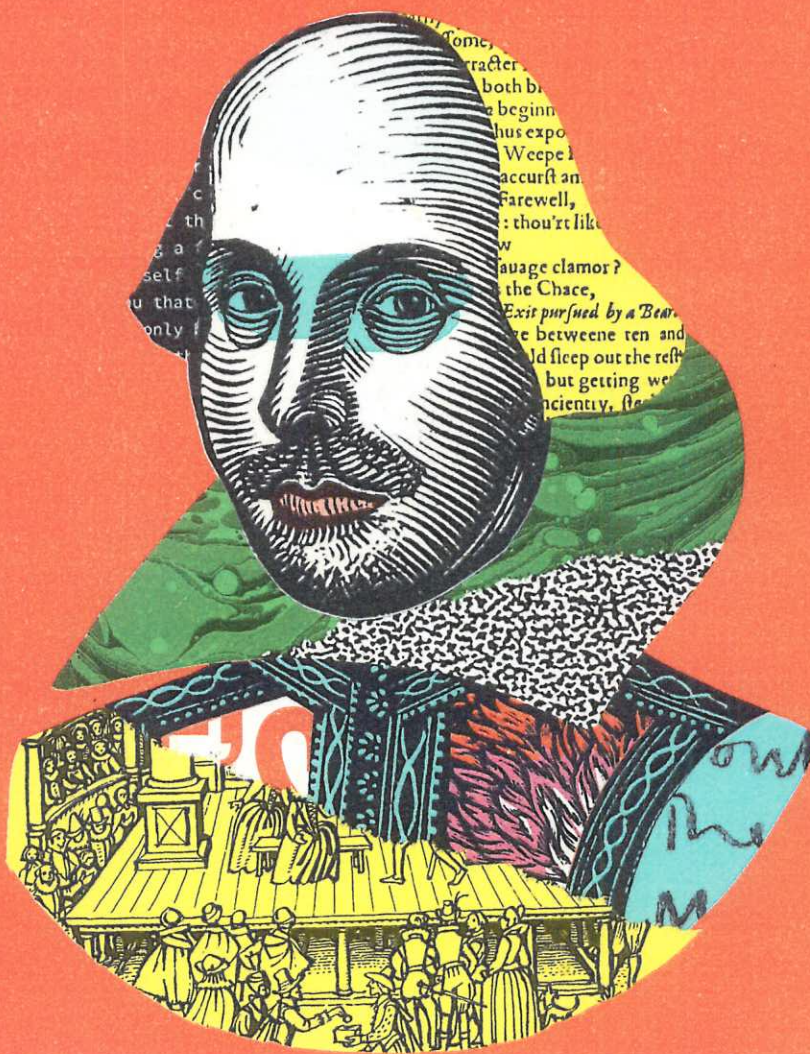


A PELICAN BOOK

# This is Shakespeare

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anti-historical excess intruding on a history play, just as the character of Falstaff impedes the patterns of succession that structure historical progress. His bulk blocks historical progress, so we are not quite yet ready for the glorious redemptive reign of Hal as Henry V. The result? Even more Falstaff, in *2 Henry IV*.

## Much Ado About Nothing

Shakespeare writes some fabulous villains. Richard III, Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear* are all energetically amoral figures whose iniquity is elevated into a compelling personal credo. They are alluring and terrifying in equal measure, drawing other characters into their nihilistic world, demonstrating the awful entranced complicity of villain and victim. They represent a horrifically plausible evil that is always one step ahead of goodness, and they are brilliant, bravura, charismatic stage presences. Well, sometimes. But not in this case. The villain of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John, seems to be phoning it in. Criticisms of Keanu Reeves's performance of the role in Kenneth Branagh's sunny film (1993) as 'wooden' really miss the point: it's not Reeves who is wooden but Don John himself, and in capturing that peculiar stiltedness, his is actually a brilliant performance. So why is everyone in the play world of Messina taken in by this poor man's Iago, this wannabe Edmund, this budget Richard – and how might their collective credulity help us understand the specific undercurrents of romantic comedy in *Much Ado*?

