of popular resistance to tyrants. That man refuses to remain silent and watch. It costs him his life, but he stands up for human decency. Though he is a very minor figure with only a handful of lines, he is one of Shakespeare's great heroes.

THE DEVASTATION AT the close of *Lear* poses in its most extreme form questions that hover over all of Shakespeare's representations of tyranny: How can alert and courageous people not merely escape from the tyrant's grasp, in order to fight against him and try to topple him, but prevent him from coming to power in the first place? How is it possible to stop the devastation from happening? In *Richard III*, the hate-crazed Queen Margaret, hovering around the court of King Edward like a dark nemesis, tries to warn the Duke of Buckingham, whom she exempts from her hatred, to beware of Richard:

> Take heed of yonder dog.
> Look when he fawns, he bites; and when he bites,
> His venom tooth will rankle to the death.
> Have not to do with him, beware of him;
> Sin, death, and hell have set their marks on him,
> And all their ministers attend on him.
> (*Richard III* 1.3.288–93)

But the duke dismisses her warning and serves instead as one of the prime enablers in Richard's rise to power—until he himself falls beneath Richard's axe.

In *Lear,* the courageous Earl of Kent speaks out boldly to try to persuade the king he loyally serves to stop his madness and withdraw the curse he has bestowed on the only daughter who actually loves him. But, in the face of Lear's rage, no one takes Kent's side, and he is banished on pain of death. When Kent disguises himself in order to continue to serve his master, he is entirely unable to stop the catastrophic decline. If anything, his belligerent boldness only further whets the anger of the two wicked daughters, and the kingdom, like the old king himself, spirals into madness and disaster.

There is one play in Shakespeare's whole career that features a systematic, principled attempt to stop tyranny before it starts. *Julius Caesar* opens with the tribunes Murellus and Flavius angrily trying to stop the commoners from celebrating Caesar's triumph over Pompey. They see clearly that the mob's excitement around the general has dangerous political ramifications, and they rush to pull down the decorations that have been hung on his statues:

> These growing feathers plucked from Caesar's wing
> Will make him fly an ordinary pitch,
> Who else would soar above the view of men
> And keep us all in servile fearfulness.
> (*Julius Caesar* 1.1.71–74)

Their efforts are not without risk. "Murellus and Flavius," we are told, "for pulling scarves off Caesar's images, are put to silence" (1.2.278–79).

In the play's second scene, two key figures in Rome's senatorial elite share with each other the same anxiety. Conversing with Cassius, Brutus starts every time he hears the roar of the crowd in the distance. "What means this shouting?" he asks nervously. "I do fear the people/Choose Caesar for their king" (1.2.79–80). Cassius seizes on the opportunity to express his own anger and perplexity at Caesar's exalted position:

> 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. (1.2.135–38)

The key thing, Cassius urges, is to understand that what is happening is not some mysterious, ineluctable fate. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,/But in ourselves, that we are underlings" (1.2.140–41). And this means, by implication, that it is possible to do something about the imminent threat of tyranny.

Brutus is himself highly alert to this implication and has given it much thought on his own. He promises Cassius to continue the conversation in the near future. Before they part, they learn that the shouts of the crowd came when Caesar thrice refused the crown that Antony offered him. This refusal hardly settles the matter. Casca reports a rumor about what the Senate plans to do the next day: to make Caesar a king who can wear his crown everywhere but in Italy. Cassius responds by claiming that he would rather commit suicide

than live under such domination. The ability to end one's own life, he suggests, confers a kind of freedom: "Therein, ye gods, you make the weak most strong;/Therein, ye gods, you tyrants do defeat" (1.3.91–92).

Brutus, as we shortly learn, is also thinking about freedom from tyranny, but his thoughts do not turn to suicide. "It must be by his death" (2.1.10), he says. His words are not part of a conversation. They are not even overheard by anyone on the stage: he has conspicuously dismissed his servant. In his orchard in the middle of the night, he is brooding by himself. Neither the "It" in "It must be" nor the "his" in "his death" are specified. We are plunged into a mind in motion, and thus there is no prologue.

> 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.
> It is the bright day that brings forth the adder,
> And that craves wary walking. Crown him that.
> (2.1.10–15)

Shakespeare had never written anything like this. What are we supposed to make of it?

Brutus invokes "the general"—that is, the common good—as opposed to a "personal cause," but his long soliloquy undermines any attempt to draw a clean line between abstract

political principles and particular individuals, with their psychological peculiarities, their unpredictability, their only partially knowable, opaque inwardness. The verbs "would" and "might" shimmer and dance their ambiguous way through the twists and turns of a mind obsessed. The resonant phrase "there's the question," which anticipates Hamlet's famous words, extends like a miasma across the whole of Brutus's train of thought.

Ancient Romans liked to think of themselves as the great figures not of self-reflection but of action. They would conquer the world and leave philosophical investigations and neurotic navel-gazing to the Greeks. For Shakespeare, however, behind the screen of public rhetoric in Rome there were troubled, vulnerable, conflicted people uncertain of the right course to take and only half aware of what was driving them to act. The danger was all the greater because they were acting on a world stage, and their obscure private motives had massive, potentially catastrophic public consequences.

"There's the question," Brutus says, not quite saying what the question is. Tangled together, several different questions are tormenting him. In how much danger is the Roman republic, which I love and will defend with my life? What does Cassius want from me? How likely is it that Caesar—who has just thrice refused a proffered crown—will develop into a tyrant? What is the best way to prevent a disaster? How should my close, long-term personal friendship with Caesar factor into whatever decision I reach? Would it make more sense simply to watch and wait?

