

Barnes and Noble Shakespeare (2007)

Introduction to *Julius Caesar*

by Andrew Hadfield

Julius Caesar is a pivotal play in Shakespeare's career. Performed in 1599, it was probably the first play presented at the newly constructed Globe, a large, expensive theater that Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's men, needed to fill. The play itself is tense and dramatic, and, while Shakespeare's audience would have already been familiar with the story, the play offers a fresh and compelling study of the destructive conflict of major historical actors undermined by their own limitations. Topical and allusive, Shakespeare's text dares the audience to make connections between the fall of the Roman Republic and their own times. The play ushered in a new, more mature and confident phase of Shakespeare's writing that saw him produce his major tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—in the next few years.

Julius Caesar shows Shakespeare finally realizing the potential that he had always shown throughout his early career. Few Shakespeare plays have been more frequently performed on stage in the last three centuries or studied in schools, demonstrating that what was clearly a successful and popular work in 1599 has captured audiences and readers ever since. Even people who have never seen or read the play can recite "Et

tu, Brutè?" and "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears." And, like many of the most celebrated literary works, *Julius Caesar* inspires controversy and occasionally conspiracy theories, with some readers even regarding the play as a religious allegory (Julius Caesar, after all, has the same initials as Jesus Christ) and the assassination of Caesar as a mythical event of cosmic significance.

The question that has dominated critical interpretation has been which political faction Shakespeare represents with greater sympathy. Does he tilt toward the republicans, representing Brutus as the "noblest Roman of them all," as Antony declares him to be at the end of the play? Or does he recoil in horror at the dreadful act of violence at the heart of the play, showing us that the republican faction is a group of deluded revolutionaries who have murdered a great hero whose flaws are insubstantial? Perhaps the dominant mode of reading *Julius Caesar* has been to assume that Shakespeare is wisely commenting on the follies of human history, revealing to us that violence inevitably fails to reform corrupt government, only exaggerating the miseries of the suffering people who have had to live under a repressive regime.

There is much to recommend this reading, even if it conveniently reproduces the familiar idea that Shakespeare was a conservative figure who had an instinctive hatred of crowds and mob rule, frequently warning his audience and readers against the follies of premature, rash action. The play does suggest that Caesar is probably not the dreadful tyrant who has sometimes been portrayed, especially in productions that have sought to represent him as a fascist dictator. Caesar is feeble and ailing, deaf in one ear and lacking a robust physical presence, not a vigorous and driven ideologue. Dreadful crimes are committed in his name, such as the silencing of the tribunes, Murellus and Flavius, who object to the celebrations for his victories over Pompey, but they are not necessarily authorized by him. He is arrogant and naïve, especially when he refuses to listen to good advice, and he has

little idea of how to govern those who surround him or, indeed what they are planning and how they might feel about him.

But, as Brutus admits in his orchard (2.1.10–34), Caesar has to be killed not because of what he has done but because of what he might do, logic that is problematic on a number of levels, not least because Caesar is hardly unformed. Nevertheless, even if he is no towering twentieth-century dictator, as he has often been represented in more recent productions of the play, Caesar is hardly a straightforwardly admirable character. The opening scene is a reminder that Caesar has achieved power through his triumph over his rival, Pompey, and that he has been prepared to fight a bloody and divisive civil war to rule in Rome. His ally, Mark Antony, delivers a superb funeral oration for his dead friend and leader, but is prepared to rip the social fabric of Rome apart for his own personal revenge.

The republican faction is itself undeniably flawed, and only the most partisan reader could argue that Shakespeare nails his colors to their mast. Cassius is sly and underhanded, having enough knowledge of human behavior to flatter Brutus into joining his cause by throwing stones at Brutus's window and claiming that the people are demanding that Brutus act to save them. Even if Cassius's devoted, homoerotic regard for Brutus humanizes him in the last two acts as the republican forces are hunted down and destroyed, it is still hard not to feel that Cassius, like Mark Antony, allows personal loyalties to override any sense of allegiance to wider communities or feelings of responsibility toward other human beings whose fates he is able to control.

Brutus is undoubtedly a man of principle and constancy, yet he often behaves ridiculously. His speech justifying the assassination of Caesar is based on shaky premises and faulty logic. He delivers another flat speech (3.2.12–46) when needing to persuade the people to support the actions of the conspirators, failing to make a series of specific points against Caesar (that his military background renders him

incapable of appreciating the complex nature of Roman government, that he was prepared to wage a brutal civil war to get what he wanted) and concentrating instead on Caesar's abstract and hardly capital crime of "ambition." He is aloof and cold as both friend and husband, refusing to discuss matters with his intelligent and faithful wife who is prepared to wound and finally kill herself because of him, and then failing to see how crucial his alliance with Cassius is as their campaign becomes more and more desperate. Most important, his judgment is often simply wrong, and he is too arrogant to realize how foolish his actions are. He allows Antony to speak at Caesar's funeral against the sage advice of Cassius, who realizes Antony's ability to undermine their cause. He insists that they all bathe in Caesar's blood after they have killed Caesar as a sign of their commitment to "Peace, freedom, and liberty," a moment of grim comedy. And he insists on immediately engaging the army of the triumvirate when no prudent general would take such an absurd risk.

Brutus, as these character summaries indicate, is easily the most important figure in the play (Caesar, after all, dies in Act Three), and *Julius Caesar* has sometimes been read as his tragedy. However, we may wish to resist such efforts to see the play as the tragedy of a single heroic individual. Greek tragedy, and Aristotle's influential reading of the body of drama that defined European theater, emphasized that the action could carry the tragic effect rather than the audience needing to see one figure as a tragic hero. Shakespeare's play can be read as a comment on the tragic state of Rome as the city was in the painful process of transforming itself from a republic to an empire. The characters and their personalities matter less than the situations that they find themselves in and the limited solutions at their disposal.

Roman history was taught in all Elizabethan schools, and everyone who had had an education—and many who had not—knew the basic history of the ancient city-state, knowledge that cannot be taken for granted today. Roman history was widely believed to be

cyclical in nature. Rome was traditionally thought to have been founded by its first king, Romulus, who killed his brother Remus after a quarrel. A series of dynasties ruled Rome until the Tarquins, the last kings of Rome, assumed control. Their rule ended when Tarquinius Sextus, the son of the tyrannical king Tarquinius Superbus, raped the chaste Roman matron Lucrece, as Shakespeare narrated in his own version of the story, *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). Unable to live with her shame, Lucrece killed herself, and the angry Romans, led by Brutus's ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, rose up and exiled the Tarquins, vowing never to be ruled by kings again. In place of the monarchy, they established the Roman Republic, a stable form of state that treated all citizens relatively equally, trusting the senators who met in the Capitol building to determine how the city should be governed in consultation with other officials such as the tribunes (elected by the plebeians to represent them).

