

Rational and Irrational Ambiguities in *Julius Caesar*

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Abstract

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is remarkable for its rational mode as manifested in the use of language, style, action as well as its characterization. In this essay, I argue that the play is also striking with its numerous (ir)rational ambiguities. The same Latin word, *ratio*, is at the root of two words that are often used to explain human behaviors: reason and rationality. The first related ambiguity is organized around the conflict between reason and passion. The other is related to rational choice, which is opposed to the diverse forms of irrationality. This paper argues that *Julius Caesar* challenges the idea that a rational actor is one who acts only for sufficient reasons, and the play also subverts the conventional understanding of reason and rationality.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, rationality and irrationality, ambiguity

1. The Rational Mode of *Julius Caesar*

No one reading *Julius Caesar* will miss the highly rational mode of the play. In language, style, action, as well as characters, this play stands out among Shakespeare's plays as perfectly in control of reason. It is remarkably unelaborated in style, and this presumably suggests a "Roman" air. Often, even when most impressive, it offers very little figurative language, depending rather on cogency of pronouncement. The cogency comes from characters who know their positions and formulate them indomitably. Caesar's mode consists of little else: with majestic resonance, grand or grandiose, it formulates, determines, pronounces, so that his mere 130 lines loom large through finality of meaning measured out with semi-divine authority. Brutus expresses his Roman resolution (e.g. I, ii, pp. 82ff, pp. 162ff) with equal decisiveness, sounding with disciplined resonance. Brutus develops this manner in the great speech against oath-taking, public utterance inspired by enlightened resolution. In a quieter, graver mood, but with un-complicated

firmness, Portia invokes the spirit of Cato to vouch for her integrity. Characters adopt the third person, for themselves or their addressees, as if they were autonomous human objects, the names standing for the individuals. Status-ridden though this habit is with Caesar (damagingly so), the effect elsewhere is of characters living up finally to an ideal of themselves. To be “Brutus” or “Portia” or “Cassius” is to stand for what the name represents. Indeed, names have a talismanic value; one should be what one’s name implies since it is a proudly borne badge of worth, individual rather than individualistic, honored for integrity.

This intended cogency of pronouncement, appealing to the mind and reason rather than emotion or impulse, gives the play a basic tone of rationality. Thus Arthur Humphreys suggests that the predominant style of *Julius Caesar* might be called “rational lyricism”—“‘rational’ in that firm ideas readily available are its content, and ‘lyricism’ in that the sense lithely recognizes the sway of the meter” (Humphreys, p. 43).

This is because the predominant style of the play is that of fine public address. Even when delivered privately it expounds, however sympathetically. The similes and anecdotes with which it enlivens its meanings are clear, illustrative analogies. What strikes the ear from the start is the exact balance between meaning and metre, the flow and adjustment of sense within each line, and the unforced undulation of speeches and rhythms as though swing and poise were the most natural things in the world. Indeed, for these speakers who need seldom struggle for their meanings they are natural. This naturalness of swing and poise gives all the appearance of what Gadamer calls “a ‘rational’ grasp of the world”, because it suggests the preference of reason to language: when sense comes directly from sound reason, language will take care of itself (Gadamer, p. 4).

Together with “rational lyricism” of language style, rationality of action is another manifest feature of *Julius Caesar*. Rationality of action can be approached from the point of view of the purposive-rationality of the choice of means. A teleological model of action is obviously maintained in the play. Action is presented as purposive activity. The acting subject intervenes in the world with the aim of causally bringing about an intended state of affairs by choosing and applying suitable means. The one aspect of action, social purpose, which stresses order, law, and reason more than any other aspect of human action, is given almost exclusive representation in the play. Northrop Frye suggests that in the three social tragedies, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*, the tragic actions are based similarly on three main character-groups. First is the order-figure: Julius Caesar in this play; Duncan in *Macbeth*; and Hamlet’s father. He is killed by a rebel-figure or usurper: Brutus and other conspirators; Macbeth; and Claudius. Third comes a nemesis-figure or nemesis-group: Antony and Octavius; Malcolm and Macduff; and Hamlet (Northrop Frye, 1965, p. 17). We have only to think of the killing scenes of these three plays to see immediately how rational the killing motives of the characters of *Julius Caesar* are. Brutus determines to kill Caesar for pure political and moral reasons. He has no three witches to fan up his personal ambition and whisper the idea of murder into his almost unprepared mind. Antony’s defeating and, finally, indirect killing of Brutus is also

a carefully planned political and military action, sharing nothing with Hamlet's mysterious delay and hesitation. The murder-nemesis pattern is clear-cut and highly rationalized in terms of politics and morality.