A piece of proverbial folk wisdom—"It is the bright day

that brings forth the adder"—gives way to a cautionary warning: "And that craves wary walking." Both then yield to an incoherent, ungrammatical exclamation—"Crown him that"—that seems the verbal trace of a fantasy passing unbidden through Brutus's mind. So the speech continues, twisting together the natural with the social, mingling both eyewitness observation and personal fantasy, driving incoherently and fatefully toward an assassination plot whose public justification is a kind of press release the killer is already fashioning:

> 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.
> (2.1.28–31)

We are witnessing the genealogy of one of the great world-historical events, the assassination of Julius Caesar, but we are asked to view it both from without and within.

The characters in *Julius Caesar* attempt to define themselves in relation to distinct political and philosophical principles. Cassius claims that he is a follower of Epicurus, which implies that he believes that humans alone, and not the gods or fate, are responsible for their own happiness or unhappiness. Cicero maintains, as the academic school of skeptical philosophers did, that "men may construe things after their fashion,/Clean from the purpose of the things themselves" (1.3.34–35). Brutus is a stoic, coolly indifferent to portents and omens. Later in the

play, though he has already learned that his wife is dead, he feigns ignorance so that he can demonstrate his absolute self-mastery: "Why farewell, Portia" (4.3.189). But the calculated demonstration already calls into question the authenticity of the principle, and the play repeatedly undermines anything that looks philosophically coherent.

None of the characters—certainly not Julius Caesar, Antony, or Cassius—embodies a stable position, let alone an abstract ideal. Brutus comes closest, and in the play's final moments Antony eulogizes him as "the noblest Roman of them all" (5.5.68). But these are the public pronouncements of the deeply cynical victor, and we have already seen from the inside how murky, confused, and conflicted are Brutus's thoughts. Nevertheless, in the midst of the uncertainty that besets every choice, it is necessary to decide what to do, and Brutus decides to kill Caesar. Believing that only this drastic step will save the republic, he lends his immense prestige to the group of conspirators, each of whom has his own tangled motives for action, and at the crucial moment, on the Ides of March, he joins the others in thrusting his knife into the body of his friend.

"Stoop, Romans, stoop," Brutus tells his fellow assassins, in the wake of their deed,

> 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!"
> (3.1.106–11)

Now and for generations to come, as he imagines it, they will be celebrated as the saviors of Rome. Their cause is just, and he is confident that it will be recognized as such precisely because they are not cynical politicians but men of noble ideals.

Except that it does not work out this way. The problem is not only that everyone's motives are inevitably more mixed than shouted slogans suggest, but also that real-world actions grounded on noble ideals may have unforeseen and ironic consequences. Brutus dreams that such ideals as honor, justice, and liberty can somehow exist in pure form, untouched by base calculations and messy compromises. Yet his staunchest attempt to act from pure principle is his refusal to kill Antony alongside Caesar, and that refusal is a political catastrophe. For Antony is not merely one of Caesar's loyal followers; he is a brilliant demagogue whose famous speech over Caesar's corpse—"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears . . ." (3.2.71)—sparks the civil war that brings down the republic, the very institution the conspirators wished to save.

Shakespeare makes clear that Brutus's desire to keep his motives free from any taint of self-interest or violence is a mere fantasy. He longs to destroy the threat that Caesar represents—the threat of tyranny—without destroying Caesar, but even Brutus recognizes that this clean, bloodless defense of liberty is impossible:

> Oh, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit
> And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,
> Caesar must bleed for it. (2.1.169–71)

Shakespeare does not quite ridicule Brutus's refusal to permit the bloodletting that the other conspirators wish to undertake in the wake of the assassination. That refusal bespeaks a certain nobility of spirit that contrasts sharply with the cynical opportunism of Antony and his allies, who immediately seize the occasion to kill their enemies. But the dream of purity is hopelessly unrealistic and hedged about with irony. And it utterly fails to take into account the volatility of the mass of ordinary Romans.

Julius Caesar does not offer any solution to the psychological and political dilemmas it mercilessly probes. There is no moment of clear-eyed understanding, certainly not for Cassius (who commits suicide because he hopelessly misconstrues the outcome of the swirling battle at Philippi) or for Brutus, who is haunted by Caesar's ghost. What the tragedy offers instead is an unprecedented representation of political uncertainty, confusion, and blindness. The attempt to avert a possible constitutional crisis, were Caesar to decide to assume tyrannical powers, precipitates the collapse of the state. The very act that was meant to save the republic turns out to destroy it. Caesar is dead, but by the end of the play Caesarism is triumphant.

Ten

RESISTIBLE RISE

SOCIETIES, LIKE INDIVIDUALS, generally protect themselves from sociopaths. We would not have been able to survive as a species had we not developed the skill to identify and deal with noxious threats from within as well as without. Communities are usually alert to the danger posed by certain people in their midst and contrive to isolate or expel them. This is why tyranny is not the norm of social organization.

In special circumstances, however, protection proves more difficult than it would at first seem, for some of the dangerous qualities found in a potential tyrant may be useful. Shakespeare's great historical example of this double-edged utility is Caius Martius, better known as Coriolanus, whose fierce aggression, imperiousness, and indifference to pain made him an immensely successful warrior in defense of Rome in the fifth century B.C.E. The playwright found the outline of the story in one of his favorite sources, Plutarch's *Lives*, and he fashioned it into the last tragedy he ever wrote.

Coriolanus is set in the very distant past, but the play