The Political Science Reviewer • Volume 48, Number 1 • 2024

The Poetic Philosophy of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

Lynita K. Newswander
Brigham Young University–Idaho

Introduction

Marcus Junius Brutus is a man of no small reputation. Immortalized first by Plutarch and later by Shakespeare, his morality and motivation have been maligned in the public imagination through the ages. In his betrayal of Caesar, he is the archetypal traitor. And for all his careful conspiring, the actions he took to save the Roman Republic likely only hastened its downfall and his own death. Were these consequences fully constituent of his legacy, there would be little to recommend Brutus for any hope of redemption. Accordingly, Dante assigns him to the nethermost depths of hell, where he is damned to an eternity of torture by the devil himself alongside fellow conspirator Cassius and in the company of none other than Judas Iscariot.

In his poetic resurrection of Plutarch's Brutus, Shakespeare offers the man a second chance at salvation. Rather than focus on the actions Brutus takes and their outcomes, Shakespeare shifts the emphasis of the play to the man's inward struggle. Consequently, a popular modern interpretation is of Brutus as a tragic hero, as one who nobly acts as he believes is right, even when such actions are condemned by others.[1] Little matter that Brutus died and the Republic fell; he lived and died with honor. If anything, the dreadful consequence makes Brutus all the more heroic. In contemporary parlance, he authentically "lived his truth" and therefore may be celebrated at least as a contemplative murderer, if a murderer nonetheless.

However much we love to hate and hate to love him, reducing the play to the study of a single character or even a single virtue limits our perspective and robs the drama of its full breadth of meaning.[2] Neither singular interpretation—of Brutus as a traitorous villain or a tragic hero—does full justice to the complexity of Shakespeare's poetic philosophy. We cannot fully appreciate what *Julius Caesar* offers to teach about human nature and our struggle with the world without also looking at Cassius as the moral foil of Brutus. This, perhaps, is where the key tension of the conspiracy lies: between Epicurean Cassius, desperate to master fate; and Stoic Brutus, fixed on mastering himself.[3] Arguably, each man loses control of one while he labors to snatch the other. Different as their motivations are, each depends on the other; for Cassius is not honorable and Brutus lacks skill for practical political calculation.[4] Shakespeare waxes philosophical in his characterizations of these men and their use of each other, prompting questions of courage and integrity, ethics and motivation, and the possible futility of human action.[5] And, as Timothy Burns notes, their struggle is quintessentially Aristotelian, as through them Shakespeare "brings all of his gifts to bear on the problem that Aristotle presents as confronting political life at its peak—the problem of the outstandingly virtuous individual, and the dilemma that his rule poses to the life of virtue."[6]

Brutus and Cassius seem an unlikely pair, yet they are eternally bound in infamy. While they share an animosity for Caesar, their motivations differ, lending a seeming sense of righteousness to Brutus's character and recklessness to Cassius's. To be fair, both are motivated by the pursuit of a good. Brutus is driven by a Stoic morality that demands absolute fidelity to principle. Cassius, in contrast, places an instrumental value on virtue. Even so, the ethical delineation between the coconspirators is not quite so clear-cut as that, for—in a very relatable way—neither man is ultimately able to live up to his own philosophy. Brutus is so caught up in his pursuit of honor that he displaces passion with a cold, unwavering sense of morality. Cassius, in contrast, displays a spiritedness that

risks blinding him to reason. Ultimately, each suffers from the encumbrance of a disordered soul, the imbalance within impeding their pursuit of the good. Consequently, their plot leads to chaos and neither character achieves his aim: Brutus's beloved Republic falls, and Cassius gains only infamy. If these are the very dangers the Fates portended all along, the fault, it appears, was not in the stars but in Brutus and Cassius after all.

In what follows, I argue that Shakespeare's play is a masterful translation of complex philosophical ideals into enduring and resonant tragedy with a focus on the oppositional morality of Brutus and Cassius as a reflection of Plutarch's eclectic philosophy. I then offer a study of the intricate interplay of passion and reason as motivation and justification for the coconspirators. Next, I interpret the assassination as an act of both courage and fear wherein Brutus's confidence in his moral superiority becomes his tragic flaw. The fourth section contextualizes the discussion of moral motivation within the framework of fate. Finally, I conclude with the assertion that the play itself is a work of Shakespearean poetic philosophy, employing a tragedy of moral complexity and ambiguity to ultimately elevate toward the good.

Shakespeare's Soulcraft

In his creation of Brutus and Cassius, Shakespeare brings Plutarch's eclectic mix of Platonism, Peripateticism, and Stoicism to bear in his retelling of the story.[7] This connection to classical philosophy is clear in the drama's juxtaposition of passion and morality, action and duty, consequence and fate. Reading such philosophical leanings into Shakespeare is not a stretch. Aside from Plutarch as an intermediary, the playwright may have had his own knowledge of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and other inheritors of the Greek Academy through their Latin translations.[8] According to David Lowenthal, Shakespeare begins with philosophical intention and is "an independently thinking follower of classical philosophy—of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—whose understanding of their teaching and that of their Pre-Socratic predecessors was profound."[9] Expanding

the Straussian view, Daryl Kaytor goes so far as to claim that "Shakespeare's genius is at least in part due to his uncanny ability to transform Platonic wisdom into fully realized dramatic action."[10] This Platonic wisdom is on full display as Brutus's morality plays against that of Cassius, each man's virtue exaggerating the other's fault.

