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Honor and Power in Shakespeare's Rome: A Close Reading of Julius Caesar and Plutarch's Parallel Lives

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Honor and Power in Shakespeare's Rome:
A Close Reading of *Julius Caesar* and
Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*

Bailey Buford Lee

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite of Honors
in the English Department
under the advisement of William Cain

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For my beloved Grandmother, Edith Bailey Lee,
who taught and loved Shakespeare

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Introduction

Shakespeare's Test

I imagine Shakespeare sitting at his desk with a small candle flickering over his copy of the Thomas North translation of Plutarch's *Lives*. I can see him reading and ruminating, perhaps sipping ale, crafting *Julius Caesar* with strokes of genius and strokes of his quill. It is fascinating to consider the intentions behind each of the creative decisions that transform these ancient historic biographies into a living, uncontainable play. His medium allows him to bring these monumental Roman figures to life, and to create a world which his audience can inhabit.

In one of the earliest writings on dramatic theory, *Poetics*, Aristotle writes about the distinction between history and tragedy:

The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity...tragedians still keep to real names, the reason being that what is possible is credible. (7)

Julius Caesar embodies this understanding of poetry and tragedy in a very Shakespearean way: "[He] reflects Plutarch's primary interest in ethical analysis" (Palmer 399). While Shakespeare animates these famous and infamous Roman characters, he raises profound questions about politics, power, ambition, honor, morals, and reason. These questions are all the more worthy of consideration and

analysis when we consider their timelessness—their perennial resonance likely attracted Shakespeare to Plutarch’s texts. Through the widely known—and therefore possible—tales of ancient Rome, Shakespeare explores the universal experiences and problems described in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

Many scholars have discussed the similarities between Elizabethan England and Shakespeare’s Rome. In “The Crisis of Aristocracy in *Julius Caesar*,” Wayne A. Rebhorn writes:

English political writers...when describing the contemporary social order, stress the basic analogy between classes of English society and those of ancient Rome. Thus, it is reasonable to infer that Elizabethans coming to *Julius Caesar* would have seen in the play not just a re-creation of the revered Roman past but a representation of aspects of their contemporary social and political order. (81)

While not the primary focus of this thesis, it is important to note the striking similarities between Elizabethan England and this re-creation of Rome, as they reveal the influence of topical Elizabethan issues on Shakespeare’s creative work. He approaches these pervasive moral and political questions through his complex characters. This strategy allows him to express, as Aristotle would call, the universal.

Through his characterization of prodigious historic figures, Shakespeare explores fundamental human experiences. It is this universal nature, this poetic capture of the purely human, that makes Shakespearean drama so thought-provoking and compelling to this day. In my comparative analysis of

Julius Caesar and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, I will consider the ways that genre shapes the changes made by Shakespeare. The primary distinction between history and drama is the difference between narration and observation of 'living' characters: "The facts with which the drama concerns itself are those of human character in its living play. And assuredly, whatever be its imperfection, its crudeness, its extravagance, no other body of literature has amassed in equal fullness and equal variety a store of concrete facts concerning human character and human life" (Dowden 23).

Shakespeare's rendering of Rome embodies the messiness of humanity. R. T. Jones offers a hypothesis that helps to frame our understanding of the complexities and ambiguities in *Julius Caesar*: "It is...a part of the function of the play to test in practice an ideal that is commonly honored, and the outcome of the test is nothing so simple as a pass or fail. Perhaps the reader's and the spectator's most rewarding task is to observe how scrupulously and delicately the test is carried out" (43). As I move through my analysis of the central characters and themes in *Julius Caesar*, I will reflect back upon this conception of Shakespeare's work as a "test": an exploration of the human condition through the eyes of ancient Roman figures.

A Brief Biography of Plutarch

Before moving forward, it is helpful to form an understanding of who

Plutarch was and what his role was in Greco-Roman society. Plutarch's works have endured and remained influential for thousands of years, and have played a crucial role in shaping our understanding of Greek and Roman history. His collection of biographies, *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*, inspired innumerable translations and creative works—including Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

Though Plutarch wrote more than fifty biographies, he left behind no autobiography. Historians have pieced together his life story from his writing and traces of information in antiquities. Plutarch was born in Greece in approximately 47 A.D. and died sometime after 120 A.D. (Barrow xii). When he was born, Greece had been under Roman rule for ten generations. Plutarch was proud to be Greek, and he played a significant role in the Hellenic revival during his time. All of his writings that we know of are written in elegant classical Greek, which is “a symbol of education, of attachment to the Greek tradition, and of [his] own elite status” (Stadter 45). While he was a proud Greek, Plutarch demonstrated a deep love for and fascination with Rome, its people, and its history. In 66 or 67 A.D. Plutarch was a student of Ammonius at the Academy of Athens, where he studied philosophy and likely developed his interest in the relationship between philosophy and politics (C. Jones 13).

Plutarch was remarkably devoted to his family's home city, Chaeronea. According to Christopher P. Jones, “Plutarch would not leave Chaeronea, for fear

of making it poorer by one citizen" (3). Though Plutarch's family cannot be traced back to mythical times, they had been in Chaeronea for many years and had the means to provide him with the best education, and held claims to local supremacy and power, as well as connections to many other local aristocracies (Jones 11). His great grandfather Nicarchus fought in the battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E., which was the final battle of the Roman Republic between Octavius Caesar and the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra (Barrow 15).

Historians believe that Plutarch inherited a large house from his father, where he would welcome Greek and Roman friends as guests for lectures and discussions (Barrow 19). He also had a wife named Timoxena, who bore him three children: two boys and one girl. In a letter Plutarch wrote Timoxena when their daughter died at the age of four, he portrays her as "devoted mother, with a strong sense of order and good manners, modesty and simplicity" (20).

As a philosopher, Plutarch is unique because of his connections to powerful members of Roman society and exceptionally high stature and influence. While he did inherit some of his affiliations with local sources of power, he forged relationships with prominent Greeks and members of the Roman ruling elite on his own. Historians know that Plutarch maintained friendships with nine Romans who held consular rank (Stadter 9). His two most notable friendships were with Mestrius Florus and Sosius Senecio, both of whom are known to have been close with the Emperor (34).

Plutarch studied Platonic philosophy and believed firmly that it was a philosopher's duty to advise rulers. His relationships with powerful Romans allowed him to work towards this goal, gaining influence as a philosopher and advisor (10). Philip Stadter notes that "*Lives* are addressed to Plutarch's friend, the extremely distinguished general and twice consul Sosius Senecio. This would imply an audience which consisted of members of the Roman political elite, not simply the cultured Greeks who might normally be expected to read Greek literature of Plutarch's level" (45). Plutarch often refers to his Roman friends as "patricians" in his writing. The linguistic connection to the words "pater" and "father" indicates of a high level of respect (22). Such patron relationships were common and important in Roman society, but Plutarch is unique for successfully establishing relationships with people so far above him in power and wealth. His friendships with members of the Roman elite, the dominant power in his time, were useful and strategic; he earned lofty favors from his friendships and patronage relationships with these powerful Romans.

Historians know that by the time he died, he had adopted the name Mestrius Plutarch—an Italian name that indicates he gained Roman citizenship. He does not, however, mention his Roman name or citizenship in any of his works; the only evidence of his Roman identity is on an inscription that remains at Delphi (Barrow 12). According to R. H. Barrow, "it is a reasonable inference that he...was recommended to Emperor Trajan as a man deserving honour by his close

friend L. Mestrius Florus” (Barrow 12). This is a testament to the respect Plutarch commanded from elite Romans, and to his high standing in Greek society.

As a philosopher of the Platonic persuasion, Plutarch believed it was his duty to inform and advise the ruling class. All of his writings are intended to fulfill this duty— and given his relationships with powerful Romans, it is likely that he achieved his goal. Stadter wrote that, “Plutarch’s mission as a teacher and philosopher was to offer material for consideration, examples of behavior, which could serve the statesmen who were his contemporary readers in their efforts to act both morally and effectively in their own political careers” (12). The *Lives* biographies highlight epic figures like Marcus Antonius, Julius Caesar, Octavius Caesar, and Brutus, whom Plutarch presents as examples of behavior, along with his own commentary.

Mapping Shakespeare’s Rome

Plutarch’s account of the story of Julius Caesar likely interested Shakespeare because of the numerous parallels that can easily be drawn between Rome and England. In *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art*, Edward Dowden writes:

When Shakespeare began to write *Julius Caesar*, he turned from the political problems of England to those of Rome, for the play follows immediately upon *Henry V*, the last of his great English history plays. Of all Roman historical events, the story of the death of Caesar was perhaps the one best known to Elizabethan Englishmen, for it involved political issues which

were just as much alive in Renaissance England as they had been in Classical Rome...Modern scholarship has come to recognize, however, that Shakespeare was deeply concerned with the political problems of his age and that he reflected that concern in his plays. (10)

Shakespeare “reflects Plutarch’s primary interest in ethical analysis” (Palmer 399). His interest in Rome as a vehicle for exploring topical Elizabethan issues advises our understanding of his treatment of political, ethical, and gendered issues in the play. It informs our reading of the play, encouraging us to search for meaning in his shaping of the story’s dramatic narrative. Knowledge of these parallels and topical issues also reveals another layer of potential meaning beneath Shakespeare’s poetry.

According to Thomas Laqueur, “Politics, broadly understood as the competition for power, generates new ways of constituting the subject and the social realities within which humans dwell” (11). Shakespeare approaches Roman politics through issues of morality and ethics. Because of the extremely close relationship between Elizabethan psychology and moral philosophy, we can gauge his stance on matters of morality through his treatment of his characters and their motivations (Palmer 400). Shakespeare uses *Julius Caesar* to test publicly accepted ideals and investigates the effects of power on men’s ability to reason, and “when the dramatist’s imagination operates with the intensity and rigorous honesty of Shakespeare’s, an experiment on the stage becomes equivalent to a test in practice” (Jones 43).

Shakespeare's poetic world transcends time. He not only brings history to life, but also humanizes monumental, almost-mythical historical figures, and opens the door for profound questions about ethics and the fundamental human experience. In his essay, "History and Histories in *Julius Caesar*," R. A. Yoder writes: "Especially in *Julius Caesar*, where events are telescoped, poetry assumes much of the burden; the condition of society is rendered by a complex poetic substructure" (316). The concept for this project stems from my interest in the evolution of language over time, and the different meanings it assumes as it endures. I originally planned to work with both *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar*, but as my work progressed I found *Julius Caesar* to be so rich and complex that it deserved my full attention.

This thesis will examine Shakespeare's creative process and intentions through a close reading of *Julius Caesar* alongside Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. I will consider both the Roman and Elizabethan cultures that might have influenced Shakespeare and his work. The three main areas of my focus will constitute the three chapters of this thesis: (1) the cyclical nature of history, (2) mimetic desire and the corrupting effects of power, and (3) gender in Rome. These core areas are what make up the greater system of honor and power in Shakespeare's Rome. Through my analysis of the thematic elements and complex poetic substructure of the play, I will attempt to shed light on Shakespeare's primary authorial interests and the operation of power, honor, and gender in *Julius Caesar*.

Chapter One:
The Great Mechanism of History

In the world of Julius Caesar, the conventions establish a dramatically convincing representation of a universe, governed by inexorable law, in which events are brought about not according to man's idealistic intentions but deterministically by their own logic. (Rabkin 251)

Shakespeare uses the characters in *Julius Caesar* to explore profound ethical questions about power and politics. At the center of the intricate web of Roman political history lies the question of agency: how much control do these great men have over their destiny? Shakespeare is asking, too: how much of history is determined by men and their actions? We must consider Jan Kott's theory of the 'Great Mechanism' of history, which argues that "it is the ultimate historicism, where everything can be explained in terms of the historical process, but the process is circular and absurd" (Yoder 390). As I dive deeper into my analysis of *Julius Caesar* and *Parallel Lives*, this theory too will repeatedly arise as a viable explanation for the events that Plutarch describes and the changes that Shakespeare chooses to make to his source.

While explicating these two great texts, I will explore concepts of moral choice, judgment, and agency. All of these human qualities are closely linked with understandings of honor and power in Rome. R. A. Yoder comments: "Rome, like Shakespeare's England..., is a study of continuous disintegration and the

inevitable progress of power” (309). In *Julius Caesar*, power is at the center of every action, every decision, every war, every death; power is won, power is taken, power is yearned for. Ever-shifting and elusive power is at the center of the Roman political world; men attempt to wield it in order to write their own histories.

The importance of power is highlighted when the play opens and we encounter two tribunes, Flavius and Murellus, condemning commoners for celebrating Caesar’s victory over Pompey. Flavius proclaims:

Let no images
Be hung with Caesar’s trophies. I’ll about
And drive away the vulgar from the streets.
So do you too, where you perceive them thick.
These growing feathers plucked from Caesar’s wing
Will make him fly an ordinary pitch,
Who else would soar above the view of men,
And keep us all in servile fearfulness. (1.1.69-76)

The conversation between Flavius, Murellus, and the commoners sets the scene of the political climate in Rome. Flavius describes his plan to strip celebratory decorations hung on statues of Caesar. He has little respect for commoners and supporters of Caesar, referring to them as “the vulgar.” He reveals his determination to stifle Caesar’s success; he hopes that subduing public celebration of Caesar will work to restrain his burgeoning, increasingly dangerous confidence. Flavius’s plan draws our attention to the connection between Caesar’s power and his ego—and to the danger that his confidence represents. There is fear in Flavius’s

words, too: he fears that Caesar's increasing power threatens to lower the status of others, making them "servile."

Plutarch provides a detailed description of these events in the *Life of Julius Caesar*:

After that, there were set up images of Caesar in the city with diadems upon their heads, like kings. Those two Tribunes, Flavius and Marullus, went and pulled down; and furthermore, meeting with them that first saluted Caesar as king, they committed them to prison. The people followed them rejoicing at it, and called them 'Brutes', because of Brutus, who had in old time driven the kings out of Rome and that brought the kingdom of one person unto the government of the Senate and people. (Plutarch 83-84)

Shakespeare adapts Plutarch's account to focus more on Caesar's political fortitude and the danger of his power. He deliberately excludes the word "king" from Flavius's dialogue. It remains clear in Shakespeare's text that the decorations hung on Caesar's statues are representative of the celebration that a monarch would receive. The omission of any direct acknowledgement of Caesar's monarchist ambition creates an environment where the audience or reader become suspicious of him and his motives; this strategy blurs the lines and places us in a position where we are more likely to empathize with the conspirators' suspicions. Plutarch describes how the people praised Flavius and Marullus for condemning the celebration of Caesar as king—something that Shakespeare chooses to exclude, blinding us to the desires of the Roman public.