The Republic was a remarkably successful institution, working through a series of checks and balances to chart a middle course against extremes. Nonetheless, it came under severe pressure as Rome expanded into an empire, in part because it now had to govern vast areas that were hard to control and in part because the army became an increasingly powerful element of Roman society that sought more control for itself. The Republic began to degenerate as feuding factions of generals, inflated by their own triumphs, threatened the fabric of government. Pompey the Great clashed with Julius Caesar, the latter triumphing and becoming dictator. Although Caesar was then assassinated, a series of bloody civil wars erupted throughout the empire until Octavius stood alone as sole ruler of Rome, crowning himself as its first emperor, Augustus. His reign was controversial, having been supported and condemned in equal measure by subsequent historians. But he was followed by some of the most brutal dictators in world history: the infamous Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero. During their reigns, many of the works that the Elizabethans studied were written, including the influential histories by Tacitus and Livy as well as the republican anti-epic by Lucan, the *Pharsalia*.

It is little wonder that the legacy of the Republic was regarded with much more enthusiasm than that of the vicious early days of the Empire.

As this brief overview suggests, Roman history seemed straightforward and easy to remember, and readers were encouraged to make comparisons with events in their own times. Early audiences of *Julius Caesar* were clearly in a position to make such connections when they saw the play, given the ubiquity of Roman history and the wealth of comparisons made between the history of Rome and the history of England by Shakespeare's contemporaries (see "*Julius Caesar* on the Early Stage," page 291). The Rome we see represented on stage in Shakespeare's play is a frightened, paranoid, and vicious place in which individuals find that they can trust no one outside a select circle of close friends because there are no public institutions left to support debate and proper government. The city Shakespeare depicts bears little comparison to that of the Republic at its most stable, when Rome was famed for public oratory and political debate. While the Republic staged great trials of miscreants in which famed orators argued the merits of cases and political decisions were openly debated by all citizens, in *Julius Caesar* individuals hide in corners planning violent acts of desperation. A more pointed contrast still is that between Brutus the founder of the Roman Republic and Brutus the assassin. While the actions of the first Brutus do actually lead to "Peace, freedom, and liberty," those of the second, despite the rallying cry, lead only to chaos and civil war, the death of the incumbent ruler only leading to more deaths.

We must not, however, blame this failure to live up to the ideals of the Republic simply on the characters in Shakespeare's play. A companion piece to *Julius Caesar* is *Hamlet*, another drama centered on a political assassination in which the frustrated and doomed hero exclaims, "The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (1.5.188–189). Hamlet realizes the weight of the unwelcome burden that has been thrust upon him and which he would never have chosen himself. The same dilemma confronts the characters in *Julius Caesar*, especially Brutus. That he fails to reproduce the results of his predecessor and

namesake suggests that when history does repeat itself it is invariably a pale shadow or a parody of what went before. The time was ripe for the transformation of Rome when the Tarquins ruled. They were genuine tyrants who needed to be overthrown, and there was a popular will that meant that the Republic became a realizable possibility. Julius Caesar is only a potential tyrant, not obviously worse than those men who surround him, and the popular will for the revitalization of the Republic is faked by Cassius. Far from exhibiting a union of leaders and populace, the play shows the conspirators huddling in small groups nervously making grand plans while the people celebrate the achievements of Caesar and ignore the attempts of the tribunes to stir up sympathy for the Republic. As in *Hamlet*, the time is out of joint, and things cannot be put right.

The Republic was able to function so well in the first place because of two central features. One of these was the esteem in which Romans regarded eloquence in speech and writing, including eloquence in political speech, forensic oratory, forms of praise, treatises, letters, works of fiction, and dialogues. The second was the value Romans placed upon friendship, which bound citizens together in a common enterprise. We see eloquence go badly awry in *Julius Caesar*. Caesar himself makes no important speech and concentrates instead on oracular pronouncements that are invariably bizarre and reveal more about his own sense of his self-worth than about anything in the world beyond his ego, a worrying but all too familiar tendency of the isolated dictator. He frequently refers to himself in the third person, as though he had already become a god (an obsession of later Roman emperors). When Calphurnia does manage to persuade him—albeit briefly—that he ought not attend the Senate on the Ides of March, he informs Decius, who has come to collect him, that he will not falsely claim to be sick:

Shall Caesar send a lie?

Have I in conquest stretched mine arm so far

To be afraid to tell graybeards the truth?

Decius, go tell them Caesar will not come. (2.2.65–68)

Decius asks for a cause to be given so that he can avoid humiliation but is told that the cause is simply Caesar's will. And yet, as we all know, Caesar is eventually persuaded to attend when a more flattering interpretation is given of his wife's frightening dream.

Such words hardly resemble the achievements of the Roman Republic in its heyday, represented for Elizabethans mainly by the works of Cicero, the eloquent and outspoken conscience of the Republic. Cicero produced a whole library of important works, including dialogues, orations made in the Senate and in famous trials, and treatises, most famously on the duties of a citizen, the value of friendship, and the elements of the republican constitution. Cicero was a master of the art of rhetoric, able to tailor any argument to an appropriate form in order to persuade an audience of his position, whether praising great men, prosecuting wrongdoers, or reminding citizens of their loyalty to their country. Cicero does indeed appear in Shakespeare's play, but only as a minor figure. Cicero appears in the third scene of the play, during the great storm that marks the onset of the action once the conspirators have made their decision to kill Caesar. Like Caesar—but for different reasons—he says little, in contrast to the known record of his loquaciousness and ability to manipulate words better than anyone else. Cicero refuses to join the conspirators and appears a calm presence in contrast to the intensely nervous Casca. We eventually learn that he has been put to death. Nonetheless, Cicero's reputation and his role in promoting the virtues of republican Rome cast a shadow over the action of the play. The fact that he has little chance to speak or act in *Julius Caesar* is a potent sign that his values cannot flourish in the cloak-and-dagger world of the play; the eloquent speech and writing that Rome at its best produced and promoted are now irrelevant. Cicero may disparage the aims of the conspirators as well as the actions of Caesar, and stand above the superstition and chaos that envelop Rome, but he is powerless to change the course of the city's destiny.

It is a sad fact that republicans such as Brutus are poor orators—partly because they have no investment in or experience of

trying to persuade an audience of citizens that they are right—whereas their most significant opponent, Mark Antony, is a brilliant orator, attentive to the needs and demands of the situation, fully in command of his material, and sensitive to what his audience wants to hear. There is, of course, considerable irony in the fact that Antony is able to derail the republican cause using its own traditional virtues. Not only does he demonstrate that he is a more eloquent speaker than any of his opponents, but he also does what he does for the sake of his dead friend, Julius Caesar. The tables are neatly turned, a further sign of the times when nothing stays in one place. The irony multiplies when, in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606), Antony meets a similar fate as he dies fighting his erstwhile allies while the Roman Republic implodes from within.

Antony's touching but dangerous loyalty to Caesar is balanced by the friendship between Cassius and Brutus. We witness a world in which the virtues of friendship should lead to stronger ties that enhance and bond the social fabric of the state, but, in fact, here they help to undermine it. Cassius's highly charged love for Brutus helps to persuade him to hatch the plot to assassinate Caesar, a telling example of virtue turned to vice, while Brutus's love for Cassius leads him consistently into terrible errors of judgment. At the end of the play Antony praises Brutus as the "noblest Roman of them all," excusing him from acting against Caesar out of impure motives, unlike his allies, who he argues acted out of "envy of great Caesar" (5.5.69). Antony has missed what is obvious to the audience: just as he acted out of love for Caesar—and was prepared to countenance virtually any consequence to avenge his dead friend—so did Cassius act out of his devotion to Brutus as well as his hatred of Caesar. The two friendships serve to destroy the Republic, the very state that encouraged men to develop such relationships with each other, another keen irony that shadows the play.