When viewed through a philosophic lens, courage as virtue is reacquainted with its classical association with morality, which proves a common stumbling block for many of Shakespeare's most troubled and brooding protagonists. Such "Platonic wisdom" is made flesh in characters like Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, and others, among whom Brutus and Cassius are in good company.[11] These complicated characters are morally and ethically complex in their varied ideations of justice. Each strives to act courageously but is harried by his own weakness. With Brutus and Cassius in particular, virtue as a lens for character analysis emphasizes their reliance on *thumos* and *logos* as constituent parts of a rightly ordered soul. In Book IV of the *Republic*, Plato reasons that courage resides in the proper alliance of *logos*, or reason, and *thumos*, or spiritedness.[12] Aristotle similarly proscribes balance, lest virtue (in moderation) be turned to vice (in extremes). In his case, the balanced soul consists of the rational and the irrational; courage is the mean between cowardliness and rashness.

Plutarch's eclectic philosophy accepted the Peripatetic idea that reason and passion are most stable when properly balanced. In his *Moralia*, he writes that the natural task of practical reason is "to eliminate both the defects and the excesses of the passions" as the case demands. Although "the impulsion of passion springs from moral virtue," it needs reason to achieve the moral virtues, "which are means between deficiency and excess."[13] Finding and maintaining such balance is the aim of all who seek for justice, and prudence must be applied so as not to miss the mark. From Plutarch's perspective, the virtue of self-mastery comes through careful weight and measure of the needs of each situation. As with Plato's charioteer at the helm of the soul, reason must actively guide, goad, and restrain passion as necessary.

For Aristotle, this imbalance is precisely the essence of tragedy, with its many paths to failure.[14] Such drama leaves the audience with an ambiguous feeling, prompting them to work out the morality or immorality of an action for themselves. Plato is not a fan of this type of ambiguity; he would have drama point unerringly to what is right, rather than risk venerating vice.[15] While Plutarch adopts a mostly Platonic sense of the soul, his retelling of the history of Julius Caesar is recognizably Aristotelian in its poetic morality.

With this nod toward Aristotle, imbalance is the essence of poetic philosophy in the *Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Shakespeare and Plutarch purposefully portray Brutus in his full complexity as a man ultimately unable to live up to his own moral code because human nature is complex. Brutus's imperfect attempt at heroism is instructive to readers who likewise struggle to find the ideal balance between passion and reason, or who see similar faults in contemporary political leaders. Speaking of his aim in writing biographies, Plutarch says, "[S]ince it is hard, or indeed perhaps impossible, to show the life of a man wholly free from blemish, in all that is excellent we must follow truth exactly, and give it fully; any lapses or faults that occur, through human passions or political necessities, we may regard rather as the shortcomings of some particular virtue, than as the natural effects of vice."[16] Multifarious as they are, Brutus and Cassius alike are relatable in their deficiencies. The fault within them is a conflict no different from the fault within each of us: try as we might, we cannot always adequately judge between right and wrong. Our pride gets in the way of our honest desire to do good. And sometimes even our best efforts lead to the end we seek to avoid.

With their complementary strengths and deficiencies, Brutus and Cassius come together in a bid to counterbalance the fate they fear. Neither man on his own possesses the proper balance of reason and spirit. Where Cassius is rash, Brutus is rational and introspective; where Brutus hesitates, Cassius is cunning and courageous. Casca voices the heart of this alliance of necessity in Act I, scene iii, when he says of Brutus,

Oh, he sits high in the people's hearts;
And that which would appear offense in us,
His countenance, like richest alchemy,
Will change to virtue and worthiness.[17]

As Bloom notes, Brutus's moral superiority invites trust, and his conviction of his own virtue is a source of strength.[18] The coconspirators agree; they must win Brutus to the cause. But as Cassius and Brutus intermingle their plan, they also intertwine their weaknesses; consequently, neither can effectively be made whole by the other. The chariots of their souls thus unsteadied, their ultimate aims are frustrated: Cassius does not gain political favor and Brutus does not become the savior of the Roman Republic. Tragedy ensues, for the union of two imbalanced souls cannot lead to virtuous ends.

Spirit and Reason

Brutus and Cassius make an odd pair from the start. Although Caesar loved Brutus, he distrusted them both, as he did all men who were "pale and lean," or given to much thought and less action.[19] Plutarch says of Brutus that he was valiant, honorable, virtuous, gentle, lowly, esteemed of men, hated by no one, and noble-minded. He was "a man of singularly gentle nature, of a great spirit, insensible of the passions of anger or pleasure or covetousness; steady and inflexible to maintain his purpose for what he thought was great and honest."[20] Cassius, by contrast, was "a man governed by anger and passion, and carried often, for his interest's sake, beyond the bounds of justice."[21] Both were serving as praetors in the year that Caesar was killed, and both had been named in advance as consuls for 41 BCE. They were frequently at odds with each other as each sought political advancement, making disinterested cooperation uncharacteristic of their relationship. But conspiracy makes strange bedfellows. Where Brutus longed for liberty, Cassius had a hedonist hope for personal gain. Caesar stood in the way of them both, pulling them into an alliance of necessity rather than of shared values.