In Rome, power is a fearful thing; men try desperately to control it and

prevent others from gaining too much of it. In his essay “Structure, Convention, and Meaning,” Norman Rabkin states that “Man is only actor, not playwright, and as actor he may not even, in the terms of *Julius Caesar*, know the conventions of the play in which he acts” (Rabkin 253). Brutus, Cassius, and the other conspirators try to determine their own futures—but Roman society functions in such a way that men can never really break free from the great mechanism of history, but only play into it. Shakespeare explores these questions of self-determination, agency, and political evolution through his presentation of the characters and their actions.

A tool commonly employed in Shakespeare’s Rome is an evocation of fear. Because of this, it can be hard to know when fear is justified. This lack of clarity lies at the center of the play. We do not know whether the great fear of Caesar and his power is warranted. The play is ripe with examples of dramatic fear mongering. Speaking to Caska, Cassius describes Caesar without directly mentioning his name, employing the same insidious tactic he uses to evoke fear of Caesar in Brutus:

Now could I, Caska, name to thee a man
Most like this dreadful night
That thunders, lightens, opens graves and roars
As doth the lion in the Capitol:
A man no mightier than thyself, or me,
In personal action, yet prodigious grown
And fearful, as these strange eruptions are. (1.3.72-78)

By allowing Brutus and Caska to reach the conclusion on their own that the subject of discussion is Caesar, Cassius validates his statements and evades presenting himself as envious or spiteful. Having observed Cassius's behavior up to this point, readers or audience members might sense dramatic irony here, as Cassius is clearly motivated by jealousy. He might be simply proclaiming a personal vendetta.

Cassius links Caesar with the supernatural events plaguing Rome—a comparison that suggests Caesar's growing power is the cause for the bad omens. The reference to opening graves is peculiar, as there is no prior indication in Shakespeare or Plutarch that Caesar has taken such action. It is possible that this statement could either mean Caesar causes new graves to be opened for those whose deaths he is responsible (i.e., Pompey), or that his abuse of power angers and awakens noble Roman forefathers. Likening Caesar to the roaring lion in the Capitol reduces him to a mere animal: dangerous, thirsty for blood, and a thoughtless beast. Cassius's envy of Caesar slips through once again, when he expresses the idea that Caesar is "no mightier" than he or anyone else. He then states that Caesar is "prodigious grown" and "fearful." These words emphasize the danger of Caesar's growing power and renown. Cassius is not the first to express fear of Caesar's power, however. One of our first introductions to Caesar comes when Flavius expresses fear that Caesar might keep Romans in "servile fearfulness" (1.1.76).

Many of these sentiments echo those expressed in Plutarch, especially the fear of Caesar's increase in power and greatness: "They could not then pull him back, though indeed in sight it would turn one day to the destruction of the whole state and commonwealth of Rome, too late they found that there is not so little a beginning of anything, but a continuance of time will soon make it strong, when through contempt there is no impediment to hinder the greatness" (Plutarch 24). This image of Caesar is almost as shocking as the one presented by Cassius—it is built on the same fear that motivates Brutus, Flavius, and the rest of the conspirators. Later, we will see this same logic inspire Brutus's metaphor of Caesar as a "serpent's egg" that must be killed in the shell. He wants to stop Caesar before "there is no impediment to hinder the greatness." This may seem to contradict Cassius's assertion that Caesar is "a man no mightier than thyself, or me, in personal action," but we must recall that Shakespeare chooses to omit many of Caesar's major accomplishments. Because of this, his augmenting greatness seems more inexplicable and less justified.

Cassius's warning that Caesar "roars / as doth the lion in the Capitol" is adapted from a passage in Plutarch:

The rumour went that these lions did marvelous great hurt to the Megarians. For, when the city was taken, they brake their cages where they were tied up, and turned them loose, thinking they would have done great mischief to the enemies, and have kept them from setting upon them. But the lions, contrary to expectation, turned upon themselves that fled unarmed, and did so cruelly tear some in pieces that it pitied their enemies to see them. And this was the cause, as some do report, that made Cassius

conspire against Caesar. But this holdeth no water. For Cassius even from his cradle could not abide any manner of tyrants... (Plutarch 109-110)

Shakespeare likely saw the parallel between Caesar and the lions referenced in the passage above. The lions, powerful and untamable beasts, turn on those whom they are supposed to serve; Cassius fears that Caesar will betray and destroy Rome in the same way. Shakespeare draws inspiration from this passage when constructing the strange omens in Rome leading to Caesar's death, and allows Cassius to recognize the parallel between the omens and the danger of Caesar's rapidly growing power. This passage also highlights Cassius's hatred of "tyranny," a theme which recurs throughout Plutarch and the play. Though we know there is envy driving his actions, it is important to recognize that some of his motivation stems from an honorable place.

While the violence of the lions in this passage is reminiscent of the threat that Caesar poses to Rome, I would argue that it also embodies the viciousness of the conspirators' actions. On the day of his murder, Caesar is ambushed and unarmed; he is "cruelly" stabbed; and the people—who, because of his dynastic ambition, could be qualified as his "enemies"—eventually take pity on him. Perhaps this passage is where the bizarre "mouth" imagery stems from in Antony's funeral oration: the "mouths" on Caesar's body could be a physical representation of the cruel wounds and bites inflicted by the lions (the conspirators). The patterns in this imagery, and in imagery throughout the play,

are suggestive of the cyclical nature of history. Many of the parallels Shakespeare employs can be traced back to a fascination with human tendencies and patterns in history. In addition to patterns within the play, Shakespeare likely saw parallels between the uncertainties plaguing both Rome and Elizabethan England.

Much of the uncertainty that affects Rome hinges upon questions of judgment and moral choices. We will see that in Rome, power can be corrosive and can severely impair one's ability to exercise reason. Scholars have asserted that, "the primary concern of the play is therefore with the causes of error in men's minds, as they lead to morally defective decisions" (Palmer 400), and that, "*Julius Caesar* [is] Shakespeare's first great tragedy of moral choice" (Ribner 19). These assertions are true. When considered in tandem with the great mechanism of history, we see that whatever causes error in men's minds is also a driving force behind this cyclical and seemingly senseless process. An excellent example of this is found in Brutus's struggle to reconcile love of reason and morality with his fear of Caesar's burgeoning power. Brutus feels an obligation to defend the liberty of the Roman republic; he serves a noble cause. In his soliloquy in Act Two, he attempts to discern the proper way to do so. A close examination of his reasoning reveals major flaws in his logic.

Brutus begins his soliloquy by defining the danger of Caesar's greatness:

Th'abuse of greatness is when it disjoins
Remorse from power; and to speak truth of Caesar
I have not known when his affections swayed
More than his reason. (2.2.18-21)

These first few lines highlight what is not only the most frightening aspect of Caesar's greatness, but also what fuels the great mechanism of history: the separation of "remorse from power." Brutus's use of the word "remorse" carries several different meanings: he could be referring to guilt, shame, and regret, or he could be referring to thoughtfulness. If we assume the former meaning, Brutus could be implying either that Caesar has committed acts for which he should (but does not) feel remorseful—or that a powerful Caesar will commit cruel acts without feeling any sort of remorse. If we assume the latter meaning, Brutus could be referring to the dangerous influence of power and confidence on Caesar's thoughtfulness and wisdom. Both interpretations highlight the effect that the possession of great power has on men.

After describing the risks associated with the acquisition of greatness and power, Brutus goes on to clarify that he has never seen a time when Caesar's "affections swayed / more than his reason." From one of the most respectable and honorable men in Rome, this statement carries weight—and it expresses an entirely different sentiment than the conclusion that Brutus reaches by the end of this soliloquy. Here, Brutus states that he has no indication that Caesar has ever let his power affect his judgment. He has no concrete reason to believe that Caesar poses a threat to Rome.

Next in Brutus's process of reasoning, he states:

But 'tis a common proof

That lowliness is young ambition's ladder
Whereto the climber upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend. (2.2.21-26)

Though Caesar has not yet demonstrated warning signs of losing touch with reason, Brutus turns to "a common proof" to make an ominous prediction of Caesar's evolution as a leader. Brutus states that "lowliness is young ambition's ladder," implying that Caesar is using humility as a means to satisfy his ambition and acquire more power. This powerful image portrays Caesar as opportunistic, deceitful, and power-hungry.

Brutus says that should Caesar successfully rise further in the Roman power structure, he will "look in the clouds, scorning the base degrees / by which he did ascend." Motivating the imagery of ascending a ladder to the clouds is Brutus's fear that Caesar has a covetous desire to become king of Rome. With his use of the term "base degrees," Brutus suggests that Caesar will take advantage of other Romans and, upon becoming king, disregard them as lowly and dishonorable. The word "base" is also an allusion to the alchemic and metal imagery that appears throughout the play. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the significance of this imagery. By this point in his reasoning process, Brutus has manipulated his original characterization of Caesar as reasonable into one of a man with dangerous and malicious intent. This rapid evolution of his

understanding of Caesar is cause for concern, as it remains unclear whether Brutus's logic is corrupted by others (Cassius) or influenced by personal motives.

According to Plutarch, Caesar was very well-spoken and personable, which allowed him to garner more respect and power in Rome:

Now Caesar immediately won many men's good wills at Rome through his eloquence in pleading of their causes; and the people loved him marvelously also, because of the courteous manner he had to speak to every man and to use them gently, being more ceremonious therein than was looked for in one of his years...His enemies judging that this favour of the common people would soon quail when he could no longer hold out that charge and expense, suffered him to run on, till little and little he was grown to be of great strength and power. (Plutarch 23)

This passage appears to describe what Brutus fears most: that for Caesar, "lowliness is young ambition's ladder." It shows Caesar leveraging kindness towards the common people in order to gain respect and, subsequently, power. Plutarch does not directly condemn these actions. It remains possible that Brutus wins the favor of Romans with true and honest intentions. However, Plutarch frequently mentions Caesar's "greedy desire of honour" (26) and the "covetous desire he had to be called king" (Plutarch 80). Such characteristics contradict, at least somewhat, the benevolence and altruism demonstrated in the passage above. Recognizing this contradiction, Shakespeare repurposes it as justification for Brutus's fear.

Plutarch's passage also highlights how the Roman people serve as stepping stones for Caesar on his pathway to power. By winning their favor, he is able to

gain more honor and power. This transformation of favors into power is echoed by the alchemical imagery in Brutus's soliloquy, when he says that Caesar may "scorn the base degrees / by which he did ascend" (2.2.25-26)—where Roman citizens are the "base degrees" (or base metals) which Caesar will use to transform himself into a man of insuppressible power.

After embracing a historic pattern as proof of what Caesar will become, Brutus concludes:

So Caesar may.
Then, lest he may, prevent. And since the quarrel
Will bear no colour for the thing he is,
Fashion it thus: that what he 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. (2.1.26-34)

He acknowledges that this unsettling image of Caesar is not yet reality. Nevertheless, he believes that for the protection of Rome, he must "prevent" Caesar from continuing to become more powerful. He argues that an "augmented" Caesar, in other words: a crowned Caesar—will quickly evolve into a dangerous man consumed by his own power and confidence. Brutus likens him to a "serpent's egg," a seemingly harmless and innocent thing growing a vicious and devious predator within. He concludes that the wisest path forward is to "kill [Caesar] in the shell." In just sixteen lines, Brutus systematically modifies his understanding of Caesar until he finds justification for the conspiracy. Because

Brutus is characterized as an honorable defender of Rome, we might find little reason to question his conclusion about the threat posed by Caesar. A close reading of this soliloquy, however, suggests the possibility that Brutus might also be influenced by his own greatness and power—and that eliminating Caesar might be in his personal best interests, rather than Rome's.

This sentiment is a reflection of the passage from Plutarch that states that Caesar's power might "turn one day to the destruction of the whole state and commonwealth of Rome" if his power is allowed to grow until there "is no impediment to hinder the greatness" (Plutarch 24). While Brutus's conclusion might be subconsciously motivated by selfish desire, we know that Brutus is consciously committed to the well-being and integrity of Rome. Shakespeare drew inspiration from this passage of Plutarch when constructing Brutus's metaphorical description of the threat posed to Rome by Caesar. Yet we must recall that at the beginning of the soliloquy Brutus confesses: "to speak truth of Caesar / I have not known when his affections swayed / More than his reason" (2.2.19-21).

Shakespeare's decision to insert these few lines undermines the certainty of Brutus's conclusion—the moral justification for the conspirators' cause remains muddy and unclear. I would argue that Shakespeare's embrace of this ambiguity has important effects. First, it forces his audience into a position where we experience the same destabilizing confusion as the characters in his play. Second, it highlights the absurdity of the great mechanism of history; without clarity,

history keeps moving in circles.

Following Caesar's death, Cinna is the first to speak, declaring: "Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead! / Run hence, proclaim, cry it about the streets" (3.1.78-79). His words render Caesar the physical embodiment of tyranny—yet he makes this bold proclamation over Caesar's bloody body. The word "tyranny" can mean "dictatorship, autocracy, and oppression," but it can also mean "cruelty, barbarity, and unmerciful violence." The conspirators believe that by killing Caesar they have eliminated tyranny and effectively secured liberty and freedom for Rome. Their actions could be seen as tyrannical—especially because it remains unclear whether Roman citizens are actually any more "free" as a result of Caesar's death. Cinna tells onlookers to "cry it about in the streets." This celebration is naïve; as we will see, the news of Caesar's death incites chaos, especially because his death means that political instability and uncertainty lie ahead.

Cassius and Brutus both later adopt and change Cinna's directives, encouraging onlookers to "cry" the news in the streets. All of these exclamations and reactions indicate that the conspirators have not given much thought to the political vacuum and instability that Caesar's brutal murder will create.

Shakespeare adapts these reactions from the following passage from Plutarch:

Brutus and his confederates on the other side, being hot with this murder they had committed, having their swords drawn in their hands, came all in a troop together out of the Senate, and went into the market-place, not as men that made countenance to fly, but otherwise boldly holding up their

heads like men of courage, and called to the people to defend their liberty, and stayed to speak with every great personage whom they met in their way. (Plutarch 96)

Shakespeare decides to give the first words following the murder to a minor conspirator. David Daniell notes, “the moment is sometimes staged so that the horror of what they have done makes the conspirators cower and speak feebly” (238). Giving the first words to a minor conspirator tells us that most of the conspirators are stunned. It is hard to imagine why else Brutus or Cassius, who are usually eager to speak, would remain silent. They need Caska to break the ice, perhaps to remind them how they ended up here.

