Julius Caesar

By William Shakespeare

DRAMATURGY

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WHY THIS PLAY NOW?

The following is a statement from one of your production dramaturgs on: “why this play now?” Examining the cultural moment in which we are creating theatre, what does it mean to be approaching this text at this moment in time? The question of “Why this play now?” is something that every person working on this production—production team, cast, and crew—must decide for themselves. What value do *you* see in doing this work at this moment in time? Below, some possible reasons are suggested; feel free to think about them and reflect on your own reasons.

WHY THIS PLAY NOW?

by Arushi Grover

1. We live in a fraught American cultural and political landscape.

We live in a moment when we are constantly questioning whether those who rule us have too much power or whether they are wielding their power incorrectly. Contemporary American politics has been constantly reevaluating the power of our own leadership—in the past, productions have imagined Caesar as Obama and Trump (Marks). In the cultural landscape, the populus might be seen as reflected in the mobs of our own forum, in the digital world: Twitter. Would Elon Musk be Caesar or Brutus? Celebrities and influencers our conspirators? Collectively, many agree that power is suspect, but then in transferring power from those who have to those who have not, is there not another party in power? Paradoxes and ambiguity abounds as we evaluate and reevaluate whether those who have power are wielding it justly.

2. We are restoring queerness to Rome and questioning masculinity.

Scholars conclude that male homosexuality was part of the culture of ancient Rome. Sexuality, then, was about power and status. While it was evident that men have relations with each other, acceptance varied for who was deemed the active or passive partner in the relationship. Echoes abound in contemporary culture, where queerness is understood to exist, but is not always accepted. And more importantly, the question of what determines masculinity and manhood is constantly being rethought. In *Julius Caesar*, characters prove their masculinity by attending their death with honor and stoicism. In our own time, we are busy at work eschewing gender norms—redefining masculinity, valuing the supposed converse of feminine, and breaking the binary altogether. In each of these worlds, in that which belonged to the ancient, in Shakespeare’s, and in our own, we feel the hollow echoes of masculinity reverberate in our social standings and self-worth.

I. SHAKESPEARE’S LONDON

Julius Caesar would have been one of the first plays to be performed at the new Globe Theatre, located on the banks of the Thames River, in London in 1599 (Dickson and Staines 199). Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne at the time in England.

Political Context: Richard II, Essex, and Elizabeth

According to David Daniell, “When *Julius Caesar* was being written, there was in England, and associated with Caesar, a sharp political awareness that it was possible to challenge rigidity of rule: a rigidity probably extending to tyranny; a challenge possibly extending to conspiracy leading to rebellion” (Daniell 22). Daniell notes this in regards to two contexts: the death of Richard II, a victim of tyranny; and that assassination of Julius Caesar, out of a fear of tyranny (22).

Richard II was king of England between 1377 and 1399. In 1388, a group of lords hostile to Richard II “sentenced many of the king's favourites to death and forced Richard to renew his coronation oath” (“Richard II”). In retaliation in 1397, Richard banished several of his opponents, including his cousin, Henry of Bolingbroke (“Richard II”). In 1399, while Richard II was in Ireland, Henry of Bolingbroke “returned to claim his father’s inheritance”, and “[s]upported by some of the leading baronial families (including Richard’s former Archbishop of Canterbury), Henry captured and deposed Richard. Bolingbroke was crowned King as Henry IV” (“Richard II”). There were risings in support of Richard, and he died either by murder or self-starvation in Pontefract castle (“Richard II”).

In the late 1590’s, there was a faction supporting the Earl of Essex who “took a special interest not so much in the deposition of King Richard as in his murder” (Daniell 23). Robert Devereux (1565-1601) was the 2nd Earl of Essex and a relative of the Queen (Dickinson 12). In the summer of 1599, he was sent by the Queen to “subdue rebellious Ireland” (Daniell 23). Essex met Tyone of Ireland and made a truce with him, supposedly telling the rebel that “soon there was to be a change of regime in England” (Burgess 167). Essex would go on to be put on trial, and two years later he would stage an out-and-out rebellion in 1601 (Daniell 23). Meanwhile, in 1599, the government was alarmed about Essex, at one time demanding changes to a book to be published that was essentially about the deposition of Richard and the usurpation of Henry IV, with a full-page dedication to Essex (23-24).

Queen Elizabeth might have invited comparison between her and a tyrannical Caesar through her policies in the years leading up to her death (Daniell 25). She asserted herself as immortal, and a modern historian characterized her reign as “the apotheosis of a woman, a monarch transmuted into a god” (26). Furthermore, comparisons between ancient Rome and Elizabethan England could be seen through the “dreaded political [consequence of] civil war” (Garber 410). Elizabeth and Caesar, as portrayed in the play, were also both heirless, inviting comparisons over anxieties of succession.