The most eagerly anticipated scene in the play for much of its stage history was the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius in Act Four, scene three. Here we see the two doomed generals talking at cross purposes and revealing a breach that can never be healed, one

that fatally undermines their military strategy. Cassius and Brutus have vastly different values. Cassius values his friendship with Brutus before all else, so much so that he wants Brutus's regard for him to obscure any sense of Cassius's human flaws. Brutus, in contrast, wants Cassius to adhere to an absolute scale of moral values that no one but the "noblest Roman of them all" could possibly achieve. Their division is not only a pitiful human tragedy, one of the many contained in this remarkable play, but an indication of the collapse of generally accepted values that characterizes the fall of the Roman Republic.

Julius Caesar is a splendid play: complicated, controversial, full of intense dramatic moments, and eloquent even when lack of eloquence is represented on stage. Shakespeare clearly wanted his audience to make connections between the events that finally destroyed the Roman Republic and the impending death of Tudor England. Was England descending into chaos with the absence of a proper central authority, as Elizabeth grew ever older and, according to many of her subjects, remote from the needs and desires of the people she governed? Were her chief courtiers acting like the Roman senators who eventually decided to assassinate their leader, even if they would never dare to commit such a sacrilegious act? Would her death plunge the land into a civil war like the one that had torn Rome apart? Of course, this is not to insist that all readers and audiences bear such connections in mind each time they experience the play. *Julius Caesar* is a tragedy that cannot be limited to the interests and anxieties that surrounded its first production. As Shakespeare's best-known Roman play, it has inspired a range of creative interpretations, and the dangers of unchecked tyranny, like those of self-deceived would-be saviors, are known in every age. Nevertheless, understanding the Roman history that Shakespeare imaginatively recreates enables us to appreciate the significance, range, and depth of the meanings of the play.

Shakespeare and His England

by David Scott Kastan

Shakespeare is a household name, one of those few that don't need a first name to be instantly recognized. His first name was, of course, William, and he (and it, in its Latin form, *Gulielmus*) first came to public notice on April 26, 1564, when his baptism was recorded in the parish church of Stratford-upon-Avon, a small market town about ninety miles northwest of London. It isn't known exactly when he was born, although traditionally his birthday is taken to be April 23rd. It is a convenient date (perhaps too convenient) because that was the date of his death in 1616, as well as the date of St. George's Day, the annual feast day of England's patron saint. It is possible Shakespeare was born on the 23rd; no doubt he was born within a day or two of that date. In a time of high rates of infant mortality, parents would not wait long after a baby's birth for the baptism. Twenty percent of all children would die before their first birthday.

Life in 1564, not just for infants, was conspicuously vulnerable. If one lived to age fifteen, one was likely to live into one's fifties, but probably no more than 60 percent of those born lived past their mid-teens. Whole towns could be ravaged by epidemic disease. In 1563, the year before Shakespeare was born, an outbreak of plague claimed over one third of the population of London. Fire, too, was a constant

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wise with Cassius. He is cynically aware of every step he takes. He is the Seducer. He proceeds to lay siege to Brutus' integrity exactly as a seducer in a commoner sense does to a woman's chastity. Cassius looks up to Brutus, even loves him. Why, then, does he not let him alone and find someone more fit for the business he has in hand? Because the conspiracy needs the moral prestige that only Brutus can lend it.

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

Like the woman who thinks it is not in her, he thinks it is not in him, but proves that it is by remaining to hear more—just as Ivan Karamazov once remained to hear more from Smerdyakov.

Cassius knows his brother will entertain no proposal save for the general good. So he attacks him where virtue and its opposite are forever getting confused, in his pride, pride in his ancestors' dedication to republicanism:

O, you and I have heard our fathers say,
There was a Brutus once that would have brook'd
Th' eternal devil to keep his state in Rome
As easily as a king.

The fathers once more! It is the clinching argument. Like Romeo and Hal, Brutus capitulates to the past, or rather to Cassius' subtle perversion of it (the earlier Brutus did not kill the tyrant). "I sense what you are driving at," Brutus confesses in effect. "Indeed, I have been meditating on these very things myself, and will confer about them—later."

What you have said
I will consider; what you have to say
I will with patience hear, and find a time
Both meet to hear and answer such high things.

The lines have a familiar ring.

Yet when we can entreat an hour to serve,
We would spend it in some words upon that business,
If you would grant the time.

Macbeth to Banquo! a sinister parallel.

Caesar with his train enters, and when he has retired, Casca tells how he was three times offered the crown and three times refused it. As Casca goes out, Brutus changes his appointment with Cassius from some indefinite time in the future to a definite one on the morrow at his home. Cassius has won. He soliloquizes:

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Well, Brutus, thou art noble; yet, I see,
Thy honourable metal may be wrought
From that it is dispos'd. Therefore it is meet
That noble minds keep ever with their likes:
For who so firm that cannot be seduc'd?

Seduced: he is honest enough to use the very word. With cynical frankness he admits that he has corrupted his friend, that his own conduct has been ignoble, that, if the roles had been reversed, Brutus would never have done to him what he has done to Brutus. And yet, in the face of all this from the arch-conspirator, men have argued whether Brutus did right or wrong to enter the conspiracy!

IV

His evil angels have had their way with Brutus in the first act. As the second act opens, we find him invoking his good angel. But he does not know it: he thinks he is just a sleepless man arousing a sleeping child.

What, Lucius, ho!
I cannot, by the progress of the stars,
Give guess how near to day. Lucius, I say!
I would it were my fault to sleep so soundly.
When, Lucius, when! Awake, I say! What, Lucius!

Here the metaphor of daybreak that figures so significantly through the play is beautifully introduced. The daybreak of the fatal day of Caesar's death is but an hour or so away. Following close upon it will be the daybreak of new liberty for Rome, or so Brutus believes. Finally, there is the daybreak of life itself incarnated in the child. Brutus cannot estimate by the stars how near day is. But he looks in the wrong place. The dawn that might save him is as near as the next room, as near as the child, as near as himself, and when he cries "Awake!" he is beseeching the child within to awaken before it is too late. The boy enters, and his master sends him to light a taper in another room, not realizing that the child himself is the best light. From end to end the role of Lucius is permeated with this symbolism. Caesar, just before his fall, announces that he is the Northern Star that alone holds a fixed place in the moving firmament. Lucius is that star. It is not by chance that the moment the boy is gone Brutus begins to lose his way, to strike the note of darkness: "It must be by his death."

Presently Lucius comes back with a paper that was thrown in at the window of Brutus' study:

"Brutus, thou sleep'st; awake, and see thyself!"

How different that "Awake" from the one that opened the scene, and what ironical words to address to a victim of insomnia who has been

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awake all night! Lucius, whom Brutus has sent out for a calendar, re-enters, and the Janus-like stage direction is "*Knocking within.*" The boy goes to the gate and reports that Cassius has come with others he cannot identify because their hats are plucked about their ears and half their faces buried in their cloaks. "O conspiracy!" cries Brutus, and the speech that follows shows how his soul abhors the enterprise he is nevertheless bent on undertaking. Dangerous, dark, monstrous; night, cavern, evil; shame, mask, hide: adjectives, nouns, and verbs conspire fairly to shout the truth in his ears. But he is deaf. And this lover of truth stoops to the abjectest hypocrisy when he bids the conspiracy hide itself in smiles and affability.

