–8]. A despairing Cassius commits suicide, and Brutus follows thereafter.

In other words, Brutus is short-sighted, egotistical, and blind to these faults. Why then does he command such respect? To begin, he is genuinely kind. Consider his relationship with his young servant Lucius. Both their scenes together happen late at night, and both times Lucius cannot stay awake. “Fast asleep?” Brutus remarks, having dismissed the conspirators from his garden and called for Lucius:

It is no matter.
Enjoy the honey-heavy dew of slumber.
Thou hast no figures nor no fantasies
Which busy care draws in the brains of men;
Therefore thou sleep’st so sound.

[II.i.228–32]

In Act Four, far from home, Brutus is even more solicitous—not only toward Lucius but to several older servants, all of whom have followed their master and his army to Sardis:

Brutus: Where is thy instrument?
Lucius: Here in the tent.
Brutus: What, thou speak'st drowsily.
 Poor knave, I blame thee not; thou art o'erwatched.
 Call Claudio and some other of my men.
 I'll have them sleep on cushions in my tent.
Lucius: Varrus and Claudio!
Enter Varrus and Claudio.
Varrus: Calls my lord?
Brutus: I pray you, sirs, lie in my tent and sleep.
 It may be I shall raise you by and by
 On business to my brother Cassius.
Varrus: So please you, we will stand and watch your pleasure.
Brutus: I will not have it so. Lie down, good sirs.
 It may be I shall otherwise bethink me.
Varrus and Claudio lie down to sleep.
Brutus: Look, Lucius, here's the book I sought for so.
 I put it in the pocket of my gown.
Lucius: I was sure your lordship did not give it me.
Brutus: Bear with me, good boy, I am much forgetful.
 Canst thou hold up thy heavy eyes a while,
 And touch thy instrument a strain or two?
Lucius: Ay, my lord, an't please you.
Brutus: It does, my boy.
 I trouble thee too much, but thou art willing.
Lucius: It is my duty, sir.
Brutus: I should not urge thy duty past thy might.
 I know young bloods look for a time of rest.
Lucius: I have slept, my lord, already.
Brutus: It was well done, and thou shalt sleep again.
 I will not hold thee long. If I do live,
 I will be good to thee.

[IV.ii.291–317]

Again Brutus fixates on sleep, no doubt because he cannot sleep himself—the surest sign, in Shakespeare, of a guilty conscience. Yet the scene is so peaceful, and Brutus so gentle, one can almost forget the violence of the surrounding acts. After Lucius falls asleep at his instrument, Brutus opens his book and reads. (Reads! In Act Four of a tragedy! Were I to direct *Julius Caesar*, I would stretch out this moment for as long as the

audience would let me.) He is interrupted by Caesar's ghost, yet even this episode—
despite its creepy, clichéd beginning—partakes of the quiet atmosphere:

Brutus: How ill this taper burns! Ha! Who comes here?
I think it is the weakness of mine eyes
That shapes this monstrous apparition.
It comes upon me. Art thou any thing?
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That mak'st my blood cold and my hair to stare?
Speak to me what thou art.

Caesar's Ghost: Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

Brutus: Why com'st thou?

Caesar's Ghost: To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi.

Brutus: Well; then I shall see thee again?

Caesar's Ghost: Ay, at Philippi.

Brutus: Why, I will see thee at Philippi then.

Exit Caesar's Ghost.

Now I have taken heart, thou vanishest.
Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.

[IV.ii.326–39]

I remember first reading this, back in high school, and wondering if I'd missed something—surely Caesar's ghost has more to say! Brutus recovers admirably from his initial shock; far from being frightened, he yearns to speak further with the “evil spirit.”

We see this self-composure elsewhere in the play, notably in contrast with Cassius. On the day of the assassination, as they approach the Senate, the conspirators receive an unexpected scare:

Popillius: I wish your enterprise today may thrive.

Cassius: What enterprise, Popillius?

Popillius: Fare you well.

He leaves Cassius, and makes to Caesar.

Brutus: What said Popillius Laena?

Cassius: He wished today our enterprise might thrive.

I fear our purpose is discovered.

Brutus: Look how he makes to Caesar. Mark him.

Cassius: Casca, be sudden, for we fear prevention.

Brutus, what shall be done? If this be known,

Cassius or Caesar never shall turn back,

For I will slay myself.

Brutus: Cassius, be constant.
 Popillius Laena speaks not of our purposes,
 For look, he smiles, and Caesar doth not change.

[III.i.13–24]

Following the assassination, Brutus quickly takes charge:

Cinna: Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!
 Run hence, proclaim, cry it about the streets.
Cassius: Some to the common pulpits, and cry out
 “Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement!”
Brutus: People and senators, be not affrighted. . . .
 Where’s Publius?
Cinna: Here, quite confounded with this mutiny.
Metellus: Stand fast together, lest some friend of Caesar’s
 Should chance—
Brutus: Talk not of standing. Publius, good cheer!
 There is no harm intended to your person,
 Nor to no Roman else—so tell them, Publius.
Cassius: And leave us, Publius, lest that the people,
 Rushing on us, should do your age some mischief.
Brutus: Do so; and let no man abide this deed
 But we the doers.

[III.i.77–95]

The impression that everyone is improvising—that no one bothered to plan for what might happen *after* killing Caesar—is heightened by Brutus’s next command, which outrageously contradicts his direction from the previous night to “be sacrificers, but not butchers” [II.i.166]:

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 marketplace,
 And, waving our red weapons o’er our heads,
 Let’s all cry “Peace, freedom, and liberty!”

[III.i.106–11]

Never mind the absurdity of crying “peace” with bloody weapons. These liberators are prevented from marching forth (though not from besmearing themselves) by Antony, who—as we shall see—deftly manipulates the overconfident Brutus.

The next scene features Antony's great speech—"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears" [III.ii.73]—but first Brutus wins the crowd's (temporary) approval with a speech of his own. Few people, I would venture, remember Brutus's words here, though he has clearly labored over them; the opening phrases could not make a sharper contrast with Antony's celebrated response. "Romans, countrymen, and lovers," Brutus begins, using the more affected "lovers" where Antony says, simply, "friends":

. . . hear me for my cause, and be silent that you may hear. Believe me for mine honor, and have respect to mine honor, that you may believe. Censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses, that you may the better judge.

