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Dramatic Conjuring in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

In the world of *Julius Caesar* a soothsayer cries out warnings associated with the Ides, a time of the month sacred to Jupiter and marked by a full moon that influences the occurrence of magical or supernatural events. On the Ides (the thirteenth or the fifteenth day of each month) the *Idulia*, a special priest, sacrifices a white lamb to Jupiter, the god who controls among other things fair weather, rain, and storms.¹ Appropriately a literal storm takes place in Shakespeare's play to suggest not only the threat of Caesarism but also the brewing conspiracy that will slaughter Caesar. Those who plan the sacrifice are not special priests of Jupiter, no matter how much they will try to ritualize the murder once it is committed. Rather than revere ritual the conspirators will pervert it, and the result will include violent repercussions in the realm of nature. The storm anticipates this violence. What should be luminous full-moon nights become times of unnatural exhalations and dark mystery. In the midst of the storm Cassius tells Casca that Caesar is "Most like this dreadful night/ That thunders, lightens, opens graves, and roars/ As doth the lion in the Capitol" (I.iii.73-75).² Cassius is here picturing Caesar as a frightening threat to all free Romans. Part of the description speaks of Caesar as a necromancer — indeed a sorcerer— who has the sinister power to call forth spirits for evil ends. We are not surprised that Cassius sees Caesar as a sorcerer, nor that he looks favorably upon Brutus as a figurative magus.³

The play as a whole presents contrasting kinds of conjurers through several key references to conjuring. Particularly important is Brutus as tragic conjurer in dramatic contrast with Antony as triumphant conjurer-antagonist. Brutus is the potential conjurer who prefers not to engage in conjuring but who becomes involved in it just the same. His tragedy includes a reluctance to conjure coupled with accidental conjurings. It is this dilemma that eventually leads to the destruction of Brutus's cause and Brutus himself.

Early in the play Cassius, hoping to demonstrate that Brutus is at least the equal of Caesar, speaks of conjuring with Brutus's name:

Why should (Caesar's) 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."

(I.ii.141-45)

This statement near the opening of the play is dramatically vital in that it anticipates many references to conjuring in later scenes. In attempting to seduce the mind of Brutus, Cassius creates images of incantation ("Sound them") and magic ("conjure with 'em") in such a way as to establish an aura of fantasy so that Brutus's imagination will be sparked. It is no wonder that Brutus's world becomes "Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream" (II.i.65). Casca too sees Brutus in magical terms:

(Brutus) sits high in all the people's hearts:
 And that which would appear offence in us,
 His countenance, like richest alchemy,
 Will change to virtue and to worthiness.

(I.iii.157-60)

This kind of association continues when Caius Ligarius enters the play, hails Brutus as "Soul of Rome," and goes on to say,

Brave son, deriv'd from honourable loins!
 Thou, like an exorcist, hast conjur'd up
 My mortified spirit.

(II.i.321-24)

Brutus's image assumes the dimensions of a great and noble magus who can bring marvelous change to a world where political pressures are threatening the life of the Roman republicanism. But unfortunately — and tragically — Brutus as conjurer is merely an illusory image in the "world of illusion to which (the conspirators') project belongs."⁴

As a man of reason Brutus strikes us as one capable of raising the good spirits of men through an orderly display of noble principles. His stoic calm and intellectual reserve are the kinds of qualities we look for in the practitioner of *magia naturalis*. Antony, on the other hand, represents passionate intensity and hence the potential for political sorcery. Shakespeare heightens the contrast between the two characters by not only linking one with Reason and the other with Passion but also

by dramatizing the one's reluctance to handle the art of figurative conjuring and the other's adeptness in exploiting that art to the limit. This distinction between Brutus's and Antony's handling of conjuring gets under way in the assassination scene (III.i), where Brutus's ceremonial frame of mind leads to a somber plea:

Stoop, Romans, stoop
And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood
Up to the elbows, and besmear our swords.

(III.i.105-7)

In his desire to avoid having the assassination come off as a "savage spectacle" (III.i.223), Brutus wishes to clothe the murder in the garb of ritual.⁵ With Antony's entrance, however, solemnity gives way to stirring emotion:

O mighty Caesar! dost thou lie so low?

(III.i.148)

Ready to die at the Conspirators' hands and craftily flattering them by speaking of them as surgeons who must "let blood" (III.i.152) for the sake of political health, Antony holds his passion in check, revealing it only after the conspirators have left the site of Caesar's death. Then Caesar is invoked in more fervent terms:

O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek, and gentle with these butchers.