Let's start with some analysis of Don John's role in the play. *Much Ado About Nothing* opens by bringing together two distinct gendered worlds, when the returning soldiers under

Don Pedro's command billet in Messina, home to old men and young women. A declarative stage direction names 'John the bastard' as one of the brigade (1.1.90). He is largely silent, until he is welcomed by Leonato, Governor of Messina. This silence comes straight from the Shakespearean villainy play-book: in other plays, we see Iago and Edmund as taciturn onlookers in long scenes to which they hardly contribute but from which they gather intelligence to furnish their traps. We discover that there has been bad blood between Don John and his legitimate brother, Don Pedro, but that they are now reconciled (it's not clear whether this argument between the brothers was the substance of the wars, or a sideline, since we never hear about their cause). John's reply professes inelegance: 'I thank you. I am not of many words, but I thank you' (1.1.150–51). The play's attention shifts to the matchmaking of Claudio and Leonato's daughter Hero, and to some jockish bantering with Benedick, a prominent soldier in Don Pedro's army.

We then see Don John in full villainous mode talking to his henchman, Conrad. John defines himself here by a kind of saturnine melancholy, claiming that his 'sadness is without limit' (1.3.4). Disdaining the silencing 'muzzle' (30) of the peace terms with his brother, Don John commits himself instead to a radical policy of self-revelation. In contrast to those Shakespearean villains who admit they are not what they seem (or even, Iago-like, 'I am not what I am' (*Othello* 1.1.65)), Don John states that he is incapable of dissimulation: 'I cannot hide what I am. I must be sad when I have cause, and smile at no man's jests' (1.3.12–14). He's a curious kind of villain, characterized by disclosure rather than concealment: 'I

am a plain-dealing villain' (29–30). News arrives that Claudio, described as Don Pedro's 'right hand' (45), is to be married. Don John sees that 'this may prove food to my displeasure': 'That young start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow. If I can cross him any way I bless myself every way' (60–63). Because Claudio has substituted for Don John in Don Pedro's affections, Don John will plot to undermine the wedding.

As we've seen before, the boy-meets-girl structure of romantic comedy doesn't quite capture Shakespeare's approach. Often it's girl-meets-boy for starters, but then there are the boy-meets-girl-and-this-really-messes-up-his-boy-pals or even boy-meets-girl-who-will-have-to-do-since-the-boy-he-really-wants-is-off-limits versions. That's to say that romantic comedies, produced by Renaissance dramatists including Shakespeare for a largely male audience, major on male-male relationships. *Much Ado About Nothing* is a fine example of this Shakespearean genre of bromantic comedy, as Don John reveals. His plot is established within a network of rivalrous male bonding that structures the entire play. Don Pedro has already told Claudio that he will woo Hero on his behalf, and this courtship is a negotiation between Claudio, Don Pedro and Leonato, with Hero herself barely figuring. The couple are never seen speaking together on stage until the scene of their marriage ceremony, and Don Pedro's triumphant declaration, 'Here, Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won. I have broke with her father and his good will obtained. Name the day of marriage' (2.1.279–81), seems to miss out something important, not least Hero's unambiguous consent. In part, at least, Hero is silent because she's irrelevant: her existence merely seals the deal between the



powerful men and secures the network of male relationships at the heart of the play.

The masked ball gives Don John further chance for mischief. He pretends he thinks the masked Claudio is in fact Benedick, telling him that Don Pedro is really wooing Hero for himself. Claudio's gullible response to this fiendishly clever manipulation means not only that he immediately believes it – 'Tis certain so, the Prince woos for himself' (2.1.164) – but that he quickly excuses the prince for this betrayal: 'for beauty is a witch / Against whose charms faith melteth into blood' (169–70). Hero is to blame. Claudio is rationalizing the situation so that his relationship with Don Pedro can sustain this alleged breach of faith. While this particular malign misinformation is soon cleared up, Don John is not defeated, attacking Claudio to heal his own psychic agonies: 'any impediment will be medicinable to me' (2.2.4–5). This time the proposed intervention targets Hero's virtue more directly. Don John will bring Claudio and Don Pedro to see her gentlewoman Margaret performing 'Hero' apparently in a nocturnal assignation with a lover. He whips Claudio up with the idea that 'the lady is disloyal' (3.2.93–4) and promises to show him the proof. Claudio vows to 'shame her' (115) at the wedding if these allegations prove true, and Don Pedro agrees, confirming that the relationship between Claudio and Hero is in fact a relationship between Claudio and Don Pedro: 'And as I wooed for thee to obtain her, I will join with thee to disgrace her' (116–17). Neither raises a murmur of suspicion about why Don John should so trouble himself with their joint honours, nor does either of them recall his dubious past behaviour. Don John the bastard

is here behaving like a bastard, in both the early modern and modern senses, but the characters all seem to have forgotten this conveniently legible marker of his true nature.