[III.ii.13–17]

It is the kind of speech meant to be studied at leisure, when its balanced clauses, repetitions, and variations can better be appreciated; live, they merely obscure the core argument: "Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?" [III.ii.22–4]. In truth this is not an argument but a rhetorical question; to Brutus, the answer is so obvious it goes without saying—literally—but the plebeians have other ideas: cheering for Brutus, they demand he receive a parade and be crowned Caesar [III.ii.47–52]. Yet Brutus hears only the cheers; thus satisfied, he cedes the pulpit to Antony and seals his doom.

I can easily imagine Brutus giving similar speeches in the Senate—conveying approbation or censure in artful phrases for his fellows to appreciate but not act on, as true power shifts inexorably to Caesar.⁷ Speak earnestly and often enough and a man may gain a reputation as a moral leader, a voice of *ethos*, without actually having to prove it.

⁷ Casca famously describes such a scene following an oration by Cicero: "But those that understood him smiled at one another, and shook their heads. But for mine own part, it was Greek to me" [I.ii.282–4].

This gap between Brutus's ideals and his actions grows ever wider as he attempts to rationalize murder, and it reappears in Act Four, during an argument with Cassius. Again Brutus plays the cool friend:

Cassius: Most noble brother, you have done me wrong.
Brutus: Judge me, you gods: wrong I mine enemies?
 And if not so, how should I wrong a brother?
Cassius: Brutus, this sober form of yours hides wrongs,
 And when you do them—
Brutus: Cassius, be content.
 Speak your griefs softly. I do know you well.
 Before the eyes of both our armies here,
 Which should perceive nothing but love from us,
 Let us not wrangle. Bid them move away.
 Then in my tent, Cassius, enlarge your griefs,
 And I will give you audience.

[IV.ii.37–47]

They move inside, but the dynamic remains: “sober” Brutus versus hot Cassius:

Cassius: That you have wronged me doth appear in this:
 You have condemned and noted Lucius Pella
 For taking bribes here of the Sardians,
 Wherein my letters praying on his side,
 Because I knew the man, was slighted off.
Brutus: You wronged yourself to write in such a case.
Cassius: In such a time as this it is not meet
 That every nice offense should bear his comment.
Brutus: Let me tell you, Cassius, you yourself
 Are much condemned to have an itching palm,
 To sell and mart your offices for gold
 To undeservers.
Cassius: I, an itching palm?
 You know that you are Brutus that speaks this,
 Or, by the gods, this speech were else your last.
Brutus: The name of Cassius honors this corruption,
 And chastisement doth therefore hide his head.
Cassius: Chastisement!
Brutus: Remember March, the ides of March, remember.
 Did not great Julius bleed for justice' sake?
 What villain touched his body, that did stab,
 And not for justice?

[IV.ii.53–73]

Brutus begins to lose the argument right here, though Cassius is too agitated to realize it. What is he talking about?! Not only do the conspirators never mention justice—not to each other, not to their fellow Romans—the word “justice” does not appear anywhere else in the play. (The nearest we get is in Antony’s funeral oration, when he describes the fallen Caesar as “my friend, faithful and just to me” [III.ii.85].) Over and over we are told Caesar died for his ambition, not for injustice (to whom? half-a-dozen envious aristocrats?), and certainly not “for supporting robbers” [IV.ii.75], as Brutus, later in this lecture, accuses him of doing.

More revealing accusations follow. Brutus has a grievance to enlarge as well:

You have done that you should be sorry for.
 There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats,
 For I am armed so strong in honesty
 That they pass by me as the idle wind,
 Which I respect not. I did send to you
 For certain sums of gold, which you denied me;
 For I can raise no money by vile means.
 By heaven, I had rather coin my heart
 And drop my blood for drachmas than to wring
 From the hard hands of peasants their vile trash
 By any indirection. I did send
 To you for gold to pay my legions,
 Which you denied me. Was that done like Cassius?
 Should I have answered Caius Cassius so?
 When Marcus Brutus grows so covetous
 To lock such rascal counters from his friends,
 Be ready, gods, with all your thunderbolts;
 Dash him to pieces.

[IV.ii.120–37]

This is insufferable even before we note its hypocrisy. Brutus “can raise no money by vile means”—how does he expect Cassius to raise the money he has demanded? He has already chastised Cassius for the “corruption” of selling offices and taking bribes—apparently Brutus finds these practices corrupt only when he cannot more conveniently

To sports, to wildness, and much company.
Trebonius: There is no fear in him. Let him not die;
 For he will live, and laugh at this hereafter.

[II.i.183–91]

- As we saw during his later argument with Brutus, Cassius either misses or chooses not to object to the faulty logic and naiveté. He alone among the conspirators is shrewd enough not to underestimate Antony, yet he bows to their bad judgment every time.
2. When Brutus grants Antony permission to speak over Caesar's body, Cassius immediately pulls Brutus aside: "Do not consent / That Antony speak in his funeral. / Know you how much the people may be moved / By that which he will utter?" [III.i.234–7]. Again Brutus shrugs off the danger, again Cassius weakly resists ("I know not what may fall. I like it not." [III.i.245]), and again Brutus charges unchecked in the wrong direction.
 3. Cassius is not present for Brutus's inexplicable decision to leave the scene before Antony speaks—Brutus has ordered his friend to take half the crowd "into the other street" and address them there [III.ii.3–4]. Still, it's fair to wonder why Cassius did not insist on hearing Antony. I doubt he'd have been able to prevent the disaster he foresaw, but at least he might have tried.
 4. The pattern repeats itself in Act Four, when Cassius argues for remaining at Sardis—"Tis better that the enemy seek us; / So shall he waste his means, weary his soldiers, / Doing himself offense; whilst we, lying still, / Are full of rest, defense, and nimbleness" [IV.ii.251–4]—and Brutus argues for leaving. This time when Cassius attempts to push back ("Hear me, good brother."), Brutus cuts him off with a curt "Under your pardon" [IV.ii.264–5]. This seems to sap whatever

Cassius: You wrong me every way, you wrong me, Brutus.
 I said an elder soldier, not a better.
 Did I say better?

Brutus: If you did, I care not.

Cassius: When Caesar lived he durst not thus have moved me.