Because Brutus was a generally cautious and introspective person, his dark feelings for Caesar left him unsettled. This unease is multiplied by Brutus's own sense of *philotimia*, or love of honor: he has a reputation to uphold, after all, and there is little else that would bring more honor than to be the savior of his beloved Republic, even if it costs him his life.[22] Paradoxically, this preoccupation with honor proves perilous to his moral justification of personal disinterest. Torn between honor and selflessness, Brutus puts himself through mental gymnastics to justify the virtue of his chosen path. Used to relying primarily on logos as his guide, Brutus is undone by the flood of emotion he feels—fear of what Caesar may become, on the one hand, and disgust at the very consideration of betrayal, on the other. We see his caution on full display in his attempt to steady his mind as it is absorbed by the division of his allegiance to friend and to country. Although ultimately bolstered by conviction, for much of Acts I and II Brutus is troubled and uncertain. His logos is out of balance with his thumos; his reason is troubled by his passion. Already one to think much and sleep little, his fears for Rome and for his own virtù in the face of a distasteful moral obligation send him into an obsessive spiral of his own thoughts. His visage is noticeably marred by his unsettled conscience. His friends and his wife wonder what is wrong with him. Cassius, looking for opportunity, takes note. When Brutus opts not to join the others on the course for the race of the Lupercal in Act I, Cassius is ready to take advantage of his isolation and confusion. His approach is one of concern for a friend:

> Brutus, I do observe you now of late:
> I have not from your eyes that gentleness
> And show of love that I was wont to have.[23]

Honorable as he is, Brutus answers without reserve:

> . . . if I have veil'd my look,
> I turn the trouble of my countenance
> Merely upon myself. Vexed I am

> Of late with passions of some difference,
> Which give some soil perhaps to my behaviors.[24]

Later in this scene, Brutus famously relents that those "passions of some difference" have led him to be "with himself at war,"[25] foreshadowing the conflict that Rome will soon have with itself as a result of his actions. He is not used to having passion encroach his reason, and the imbalance leaves him unsettled. Cassius sees this confession as his chance, but just as he is weaseling his way into disclosing his murderous design, their conversation is interrupted by shouts and trumpets that portend an imperial future for Caesar. The enthusiastic clamor of the crowd prompts Brutus to divulge what has been troubling him: "I do fear, the people / Choose Caesar for their king."[26] Anxiety for his country proves weightier for him than his love for Caesar, making *fear* of what will happen if he does not act his prime motivation moving forward. Sensing his friend's apprehension and subsequent weakness, Cassius tempts him, saying,

> Men at some time are masters of their fates:
> The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
> But in ourselves, that we are underlings.[27]

Men are not made to simply roam the world until they find their graves, he says. They are sometimes given an opportunity to take the lead. If one's situation is not what one would like it to be, it is one's own fault, because every man of virtù holds the power to change his circumstance. In other words, if a person is manly enough, he will not sit back in fear but will do something about it. Cassius's careful rhetoric is a fiery match set to ignite the ready fodder of Brutus's intentions and the agitation of his confused conscience. Brutus leaves the festivities more troubled than ever.

Such anxiety and hesitation seem antithetical to Brutus's reputation for moral courage. It is the fear of a ruined Republic, coupled with the weight of his dedication to honor above all else, that prompts him to reason through the problem with unsound

logic. Although the very idea of murdering his friend and leader repulses Brutus's general sense of honor and justice, his fear for the Republic and perhaps for his own reputation looks to reason to justify its desire for resolution. We see Brutus struggle with his thoughts and his feelings repeatedly in the early portions of the play. Through the night of a terrible storm in Act II, he sits up by candlelight and reasons with himself in an attempt to rectify the tension of a moral sense torn by a complicated compulsion to honor. He has no personal cause against Caesar "but the general." Interestingly, here he also recognizes that Caesar himself is ruled by reason rather than by his passions, admitting that he'd never known Caesar's affections to sway his reason. But, he says, Caesar *may* let his passions get the better of him. Although Brutus operates with confidence of conscience because he trusts that his reason rightly rules his passion, he does not extend the same faith to his friend. His concern for what may happen clouds his ability to make a rational decision. With that suspicion, Brutus finds his path clear:

> Then, lest he [Caesar] may, prevent . . .
> And therefore think him as a serpent's egg
> Which hatch'd would as his kind grow mischievous,
> And kill him in the shell.[28]

Thus, it is through logos at the whim of fear that Brutus justifies the morality of his decision and seals the fate of Caesar. When Brutus, primed by the frightening storm around him, sees what terrifying future may await the Roman Republic, logic falls victim to emotion and he loses his grip on wisdom. Rather than being the guide of his feelings, logos reverses course and does their bidding. Because his strength is generally in his logic, Brutus is confident that his reasoning will lead him to what is right. What had moments ago appeared abhorrent now seems to be his moral obligation. Fear blinds him to the reality that his logic has been compromised.