To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.

These lines are Lady Macbeth's. Except perhaps for the touch about the serpent, where she goes a bit beyond him, they might pass unchallenged if assigned to Brutus at this point.

As Brutus and Cassius whisper together, several of the other conspirators take up, as if the scene were music, the theme of daybreak with which it opened:

DECIVS: Here lies the east. Doth not the day break here?
CASCA: No.
CINNA: O, pardon, sir, it doth; and yon grey lines
That fret the clouds are messengers of day.
CASCA: You shall confess that you are both deceiv'd.
Here, as I point my sword, the sun arises,
Which is a great way growing on the south,
Weighing the youthful season of the year.
Some two months hence, up higher toward the north
He first presents his fire; and the high east
Stands as the Capitol, directly here.

"While Brutus and Cassius confer," says Kittredge, "the others courteously occupy themselves with casual talk about indifferent matters." It may have seemed casual and indifferent to the speakers. But it was not to their imaginations, nor to Shakespeare's. If there is a passage in the play that lets us into the secret of what the author thought of the conspiracy it is this. (This, and possibly two others yet to be mentioned.) As we have seen, Shakespeare is forever using such apparent parentheses for uttering his own convictions under the protection of a metaphor. These men think

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they are about to bring a new day to Rome when they cannot even agree as to where the geographical east lies. They promise a new spiritual morning before they have even learned where the material sun comes up! And when Casca cries:

Here, as I point my sword, the sun arises,

we feel the presumption of expecting a new day to break at the command of a sword. Casca has surpassed Chauncleer in egotism. Thus is the political message of the play condensed into a metaphor, its whole point suspended, as it were, on the point of a sword.

Cassius suggests in succession that the conspirators bind themselves to one another by an oath, sound out Cicero, and mark Antony to fall with Caesar. Brutus negatives each of these proposals, revealing in each instance how unfitted he is for the business he is undertaking. In the case of Cicero, the reason he gives,

For he will never follow anything
That other men begin,

strongly implies that he does not want to share his prestige as moral head of the conspiracy. In the other two cases he is unconsciously attempting to compensate for an ignoble major decision by minor nobler ones.

If there were no other evidence whatever, the speech in which Brutus seeks to justify the sparing of Antony would be enough in itself to show how completely the true Brutus recognizes in advance the futility of the course on which the false Brutus is embarking. Without knowing it, he puts his finger on the precise reason why the conspiracy was bound to fail. As in Richard II's tribute to Peace, or Henry V's argument with Williams about the king's responsibility for the consciences of his soldiers, the imagination of the man tells the truth over his head. He thinks he is saying one thing when actually he is saying just the opposite.

Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,
To cut the head off and then hack the limbs,
Like wrath in death and envy afterwards;
For Antony is but a limb of Caesar.
Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius.
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! And, gentle friends,
Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully;
Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,

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Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds;
 And let our hearts, as subtle masters do,
 Stir up their servants to an act of rage,
 And after seem to chide 'em. This shall make
 Our purpose necessary and not envious;
 Which so appearing to the common eyes,
 We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers.
 And for Mark Antony, think not of him;
 For he can do no more than Caesar's arm
 When Caesar's head is off.

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. No one will question that major premise. All lovers of liberty will second the minor one. 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.

The logic is false, but the metaphors, as usual, slip in the truth.

Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius . . .
 Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods.

Dropping out the six lines that intervene between those two reveals the tricks his mind is playing upon Brutus—for who ever carved what had not previously been butchered? And the figure of the master and servants betrays him even more ignominiously. **The conspirators seek the end of the man who would make himself master of Rome. Brutus tells them they must imitate the subtle master who stirs up his servants to a violent act and then appears to chide them for committing it.** Thus the assassination will be received as a deed of necessity rather than envy:

We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers.

Purgers! the very word that in our day has been used so often to camouflage murder. The example establishes the point it is supposed to refute and stamps the act it is used to justify as murder.

Brutus' opinion prevails, Antony is spared, and to an ominous striking of the clock, anticipating the ringing of the bell that summoned Macbeth "to heaven or to hell," the conspirators disperse as Cassius cries, "The morning comes upon's," and Brutus warns,

Let not our looks put on our purposes,
 But bear it as our Roman actors do.

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He is indeed, himself, playing a part. And when he turns to the child, it is as if he were bidding a final farewell to his true but discarded self:

Boy! Lucius! Fast asleep? It is no matter.

No matter that his innocence slumbers? He did not think so when the scene opened.

But if one of Brutus' good angels is asleep, the other is not. Portia enters to inquire why her lord has left her bed at this unwonted hour. And with a skill that would do credit to a twentieth-century psychiatrist she lists the symptoms she has noted of his mental perturbation, signs of a nervous irritability that has altered him almost past recognition. He protests that he is merely physically unwell. She will have nothing of that explanation, and piercing directly to the truth, she cries:

No, my Brutus,

You have some sick offence within your mind.

She kneels to him, begging him to reveal his secret.

There is a tide in the affairs of men . . .

It was at this moment, not when, too late, he uttered those famous lines to Cassius, that Brutus should have recognized that his last chance to save himself from becoming an assassin had come.

O ye gods!

Render me worthy of this noble wife!

If ever a prayer was sincere, it is this. If ever a man had a chance to help answer his own prayer, this is he. Again, the stage direction registers the spiritual crisis with a "*Knocking within*." It is as ominous a knocking as the more famous one in *Macbeth*.

And what does Brutus say and do?

Hark, hark! one knocks. *Portia, go in awhile,*

And *by and by* thy bosom shall partake

The secrets of my heart.

All my engagements I will construe to thee,

All the character of my sad brows.

Leave me with haste. (Exit Portia)

Lucius, who's that knocks?

(Re-enter Lucius with Ligarius)

LUC.: Here is a sick man that would speak with you.

BRU.: Caius Ligarius, that Metellus spake of.

Boy, stand aside. Caius Ligarius! how?

If the poet had had Brutus say, "My Wisdom, go in awhile! My Innocence, stand aside! Sickness, let me embrace you!" he could hardly have

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made his point clearer. There are few stage directions in his plays more pathetic than those two words: *Exit Portia*. It might have been: *Exit the Soul of Brutus*.

Brutus tells Ligarius that great things are afoot, and, summoning his failing forces, the latter inquires, "What's to do?"

A piece of work that will make sick men whole,
replies Brutus.

But are not some whole that we must make sick?
asks Ligarius, suspecting the truth. He does not know that his words fit the man to whom he is speaking better than they do the intended victim, who in an hour or two will be beyond both sickness and wholeness. "That must we also," replies Brutus, equally ignorant of the application of the words to himself. "Set on your foot," says Ligarius,

And with a heart new-fir'd I follow you,
To do I know not what: but it sufficeth
That Brutus leads me on.