[IV.ii.105–12]

This last line is a reminder how far Cassius has fallen, for when Caesar lived Cassius was convinced he was the great man's superior. His sense of wronged pride is the subtext of every argument for assassination Cassius makes:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
 Like a Colossus, and we petty men
 Walk under his huge legs, and peep about
 To find ourselves dishonorable graves.
 Men at sometime were masters of their fates.
 The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
 But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

[I.ii.136–42]

Occasionally, it is the explicit text:

I was born free as Caesar, so were you.
 We both have fed as well, and we can both
 Endure the winter's cold as well as he.
 For once upon a raw and gusty day,
 The troubled Tiber chafing with her shores,
 Said Caesar to me "Dar'st thou, Cassius, now
 Leap in with me into this angry flood,
 And swim to yonder point?" Upon the word,
 Accoutred as I was I plunged in,
 And bade him follow. So indeed he did. . . .
 But ere we could arrive the point proposed,
 Caesar cried "Help me, Cassius, or I sink!"
 Ay, as Aeneas our great ancestor
 Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder
 The old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber
 Did I the tired Caesar. And this man
 Is now become a god, and Cassius is
 A wretched creature, and must bend his body
 If Caesar carelessly but nod on him.

[I.ii.99–120]

Cassius also mocks Caesar for “a fever” he once had, and for his epilepsy: “His coward lips did from their color fly; / And that same eye whose bend doth awe the world / Did lose his luster” [I.ii.121–6]. How terribly ironic, then, that this paragon of manly health has, by his own admission, always had “thick” eyesight [V.iii.21], and that an error due to his poor vision is what kills him.

Two Suicides

Tragicomic errors notwithstanding, Cassius dies relatively straightforwardly. Believing the battle lost, yet too nearsighted to see for himself, Cassius sends his friend Titinius to observe the field. When Titinius is surrounded by unknown soldiers, Cassius assumes the worst. “Come hither, sirrah,” he orders his slave:

In Parthia did I take thee prisoner,
And then I swore thee, saving of thy life,
That whatsoever I did bid thee do
Thou shouldst attempt it. Come now, keep thine oath.
Now be a freeman, and, with this good sword
That ran through Caesar’s bowels, search this bosom.

[V.iii.36–41]

In fact, we soon learn, Titinius was intercepted by friends who report Brutus’s victory over Octavius. The news comes too late for Cassius; he lies dead, having—for arguably the first time in the play—“misconstrued everything” [V.iii.83].

Brutus, in telling contrast, overcomplicates even his death. The confusion begins as he and Cassius say farewell:

Cassius: If we do lose this battle, then is this
The very last time we shall speak together.
What are you then determined to do?
Brutus: Even by the rule of that philosophy
By which I did blame Cato for the death
Which he did give himself—I know not how,
But I do find it cowardly and vile
For fear of what might fall so to prevent

The time of life—arming myself with patience
 To stay the providence of some high powers
 That govern us below.

Cassius: Then if we lose this battle,
 You are contented to be led in triumph
 Thorough the streets of Rome?

Brutus: No, Cassius, no.
 Think not, thou noble Roman,
 That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome.
 He bears too great a mind.

[V.i.97–113]

I'm not sure I can untangle his meaning, but initially Brutus seems to be vowing *not* to kill himself, an action he finds “cowardly and vile” and contrary to his Stoic philosophy, which urges “patience” in defeat. Yet he also vows, in response to Cassius’s second question, not to surrender; his mind is “too great” to bear such humiliation. What then is left should he lose?

Perhaps Brutus remains arrogant enough, even after his encounters with Caesar’s ghost,⁹ to believe he cannot lose; perhaps he simply assumes he shall die fighting. Thus we come to the final scene, when Brutus, still alive, must acknowledge defeat . . . as quietly as possible, lest all his remaining friends hear!

Brutus: Sit thee down, Clitus. Slaying is the word:
 It is a deed in fashion. Hark thee, Clitus.

He whispers.

Clitus: What I, my lord? No, not for all the world.

Brutus: Peace, then, no words.

Clitus: I’d rather kill myself.

He stands apart.

Brutus: Hark thee, Dardanius.

He whispers.

Dardanius: Shall I do such a deed?

He joins Clitus.

Clitus: O Dardanius!

⁹ In addition to their brief confrontation at Sardis, Caesar’s ghost appeared to Brutus “this last night, here in Philippi fields” [V.v.17–19], though Shakespeare does not dramatize this second meeting.

Dardanius: O Clitus!

Clitus: What ill request did Brutus make to thee?

Dardanius: To kill him, Clitus.

[V.v.4–12]

Brutus finally raises his voice, but the response is the same:

Brutus: Good Volumnius,
Thou know'st that we two went to school together.
Even for that, our love of old, I pritheee,
Hold thou my sword hilts whilst I run on it.

Volumnius: That's not an office for a friend, my lord.

[V.v.25–9]

Cassius bribes a slave with freedom to help slay him; idealistic Brutus insists he be killed for love, to everyone's embarrassment. At last Brutus finds a man with "some smatch of honor" [V.v.46]—enough to hold a sword, at least, for Brutus to fall on. Yet even now, so close to death, he seems clueless:

Countrymen,
My heart doth joy that yet in all my life
I found no man but he was true to me.
I shall have glory by this losing day,
More than Octavius and Mark Antony
By this vile conquest shall attain unto.

[V.v.33–8]

Strange words for a man whose defining act consists of betrayal and murder. More to the point, they're false. Has Brutus forgotten how Antony turned the mob against him? Or how Cassius manipulated him—Cassius, who, having successfully tempted Brutus, all but boasted of his treachery?

Well, Brutus, thou art noble; yet I see
Thy honorable mettle may be wrought
From that it is disposed. Therefore it is meet
That noble minds keep ever with their likes;
For who so firm that cannot be seduced?

[I.ii.308–12]

Not that Brutus is very firm¹⁰; this longing for glory is one more crack in his professed stoicism.

Antony and Octavius are happy to play along, once their victory is secure. Prior to the climactic battle, Antony in particular treats the conspirators with contempt:

Brutus: Words before blows: is it so, countrymen?

Octavius: Not that we love words better, as you do.

Brutus: Good words are better than bad strokes, Octavius.

Antony: In your bad strokes, Brutus, you give good words.
Witness the hole you made in Caesar's heart,
Crying "Long live, hail Caesar."

Cassius: Antony,
The posture of your blows are yet unknown;
But for your words, they rob the Hybla bees,
And leave them honeyless.

Antony: Not stingless too.

Brutus: O yes, and soundless too,
For you have stolen their buzzing, Antony,
And very wisely threat before you sting.