The same storm that makes Brutus susceptible to his fears makes a reckless man of Cassius. With terrible lightning and thunder as his backdrop, Cassius also soliloquizes his plan to assassinate

Caesar. However, his rumination takes a different course. He most certainly is not afraid. In contrast to Brutus, Cassius appears the very essence of thumos.[29] As Brutus sits fretting in his room, Cassius ventures out into the raging storm "unbraced," baring his bosom to the thunderbolts and presenting himself to the aim of the blue lightning. He berates Casca for being pale and fearful in the face of the portentous storm, and then he capitalizes on that fear, laying responsibility for the tempest on Caesar. He says that succumbing to fear of Caesar is "womanish"—suggesting that Casca's behavior is in direct contradiction to the manliness of virtue.[30] Cassius's insult is intentional. Both the Greek *andreia* (from *aner*, man) and Latin *virtù* (from *virtus*, man) suggest the heavy pressure for men to perform virtue and eschew fear. Cassius performs his virtue with exaggerated bravado: in defiance of logic, he is reckless and tempts fate. What is more, he is overconfident in his own power and boldly declares to Casca,

> Cassius from bondage will deliver Cassius . . .
> No stony tower, nor walls of beaten brass,
> Nor airless dungeon, nor strong links of iron,
> Can be retentive to the strength of spirit.[31]

Use of the third person in self-reference here is a sign that Cassius is a little full of himself. His bravery comes not from confidence in the nobility of his action, as it does for Brutus, but from the reassurance of his own strength: "But I am arm'd," he says, "And dangers are to me indifferent."[32] Far from being motivated by fear for his Republic, Cassius is motivated by an excess of spirit and faith in himself. Logos is notably absent.

Cassius's strategy with Casca is different than it was with Brutus and provides a clearer view of just how cunning he can be. While Cassius appealed to Brutus's nobility with flattery, he derides Casca for his lack of resolve. Casca is provoked rather than insulted by Cassius's slander. The flame of his thumos is fanned by a challenge to his honor and bravery. When Cassius tells him, "That part of tyranny that I do bear / I can shake off at pleasure," Casca

responds in equal measure, "So can I. So every bondman in his own hand bears / The power to cancel his captivity."[33] Swept up in the tide of Cassius's rhetoric, Casca accepts Cassius's fallacious reasoning and chooses faction as the alternative to slavery. He, like Cassius and Brutus, is motivated to protect his virtù, or at least public perception of it. Fear of ridicule, as much as fear of Caesar, prompts him to join the conspiracy.

There is something about Cassius that has always been unsettling to Caesar, and this, perhaps, is the root of their conflict. Cassius, who had in times before saved Caesar's life with his own strength, cannot trust his beloved country to a leader so unmanly. Likewise, Caesar sees Cassius as an envious brute, the sort of person most men would fear; but of course, Caesar himself will admit no anxiety. Confiding in Antony his apprehensions regarding Cassius, Caesar quickly moves to save face, saying, "I rather tell thee what is to be fear'd / Than what I fear, for always I am Caesar."[34] In the end, Caesar's desire to maintain his public image causes him to ignore the counsel of sorcerers and soothsayers, his wife, and his own gut feelings. With all the self-assurance of a man who makes his own destiny, he takes those fateful steps to the senate.

The Act

Inspired by Brutus's reputation for honor and Cassius's passionate ambition, the conspiracy grows. As the group gathers at the site arranged for the assassination, they act in fear as much as bravery. These humors are most notably mismatched in Brutus and Cassius. Together, they have enough bravado and trepidation to lead the conspirators to the senate on that Ides of March. The imbalanced courage that they have cobbled together, leaning thusly on each other in their opposite extremes, propels them to action. Neither Brutus's sense of honor nor Cassius's ambition will allow them to turn from their set course. Between the two of them, they can only approximate the virtue of courage that comes from a proper balance of deficiency and excess. It is only by relying on each other's strengths that they can momentarily overcome their own individual weakness and get on with the deed.

A thin line between courage and fear keeps the assassins on their path. While anxiety tends to lead toward the brooding we see in a moody Brutus in Acts I and II, courage demands action. And as Caesar so clearly exemplifies, action brings glory. By comparison, contemplation looks like hesitation and weakness. When thumos is overvalued and logos takes a backseat, what might be termed courage is far from Aristotle's virtuous mean. For courage to be put to its best use, it must properly balance thumos and logos as each particular situation requires. Extolling the virtue of courage in the *Statesman*, Plato speaks of action that is "keen and manly and also swift and man-like and similarly intense."[35] For thumos to become courageous virtue, it must be tempered by "the gentler nature," he says, or "the peaceful and orderly nature" that belongs to modesty, wisdom, and peacefulness.[36] For Plato, the ideal temperament must be carefully bred and results in the ideal leader—one who will not risk himself or his people unnecessarily, but who is brave enough to take risks when warranted. Courage is a commendable virtue to the extent that it empowers people to do good. But it must also be coupled with reason and deliberation. In the absence of those guardians, what may seem courageous is merely unfettered thumos, a raging dog: quick to act, especially in anger or retaliation.