(III.i.254-55)

This fervor builds through Antony's soliloquy. His speech becomes incantatory, attempting to conjure up a menacing spirit:

. . . 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.

(III.i.270-75)⁶

What Antony desires is not the ceremonious laying to rest of the dead but the energetic raising up of the spirit. He realizes full well, as did

Caesar himself, the power of Caesar's spirit. Before he is assassinated the would-be dictator says,

Be not fond,
To think that Caesar bears such rebel blood.
That will be thaw'd from the true quality
With that which melteth fools — I mean sweet words.

(III.i.39-42)

The inherent strength of Caesar's spirit in addition to Antony's determination to call it forth ensure its persistence in the world of the play. Caesar's (and Antony's) opponents must reckon with this dramatic fact.

Shakespeare presents the greatest moment of contrast between Brutus and Antony in the climactic forum scene (III.ii). Tension is established by the sequential positioning of two addresses to the Roman people: the first of these is given by Brutus, who speaks prose, the style of the intellect; the second is by Antony, who speaks verse, the vehicle for emotional appeal and response. Brutus's speech is balanced euphuistically. Reason predominates in the form and content of his remarks. Antony, in his attempt to create movement among the people, resorts to a distinctive feature of the Arcadian style: animation. If Brutus's speech strikes us as highly rhetorical, Antony's is an exemplary fusion of great rhetoric and poetry. If Brutus depends more upon the abstract, Antony takes hold of the Roman crowd through concrete references. For the audience in the theatre, Brutus emerges as the honest speaker; for the Roman populace, Antony does. And if it is true, as Muriel Bradbrook believes, that "everywhere in this play . . . the style is the man," then what Maynard Mack calls Antony's "direct appeal to passion" characterizes him as the "born opportunist" (as Granville-Barker calls him) opposed to Brutus the idealist.⁷

Brutus does not succeed in conveying the vital point that Caesarism was his target in the recent assassination, for as many readers and viewers of the play have noticed, only chagrin could result from the response of the plebeians to the words of Brutus at the opening of III.ii:

Third Plebeian. Let him be Caesar.
Fourth Plebeian.
Shall be crown'd in Brutus.

Caesar's better parts

(51-52)

Brutus has inadvertently conjured up the spirit of Caesarism. This continues to clarify for us his tragic role as reluctant conjurer. His sup-

porters see him as a political magus, but Brutus is not a conscious magician, as is Antony, who has already consciously invoked the spirit of Caesar in the assassination scene and who is about to do the same here, this time with devastating effects. There is no need to dwell upon the entire speech of Antony, but there is need to examine an aspect of the speech that has not been thoroughly explored.

At about the mid-point of his address to the plebeians, Antony uses the will of Caesar as one of his major stage-properties in methodically carrying out the theatrical exhibition of emotion and passion. The Fourth Plebeian calls for the reading of the will, the crowd chimes in, and Antony responds:

Antony. You will compell me then to read the will?
Then make a ring about the corpse of Caesar,
And let me show you him that made the will.
Shall I descend? And will you give me leave?

All. Come down.

Second Plebeian. Descend.

/Antony comes down/

Third Plebeian. You shall have leave.

Fourth Plebeian. A ring! Stand round.

(III.ii.159-66)

Two symbolic gestures occur here; one of them is of extreme importance. Antony makes a descent to the level of the people and having done so gains their confidence; then (at line 160) he calls for a circle of plebeians about the corpse of Caesar.⁸ What follows is the central act of conjuring in the play: Antony calls forth the spirit of Caesar from what has become a magic circle within which lies the body of Caesar. By demanding that a ring be made, Antony furthers the theatrical effectiveness of his speech. He then continues to do this by invoking the name of Caesar in incantatory lines that rely on animated rhetorical poetry. The animation of words and minds during Antony's speech is figured in the kinesthetic imagery of lines such as,

But were I Brutus,
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
Would ruffle up your spirits, and put a tongue
In every wound of Caesar that should move
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny.

