# Manifestations of the Supernatural in *Julius Caesar*

Cumberland Clark

The Romans were extremely superstitious people who put great store in prodigies (i.e., omens, portents, supernatural signs), ghosts, dreams, astrology, and other fantastic elements. Shakespeare faithfully worked a number of these elements into his most famous Roman play, *Julius Caesar*. The late Cumberland Clark, former vice-president of the Shakespeare Reading Society and a prolific author on Shakespeare's works, here presents a spirited look at the ways the playwright used the theme of the supernatural in telling the tale of mighty Caesar's fall. After providing an excellent description of the setting and appearance of Caesar's ghost, Clark makes the point that in life Caesar was not nearly as formidable as he was in death. Then Clark discusses omens, including the storm in which Casca and Cicero meet, as well as the serious and often fearful manner in which the characters react to disturbing dreams.

While a study of Shakespeare and the Supernatural necessarily concerns itself chiefly with the four great dramas in which fairies, ghosts, and witches play a principal part, there are at least a dozen others from which the poet was unable to exclude the influences of the unseen world. Probably the most famous of these is *Julius Caesar*.

A tragedy dealing with the conflict between monarchical and democratic parties in the political world of Rome may seem a somewhat unpromising stage on which to introduce the Supernatural. It must be remembered, however, that the Romans were extremely superstitious, a trait that is emphasized over and over again in *Julius Caesar*. The marvellous and unnatural are

Reprinted from *Shakespeare and the Supernatural*, by Cumberland Clark (London: Williams & Norgate, 1931).

not represented solely by the appearance of Caesar's Ghost in IV. 3. They are given special prominence by the terrifying astrological portents that accompany the storm on the eve of the assassination, the prophetic dream of Calphurnia, and the warnings uttered by Artemidorus and the Soothsayer.

## An Unusual and Eerie Experience

Perhaps Shakespeare would not have introduced the principal supernatural event–the appearance of the Ghost–if he had not found it in his authority, Plutarch. The Greek biographer describes in uninspired language the circumstances and manner of the spectral visit, and goes on to say, "Brutus boldly asked what he was, a god or a man, and what cause brought him hither? The spirit answered: 'I am thy evil spirit, Brutus, and thou shalt see me by the city of Philippi.' Brutus being not otherwise afraid, replied again unto it: 'Well: then I shall see thee again.' The spirit presently vanished away."

This somewhat matter-of-fact account of an unusual phenomenon was transformed–as was all of Plutarch–into something impressive and dramatic by the master touch of Shakespeare. The Poet realized that the circumstances were favourable for some unusual and eerie experience. It was late at night and dark. Great events were pending. The memory of a crime, as yet unpunished and unavenged, hovered about the tent of Brutus. The republican leader has had a tiring day. He has just emerged from a violent quarrel with his brother-in-law, Cassius. He has received news of the death of his beloved and noble wife, Portia. His cause is not going well. Octavius and Antony are marching against him with a powerful army. He is tired and drowsy and troubled by a premonition of his own death at Philippi. His page, Lucius, has dozed off in the middle of playing to him "a sleepy tune." He tries to settle himself to read, when the Ghost, for whose appearance the music has helped to prepare the audience, enters (IV. 3. 275-281):

*Bru.* How ill this taper burns! Ha! Who comes here?
I think it is the weakness of mine eyes
That shapes this monstrous apparition.
It comes upon me.
Art thou any thing?
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That makest my blood cold, and my hair to stare?
Speak to me what thou art.



Thereafter Shakespeare transcribes Plutarch to the exit of the spectre.

Caesar's Ghost is a conventional ghost judged by Elizabethan superstition. It arrives in the depth of the night, heralded by solemn music, and must be addressed before it can speak. Like other ghosts, it is condemned to walk the earth until its death is avenged. Shakespeare's mind was very much upon these disturbing visitors at this period, for *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* were written much about the same time.

## The Power and Influence of Caesar's Spirit

There is, however, a difference between Caesar's Ghost and the *Hamlet* Ghost. Caesar's Ghost is subjective. It appears only to Brutus. Hamlet's Ghost, on the other hand, is objective–it only becomes subjective on its later visit–and is seen by all present. Caesar's Ghost is more like the ghost of Banquo [in *Macbeth*]. Both Macbeth and Brutus recognize the subjective nature of the apparition before their eyes. Macbeth knows it is an "unreal mockery," the very painting of his fear; and Brutus declares "it is the weakness of mine eyes" that "shapes this monstrous apparition."

In the two plays, *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare deals with the assassination of the head of state, and is not so interested in the one slain as in the results of the crime upon the murderer. In picturing these results he has found the Supernatural (suggested in each case by his authority) of the highest dramatic value. Julius Caesar alive is not a character that commands great respect and admiration. He is vain, boastful, irresolute, and a prey to flatterers. But Julius Caesar dead is an all-important influence in the drama. We are conscious throughout of the ever-presence of his restless, inexorable spirit hovering, like the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth*, over the whole action, and leading the assassins relentlessly to final doom and retribution. Brutus feels the power of the dead Caesar constantly. Even he, the hero of the tragedy, cannot escape from it. He cries (v. 3. 94–96):

O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet!
Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords
In our own proper entrails.