Antony: Villains, you did not so when your vile daggers
Hacked one another in the sides of Caesar.
You showed your teeth like apes, and fawned like hounds,
And bowed like bondmen, kissing Caesar's feet,
Whilst damned Casca, like a cur, behind,
Struck Caesar on the neck. O you flatterers!

[V.i.27–45]

Once Brutus is dead, however, Antony proves an adept flatterer himself. "This was the noblest Roman of them all," he proclaims over Brutus's corpse:

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."

[V.v.67–74]

¹⁰ Except when rejecting a friend's advice.

Even if all this were true—and it surely is not, or Cassius would not have appealed so baldly to Brutus’s ego—we might wonder how Antony knows it, but that is to miss the point. He may be Shakespeare’s least exceptional hero—an ordinary thinker, a passable speaker, a disastrous leader—yet something in Brutus inspires admiration, if not quite love, in his fellow Romans. Perhaps it is his very mediocrity—who would ever perceive in this “gentle” man a threat? Yet not only does Brutus threaten everything he claims to value, he destroys it—never on purpose, perhaps, but the end is the same. All to prevent an aging dictator-for-life from becoming king. Was the risk truly worth it? How we answer this question depends on our impressions of this man, this spirit, Brutus fears,

Caesar

Harold Goddard makes the intriguing point that, if we take seriously certain opinions from his plays, Shakespeare seems to have had a dim view of Julius Caesar:

Caesar and Alexander [the Great] apparently came to stand for Imperialism in Shakespeare’s mind in a somewhat similar fashion. Falstaff speaks of Caesar as “the hook-nosed fellow of Rome.” Rosalind refers to his “thrasonical brag.” Hamlet has him turned to clay and stopping a hole in the wall along with Alexander who performs the same office for a beer barrel. And we remember Alexander the Pig [from *Henry V*]. Fluellen, Falstaff, Rosalind, and Hamlet. Can anyone imagine Shakespeare having sympathy for what those four scorned? [330]

Goddard’s own description of Caesar—a “strong man . . . on the edge of death” [309]—is also quite right.

Caesar’s first lines suggest, rather pitifully, his various weaknesses. It is the Feast of Lupercal, a Roman festival when priests (and, at least in Shakespeare’s telling, virile soldiers) struck sterile women with goatskins to promote fertility. To “loud music”

Caesar enters, along with his wife, Calpurnia, and a train of followers, including Mark

Antony:

Caesar: Calpurnia.

Casca: Peace, ho! Caesar speaks.

Music ceases.

Caesar: Calpurnia.

Calpurnia: Here, my lord.

Caesar: Stand you directly in Antonio's way
When he doth run his course. Antonio.

Antony: Caesar, my lord.

Caesar: Forget not in your speed, Antonio,
To touch Calpurnia, for our elders say
The barren, touched in this holy chase,
Shake off their sterile course.

Antony: I shall remember:
When Caesar says "Do this," it is performed.

Caesar: Set on, and leave no ceremony out.

Music.
[I.ii.1–13]

These thirteen lines establish Caesar's authority—the festival literally stops and starts at his command—even as they cast doubt on his power. Calpurnia may be “barren,” but it is Caesar whose legacy requires an heir, and the need grows more urgent with each passing year. More subtly, perhaps, we can hear Caesar's arrogance—as Antony notes, the great man's wish is their command, even if it is merely to shut up and listen to a private conversation about infertility—as well as an absentminded dullness characterized by repetition: not only of names (“Calpurnia,” “Antonio”) and ideas (does Caesar really think anyone needs him to explicate the Lupercal?) but of the scene itself. Immediately after restarting the music, Caesar re-stops it:

Soothsayer: Caesar!

Caesar: Ha! Who calls?

Casca: Bid every noise be still. Peace yet again.

Music ceases.

Caesar: Who is it in the press that calls on me?
I hear a tongue shriller than all the music

Cry “Caesar!” Speak. Caesar is turned to hear.

[I.ii.14–19]

This time Caesar repeats his own name, referring to himself in the third person—a tic we shall hear again . . . and again. The soothsayer warns Caesar to “Beware the ides of March” [I.ii.20 & 25]; Caesar dismisses the man as “a dreamer” and exits [I.ii.26], clearing the stage for Cassius and Brutus to have their fateful conversation.

Surely this distracted, puffed-up man is not all there is?¹¹ When Caesar re-enters, Shakespeare grants him a moment of clarity. “Let me have men about me that are fat,” he tells Antony,

Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep anights.
Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look.
He thinks too much. Such men are dangerous.
Antony: Fear him not, Caesar, he’s not dangerous.
He is a noble Roman, and well given.
Caesar: Would he were fatter! But I fear him not.
Yet if my name were liable to fear,
I do not know the man I should avoid
So soon as that spare Cassius. He reads much,¹²
He is a great observer, and he looks
Quite through the deeds of men. . . .
Such men as he be never at heart’s ease
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,
And therefore are they very dangerous.

[I.ii.193–211]

He then blusters, too afraid of seeming fearful to heed his own advice:

¹¹ Midway through *Hamlet*, Polonius mentions he was once an actor: “I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i’ th’ Capitol; Brutus killed me” [*Hamlet*, III.ii.101–2]. It is very tempting to conclude that the same actor who originated *Hamlet*’s quintessential old fool played a similar role in *Julius Caesar*. The parallels become even more compelling when we note that Polonius is killed by Hamlet, who was played by Richard Burbage, who would also have played Brutus.

¹² So Caesar says, though the only character we actually see reading is Brutus: first the forged letter urging him to “Speak, strike, redress” [II.i.47]; then the book with which, in Act Four, he distracts himself from insomnia. Caesar pointedly does *not* read the warning that a supporter, Artemidorus, tries to give him [III.i.3–12], and thus he walks blithely to his death.

I rather tell thee what is to be feared
 Than what I fear, for always I am Caesar.
 Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf,
 And tell me truly what thou think'st of him.

[I.ii.212–5]

Is there a sharper contrast between reputation and reality than “for always I am Caesar” followed by “Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf”?