(III.ii.228-32)

Moving the spirit (even ruffling it up) is the conjurer's job. Preceding these lines Antony introduces still another stage-property: Caesar's mantle. Following the same set of lines he will return to Caesar's will. If one is looking for perfect examples of the emblematic richness of Shakespeare's dramaturgy, here they are in this one scene: the will, the descent, the mantle, the encircled corpse.⁹

From the perspective of the advocates of republicanism, Antony calls forth a vicious demon with sorcery; from a different perspective he engages the light of reason to call up a luminous spirit of Caesar in magus fashion. Antony is in effect both magus and sorcerer. And in a similar way Brutus, though a man of reason when broadly contrasted with Antony, is actually a mixture of the irrational and the rational, of the sorcerer and the magus. It is true, as Norman Rabkin points out, that Brutus attempts to live by reason but that he is none the less "determined by irrational elements within himself that he cannot recognize."¹⁰ Brutus the potential magus is the reluctant sorcerer. His complex psychology and his tragic dilemma are one.

Another outstanding instance of the dilemma is found in the scene during which the assassination is agreed on. As soon as agreement is reached the anachronistic clock chimes three times (II.i.192-93). Caesar's murder has been planned; and Brutus, who would have the conspirators be "sacrificers, but not butchers" (II.i.166), goes on to say,

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!

(II.i.167-70)

The full irony of the above lines is grasped when we realize that the clock acts as a metaphorical bell — a necromantic bell that evokes the spirit of the dead.¹¹ In other words, Brutus (as he does in the forum scene) inadvertently conjures up the spirit of Caesar. Here, of course, he conjures up that spirit before Caesar is dead. The suggestion is clear: Brutus, no matter how much he wishes to eliminate the spirit of Caesar (or "Caesarism"), is faced with the dilemma of evoking that spirit by virtue of his inability to handle consciously the powers of conjuring. Brutus is in the absurd position of the non-magician who every now and then performs a magical trick that he under no circumstances wishes to perform. When he balks at the idea that a conspirator's oath be taken (II.i.113-40) he unconsciously expresses his deep-seated wish not to be

involved with conjuring. The *OED* helps us to understand the significance of the refusal, for prior to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the verb "to conjure" could mean "to swear together; to make a privy compact by an oath; to form a conspiracy." This semantic fact underscores Brutus's role as inadvertent or reluctant conjurer. By responding negatively to Cassius's "let us swear our resolution" (II.i.113) Brutus is saying essentially that he does not wish to conspire in the customary way; he does not wish to commit himself formally; he is against oaths in this particular conspiracy. In brief, Brutus wishes to lead a conspiracy, but one of the stipulations is that he not be obligated to conjure. And conjure, in the older sense of the word, he does not; in the more common sense of the word, however, he conjures accidentally and to no avail. Either way, Brutus's association with conjuring anticipates a tragic or fatal outcome.

Toward the end of Act Four Brutus once again enacts the role of inadvertent conjurer. He is trying to rest his anxious mind before the action of Philippi, and as in the orchard scene earlier (II.i) the setting is quiet, Brutus is meditative, and Lucius is nearby. This time Brutus asks Lucius to play a melody on his stringed instrument. The First Folio calls for "Musicke, and a Song" (IV.iii.265), and although it is not certain which song is called for, the important detail here is music, whether it be instrumental or vocal. Shortly after Lucius begins his tune he falls asleep, following which Brutus, having removed the delicate instrument from the boy's hands, opens a book and begins reading:

Let me see, let me see; is not the leaf turn'd down
Where I left reading? Here it is, I think.

Enter the Ghost of Caesar

How ill this taper burns. Ha! who comes here?

(IV.iii.271-75)

Brutus, in asking Lucius to play a tune, has helped to create an occult atmosphere fit for the conjuring up of a spirit.¹² Sound (i.e., music, a bell, the singing voice, or some other device) is traditionally involved in the conjuring art, as are books and burning candles. Brutus has not consciously assembled bell, book, and candle for a magical rite; nevertheless, the sound of music, Brutus's gazing at a book, and the ill-burning taper are further dramatic emblems in this play about a conspirator who has little or no control over conjuring. Brutus controls neither Antony's conjuring power nor his own. Furthermore, in the

scene at hand Brutus experiences the pressures of trying to determine the difference between good and evil, symbolized here by the question concerning whether the raised spirit is "some angel, or some devil" (278), the answer to which is the Ghost's declaration that he is Brutus's "evil spirit" (280). Plutarch, Shakespeare's chief source for *Julius Caesar*, does not say anything about the identity of the ghost, nor does he say anything about the idea of conjuring anywhere in the material related to this play.¹³ Shakespeare, however, finds it necessary to make the spirit the shade of Caesar. Dramatically this establishes a striking parallel and contrast between the present scene (IV.iii.251ff.), which already parallels the orchard scene (II.i), and that scene near the opening of the play in which Caesar enters with pomp and ceremony (I.ii): in IV.iii the spirit of dead Caesar enters after music is sounded; in the earlier scene, Caesar, triumphant and quite alive, enters Rome to the sound of music (I.ii.16).¹⁴