This hesitation does not seem to appear in Plutarch’s account, in which Brutus immediately leads the conspirators into the market-place “holding up their heads like men of courage.” Instead, Shakespeare crafts a Brutus who seems more hesitant and more desperate for control. Brutus speaks the lines: “People and senators, be not affrighted. / Fly not. Stand still.” (3.1.82-83). Plutarch records: “When Caesar was slain, the Senate, though Brutus stood in the midst amongst them as though he would have said somewhat touching this fact, presently ran out of the house, and flying filled all the city with marvelous fear and tumult” (Plutarch 96). Shakespeare’s Brutus is desperate to mitigate the chaos—but what the murder has set in motion cannot be stopped. He seems all the more lost when Caska has to verbally instruct him: “Go to the pulpit, Brutus.” Decius then orders: “And Cassius too” (3.1.84). These small comments from minor conspirators

indicate that the leaders are already beginning to lose control of the situation—even in the face of great men, the great mechanism history will have its way.

In his essay “Fatal Logic in *Julius Caesar*,” Joseph Houppert writes:

The world of *Julius Caesar* is the world that Shakespeare came to find most congenial for the revelation of tragic character. It is a world in which destruction hovers over the heads of important men—kings, generals, triple pillars of the world—whose decisions and errors affect not only themselves but society at large. It is a world, in short, in which men act and die, and by their death give testimony to their frailty. (9)

Until the moment of their deaths, we often forget that these great Roman figures are merely human. As they become more powerful and their sense of reason begins to slip away, they too lose sight of their mortality. Shakespeare directs our attention to the perspective that these monumental men so often lack; their words become ironic when we consider the destruction and chaos lurking around the corner.

Immediately after Brutus suggests bathing hands in Caesar’s blood, Cassius says to the other conspirators: “Stoop, then, and wash. How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown?” (3.1.11-113). This follows a pattern set throughout the conspiracy: Cassius always follows Brutus’s lead. Cassius sometimes disagrees with Brutus, but ultimately it is Brutus who has the final say. Cassius’s reference to the “lofty scene [being] acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown” is a direct

allusion to the fact that the scene is, indeed, being acted out hundreds of years later.

Though Shakespeare inserts the conspirators' unsettling decision to wash in Caesar's blood, Plutarch's description of Caesar's murder is even more gruesome and bloody. After describing the stabbing in great detail, he says: "All the rest also were every man of them bloodied" (Plutarch 124). Shakespeare's decision to have the conspirators bathe in Caesar's blood presents their actions as cruel and almost sadistic.

Shakespeare highlights the cyclical nature of history at Caesar's funeral. A plebeian comments as Brutus speaks: "Let him be Caesar" (3.2.51). These words raise the most unsettling and important question about Rome: will there always be a Caesar? We have seen that the elements of Caesar's personality that earned him power and honor were the same traits that led to his demise. The structure of the Roman political world functions in such a way that Caesar's death creates a vacuum. Brutus and the conspirators murder Caesar in the belief that they will rid Rome of a dangerously powerful man beginning to lose his empathy and reason. What they have ignored until this point, however, is the uncertainty of the political climate and changes that will result from the abrupt elimination of Caesar. We do not know whether the evolution of Caesar's character (or rather, predicted evolution) is anything out of the ordinary. The plebeian's words call attention to this possibility by suggesting that Brutus might fill the vacuum caused by Caesar's

death—thus becoming the danger he hopes to eliminate.

While Brutus may be trapped in a seemingly inescapable historical vortex, we should remember that the Rome is a world of human creation. When analyzing Shakespeare's Roman political world and its effect on men, it is helpful to remember the following:

If the anatomy of Rome explains why history triumphs over men in *Julius Caesar*, it incidentally suggests that this triumph is not inevitable or inescapable. For the 'world' of the play – its conditions and situation – is one men have created...The mechanism of history draws its power from the situation men have made, and in its remorseless way it turns on the makers. (Yoder 326)

In the story of *Julius Caesar*, history does triumph—Shakespeare is interested in *why* this happens.

The plebeian's comment, "Let him be Caesar," is Shakespeare's invention. While Plutarch details the public's reaction to Brutus's speech, he includes no comment of this nature: "When Brutus began to speak, they gave him quiet audience. Howbeit, immediately after, they showed that they were not all contented with the murder... they fell into a great uproar among them and marvelously reviled him; insomuch that the conspirators returned again into the Capitol" (Plutarch 126). While Shakespeare's plebeians give Brutus quiet audience at first, he modifies their reactions to include a celebration of Brutus as a potential monarch. This change makes a mockery of Brutus's efforts to protect the Republic of Rome, while also highlighting the cyclical nature of history.

The evolution of Caesar's character—and the parallel underscored when Brutus is envisioned as the next "Caesar"—suggests that in the Roman political climate, power and reason might be mutually exclusive. As men gain more power and honor, they become more confident. It is Caesar's excessive confidence that blinds him to his weaknesses and causes him to become vulnerable to the conspirators. Similarly, Brutus's confidence renders him vulnerable to Cassius's manipulation, leads him to join the conspiracy, and blinds him to the major flaws in his logic. These parallels demonstrate how the structure of Roman society plays into the great mechanism of history. Because of the that way power is earned in Rome, men are doomed to fail from the start. Shakespeare draws his audience's attention to the power of history—and he uses the play as a "test" of commonly celebrated ideals.

Chapter Two:
Mimetic Desire and the Corrupting Effects of Power

The concept of 'inner wastage' ...precisely fits these Romans. Inwardly they are used up, some external force drives them. They play a role up to the hilt, but at the expense of character; thus there is nothing spontaneous about them, even in a great effort they seem to be merely going through the motions. (Yoder 316)

In this chapter, I will focus on mimetic desire and the corrupting effects of power as demonstrated in Shakespeare's work. My analysis of *Julius Caesar* and *Parallel Lives* will reveal the ways Shakespeare's creative interpretation highlights this 'inner wastage' of Romans in their struggle to earn honor and power. René Girard defines mimetic desire as "the mutual borrowing of desire by two friends who become antagonists as a result. When mimetic rivalry becomes intense, tragic conflict results." He also states that, "when mimetic rivalry escalates beyond a certain point, the rivals engage in endless conflict which undifferentiates them more and more; they all become *doubles* of one another ...The destruction of Rome is this very process; no single man is responsible for it; everybody is" (400).

In Shakespeare's Rome, we can clearly see that "Men are brilliantly differentiated, but drawn into the mechanism of history they lose their streaks, repeating each other's ways, becoming more alike" (Yoder 315). Mimetic desire is at the heart of both the conspiracy and the downfall of Rome. A close reading of

Julius Caesar will elucidate the ways that mimetic desire contaminates the play's central characters and contributes to the great mechanism of history.

Roaring Caesar

One of our earliest introductions to Caesar comes from Cassius:

But ere we could arrive the point proposed
Caesar cried, 'Help me, Cassius, or I sink!'
I, as Aeneas, our great ancestor,
Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder
The old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber
Did I the tired Caesar: and this man
Is now become a god, and Cassius is
A wretched creature, and must bend his body
If Caesar carelessly but nod on him.
He had a fever when he was in Spain,
And when the fit was on him I did mark
How he did shake. 'Tis true, this god did shake (1.2.110-121)

In a society where honor, bravery, and masculinity are prerequisite for acquiring power, this juxtaposition of Caesar's god-like status and physical frailty inspires doubts about his right and ability to rule Rome.

In his cynical description of Caesar, Cassius highlights the irony of obeying and honoring a weak and dependent man. He goes on to liken himself to a great historical figure, Aeneas—a reference that carries an important subliminal meaning, as Aeneas founded Rome (Daniell 170). These lines reveal the envy that consumes and motivates Cassius. He believes himself to be great, as honorable as

the founder of Rome, yet he has been reduced to “a wretched creature” who “must bend his body / if Caesar but carelessly nod on him” (1.2.117-118). While other conspirators seek to protect the integrity of Rome, for Cassius it is his jealousy and indignity that drive him to instigate the conspiracy against Caesar. A weak image of Caesar is further established when Brutus acknowledges that Caesar “hath the falling sickness” (1.2.253).

Shakespeare draws inspiration for this passage from *the Life of Julius Caesar*, in which Plutarch describes how Caesar saved his own life during battle by swimming to safety: “But he, leaping into the sea, with great hazard saved himself by swimming. It is said that then holding divers books in his hand he did never let them go, but kept them always upon his head above water, and swam with the other hand, notwithstanding that they shot marvelously at him, and was driven sometime to duck into the water” (Plutarch 70). The modifications that Shakespeare makes to this tale affect our understanding of Caesar and of Cassius—our awareness of these changes allows us to better understand what Shakespeare’s intentions were when constructing the dialogue of the play. He largely omits mentions of Caesar’s strength and perseverance in favor of highlighting his physical weakness. In fact, much of our understanding of his character comes from criticism spoken by Cassius. Giving Cassius narrative power highlights his envious nature while simultaneously casting doubt on Caesar’s strengths and abilities. Because masculinity and physical strength are inextricably

linked with power, this shaping of Caesar's character— regardless of whether or not we view Cassius as a reliable source of information—primes us to sympathize with the conspirator's concerns.

Plutarch's description of Caesar's miraculous swimming escape contrasts sharply with the story Cassius tells Brutus. Plutarch describes a Caesar who is strong and unrelenting, despite his physical limitations:

For concerning the constitution of his body, he was lean, white, and soft skinned, and often subject to headache, and otherwhile to the falling sickness...but yet therefore yielded not to the disease of his body, to make it a cloak to cherish him withal, but, contrarily, took the pains of war as a medicine to cure his sick body, fighting always with his disease, travelling continually, living soberly, and commonly lying abroad in the field.
(Plutarch 37)

Shakespeare's decision to exclude Caesar's determination and resilience creates a dramatically different character. While Plutarch describes Caesar's limitations, he also emphasizes his resilience and perseverance. His battle with his illness makes him more masculine, stoic, and noble—not less. By Roman standards, Plutarch's Caesar is more deserving of honor and power. This is dramatically different from the weak, shaking Caesar we meet in Shakespeare's Rome.

A careful analysis of these two passages provides a deeper understanding of how mimetic desire operates in the Roman political world. It also tells us what Shakespeare wants his audience to glean from Cassius's stinging words.

Shakespeare's alteration of Plutarch is clearly designed to draw out Cassius's

extreme jealousy. Cassius is controlled by powerful mimetic desire for the stature, power, and honor that Caesar has acquired. Later, he will successfully spread his antagonistic feelings towards Caesar to those involved in the conspiracy. The conspiracy is a product of what René Girard would call mimetic contamination.

Caesar first speaks at the festival of Lupercal: “Forget not in your speed, Antonio, / To touch Calphurnia; for our elders say, / The barren touched in this holy chase / Shake off their sterile curse” (1.2.8-9). What is most striking about his request to Antony is the implication that he has no rightful heir. If Caesar does indeed aspire to become king of Rome, such an implication represents a threat to his dynastic ambition. In light of Caesar’s other physical ailments, his failure to produce an heir also might also raise the suspicion that he, not Calphurnia, is sterile. Plutarch notes that Caesar has two children: a daughter by his first wife and a son by Cleopatra. Shakespeare chooses to omit this information and hint at potential sterility. His request to Antony raises questions about his dynastic ambition, while question about his sterility undermine his ambition—and his masculinity.

The uncertainty surrounding Caesar’s fertility is a product of Shakespeare’s creative imagination. He adapts the following detailed description of the feast of Lupercal:

And many noblewomen and gentlewomen also go of purpose to stand in their way, and do put forth their hands to be stricken, as scholars hold them out to their schoolmaster to be stricken with the ferula; persuading themselves that, being with child, they shall have good delivery, and also,

being barren, that it will make them to conceive with child. Caesar sat to behold that sport upon the pulpit for orations, in a chair of gold, appareled in a triumphing manner. Antonius, who was a Consul at that time, was one of them that ran this holy course. (Plutarch 82-83)

In Plutarch's account, Caesar is positioned linguistically between a description of the running of Lupercal and the mention of Antonius running the course. Caesar sits on a "chair of gold, appareled in a triumphing manner," a strikingly king-like image. The structure of this passage draws our attention to how his monarchist ambitions are made vulnerable by his lack of an heir. While Plutarch reports that Caesar has no legitimate heir, he does describe Caesar's other children in detail. Shakespeare instead chooses to construct a Caesar who appears childless, raising questions about Caesar's fertility and, consequently, his masculinity.

In Shakespeare's Rome, mimetic desire and the great mechanism of history are closely intertwined. Men yearn for the honor and power possessed by their compatriots—and as soon as they earn a reputation "honorable" enough to acquire power, their honor and power begins to erode their sense of reason and inflate their ego. This corrosion of reason seems to infect all Roman leaders is what powers the mechanism of history.

Caesar's excessive confidence is first exposed by Caska: "Marry, before he fell down, when he perceived the common herd was glad he refused the crown, he plucked me ope his doublet and offered his throat to cut" (1.2.262-265). The commoners' apparent fear of a crowned Caesar damages his ego, and

consequently enrages him. His dynastic ambition is clear here, as a small threat to his ambition sends him into an arrogant fury. His dramatic offering of “his throat to cut” is meant to be an act of bravery and confidence. He believes that he is untouchable. Perhaps he believes that such a bold gesture will prove that he is worthy of a crown. Caska asserts that following this incident, Caesar “fell down” and experiences an epileptic episode. Once again, Shakespeare creates a clear link between Caesar’s confidence and physical ailments, undermining his masculinity and highlighting the destructive nature of his confidence.

Shakespeare lifts Caska’s dramatic lines from Plutarch: “Thereupon also Caesar rising departed home to his house, and tearing open his doublet collar, making his neck bare, he cried out aloud to his friends that his throat was ready to offer to any man that would come and cut it” (Plutarch 81). While both passages portray Caesar as overconfident and dramatic, Shakespeare roots Caesar’s temper tantrum in his desire to become king of Rome. In Plutarch, the description of his rage is preceded by an entirely different sentiment: “Caesar returning to Rome from the city of Alba, when they came to salute him, they called him king. But the people being offended, and Caesar also angry, he said he was not called king, but Caesar. Then, every man keeping silence, he went his way heavy and sorrowful” (Plutarch 81). In this account, Caesar seems opposed to being called king.