Cassius notwithstanding, Caesar’s theory of physical psychology is nonsense; the counterexample is Antony himself, who proves more ambitious, and dangerous, than anyone in the play. (Octavius shall eventually prove most dangerous, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but in *Julius Caesar* he is easy to overlook.) Not to mention that Caesar’s own ambition in the play is to become “greater” than his present self, by winning a crown. This is not some baseless fear by the conspirators; they may be biased, but they’re not blind. When Caesar re-enters, having failed offstage to manipulate the plebeians into crowning him, an “angry spot doth glow” on his brow [I.ii.184]¹³; his unprompted diagnosis of Cassius’s resentment may be a projection of his own.

We next see Caesar on the ides of March; it is dawn, the scene calls for thunder and lightning, and he is brooding on bad omens:

Caesar: Nor heaven nor earth have been at peace tonight.
 Thrice hath Calpurnia in her sleep cried out
 “Help, ho! They murder Caesar!” Who’s within?

Enter a Servant.

Servant: My lord.

Caesar: Go bid the priests do present sacrifice,
 And bring me their opinions of success.

[II.ii.1–6]

¹³ It is true that Brutus is himself a biased conspirator, but I trust him here, if for no other reason than it would risk confusing the audience if Caesar’s demeanor did not match Brutus’s description.

Alone and in private, Caesar is free to drop the façade and indulge both fear and superstition. Later, at the Capitol, he shall declaim on his rare constancy—like the Northern Star, he alone on Earth “doth hold his place”:

So in the world: ’tis furnished well with men,
And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
Yet in the number I do know but one
That unassailable holds on his rank,
Unshaked of motion . . .

[III.i.60–70]

Anyone who employs augurs is more than ready to change his mind, of course. The façade returns the moment Calpurnia enters: “The things that threatened me / Ne’er looked but on my back,” Caesar insists; “when they shall see / The face of Caesar, they are vanished” [II.ii.10–12]. Calpurnia then lists, in fantastic detail, the very portents that Caesar has ordered his priests to divine (a whelping lioness; rain like blood; shrieking ghosts [II.ii.13–26]), only now Caesar pretends to have lost interest, “for these predictions / Are to the world in general as to Caesar” [II.ii.28–9].

To be fair, Caesar may not be completely fooling himself. Calpurnia, fearing for her husband’s life, dreams of his murder. Caesar orders his priests—“dreamers” like any soothsayer—to forecast his “success”; he fears not death so much as failure, a philosophy that would be more inspiring if he weren’t trying so hard to sell everyone on it:

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,¹⁴
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.

[II.ii.32–7]

¹⁴ Shakespeare leaves unsaid the implied word, *death*, so that Caesar, characteristically, seems to be proclaiming himself fearless.

As much as anyone in Shakespeare, Caesar sounds like he has decided that repeating an idea makes it true. Even when his own priests advise caution—“Plucking the entrails of an offering forth, / They could not find a heart within the beast” [II.ii.38–40]—Caesar reinterprets the sign to mean what he wants:

The gods do this in shame of cowardice.
 Caesar should be a beast without a heart
 If he should stay at home today for fear.
 No, Caesar shall not. Danger knows full well
 That Caesar is more dangerous than he.
 We are two lions littered in one day,
 And I the elder and more terrible.

[II.ii.41–7]

Perhaps even Caesar can hear how foolish he sounds, because when Calpurnia finally kneels, begging him not to go to the Capitol, he relents. Fortunately for the conspirators, one of their number, Decius Brutus (a distant cousin of Marcus), arrives at that moment with *another* reinterpretation:

Caesar: Calpurnia 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. . . .

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.

[II.ii.75–89]

This eases Caesar’s mind, and Decius ups the stakes. Caesar’s positive response confirms the conspirators have judged correctly—the man does want to be king:

Decius: And know it now: the Senate have concluded
 To give this day a crown to mighty Caesar.
 If you shall send them word you will not come,

Their minds may change. . . .
 If Caesar hide himself, shall they not whisper
 “Lo, Caesar is afraid”?
 Pardon me, Caesar; for my dear dear love
 To your proceeding bids me tell you this,
 And reason to my love is liable.
Caesar: How foolish do your fears seem now, Calpurnia!
 I am ashamed I did yield to them.
 Give me my robe, for I will go.

[II.ii.93–107]

And that is that. We never see Calpurnia again, but Caesar gets one more scene,
 which he begins by egregiously tempting fate. As he approaches the Capitol, he spots the
 soothsayer from Act One:

Caesar: The ides of March are come.
Soothsayer: Ay, Caesar, but not gone.

[III.i.1–2]

The Senate convenes, and the conspirators distract Caesar by requesting clemency for a
 banished friend. As they kneel before him, Caesar once more displays his lack of self-
 awareness:

These couchings and these lowly courtesies
 Might fire the blood of ordinary men,
 And turn preordinance and first decree
 Into the law of children. Be not fond
 To think that Caesar bears such rebel blood
 That will be thawed from the true quality
 With that which melteth fools: I mean sweet words,
 Low-crooked curtsies, and base spaniel fawning.

[III.i.36–43]

Flattery is what has led him to the Capitol, against his better judgment (not to
 mention his wife’s and priests’)! Or do vivid descriptions of statues spouting “reviving
 blood,” and appeals to “dear dear love,” not count as “sweet words”? It matters not.
 Within 40 lines, Calpurnia’s nightmare has come true: the conspirators all rise up and
 murder Caesar. This, ironically, is his finest moment in the play. He gives no speeches as

he falls, no self-pitying remarks or histrionics—only those immortal, accepting words: “*Et tu, Brute?* Then fall Caesar” [III.i.76]. The old soldier knew himself after all, at least in one crucial respect: he did not fear death.

Portia

A play so filled with suicide would seem to have few characters who do fear death. Yet even among such Romans, Brutus’s wife stands out for her fortitude. The role is small but memorable, partly for the play’s overall lack of women (even by Shakespearean standards), but also for Portia’s peculiar ferocity. Her first speeches, delivered to Brutus after he has secretly joined the conspiracy, reveal a loving partner who is accustomed to her husband’s confidence:

You’ve ungently, Brutus,
Stole from my bed; and yesternight at supper
You suddenly arose, and walked about
Musing and sighing, with your arms across;
And when I asked you what the matter was,
You stared upon me with ungentle looks.
I urged you further; then you scratched your head,
And too impatiently stamped with your foot.
Yet I insisted; yet you answered not,
But with an angry wafture of your hand
Gave sign for me to leave you.