Little does Brutus realize at the opening of the play how much Cassius's talk of conjuring with Brutus's name signifies. That early reference to conjuring reverberates ironically throughout *Julius Caesar*. What is more, the irony is intensified by means of the parallel death-scenes in the fifth act. To heighten the similarities between the deaths of Cassius and Brutus, Shakespeare gives them the following last-minute invocations:

Caesar, thou art reveng'd.

(V.iii.45)

.....

Caesar, now be still;
I kill'd not thee with half so good a will.

(V.v.50-51)

These feeble attempts at conjuring are ironic in that (1) they are neither necessary nor effectual in the closing moments of the lives of Cassius and Brutus and (2) they are at once pathetic and emphatic reminders at this point in the dramatic structure that the name of Caesar is a more powerful conjuring name than any other in the play. Cassius's thesis early in the play, "'Brutus' will start a spirit as soon as 'Caesar'" (I.ii.145), is refuted and even made to look somewhat absurd when seen from the perspective of Act Five. Moreover, the focus of that perspective is sharpened as soon as Antony addresses young Octavius with the name of

Caesar. Antony, the first and only one in the play to address Octavius in this way, is the master conjurer to the last.¹⁵ He has, as it were, the honor of carrying out the symbolic transfer of the already conjured spirit of Julius to Octavius. What remains in the *dénouement* to emphasize the triumph of *Caesar redivivus* is the person of Octavius Caesar uttering the final lines of the play with supreme satisfaction:

. . . let's away,
To part the glories of this happy day.

Octavius has in effect become the name with the greatest conjuring power.

Exploring the significance of conjuring in *Julius Caesar* demonstrates the artistry involved in the implementation and development of an idea that directs the course of theme and characterization. Conjuring spans all five acts, and an understanding of its function in the play, as we have seen, helps to clarify scenic relationships, dramatic emblems, character relationships and the personal tragedy of Brutus. *Julius Caesar*, in view of this, becomes a unified structure with a dramatic figure whose psychological dilemma is central to the tragic import of the play. As a traditional concept, as a dramatic theme, as a means of understanding personalities and the contexts in which they exist, conjuring contributes abundantly to the overall magic of *Julius Caesar* as a poetic drama meant for the stage.

NOTES

1. *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*, ed. Oskar Seyffert et al. (1891; rev. ed., Cleveland: World Publishing, 1956), pp. 109-110, 317 and 337-38.
2. T.S. Dorsch, ed., *Julius Caesar*. The Arden Shakespeare (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958). All references to the play will be taken from this edition.
3. Robert H. West considers the distinction between magus (or theurgist) and sorcerer (or goetist) in *The Invisible World: A Study of Pneumatology in Elizabethan Drama* (Atlanta: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1939), pp. 40-41 and passim. See also chapters 5 and 6 of Walter Clyde Curry's *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1957). Edgar Wind in *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1967) has a lucid discussion of *magia naturalis* (as distinct from necromantic sorcery) in connection with the Florentine Neoplatonists, especially Pico della Mirandola (pp. 110-13). Daniel P. Walker's *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute, Univ. of London, 1958) is a thorough account of a theurgist's *magia naturalis*.
4. Derek Traversi comments on the way in which the conspirators are drawn into a "world of illusion" and how Brutus's talk of "phantasma" recalls Macbeth's "hallucinatory approach to his more inhuman crime" (*Shakespeare: The Roman Plays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 30 and 35); and Maurice Charney observes that it is important that Cassius try to "dispel for Brutus the magical name of 'Caesar'" (*Shakespeare's Roman Plays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 70-71).

