



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival



EVER THUS TO TYRANTS

The plot to overthrow Julius Caesar is either treachery or an attempt to save the Republic, depending on your opinions of the figures involved. Historians have long debated whether Caesar was an accomplished leader or, as the conspirators argue, a power-hungry tyrant. What does Shakespeare’s play tell us?

Legend has it that Marcus Brutus uttered “sic semper tyrannis” (“ever thus to tyrants”) as he and the other conspirators assassinated Julius Caesar. The phrase has also gained notoriety because John Wilkes Booth allegedly shouted the phrase as he fatally shot Abraham Lincoln. Booth, who at one time played Mark Antony in Shakespeare’s play, was aware of the phrase’s attribution to Brutus. He wanted to connect his murder to the death of Julius Caesar, perhaps to justify the deed. But Brutus probably never said these words. The Roman historian Plutarch does not mention this in his account of Caesar’s life, although the assassination is described in gruesome detail. Shakespeare relied heavily on Plutarch to write his play, and so Brutus in *Julius Caesar* does not say the infamous line either.

However, some of the other conspirators are eager to label Caesar a tyrant. Immediately after the assassination, Cinna shouts for all to hear, “Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!” By the time that Brutus and Antony give their funeral speeches, part of the public has adopted this viewpoint, calling the late Caesar a tyrant. Earlier in the play, we see Cassius first develop this narrative. Without outright

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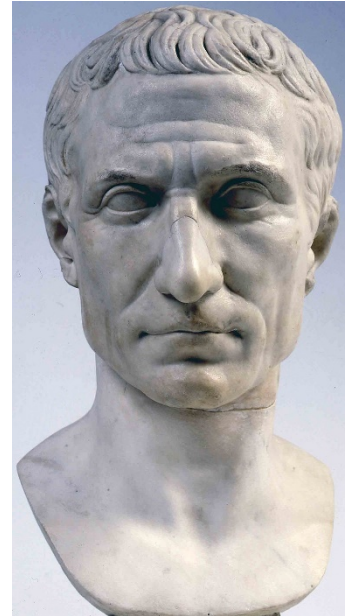
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THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT:
CAESAR

accusing Caesar of illegitimate rule just yet, Cassius mentions to Casca, “That part of tyranny that I do bear / I can shake off at pleasure.” Cassius is essentially saying that *if* Caesar is a tyrant, killing him would be justified. Even though Brutus never uses the term to describe his former friend, we see Cassius’ frame influence him as well. “Let’s be sacrificers but not butchers,” Brutus tells the other conspirators, claiming divine sanction over worldly authority. During the funeral, Brutus heaps praises on the dead Caesar, but subtly hints at the idea of unchecked power when he says that Caesar met his death “for his ambition.”

But was Julius Caesar really a tyrant? And does that justify his brutal murder? That was a pressing concern during the time that Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar*. In the 1590s, a faction supporting the Earl of Essex as a contender to the throne was gaining traction. Towards the end of her reign, Queen Elizabeth was compared to the deposed Richard II, another figure that Shakespeare dramatized. As Elizabethans debated whether it is just to overthrow a despotic ruler and if so, on what authority, having a strong opinion about Caesar could be construed as a political statement. As a theatre artist whose livelihood depended on the whim of the authorities, Shakespeare chooses not to take a side in the debate. While Caesar in the play is arrogant and obstinate, he does not make a blatant power grab. And as the anti-Caesar coalition begins to fall apart after the assassination, we see that some of the conspirators killed the so-called tyrant out of patriotic duty and others out of self-interest. To Shakespeare, politics is never cut and dried.

And yet, “sic semper tyrannis” has become a part of the collective imaginary. We tend to associate the assassination of Julius Caesar with tyranny even if we cannot say exactly what makes him a tyrant to the Romans or the Elizabethans—or to us. Perhaps more than anything else, *Julius Caesar* is a play about the power of political messaging. The conspirators *need* Caesar to be a tyrant to justify themselves, just as Caesar’s loyalists *need* the assassins to be traitors to the Republic. This has become an all too familiar concept in contemporary politics where “optics” and “spin” can profoundly shape our impressions of figures and events—of truth itself.



Bust of Julius Caesar
(Wikimedia Commons)