EVERYMAN

JULIUS CAESAR

William Shakespeare

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former editor of the *Shakespeare Quarterly*

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THE EVERYMAN SHAKESPEARE

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FOREWORD TO JULIUS CAESAR

One of the first serious problems one faces in planning a production of *Julius Caesar* is the question of the Roman mob. How many players can be afforded, and how much time allotted to manipulate them, not only in the Forum Scene, but also at the opening of the play, the murder scene, and the episode of the lynching of Cinna the Poet?

Brutus is evidently the protagonist of the play, but it is very difficult for even the most skilful actor to prevent him from being outshone by the players of Mark Antony and Cassius. Though he has many great scenes and speeches (some of them foreshadowing Hamlet and Macbeth) and, on paper, dominates the action, he is entirely without humour and may easily seem dull and priggish.

Antony has brilliant youthfulness and vitality; Cassius, a feverish, spiteful urgency. The text gives wonderful opportunities for contrasting orchestration in the acting and speaking of these three superb characters.

Casca, with his one fine scene in prose after the Games, is certainly the best of the minor parts, and his opportunity for comedy is something of a relief after the sonorous stretches of verse in which most of the play is written.

Caesar himself is merely an imposing figurehead, with few opportunities for the actor (as I know myself from having attempted the part several times on both stage and screen), except for his short scene with Calphurnia. His appearance as the ghost in the tent scene is strikingly effective, but his speeches in the Senate-house, just before the murder, are trite and pompous, as Shakespeare seems to have intended.

Portia is, of course, extremely sympathetic, but has only two short scenes to arouse our interest. I always feel that more could be made of the boy Lucius, who has evidently been a surrogate son

to the childless couple. His presence in the tent scene when he falls asleep over his instrument as he is singing, and reminding us of Portia just when Brutus alludes so movingly to her death, should be one of the most touching episodes in the whole play.

In 1952 I played the part of Cassius in the Hollywood film of *Julius Caesar*, and Marlon Brando made a striking success of Mark Antony in his only appearance in a classical role. I still think that this production was one of the best renderings ever given of the play. The film, produced by John Houseman and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, still holds up with considerable effect after all these years, and succeeds when so many stage productions (including several in which I have acted myself) have failed.

It is a great pity, however, that in the battle scenes of the film, the last two acts were carelessly strung together on the cheap, for these scenes particularly should have benefited by the more ample expanses of the screen. But the later scenes are, in any case, apt to be something of an anticlimax once the tent scene is over, and the death scenes, first of Cassius, then of Brutus, fail in their writing to compare with the magnificent poetry so vividly achieved in the first three acts, while Antony must make do with a few conventional speeches to finish off the play.

In America, the Mercury Theatre's 1937 production of the play by Orson Welles is still remembered and spoken of as having been sensationally successful, but Welles' ingenious innovation of dressing the characters as Mussolini Blackshirts, which seemed brilliantly appropriate at that particular time, has encouraged fatal mistakes in more recent stage productions. It is most important, of course, that the characters should appear in civilian costumes during the first three acts of the play, and the plotting and carrying out of the murder can only make its proper impact if one is made to feel the lurking secrecy of a swarming city, rife with dangerous intrigue in high places, and threatened by a lawless mob.

Actors are traditionally wary of wearing togas, but, if worn with ease and confidence, they should seem becoming and graceful and indeed easier to wear than the constricting armour,

kilted tunics, and helmets which the actors must appear in for the battle scenes. It has been suggested that the tragedy be staged in Elizabethan costume, and there is a possible excuse for this idea in some of the anachronisms in the text. But ruffs and trunk hose would hardly, I believe, be very successful, and these costumes are equally difficult for actors to wear.

I saw the play for the first time when I was only twelve years old. My recollection of the event has always reminded me of one of my most cherished memories.

The play was performed in 1916 at the Drury Lane Theatre for a single performance only – to celebrate Shakespeare's Tercentenary – and was acted by a large and distinguished cast consisting of all the leading players then in London. The part of Cassius was superbly acted by H. B. Irving, the eldest son of the late Sir Henry. His eminent father had always dismissed the possibility of staging the play, because he thought it impossible to decide which of the three principal parts he should, as actor-manager, choose for himself.