[II.i.236–46]

His claim merely to be ill does not fool her:

Is Brutus sick? And is it physical
To walk unbraced and suck up the humors
Of the dank morning? . . .
No, my Brutus,
You have some sick offense within your mind,
Which by the right and virtue of my place
I ought to know of.

[II.i.260–9]

When he continues to put her off, she presses further—though her action is to kneel, her words suggest a level of equality in their relationship that Shakespeare rarely explored outside his romantic comedies:

Within the bond of marriage, tell me, Brutus,
Is it excepted I should know no secrets
That appertain to you? Am I your self
But as it were in sort or limitation?
To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,
And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the suburbs
Of your good pleasure? If it be no more,
Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.

[II.i.279–86]

He reassures her: “You are my true and honorable wife, / As dear to me as are the ruddy drops / That visit my sad heart” [II.i.287–9]. But now the conversation takes a truly weird turn. “Think you I am no stronger than my sex, / Being so fathered and so husbanded?” she replies:

Tell me your counsels; I will not disclose 'em.
I have made strong proof of my constancy,
Giving myself a voluntary wound
Here in the thigh. Can I bear that with patience,
And not my husband's secrets?

[II.i.295–301]

Say what?! Shakespeare lifted this detail from Plutarch, but even supposing most of his contemporaries knew the story, the moment seems to defy staging. In “The Life of Brutus” [13.4–13.11], Portia shows her wound to Brutus for the first time during this very conversation; a stunned Brutus then “prayed that he might succeed in his undertaking and thus show himself a worthy husband of [Portia].” Shakespeare’s language here echoes Plutarch’s: “O ye gods,” Brutus cries, “Render me worthy of this noble wife!” [II.i.301–2]. Yet I cannot imagine such a revelation onstage—I wouldn’t know whether to scream or laugh. (The lines were cut in the few productions I’ve seen.) Is Portia simply

reminding Brutus of what she has already shown him, sometime in the past and offstage? Why then is he so deeply affected—not just to proclaim her “noble” but to agree finally to tell her the truth?

Portia, go in a while,
And by and by thy bosom shall partake
The secrets of my heart.
All my engagements I will construe to thee,
All the charactery of my sad brows.

[II.i.303–7]

This is no empty promise; when next we see Portia, shortly before the assassination, she clearly knows—and seems to approve of—what is to come. (This too is consistent with Plutarch.) “O constancy, be strong upon my side,” she apostrophizes. “Set a huge mountain ’tween my heart and tongue. / I have a man’s mind, but a woman’s might. / How hard it is for women to keep counsel!” [II.iv.6–9]. Later she cries, “O Brutus, / The heavens speed thee in thine enterprise” [II.iv.42–3]. Despite her anxiety, she does not give away the plot when the soothsayer, en route to the Capitol, expresses fear for Caesar [II.iv.30–5]. Yet she does not trust herself; on the verge of fainting, she orders Lucius to “bring me word” from Brutus and hurries inside [II.iv.45–8].

This is the last we hear from Portia, though unlike Calpurnia she continues to affect her husband. In Act Four, after he and Cassius argue and reconcile, Brutus explains his uncharacteristic anger as the product of “many griefs.” Not very stoical of you, Cassius remarks. “No man bears sorrow better,” Brutus insists, then, to prove his point, says matter-of-factly, “Portia is dead.” Now Cassius is stunned:

Cassius: Upon what sickness?
Brutus: Impatience of my absence,
And grief that young Octavius with Mark Antony
Have made themselves so strong—for with her death
That tidings came. With this, she fell distraught,

And, her attendants absent, swallowed fire.
Cassius: And died so?
Brutus: Even so.
Cassius: O ye immortal gods!
Enter Lucius, with wine and tapers.
Brutus: Speak no more of her. Give me a bowl of wine.
 [IV.ii.195–210]

The shock of Portia’s suicide—and the horrifying method—distract us from Brutus’s nonsense. He has been insomniac the whole play, and he has just (so he claims) taken out his grief on his friend; I doubt he “bears sorrow better” than other men. Brutus seems also to realize this, for he contrives a do-over. Two more friends, Titinius and Messala, enter the tent, and Brutus immediately mentions the letters he has received about Octavius and Mark Antony. Messala says he has received similar letters. “With what addition?” Brutus asks, apropos of . . . nothing? We have already heard him tell Cassius that, in addition to the “tidings” of their increasingly powerful enemies, he has learned of Portia’s death. So after briefly reporting on Octavius and Antony’s reign of terror—the pair, along with Lepidus, another general, have executed as many as one-hundred senators—Messala asks the question we may assume Brutus desires:

Messala: Had you your letters from your wife, my lord?
Brutus: No, Messala.
Messala: Nor nothing in your letters writ of her?
Brutus: Nothing, Messala.
Messala: That methinks is strange.
Brutus: Why ask you? Hear you aught of her in yours?
Messala: No, my lord.
Brutus: Now as you are a Roman, tell me true.
Messala: Then like a Roman bear the truth I tell;
 For certain she is dead, and by strange manner.
Brutus: Why, farewell, Portia. We must die, Messala.
 With meditating that she must die once,
 I have the patience to endure it now.
Messala: Even so great men great losses should endure.
Cassius: I have as much of this in art as you,
 But yet my nature could not bear it so.

Brutus: Well, to our work alive.

[IV.ii.219–48]

How curious. It is certainly possible Shakespeare wrote two versions of the scene—one in which Brutus behaves like a proper Stoic, and one in which he expresses the grief we might expect from him—and both versions were mistakenly included in the First Folio.¹⁵ But we have seen Brutus repeatedly fail to live up to his own expectations—as thinker, leader, orator, friend (and, soon enough, soldier). Why then should we not take the entire scene, with its apparent contradictions, at face value? The grief Brutus expresses as anger toward Cassius humanizes him; the shame he then feels to have acted contrary to his principles, and his desire for another chance, no less humanizes him. Brutus is, in most respects, an unremarkable man. The play hints he may have had a remarkable marriage. Like so many tragic figures, his drive to be greater than he is costs him everything: love, friendship, and finally life itself.

Which brings us to the play’s main victor:

Mark Antony

We first see Antony “stripped for the course” [I.ii.1]—that is, scantily clad (and undoubtedly sculpted) in anticipation of the rites of Lupercal—and we hear several memorable opinions of him before he says much himself. Caesar compares him favorably to the dour Cassius, who “loves no plays, / As thou dost, Antony; [who] hears no music” [I.ii.204–5], and the moralizing Brutus gives the underside of this picture: Antony is no threat, “for he is given / To sports, to wildness, and much company” [II.i.188–9]. Indeed, to the very end the conspirators sneer at Caesar’s best soldier: “A peevish schoolboy,” Cassius spits at Octavius at Philippi, “Joined with a masquer and a reveler!” [V.i.61–2].