Follow me then,

says Brutus, and he too might well have added, "to do I know not what." It is tragic when a nobility that might have led only follows, when it consents to be used by envious men for their base purposes. It adds to the tragedy when weak men, trusting that nobility, follow it blindly into that baseness.

V

Brutus is not the only one whose sleep is interrupted the night before the assassination and who will not let his wife save him. The same is true of Caesar. Three times Calphurnia dreams that her husband is murdered, that his statue runs blood in which many Romans bathe their hands. And the augurers confirm her fear. Caesar decides not to go to the Capitol. But Decius Brutus, by a strained reinterpretation of the dream and by dangling the hope of a crown before him, gets him to change his mind. Brutus leads him to Brutus. The crown he is to receive is death.

Even at the last moment he might have been saved if he had regarded the Soothsayer or had received the petition of Artemidorus, the philosopher, who in some unexplained way—possibly because the conspirators had not bound themselves to secrecy by an oath—had got a hint of the conspiracy.

What touches us ourself shall be last serv'd,

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he cries, brushing Artemidorus aside. What looks like magnanimity is inverted pride.

Metellus Cimber kneels before Caesar begging the repeal of his brother's banishment. If Caesar's decision had been made a genuine test of his fitness to live, the spectator might feel more sympathy with the conspirators. But his death is ordained regardless of how he decides. Brutus, with a kiss that reminds us more of Judas than of the Brutus who expelled Tarquin from Rome, seconds the petition of Metellus Cimber. Caesar, refusing, justifies his unwillingness to change his mind by comparing himself to the Northern Star and to Olympus. It is assumption of divinity. The man is infatuated. The moment has come. Casca stabs him from behind, the others follow, Brutus, significantly, striking last. "*Et tu, Brute?* Then fall, Caesar!" How much deeper into Brutus' heart those words must have sunk than did the dagger that made "the most unkindest cut of all" into Caesar's flesh. It was Caesar who stabbed Brutus.

VI

Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!

cries Cinna.

Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement!

cries Casca.

Peace, freedom, and liberty!

cries Brutus, and unconsciously fulfilling Calphurnia's dream, he bids his fellows bathe their hands to the elbows in Caesar's blood. (Is this the man we saw bending over a sleeping child but a few hours before?)

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

cries Cassius as he complies with Brutus' bloody suggestion.

How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,
That now on Pompey's basis lies along
No worthier than the dust!

cries Brutus, echoing Cassius. It is significant that while the first prophecy is political, the second is theatrical. How many times since then both have been fulfilled. "So oft as that shall be," Cassius concludes,

So often shall the knot of us be call'd
The men that gave their country liberty.

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What they did give it is best seen by turning over a few pages of the text to the opening of Act IV, where Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus, the new rulers of Rome, sit around a table pricking off the names of those who must die that their own regime may base itself in safety. So soon can tyranny succeed violent revolution. And if the immediate fruits of the assassination as depicted in this play are insufficient, the reader may turn to *Antony and Cleopatra* to behold its remoter harvest.

But this is anticipating.

Antony, whom Brutus spared, begs leave to speak over Caesar's body at his funeral, and, in the face of Cassius' protest, Brutus consents. In a speech that will precede Antony's he will placate the people. The two orations, or rather Brutus' oration and Antony's speech, have been declaimed and dissected in innumerable classrooms. Yet the contrast between them remains a better treatise on the relation of sincerity to style than a shelf of textbooks.

Though everybody sees that the wily Antony puts his speech over, as we say, while Brutus does not, just as a speech Brutus' effort has usually been declared a good one by academic authority. It was merely too good for the mob, it is said. On the contrary it is one of the worst speeches ever made by an able and intelligent man. Its symmetrical structure, its balanced sentences, its ordered procedure, its rhetorical questions, its painfully conscious and ornamental style, its hopelessly abstract subject matter, all stamp it as the utterance of a man whose heart is not in his words. It is a dishonest speech.

The cry of the Third Citizen, "Let him be Caesar," measures its practical effectiveness. Those four words have often been pointed out as one of the most crushing ironies in the play. They are, and with the other comments of the populace show how hopeless the cause of the conspirators was. These people did not deserve liberty. They were ready for slavery.

Antony's speech, on the other hand, for all its playing on the passions of the people, and for all its lies, is at bottom an honest speech, because Antony loved Caesar. Because to that extent he has the truth on his side, he is as concrete as Brutus was abstract. A sincere harangue by a demagogue is better than the most "classic" oration from a man who speaks only with his lips. It is like Henry IV and Falstaff. The good form is on one side, the veracity on the other.

Now let it work,

cries Antony in an accent with which our own day has made us well acquainted,

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Mischief, thou art afoot,
Take thou what course thou wilt!

And Shakespeare devotes a little scene to Cinna, the poet, whom the mob mistakes for Cinna the conspirator. What if they do have hold of the wrong man! They go ahead anyway—on sound lynching principles. It is the Jack Cade motif over again. Mythology is wrong. It is not love, it is passion that is blind.

Meanwhile, before this, word has come to Antony that Brutus and Cassius

Are rid like madmen through the gates of Rome.

Instead of liberating Rome, Rome has "liberated" them. But a few hours before they were crying "Tyranny is dead!" and so soon it all seems like a dream.

VII

After the proscription, at which we took a glance in advance, the scene shifts to Sardis. Assassination and revolution have eventuated in war, and already the two brother-generals are blaming each other for their predicament.

Thou hast describ'd
A hot friend cooling. Ever note, Lucilius,

says Brutus to his servant who has just come from Cassius,

When love begins to sicken and decay,
It useth an enforced ceremony.
There are no tricks in plain and simple faith.

If only Brutus had remembered that truth when, at its inception, he bade the conspiracy hide itself in smiles and affability!

Cassius enters with the salutation,

Most noble brother, you have done me wrong,

and, the two beginning to wrangle, Brutus draws his friend into his own tent that their dissension may not be overheard.

A guilty conscience invariably finds in others the evil it will not admit to itself. The quarrel scene is Brutus' specific confession that the conspiracy and assassination were terrible errors.

As usual, he takes a high idealistic line. He charges Cassius with protecting bribery. "In such a time," Cassius answers, one cannot be meticulous. Brutus implies that Cassius has "an itching palm" and has sold offices for gold. Cassius declares that if he were not Brutus that speech would be his last.

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Remember March, the ides of March remember,
cries Brutus in a tone that reminds us of the very dog he mentions:

Did not great Julius bleed for justice' sake?
What villain touch'd his body, that did stab
And not for justice? What, shall one of us,
That struck the foremost man of all this world
But for supporting robbers, shall we now
Contaminate our fingers with base bribes,
And sell the mighty space of our large honours
For so much trash as may be grasped thus?
I had rather be a dog, and bay the moon,
Than such a Roman.

Shall we who made away with the great Injustice, the great Robber, stoop to little injustices and petty thefts? But in that case, we feel like asking, how about imitating the great Apostle of Force by practicing a little as-sassination? Brutus is not pushing analogy that far.

Brutus, bait not me;
I'll not endure it,

Cassius exclaims, and the quarrel descends to common scolding with Brutus immeasurably the worse offender.

There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats,
he declares, when Cassius warns him not to go too far,

For I am arm'd so strong in honesty
That they pass by me as the idle wind,
Which I respect not.