The rationality of characters is the third important feature of *Julius Caesar*. The Roman ideal is a rational one. The conspirators, especially Brutus and Cassius, associate themselves with Rome as the home of truth, honor and manliness. Their conspiracy against Caesar is made up from the beginning as a noble fight against the irrational ambition of the degenerating Caesar who falls from the Roman ideal of republicanism. It is by suggesting that Romans are slaves that Cassius incites Brutus to rebel (I, ii, pp. 150ff.; I, iii, pp. 103ff.); it is for Rome, "O Rome, I make thee promise" (II, i, p. 56), that Brutus joins the conspiracy, and he is conscious of the duties of being a Roman,

I had rather be a dog, and bay the moon,
Than such a Roman. (IV, iii, pp. 27-28)

With the Romans, we know, the rational is identified with national law, the well-known ideas expressed by Cicero in his *Republic*:

There's a true law, right reason that conforms to nature, present in all of us, immutable, eternal; this law directs men to the good by its commands, and detours them from evil by its prohibitions; should it order or prohibit, it does not address itself in vain to the virtuous, but has no influence on the wicked. It is impossible to oppose it by other laws, not to derogate its precepts; it is impossible to abrogate this law; neither the Senate nor the people can exonerate us from it. It cannot be different in Rome or in Athens, and it will not be in the future different from what it is today; but one and the same law, eternal and immutable, will impose itself upon all peoples for ever. One Master being the leader, He is the author of this law, who has promulgated and sanctions it. Those who do not obey it negate human nature and must anticipate the severest punishments. (Book III, chap. 32)

This idea of human reason as obeying Nature's reason becomes the only spring of Brutus's political and personal action. He sees Caesar's possible acquisition of the title of King as a sure violation of the human nature of a noble Roman that Caesar is:

... He would be crowned.
How that might change his nature, there is the question. (I, ii, pp. 12-13)

Moreover, the "wickedness" of Caesar's opposition to the natural law of republicanism cannot be duly influenced, but must be wiped out. Brutus seems to believe firmly that his action represents the natural "tide in the affairs of men":

There is a tide in the affairs of men,

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures. (IV, iii, pp. 218-228)

There is almost no action of his that is not associated with self-evident truths and compelling reasoning. His behavior is what we would describe as rational, in conformity to principles, to the spirit of the system, behavior which chooses ends through knowledge of cause, makes efficacious means, and makes action conform to the reflections and designs, not allowing oneself to be held or led astray by the emotions or passion. We read a very close approximation of him in the quote by Brand Blanshard: “He tries to incarnate pure intelligence. The wheels of intellect revolve in a vacuum, ... He acts always from calculation, never from impulse, affection or even hatred” (Blanshard, p. 411).

2. The Irrational Elements

All the three aspects of rationality we have mentioned about the play: language style, action, and characters, do not mean that it can be read as a play about rationality, or even worse, as a play lacking in complexity simply because it is so “rational”. (Is it not thought to be easily cast in a boy’s school?) It is a play of great complexity and much of the complexity lies in what might be called the “irrational elements” of the play. These irrational elements are hidden under the rational surface: not only the psychological contents implied in the public behavior and the intricate operation of minds ignored or repressed by the characters themselves, but also the very eagerness to be “reasonable” that can be so intense as to defy rational explanation, just like pride or lust. The irrational is not necessarily anti-rational, a denial of reason. It is marginal to the rational, difficult or impossible to be formulated in logical or rational terms. Our life is full of the irrational as well as the rational and so are Shakespeare’s plays, *Julius Caesar* being no exception. I should like now, reading against the grain of the play, to look at some of the play’s irrational elements and see how they contribute to its richness as well as complexity.