Marc Antony expresses the same thought (III. 3. 270–275):

. . . Caesar's spirit ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side, come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice

Cry "Havoc," and let slip the dogs of war;
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial.

There is no doubt, I think, that Shakespeare meant us to understand that when the inward voice warns Brutus that his end is near, then his consciousness of the ever-presence of Caesar's spirit is so intensified that it brings him into closer contact with the Unseen and results in a visible manifestation.

When Caesar's Ghost tells Brutus that he will see him at Philippi (IV. 3. 283), he means that he will meet him on the same plane of existence–in other words, in the spirit world of the hereafter. Shakespeare, with his customary economy in the use of the Supernatural, does not show us this further spectral appearance on the stage; but we learn that it has happened from Brutus' speech to Volumnius (v. 5. 17–20):

The ghost of Caesar hath appear'd to me
Two several times by night; at Sardis once,
And this last night here in Philippi fields:
I know my hour is come.

Brutus seems to interpret the second manifestation as a command from the spirit of his victim to take his own life. Wherefore he runs upon his sword, and dies, exclaiming, "Caesar, now be still" (v. 5. 50).

## Portents and Dreams

Superstitious fear is wonderfully depicted by Shakespeare in the horror of Casca at the terrifying violence of the thunderstorm in I. 3, and the ghastly prodigies accompanying it–all intended as a sign of the anger of the gods at the dastardly conspiracy against Caesar. To an Elizabethan audience, steeped as it was in astrology, these celestial disturbances would bear a profound significance. Only the level-headedness of Cicero prevents Casca from becoming panic-stricken, until the shrewd Cassius arrives to place an interpretation upon the phenomena that appears to justify the dark conspiracy against Caesar. Here we have an instance of the *friendly* intervention of the Supernatural in an endeavour to prevent man from committing blunders that will prove disastrous to himself. Man, however, cannot be deprived of his freewill and independence, even when such deprivation would be to his own advantage. He can choose to ignore the helpful warning from the metaphysical world, silencing it with his own obstinacy



and wilfulness. This course the conspirators against Caesar pursue, and eventually pay for their mistake with their lives.

Much store was laid by Shakespeare's contemporaries on dreams and their interpretation. Here was a favourite channel of communication between the mortal and immortal, and free use was made of it by the playwrights. Calphurnia's dream (II 2) would strike the average playgoer as a clear warning from the spirit world which no sensible man should ignore.

We learn of Calphurnia's troubled sleep in the first lines of the scene. Caesar says:

Nor heaven nor earth have been at peace to-night
Thrice hath Calphurnia in her sleep cried out,
"Help, ho ! They murder Caesar!"

But the first arguments that Caesar's wife uses to dissuade her husband from leaving their house on the fatal day are the violent thunderstorm and the "horrid sights" which accompanied it. . . . To these Caesar turns a deaf ear. He is terribly afraid of being thought afraid. But Calphurnia's pleading is insistent. She tells him, "Your wisdom is consumed in confidence", and on bended knee begs him to call it *her* fear, and not his own, that keeps him at home. Caesar is persuaded; but at that moment, unfortunately, the wily conspirator, Decius, arrives to learn of his decision. Realizing at once that it must involve the utter failure of the conspiracy, he presses Caesar to give him the reason for absenting himself from the senate-house. It is then we hear of Calphurnia's dream in detail. . . . With remarkable presence of mind and ingenuity Decius places an entirely new and favourable construction on the dream, and one that flatters Caesar. He tells the dictator that the Senate intend to offer him a royal crown, and is scornful that this final triumph of his career should be frustrated by the foolish fears of a weak woman. Caesar is persuaded to change his mind once again. . . . He waves aside her presentiment and allows his vanity to lead him to his death. Caesar's action in rejecting so clear an offer of metaphysical aid would sound like madness in Elizabethan ears, and would fill the audience with excited anticipation of the inevitable penalty.

## Warnings that Go Unheeded

Another hand from the Unseen is outstretched to save Caesar. Through Artemidorus and a Soothsayer further warnings are given of the danger threatening him. Prophecy was one of the

recognized branches of witchcraft; and the picture of Caesar recklessly turning from these well-intentioned and clairvoyant counsellors would be, in the modern phrase, "good theatre."

Although the Supernatural is not dominant in *Julius Caesar,* it has an important role to fill in the unfoldment of the tragedy. It intervenes in an endeavour to prevent men from committing irrevocable blunders. But it fails, for it has no power to coerce the free-will of man. Its warnings are disregarded, and disaster ensues.