It is the perfect echo of an earlier speech in the play. The arrogation of moral infallibility is but a step below the affectation of divinity. Brutus has become like Caesar! His victim has infected him with his own disease. It is the special nemesis of the revolutionist. He comes to resemble what he once abhorred.

And the irony goes even further. "I did send to you," Brutus goes on,

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?

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He will not wring gold from the peasants by any indirection. But he will take it, even demand it, of Cassius, who, of course, has no other ultimate source from which to obtain it than just those peasants. Brutus is doing what in the same breath he declares that he would rather die than do. "I won't rob myself, but I will rob by way of you, for I can do nothing indirectly." That is what his astounding argument reduces to. "Indirection": Pandulph's word, Polonius' word. Brutus thinks he is angry with Cassius for his countenance of petty thefts and bribes. Actually he is angry with himself for robbing Rome, for robbing Portia, for robbing himself.

Cassius, stung to the quick, does just what Caesar once did to the mob: presents his bosom to Brutus' dagger—and instantly Brutus relents. But when so huge a fire is suddenly quenched some sparks are bound to escape. A Poet, overhearing and sensing something wrong between the generals, breaks boldly in in an attempt to reconcile them. In ejecting him, Brutus vents what is left of his anger. But in doing so he speaks and behaves more like Hotspur than like Brutus.

Alone again with Cassius, Brutus chooses the moment to reveal the hidden tension he has been under during their quarrel. Portia is dead—by her own hand.

In keeping this secret from his audience as well as from Cassius, Shakespeare violates a fundamental rule of stagecraft. It is one of the clearest of many indications in his plays that he cared for something more than the first impressions of a theater audience. Reread, or seen a second time on the stage, the quarrel scene sounds harmonics that the ear misses completely the first time the scene is encountered.

Brutus attributes Portia's suicide to his absence and to the successes of Octavius and Antony. We can guess, only too easily, the deeper reason why

she fell distract
And, her attendants absent, swallow'd fire.

As fact, Portia's death by swallowing fire is perhaps incredible. As truth, it rises to an order beyond the invention possibly even of a Plutarch or a Shakespeare, to the level of myth itself. But the poet has at least made the most of what he inherited. As he uses it, this incident becomes the second of his three main comments on his own play (the first being the passage on the location of the East). He has made plain in the one scene where we see them together that Portia is Brutus' other "half." As the mirror of his soul, she is bound to reflect so tremendous an event as his spiritual death in accepting the code of violence. And that is exactly what her death does.

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On entering the conspiracy Brutus metaphorically swallowed fire. Portia swallows it literally as an allegory of his act. It is both a picture of his dereliction and a measure of the agony she underwent because of it. The whole meaning of the drama seems somehow concentrated in this symbol.

VIII

The boy brings wine and Brutus and Cassius pledge each other and "bury all unkindness" in the cup. But Brutus will never by swallowing the fire of wine bury the memory of how Portia died. At the very moment indeed he is to be reminded of her end. Messala enters bringing news from Rome. Not knowing whether Brutus has heard of his wife's suicide, he sounds him out, and, on Brutus' insistence that he reveal what he is hinting at, tells the truth. Brutus pretends he has not heard and receives the word with stoic calm. The double report of Portia's death has often been held an error in the text, a sign of unfinished revision. But surely it is just one more bit of evidence that Brutus is acting a part. The unnatural restraint he puts himself under in this personal matter may have more than a little to do too with the rash plan of battle we find him advocating a few minutes later. He turns to it with an abruptness that would have been cruel, had the situation been what Messala supposed.

Shall Brutus and Cassius march down to the enemy and give battle at Philippi or await him where they are on the heights? Brutus is for the former course, Cassius for the latter. The decision is motivated by unseen forces. The quarrel and reconciliation, with the news of Portia's death, have left Cassius melancholy and in no mood to cross Brutus again. The unnatural restraint that Brutus has imposed upon himself with regard to Portia's death helps perhaps to make him impulsive. At any rate he argues—in words the world knows by heart—that they are now at their high tide and should strike immediately. But whatever may be true of the military situation, Brutus' moral tide is at its ebb, and the strategy he favors is ultimately dictated by that fact. Whatever the immediate reasons for it, it conforms finally to nothing less than the pattern of his whole life. His is the story of a man who instead of keeping to "the hills and upper regions" has by the assassination come down to "the enemy." Had he still had hope in his heart, his unconscious might have tried to compensate for his moral decline by insisting that his forces keep to the heights. But with the death of Portia a dark fatalism begins to possess him. He is the victim of a desperation he does not yet realize. And so the plan of battle becomes a symbolic picture of his life. He has gone down before and led other men down. He will do it for the last time. As when he entered the conspiracy,

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his willingness to descend to their level suits "the enemy" exactly. Reluctantly Cassius consents. He who had once led Brutus lower now follows him. "Time is come round." The nemesis is inevitable. Thus, Shakespeare seems to be saying, our particular decisions, which appear to be made freely and on the merits of the occasion, are overruled by the total pattern of our lives. Cause and effect may reign in the physical world, but likeness and unlikeness are sovereign in the realm of the imagination. In our day the man who has plunged too heavily in the stock market leaps from the twentieth story of a skyscraper to his death. The type of suicide he chooses is not chance. It was not chance that Caesar had the "falling" sickness. Nor that the man who killed him becomes a victim of that sickness in another form.

Brutus is left alone with the boy Lucius, and, as usual in his presence, his true self comes to the surface. He is all tenderness. This man who could kill Caesar cannot ask a tired child to watch one hour more. He calls in Claudius and Varro, but bids them lie on cushions rather than stay awake, so sensitive is he to their feelings. It is compensation, of course. He finds the book for which he has searched—revealing touch—in the pocket of his gown, but before beginning to read—another revealing touch—he begs for a strain or two of music from Lucius. The drowsy boy complies, but after a note or two falls asleep over his instrument, and we have Henry IV's soliloquy on sleep dramatized before us. The scholar-assassin finds the leaf turned down where he left reading and composes himself to go on. But noting something strange about the taper, he looks up, and beholds a "monstrous apparition" coming toward him. It is the Ghost of Julius Caesar!

Is the specter a creature of his own fantasy, nothing at all, or, if something, angel or devil? "Speak to me what thou art."

Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

The Delphic answer leaves open the question whether it is from within or from without. But it leaves no doubt, in either case, of its infernal origin. With a promise to meet Brutus again at Philippi, it vanishes.

O, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit,
And not dismember Caesar!

Too late Brutus discovers that when his dagger entered Caesar's body it released a power as towering and uncontrollable as the genie freed by the fisherman in the Arabian tale. Julius Caesar is dead. But his spirit has volatilized into something as invulnerable as the air. "In the spirit of men there is no blood."

may, through acts of treachery, lose possession of his soul before he dies ("before the time that Atropos [the Fate who cuts man's thread of life] should send it," 126). Then, on earth, a devil inhabits the body until its natural death.

137-47. *he is Ser Branca D'Oria*: A prominent resident of Genoa, Branca D'Oria murdered his father-in-law, Michel Zanche (see XXII, 88), after having invited him to dine with him. Although this treacherous act occurred in 1275, Branca (or at least his earthly body) did not die until 1325. Alberigo tells Dante that the soul of Branca, together with that of a close relative who helped him carry out his acts of treachery, fell here, to Tolomea, even before Michel Zanche's soul reached the *bolgia* of the Barrators (142-47).

