The Heart of the Plot: An Unnatural Conspiracy

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At the heart of the plot of *Julius Caesar* lies the infamous conspiracy to assassinate the title character. This illuminating examination of the conspiracy is by Norman Sanders, a former professor of English at the University of Tennessee and highly respected Shakespearean scholar. Sanders first concentrates on the key scene near the play's opening, in which Cassius attempts to win Brutus over to the idea of killing Caesar by taking advantage of Brutus's trusting nature. Next, Sanders discusses Brutus's tragic mistake of believing rumors and innuendoes over solid proof of Caesar's tyranny. As Sanders points out, this is not the only way in which Shakespeare shows the conspiracy to be wrong-headed and doomed to ultimate failure. Monstrous omens, especially during a frightening storm, appear to taint the assassination plan as somehow unnatural. And subsequent scenes cast doubt on the justification of the conspirators' attempts to rationalize the murder as just or even as a necessary religious purification of a Rome threatened by the disease of tyranny.

To group Brutus and Cassius together merely as 'conspirators' or 'enemies of Caesar' is to oversimplify the nature of the conspiracy, because they are different in character, motive, and intention. For Cassius, the drive to murder Caesar is deeply written into his very nature. . . . As an 'unharmonious' man 'who loves no music', Cassius is branded as a figure of disorder on both the personal and political levels. Personally, his hatred of Caesar is grounded in envy at beholding a greater than himself; and politically, his abhorrence is based on his belief in a free, republican Rome whose wide walls should encompass more than a single

man. Neither of these emotions need necessarily lead a man to political action; but Cassius also has a philosophy that is more Renaissance than Roman, and which, to Shakespeare's original audience, was personified by the imperfectly-known but notorious figure of Nicolai Machiavelli [the notorious fifteenth-century Italian statesman who wrote about political power and manipulation]: this is the concept of man as master of his own destiny independent of any superhuman power:

> Men at some time are masters of their fates;
> The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
> But in ourselves, that me are underlings.

It is this combination of the hate-infested man and the convinced republican, who, in Plutarch's words, 'even from his cradle could not abide any manner of tyrants', who attempts to seduce Brutus to his party. As he does so, the two basic strains in his nature intertwine. On the one hand, he is totally sincere in his belief that he

> had as lief not be as live to be
> In awe of such a thing as I myself

because he was 'born as free as Caesar'. But he speaks of these beliefs in a context that devalues them. For he slips constantly from his high standards of republicanism into a more material and personal support of them. Caesar's pretensions certainly violate Cassius's ideals, but the physical limitations of Caesar in comparison with the personal standards Cassius sets are more immediately influential. Thus his own daring challenge of the elements and of Caesar is set against Caesar's weak response:

> Accoutrèd as I was, I plungèd in
> And bade him follow; so indeed he did.
> The torrent roared, and we did buffet it
> With lusty sinews, throwing it aside
> And stemming it with hearts of controversy.
> But ere we could arrive the point proposed,
> Caesar cried, 'Help me, Cassius, or I sink!'

It is this illustration that is brought forward to prove his point about individual freedom. Similarly, it is Caesar's fever in Spain which is used to show the human weaknesses of the eye 'whose bend doth awe the world', and of the tongue 'that bade the Romans / Mark him and write his speeches in their books'. In the Cassius who speaks of greatness in terms of feeding, and of honour in terms of personal achievement,

we have the man whose political grasp is limited to immediate practice, whose mind cannot grasp abstract concepts, who can only perceive those standards which he himself creates, and for whom politics is the realm of personal relationships in which he is naturally inept, yet in which he craves success.

Brutus Manipulated by Cassius

It is the function of this man to persuade Brutus, who is his opposite in almost every respect, to join the conspiracy. Although, because of his egotism, he is unfitted for the role of tempter, he is successful owing to the nature of the man he tempts. For, though Brutus is able without effort to inspire friendship and form close personal relationships, and has a mind which moves easily in the world of ideals and abstractions, he is unable to 'look quite through the deeds of men'. Throughout the scene between them, he is so wrapped in his own thoughts and fears about Caesar that he only half-listens to Cassius's words, or rather registers only those among them that are directly connected with his own misgivings. Over-conscious of his own heritage and the historical associations of his name, he quickly responds to Cassius's calculated weighing of this name with Caesar's:

> Brutus and Caesar. What should be in that 'Caesar'?
> Why should that name be sounded more than yours?
> Write them together, yours is as fair a name;
> Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well;
> Weigh them, it is as heavy; conjure with 'em,
> 'Brutus' will start a spirit as soon as 'Caesar'.