Given that Don John scarcely troubles to hide his malevolence, that he bears the useful shorthand 'bastard' like an accusing finger as part of his name throughout the play, and that his first attempt to screw Claudio over at the ball fails, then why do Claudio and Don Pedro believe him so implicitly? One possible answer is generic rather than psychological. The classical New Comedy, associated with Plautus and Terence, on which Shakespeare often bases his own dramas, delivers a stock cast of lovers, wily servants and boastful soldiers. New Comedy also involves a prominent role for a blocking figure, often a patriarch who does not want the young couple to get married. We can see how this operates in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* or in *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, where the circumvention of the father figure is a significant part of the comic plot. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, this blocking figure is more displaced. Leonato, the supposed patriarch, could not be happier that his daughter is to be married off to Claudio. And everyone in the plot wants Beatrice and Benedick to get together. (We might observe in passing that *Much Ado* is probably the first Shakespearean comedy in which the crucial blocking element to romance is actually psychological rather than circumstantial: the obstacle that needs to be overcome to bring the couple together is, here, significantly an internal not an external one. That's what makes this part of the play seem so modern – it doesn't rely on elaborate plot, but on recognizable relationship congestion caused by emotional scarring,



fear of commitment and so on.) In the absence of any other blocking figure, Don John takes up the role: his rivalries with other men express themselves by trying to divert the play's impulses away from heterosexual conclusion. And so, he is believed because the play needs a blocking figure: a kind of generic speed bump to slow down its progress, delaying and deferring its movement towards marriage.

If the blocking figure is a conventional element of Shakespearean comic structure, Don John is given a slightly different role from that found by Shakespeare in his sources. While the tale of the slandered-but-virtuous woman is a popular trope in early modern literature (and one to which Shakespeare is repeatedly drawn in plays from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to *The Winter's Tale*), the plot from Shakespeare's source, the Italian poet Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, took male jealousy as its motivation. The source material shows us Don John equivalents who have been rejected by Hero and who therefore seek to destroy her reputation. Shakespeare is not averse to these plots of male sexual rivalry – titular pairs in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* are exemplary – but he doesn't give us one here. George Bernard Shaw called Don John a 'true natural villain . . . having no motive in this world except sheer love of evil', but perhaps motive in Don John's case is not entirely absent. Don John activates a plot in which bonds between men are the real blocking structure in this play: his destructive behaviour is related explicitly to the play's wider depiction of male relationships and the threat these pose to comic resolution.

Almost all of Shakespeare's comedies dramatize the developmental movement in which young people forgo primary

attachments to their own sex in favour of exclusive romantic attachment to an opposite sex partner. Elizabethan young men got part of their education about this rite of passage from the theatre. So, in the last scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, when Portia makes Bassanio squirm as she forces him to confess he gave away his wedding ring, we see her imposing a message on her new husband and on the young men of the audience: you're with me now. In the chapter on *Twelfth Night* we see that this choice is helpfully muddled for Orsino, whose love for the cross-dressed Cesario shifts across into marriage: Orsino is fortunate in not having to choose between his male friend and his female lover. But nowhere in the plays is this drama of male torment more explicitly painted than in *Much Ado About Nothing*. After spending more than half the play flirting and bantering, while maintaining that they cannot stand each other, Beatrice and Benedick finally acknowledge their mutual feelings amid the shock of Hero's broken nuptials. 'I protest I love thee,' says Benedick. 'I was about to protest I loved you,' replies Beatrice (4.1.280–81, 284–5). Just as each makes him or herself vulnerable to the other, there comes immediately a terrible choice. 'Come, bid me do anything for thee,' offers Benedick in the heady expansiveness of acknowledged love. Beatrice's reply is deadly: 'Kill Claudio' (289–90). To be sure, the context of Claudio's cruel denunciation of Hero has made this explicable, but we could reverse the causal relationship: the romance plot is the vehicle for Benedick's absolute break with Claudio, rather than the other way around. To be with Beatrice means to kill Claudio.