The same Latin word, *ratio*, is at the root of two words that are often used to explain human behaviors: reason and rationality. But in *Julius Caesar*, they are not as simple as they sound. The one problem evolves around the conflict between reason and passion. The other is related to rational choice, which is opposed to the diverse forms of irrationality. *Julius Caesar* challenges the idea that a rational actor is one who acts only for sufficient reasons, and it also subverts the conventional understanding of reason and rationality. Shakespeare shows us that a man who attempts to live by reason is often governed by irrational elements within himself that he cannot recognize. Thus the great soliloquy in which Brutus contemplates the killing of Caesar begins with a decision already made—“It

must be by his death”—and proceeds through a set of rationalization that reveals the utter absence of foundation for Brutus’s fears. The proud and independent Brutus—like the proud and independent Caesar subject to the skillful flattery by Decius—bases his action as much on the shrewd innuendo of Cassius as on the formulation of his own reason. Noble though Brutus is, he shows by the eve of Philippi a degeneration—manifest in his querulousness, his new eagerness to finance his campaign with ill-got money as long as he has not raised the money himself, and his priggishness with the sympathetic Cassius—which demonstrates clearly that he is more swayed by complicated psychological pressures than by abiding and inner principles.

Brutus’s accusation of Cassius for his unjust methods of raising money and insistence that Cassius’s guilty friend be punished are but the effects of his own psychological projection. His exaggeration of anger with others results from his unconscious need to relieve himself of the guilt of having to resort to ill-got money to maintain his army, a need he dares not even acknowledge to himself. Like any other human being, Brutus simply cannot help being sadomasochistically harsh to those who mirror his own defects. His turning down of Cassius’s military proposal and insisting that they advance across the Dardanelles to Macedonia and meet Antony and Octavius at Philippi are another psychic complex. As a murderer of his friend and benefactor, Brutus, no matter how noble the cause of his murder is, is guilty of betrayal. When he is challenged by Antony for that very betrayal, he is cornered in an awkward position of defense, psychologically as well as morally. Thus he takes a reckless military aggressive position only to compensate for a deep psychological need. The irrational psychic drive gets the upper hand of the military wisdom that Brutus the soldier should have, or at least, should have accepted when it is suggested by Cassius. It is at such unconscious moments that Brutus lets himself fall into “the fathomless abyss of Reason of State”, as stated by K. C. Knights (Dean, p. 52).

The same irrational unconscious seems to work with Cassius as well. We can trace it nowhere better than in the quarrel scene between him and Brutus. It is of course Cassius, in whom the “taboo on tenderness” is strongest—who is scornful of “our mothers’ spirits” (i, iii, p. 83) and despises Caesar for behaving “as a sick girl” (I, ii, p. 127)—who here displays the most pronounced “feminine” traits, “that rash humor my mother gave me” (IV, iii, p. 118). In Cassius the political springs of action are revealed as only too personal. What nags at him is simply envy of Caesar, but in spite of himself, he appeals to Roman “honor”, to the “nobility” of his associates. This is not simply laid on for the benefit of Brutus, but is part of his own self-deception. The banished feelings have simply come in by the back door, thinly disguised. Here the blurring of purposive-rationality is a result of the disguised battle between conscious reasoning and unconscious shuffling away from reality.

In the play, the political reality of the conscious reasoning appears in dreamy light. It is this that explains our sense of something monstrous in the action, partly symbolized by the storm and prodigies, and made explicit by Brutus in soliloquy when, deserting the actual, he has given himself to a phantasmagoria of abstractions.

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream ... (II, I, pp. 63-65)

O conspiracy !