Despite this dramatic show of modesty, however, Plutarch acknowledges the “covetous desire he had to be called king” (Plutarch 81). The inconsistencies in

Caesar's behavior suggest the possibility that his modesty is false—a show put on for the people—and that arrogance is his true nature. Shakespeare's adaptation of this passage brings Caesar's ambition to the forefront. Reading this passage as an example of false modesty, Shakespeare might have drawn inspiration for Brutus's assertion that "lowliness is young ambition's ladder" (2.2.22).

Caesar's inability to tolerate disrespect or a bruised ego is evident when Caska announces, "Murellus and Flavius, for pulling scarves off Caesar's images, are put to silence" (1.2.284-285). This is an excellent example of the type of behavior that leads Brutus to question Caesar ability to nobly rule Rome. Caesar repeatedly demonstrates intolerance for any signs of disrespect or differing opinions, and he is alarmingly comfortable using his power to silence and control his perceived foes.

Plutarch details a similar reaction: "Caesar was so offended withal, that he deprived Marullus and Flavius of their Tribuneships, and, accusing them, he spake also against the people, and called them *Bruti* and *Cumani* (to wit, 'beasts' and 'fools')" (Plutarch 84). Shakespeare adapts this passage to make Caesar's actions more ambiguous. Rather than being "deprived...of their Tribuneships" and having harsh words spoken against them, they are "put to silence." This ambiguity, combined with Caesar's dangerous confidence, suggests that Marullus and Flavius could have been put to death for merely "pulling scarves off Caesar's images."

Shakespeare embraces ambiguity as a dramatic tool here and throughout the play, a means for heightening the sense of danger and obscuring the truth. Some scholars have argued that the ambiguity surrounding Caesar's character and dangerous ambition is a strategy used by Shakespeare to "represent Caesar not as he was indeed, but as he must have appeared to the conspirators; to make us see him as they saw him, in order that they, too, might have fair and equal judgment at our hands" (Dowden 286). Knowing the changes Shakespeare makes to his sources, this seems an even more accurate and probable assessment.

Lean and Hungry: Personified Mimetic Desire

As the conspiracy continues to form, Cassius declares to Brutus: "Men at some times are masters of their fates. / The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings" (1.2.138-140). This statement reiterates Cassius's former assertion that Caesar is undeserving of his power. Cassius firmly believes he is deserving of and capable of acquiring more power—and he believes that he is only an "underling" because he has not yet embraced his own full potential. By initiating the conspiracy, Cassius attempts to become the master of his own fate. He also personifies the concept of mimetic contamination, as he works to spread his jealousy and inspire mimetic desire in those around him.

Through Cassius and the other conspirators, Shakespeare raises the question of how much self-determination men actually have. The role of fate and

the cyclical nature of history thus are at the center of both Shakespeare and Plutarch. Here, Cassius believes that he has the power to change the path of history. His reference to the stars evokes celestial imagery tied to the “civil strife in heaven” that is present throughout the play. From Cassius’s perspective, such cosmic disorder is likely a celestial condemnation of Caesar’s undeserved rise to power. This belief, combined with his envy, motivates him to initiate the conspiracy.

Plutarch describes Cassius’s envy in *The Life of Marcus Brutus*: “But Cassius being a choleric man and hating Caesar privately, more than he did the tyranny openly, he incensed Brutus against him. It is reported that Brutus could evil away with the tyranny, and that Cassius hated the tyrant, making many complaints for the injuries he had done him” (Plutarch 109). In this light, we understand that the word “underling” has a different meaning for him than it does for Brutus. Cassius “[hates] Caesar privately” and is motivated by personal interests, hoping to escape from Caesar’s shadow and gain more power for himself. On the other hand, Brutus likely hears the word “underlings” and assumes Cassius is referring to the Roman people as a whole, a republic threatened by the greatness of Caesar. This dual meaning sheds light on how two men, with starkly different motivations, could be committed to the same cause.

In “The Crisis of Aristocracy in *Julius Caesar*,” Wayne A. Rebhorn argues:

The emulation at the roots of their being pits them against each other in destructive, internecine combat, and it generates contests...which

needlessly expose them to danger and even destruction and which serve no military end whatsoever. Such contests are willfully, gratuitous forms of risk-taking that purchase identity at the price of potential personal extinction and that are carried forward without a thought for the good of the state. (84)

Cassius is willing to pay the price of “potential personal extinction” or destruction of Rome in exchange for a more powerful identity. His motivations in the conspiracy, while disguised as noble, are purely selfish. Brutus firmly believes he serves a noble cause, but he, too, is looking to “purchase identity” in that he longs to maintain his public persona of the “Honorable Roman.”

Much of the Roman conception of the “Honorable Roman” is rooted in heritage, which is emphasized in his lament: “Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods!” (1.2.150). This exclamation carries several important implications about the condition of nobility in Rome, and about Cassius’s perception of his standing in society. It reveals the close link between Roman conceptions of nobility and heritage; Cassius’s use of the words “breed” and “bloods” highlights the embodied nature of Roman nobility, a trait often considered to be passed on from parent to child. For example, frequent references are made to Brutus’s family lineage as evidence supporting his noble and honorable reputation. Shakespeare does not provide much information regarding Cassius’s family heritage, and chooses not to include the wife mentioned by Plutarch. This isolation of Cassius tightens his connection to Brutus.

Cassius's lamentation, while built on a traditional Roman understanding of nobility, is primarily a criticism of Romans for allowing Caesar to reach his current political standing. David Daniell states that the expression "noble bloods" refers to "men of rank, and men of spirit" (173). Cassius expresses both the belief that Caesar does not possess adequate rank or spirit to deserve his power, and the disappointment that no men have yet thwarted Caesar. Cassius aims to counteract the threat he perceives in Caesar by instigating the conspiracy, seeking to reclaim Rome and become the master of his own fate.

Shakespeare's decision to focus on the characteristics and qualities of the "Honorable Roman" reflects his interest in the similarities between Rome and Elizabethan England. Rebhorn writes: "such a concern with aristocratic self-definition was of vital interest in Elizabethan culture and was in good measure the result of the dislocations caused by social mobility and the ontological insecurity that mobility produced for Englishmen used to living in a seemingly immutable, intensely hierarchical society" (81). Cassius's lament that Rome has "lost the breed of noble bloods" draws our attention to this type of "self-definition" that aristocracy practices in both Shakespeare's Rome and Elizabethan England. Cassius is angered by Caesar's movement up the political ladder—a ladder that should be, in his mind, accessible only to those of noble birth—and so he is infected by mimetic desire for the same accumulation of power.

Though in the end he is thwarted by his inability to recognize threats, Caesar demonstrates a shrewd awareness of Cassius's true nature early in the play. At the celebration of Lupercal, Caesar says to Antony: "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look: / He thinks too much: such men are dangerous" (1.2.193-194). Caesar's observations indicate that he still possesses the astute and observant mind that is necessary for a leader; as his shrewdness diminishes over the course of the action, readers and audience members may come to suspect that he is evolving along the lines of Brutus's predictions. However, in his comments to Antony, Caesar makes a perceptive judgment of Cassius's true character. He recognizes that Cassius is brooding and dangerous. The words "lean" and "hungry" paint Cassius as an almost animal-like predator; he is hungry for more power—and for Caesar's blood. Because Caesar has already been labeled a threat to Rome at this point, his identification of Cassius as "dangerous" raises the question: which man is more dangerous?

This same sentiment can be found in Plutarch: "Caesar also had Cassius in great jealousy and suspected him much. Whereupon he said on a time to his friends: What will Cassius do, think ye? I like not his pale looks'" (Plutarch 85). Plutarch also notes that Caesar expresses fear of "the lean and whitely-faced fellows, meaning that by Brutus and Cassius" (109). Shakespeare includes these expressions in Caesar's perceptive comments, but adds the words "hungry" and "dangerous." These additions reveal the important connection that Shakespeare

wants to be sure his audience recognizes: hunger for power makes men dangerous. With this understanding we can recognize that Cassius is dangerous—his selfish hunger for more power contributes both to Caesar’s death and to dramatic instability in Rome. Caesar’s hunger for power makes him dangerous to a certain degree, too, but it remains unclear whether his ambition makes him as dangerous as the conspirators believe. Shakespeare’s decision to include an insightful comment from Caesar indicates that he wants his audience to recognize the danger of Cassius and to question the characterization of Caesar that is propagated by the conspirators. It seems that Shakespeare wants his audience to give equal and fair consideration to the merits of both sides of the conspiracy.

Though Shakespeare’s Caesar is stripped of his physical resilience, he possesses a shrewd intuition at the beginning. Unsurprisingly, this intuition is muddled by his growing confidence. After describing his fear of Cassius’s “lean and hungry look,” Caesar says to Antony: “I rather tell thee what is to be feared / Than what I fear: for always I am Caesar. / Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf” (1.2.210-212). As a powerful man with an honorable reputation, he attempts to rescind his admission of fear. He implies that, because of his greatness, he is not subject to the same fears as everyone else. His determination to suppress fear is in part what leads to his demise. The reference to his “deaf ear” is a potent metaphor that highlights his fatal flaw: Caesar is “deaf” to advice and unable to acknowledge threats to his existence. His confidence renders him incapable of

admitting weakness or fear, or of accepting that someone else might have insight that he does not. Caesar's overwhelming confidence makes him vulnerable.

Plutarch does not mention anywhere the possibility that Caesar was deaf; this ailment is another one of Shakespeare's inventions. It creates a distinctive parallel between Caesar's physical weaknesses and his confidence. In this light, his confidence becomes the equivalent of a disease, plaguing and weakening him. If Shakespeare's Caesar is unable to overcome his other physical ailments, this connection raises uncertainty about whether or not Caesar will overcome his confidence.

In conversation with Caska, Cassius declares: "Cassius from bondage will deliver Cassius" (1.3.90). Here, the "bondage" from which Cassius will free himself is the great shadow cast upon him by Caesar. This statement clarifies Cassius's intent beyond reasonable doubt. He believes that Caesar's power and high political stature prohibit him from reaching his full potential. By eliminating Caesar, Cassius will be free to ascend the Roman political ladder and acquire the power that he feels he deserves.

As he originally suggests to Brutus, Cassius intends to become the master of his own fate and overtake Caesar in the hierarchy of power. Plutarch details: "Cassius being a choleric man and hating Caesar privately, more than he did the tyranny openly" (Plutarch 109). Though such a straightforward assessment of Cassius's motivations never appears in Shakespeare, his temperament and

jealousy are embodied in his many brooding and rage-filled comments. Cassius's belief that he must deliver himself from "bondage" is an excellent example of this temperament. We see Cassius as the primary instigator of the conspiracy in Plutarch, when he notes: "Now when Cassius felt his friends and did stir them up against Caesar, they all agreed and promised to take part with him" (Plutarch 111). He incites the conspiracy not for the greater good of Rome, but for his own personal and political gain. Because of Brutus's involvement, other conspirators believe they are committing to a noble cause—and perhaps they are—but at the heart of the conspiracy is Cassius's envy and hunger for power; the conspiracy is the product of mimetic contamination.

While working to rally Caska to the cause of the conspiracy, Cassius says: "I have moved already / Some certain of the noblest-minded Romans / To undergo with me an enterprise / Of honourable dangerous consequence" (1.3.121-124). He acknowledges that he has worked intentionally to recruit allies to his cause; the phrasing here is such that Cassius takes credit for concocting and organizing the conspiracy. His reference to the "noblest-minded Romans" most obviously points to Brutus—he is well established as one of the most honorable and respected men in Rome. Here, Cassius misrepresents the truth in order to manipulate Caska. Brutus has not yet concluded that Caesar must be eliminated; he reaches this conclusion during his soliloquy in Act 2, scene 1. Yet Cassius implies that Brutus has agreed—or at least that other men of Brutus's stature have agreed—to join in

Caesar's murder. He knows that this implication will likely persuade Caska to join the conspiracy, as Brutus's reputation is enough to validate the cause.

Because Brutus is a man of such high repute, Cassius knows that his support of the conspiracy will provide validation. On the importance of recruiting Brutus to the cause, Cassius states: "O he 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" (1.3.157-160). Alchemical imagery is once again at play here. As Brutus "sits high in all the people's hearts," his approval of and involvement with the conspiracy will change the people's reactions to Caesar's murder. Cassius is not concerned with whether Brutus's support makes Caesar's murder the right thing, but rather about how his actions will affect his public image. He sees that, with Brutus on his side, his actions will be perceived as virtuous and worthy—he will appear to have been defending the good of Rome alongside one of the noblest Romans, rather than committing an act of betrayal in search of more power.

Discussing the threat posed by Caesar, Brutus says: "If it aught toward the general good, / Set honour in one eye, and death i'th' other, / And I will look on both indifferently, / For let the gods so speed me as I love / The name of honour more than I fear death" (1.2.85-89). These words reveal a central dimension of Brutus's character and, upon further consideration, raise an important question about his flaws. Brutus deeply values his honor and reputation; he knows that he

is one of the most respected men in Rome, and this gives him great pride. His pride, however, has an effect on Brutus that is unsettlingly similar to Caesar's "wisdom consuming confidence." Brutus loves "the name of honour" so much that he commits to the conspiracy against Caesar without considering all of the possible ramifications.

His pride and honor blind him. Deeply committed to the good of Rome and protecting Roman liberty, his pride leads him to be overconfident in his own judgment. Brutus's statement that, if faced with a choice between honor and death, he will "look on both indifferently" is followed immediately by: "I love / the name of honour more than I fear death." Brutus is unaware of the major grammatical contradiction here: he *cannot* demonstrate indifference if he values honor more than he fears death. This discrepancy intimates how his pride overpowers his reasoning.

Plutarch similarly records that Brutus states: "I mean not to hold my peace, but to withstand it, and rather die than lose my liberty" (Plutarch 112). Shakespeare modifies this statement intentionally to highlight the Brutus's flawed logic and the corrosive nature of pride. This modification suggests that Shakespeare wants us to recognize Brutus's imperfections—and perhaps recognize, too, the similarities he shares with Caesar.

Plutarch provides innumerable details evaluating Brutus's character: "For, as Brutus's gravity and constant mind would not grant all men their requests that

sued unto him, but being moved with reason and discretion did always incline to that which was good and honest, even so, when it was moved to follow any matter, he used a kind of forcible and vehement persuasion that calmed not till he had obtained his desire" (Plutarch 107). He also notes: "But Brutus, preferring the respect of his country and commonwealth before private affection" (Plutarch 105). Shakespeare's Brutus exhibits many of these qualities. His constancy is frequently highlighted as one of his most noble virtues. His honor stems from his deep commitment to the Roman people. Cassius abuses this commitment when he leaves several notes on the Praetor's chair in order to manipulate Brutus. In this way, his constancy and commitment—which would ordinarily be noble virtues—become fatal weaknesses.