Benedick's realization of this cost is sharp but not unprecedented in the play. That romance and marriage signal an



end to certain sorts of male relationship is part of the wistfulness of *Much Ado*. Military camaraderie outside the play is replaced within it by the ‘merry war’ (1.1.59) of words between Beatrice and Benedick, and violent plots and ambushes are recast in the play’s repeated tropes of overhearing. In ‘The Last One’, the final episode of the long-running romantic sitcom *Friends* (2004), the establishment of the heterosexual couples which will bring narrative closure is simultaneously seen to cut out the same-sex friendships. Their loss is symbolized by the poignant dismantling of the table football which has been such a symbol of male bonding in the guys’ apartment. Something similar happens in *Much Ado*. From the beginning of the play, problems emerge among the men as they shift their interest from masculine friendship to romance. Benedick bemoans Claudio’s moonish preference for the effeminate ‘tabor and . . . pipe’ and ‘new doublet’ over ‘drum and . . . fife’ and ‘good armour’ (2.3.15, 18, 14, 16), as their shared male pursuits are displaced by Claudio’s engagement in the female sphere. Under provocation from Don John, Claudio suspects that his friend Don Pedro is wooing Hero for himself. The ‘bros before hoes’ ethic of the military is at odds with the momentum of romantic comedy.

Don John is believed because the world of the play makes men implicitly more likely to believe other men than they are to believe women. When Claudio accuses Hero of infidelity before her father at the altar, he does so in shocking terms of sexual disgust which identify marriage primarily as a relation between men (‘Give not this rotten orange to your friend’ (4.1.32)). The shame is the broken contract between male friends, rather than the broken marriage itself. Leonato

immediately believes his daughter’s accuser, crying out in an ecstasy of shame that is as vehement as it is short-lived: ‘Do not live, Hero, do not ope thine eyes’ (4.1.124). Only Beatrice believes absolutely in her cousin’s honesty.

Perhaps it’s worth observing here one character who is absent from this scene in which sexual politics are at their most tribal. There are clues in the early texts of *Much Ado About Nothing* that Shakespeare originally conceived of a role for Hero’s mother in the drama, and that he went so far as to give her a name, Innogen. The opening stage direction of the first edition of the play, printed in 1600, reads: ‘Enter Leonato, governor of Messina, Innogen his wife, Hero his daughter and Beatrice his niece, with a messenger’, and there’s another stage direction in which Innogen’s ghostly presence is registered. Innogen never speaks, however, and most scholars assume that during the course of writing the play her role atrophied and was no longer relevant. The stage directions inadvertently record an earlier remnant of the drafting process. It’s interesting in the larger scope of Shakespeare’s attitude to mothers (generally absent: think Queen Lear, Duchess Senior, Mrs Prospero as candidates for a second volume of Carol Ann Duffy’s revisionary feminist poems *The World’s Wife*), but whatever the reasons, the effect of this excision is to isolate the two young women of the play. The failed wedding scene accentuates their vulnerability within an essentially patriarchal structure. What would Innogen have said to a husband who denounced their daughter on the say-so of a callow young soldier and a saturnine malcontent? Presumably this challenge to the gendered balance of power at this crucial point was precisely what Shakespeare



did not want: the incompletely erased Innogen shows us the play's own gender politics at work.

Although the straightforwardness of relationships between men is irreparably damaged in the play, it could be argued that male camaraderie prevails. *Much Ado* is a play profoundly uneasy about female sexuality and its assumed duplicity. Leonato begins with a joke about whether he is really Hero's father, answering Don Pedro's innocent 'I think this is your daughter' with the unnecessary 'Her mother hath many times told me so' (1.1.98–100). Even after Hero's infidelity has been revealed as a piece of Don John's Machiavellian theatre, these jokes about cuckoldry (and cuckoldry is another form of relationship between men: the husband and the lover, rather than the lover and the wife) are still the dominant currency of male interchange. 'Prince, thou art sad,' Benedick notes of the redundant matchmaker Don Pedro in the play's closing scene, 'get thee a wife. There is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn' (referring to the supposed horns of the cuckold) (5.4.121–2). The play ends by equating marriage with the inevitability of female unfaithfulness, even as these attitudes have been so dangerous in trying to divert the play from its romantic conclusion.