Sham'st thou to show thy dangerous brow by night,
When evils are most free? O! then by day
Where wilt thou find a cavern dark enough
To mask thy monstrous visage? Seek none, conspiracy;
Hide it in smiles and affability:
For if thou path, thy native semblance on,
Not Erebus itself were dim enough
To hide thee from prevention. (II, I, pp. 80-88)

A complete lack of rational correspondence between the professed intentions of the conspirators and their action is marvelously epitomized by those half-disguised figures lurking in the dark night, frightened by their own shadows and echoing footsteps, for they

.... construe things after their fashion,
Clean from the purpose of the things themselves... (I, iii, pp. 34-25)

These two lines by Cicero are an excellent footnote to Schopenhauer's philosophy of irrationality: it is the will and not logic that convinces the conspirators of the necessity of killing Caesar. Intellect is but a subordinate and instrument of desire; when it attempts to display the will, confusion follows. No one is more liable to mistakes than he who acts only by reflection. We might argue that those conspirators make all their mistakes precisely because they don't follow their intuitive will but submit to Brutus's reflection. Just like Caesar does not follow the "dream" of Calpurnia but listens to the reason of Decius.

Who in the play makes more mistakes than Brutus? Brutus makes his first mistake by refusing to hear of an oath being sworn among his band of high-souled brothers, because someone of this group betrays their confidence before daylight and Artemidorus has the details of the plot and tries to get Caesar to read a note containing them. It is only luck and Caesar's careless self-assurance that prevent the whole plot from being exposed then and there. Brutus makes the second mistake by vetoing the suggestion that Cicero be included in their group. The master-orator of the age is excluded, and they find out later that they have no one to offset the influence of Mark Antony's eloquence upon the populace, and that is the beginning of their downfall. Brutus makes the third mistake by refusing to agree to the suggestion of killing Antony. Later it is the same Antony who checkmates them and starts them on the slippery path to their doom.

To Brutus, what is moral consists of such ideas as honor, truth, innocence, manliness, etc. They represent to him the absolute and universal principles of action in public life

as well as in private life. But in actual life, these “virtues” cannot help transforming into another problem, to wit, “Under what conditions did men construct the value judgments good and evil?” And what is their intrinsic worth? Have they thus far benefited or retarded mankind? Do they betoken misery, curtailment, degeneracy, or on the contrary, power, fullness of being, energy, courage in the face of life, and confidence in the future? Brutus’s absurdity lies in his belief in the intrinsic values of those virtues and in their usefulness in private life and public affairs as well. Nietzsche pointed out with real insight in his *The Genealogy of Morals*:

The intrinsic worth of these values was taken for granted as a fact of experience and put beyond question. Nobody, up to now, has doubted that the “good” man represents a higher value than the “evil”, in terms of promoting and benefiting mankind generally, even taking the long view. What if the “good” man represents not merely a retrogression but even a danger, a temptation, a narcotic drug enabling the present to live at the expense of the future? (Nietzsche, p. 155)

The case of Brutus is that of the liberal intellectual in a world of Realpolitik—a familiar enough case in the modern world. He takes the worth of honor, truth, and manliness for granted and believes that they are of equal worth to the public good and to private behavior, and that moral domination should precede political domination. But it is precisely his moral domination that leads to the failure of his ideal, a bitter irony of his moral rationality. The disastrous effect of his moral domination is most manifest on Cassius.

Cassius is the co-hero of the play, and skilled politician though he is, with little scruple to play on Brutus’s finer feeling. He admires Brutus and cannot help allowing Brutus to achieve moral ascendancy over him, once the murder of Caesar is accomplished. The coarser nature is dominated by the finer, to the destruction of both of them and of the ideal to which they have sacrificed everything. In the quarrel scene it is Cassius who first gives way, and it is under the influence of this domination by Brutus that, against his better judgment, Cassius allows Brutus to have his way in the ill-advised plan of seeking immediate battle at Philippi. Nowhere is the Epicurean Cassius more like the Stoic Brutus than when he commits suicide because he is ashamed of having lived “so long, to see my best friend taken before my face!” (V, iii, pp. 34-35) And that suicide, rather than military defeat, seals the doom of the republican cause. But Cassius is not as unlike Brutus as he thinks he is. Though he is the shrewder and the more practical, he has the same belief as Brutus in the intrinsic worth of moral virtues, and is basically an idealist too, an intellectual, who, though Caesar had come to suspect because “he thinks too much”, does not think beyond moral innocence.

