



***bitig* Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi**

bitig Journal of Faculty of Letters

(Cilt/Volume: 5, Sayı/Issue: 10, Aralık/December 2025)

Caesarism and Brutism: Ideological Extremes and the Collapse of the Roman Republic in *Julius Caesar*

Seçil ERKOÇ IQBAL

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, İnönü Üniversitesi

secilerkoc@hotmail.com

 ORCID 0000-0003-0934-331X

Araştırma makalesi/Research article

Geliş Tarihi/Received: 10.05.2025

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted: 07.08.2025

Atf/Citation

Erkoç Iqbal, Seçil (2025). Caesarism and Brutism: Ideological Extremes and
the Collapse of the Roman Republic in *Julius Caesar*. *bitig Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*. 5(10), 207-226.



Bu makale iThenticate, turnitin, intihal.net programlarından biriyle taranmıştır.

This article was checked by iThenticate, turnitin or intihal.net.

Abstract Introducing the concept of Brutism, characterised by philosophical idealism, emotional suppression, Stoic rigidity and moral strictness, as a counter-ideology to Caesarism, this study argues that Brutus, in his attempt to prevent dictatorship, ends up with constructing his own version of ideological tyranny. While Caesarism emerges as an ideological and charismatic apparatus that rises above the physical presence of Julius Caesar and transforms him into an abstract entity that continues lingering throughout the play, manipulating and moving the masses according to its own advantage, Brutism represents an idealistic yet rigid republicanism that is blindly rooted in the supremacy of reason over human emotions. Through a comparative analysis of Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus, it is also attempted to reveal how both men, despite their opposing political ambitions, mirror each other in their unbending attitude, self-righteousness, and detachment from emotional intelligence as represented through their wives Calphurnia and Portia, respectively. Neglecting the insightful warnings coming from the domestic sphere, Caesar and Brutus prepare their ultimate downfall. The tragic silencing of women and the ensuing catastrophic civil war demonstrate the dire results of eliminating wisdom and feminine agency from the political domain. The murder of Cinna the poet, triggered by the irrational wrath of the Roman citizens, further indicates how the ideological extremes can gain strength from rhetorical manipulation and evolve into a chaotic schism. By comparing Caesarism and Brutism, as two different yet alike facets of these extremes, this study argues that *Julius Caesar* presents a deeply ambivalent projection of leadership which, when denied access to a more comprehensive outlook bringing domestic and public, emotion and reason, woman and man side by side, runs the risk of transforming into a rigid form of tyranny and oppression. Shakespeare's play, therefore, presents a timeless critique of both Caesarism and Brutism, and it warns that unchecked power and moral fanaticism can easily lead to civil war and collective ruin in the long run.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, political ideology, emotional intelligence, gender roles

Sezarizm ve Brutizm: *Jül Sezar*'da İdeolojik Aşırı Uçlar ve Roma Cumhuriyeti'nin Çöküşü

Öz Felsefi idealizm, duygusal baskı, Stoacı katılık ve ahlaki kuralcılık ile karakterize edilen Brutizm kavramını, Sezarizm'e karşı bir ideoloji olarak sunan bu çalışma, Brutus'un diktatörlüğü önleme çabalarının aslında onun kendi ideolojik tiranlığını yaratmakla sonuçlandığını savunmaktadır. Sezarizm, Jül Sezar'ın fiziksel varlığının ötesine geçen ve onu, oyun boyunca kitleleri kendi çıkarına