154. *For in company with Romagna's rankest soul*: Friar Alberigo. Faenza, his home town, was in the region of Romagna (now called Emilia).

155. *I found one of your men, whose deeds were such*: Branca D'Oria.

CANTO XXXIV

FAR ACROSS the frozen ice can be seen the gigantic figure of LUCIFER, who appears from this distance like a windmill seen through fog; and as the two travelers walk on toward that terrifying sight, they see the shades of sinners totally buried in the frozen water. At the center of the earth Lucifer stands frozen from the chest downward, and his horrible ugliness (he has three faces) is made more fearful by the fact that in each of his three mouths he chews on one of the three worst sinners of all mankind, the worst of those who betrayed their benefactors: JUDAS ISCARIOT, BRUTUS, and CASSIUS. Virgil, with the Pilgrim on his back, begins the descent down the shaggy body of Lucifer. They climb down through a crack in the ice, and when they reach the Evil One's thighs, Virgil turns and begins to struggle upward (because they have passed the center of the earth), still holding on to the hairy body of Lucifer, until they reach a cavern, where they stop for a short rest. Then a winding path brings them eventually to the earth's surface, where they see the stars.

"*Vexilla regis prodeunt Inferni,*"

my master said, "closer to us, so now
look ahead and see if you can make him out." 3

A far-off windmill turning its huge sails
when a thick fog begins to settle in,
or when the light of day begins to fade, 6

that is what I thought I saw appearing.
And the gusts of wind it stirred made me shrink back
behind my guide, my only means of cover. 9

Down here, I stood on souls fixed under ice
(I tremble as I put this into verse);
to me they looked like straws worked into glass. 12

Some lying flat, some perpendicular,
 either with their heads up or their feet,
 and some bent head to foot, shaped like a bow. 15

When we had moved far enough along the way
 that my master thought the time had come to show me
 the creature who was once so beautiful, 18

he stepped aside, and stopping me, announced:
 "This is he, this is Dis; this is the place
 that calls for all the courage you have in you." 21

How chilled and nerveless, Reader, I felt then;
 do not ask me—I cannot write about it—
 there are no words to tell you how I felt. 24

I did not die—I was not living either!
 Try to imagine, if you can imagine,
 me there, deprived of life and death at once. 27

The king of the vast kingdom of all grief
 stuck out with half his chest above the ice;
 my height is closer to the height of giants 30

than theirs is to the length of his great arms;
 consider now how large all of him was:
 this body in proportion to his arms. 33

If once he was as fair as now he's foul
 and dared to raise his brows against his Maker,
 it is fitting that all grief should spring from him. 36

Oh, how amazed I was when I looked up
 and saw a head—one head wearing three faces!
 One was in front (and that was a bright red), 39

the other two attached themselves to this one
 just above the middle of each shoulder,
 and at the crown all three were joined in one: 42

The right face was a blend of white and yellow,
 the left the color of those people's skin
 who live along the river Nile's descent. 45

Beneath each face two mighty wings stretched out,
 the size you might expect of this huge bird
 (I never saw a ship with larger sails): 48

not feathered wings but rather like the ones
 a bat would have. He flapped them constantly,
 keeping three winds continuously in motion 51

to lock Cocytus eternally in ice.
 He wept from his six eyes, and down three chins
 were dripping tears all mixed with bloody slaver. 54

In each of his three mouths he crunched a sinner,
 with teeth like those that rake the hemp and flax,
 keeping three sinners constantly in pain; 57

the one in front—the biting he endured
 was nothing like the clawing that he took:
 sometimes his back was raked clean of its skin. 60

"That soul up there who suffers most of all,"
 my guide explained, "is Judas Iscariot:
 the one with head inside and legs out kicking. 63

As for the other two whose heads stick out,
 the one who hangs from that black face is Brutus—
 see how he squirms in silent desperation; 66

the other one is Cassius, he still looks sturdy.
 But soon it will be night. Now is the time
 to leave this place, for we have seen it all." 69

I held on to his neck, as he told me to,
 while he watched and waited for the time and place,
 and when the wings were stretched out just enough, 72

he grabbed on to the shaggy sides of Satan;
 then downward, tuft by tuft, he made his way
 between the tangled hair and frozen crust. 75

When we had reached the point exactly where
 the thigh begins, right at the haunch's curve,
 my guide, with strain and force of every muscle, 78

- turned his head toward the shaggy shanks of Dis
and grabbed the hair as if about to climb—
I thought that we were heading back to Hell. 81
- “Hold tight, there is no other way,” he said,
panting, exhausted, “only by these stairs
can we leave behind the evil we have seen.” 84
- When he had got me through the rocky crevice,
he raised me to its edge and set me down,
then carefully he climbed and joined me there. 87
- I raised my eyes, expecting I would see
the half of Lucifer I saw before.
Instead I saw his two legs stretching upward. 90
- If at that sight I found myself confused,
so will those simple-minded folk who still
don’t see what point it was I must have passed. 93
- “Get up,” my master said, “get to your feet,
the way is long, the road a rough climb up,
already the sun approaches middle tierce!” 96
- It was no palace promenade we came to,
but rather like some dungeon Nature built:
it was paved with broken stone and poorly lit. 99
- “Before we start to struggle out of here,
O master,” I said when I was on my feet,
“I wish you would explain some things to me. 102
- Where is the ice? And how can he be lodged
upside-down? And how, in so little time,
could the sun go all the way from night to day?” 105
- “You think you’re still on the center’s other side,”
he said, “where I first grabbed the hairy worm
of rotteness that pierces the earth’s core; 108
- and you *were* there as long as I moved downward
but, when I turned myself, you passed the point
to which all weight from every part is drawn. 111

- Now you are standing beneath the hemisphere
which is opposite the side covered by land,
where at the central point was sacrificed 114
- the Man whose birth and life were free of sin.
You have both feet upon a little sphere
whose other side Judecca occupies; 117
- when it is morning here, there it is evening.
And he whose hairs were stairs for our descent
has not changed his position since his fall. 120
- When he fell from the heavens on this side,
all of the land that once was spread out here,
alarmed by his plunge, took cover beneath the sea 123
- and moved to our hemisphere; with equal fear
the mountain-land, piled up on this side, fled
and made this cavern here when it rushed upward. 126
- Below somewhere there is a space, as far
from Beelzebub as the limit of his tomb,
known not by sight but only by the sound 129
- of a little stream that makes its way down here
through the hollow of a rock that it has worn,
gently winding in gradual descent.” 132
- My guide and I entered that hidden road
to make our way back up to the bright world.
We never thought of resting while we climbed. 135
- We climbed, he first and I behind, until,
through a small round opening ahead of us
I saw the lovely things the heavens hold, 138
- and we came out to see once more the stars.