Once, I believe in America, the Booth brothers appeared in it together. Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who succeeded to leadership of the profession after Irving's death, staged an elaborate spectacle, with a large crowd and handsome pictorial scenery by Alma-Tadema, a greatly admired Royal Academician of the period. This production had three fine actors in the three great parts, though Tree himself was not greatly praised for his Mark Antony, and his casting of Lady Tree as the boy Lucius cannot have been a very wise or happy choice. Tree's scenery, which must have been stored in the intervening years, was used again at the Drury Lane matinée, and of course I thought it very grand and effective. But, apart from the acting of Cassius, I also admired greatly an electrifying performance of Mark Antony by the young Henry Ainley. His subsequent playing of the same part in a production of his own at the St James's Theatre, some four years later, seemed to me far less striking.

Above all I remember the tremendous effect of the crowd scenes. In the souvenir programme, which I still possess, I find that

these scenes were directed by Harley Granville-Barker, whom I came to admire so greatly when I became an actor. The few rehearsals I had under his direction, and a number of letters he wrote me at various times, are among my most precious reminders of his genius.

But, alas, the intervention of the 1914–18 War, and his second marriage to a lady who beguiled him away from the theatre, robbed a whole generation of a superb master of the stage. His preface on *Julius Caesar* is typically sensitive and I have always found it an inspiration when studying the play.

Sir John Gielgud

SIR JOHN GIELGUD's first stage appearance was playing the role of the Herald in *Henry V*. He has since appeared in such diverse Shakespearean roles as Hamlet, Shylock, Antony, King Lear, Prospero, Julius Caesar, and Richard II, and directed productions of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Twelfth Night*, among many others.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO JULIUS CAESAR

Shakespeare probably wrote *Julius Caesar* in 1599, shortly after he produced *Henry V*, the ninth of his ten 'chronicle histories' about the dynastic struggles in late medieval England, and shortly before he completed *Hamlet*, the first of what commentators now refer to as the four 'great tragedies'. He probably wrote *Antony and Cleopatra*, the thematic sequel to *Julius Caesar*, in late 1606 or early 1607, shortly after he finished *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, the other pillars of his 'big four', and shortly before he began directing most of his attention to the tragicomic romances with which he would gather his labours to a close between 1608 and 1613.

Approached in terms of their position in Shakespeare's career, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* bracket the artistic period for which he is most widely celebrated today. The earlier of the 'Roman plays' is sometimes described as the drama that charts Shakespeare's ascent to his creative summit; the later one is frequently discussed as the work that signals his transition from a preoccupation with tragedy to a new exploration of what might be called 'divine comedy', a transfiguring theatrical form that permitted the playwright to examine those values that enable human beings to surmount their trials and seek fulfilment in a sphere beyond the vicissitudes of earthly Fortune. Whereas *Julius Caesar* can be seen as an outgrowth of the English history plays, transposing to a more remote classical setting the same problems that Shakespeare had been pondering in dramas like *Richard II* and the two segments of *Henry IV*, *Antony and Cleopatra* can be viewed as a foreshadowing of the emphasis on reunion, reconciliation, and renewal in 'late plays' like *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*.

Stylistically, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* seem

galaxies apart. The earlier work strikes us as clear, focused, and straightforward; it is one of the shortest of Shakespeare's plays, and the elegance of its elocution has carved many of its phrases into our collective memory. The later tragedy, by contrast, is elusive, panoramic, and convoluted; it is one of the longest of Shakespeare's dramas, and its figurative language is at times so extravagant and multifaceted that different interpreters can emerge with quite disparate readings of its more complex passages. *Julius Caesar* impresses us as the achievement of an assured playwright who is just beginning to attain his full scope as a thinker and as a writer of tragedy; *Antony and Cleopatra* impresses us as the effort of a more mature dramatist who has scaled the heights in tragedy several times over and is now beginning to experiment with increasingly innovative techniques in his ongoing quest for loftier realms to survey.

For all their differences, however, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* have a great deal in common. They both derive from the same narrative source, Sir Thomas North's 1579 English translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. They both address philosophical and political questions that would have engaged the interest of Shakespeare's English contemporaries. And they both concern themselves with one of the major themes of Renaissance culture: the significance and continued pertinence of Europe's Graeco-Roman heritage.