göre manipüle eden ve yönlendiren soyut bir varlığa dönüştürecek ideolojik ve karizmatik bir aygıt olarak ortaya çıkarken, Brutizm ise aklın duyguların üzerine kurduğu tahakküme körü körüne bağlı, idealist, ancak aynı zamanda da katı bir cumhuriyetçiliği temsil etmektedir. Jül Sezar ve Marcus Brutus'un karşılaştırmalı analizi ile, her iki karakterin, zıt siyasi hırslarına rağmen, katı tutumları, kendini beğenmişlikleri ve eşleri Calphurnia ve Portia'nın temsil ettiği duygusal zekadan uzaklaşmaları sebebiyle, aslında birbirlerine nasıl da ayna tuttıkları ortaya konulmaya çalışılmıştır. Sezar ve Brutus, hanelerinden gelen apaçık uyarıları göz ardı ederek aslında kendi nihai çöküşlerini hazırlamaktadırlar. Kadınların trajik bir şekilde susturulması ve bunu takip eden iç savaş aslında bilgeliğin ve kadın eyleyciliğinin siyasi alandan ortadan kaldırılmasının korkunç sonuçlarını göstermektedir. Şair Cinna'nın, Romalı vatandaşların mantıksız öfkesi ile tetiklenen cinayeti, ideolojik aşırı uçların süslü sözlerle bezeli manipülasyonlardan nasıl güç kazanıp kaotik bir bölünmeye yol açabileceğini bir kez daha göstermektedir. Sezarizm ve Brutizm'i bu aşırı uçların iki farklı ama bir o kadar da benzer yüzü olarak karşılaştıran bu çalışma, *Jül Sezar*'ın, hane ile kamusal, duygu ile akıl ve kadın ile erkeği yan yana getirecek daha kapsamlı bir bakış açısına erişim reddedildiğinde, katı bir tiranlık ve baskı biçimine dönüşme riski taşıyan, son derece çelişkili bir liderlik projeksiyonu sunduğunu savunmaktadır. Shakespeare'in oyunu, bu bağlamda hem Sezarizm'e hem de Brutizm'e karşı zamansız bir eleştiri sunar ve kontrolsüz güç ve ahlaki bağnazlığın uzun vadede kolayca iç savaşa ve toplumsal yıkıma yol açabileceği konusunda uyarıda bulunur.

Anahtar sözcükler: Shakespeare, Jül Sezar, politik ideoloji, duygusal zekâ, cinsiyet rolleri

Introduction

The earliest reference concerning the performance date of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599) appears in the account of a Swiss medical student, Thomas Platter, who documented his visit to a London playhouse in September 1599. Writing shortly after the event, Platter recalls:

After lunch on September 21st, at about two o'clock, I and my party crossed the river, and there in the house with the thatched roof we saw an excellent performance of tragedy of the first Emperor Julius Caesar with about fifteen characters; after the play, according to their custom they did a most elegant and curious dance, two dressed in men's clothes, and two in women's. (qtd. in Thomas 1992: xi)

As literary scholar Peter Ure observes, it is not common "to be able to date a performance at an Elizabethan public house so exactly" and what makes the occasion equally interesting is that "the theatre concerned was to be the most famous in modern Europe – the first Globe (1599-1613) of Shakespeare's company, the King's or Lord Chamberlain's Men, which had just that autumn opened its doors" (1987: 11). This historical specificity earns *Julius Caesar* a distinct position in

Shakespeare's literary career, marking not just the inauguration of a new stage but also the thematic launch of a play deeply concerned with spectacle, authority, and public performance. Having been written in the very same year, *The Tragedie of Julius Caesar*, as it is entitled in the *First Folio* of 1623, is the first play to have been performed at the newly constructed Globe (Wilson 1992: 106). Wilson's observation reinforces the significance of the play as a deliberate choice for the Globe's debut – suggesting that its political themes and exploration of public oratory were especially in accordance with the open, communal atmosphere of this new theatrical space. It is also significant to note that “[u]nlike many of Shakespeare's other plays, *Julius Caesar* has no pre-1623 quarto edition, so scholars have no opportunity to be puzzled by variant texts” (McMurtry 1998: 1). This textual stability is unusual in the Shakespearean canon and contributes to a sense of formal consistency; however, it contrasts sharply with the interpretative instability of the play's characters and ideological positions. The relative fixity of the text underscores how ambiguity can emerge even from a single, authoritative source. Hence, it would be wrong to assume that the play renders itself as an open text which is clear and easy to follow. According to Ernest Schanzer, “*Julius Caesar* is one of Shakespeare's most controversial plays” because there are various interpretations that try to “agree on who is its principal character or whether it has one; on whether it is tragedy and, if so, of what kind; on whether Shakespeare wants us to consider the assassination as damnable or praiseworthy” (1963: 10). Schanzer's remarks further emphasise the play's structural and moral complexity, which aligns with the idea that Shakespeare refuses to embrace a singular ideological stance. Instead, he encourages the reader/audience to reflect on competing conceptions of justice, loyalty, and political authority. These conflicting perspectives are not necessarily specific to the play's Elizabethan context since it is possible to trace the appearance of these various views even back to the Middle Ages. To illustrate, as McMurtry conveys, “Dante (1265-1321) saw Brutus and Cassius as deeply dyed traitors, disloyal to their friend and ruler, and in his *Inferno* gives them a central place in hell” (McMurtry, 1998, p. 18). This medieval perspective accentuates the moral weight attached to political betrayal, demonstrating how interpretations of Brutus's actions are shaped by broader historical and theological frameworks that predate and potentially inform Shakespeare's own portrayal. Nevertheless, as opposed to the convictions that take sides with Caesar; “in the view of Shakespeare's contemporary Sir Philip Sidney, Caesar was a rebel threatening Rome, and Brutus was the wisest of senators” (Mowat and Werstine 2011: xiii). Various as the interpretations are, the play is not merely about favouring any of these different viewpoints but understanding how people may construe their version(s) of ‘truth’ and use it to confirm and