At the center of *Julius Caesar* is the question of the effect of power on one's ability to reason. Through Brutus's flawed and eventually fatal logic, "Shakespeare shows us that even the man who attempts to live by reason is determined by irrational elements within himself that he cannot recognize" (Rabkin 253). Brutus's inability to recognize his own flaws is telling; in Rome, even the most honorable man cannot withstand the mentally corrosive effects of an honorable reputation. Whether conscious of it or not, Brutus is also motivated by a desire to maintain his honorable reputation. This knowledge also allows us to see the parallel between Brutus and Caesar; the mimetic rivalry between the two men undifferentiates them and makes them begin to evolve into doubles of one another (Girard 400).

Shakespeare demonstrates not only the effects of power on men's logic but also the ease of manipulating "honorable" Romans. Despite his honor and dedication to the good of Rome, Brutus is easily manipulated by Cassius. After planting the seed of the conspiracy, Cassius says: "Well, Brutus, thou art noble: yet I see / Thy honourable mettle may be wrought / From that it is disposed" (1.2.307-309). This statement clarifies both Cassius's intentions and Brutus's foremost flaw. Cassius recognizes that Brutus is honorable and cares about the good of Rome, but he also sees that his confidence and pride make him susceptible to manipulation. While the word "mettle" literally refers to Brutus's determination, bravery, and noble spirit, is also a homonym of "metal." The "Noble" was a gold coin produced in England during the 14th century; to a Shakespearean audience, this would imply the presence of alchemy as an allusive context.

Cassius literally states that Brutus may be actively influenced to stray from his honorable nature and intentions. Within the frame of alchemy, Cassius implies also that Brutus may be manipulated and wrought from gold to a baser metal. If Brutus, an honorable Roman, may be transformed and reduced in this way, the constancy of his Roman nobility becomes questionable—in a place where constancy is valued above all else. The trait which enables Cassius to influence Brutus is the same trait that earns Brutus his power and honorable reputation: his constancy. As readers or audience members, we begin to suspect that Brutus may

not be as reliable a voice of reason as he believes.

Plutarch describes with great detail how Cassius manipulates Brutus in order to accomplish his goal:

'Why,' quoth he, 'what Roman is alive that will suffer thee to die for the liberty? What, knowest thou not that thou art Brutus? Thinkest thou that they be cobblers, tapsters, or suchlike base mechanical people, that write these bills and scrolls which are found daily in thy Praetor's chair, and not the noblest men and best citizens that do it? ... At thy hands they specially require, as a due debt unto them, the taking away of tyranny, being fully bent to suffer any extremity for thy sake, so that thou wilt show thyself to be the man thou art taken for, and that they hope thou art.' (Plutarch 112-113)

This appeal by Cassius demonstrates the unique relationship between Brutus's ego and his honorable commitment to Rome. While his devotion to honor and to Rome likely stems from an honest and noble place, his 'honorable reputation' feeds his ego and his power. Cassius is able to appeal to Brutus's desire to maintain his honorable public persona. He points to the schism between Brutus's private and public self-questioning: "knowest thou not that thou art Brutus?" Additionally, we see the importance of class rank in Rome when Cassius references "cobblers, tapsters, or suchlike base mechanical people."

Because Brutus is a man of such high repute, Cassius knows that his support will provide validation for the conspiracy. On the importance of recruiting Brutus to the cause, Cassius states: "O he 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" (1.3.157-160).

Alchemical imagery is once again at play here. As Brutus "sits high in all the people's hearts," his approval of and involvement with the conspiracy will change the people's reactions to Caesar's murder. Cassius is not concerned with whether Brutus's support makes Caesar's murder the right thing, but rather about how his actions will affect his public image. He sees that, with Brutus on his side, his actions will be perceived as virtuous and worthy—he will appear to have been defending the good of Rome alongside one of the most noble Romans, rather than committing an act of betrayal in search of more power.

The alchemy that Cassius discusses here is different from the alchemy he plans to enact on Brutus. Cassius seeks to use Brutus as a tool to change the people's perception of his actions, while at the same time hoping to transform Brutus's fundamental nature. Though his true nature will have been wrought from noble to base, his public persona and reputation will still endure long enough to protect the conspirators from condemnation. To use alchemical terms, Cassius hopes to transform Brutus from a solid gold coin to a gold plated coin. The blurring of outward appearances and inner truth is a problem at the center of *Julius Caesar*. The complexity of explicating the public and private self of these monumental Roman characters is perhaps the main reason we will never know whether Julius Caesar's murder was justified—or whether Brutus was on the right side of history.

According to Plutarch, many of the conspirators look to Brutus as a leader and a source of legitimacy when deciding whether to join the cause:

For they told him that so high an enterprise and attempt as that did not so much require men of manhood and courage to draw their swords, as it stood them upon to have a man of such estimation as Brutus, to make every man boldly think that by his only presence the fact were holy and just: if he took not this course, then that they should go it with fainter hearts; and when they had done it they should be more fearful, because every man would think that Brutus would not have refused to have made one with them, if the cause had been good and honest. (Plutarch 111)

Again we see the importance of the public eye. Regardless of whether their cause is noble in truth, the conspirators are more concerned with the influence Brutus's endorsement will have on the public's perception of their actions.

By the time the conspirators are fully organized, Brutus has succumbed to Cassius's manipulation and appears to believe in their cause. When one man suggests taking an oath, he replies:

But do 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. (2.1.131-139)

He believes that they are motivated by "even virtue" and that their spirits are constituted of "insuppressive mettle." The phrase "even virtue" alludes to Roman

idealization of constancy while also suggesting that their conspiracy is wholly worthy and virtuous. Speaking of the “insuppressive mettle” of the conspirators’ spirits, Brutus frames Caesar as a wicked oppressor who cannot be contained. The evocation of alchemical imagery has several effects. First, it frames the conspirators themselves as forces of alchemy—their spirits will change the fundamental state and composition of Rome. Second, it once again raises questions about Brutus’s nobility and judgment; if Brutus believes in the conspiracy, then either Cassius has successfully molded Brutus to suit his malicious cause, or Brutus remains noble and the cause is worthy.

Shakespeare’s decision to have Brutus refer to the conspiracy as not only a “cause” but also a “performance” reminds us that all of Rome will be watching. Caesar’s murder is a political statement that will shape the public personae of the conspirators. The use of the word “performance” is also a nod to the Shakespearean theatrical performance of the conspirators’ actions. Brutus challenges the need for an oath, stating that “every drop of blood” sacrificed by a Roman is “guilty of several bastardy” should they violate any promise they have made. The reference to blood again emphasizes the physicality of Roman nobility. Brutus makes a distinct split between different breeds of Romans when he says that “every Roman bears, and nobly bears” this blood. While the phrase “and nobly bears” could be an addendum, this seems improbable: nobility is never an afterthought in Rome. This subtle linguistic cue is indicative of the greater social

landscape in Roman society. Such linguistic cues are also embedded within the portrayal of blood as “guilty of several bastardy.” Brutus is asserting that betraying a promise renders any Roman illegitimate—no true son of Rome would ever break the faith of even “the smallest particle” of a promise he has made.

Shakespeare crafts Brutus’s moving speech from the following passage found in *The Life of Julius Caesar*:

Furthermore the only name and great calling of Brutus did bring on the most of them to give consent to this conspiracy; who having never taken oaths together nor taken or given any caution or assurance, nor binding themselves one to another by any religious oaths, they all kept the matter so secret to themselves and could so cunningly handle it that, notwithstanding the gods did reveal it by manifest signs and tokens from above and by predictions of sacrifices, yet all this would not be believed. (Plutarch 115)

This reveals that Shakespeare decided to have Brutus be the one to make the decision to forgo an oath. Perhaps this is Shakespeare’s way of emphasizing that Brutus has become the true ringleader of the conspiracy. It also provides an opportunity for Brutus to address many of the play’s underlying themes; his speech against an oath references masculinity, the physicality of Roman nobility, and alludes to alchemy. Plutarch also implies that, through “manifest signs and tokens from above and...predictions of sacrifices,” the gods revealed the conspirators’ motives. Shakespeare portrays many of these same “manifest signs,” but none of the characters—except for Calphurnia and Artemidorus—can see beyond their own confidence to recognize these signs. Plutarch’s repeated

implications that the gods are the driving force of history are excluded from the play. Shakespeare is interested more in men and how power affects them.

Though Brutus suffers from impaired reasoning, he does not lose sight of the importance of the public's opinion; after all, his honorable public image allows him his high standing in Roman society. Mimetic desire is a driving force behind his commitment to his honorable reputation; all noble Romans subject themselves to the cyclical mechanism of history, vying for honor and power and becoming doubles of one another.

When arguing that Antony should not become a target of the conspiracy, Brutus says: "This shall make / Our purpose necessary and not envious, / Which so appearing to the common eyes, / We shall be called purgers, not murderers" (2.1.176-179). Brutus is keenly aware of the importance of the public's perception of the conspiracy. It is crucial that he and the conspirators are perceived in a favorable light; the public view will determine both their legacy and the future of Rome. Brutus supports his argument against murdering Antony on the grounds that their actions must appear "necessary and not envious." Immediately, Cassius comes to mind; from the beginning his envious motivations have been clear. However, what is unclear is whether Brutus is aware of Cassius's envy—or whether or not Brutus himself is motivated by similar resentment and desires. Brutus wants to ensure that the conspirators are viewed as "purgers, not murderers." This statement ironically ignores that in "purging" Rome of Caesar,

the conspirators will murder a man, and Brutus will murder one of his closest friends.

Brutus reacts similarly to the suggestion of killing Antony in Plutarch's account:

But Brutus would not agree to it. First, for that he said it was not honest. Secondly, because he told them there was hope of change in him; for he did not mistrust but that Antonius, being a noble-minded and courageous man, when he should know that Caesar was dead, would willingly help his country to recover her liberty, having them an example unto him, to follow their courage and virtue. So Brutus by this means saved Antonius' life. (Plutarch 124-125)

Shakespeare's Brutus refers to Antony as "noble-minded and courageous," but he does not suggest that Antony "would willingly help his country to recover her liberty." Instead, he focuses directly on the affect Antony's death would have on the public perception of the conspiracy. The choice to emphasize Brutus's focus on public reception suggests the possibility that Shakespeare wants us to recognize Brutus's selfish motivations. He cares deeply about his reputation, and perhaps he hopes that if the conspiracy is well-received he will gain more power as a result of it.

Before the conspirators organize in the Capitol, Ligarius visits Brutus at his home and says to him: "Soul of Rome, / Brave son, derived from honourable loins, / Thou like an exorcist hast conjured up / My mortified spirit" (2.1.320-323). These comments from Ligarius might ease our worries about the validity of the

conspiracy; if Brutus is truly the “soul of Rome,” he must have Rome’s best interests at heart. His honor and worth also are supported by a noble heritage—and we know the importance of heritage among Roman nobility (and Elizabethan aristocratic society).

Plutarch describes with greater detail the “honourable loins” from which Brutus is derived: “Marcus Brutus came of that Junius Brutus for whom the ancient Romans made his statue of Brass to be set up in the Capitol with the images of kings, holding a naked sword in his hand, because he had valiantly put down the Tarquins from their kingdom of Rome...[Brutus] was rightly made and framed unto virtue” (Plutarch 102). It is noteworthy that Shakespeare chooses to omit these details about Brutus’s heritage; we must consider *why* Shakespeare does not want us to think on Brutus’s father or the role he played in removing the Tarquins from Rome. Plutarch also notes that, “if there were any noble attempt done in all this conspiracy, they refer it wholly unto Brutus, and all the cruel and violent acts unto Cassius, who was Brutus’ familiar friend but not so well given and conditioned as he” (Plutarch 102).

Caesar’s Downfall: Wisdom Consumed in Confidence

When Calphurnia urges Caesar not to attend Senate but rather remain home, he replies: “Cowards die many times before their deaths; / The valiant never taste of death but once” (2.2.33-34). This statement reflects the Roman

obsession with honor and valor. Caesar is prepared to risk his life for the sole purpose of maintaining his honor. A similar sentiment is expressed by Plutarch's Caesar, who refuses to hire guards for protection under the belief that "it [is] better to die once, than always to be afraid of death" (Plutarch 78). Shakespeare adapts Plutarch's sentence to include two conflicting Roman identities—the coward and the valiant—and reframes it around superficial perception instead of moral values. By equating cowardly actions and fear with death, he underscores the negative connotation of a "cowardly" identity.

In turn, this strong negative perception of cowardice underscores the centrality and importance of honor in Roman society. In both Shakespeare's and Plutarch's representations of Rome, attaining honor is a surefire way to gain power. Shakespeare vividly portrays Caesar's superficial obsession with honor and the unsettling effects that power has on him. As Caesar gains more honor and power, he becomes increasingly (and, in the eyes of the conspirators, dangerously) self-assured. In the end, his confidence is the reason for his demise; he is either incapable of recognizing or unwilling to acknowledge his vulnerabilities.

Following his conversation with Calphurnia, Caesar hears news from the augurers, Roman religious officials who interpret omens and foretell events, that they "could not find a heart within the beast" that they sacrificed—a bad omen indicating he should remain at home (2.2.40). Shakespeare's decision to have this news delivered by a servant suggests that Caesar feels concern about the bad

omens and seeks reliable advice; this might indicate that, at this point, Caesar maintains a certain amount of caution and wisdom. However, his response to the advice from the augurers directly contradicts these qualities: "The gods do this in shame of cowardice. / Caesar should be a beast without a heart / If he should stay at home today for fear" (2.2.41-43). Instead of accepting the augurers' advice, he creates his own interpretation in order to satisfy his compulsive need to be perceived as honorable and brave.

Caesar believes cowardice is the ultimate shame, condemned by the gods. His confidence is so inflated that he fails to see the distinction between cowardice and prudence, and his disregard for Calphurnia's and the augurers' advice is an exemplification of the danger posed by his inflated confidence. D. J. Palmer writes that, "Augury plays an important part in the tragedy, for characters are prone to interpret omens according to their hopes and fears; they unwittingly see reflected in the portents the images of their own passions, and thus both senses and reason are abused" (406). In line with this assessment, Caesar turns a deaf ear to advice that would protect his life—in favor of protecting his ego. He feels that any demonstration of fear or cowardice will reduce him from a powerful god-like figure to a mere animal, "a beast without a heart." Notably, the word courage is derived from "cor," the Latin word for heart. Caesar's egocentric perception of reality leads him to believe that the beast's missing heart is a warning against failure to remain steadfast and courageous.