Like many of his fellow writers and intellectuals, Shakespeare was deeply curious about the meaning of the classical past, and he seems to have conceived of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* as the centrepieces of a four-part theatrical meditation on 'the matter of Rome'. He had begun his exploration of antiquity in the early 1590s with *Titus Andronicus*, a melodrama about a mythical general in the fourth century AD whose torments Shakespeare depicted as an adumbration of the collapse of Roman civilization. Yet to come in his dramatic corpus, probably in 1607 or 1608, was *Coriolanus*, a tragedy about another legendary warrior, whose agonizing strife in the fifth century BC was a precondition to the flowering of a nascent Republic. In

between lay *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, the first a chronicle of the dissolution of republican institutions through the rise and fall of Rome's most famous conqueror, the second a drama about the consolidation of empire through the decline and demise of Mark Antony and the ascendancy of Julius Caesar's nephew and adopted son, Octavius.

Just how Shakespeare construed the critical period he anatomized in *Julius Caesar* (44–42 BC) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (40–30 BC) remains debatable, but we can be sure that he was aware of many different ways of looking at it. He would have known, for example, that to Roman writers such as Cato, Lucan, and Cicero, who brought a republican perspective to the events that led to the Ides of March in 44 BC, Julius Caesar was a despot whose disregard of civil liberties had made his assassination imperative. He would also have known that a number of Renaissance thinkers, among them Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson, shared his anti-authoritarian attitude towards the military genius who'd crossed the Rubicon and ensconced himself in the Capitol as a dictator.

Meanwhile, Shakespeare would probably have been even more acutely aware that the writer on whom he drew as his principal source, Plutarch of Charonea (AD 46–120), a Greek historian who had lived in Rome during the most decadent years of the Empire, portrayed Caesar as a *de facto* monarch who had brought a season of respite to a society ravaged by more than a century of civil war. According to Plutarch, Caesar was an exemplary leader who wielded power justly and responsibly and whose one fault, a vanity that made him wish to be crowned king, was a small price to pay for the oversight he provided for a body politic in desperate need of a head. Plutarch's view of the topic was the one favoured by imperial historians such as Livy and Suetonius and by medieval writers such as Chaucer and Dante (who had placed Brutus and Cassius in the same circle as the treacherous Judas in the bleakest depths of his *Inferno*), and Shakespeare would have also found it reflected, implicitly if not explicitly, in many of the official proclamations of a Tudor establishment committed to the

maintenance of social and political order in the England of his own day. Through exhortations such as the 'Homily against Disobedience and Wilfull Rebellion', Elizabethans were regularly warned that monarchy was the only form of government that could ensure domestic tranquillity. What the Apostle Paul referred to as 'the powers that be' were to be revered as ministers 'ordained of God' (Romans 13:1) to shield their people from all the perils of internecine conflict. To rebel against the existing hierarchy was to risk a return to the kind of anarchy that had ripped England asunder during the fifteenth-century Wars of the Roses, whose horrors Shakespeare had himself depicted in three English history plays on the troubled reign of Henry VI and a fourth play on the bloody tyranny of Richard III.

In addition to what he found in sources that would have informed his thinking about the political issues involved in 'the matter of Rome', Shakespeare would also have known a broad range of other writings that addressed the subject in ethical or theological terms. He would have been familiar with the critique of Roman Stoicism in Book XIV of St Augustine's *City of God* (AD 426), where the adherents of Rome's most influential school of philosophy are described as so prone to 'ungodly pride' that they are virtually indistinguishable from the self-righteous Pharisees of the Gospels. And he would have been aware of similar observations in Montaigne's *Essays* (1580, 1588) and in Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly* (1509), where the typical Stoic is derided as 'a stony semblance of a man, void of all sense and common feeling of humanity, . . . a man dead to all sense of nature and common affections, and no more moved with love or pity than if he were a flint or rock; whose censure nothing escapes; that commits no errors himself, but has a lynx's eye upon others; measures everything by an exact line, and forgives nothing; pleases himself with himself only; the only rich, the only wise, the only free man.'

Meanwhile Shakespeare would also have known the traditional Christian doctrine that the Pax Romana, the 'Universal Peace' that had been ushered in by Caesar Augustus (as we are reminded in a passage about Octavius Caesar in IV.v.3 of *Antony and*

Cleopatra), was an epoch providentially arranged to afford a suitable setting for the advent of another 'Prince of Peace'. What this meant, in the language of the title-page to a 1578 English edition of Appian's *Civil Wars*, was that the 'action' represented in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* could be discerned in golden hindsight as a 'prophane Tragedie, whereof flowed our diuine Comoedie'. In other words, a sequence of events that meant one thing to a pre-Christian Roman such as Brutus, Antony, or Octavius could have a radically different significance to a later era accustomed to explaining all of human history in the light of a divine plan in which even God's enemies were constrained to play a role in fulfilling his designs.