With the sound of the crowd hailing Caesar offstage, he talks to Cassius of his beliefs in generalizing, abstract terms not in those of the immediate situation:

> If it be aught toward the general good,
> Set honour in one eye, and death i'th'other,
> And I will look on both indifferently. . . .
> Brutus had rather be a villager
> Than to repute himself a son of Rome
> Under these hard conditions as this time
> Is like to lay upon us.

It is due to these qualities in Brutus and to his fatal capacity for taking the name of a thing for the thing itself, or the utterance of a principle as proof of its existence, that Cassius is able to twist his 'honourable mettle'. In Cassius's soliloquy at the end of Act I, scene 2, we have a clear if limited

statement of what we are to witness in the person of Brutus: namely, that qualities noble in themselves can be manipulated for less noble ends. In showing how he has used the friendship he longs for and himself professes to further a plan motivated primarily by personal envy, Cassius reveals the real nature of the conspiracy, which relies for its success on the conscious recognition that

> it is meet
> That noble minds keep ever with their likes;
> For who so firm that cannot be seduced? . . .

Supposition Rather Than Proof

Despite the influence that Cassius can bring to bear on Brutus, both in personal encounter and by his device of planting forged letters purporting to represent the will of the Roman people, the decision which is to make the conspiracy a political fact rests with Brutus alone. It is for this reason that Shakespeare shows us only him in self-communication: for the decision must be seen to come out of his character. The speech recording this decision at the beginning of Act II is the crux of the play, and it has given rise to various and opposite interpretations. By this point, we are aware of what Brutus is, and, in the speech, all the tension between his nature and commitment to an action which violates this nature is obvious. Shakespeare is here trying to make credible simultaneously a man's determination to follow a course which, in terms of his character, is perverted, and those flaws and strengths in him which make such a perversion possible. But the degree of guilt we are meant to receive from the speech, and its implications for how we view Brutus, are variable. As the lines stand, Brutus misapplies logic wilfully, if unconsciously, and consequently decides on the basis of supposition and possibility, rather than on the proven evidence which points in the opposite direction. Although he admits that

> to speak truth of Caesar,
> I have not known when his affections swayed
> More than his reason . . .

yet he chooses to take the common proof over the particular instance and

> since the quarrel
> Will bear no colour for the thing he is,
> Fashion it thus: that what be is, augmented,
> Would run to these and these extremities;
> And therefore think him as a serpent's egg

> Which, hatched, would, as his kind, grow mischievous,
> And kill him in the shell.

Monstrous and Unnatural Happenings

The degree to which one sympathizes with or blames Brutus at this moment depends upon one's over-all view of the play; but what is indisputable is that with Brutus's attempt to resolve, by whatever means, what is essentially a personal conflict with national implications, Shakespeare links other signs of disorder. The very words Brutus uses immediately following his moment of resolution convey the nature of the insurrection his whole being is undergoing, even as the state of Rome will as a result of it:

> Between the acting of a dreadful thing
> And the first motion, all the interim is
> Like a phantasma or a hideous dream:
> The genius and the mortal instruments
> Are then in council; and the state of man,
> Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
> The nature of an insurrection.

This inward 'civil war' is that which is to produce its outward counterpart in the final scenes of the play; but it is also to have a more immediate correspondence in the warring elements and prodigies that are described by Casca in Act I, scene 3, and by Calphurnia in Act II, scene 2. These monstrous and unnatural happenings in the natural world were easily related by the Elizabethans both to man's inner life and to society itself, owing to the infinite series of interlocking correspondences which they perceived between the personal, social, material, and universal levels of life. For Casca,

> When these prodigies
> Do so conjointly meet, let not men say,
> 'These are their reasons, they are natural';
> For, I believe, they are portentous things
> Unto the climate that they point upon.

Cassius on the other hand sees it as a 'very pleasing night to honest men' which projects his own disordered state, and presents him with a challenge to test the will of the gods by placing himself 'even in the aim and very flash' of the 'cross blue lightning'.

How one interprets these phenomena in the play is in accordance with one's point of view; as Cicero rightly notes,

> men may construe things after their fashion,
> Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.