As if in acknowledgement of these tensions, the play's very last lines turn back to Don John, 'ta'en in flight, / And brought with armed men back to Messina' (5.4.124–5). Some stage productions bring him on stage in chains at this point to show that his malignancy has been curtailed and contained. But Don John merely represents a more general mistrust in the play – he is not its sole source. After all, his is a tiny part (no sniggering at the back): he has only 4 per cent of the play's

lines. He does, however, symbolize something larger than himself. And perhaps this is why he is given the identity of bastard. His own malevolent illegitimacy might be thought a kind of proof that women can – and some do – sleep with men not their husbands. Don John the bastard is himself the very certification to stabilize the play's paranoia about women's faithlessness. His status as a bastard thus confirms the play's worst fears.

No wonder then that his plot promises characters and audience alike the pornographic voyeurism of Hero's chamber window at night, a spectacle to confirm the stereotype of women's infidelity. 'Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero' (3.2.96–7). But in fact we do not see the scene of this illicit encounter, backlit at an upper window or balcony – a shop-soiled, post-romantic *Romeo and Juliet*. Don John's taunting: 'I will disparage her no farther till you are my witnesses. Bear it coldly but till midnight, and let the issue show itself' (118–20) is, for the theatre audience, an empty promise. We move from the tight-jawed responses of Claudio and Don Pedro into a scene in which the comic watchmen, led by their pompously foolish chief Dogberry, undergo their inept training, then to Hero's wedding preparations with her womenfolk, then back to Dogberry, and from thence to the chapel where the marriage is to take place. The pivotal scene of Hero's apparent deceit is not staged. There's no practical reason not to show us, and we can see from the prose sources of the play that careful choreography with ladders and an upper window is a constant in the story as it is transmitted across genres. So, as with Innogen left on the cutting-room floor, the scene is deliberately omitted.



And, as with Innogen, there are consequences to this choice. It's worth thinking about what happens when we do see a scene interpolated in stage productions, since this can help us understand why it's not there. Broadly speaking, those productions of *Much Ado About Nothing* which want the play to end happily tend to show us this missing scene. The directorial motivation seems to be to suggest that Claudio's was a plausible mistake, that Don John's plot was convincing, and that Claudio's credulous acceptance should not reflect too badly on him. We too see what he sees, or thinks he sees, and recognize that it is indeed a convincing piece of stage business. He cannot therefore be blamed too harshly for his conduct. This particular reading is often accompanied with other cuts or additions – a scene in which Claudio's own mental anguish at Hero's apparent death is somehow conveyed, or the excision of the uncomfortable scene in which an untroubled Claudio and Don Pedro joke at the expense of Hero's elderly father and uncle. The trembling Adam's apple of a boyish Robert Sean Leonard in Branagh's film did much to excuse that Claudio's over-hasty denunciations.

As Shakespeare has actually written the play, without any scene at Hero's window, Claudio's readiness to believe Don John goes without visual 'proof'. In this, Shakespeare departs decisively from his sources: Claudio is a much more compromised figure than the lover-equivalent Shakespeare read about. Claudio chooses to shame Hero publicly on her wedding day rather than confront her with his suspicions and, tellingly, he imagines himself doing this even before he has any reason: 'If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her, tomorrow in the congregation where I should wed, there

will I shame her' (3.2.113–15). Thus, while Beatrice and Benedick's offbeat relationship seems recognizably modern, the dynamic between Claudio and Hero is much more difficult to make acceptable for contemporary audiences. For its series of updated plays for television, *ShakespeareRe-Told* (2005), the BBC reworked *Much Ado* in a modern newsroom setting. Everything worked in this radically different context: Bea and Ben as the bickering news anchors; Claude, laddish on the sports desk; Hero the self-possessed weathercaster. But the one thing that couldn't be transposed was Hero taking Claude back at the end – or, rather, that outcome could no longer be a 'happy' ending. (So the BBC gave us the following dialogue: CLAUDE: But when you've had some time, maybe you would think about carrying on where we left off? HERO: What get married to you? Never in a million years. CLAUDE: OK, maybe not in the short term, but . . .)