5. Adrien Bonjour's monograph on the play, *The Structure of "Julius Caesar"* (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1958), presents a sensitive analysis of the speeches by Antony in III.i, and although Bonjour, throughout his book, does not say anything about conjuring, he does speak of Antony's lines in terms of incantation (pp. 13-14).
6. Brent Stirling's chapter on Brutus's need to transform the murder of Caesar into a ceremony tells us that "the theme of incantation and ritual is . . . prominent throughout *Julius Caesar*" (*Unity in Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1956), pp. 40-54).
7. Muriel Bradbrook, *Shakespeare the Craftsman*, The Clark Lectures, 1968 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 103. Maynard Mack's remarks on the appeal to passion and the contrast between the abstractions of Brutus and the emotionalism of Antony are found in "Teaching Drama: *Julius Caesar*," in *Essays on the Teaching of English*, eds., E.J. Gordon and E.S. Noyes (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960), reprinted in *Modern Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 298. Harley Granville-Barker's comment comes in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 2 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1946), 175.
8. Waldo F. McNeir, in "Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: A Tragedy Without a Hero," *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur*, 22 no. 2 (1971), discusses the descent of Antony and sees it as an "example of Shakespeare's symbolic staging" (14).
9. See Muriel Bradbrook's statement on "the emblematic value of the stage structure as visible icon" in connection with *Julius Caesar* (*Shakespeare the Craftsman*, pp. 99-100).
10. Norman Fabbkin, "Structure, Convention, and Meaning in *Julius Caesar*," *JEGP*, 63 (1964), 253. Muriel Bradbrook, in *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), tells us: "Brutus appeals to the reason of the Roman mob, Antony to its passions" (p. 97).
11. Grillot de Givry, *Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy*, trans. J. Courtney Locke (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), pp. 171-72. One wonders whether there is some connection between magic bells, magic circles, and the ring of a bell. Do we speak of a bell "ringing" because a bell is shaped with a circular opening? Cf. the ring around Caesar's corpse, the idea of the magic circle, and the striking of the clock (presumably a bell or chime) in Act II.
12. F.W. Sternfeld, in *Music in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), deals with Lucius's music in the chapter on Magic Songs; "Lucius's lute," writes Sternfeld, "unwittingly becomes the prelude to the ghostly apparition . . ." (pp. 80-81). In another place Sternfeld reminds us that it is the sound of music that conjures up the succubus that takes the form of Helen of Troy in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* ("Shakespeare and Music," in *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Kenneth Muir and S. Schoenbaum (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), p. 158.). E.F.C. Ludowyk explains that "music, the advanced hour of the night, and the sleepiness of Lucius prepare us for the entry of Caesar's ghost" (*Understanding Shakespeare* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1964), p. 196). In *The Untuning of the Sky* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), John Hollander remarks that "the emblematic stringed instrument" is being used in a political context in *Julius Caesar* and that the reference to false strings (IV.iii.290) "suggest the discordant conspirators, now jangling and out of tune even among themselves" (p. 150). Cf. Harold C. Goddard in *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, 1 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), 328.
13. Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 5 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964), 116 and passim. Bullough reprints as a possible source for Shakespeare's play the anonymous *Caesar's Revenge*, in which Brutus refers to Caesar's ghost as a spirit "Rays'd from the deepe by enchanters bloody call" (p. 209, line 2284). Imagery of this kind derives from Senecan tragedy; cf. lines near the opening of Act III of Seneca's *Oedipus* (p. 210 of *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*, ed. Thomas Newton (1581) (London: Constable, 1927)), in which conjuring is described.

To determine where Shakespeare gets his material for the magical sections of *Julius Caesar* is beyond the scope of the present paper. Certainly he had a wide array of possible sources at his disposal: Plutarch, Ovid, Seneca, Apuleius, neo-Senecan drama, classical and Renaissance Platonism and Hermeticism, and the folk traditions (native or otherwise) handed down from the Middle Ages. In addition to the works cited in note 3 above, see Robert R. Reed, *The Occult on the Tudor and Stuart Stage* (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1965); Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) and *A Discourse of Devils and Spirits*, ed. Brinsley Nicholson

(London: E. Stock, 1886); King James's *Demonologie in Form of a Dialogue* (1597), ed. G.B. Harrison (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1924); A.D.J. Marfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); Wallace Notestein, *History of Witchcraft in England, 1558-1718* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965); and the helpful bibliographical leads in John W. Velz, *Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1968); and in G.K. Hunter, "Shakespeare's Reading" and W.R. Elton, "Shakespeare and the Thought of His Age," in *A New Companion to "Shakespeare Studies* (cited above), pp. 55-66, 180-98, 265, and 271-72.

14. Cf. G. Wilson Knight, *The Imperial Theme* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), p. 64.

15. See William and Barbara Rosen's introduction to the Signet Classic Edition of *Julius Caesar* (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. xxvii.