¹⁵ Asimov outlines this theory, though he discounts it [305–6].

Yet this portrait of Antony as reveler seems more like an obligatory nod to Plutarch—whose “Life of Antony” describes the young Mark as “swashbuckling and boastful, full of empty exultation and distorted ambition” [2.5]—than like the man we actually meet in the play. Shakespeare’s Antony hears no more music, and sees no more plays, than anyone else; he does not masque or revel or so much as wink at a woman. What he does do is give by far the play’s most important (and longest¹⁶) speech—important for its effect on the plot more than insight into Antony’s true character, for we cannot assume any line is sincere. He admits his motive at the end, after he has succeeded not just in turning Rome against the conspirators but in sparking a riot; as the mob races off to “fire the traitors’ houses” and “[p]luck down forms, windows, anything!” [III.ii.245–51], Antony says only, chillingly, “Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot. / Take thou what course thou wilt” [III.ii.252–3], confident that any course it takes shall clear his own.

Antony reveals a similar bloodthirst prior to his funeral oration, in the only other private words he speaks—and thus the likeliest to be trustworthy. Having assured the conspirators of his goodwill, he is left alone with Caesar’s corpse. “O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,” he begs, “[t]hat I am meek and gentle with these butchers.” He then prophesizes:

A curse shall light upon the limbs of men;
 Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
 Shall cumber all the parts of Italy;
 Blood and destruction shall be so in use,
 And dreadful objects so familiar,
 That mothers shall but smile when they behold
 Their infants quartered with the hands of war,
 All pity choked with custom of fell deeds;

¹⁶ over 170 lines if we include the many interjections by plebeians

And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
 With Atē by his side come hot from hell,
 Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
 Cry "havoc!" and let slip the dogs of war,
 That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
 With carrion men, groaning for burial.

[III.i.257–78]

This is horrifying, understandably so; his rage, like Caesar's wounds, is still fresh.

Antony speaks passively; he is not yet responsible for the havoc that shall cut down Caesar's—and his—enemies.

If Brutus did not foresee this "mischief" initially, as Cassius did, it should have been clear following another speech. After shaking each conspirator's "bloody hand," Antony pauses to reflect:

My credit now stands on such slippery ground
 That one of two bad ways you must conceit me:
 Either a coward or a flatterer.
 That I did love thee, Caesar, O, 'tis true.
 If then thy spirit look upon us now,
 Shall it not grieve thee dearer than thy death
 To see thy Antony making his peace,
 Shaking the bloody fingers of thy foes—
 Most noble!—in the presence of thy corpse? . . .
 Pardon me, Julius. Here wast thou bayed, brave hart;
 Here didst thou fall, and here thy hunters stand
 Signed in thy spoil and crimsoned in thy lethē.
 O world, thou wast the forest to this hart;
 And this indeed, O world, the heart of thee.
 How like a deer stricken by many princes
 Dost thou here lie!

[III.i.185–211]

Why should Antony speak so reverentially about Caesar to Caesar's murderers . . . unless he were testing his ability to outmaneuver them? Cassius finally cuts him off, yet the conciliatory tone conveys weakness—"Will you be pricked in number of our friends, / Or shall we on, and not depend on you?" [III.i.218–9], as though Antony might safely refuse

this friendship. Instead Antony deflects; he passes the responsibility back to the conspirators, and Brutus grabs it:

Antony: Friends am I with you all, and love you all
 Upon this hope: that you shall give me reasons
 Why and wherein Caesar was dangerous.
Brutus: Or else were this a savage spectacle.
 Our reasons are so full of good regard,
 That were you, Antony, the son of Caesar,
 You should be satisfied.

[III.i.222–8]

Stuffed as always with self-importance, Brutus misses—or simply ignores—Antony’s conditional: We’ll be friends *if* you convince me. . . . Antony has no intention of being convinced, of course, but rather than safeguard against this possibility Brutus sets only these three conditions for Antony:

You shall not in your funeral speech blame us;
 But speak all good you can devise of Caesar,
 And say you do’t by our permission;
 Else shall you not have any hand at all
 About his funeral. And you shall speak
 In the same pulpit whereto I am going,
 After my speech is ended.

[III.i.247–53]

Which brings us, at last, to the famous speech itself, when Antony meets Brutus’s conditions and destroys him anyway. Indeed, he nearly achieves all this in the first 30 lines:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.
 I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
 The evil that men do lives after them;
 The good is oft interred with their bones.
 So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus
 Hath told you Caesar was ambitious.
 If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
 And grievously hath Caesar answered it.
 Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest—
 For Brutus is an honorable man,

So are they all, all honorable men¹⁷—
 Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.
 He was my friend, faithful and just to me.
 But Brutus says he was ambitious,
 And Brutus is an honorable man.
 He hath brought many captives home to Rome,
 Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill.
 Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?
 When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept.
 Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.¹⁸
 Yet Brutus says he was ambitious,
 And Brutus is an honorable man.
 You all did see that on the Lupercal
 I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
 Which he did thrice refuse. Was this ambition?¹⁹
 Yet Brutus says he was ambitious,
 And sure he is an honorable man.
 I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
 But here I am to speak what I do know.
 You all did love him once, not without cause.
 What cause withholds you then to mourn for him?
 O judgment, thou art fled to brutish beasts,
 And men have lost their reason!

*He weeps.*²⁰

Bear with me.
 My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
 And I must pause till it come back to me.

[III.ii.73–107]

To which the mob, which has *just* called Caesar “tyrant” [III.ii.69] and Brutus “Caesar’s better parts” [III.ii.50], replies:

First Plebeian: Methinks there is much reason in his sayings.

Fourth Plebeian: If thou consider rightly of the matter,

¹⁷ Antony repeats some version of this line eight times, until he might as well be saying “dishonorable.” “They were traitors. Honorable men?” the crowd finally shouts back [III.ii.153].

¹⁸ So skilled a performer as Antony surely knows that one of ambition’s best strategies is to cultivate the *appearance* of humility; a demagogue may have no greater ally than an adoring public. Even Brutus knows this! Recall “’tis a common proof / That lowliness is young ambition’s ladder . . .” [II.i.21–2].