NOTES

1. “*Vexilla regis prodeunt Inferni*”: The opening lines of the hymn “*Vexilla regis prodeunt*”—“The banners of the King advance” (written by Venantius Fortunatus, sixth-century bishop

of Poitiers, this hymn belongs to the liturgy of the Church)—is here parodied by the addition of the word *Inferni* ("of Hell") to the word *regis* ("of the King"). Sung on Good Friday, the hymn anticipates the unveiling of the Cross; Dante, who began his journey on the evening of Good Friday, is prepared by Virgil's words for the sight of Lucifer, who will appear like a "windmill" in a "thick fog." The banners referred to are Lucifer's wings. The ironic nature of the parodied line and its effect are evident: with the first three words the reader is prepared to think in terms of the Cross, the symbol of man's redemption through Christ; but with the fourth he is abruptly recalled to the present reality of Hell and, moreover, to the immediate presence of Lucifer, the personification of Evil and the antithesis of Christian Love.

10. *Down here, I stood on souls fixed under ice:* These sinners in various positions fixed rigidly in the ice present a picture of complete immobility and incommunicability, as though they have been entombed a second time. Silence reigns in this fourth division of Cocytus (named Judecca, 117, after the traitor Judas), the gelid abode of those souls in whom all warmth of love for God and for their fellow man has been extinguished.

18. *the creature who was once so beautiful:* Before his fall Lucifer was held by God to be the fairest of the angels. Pride caused Lucifer's rebellion against his Maker and precipitated his expulsion from Heaven. The arch-traitor is, like the other sinners, fixed and suffering in the ice. He weeps.

20. *This is he, this is Dis; this is the place:* In antiquity Pluto, god of the Underworld, was often referred to as "Dis," a name here applied to Lucifer.

38-45. *and saw a head—one head wearing three faces!:* Dante presents Lucifer's head as a perverted parallel of the Trinity. The symbolic value of the three single faces has been much debated. Although many commentators believe that the colors (red, yellow, black) represent the three known continents (Europe, Asia, Africa), it seems more logical that they should be antithetically analogous to the qualities attributed to the Trinity (see Canto III, 5-6). Therefore, Highest Wisdom would

be opposed by ignorance (black), Divine Omnipotence by impotence (yellow), Primal Love by hatred or envy (red).

46. *Beneath each face two mighty wings stretched out:* The entire figure of Lucifer is a parody of the angelic. Originally belonging to the order of the Cherubim, he retains his six wings even in Hell, though here, devoid of their heavenly plumage, they appear as those of a bat (the standard depiction of the Devil's wings in the Middle Ages). Satan's huge but impotent figure in the darkness might also be contrasted with the image of God (in the *Paradise*) as a small, indivisible point of light in movement.

61-63. *That soul up there who suffers most of all:* Having betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver, Judas endures greater punishment than the other two souls. His position in Lucifer's mouth recalls that of the Simonists in Canto XIX. Moreover, Lucifer himself will appear in the same manner ("his two legs stretching upward," 90), when Dante and Virgil have passed the center of the earth and are about to leave Hell. The Simonists, then, prefigure the principal traitors against God and Christ, both in act (treachery to Christ's Church) and spatial disposition of their bodies. See XIX, final note.

65. *the one who hangs from that black face is Brutus:* Marcus Brutus, who was deceitfully persuaded by Cassius (67) to join the conspiracy, aided in the assassination of Julius Caesar. It is fitting that in his final vision of the *Inferno* the Pilgrim should see those shades who committed treacherous acts against Divine and worldly authorities: the Church and the Roman Empire. This provides the culmination, at least in this canticle, of the basic themes: Church and Empire.

67. *the other one is Cassius, he still looks sturdy:* Caius Cassius Longinus was another member of the conspiracy against Caesar. By describing Cassius as "still looking sturdy," Dante shows he has evidently confused him with Lucius Cassius, whom Cicero calls *adepts*, "corpulent."

79-81. *turned his head toward the shaggy shanks of Dis:* Virgil, carrying the Pilgrim on his back, slowly makes his way down Lucifer's hairy body and, upon reaching a certain point (the

center of the universe and, consequently, of terrestrial gravity), where Lucifer's thighs begin, he must turn his head in the direction of Lucifer's legs and begin to climb "upward"—thus confusing the Pilgrim on his back. The way in which Virgil executed his own shift of position on Lucifer's body must have been as follows: when he reached the thigh he moved his head to the side and downward until (still holding on with one hand to the hair of the chest) he could reach with his other hand to grasp the hair on the thigh—then (aided now by the shift of gravitational pull) to free the first hand and complete the half-circle he had initiated, proceeding henceforth as a man climbing.

Incidentally, of all the translations of this passage that I have read (including not only translations in English but also those in French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Dutch, Latin, Greek, Welsh), none translates line 79 as I do, attributing the "shanks" to Lucifer; all give them to Virgil, presenting him as turning his head toward his own shanks. This is not because the line is difficult ("*Valse la testa ov'elli avea le zanche*," "he turned the head to where *he* had the shanks"); in fact, it is not even ambiguous, if the translator bears in mind the use of subject pronouns in Italian. What must have happened is that every translator has copied unthinkingly translations that have preceded. As it is, by attributing the *zanche* ("shanks") to Virgil they have not only sinned on aesthetic grounds (this derisive, pejorative term applied to the noble body of Virgil!), but have blurred the clear symbolism here intended: *zanche* is used only twice in *The Divine Comedy*, once in reference to the legs of Nicholas (Canto XIX) and once in this canto. Surely, the two pairs of legs thus verbally linked must be those not of Nicholas and Virgil but those of Nicholas and Lucifer—both of whom present to the Pilgrim's eyes their legs protruding from the ground.

96. *already the sun approaches middle tierce!*: The time is approximately halfway between the canonical hours of Prime and Tierce, i.e., 7:30 a.m. The rapid change from night ("But soon it will be night," 68) to day (96) is the result of the travelers' having passed the earth's center, thus moving into

the Southern Hemisphere, which is twelve hours ahead of the Northern.

107-108. *the hairy worm of rottenness*: Compare VI, 22; n. 13-22.

112-15. *Now you are standing beneath the hemisphere*: Lucifer's body, falling head first from Heaven to the Southern Hemisphere, bored through to the earth's center, where he remains imprisoned. Before he fell through the Southern Hemisphere ("this side," 121), it was covered with land, but the land, "alarmed by his plunge," sank beneath the sea and shifted to the Northern Hemisphere ("our hemisphere," 124). But the land at the center of the earth "rushed upward" at once, leaving the "cavern" above Lucifer's legs and forming the Mount of Purgatory, the only land in the Southern Hemisphere.

127-32. *Below somewhere there is a space*: Somewhere below the land that rushed upward to form the Mount of Purgatory "there is a space" (127) through which a stream runs, and it is through this space that Virgil and Dante will climb to reach the base of the Mount. The "space" is "as far/from Beelzebub [Lucifer] as the limit of his tomb" (127-28); that is, at the edge of the natural dungeon that constitutes Lucifer's "tomb," there is an opening, a "space," serving as the entrance to the passage from the earth's center to its circumference, created by Lucifer in his fall from Heaven to Hell.

139. *and we came out to see once more the stars*: The Pilgrim, denied sight of the celestial bodies in Hell, now looks up at them again. The direction his journey will now take is upward, toward that Divine Realm of which the stars are the signal for us on earth. That all three canticles end with the word "stars" symmetrically reinforces the concept of movement upward toward God, the central theme and motive force of *The Divine Comedy*.