There are in fact biblical echoes in both plays that hint at the cosmic irony this Christian vantage on pagan Antiquity would seem to imply. And it may well be that that angle of vision accounts in part for the phenomenon Tony Randall remarks upon in his delightful and thought-provoking foreword to the Everyman edition of *Antony and Cleopatra*. For if in some fundamental sense even 'the Noblest Roman of them all' is limited by the mere fact that he *is* what Hamlet's friend Horatio calls 'an antique Roman', there may be sound reasons for an audience's sense that plays like *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* provide us, in Randall's words, with no one 'to root for'.

In both tragedies we find ourselves in the presence of grandiose figures whose behaviour distresses us. In *Julius Caesar*, for example, we concentrate much of our attention on Brutus, a man who seems to be unanimously applauded for his virtues, and a man whose lineage can be traced to an ancestor (the legendary Lucius Junius Brutus) who expelled kingship from Rome and founded the Republic in 509 BC. At a time when survival of the kind of representative government initiated by his forebear appears to be in grave jeopardy, Marcus Junius Brutus is naturally the statesman to whom his concerned compatriots turn for another deliverance. We see him deliberate over his decision to join a conspiracy that goes against his better nature. We observe the scrupulous distinctions he insists upon in his desire to sanctify

a deed that must inevitably appear brutal. We admire the integrity with which he essays to keep his cause pure: free of self-serving motives, free of unnecessary bloodshed, free of demagoguery, free of corruption. We respond to the solicitude he shows his pageboy Lucius. And we note the devotion he inspires in his comrades and in his courageous wife Portia. At the same time, however, we cannot help noticing that this Brutus is a man who often comes across as lacking in feeling, a man who must always have his own way even though he invariably turns out to be wrong, and a man who seems incapable of imagining that he is susceptible to error. What we find, in short, is a character whose high-minded 'constancy' seems remarkably similar to that of the would-be king whose arrogance blinds him to the fact that, for all the authority he wields, he is 'but a Man'.

Because we keep hearing about Brutus' moral and political stature, we tend to assume that in some fundamental sense he really must be the paragon that Mark Antony eulogizes at the end of the play. If, however, we find it difficult to square our perceptions of Brutus with the praise that even his erstwhile enemies bestow upon him, before we conclude that the fault is in ourselves we should consider the possibility that Shakespeare *wants* us to feel puzzled, uneasy, and dismayed – that a crucial element of his strategy as a dramatist, indeed, is to make his audience uncomfortable with discrepancies between what a character like Brutus says about himself or has said about him, and what his thoughts and actions reveal him to be in actuality.

The kind of disappointment we are likely to feel about Brutus, and in different ways about Shakespeare's other Romans, is the discontent that issues, quite literally, from disillusionment – from our discovery that a character we want to 'root for', a person who seems to be endowed with almost superhuman talents, is fatally deficient in some quality that is essential to his or her full realization of that vast potential. In Shakespearean tragedy, the defect that vitiates a protagonist's gifts is usually a lapse in self-knowledge (which results in impaired judgement) or a lapse in self-control (which results in perverted will-power) or both.

Frequently a failure of reason causes or is accompanied by a breakdown of will; just as frequently a failure of will (such as a habitual surrender to the vices of the flesh) either leads to or is associated with a breakdown of reason. In either case, the key to a play's effect – to the fulfilment of its 'purpose', as Hamlet would put it – lies in the audience's ability to respond intelligently and sensitively to all the clues Shakespeare provides about his characters, and on that basis to perceive any flaws or follies in even the most elevated and attractive of them.

The personalities we encounter in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* occupy a setting and live in a time that has a great deal to do with who they are, how they think of themselves, and what they do. As they note on numerous occasions, the stage they march across is pregnant with consequence, and what is at stake upon it is not just Rome, and not just the Roman Empire; it is nothing less than what one of Caesar's near-contemporaries would later refer to as 'the whole world' (Matthew 16:26).