¹⁹ See my previous note. Antony never answers these rhetorical questions.

²⁰ The Mankiewicz film takes advantage of the medium here; the close-up of Marlon Brando’s Antony leaves no doubt this “weeping” is merely strategic.

Caesar has had great wrong.

Third Plebeian: Has he not, masters?

I fear there will a worse come in his place.

Fifth Plebeian: Marked ye his words? He would not take the crown,

Therefore 'tis certain he was not ambitious.

First Plebeian: If it be found so, some will dear abide it.

Fourth Plebeian: Poor soul, his eyes are red as fire with weeping.

Third Plebeian: There's not a nobler man in Rome than Antony.

[III.ii.108–16]

Can it really be so easy? Are people really so fickle? Time and again—from Jack Cade's doomed rebellion, in *2 Henry VI*, through the falling out of Palamon and Arcite, in *The Two Noble Kinsman*—Shakespeare practically screams, *Yes!* “O masters, if I were disposed to stir / Your hearts and minds to mutiny and rage,” Antony begins [III.ii.121–2], and there is no doubt things will end exactly there. His strategy is crude but effective:

But here's a parchment with the seal of Caesar.
I found it in his closet. 'Tis his will.
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 wills,
Bequeathing it as a rich legacy
Unto their issue.

[III.ii.128–37]

Naturally everyone demands to hear the will, but Antony, despite several more hints, manages to delay the reveal for another hundred lines. By then the mob has already cried “mutiny” and “burn the house of Brutus” [III.ii.225]; Antony calls them back one final time:

Here is the will, and under Caesar's seal.
To every Roman citizen he gives—
To every several man—seventy-five drachmas. . . .
Moreover he hath left you all his walks,
His private arbors, and new-planted orchards,
On this side Tiber. He hath left them you,

And to your heirs for ever—common pleasures
 To walk abroad and recreate yourselves.
 Here was a Caesar. When comes such another?

[III.ii.234–44]

Thus he concludes; “mischief” rages, and by line 260 the conspirators have fled. The matter of Caesar’s will is not yet resolved, however. Act Four opens as the second triumvirate—Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus—bargain away men’s lives as though cruelty were a competition:

Antony: These many, then, shall die; their names are pricked.

Octavius: Your brother too must die. Consent you, Lepidus?

Lepidus: I do consent.

Octavius: Prick him down, Antony.

Lepidus: Upon condition Publius shall not live,
 Who is your sister’s son, Mark Antony.

Antony: He shall not live. Look, with a spot I damn him.

[IV.i.1–6]

Antony then dispatches Lepidus with an order that may easily be missed—or misunderstood: “go you to Caesar’s house; / Fetch the will hither, and we shall determine / How to cut off some charge in legacies” [IV.i.7–9]. In other words, Antony intends to change the will so that the triumvirate may take at least some of what Caesar promised the commons. Never mind that he has already read them the will, or that he owes his power to their outrage—Antony apparently believes he is more secure than those who have fallen before him.

This short-sighted trust in his own strength—this hubris—may explain the rest of the scene, during which Antony fixates on perceived weakness. “This is a slight, unmeritable man, / Meet to be sent on errands,” he gripes to Octavius, after Lepidus has exited. “Is it fit, / The threefold world divided, he should stand / One of the three to share

it?” [IV.i.12–15]; when Octavius attempts mildly to defend their ally, Antony takes the opportunity to put the future emperor in his place also:

Octavius, I have seen more days than you,
 And though we lay these honors on this man
 To ease ourselves of divers sland'rous loads,
 He shall but bear them as the ass bears gold,
 To groan and sweat under the business,
 Either led or driven as we point the way;
 And having brought our treasure where we will,
 Then take we down his load, and turn him off,
 Like to the empty ass, to shake his ears
 And graze in commons.

[IV.i.18–27]

Only a fool—which Octavius certainly is not—would hear this and not wonder whether similar scorn were being directed at *him*, behind his own back, or whether similar plans to “turn him off,” once he has carried his load, were being formulated in Antony’s mind. Brutus and Cassius shall dismiss Octavius as a “[y]oung man” and “peevish schoolboy” [V.i.60–1]; how could the great Mark Antony, renowned general, “so well beloved of Caesar” [II.i.156], not have an equally low opinion?

One of the play’s last exchanges between Antony and Octavius, as they marshal their troops at Philippi, hints at their growing discord:

Antony: Octavius, lead your battle softly on
 Upon the left hand of the even field.
Octavius: Upon the right hand, I; keep thou the left.
Antony: Why do you cross me in this exigent?
Octavius: I do not cross you, but I will do so.

[V.i.16–20]

Shakespeare also gives Octavius the final words [V.v.75–80], following the triumvirate’s victory, though Antony gets to deliver the verdict on Brutus: “the noblest Roman of them all” [V.v.67–74]. Neither speech reveals anything reliable about the speakers, other than

their abilities to flatter the deceased and enact ceremony. We shall not see them again until *Antony and Cleopatra* (written six or seven years after *Julius Caesar*), at the end of which Octavius is emperor and Antony is dead. If we remember Antony as the more vivid—even sympathetic—character, it is mainly for the tragic romance of this later play, plus his one, brilliant oration at Caesar’s funeral.

* * * * *

Julius Caesar is not generally counted among Shakespeare’s “great” tragedies. This may be partly because Brutus and Caesar, Cassius and Antony, are themselves less grand, less terrible, than the heroes and villains of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*. But a related reason, I think, is that the action of *Julius Caesar* seems less cosmic in scope—Caesar’s assassination and the ensuing civil war are crimes against Rome more than sins against a universal order. (In contrast, *Hamlet* is only nominally about a Danish prince, and *Lear*’s devastation extends far beyond ancient Britain.) In describing “the substance” of Shakespearean tragedy, A. C. Bradley writes, “We remain confronted with the inexplicable fact, or the no less inexplicable appearance, of a world travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste” [39]. People die in this still-early tragedy, and institutions are torn down (and the foundations are laid for new ones), but I do not find much that is glorious or evil, in Bradley’s sense. I suppose this accounts for my essay’s relatively subdued tone. I appreciate this play more than love it, in much the same way, I suspect, that Shakespeare’s Romans appreciated Brutus. Until he killed a greater man and led his friends to senseless deaths.

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