Plutarch provides a slightly different account of these actions: “Caesar self also, doing sacrifice unto the gods, found that one of the beasts which was sacrificed had no heart; and that was a strange thing in nature – how a beast could live without a heart” (Plutarch 87). Shakespeare’s manipulation of this account shapes the way we perceive Caesar and his reaction to this news. Rather than “Caesar self” performing the sacrifice, he receives news from a sacrifice he ordered. By transferring this action to the augurers, Shakespeare highlights Caesar’s reliance on others and makes him appear less in control of his own fate. Rather than determining his own fate, he depends on the actions and insights of others. Not only does this transfer of action strip Caesar of his autonomy, but it creates a situation where we witness him directly reject the advice of others. Shakespeare’s decision to make this change, then, was likely designed to direct our attention to the danger of Caesar’s “deafness” caused by his over-confidence.

Before Caesar enters the Senate, Artemidorus tries to pass him a written warning of the conspiracy. In an aside, he says: “My heart laments that virtue cannot live / Out of the teeth of emulation. / If thou read this, O Caesar, thou mayst live; / If not, the Fates with traitors do contrive” (2.3.12-15). Artemidorus provides a perspective on the conspiracy that frames Caesar as the victim; he views Caesar as a virtuous leader and sees jealousy as the driving force behind the conspiracy. His choice of the word “emulation” brings us to consider the role of René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire in *Julius Caesar*. If the conspiracy is a form

of emulation, the conspirators are driven by mimetic desire for Caesar's virtue, honor, or power. This understanding of the conspiracy helps to illuminate how different conspirators are seemingly committed to the same purpose with such different motivations. Though Cassius is driven by envy of Caesar's power and Brutus is driven by a desire to protect the integrity and honor of Rome, both men are emulating Caesar's bold behavior and the values associated with Roman honor and power.

Artemidorus's reference to the Fates raises questions regarding divine intervention. This plot point is based closely on a passage from Plutarch:

Artemidorus...who by means of his profession was very familiar with certain of Brutus' confederates and therefore knew the most part of all their practices against Caesar, came and brought him a little bill written with his own hand, of all that he meant to tell him. He, marking how Caesar received all the supplications that were offered him, and that he gave them straight to his men that were about him, pressed nearer to him and said: 'Caesar, read this memorial to yourself, and that quickly, for they be matters of great weight, and touch you nearly.' (Plutarch 91)

Plutarch makes no mention of Caesar's "virtue" or the "emulation" of the conspirators; these declarations of character and intentions come from Shakespeare himself. He gives Artemidorus revealing commentary, but provides no background information or context to legitimize him or his opinions. Despite questions about his legitimacy, we realize that there are Romans who still respect

Caesar—and we are given a reminder that the conspiracy does not necessarily represent popular opinion. We also notice that Shakespeare chooses to include the line “the Fates with traitors do contrive” (2.3.15). Before this commentary, the only other mention of “fate” in Shakespeare comes when Cassius says to Brutus: “Men at some time are masters of their fates” (1.2.138). The difference between “fates” and “Fates” leads us to ponder how much agency and control these men truly possess in the grander scheme of things.

Caesar never reads Artemidorus’s note. When Artemidorus attempts to pass him the letter, Caesar replies: “What touches us ourself shall be last served” (3.1.08). The ‘royal we’ is a principle that represents the separation between the public and private self of political or public figure—especially monarchs. David Daniell notes that “us ourself” is a reference to “the royal we,” and that “Tudor audiences would hear grist to the mill of the conspiracy” (232). In other words, Tudor audiences would recognize in Caesar’s statement a belief that was central to the English monarchy and sympathize with the conspirators’ fear of Caesar’s desire to become King. In this way, Caesar’s use of the ‘royal we,’ or ‘majestic plural,’ would be cause for alarm. We are also reminded of Caesar’s belief that he is unassailable; despite the urgency of Artemidorus’s request, Caesar feels comfortable attending to other matters first. While a desire to put others first could potentially be a positive attribute in a leader, for Caesar it derives not from benevolence, but rather from narcissism and confidence.

The scholar Irving Ribner argues: "Shakespeare saw the problems of government in personal human terms. A man must have the public virtues to be an efficient ruler, but he must have the private virtues as well, if he is to be a great and good one" (18). The distinction between public and private virtues is an echo of the concept of the "royal we;" rulers in Rome must make constant effort to maintain their integrity in both the public and private spheres. As Caesar's public persona becomes greater, there is a risk that his growing confidence will corrupt private virtues and integrity.

Shakespeare alters Plutarch's account to highlight Caesar's narcissism. In the original account, when Artemidorus tried to pass off the letter, "Caesar took it of him, but could never read it, though he many times attempted it, for the number of people that did salute him; but holding it still in his hand, keeping it to himself, went on withal into the Senate-house" (Plutarch 91). This description shows a Caesar who is still willing to hear advice from others, but who devotes most of his attention to those around him. Shakespeare's adaptation of this passage does not *literally* change Caesar's actions or order of priorities: in both versions, he is unable to read the letter because he prioritizes hearing the business of Roman citizens. Instead, Shakespeare changes Caesar's attitude; the insertion of the "royal we" directs our awareness to Caesar's kingly ambition. Rather than humbly prioritizing the needs of others, Shakespeare's Caesar feels the need to publicly proclaim his "service" to and prioritization of the Roman people. In turn,

this change emphasizes Caesar's pride: he wants the world to perceive his benevolence and strong leadership.

Plutarch also notes: "Howbeit other are of opinion that it was some man else that gave him that memorial, and not Artemidorus, who did what he could all the way as he went to give it Caesar, but he was always repulsed by the people" (Plutarch 91-92). This commentary provides insight into Caesar's character. It is hard to imagine that a man who is "repulsed by the people" would direct his attention and resources to the Roman public for their sake, which brings us back to Brutus's fear that Caesar is employing false modesty in order to gain more power. We see this disdain for the Roman people when Shakespeare's Caesar comments, "What, is the fellow mad?" (3.1.10). This offhanded comment inserted by Shakespeare implies that Caesar does not read Artemidorus's note not only because of his confidence and pride, but also because he holds little to no respect for the common people. We might conclude that the conspirators' motivations are justified.

Before his death, Caesar paints a monumental image of himself that might give the audience pause. It seems possible that his ego has grown so immense as to justify the conspirators' cause:

I could be well moved if I were as you:
If I could pray to move, prayers would move me.
But I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.

The skies are painted with unnumbered sparks:
They are all fire, and every one doth shine;
But there's but one in all doth hold his place.
So in the world: 'tis furnished well with men,
And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive,
Yet in the number I do know but one
That unassailable holds on his rank
Unshaked of motion. And that I am he. (3.1.58-70)

He separates himself from the men who are 'flesh and blood, apprehensive', placing himself in the role of a divine leader. Referring to himself as the 'northern star', Caesar implies that he is the unwavering and constant force guiding Rome. Caesar's references to the stars also draw attention to the cosmic disorder plaguing Rome throughout the play. R. A. Yoder writes that the storms and omens in *Julius Caesar* are "an expression of cosmic disorder, "civil strife in heaven," that is not restricted to particular men and places but spread out through the entire world" (Yoder 320). By linking himself to the cosmos, Caesar connects himself to the "civil strife in heaven" described by Caska and also highlights the uncertain future of Rome (1.13.11).

When Cinna and Decius attempt to interrupt Caesar, he exclaims: "Hence! Wilt thou lift up Olympus?" (3.1.74). David Daniell notes that Olympus is "the mountain home of the gods in Greek mythology, and so making a metaphor for an impossibility; but Caesar's near-last words suggest that he thinks of himself as a god" (237). In his response to Cinna and Decius, Caesar echoes the sentiments expressed in lines 58 – 70 and underscores his perception of himself as a god even

more directly. Based on these lines, it appears that Caesar's power has distorted his awareness of reality. Shakespeare structured this scene in a way that makes Caesar's murder even murkier. His final moments seem to align with the image of a dangerous and arrogant leader that is driving the conspiracy against him. There is also a terrible irony here: Caesar is far from a god and, in fact, will shortly be brutally murdered by the men to whom he is speaking.

A similar arrogance appears in Plutarch's account, in which, "Caesar ... was set in his chair; who denying their petitions and being offended with them one after another, because the more they were denied, the more they pressed upon him and were earnest with him" (Plutarch 92). Caesar does not even give consideration to the requests directed towards him; his inclination to become "offended with" those petitioning him suggests that he is not as patient or committed to helping the people as he would like us to believe. His demonstration of this behavior comes at a timely moment. Such unwillingness to consider the opinions or needs of others seems to directly provoke his murder. The conspirators choose to act in a situation where his concentrated power is at the center of our attention. Shakespeare adapts this passage to amplify Caesar's dangerous ego even further, indicating that perhaps he wants to ensure that his audience recognizes the extent to which Caesar's power affects his reason.

Ambition's Debt

Caesar's final moments exemplify the epic magnitude of his spirit. Though his greatness casts a shadow on his character, it is this very magnitude that allows Caesar to rise to the top of Roman society:

It is the spirit of Caesar which is the dominant power of the tragedy; against this—the spirit of Caesar—Brutus fought; but Brutus who forever errs in practical politics, succeeds only in striking down Caesar's body; he who had been weak now rises as pure spirit, strong and terrible, and avenges himself upon the conspirators. The contrast between the weakness of Caesar's bodily presence in the first half of the play, and the might of his spiritual presence in the latter half of the play, is emphasized and perhaps over-emphasized by Shakespeare. (Dowden 287)

This understanding of Caesar's spirit as the dominant power of the tragedy explains Shakespeare's decision to title the play *Julius Caesar*. It also provides some insight into the way power functions in Rome—and how it affects men's ability to reason.

After Brutus delivers him the final deadly blow, Caesar speaks his final words: "Et tu, Brute? – Then fall, Caesar" (3.1.77). These six words that Caesar says before he dies could be characterized by what Aristotle would term the "moment of recognition." Caesar realizes that the man whom he considered his dearest friend has betrayed him. Shakespeare's choice to contain Caesar's tragic moment of recognition to six words has a powerful effect. Just moments before his assassination, Caesar boldly proclaims himself "constant as the northern star" and likens himself to Olympus—yet Shakespeare gives him no final monologue.

His moment of recognition is fleeting but resounding. Caesar is swiftly

defeated, reduced from Olympus to a mere mortal; this great man does not resist, does not fight back, make angry proclamations of betrayal, or beg for mercy.

Perhaps he accepts his defeat so immediately because he believes that he must valiantly confront his fate, or perhaps his strength is broken by Brutus's betrayal.

The phrase, "Et tu, Brute?" is controversial because of its possible dual meaning. The Latin interpretation of the phrase translates to "and thou, Brutus," whereas the proverbial Greek interpretation translates to "and thou, son?" It is known that Caesar spoke both Latin and Greek. The Greek interpretation of the phrase aligns with the legend that Brutus was Caesar's natural son; Plutarch takes note of this legend in the *Life of Julius Caesar*. If we embrace the Greek expression, Caesar's defeat by Brutus is even more shattering: Caesar is delivered the final blow not only by one of his dearest friends, but by his son.

Caesar's moment of recognition, while tragic and powerful, does not indicate whether at his moment of death he is aware of his own errors of judgment. Shakespeare's decision to maintain the ambiguity surrounding Caesar's death leaves open the central question: was Caesar's death justified? If upon his deathbed, Caesar is unable to recognize the errors of judgment that led him there, were the conspirators' actions warranted? Shakespeare does not provide us with definite answers to these questions—perhaps because there is no definite answer to be had.

Shakespeare uses his creative hand in his interpretation of Caesar's murder.

His script omits a significant amount of the detail provided in Plutarch's account: "Then Casca behind him strake him in the neck with his sword...But, Caesar, turning straight unto him, caught hold of his sword and held it hard; and...Caesar in Latin [cried out]: 'O vile traitor Casca, what doest thou?'... [He] was hacked and mangled among them, as a wild beast taken of hunters. Men reporteth also that Caesar did still defend himself against the rest, running every way with his body" (Plutarch 95). Shakespeare gives Caesar no opportunity to defend himself. He does not resist or proclaim Casca a "vile traitor," accepting his death upon the realization that Brutus has betrayed him. The reduction of movement and resistance by Caesar in the face of his death has several effects. First, he seems to embrace the philosophy which he has preached: "cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once" (2.2.32-33). Instead of resisting, he gracefully accepts his tragic fate. In this way, Shakespeare's adaptation creates a Caesar who is, in fact, braver and more honorable. In contrast with the resistant Caesar portrayed in Plutarch's description, Shakespeare presents a Caesar, in so bravely accepting his fate, who seems more aware of the fatal errors in his judgment that led to his demise.

Plutarch also provides a significantly more vivid description of Caesar's murder. Possibly this change stems primarily from genre differences: Caesar's brutal murder can be acted out in a play, rather than described. As previously noted, Plutarch's account states that Caesar "was hacked and mangled among

them, as a wild beast taken of hunters.” While Shakespeare does not directly use this terminology, he portrays the same sheer brutality of the murder that is captured in these lines when the conspirators bathe in Caesar’s blood.

We should also reflect upon the ominous sacrifice that found a “beast without a heart” in both Shakespeare and Plutarch. While Caesar might himself be the “beast” without a heart, the vicious, hunter-like nature of the conspirators makes them also appear heartless. This hunter-prey imagery also resurfaces later in Antony’s funeral oration, where he describes the wounds inflicted upon Caesar—I will discuss this imagery at further length later in this chapter.

What is Caesar’s reaction to Brutus’s betrayal? Plutarch provides a detailed description of Caesar’s reaction: “But when he saw Brutus with his sword drawn in his hand, then he pulled his gown over his head and made no more resistance, and was driven...against the base whereupon Pompey’s image stood, which ran all of a gore-blood till he was slain. Thus it seemed that the image took just revenge of Pompey’s enemy” (Plutarch 95). Shakespeare embodies this despondency in Caesar’s final words, submerging his pain and sense of betrayal in a brief and tragic ‘moment of recognition.’ Knowing Caesar’s pride and confidence, we sense that his submission is induced by tremendous heartbreak and betrayal. His final words, “Et tu, Brute?” hint at a theory that would explain the gravity of this betrayal: Brutus is Caesar’s son.