As Brutus observes in one of many such images in the Roman plays, 'There is a Tide in the affairs of Men' (*Julius Caesar*, IV.iii.220), and the person who can crest it to victory will enjoy all the benefits of 'Fortune'. Brutus thinks it possible to master that 'Tide', but events prove Cassius to be a better judge of its ebb and flow. Later, prompted by Cleopatra, Mark Antony trusts his fortunes to the tide in a less figurative sense; because of his dependence on his Siren-like Queen, however, he too founders. In the meantime, like Pompey the Great, who had been overthrown by Julius Caesar, a younger Pompey falls victim to an even wilier Caesar. And as might have been predicted, the ineffectual Lepidus never regains his land legs after the poor, drunken 'Third part o' the World' is carried ashore from Pompey's galley in II.vii of *Antony and Cleopatra*. What prevails, then, is 'the Spirit of Caesar' (*Julius Caesar*, II.i.165), a ghostly presence that hovers over the last half of the play that bears his name, and one that then becomes embodied anew in the Octavius who methodically dispatches his rivals in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

As she weighs the meagre options that remain to her after the

defeat and death of her partner, Cleopatra observes that ''Tis paltry to be Caesar: / Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's Knave' (V.ii.2–3). In these words we hear the self-consoling rationalizations of a loser – here a Circean temptress whose baleful influence on a potential Aeneas has 'unqualited' Antony (III.xi.43) and made him defenceless against the 'Fullest Man' (III.xiii.85) of the age. But what we should also recognize in Cleopatra's comment is something that would have been even more apparent to the audiences for whom Shakespeare wrote his Roman plays: the fact that the same tide that is now at the flood will eventually recede, taking with it both Caesar and the Empire that he and his contemporaries have so painstakingly assembled out of the 'Clay' (I.i.35) from which mortal kingdoms are moulded.

The Caesar who arrives to consummate his victory at the end of *Antony and Cleopatra* is almost as puffed up with 'Glory' (V.ii.359) as the earlier Caesar who compared himself to 'Olympus' (*Julius Caesar*, III.ii.75) at what he mistakenly believed to be the apogee of his supremacy. There is no suggestion that Octavius' stay at the top will be as short-lived as that of his predecessor. But in subtle, wry ways Shakespeare makes it clear that even so august an Emperor as the second Caesar has now become is neither omniscient nor omnipotent.

Whether the 'Immortal Longings' that have concluded Cleopatra's part in the pageant a few moments earlier in *Antony and Cleopatra* (V.ii.279) will yield her an eternity in the embrace of the paramour she calls 'the Crown o' th' Earth' (IV.xv.63) is anything but certain. And whether her suicide, any more than those of Cassius, Brutus, and Antony, would have impressed Shakespeare's original audiences as a triumph over Fortune and its 'vile Conquest' (*Julius Caesar*, V.v.38) is equally problematic. But of one thing there can be no doubt: the 'Greatness' of Cleopatra's grandiloquent exit has assured her of a theatrical immortality that can only be described as transcendent. Like the poetry she speaks and the rapture she evokes in those she charms, it alone is sufficient to assure that audiences and readers, if not Fortune, will ever award the palm to Egypt rather than to Rome.

Julius Caesar has none of the verbal pyrotechnics that set *Antony and Cleopatra* apart from the other Roman plays. But it has enjoyed a life in performance and in the classroom that is more than equal to that of the later play. Cinema-lovers continue to laud the stunning 1952 film in which Sir John Gielgud played Cassius to James Mason's Brutus and Marlon Brando's Mark Antony. And as Sir John notes in his informative foreword to this volume of *The Everyman Shakespeare*, *Julius Caesar* was once performed by the Booth brothers in a production that precipitated a turning point in the history of the United States.

The occasion was a benefit to raise funds for the Shakespeare statue that had been commissioned for New York's Central Park on the three-hundreth anniversary of the playwright's birth, and the one-night event took place in the Winter Garden Theatre on 25 November 1864. By this point Edwin Booth had already won acclaim as the foremost New World actor of his generation, and he took the role of Brutus. His older brother, Junius Brutus, named for their imposing father, a tragedian who had been a rival to Edmund Kean before he emigrated from England in 1821, played Cassius. Meanwhile his younger brother, John Wilkes, named after a radical eighteenth-century Lord Mayor of London whose support for the secessionist rebels on the far side of the Atlantic had made him a hero to America's founding fathers, gave a memorable performance as Mark Antony. Though the youngest Booth was cast in what would turn out to be the wrong part for him, he may well have known even then, less than five months before the gloomy Good Friday at Ford's Theatre in Washington when he shot a President he accused of monarchial ambitions and then leapt to the stage with the shout 'Sic Semper Tyrannis', that he was in the right play. And with what keen alertness he must have listened as he heard a latter-day Junius Brutus, playing Cassius, say

> How many Ages hence
> Shall this our lofty Scene be acted over
> In States unborne and Accents yet unknown?

John F. Andrews, 1993