Antony, on the contrary, has a much better instinctive mastery of the irrational factors of political struggle. He is not evil—he can be generous, noble, and kind hearted if necessary—but he is not crippled by an all innocent idea of moral virtues. He knows how to come to terms with life. Wherein lies Antony’s success? Is it not in his ability to manipulate people, to act the puppeteer and utilize the worthy emotions of the mob for

his own purposes? A brief comparison of the speeches made by Brutus and Antony to the mob will show how much more politically wise, though not necessarily more virtuous, Antony is. Brutus begins his speech in his dry, formal disjoined antithetical style, purposely appealing to the reason and avoiding stirring the emotions. It is noteworthy that the speech is in prose, instead of in poetry that would be too emotional for the rational Brutus. The mob is stunned by his moral dominance and reason, but not convinced. Antony starts speaking to a mildly hostile crowd still remembering something of what Brutus has said. He disarms them from the first by his humility and his respect for his “honorable” opponents. He lets the irony of the high-sounding word “honor” sink into the very system of his hearers. Consummate actor as he is, he allows the crowd to see him apparently utterly overcome with grief for his friend Caesar. He uses every device known to oratory—irony, passion, flattery, ridicule, as well as logical reasoning, and finally appeals to self-interest and material betterment by displaying Caesar’s will.

It is interesting to recall here how Schopenhauer once commented on the irrational elements involved in any argument, and it is certainly true of political argument too. He argued that the rational intellect may seem at times to lead the irrational will, but only as a guide leading his master; the will “is the strong blind man who carries on his shoulders the lame man who can see” (Schopenhauer, II, p. 421). We do not want a thing because we have found reasons for it, and we find reasons for it because we want it; we even elaborate theologies or political theories to cloak our desires. Hence Schopenhauer called man the “metaphysical animal”: other animals desire without metaphysics. “Nothing is more provoking, when we are arguing against a man with reasons and explanations, and taking all pains to convince him, than to discover at last that he will not understand, that we have to do with his will” (Schopenhauer, III, p. 443). Hence the uselessness of logic: no one ever convinced anybody by logic. To convince a man, you must appeal to his self-interest, his desires, his will. “The understanding of the stupidest man becomes keen when objects are in question that closely concern his wishes” (Schopenhauer, II, p. 437).

Antony seems to know by his fine political instinct that a legacy of seventy-five drachmas “to every several man” can convince the mob of anything he has told them and rouse them to fury and violent action that can nonetheless claim all the nobility of a just cause. The irrationality of the mob is strikingly well represented in the play. The individuals seem to be responsible, but they have no fixed standards at all—they are fickle and changeable. Brutus finds them hostile, for Caesar was popular. He temporarily persuades them with his show of reason. Antony finds them hostile and goes to work on them with all the arts of the seasoned demagogue. The hostility of the mob is unpredictable. Its uncertain and dangerous energy cannot be rationalized by any fixed moral code, but must be handled with delicate reconciliation with irrationality.

3. Interpretative Dilemmas and Ironies

Reading *Julius Caesar*, we cannot help being aware of a bewildering irrationality in

our own partial response to it. Our estimation of the characters and events of the play is liable to shift in spite of our logic reasoning. If we react according to our personal sympathies, Brutus is more likable than a superstitious vain Caesar; if we consider public consequences, Brutus is far less commendable because he brings to Rome chaos and injustice, not “Peace, freedom, and the liberty!” He kills only a man, not the spirit of Caesar, which comes back at Sardis and Philippi, and finally to triumph, in the person of Octavius Caesar.

The play demands more than a partial response; it asks that we judge a man not only for what he is but what he does. Consequences are no less important than intentions; we see that well-meaning is no guarantee of well-doing, and that bad things done for a good cause, or by people who think themselves good, are still bad. But not to do the bad things which government sometimes requires is also disastrous—witness the public failure of Brutus. Although virtue guides the civilized conduct of individuals, in this play the shifting concerns of public action, governed by necessity, demand more pragmatic laws. There are no easy solutions to the dilemmas and ironies that result. Brutus’s moral strength is paradoxically the source of his weakness in the public world; the public pursuit of private virtue turns out to be the worst kind of self-indulgence. Brutus attempts to live by reason, and by reason alone, but in his very effort of making reason his sole principle of life, he falls victim to the irrational force within himself that he cannot recognize.