Virtue also demands that once one knows the good, one must act on that knowledge. Brutus feels this burden heavily. As one used to taking decisive action based on the morality of his reasoning, he sees no ethical choice but to move ahead. Once the course is set, Brutus meets the others who are readying themselves for the assassination. Reconciled to what he will do, his logos acts to elevate the thumos of the others. Even in killing Caesar, he urges, "Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers. . . . Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully; . . . Our purpose necessary, and not envious: . . . We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers."[37] Here, he exhibits the dispassionate rationality of an honorable man carrying out his duty. He is bold and resolute, even as Caesar looks upon him and pronounces his betrayal.[38]

While Cassius was the one to call Brutus to action, when the time for action comes, Brutus leads. Moments before the deed is

done, Cassius, thinking that Caesar may have been warned, falters. But Brutus pushes him on, urging, "Cassius, be constant."[39] As the conspirators follow Caesar to the capitol and seek to press near him, Brutus is the guiding voice. No longer an anxious accomplice, he takes ownership of his role. Once Metallus Cimber steps forward to make his petition to Caesar, Brutus encourages his conspirators to "press near, and second him."[40] But then it is Brutus himself who steps forward to make the next appeal to Caesar. As intended, others follow suit, soon surrounding and overwhelming the man. In a role reversal, it is Cassius who is afraid and Brutus who is bold in the vital moment. Strengthened by what he had reasoned to be nobility of purpose, Brutus is unashamed, allowing his thumos to be unbound.

And so falls Caesar. With his death, the citizenry is in chaos. Most of the assassins, who just moments before were so full of certainty and purpose, are now afraid. As the others scramble to think of a plan, Brutus steps forward and takes full control of the situation. His fear removed, he can once again act as a fully rational being, albeit one who is politically naive. Fortified by his cool-headed control, the others follow. Rather than hiding from the consequence of his deed, Brutus seeks to shape that consequence. As he sees it, this is as easy as simply telling the truth. Because he believes his purpose is noble, he has no fear, even in the immediate aftermath of the assassination. Addressing the confused and frightened masses, he seeks to calm them, saying, "[A]mbition's debt is paid."[41] When Metellus Cimber speaks of standing "fast together, lest some friend of Caesar's should chance" to seek quick revenge against the conspirators, Brutus cuts him off. In this instance, he does not wait to reason with himself or counsel with others. No longer burdened by strange feelings, he is free to take decisive action and act the part of an honorable man unencumbered by moral ambiguity. He knows precisely what virtue requires of him. First, he calls to Publius, a necessary ally, fully confessing his act without shame. To further emphasize his ownership of the deed, he bathes his hands and arms in Caesar's blood, smears it on his sword, then convinces his coconspirators to do the same and parade in this

spectacle through the city streets. Empowered by his moral assurance, Brutus the fearful has transformed into Brutus to be feared. He is first in the procession. Cassius relinquishes that role to Brutus, announcing, "Brutus shall lead, and we will grace his heels."[42]

And so it is Brutus who represents the conspirators and attempts to calm the maddened crowd. He reasons with the people, leading them through his lines of logic. Speaking simply and honestly, he admits that though he loved Caesar, he loved Rome more, and he explains that it was necessary for Caesar to die for his ambition. His logos coupled with the ethos of his reputation, Brutus effectively sways the multitude, at least for the time being. His moralistic dispassion appeases the people but also overrides any sense of self-preservation in him. Twice Brutus acknowledges to the people that they may want to kill him for what he has done. His Stoic virtù on full display, he admits that he would happily give his life if it should please his country. As he stands before them, the people are with him, their thumos satisfied by his logos and the display of apparent honor that matches their expectations of him. However, as soon as Antony begins to speak, noble words of Brutus are forgotten and his fate is sealed.

Fate

For Brutus and Cassius, no amount of reason or passion is enough to overcome the existential pull of the inevitable. Each of the major characters seeks to take control of his situation with the desperate hope that he has the power to improve it. However, their unbalanced souls make a precarious starting point for their aspirations and limit their ability to bring about the heroic future they imagine for themselves. The optimism of their self-confidence colors their view of the fortunes that await: out of pride, Caesar chooses to act independently of the many warning signs before him on the Ides of March. Brutus labors for liberty in the Republic and his own sense of dignity, seeking to avoid the future he fears. Cassius is bent on seeking justice and restoring his self-regard through the disposal of a weak leader he cannot respect. When signs and wonders in heaven and earth point to a fate these men do not want, they

reframe the warnings to match their design. For Brutus, the storm means that Caesar is dangerous. For Cassius, it means that his plot is righteous. For Caesar's wife, a dream of blood pouring from his statue foretells her husband's death; for Caesar's yes-man, it means that Caesar is the lifeblood of his country. As they read the signs before them, each desires to be the master of his stars rather than only subject to what the stars hold for him.

This conflict mirrors the underlying tension between the stoic hero of Roman mythology and the Epicurean who makes his own fate. While the mythos of Caesar's day taught that the Fates determined destiny, ambitious men are never quite satisfied with the idea that they are powerless in the eternal scheme. Like the men whose lives he commemorates, Plutarch rejects the idea of determinism and fate.[43] In "The Life of Coriolanus" he says, "Certainly we cannot suppose that the divine beings actually and literally turn our bodies and direct our hands and our feet this way or that, to do what is right."[44] Instead he posits that reason, not irrational impulse, is the key to freedom. Thus, in his version of history, courageous men take on an anachronistic ideology; in this case, they do so only to find themselves still subject to the dogma of their milieu.