But however imperfect and fearful a prospect, marriage, as Benedick ruefully acknowledges, is a social inevitability: 'The world must be peopled' (2.3.229–30). As in a Hollywood screwball comedy such as *Bringing up Baby* or *His Girl Friday* (directed by Howard Hawks in 1938 and 1940), the bantering interplay between Beatrice and Benedick functions as a kind of verbal foreplay. We feel we know they ought to get together, because their playful dialogue bespeaks deep intimacy. They just need a little help to change roles. But it is also striking how much social pressure is exerted to resolve these two confirmed singletons, these potential misfits, into a couple. Their initial refusal of convention is a challenge to everyone around them. Each says they do not want to marry, and the community swings into action to prove them wrong. And,



relatedly, the world of Messina is one in which private actions and individual behaviours are all closely monitored. Almost everything in the play is overlooked or overheard, from the opening rumours that Claudio intends to woo Hero, to the inadvertent confession of the plot in Borachio's loose talk which brings about the play's resolution. Our presence as audience adds another level to the surveillance culture which governs social codes and sacrifices privacy to a potentially coercive version of 'community' – a kind of comic Sicilian *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The means by which romantic resolution is achieved are remarkably similar in type, if not in motive, to those of Don John. That is to say, both Messina's fixers and blockers are using the same techniques. Like Claudio and Don Pedro at Hero's window, Beatrice and Benedick each think they are accidentally overhearing a scenario which has, in fact, been manufactured expressly to transmit particular (mis)information. Beatrice, in particular, hears herself accused of 'pride and scorn' (3.1.108) in her refusal to marry (we might recollect in passing that choosing to remain single is never an option for Shakespearean comic heroines: think of Olivia in *Twelfth Night* or Isabella in *Measure for Measure* or Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* – all female characters who express their opposition to marriage and all characters whose plots make damn sure that their resolve is circumvented): in part, at least, what she hears is that she should behave in a more conventionally feminine way. The scene in which she overhears her faults enumerated by her cousin is therefore the flipside of the imagined scene of Hero's balcony transgression. Both scenes work by implicitly establishing a norm of

femininity against which it measures its female characters. Hero's self-abnegation when she contritely accepts Claudio once again as her husband, shows how obediently she has taken her lesson from an act she never committed but nevertheless seems to own: 'One Hero died defiled, but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid' (5.4.63–4). Both Hero and Beatrice are brought to heel by these deceptions.

So Don John is believed by the characters and by the plot because two contesting storylines run through *Much Ado* and give it narrative torque. One impulse reinstates male bonds and is therefore, implicitly, anti-comic; the other educates men into accepting primary allegiances with women, and thus conforms to comic necessity. Don John spins the play towards tragedy, and momentarily it obeys, bringing out a friar and a crazy plan to make a difficult marital situation better by pretending a woman is dead. That worked so well in *Romeo and Juliet* – a play already well known by the time of *Much Ado*. Like other villains, and not just in comedy, Don John represents an alternative worldview from that which comes to dominate. But as these alternative visions fight it out, we can see that Don John's version does have some traction on the play's psyche. The play's men are anxious for the excuse that lets them off the obligation and commitment of marriage: Don John proffers that excuse. Ultimately he's believed because the play's male characters all – Benedick excepted – have a weakness for his particular misogynistic view of the world.

In the end, Don John's plot is foiled by the most unlikely agents – the buffoonish Dogberry, played by the Chamberlain's Men's favourite clown, the actor Will Kemp, and his dim assistants. In some ways they are unworthy opponents – but



in another way, their very foolishness is the triumph of comedy. Don John knows that his blocking misogyny is on the losing side in this romantic comedy. He needs to bide his time and beef up his villainy. There's not long to wait before another Italianate world, more hospitable to his particular anti-romantic malevolence, will present itself, and this time there will be no pesky watchmen to interrupt: *Othello*.

## Julius Caesar

Shakespeare's tragedies tend to follow certain rules. First, they're named after their prominent hero: *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello*. Occasionally they have double protagonists: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*. The shape of a tragedy is essentially biographical, ending in the death of this central character or characters. We instinctively know when Macduff kills Macbeth, or when Lear's heart breaks, that there are only minutes left before the play is over. The play cannot last without its eponymous life-force. Not so *Julius Caesar*. In this play, Shakespeare experiments with a tragedy organized around a decentred titular figure, who is killed right in the middle of the drama. What's more (or less), Caesar himself appears in only five scenes of the play, although he returns, both as a ghost and as the abiding memory for the other characters, after his death in Act 3. The climax of this play is in the middle. *Julius Caesar* builds up to, and then explores the aftermath's shock waves of a climactic event – a political assassination. The shape of this play is unusually unteleological, that's to say, it's not the end it is trying to get to, but the middle.

That may seem pretty obvious, but it is a quite different structure from that employed by Shakespeare for similar