The most profound irrational irony, however, that puzzles us not only as readers of the play but also as readers of history, seems to lie in the incongruity between the necessity and casualty of history. We are liable to think of history, not man, as the determining force of the world, so much so that we may be utterly unprepared for the discontinuities, casual changes, and unexpected variations that transform from time to time the historical pattern. Brutus is a victim to this irony of history. He believes that in his world, history, not man, is the determining force and he erroneously uses this perception to justify his battle at Philippi—“There is a tide in the affairs of men, . . .” (IV, iii, pp. 218-224). The ironic fact that Brutus is wrong about the particular application of his insight serves only to support his generalization. His wisdom is undercut only by his failure to realize that the flood of history cannot be gauged by the reasoning mind. In a world governed by necessity as well as casualty, plans, whether noble or otherwise, have little effect on the course of events.

Brutus and Cassius believe that history is amenable to reason. Cassius’s intuitions may tend to be more accurate and his plan more successful in the short range, but in the long range both men succumb to a historical process over which their reasoning has no control, while success falls to the opportunist Antony who does not plan but irresponsibly allows mischief to take its own course, and from him to Octavius, who initiates no action but simply waits to gather the fallen fruit.

4. Caesar’s Death: A Political Reading

The patricidal killing of Caesar has many a parallel in human history. When we think of

Khrushchev's speech at the Twentieth Party Congress of the USSR, in 1956, we are faced with a striking example of political patricide. Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin and burning of his dead body were as horrible as Brutus's stabbing of Caesar, even though after Stalin's long tyranny, it seemed to be a necessity of history. But Khrushchev was caught in the same plight of patricide as so many other murder-figures. His sharp attack on Stalin was both a self-denial (he called Stalin "father" when he was but a provincial Party head) and a self-fulfillment (his own growth, political and psychological, depended on his denial of Stalin, the Father).

Are such associations of modern politics appropriate in reading Shakespeare's play? Does the play say something very deep about these modern political patricides which seem so inevitable in autocratic countries, and about the private passions and psychic springs which are brought into relation with public life? For epistemological puritans, analogies are not precisely explanations at all. Historians might condemn such random similarities we see between Brutus and Khrushchev. But Shakespeare is more an artist than a historian. Analogical inference plays an important and even indispensable part in the mysterious process of intellectual activity, writing and reading as well. A great artist, Shakespeare himself possessed to an extraordinary degree a sense of analogy. When he wrote *Julius Caesar*, he had his own analogy in mind, and his Elizabethan audience watched the play with their own analogy too. This analogy is made clear in the following introduction to the play.

We must not forget how widespread was the longing for unshakable rule and how overwhelming was the dread of civil war at the time when *Julius Caesar* was first performed. Elizabeth I had come to the throne in 1558 when the country was in such a state of rebellion and confusion that it seemed likely to slip back into the horrors of the Wars of the Roses. Elizabeth had given her subjects peace, and the nation had prospered; for many years she had been a strong ruler, despite the repeated Catholic claims that she was illegitimate and therefore not a true successor. Attempts at assassination had been many. By 1599 she was old and visibly failing. She had no direct heir; there was no one whose claim to the throne after her was beyond dispute. Childless like Caesar, she could pass on the office only by naming an heir, and this she refused to do, perhaps in order to prevent the growth of factions. The shadow of war and dissension grew ominous. In such circumstances, we see first among the issues of *Julius Caesar* the very topical and concrete problem of a disputed succession, and the more abstract problem of killing—and replacing—the ruler. (Schopenhauer, II, p. 437)

If the shift to ancient history would have sharpened rather than blunted the play's contemporary relevance to the Elizabethan audience, why should we be embarrassed by the fact that the play reminds us vividly of, and opens our eyes to the things that happened around us? Like the Elizabethan audience, we, too, have the habit of viewing history as a series of objective lessons for present conduct. The play makes us think of our own life because it is still alive, still full of power to set free our imagination. And this is precisely

what art, especially great art, to which we surely link *Julius Caesar*, allows us to do.

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