Even Artemidorus, who has just nine lines in the play, holds a humanist view of man's ability to stave off an unwelcome fate. Having learned of the conspiracy, he seeks to warn Caesar as he walks to the capitol on that auspicious day. With proof of the plot inked on parchment, he pleads, "If thou read this, O Caesar, thou mayst live; / If not, the Fates with traitors do contrive."[45] He understands Caesar to be a man of action, strong enough to shape destiny at his whim, if only he would humble himself enough to take counsel and admit his own vulnerability. Ignoring this plea and this evidence, Caesar proves too proud to be constrained, precisely as Brutus had feared. Earlier in the day his wife, Calpurnia, saw the danger of this self-assurance in spite of foreboding dreams and weather, warning, "Your wisdom is consumed in confidence."[46] Yet, Caesar cannot appear afraid, and so he ignores any warnings that would inhibit his will.

Cassius knows that Brutus, too, is subject to pride and an inflated view of himself as protector of the Republic. When he first approaches Brutus about the conspiracy, he tempts his pride by suggesting that he might prove to be the master of fate if only he were bold enough to act. In the subsequent scene Cassius echoes his earlier sentiment, this time for the benefit of Casca. Speaking of his ability to end his life on his own terms at any moment, he says, "But life, being weary of these worldly bars, / Never lacks power to dismiss itself."[47] Self-assured as Cassius is, he is also a realist. If nothing else, a man of action can control how he exits the world as long as he has the courage to turn his dagger against himself. For men like Cassius, the allure of controlling fate, of being the decider of one's own destiny, has more force than the appeal of a powerless life. To die a man is better than to live as an "underling." There is honor in the ultimate act of self-actualization, for as Caesar says to a fearful Calpurnia, "The valiant never taste of death but once."[48]

Brutus shares this ethos of honor in self-sacrifice.[49] Misguided by reason to seal the fate he sought to flee, he refuses to prove powerless. Instead, he makes a final show of manliness and becomes the ultimate master of his own destiny by taking his own life. "It is more worthy to leap in ourselves / Than tarry till they push us," he says. Followed by the final determination: "I shall have honor by this losing day"—and so he does. [50] With these words, he reminds the reader of the noble Brutus of just a few pages earlier, who, innocent of all that was to come, pronounced, "I love the name of honor more than I fear death."[51] It is an easy enough thing to say in the abstract, perhaps, but when fortune shows him no other escape, his efforts having proved impotent, Brutus takes the one action he can be sure of.

Tragically, fate does not leave anyone in the play unscathed. Those too proud to properly couple virtue with action to meet the exigency before them fall victim to their own scheme. While reaching for virtù, Brutus, Cassius, and even Caesar succumb to the instability of their imperfect morality. Thus, each meets the fate he hated: Cassius is vilified by the Roman people, Brutus cannot save them, and Caesar doesn't get the crown.

Shakespeare does not offer a clear judgment of either free will or determinism in telling this tragic tale. Instead, he points the audience to the muddling moral ambiguity of Aristotelean tragedy. Such moral ambiguity was always Plutarch's aim. According to him, it is not the biographer's job to exaggerate an individual's strengths or weaknesses. Instead he says, "Our attitude should be one of modest shame on behalf of human nature, which never produces unmixed good or a character of undisputed excellence."[52] No matter how noble was Brutus or how cruel was Cassius, both men were more than only their best or worst features. They are players on the stage, daring to write their own story only to find that it is scripted in the end.

Conclusion

Flawed though he was, Brutus's honor and nobility remain praiseworthy. Taking a page from his philosophical predecessors, Shakespeare uses an imperfect Brutus to point us to the good. It is telling that when he learns of Brutus's death, Antony freely concedes that his rival was "the noblest Roman of them all." In a stroke of his own nobility, Antony recognizes the value of praising the memory of a man who was, in many respects, precisely the type of citizen Rome might wish for. He eulogizes,

> His life was gentle, and the elements
> So mix'd in him, that Nature might stand up
> And say to all the world "This was a man!"[53]

Among the "mixed elements" that damned Brutus are also his most redeeming qualities. The ambiguous admiration we feel for a flawed character like Brutus is the very aim of poetic philosophy: as we seek to understand him, we come closer to understanding humanity and catch a glimpse of the good. [54] Creative works like *Julius Caesar* capture the human struggle in drama that engrosses both the heart and mind; they moralize without lecture through their beauty and verisimilitude. Speaking of the virtue of such works for the young mind, Plutarch says that a person "may be conveyed by poetry into the realm of philosophy."[55] Allan Bloom

echoes this sentiment when he explains how Shakespeare "can take the philosopher's understanding and translate it into images which touch the deepest passions and cause men to know without knowing that they know."[56]

This does not mean that philosophical insight comes without effort. Brutus's infamy in the public imagination is a testament that, to borrow from Bloom, all too often men "don't know without knowing they don't know." Perhaps the difference comes through introspection. As Shakespeare notes through another unbalanced hero, the purpose of drama is to hold a mirror up to nature.[57] Plutarch felt the same way. "It was for the sake of others that I first commenced writing biographies," he says, "but I find myself proceeding and attaching myself to it for my own; the virtues of these great men serving me as a sort of looking-glass, in which I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life."[58] The reality is that ambiguous heroes abound in life, virtue mixes with vice, and though we might know what we want, we don't always know what is good. In the unbalanced souls of Brutus and Cassius, Shakespeare has provided the mirror for all who care to look.