Plutarch addresses this myth in the *Life of Julius Caesar*, writing that “when

[Caesar] was a young man, he had been acquainted with Servilia, who was extremely in love with him. And, because Brutus was born in that time when their love was hottest, he persuaded himself that he begat him" (Plutarch 106). This tragic irony is further accentuated when Plutarch notes that "Brutus himself gave [Caesar] one wound about his privities" (Plutarch 95). For Caesar, this would be the ultimate destruction of his confidence: his own (believed) son takes away his life and ambitions. Shakespeare chooses to exclude direct references to the rumored familial bond between Brutus and Caesar, likely because he chooses instead to construct a narrative that raises the possibility of Caesar's sterility. Placing the focus on Caesar's masculinity and kingly ambition suggests that Shakespeare is more interested in the questions surrounding issues of power in Rome than in personal relationships.

It is also important that Shakespeare largely excludes discussion of Caesar's great rival Pompey, eliminating the important historical/political context surrounding Caesar's rise to power and reign. Shakespeare's decision to move Caesar's murder from Pompey's Theater to the Capitol transforms the conspiracy from "just revenge of Pompey's enemy" to something else entirely.

Brutus believes wholeheartedly in the conspirators' cause. Following the murder, Brutus declares: "Ambition's debt is paid" (3.1.84). This statement serves as reassurance for onlookers that no one else will be harmed, but also is a reference to what Brutus sees as a primary justification for Caesar's death. In his earlier

soliloquy, Brutus states: “lowliness is young ambition’s ladder,” reasoning that Caesar poses a threat to Rome because of his desire for more power (2.2.22).

Following Caesar’s death, then, Brutus implies that Caesar had earned his death because of his ambition.

Shakespeare’s interpretation of Caesar’s murder shifts the justification from, again, “just revenge of Pompey’s enemy” to his dangerous ambition. In this light, Shakespeare is more interested in Roman men in politics and the influence of power on their character. Though Plutarch focuses primarily on the role of Fates and revenge, he does discuss at length Caesar’s great ambition: “Caesar being born to attempt all great enterprises and having an ambitious desire besides to covet great honours, the prosperous good success he had of his fruit of his labours, but rather gave him hope of things to come, still kindling more and more in him thoughts of greater enterprises and desire of new glory, as if that which he had present were stale and nothing worth” (Plutarch 79). This “ambitious desire” is demonstrated throughout the play, but directed only at one thing: becoming king of Rome. Flattening Caesar’s ambition in this way allows Shakespeare to center the plot on the conspiracy and his murder—a restructuring necessary to create a compelling play with an effective plot arc.

Plutarch notes, “This humour of his was no other but an emulation with himself as with another man, and a certain contention to overcome the things he prepared to attempt” (79). He also comments on what happens to Caesar’s legacy

after his murder: "So he reaped no other fruit of all his reign and dominion, which he had so vehemently desired all his life and pursued with such extreme danger, but a vain name only and a superficial glory that procured him the envy and hatred of his country" (Plutarch 99).

Following Caesar's murder, Brutus proclaims: "Stoop, Romans, stoop, / And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood / Up to the elbows and besmear our swords. / Then walk we forth even to the market-place, / And waving our red weapons o'er our heads / Let's all cry, 'Peace, Freedom and Liberty'" (3.1.105-110). These disturbing words and actions are an addition that Shakespeare made to the story that Plutarch tells. The conspirators will not only figuratively but also literally have Caesar's blood on their hands. This imagery casts a negative light on Brutus and the conspirators; they appear cruel and unforgiving. Because of the subliminal phallic significance of swords, the phrase "besmear our swords" suggests an erotic pleasure in Caesar's death. Perhaps this erotic pleasure stems from the power that Brutus and his comrades have potentially secured for themselves.

In creating this image, Shakespeare expanded greatly upon the following passage from Plutarch: "But Brutus and his consorts, having their swords bloody in their hands, went straight to the Capitol, persuading the Romans, as they went, to take their liberty again" (Plutarch 125). Shakespeare places Caesar's blood at the center of the conspirators' actions. This change portrays the conspirators as

wicked—even sadistic. Their actions could be interpreted in a number of different ways. Bathing themselves in Caesar’s blood, the hunter-prey relationship between Caesar and the conspirators is stressed once again. This image makes them seem like hunters celebrating their success in defeating a great, wild beast.

Brutus adopts and changes Cinna’s cry of “Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!” to “Peace, Freedom and Liberty.” He believes that by murdering Caesar, they have secured freedom and liberty for the people of Rome. His belief that they have secured peace, however, is undermined by the fact that he encourages the conspirators to bathe their hands in Caesar’s blood and wave their “red weapons” over their heads. Their actions were not peaceful; they were bloody and violent. Shakespeare stresses this dichotomy by juxtaposing the bloodiness of Caesar’s murder with the expression “Peace, Freedom and Liberty.” The contradiction here undermines the moral justification for the conspirator’s actions and foreshadows the impending instability of the Roman political world.

Chapter Three: *Gender in Shakespeare's Rome*

The cultural invisibility of women has had a counterpart in the critical invisibility of women characters. (McKewin 163)

In Chapter One, I examined the role of honor and power in *Julius Caesar*. In his adaptation of *Parallel Lives*, Shakespeare explores how honor and power function in the Roman political world—and how they affect the men who possess them. Through numerous examples, we have seen that Roman ideals are rooted in demonstrations of masculinity. The ‘Honorable Man’ is one who exemplifies traditionally masculine qualities: strength, bravery, nobility, and constancy. In Rome’s distinctly patriarchal society, questions of gender quickly rise to the surface. The few female characters that appear demand discussion and consideration, offering insight into Roman femininity and challenging traditional understandings of gender.

Scholars have debated over whether Shakespeare’s treatment of gender qualifies as proto-feminist or patriarchal. Both schools of thought operate with the understanding of “literature as a social text,” and the understanding that gender

roles are “hardly essential and stable categories of identity but contestable and changeable social constructs” (McEachern 271). While Shakespeare’s portrayal of Rome is still structured around patriarchal norms and masculine values, a close reading of *Julius Caesar* reveals what I would argue is a proto-feminist interpretation of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*.

In her essay, “Fathering Herself: A Source Study of Shakespeare’s Feminism,” Claire McEachern states:

[Shakespeare] responds to his sources in a way that consciously rebukes and revises patriarchal authority; he does not transpose, unaltered or unjudged, the cultural propositions that generate the sources’ unremarkable conclusions ... He does not replicate ideology; rather, he exposes its assumptions, forcing us to examine their emotional content, their source in human desire, and the loss and vulnerability they would work to prevent or deny. Shakespeare rewrites patriarchy, resisting its conclusions, revealing its idealized images of fathers as fictions constructed against the complexity of human desire. (290)

This argument falls in line with other assessments of Shakespeare’s creative intentions and interests. If we consider his work as a “test” of traditional Roman ideals, perhaps it is also a test of patriarchal norms—within the Roman world he creates, both literally and as a metaphor for Elizabethan England. His test shines light on the shortcomings of Roman patriarchy and Roman conceptions of honor and strength.

Julius Caesar’s expansive character list contains only two women; Calphurnia, the wife of Julius Caesar, and Portia, Brutus’s wife. Calphurnia

appears in only two of eighteen scenes of the play. Shakespeare first introduces her through Caesar: 'Calphurnia' is the first word Caesar speaks. A literal interpretation of this interaction might suggest that we are meant to perceive Calphurnia as Caesar's submissive inferior; he beckons and orders her about. The structural decision to have Calphurnia's name as Caesar's first word, however, immediately brings Calphurnia—and her relationship with Caesar—to the forefront, clarifying her status in Roman society. Throughout the play, we will see that Calphurnia and Portia as well are positioned in society based upon their relationship to men of power. I should note that my discussion applies solely to women within the aristocratic and noble spheres of Roman society; poor women and plebeians exist on a separate plane entirely.

Caesar's speaking presence in the play is bookmarked by two names; the first word he speaks is 'Calphurnia,' and the last word he speaks is his own name, 'Caesar.' Madelon Sprengnether observes: "The possibility of feminist psychoanalytic interpretation of literature, or, for that matter, of culture, depends of a reading of metaphor. It is metaphor that allows us to sub-read, to read on the margins of discourse, to analyze what is latent or implicit in the structures of consciousness or of a text" (591). Caesar's appellative linguistic bookends are no coincidence; there is an implicit meaning in the way Shakespeare has structured his consciousness. These names reveal much about both the man and the political leader Caesar.

Though we know that gender roles are ‘contestable and changeable social constructs,’ it is helpful to consider Renaissance conceptions of sex and gender. In his book, *Making Sex*, Thomas Laqueur describes the Renaissance belief in one-sex body:

In a public world that was overwhelmingly male, the one sex model displayed what was already massively evident in culture more generally: man is the measure of all things, and woman does not exist as an ontologically distinct category. Not all males are masculine, potent, honorable, or hold power, and some women exceed some men in each of these categories. But the standard of the human body and its representations is the male body. (62)

This understanding of man as the ‘measure of all things’ fits into Shakespeare’s patriarchal Roman world. To climb to the top of the Roman power structure, men must demonstrate honorable masculinity. We will see, too, that in order to gain respect women must position themselves in relation to men or attempt to demonstrate masculine traits.

In his explanation of the one-sex model, Laqueur also describes “weak, effeminate men, [who are] too cold to procreate” (52). After beckoning Calphurnia at the celebration of Lupercal, Caesar goes on to say: “Forget not in your speed, Antonio, / To touch Calphurnia; for our elders say, / The barren touched in this holy chase / Shake off their sterile curse” (1.2.6-9). David Daniell notes that “Shakespeare alters Plutarch to make Calphurnia’s curse of barrenness ... dominant at Caesar’s first entry. He has no legitimate son. He needs an heir. He is

immediately vulnerable in his dynastic ambition” (163). In addition to shaping our perception of Caesar’s character, this decision has several effects on our understanding of the gendering of power and honor in Roman society. To reiterate David Daniell’s point, Caesar’s potential lack of an heir makes him *vulnerable*. While this could simply be labelled a threat to his dynastic ambition, the vulnerability here is also rooted in something else: a subversion of his masculinity.

Roman power hinges upon the possession and demonstration of the traditional masculine ideals of strength, constancy, nobility, bravery, and honor. In fact, of the Romans in Shakespeare’s plays, Jyotsna Singh says: “What they consistently uphold as the ‘true’ Roman self—whether individual or collective—reveals itself as an ideal of masculinity premised on an exclusion of the feminine” (100). Shakespeare presents numerous examples of Romans resisting traditionally feminine traits. In this example, Caesar transfers his vulnerability (and the effeminate inability to procreate) to his wife; she becomes a scapegoat for Caesar, who is desperate to consistently demonstrate masculine values.

Shakespeare molds this scene out of the following passage from Plutarch:

And many noblewomen and gentlewomen also go of purpose to stand in their way, and do put forth their hands to be stricken, as scholars hold them out to their schoolmaster to be stricken with the ferula; persuading themselves that, being with child, they shall have good delivery, and also, being barren, that it will make them to conceive with child. Caesar sat to behold that sport upon the pulpit for orations, in a chair of gold, apparelled in a triumphing manner. Antonius, who was a Consul at that time, was one of them that ran this holy course. (Plutarch 82-83)

Note that according to Plutarch, the women place *themselves* in the path of the runners with hopes of being blessed with fertility. Caesar's "chair of gold" is evocative imagery, especially coupled with the numerous references to Caesar's temperament, narcissism, dynastic ambition, and physical vulnerability. Plutarch does not mention Caesar asking Antony to touch Calphurnia during the celebration of Lupercalia; this part of the plot is Shakespeare's addition. This is a good opportunity to reflect upon an idea presented in Aristotle's *Poetics*: the notion that "a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole" (7). A master of his craft, Shakespeare chooses to add this interaction for a reason. He seeks to expose the great Caesar's sexual insecurity, which he displaces on to his wife.

The night before Caesar's murder, Calphurnia has nightmares about what is to come. Caesar observes: "Nor heaven nor earth have been at peace tonight. / Thrice hath Calphurnia in her sleep cried out, / 'Help ho: they murder Caesar'" (2.2.1-3). Shakespeare lifts these actions from Plutarch, who writes that Caesar "heard his wife Calpurnia, being fast asleep, weep and sigh and put forth many fumbling lamentable speeches. For she dreamed that Caesar was slain, and that she had him in her arms" (Plutarch 88). Shakespeare makes one major change: Calphurnia does not give "fumbling lamentable speeches" in her sleep. She speaks the words clearly and repeatedly: "Help ho: they murder Caesar" (2.2.3). While this change is subtle, it depicts a different Calphurnia, who, even in her sleep,

speaks with clarity and conviction.

When Calphurnia wakes, she gives Caesar a bold and firm: "You shall not stir out of your house today" (2.2.9). When he resists her instructions, she says:

Caesar, I never stood on ceremonies,
Yet now they fright me. There is one within,
Besides the things that we have heard and seen,
Recounts most horrid sights seen by the watch.
A lioness hath whelped in the streets,
And graves have yawned and yielded up their dead.
Fierce fiery warriors fight upon the clouds
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,
Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol.
The noise of battle hurtled in the air,
Horses do neigh, and dying men did groan,
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.
O Caesar, these things are beyond all use,
And I do fear them. (2.2.13-26)

Plutarch describes these events differently:

Caesar rising in the morning, she prayed him if it were possible not to go out of the doors that day, but to adjourn the session of the Senate until another day. And if that he made no reckoning of her dream, yet that he would search further of the soothsayers by their sacrifices, to know what should happen him that day. Thereby it seemed that Caesar likewise did fear and suspect somewhat, because his wife Calpurnia until that time was never given to any fear or superstition. (Plutarch 89)

Both Shakespeare and Plutarch include that Calphurnia has historically remained uninfluenced by superstition or fear. This makes her fear of the bad omens even more noteworthy, and Caesar's ultimate decision to ignore her advice even more misguided. Shakespeare makes other crucial changes to the story. Most

significantly, he allows Calphurnia to reference the omens that have been occurring throughout Rome, connecting her to the outside world in a way that is not found in Plutarch.

Shakespeare empowers Calphurnia by giving her knowledge and understanding of current affairs, and he emboldens her further through his modification of the way she speaks to Caesar. She is not a weak, fearful woman begging to be heard; instead, she is Caesar's confident and knowledgeable wife who asserts herself and speaks with conviction. Through these subtle but profound changes to Calphurnia's character, Shakespeare demonstrates how "his refusal to replicate the assumptions of patriarchy—while obviously not part of any specifically feminist agenda—originates in his inquiry into the nature of power, particularly as manifested in the imitative pressures of patriarchy" (McEachern 272). He challenges patriarchal assumptions about women's roles and femininity by portraying Calphurnia not only as a confident, constant character, but also by making her an insightful voice of reason—all of which are traditionally masculine characteristics.