Roman Influence in Elizabethan London

S. P. Cerasano notes that there is cause to believe that Elizabethan Londoners in Shakespeare's audience might have felt that "Caesar's life was entwined with London and Londoners in a physical, geographical sense" (Cerasano xiii) In addition to being familiar with stories of Julius Caesar "that formed part of their own early history", Cerasano notes that the physical structures that surrounded Elizabethans in London—roads, walls, and others—were Roman (xiv). Cerasano discusses Tudor chronicler John Stow's 1603 narration of the foundations that became England, discussing "the Roman invasion, the seizure of the realm of 'Brytaine' in order to pay yearly tribute to Rome, and Caesar's eventually founding of 'Troynovant' (the 'new Troy', later Londinium, i.e., London)" (xiv). Stow reportedly describes a Roman burial ground that was full of the ashes of the Romans that lived there, "not far from the site of the Theatre, the original playhouse used by Shakespeare and his actors" (xiv). Stow also reiterates legends that Caesar built structures integral to the Tower of London and other buildings, then in ruins during the Tudor era (xiv). Cerasano concludes that "Roman civilization seemed 'alive' in these ways" (xiv).

II. ANCIENT ROME

On Plutarch's *Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*

Scholars note that Shakespeare's primary source for *Julius Caesar* was Thomas North's translation of Greek philosopher Plutarch's *Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579) (Dickson and Staines 199). Largely, Shakespeare's text reflects Plutarch's narration.

Some notable discrepancies between the two are noted below: In Plutarch, there is no mention of Calpurnia's sterility (Derrick 51). In Shakespeare, the conspirator's solidarity is attributed to Brutus, not the individuals or collective (Derrick 51). In Shakespeare, the assassination takes place in the Senate-house of the Capitol, as opposed to the Pompey's theatre, as in Plutarch (51). In Plutarch, there are two battles at Philippi, as opposed to the one in Shakespeare (51).

Below are two excerpts from Plutarchs' *Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, to illustrate the difference between Plutarch's telling of history and Shakespeare's dramatization:

An excerpt from Plutarch's Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans, *translated by Thomas North* (1595)...

Life of Julius Caesar

by Plutarch

They on the other side that had conspired his death, compassed him in on every side with their swords drawn in their hands, that Caesar turned him nowhere, but he was stricken at by some, and still had naked swords in his face, and was hacked and mangled among them, as a wild beast taken of hunters. For it was agreed among them, that every man should give him a wound, because all their parts should be in this murder: and then Brutus himself gave him a wound about his privities. Men report also, that Caesar did still defend himself against the rest, running every way with his body: but when he saw Brutus with his sword drawn in his hand, then he pulled his gown over his head, and made no more resistance, and was driven either casual-ly, or purposefully, by the council of the conspirators, against the base whereupon Pompeys image stood, which ran all of a gore blood, till he was slain. (Derrick 74)

An excerpt from Plutarch's Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans, *translated by Thomas North* (1595)...

Life of Marcus Brutus

by Plutarch

Afterwards when Caesar's body was brought into the market place, *Antonius* making his funeral oration in praise of the the dead, according to the ancient custom of ROME, and perceiving that his words moved the common people to compassion: he framed his eloquence to make their hearts yearn the more, and taking Caesars gown all bloody in his hand, he laid it open to the sight of them all, showing what number of cuts and holes it had upon it. Therewithal the people fell presently into such a rage and mutiny, that there was no more order kept amongst the common people. For some of them cried out, kill the murderers: other plucked up forms, tables, stalls about the market place, as they had done before at the funerals of *Claudius*, and having laid them all of a heap together, they set them on fire, and thereupon did put the body of *Caesar*, and burnt it in the midst of the most holy places. (Derrick 77)

Male Homosexuality in Ancient Rome

Abigail Hundson summarizes that there were no taboos on what we anachronistically would call homosexuality in ancient Rome, provided that the behavior falls in certain parameters—namely, that a freeborn citizen be the active partner with someone of lower status, such as a slave or young men aged twelve to twenty (Hundson). Craig Williams defines the active partner as the penetrative partner (Williams 3). Saara explains that, "The same sharp distinction between passive and active roles also determined the general attitude towards homosexual relations between freeborn citizens: while the active partner was accepted or at least tolerated, the passive partner's submissive role was ridiculed" (Lilja 122). Williams explains that this has implication for understandings of masculinity, that: "a Roman man who wished to retain his claim to full masculinity must always be thought to play the insertive role in penetrative acts, whether with males or females; if he was thought to have sought the receptive role in such acts he was liable to being mocked as effeminate" (Williams 3). Hudson concludes: "homosexuality in ancient Rome was as much about communications of power and status than it was about attraction and emotion, with sex as a vehicle to exercise privilege and dominance. The civil freedoms of a Roman citizen allowed him to engage in such relations with any man lower in society than him, whilst demonstrating his virility and ability to conquer others" (Hundson). Homosexuality with two people of equal status—say, Brutus and Cassius—may, therefore, have been true to the experience of ancient Romans, but likely the individuals would not be equally accepted based on who was deemed to be active and who was deemed to be passive.

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