Notes

1. See David Sedley, "The Ethics of Brutus and Cassius," *Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (November 1997): 41–53; Colbert Kearney, "The Nature of an Insurrection: Shakespeare's '*Julius Caesar*,'" *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 63, no. 250 (1974): 141.
2. J. V. Crewe, "Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 37 (1971): 31, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41801877.
3. Allan Bloom and Harry Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
4. For argument in defense of Brutus's near incorruptibility, see R. T. Jones, "Shakespeare's Julius Caesar," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 12 (1959): 41–51; Bloom and Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics*, 94.
5. Khalil Habib and Joseph Hebert Jr., eds., *The Soul of Statesmanship: Shakespeare on Nature, Virtue, and Political Wisdom* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), xi.
6. Timothy Burns, *Shakespeare's Political Wisdom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 15.

7. Ernest Schanzer goes so far as to say of Shakespeare, "[H]is Brutus is substantially Plutarch's Brutus." See Ernest Schanzer, "The Tragedy of Shakespeare's Brutus," *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 22, no. 1 (1955): 1. Similarly, Jackson Hershbell calls Socrates and Plato Plutarch's "spiritual ancestors." See Jackson Hershbell, "Plutarch's Portrait of Socrates," *Illinois Classical Studies* 13, no. 2 (1988): 374. See also Miryana Dimitrova, "Taking Centre Stage: Plutarch and Shakespeare," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plutarch*, ed. Sophia Xenophontos and Katerina Oikonomopoulou (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 493.
8. A. B. Taylor states that "[a]lthough there is no evidence . . . suggesting Shakespeare read Plato in Greek, he could read Latin[,] and comparatively easy Latin translations of all the dialogues by Ficino or Serranus . . . were available. Shakespeare may have first become aware of the Symposium in his school days from compendia." See A. B. Taylor, "Plato's Symposium and Titania's Speech on the Universal Effect of Her Quarrel with Oberon," *Notes and Queries* 51, no. 3 (2004): 278. See also Sarah Dewar-Watson, "Shakespeare and Aristotle," *Literary Compass*, no. 1 (2004): 2–3; Louise Schleiner, "Latinized Greek Drama in Shakespeare's Writing of Hamlet," *Literary Compass*, no. 1 (2004): 29–31.
9. David Lowenthal, *Shakespeare and the Good Life: Ethics and Politics in Dramatic Form* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), xvi.
10. See Jean E. Feerick, "Shakespeare and Classical Cosmology," in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Classical Literature*, ed. Sean Keilen and Nick Moschovakis (London: Routledge, 2016), 171–89; Daryl Kaytor, "On the Kinship of Shakespeare and Plato," in *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, ed. Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne (New York: Routledge, 2018), 102–17; Daryl Kaytor, "Shakespeare's Political Philosophy: A Debt to Plato in Timon of Athens," *Philosophy and Literature* 36, no. 1 (2012): 137; M. Platt, "Falstaff in the Valley of the Shadow of Death," *Interpretation: Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (1979): 5–29; Barbara Tovey, "Shakespeare's Apology for Imitative Poetry: The Tempest and The Republic Interpretation," *Interpretation. A Journal of Political Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (1983): 275–316; Barbara Tovey, "Wisdom and the Law: Thoughts on the Political Philosophy of Measure for Measure," in *Shakespeare's Political Pageant*, ed. J. Aulis and V. B. Sullivan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 61–75; M. W. Rowe, "Iago's Elenchus: Shakespeare, Othello, and the Platonic Inheritance," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, ed. G. L. Hagberg and W. Jost (New York: Blackwell, 2010), 174–92.