Shakespeare exposes the weaknesses of the patriarchal system further when his male characters ignore the wisdom and concern shared by their female counterparts. Caesar is extremely hesitant to accept his wife's advice—only tentatively agreeing to remain at home after ordering sacrifices and receiving news that the augurers have found a beast without a heart. He snidely says to

Calphurnia: “for thy humour I will stay at home” (2.2.56). Daniell notes that “the word [humour] is derogatory, as to a woman” (222). Caesar feels compelled to clarify that his decision to stay at home is to entertain his fickle, cowardly wife; he must remain constant in order to maintain his established place within the Roman political hierarchy, as “a universalized and coherent male subject ... must resist being seduced and ‘feminized’ by the possibility of changeable, multiple selves” (Singh 101). The irony here, as anyone who has heard the story of Julius Caesar knows, is that Calphurnia is right.

Plutarch notes that, after seeking the advice—upon Calphurnia’s suggestion—of several soothsayers, Caesar “determined to send Antonius to adjourn the session of the Senate” (89). In Shakespeare’s text, he reaches the same decision, but instead of Calphurnia suggesting seeking the advice of soothsayers, Caesar decides to order the sacrifices himself. This adjustment is interesting; it shifts the power dynamic and makes Calphurnia appear more confident, comparatively. These power dynamics are, once again, rooted in traditional Roman, and perhaps to an extent Elizabethan, understandings of gender roles, masculinity and femininity.

Caesar is reluctant to admit that his constancy and confidence might be swayed by a woman; he is in danger of being feminized and losing his footing on the patriarchal ladder of power. When Decius Brutus arrives to fetch Caesar for the meeting of the Senate, Caesar says:

Calphurnia here, my wife, stays me at home.
She dreamt tonight she saw my statue,
Which, like a fountain with an hundred spouts,
Did run pure blood; and many lusty Romans
Came smiling and did bathe their hands in it.
And these she does apply for warnings and portents
And evils imminent, and on her knee
Hath begged that I will stay home today. (2.2.75-82)

This description of Calphurnia's tone misrepresents what we previously observed in their conversation; he paints her as desperate. Caesar himself sounds arrogant and disrespectful, as he often does. Once again, Caesar uses Calphurnia as a scapegoat, transferring his vulnerability to her—in order to distance himself from the female-coded traits of fear, weakness, or inconstancy. He also sheds light on the structure of heterosexual relationships in the Roman world when he feels compelled to reiterate what Calphurnia says in order to persuade him: "Let me upon my knee prevail in this" (2.2.54).

Calphurnia placing herself beneath Caesar by kneeling physically suggests, according to Laqueur: "To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category" (Laqueur 8). In this scene, Shakespeare highlights both the absurdity of this power dynamic and Caesar's desperate need to have his social rank affirmed by Calphurnia before he will concede.

Shakespeare also includes the imagery of the bloody fountain, likely for dramatic effect—it is gory and foreshadows the conspirators bathing their hands in Caesar’s blood after murdering him. The insertion of this imagery into Calphurnia’s dream also paints her as a prophet-like character, making Caesar’s rude mockery of her concerns all the more ironic. Neither Caesar nor Decius shows respect for Calphurnia. While Decius’ disrespect is rooted in his mission to bring Caesar to the senate, Caesar is disrespectful because of his arrogance—and because of an internalized misogyny that is built into Roman patriarchy.

Caesar’s inability and unwillingness to heed Calphurnia’s warning is unfortunate and ironic, and is a clear representation of the deleterious nature of hyper-masculine Roman ideals:

It is the masculine consciousness...that defines femininity as weakness and institutes the structures of male dominance designed to defend against such an awareness. Shakespeare’s tragedies, as I read them, may be viewed as a vast commentary on the absurdity and destructiveness of this defensive posture. (Sprenghether 600)

Shakespeare wants his audience to recognize that Calphurnia is insightful and intelligent, despite the fact that she is a woman. When Caesar continues to resist her advice, Calphurnia tells him: “Your wisdom is consumed in confidence” (2.2.49); thus, one of the most resonant and accurate descriptions of Caesar’s temperament offered in the play is delivered by a woman. This all the more dramatizes Shakespeare’s dismantling of patriarchal assumptions.

Though we never learn of Calphurnia's fate in Shakespeare or Plutarch, we see Calphurnia overstep her bounds when she suggests that Decius should lie on behalf of Caesar and tell the Senate he is sick (2.2.64). Caesar is too prideful to accept his wife's advice in front of another man. Again, his "wisdom is consumed in confidence." After over-reaching her bounds, Calphurnia is silenced by the two men. We do not hear from or of her again.

The only two women in *Julius Caesar*, Calphurnia and Portia, are the most insightful characters in the play. Despite their inferior position in Roman society, they are tuned in to current events, politics, and the psychological workings of their husbands' minds. However, while both women possess a certain amount of fortitude and agency, they cannot stretch it indefinitely in Roman society:

"Shakespeare realized the full range and power of feminine identity, but he was also aware that even a brilliant woman had to modulate her independence in the mores of his own day" (McKewin 161). The silencing of Calphurnia is an excellent example of the limitations placed on these women. I now will direct my analysis to Portia, who exhibits similar strengths and limitations, though her relationship with Brutus contains more mutual respect than the relationship between Calphurnia and Caesar.

Portia demonstrates her insight and understanding when she senses Brutus' emotional burden and addresses it with him. He tries to brush off her attempts at communication, but nevertheless, she persists:

No, my Brutus,
You have some sick offence within your mind
Which by the right and virtue of my place
I ought to know of: and upon my knees
I charm you, by my once commended beauty,
By all your vows of love, and that great vow
Which did incorporate and make us one,
That you unfold to me, your self, your half,
Why you are heavy—and what men tonight
Have had resort to you: for here have been
Some six or seven who did hide their faces
Even from darkness. (2.1.266-277)

Here, Portia begins to claim agency by extending her reach beyond the extent of a worried wife. She is not only aware of her husband's emotional distress, but of the mysterious political tides that he is a part of. David Daniell states that "Portia [is claiming] her equality in political matters" (214). Portia demonstrates her insight, intellectual ability, and fortitude. In Plutarch, Portia does not address the political matters—Shakespeare chooses to endow Portia with political awareness.

Portia implores Brutus to speak with her, clarifying that she is "upon [her] knees." Calphurnia mirrors this action in the next scene. However, Brutus, unlike Caesar, does not desire this physical enactment of her feminine submission; instead, he says, "Kneel not, gentle Portia" (2.1.287). Though Brutus does not share his secret without serious persuasion, this reaction to Portia's kneeling suggests something about his character. This interaction takes place inside of Brutus's home, which indicates that his actions here are genuine to his private self. An

honorable man, Brutus is comfortable treating Portia as an equal—though this is a privilege she must earn. Within the home, gender roles begin to blur.

Portia is not able to persuade Brutus without extreme persistence and strength:

I grant I am a woman: but withal
A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife.
I grant I am a woman: but withal
A woman well reputed, Cato's daughter.
Think you I am no stronger than my sex
Being so fathered and so husbanded? (2.1.191-196)

This passage is based closely on Plutarch's description:

I confess that a woman's wit commonly is too weak to keep a secret safely. But yet, Brutus, good education and the company of virtuous men have some power to reform the defect of nature. And for myself, I have this benefit moreover: that I am the daughter of Cato and wife of Brutus' (Plutarch 118)

Her argument is centered upon traditional conceptions of femininity and gender roles. Portia is perceptive; she knows that Rome is a man's world, so she skillfully leverages her relationship to men of high stature to command Brutus's respect. Shakespeare modifies Plutarch's description so that Portia does not explicitly undermine her own argument. The poetic structure of her lines is repetitive but resilient—she linguistically mimics the constant battering and condemnation of femininity that she must face in such a patriarchal world. Questioning, "think you I am no stronger than my sex," Portia directly calls attention to the socially

constructed and malleable nature of traditional gender roles.

Portia goes on to argue:

Tell me your counsels. I will not disclose 'em.
I have more strong proof of my constancy,
Giving myself a voluntary wound,
Here in the thigh. Can I bear that with patience
And not my husband's secrets? (2.1.297-301)

She knows that, as a soldier and an honorable Roman, Brutus he values masculine acts of physical strength; Portia likens herself to a soldier through a demonstration of physical resilience when she inflicts herself with the wound. Portia continues to blur gender roles by claiming masculine characteristics, like constancy and strength, as her own. A similar wound is recounted in Plutarch:

[Portia] gave herself a great gash withal in her thigh, that she was straight all of a gore-blood; and, incontinently after, a vehement fever took her, by reason of the pain of her wound... With those words she showed him her wound on her thigh and told him what she had done to prove herself. Brutus was amazed to hear what she said unto him, and, lifting up his hands to heaven, he besought the gods...that he might be found a husband worthy of so noble a wife as Portia. (Plutarch 118-119)

In both Shakespeare and Plutarch, Brutus responds to Portia's act of physical strength with a word typically reserved for men in Roman society: "Render me worthy of this **noble** wife!" (2.1.302). Portia's success in transgressing the gender barrier is evident in Brutus's use of the word "noble" to describe her.

Plutarch's description of Portia's self-inflicted wound is far gorier than what is found in Shakespeare—but this distinction could be a result of genre;

Shakespeare had the ability to show the gore rather than describe it. Madelon Sprengnether contends that, “throughout Shakespeare’s tragedies the imagery of heterosexual union involves the threat of mutual or self-inflicted violence” (598). This observation is thought-provoking and demands the question: *why?* I would argue that, in the case of Portia, such self-inflicted violence is a way of evening the playing fields within the bounds of heterosexual union. Shakespeare does not change the playing fields all together; he rebels against patriarchal assumptions in a way that emphasizes their absurdity. Portia remains within the home, where self-inflicted injury is one of the most effective ways for her to demonstrate masculine strength.

Shakespeare also empowers Portia by giving her a heightened awareness of politics and current events outside the home (a change he also makes to Calphurnia’s character). While he assigns his female characters greater agency than is found in his sources, and perhaps offers implicit criticisms of patriarchy and widely-accepted gender roles, he does not entirely dismantle the authority of male power—he merely pulls some of the foundation loose, like removing the base piece in a game of Jenga. It is true that “Shakespeare invests...Portia with charm, wit, and independence, but that he also finds ways to ‘mediate their assertiveness so as to render them non-threatening’” (McKewin 160). I would argue that this illustrates Shakespeare’s method of “testing” traditional ideals within the worlds of his plays.

Through Portia, Shakespeare also presents internalized misogyny. Before sending Lucius to the capital, Portia says in an aside to herself, “O constancy, be strong upon my side: / Set a huge mountain ‘tween my heart and tongue. / I have a man’s mind, but a woman’s might. / How hard it is for women to keep counsel” (2.3.6-8). After speaking with the Soothsayer, Portia refers to feminine weakness again: “Ay me, how weak a thing / The heart of a woman is” (2.4.39-40). It is significant that, despite her intelligence and inner fortitude, Portia genuinely believes these common narratives that are designed to infantilize and oppress women.

Portia does not resurface until the mention of her suicide. Brutus is the first to speak of her death:

Impatient of my absence,
And grief that young Octavius with Mark Antony
Have made themselves so strong—for with her death
That tidings came—with this she fell distract,
And, her attendance absent, swallowed fire. (4.3.150-154)

Shakespeare makes several significant changes to Plutarch’s description of Portia’s state after Brutus leaves and suicide:

For Portia being very careful and pensive for that which was to come and being too weak to away with so great and inward grief of mind, she could hardly keep within, but she was frightened with every little noise and cry she heard (121)... She, determining to kill herself...took hot burning coals and cast them into her mouth, and kept her mouth so close that she chocked herself...choosing rather to die than to languish in pain. (Plutarch 173)

In his narrative of her death, Shakespeare assigns Portia more agency and, once again, links her more closely to the political sphere. Instead of a result of weakness, as Plutarch portrays it, he roots her suicide in anxiety about the political sphere and her husband's fate in battle. In her death, Shakespeare's Portia finally unsexes herself, claiming her agency and rejecting the restrictive feminine stereotypes of passivity and fickleness.

In Shakespeare's proto-feminist Rome, women are sources of reason and wisdom. Though confined to the home by patriarchal society's strict regulation of femininity, their power and presence can be felt throughout the play. Shakespeare uses the home as a place where rigid gender roles can soften. Glimpsing into their private lives, we see that though ceremony and hierarchy still exist, husbands and wives are more free to drift from prescribed gendered characteristics without fear of retribution.

Conclusion

*“O judgement, thou art fled to brutish beasts’
And men have lost their reason.”
—Antony (3.2.105-106)*

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare builds an extraordinarily intricate and intentional re-construction of the Rome found in Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*. He delicately assembles a poetic substructure that, when complete, provides the scaffolding for history’s most colossal characters and archetypal turbulent political world. A close reading of *Julius Caesar* in conjunction with *Parallel Lives* provides insight into Shakespeare’s creative process. The changes he makes—to the characters and to the world of the play—reveal his interest in ethics and the human condition.

The political world in Shakespeare’s Rome is awash in ever-shifting tides of honor and power, as men constantly seek to earn more honor and ascend the political ladder. Shakespeare explores this world through the manipulation of his characters, meticulously “testing” the system, uncovering its flaws and seeking

men's limitations. In this thesis, I discuss three primary areas of Shakespeare's interest that are ripe for investigation: the cyclical nature and great mechanism of history, mimetic desire and the corrupting effects of power, and gender roles in patriarchal Rome. All three of these subjects are at the center of both the destruction of Caesar and the downfall of Rome.

Shakespeare draws out the parallels between his characters, the self-destructive nature of the Roman political system, and history's triumph over men. He also subtly works against the grain of Roman patriarchy through his proto-feminist blurring of gender roles and norms. He allows characters to more freely move from prescribed gendered norms, especially within the privacy of the home, and he ascribes Portia and Calphurnia agency and independence. His female characters are more self-assured, insightful, and politically aware than their counterparts in Plutarch.

In Rome, the great mechanism of history moves continually in circles. The political scaffolding is contaminated by mimetic desire at every level; men conspire and betray one another, and seek constantly to elevate their position in society. Power and honor corrupt men's minds, stripping them of their ability to recognize their weaknesses, that sustains the conspiracy, that triggers the toppling of these colossal historic figures. In the words of René Girard: "The destruction of the Republic is this very process; no single man is responsible for it; everybody is" (400).

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