These unnatural happenings are connected with Caesar, and the disorder his tyranny creates in the body politic; but they also reflect the unnatural nature of the conspiracy against him, because 'The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes'. Both interpretations are voiced in the play, and Shakespeare pointed clearly to neither as being the right one. The final decision on this, as on so many other issues in the play, lies somewhere between Antony's laudation of Brutus and Brutus's own final lines on the futility of his action, between Caesar the man and Caesar the spirit.

The Assassination a Religious Ceremony?

Once Brutus has made the conspiracy possible by joining it, Shakespeare focuses on Brutus's recognition of the unpleasant aspects of the undertaking to which he is committed, and on his efforts to bring those things he perceives into line with the exalted motives he believes to be prompting him. In meeting his fellow conspirators as they skulk into his house muffled in their cloaks in the dead of night, he defines the nature of what he has decided to do:

> 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?

As they confer at Brutus's house, the uneasy alliance of different personalities which the conspiracy really is begins also to emerge. What has been seen, up to this point, to be a balanced combination of the emotional drive and practicality of Cassius, and the necessary idealism of Brutus, turns out to have its own tensions. The price that Cassius has to pay for the plot's success is agreement to all of Brutus's errors of policy. The oath he proposes to bind them together is dismissed with an idealistic tirade by Brutus; and his advocacy of the need for Antony's death, as well as Caesar's, is denied as being butchery introduced into a sacrifice. Both of these decisions certainly grow out of those qualities which made Brutus's part in the conspiracy a necessity; but, more than this, they are a product of a Brutus who is now unconsciously trying to fit the violent means of the deed into his exalted vision of what the end will achieve. Thus an oath cannot be allowed, because they must not stain

> The even virtue of our enterprise,
> Nor th'insuppressive mettle of our spirits,
> To think that or our cause or our performance
> Did need an oath; when every drop of blood
> That every Roman bears, and nobly bears,
> Is guilty of a several bastardy,
> If he do break the smallest particle
> Of any promise that hath passed from him.

And Antony's death would introduce a sacrilegious note into what he visualizes as a religious ceremony in which the body must suffer for the spirit's sake:

> 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,
> Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.

The Conspiracy Sick and Directionless?

During the course of this scene, Brutus's image has been tarnished to some degree. Each member of the audience must perceive the distance between Brutus's vision and the actuality of the deed he contemplates. And Shakespeare introduces two short encounters which, in part, elevate him to his early eminence above the other conspirators. In the first, Portia [Brutus's wife] serves to remind us of the cost of Brutus's decision and the degree to which it affects his whole being as she describes, from the knowledge of intimacy, the past weeks:

> It will not let you eat, nor talk, nor sleep;
> And could it work so much upon your shape,
> As it hath much prevailed on your condition,
> I should not know you Brutus.

In the second scene, Caius Ligarius rises from his sick bed at Brutus's bidding, and, conjured by the magic of his name, is ready to follow

> To do I know not what; but it sufficeth
> That Brutus leads me on.

Yet, even though both these exchanges bring sympathy for Brutus, since they show us the trust and friendship and the love and devotion he can command, they simultaneously remind us by suggestion of other qualities. For Portia echoes

her husband's awareness of his position, in her own pride in being Cato's daughter and 'the woman that Lord Brutus took to wife'; and she reflects also his blurring of the necessity for physical violence and the proving an ideal, as she shows him the gash in her thigh, self-inflicted to test her constancy. With Caius Ligarius, too, sickness touches the conspiracy: Caesar must be 'made sick', so a sick man is healthy and will join the plot, if Brutus 'have in hand / Any exploit worthy the name of honour'. . . .

Before the murder has actually been committed, all other considerations and decisions made by the conspirators seem to be of subsidiary importance; but those actions they perform in its aftermath are of prime significance in their results. It is immediately after Caesar has died that the conspiracy displays a lack of direction. At this point, the supernatural disorder of the previous night is given a human and social counterpart in the description of the city where

> Men, wives, and children stare, cry out, and run,
> As it were doomsday.

Some of the group share this hysteria, as Cinna and Cassius call for 'Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement' to be proclaimed through the streets and in the common pulpits. Only Brutus has the calm necessary to reassure the aged senator, Publius; and this calm is based on his ability to keep in the forefront of his mind the abstract concept that the deed represents: namely, that 'ambition's debt is paid'.