11. Ernest Schnazer notes that romantic critics view a bookish Brutus as a preparation for Hamlet, who would follow eight years later. See Ernest Schnazer, "The Tragedy of Shakespeare's Brutus," *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 22, no. 1 (1955): 1.
12. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), Bk. IV.
13. Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. John Dryden, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough, vol. 5 (New York: Random House, 2001), 444d.
14. According to Aristotle, poetry renews our "love for humanity" when it shows us a man striving for virtue and falling short. See Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. Joe Sachs (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 1453a.
15. In the *Republic* Socrates discusses the "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (607b). He sees the two at odds because poetry provokes the irrational part of the soul and is three steps removed from truth, and so it misinforms the polis and creates an unjust society. However, this does not stop him from using a form of poetry to tell his own story. Lee Trepanier, for one, points out that the Republic "appears to be a style of poetry that Socrates bans from his polis." This may be a function of his recognition of the power of poetry in the lives of the average citizen. See Lee Trepanier, "Socrates' Homer in the *Republic*: Retaining the Poetic Past and Preparing for the Philosophic Future," *Expositions* 11, no. 1 (2017): 80. Max Leyf also expands on this "ancient quarrel." See Max Leyf, "Plato and the Poets," *Voegelin View*, April 19, 2022, https://voegelinview.com/plato-and-the-poets.
16. Plutarch, "Life of Cimon," *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. John Dryden, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 2001), 643–44.
17. Act I, sc. iii, lines 157–60. All citations are to the 1991 Dover edition. See William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* (New York: Dover, 1991).
18. Speaking of Brutus's influence, Bloom says, "[M]orality is a real force, and it intimidates." See Bloom and Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics*, 97.
19. According to Plutarch, even Caesar feared Brutus for his "high spirit and great character." See Plutarch, "The Life of Marcus Brutus," *Plutarch's Lives* 1.577.
20. Ibid., 592.
21. Ibid.
22. For a discussion of the relationship of *philotimia* and moral courage, see Richard Avramenko, "Moral Courage and Justice," in *Courage: The Politics of Life and Limb* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 83–138.

23. Act I, sc. ii, lines 37–39.
24. Ibid., 42–46.
25. Ibid., 52.
26. Ibid., 85–86.
27. Ibid., 147–48.
28. Act II, sc. i, lines 28–34.
29. According to Harvey Mansfield, "[T]humos is essentially self-satisfaction." Explaining how this works, he says, "Instead of having reason defend itself in the calm statement of principles and the careful progress of an argument, the reasonable person often gets angry as his thumos takes over the defense of its supposed master, reason." This is precisely what happens with Cassius. See Harvey Mansfield, *Manliness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 207 and 206.
30. Mansfield claims that the Greek society in which Plato and Aristotle lived "bristled with manliness and thought it the main, or only, virtue." See Mansfield, *Manliness*, 191.
31. Act I, sc. iii, lines 93–98.
32. Ibid., 118–19.
33. Ibid., 140–41.
34. Ibid., 93–98.
35. Plato, *Statesman*, trans. Evan Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2012), 92.
36. Ibid., 102.
37. Act II, sc. i, lines 69–90.
38. According to Cicero, this is another mark of a courageous spirit—to be not "disconcerted in times of difficulty or ruffled and thrown to one's feet, as the saying is, but to keep one's presence of mind and one's self-possession and not to swerve from the path of reason." He saw courage as "the virtue which champions the right" as it sought to banish injustice. See Cicero, *De Officiis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), Bk. I.23. Aristotle similarly viewed a fixed disposition of character as a marker of courage, especially when it was modeled along with "right reason" and nobility. As he saw it, a man who was courageous would do what was noble for its own sake, despite threats of violence or discomfort, which Brutus certainly anticipated. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, rev. J. L. Akrill and J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.6–9.
39. Act III, sc. i, line 23.
40. Ibid., 32.
41. Ibid., 91.

42. Ibid., 135.
43. Plutarch, "On Stoic Contradictions," in *Moralia* 8.34.1050A–B. This idea, though, is challenged by Jan Opsomer. See Jan Opsomer, "Is Plutarch Really Hostile to the Stoics?," in *From Stoicism to Platonism, The Development of Philosophy, 100 B.C.E.–100 C.E.*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 296–321. Miles Geoffrey argues that "Shakespeare could scarcely have avoided encountering [Seneca's] doctrines and his memorable sayings on virtue, passion, suffering, and death," whether directly or indirectly, as Seneca was at the peak of his influence when Shakespeare was writing. Indeed, Caesar, Antony, and Brutus each exemplify elements of the dispassionate rationality and its danger of amoral self-assertion. See Miles Geoffrey's *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 38 and 62. Similarly, David Lowenthal insists that Shakespeare's views of Epicureanism and Stoicism came from Plato and Aristotle. See David Lowenthal, *Shakespeare and the Good Life: Ethics and Politics in Dramatic Form* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 140.
44. Plutarch, "The Life of Coriolanus," *Plutarch's Lives* 1.316.
45. Act I, sc. iii, lines 17–18.
46. Act II, sc. ii, line 49.
47. Act I, sc. iii, line 100.
48. Ibid., 35.
49. David Lowenthal describes Brutus at this point as being "puffed up in his own virtue[, conceiving] himself as the perfectly wise man depicted in Stoic literature. He therefore underestimates the power of the passions not only in other men, but in himself." See Lowenthal, "Shakespeare," 141.
50. Act V, sc. v, lines 28–29, 40.
51. Act I, sc. ii, lines 95–96.
52. Plutarch, "Life of Cimon," *Plutarch's Lives* 1.643.
53. Act V, sc. v, lines 74, 79–81.
54. Kaytor suggests, as Shakespeare borrows from classical cosmology, he comes near to giving us Plato's hoped-for reconciliation of art and philosophy. See Kaytor, "Kinship," 102.
55. Plutarch, "How the Young Man Should Study Poetry," in *Moralia* 37b.
56. Bloom and Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics*, 50.
57. Act III, sc. ii, lines 23–24, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).
58. Plutarch, "The Life of Timoleon," *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. John Dryden, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough, vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 2001), 107.