justify their actions. In this manner, “Shakespeare presents us with an enigma in such a way as to make unequivocal judgement impossible. We cannot even be certain about the kind of play it is, other than calling it a Roman play” (Thomas 1992: 23). Thomas’s view speaks directly to the play’s intentional elusiveness. The absence of a clear moral resolution mirrors the fragmented and chaotic political landscape Shakespeare presents – reinforcing the argument that the play problematizes rigid ideological constructs like Caesarism and Brutism.

The term Roman play is used to designate the plays of Shakespeare that are set in ancient Rome. Instead of introducing new characters, the playwright draws his material from Plutarch’s (46-120 C.E.) *Parallel Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (written circa 100 C.E.) which presents a series of biographical essays about famous Greek and Roman figures. The work was first translated into French by Jacques Amyot in the 1560s and then it was followed by Thomas North’s English translation that was published in 1579. North’s version was Shakespeare’s primary source for *Julius Caesar*. However, as Knight remarks, “just as in gathering material for the English historical plays from Holinshed, he selected only what he needed as an artist dealing with the universal stuff of human nature, so here his purpose is not simply to reconstruct the historical situation in Rome in the year 44 B.C.” (1987: 121). Knight’s observation displays Shakespeare’s artistic autonomy: rather than functioning as a dramatized chronicle, *Julius Caesar* becomes a philosophical and political exploration of timeless human struggles that makes the Roman setting a reflective space for Shakespeare’s own England. Knight’s insight is also echoed by Andrew Hadfield, who contends that Shakespeare’s interest in Roman history stems less from antiquarian accuracy and more from his engagement with contemporary republican thought – an intellectual tradition that viewed history as a mirror for reflecting on the dangers of tyranny and the failure of virtue in politics (2005: 12). Hence, Shakespeare uses history as a medium to reflect on the social and the political dynamics of the Elizabethan England. Just as the way the death of Julius Caesar culminates in a civil war and threatens the inner peace of Rome, the early 17th century England was also marked by uncertainties regarding who would be next monarch following the upcoming death of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603). When *Julius Caesar* was first performed, the Queen had been ruling the country for 41 years; however, since she remained unmarried there was not any direct heir waiting in line. This absence of a clear succession strategy generated anxieties comparable to those dramatized in *Julius Caesar*. By demonstrating the tragic outcomes of the civil war, which turns brother against brother and blurs the distinction between friend and enemy in his play, Shakespeare warns against the outcomes of a possible internal strife that would threaten the stability of his country in the long run. The political unease that is represented through the assassination of Julius Caesar has also clear parallels

to that of England in the 16th century. Following Henry VIII's break with Rome and proclaiming himself as the Supreme Head of the Church of England in 1534, Catholic conspirators attempted to take the control of the crown from the Protestant rulers. This conflict escalated after Pope Pius V's declaration that "all Catholic subjects were released from allegiance to 'Elizabeth, the Pretended Queen of England,'" effectively marking the English crown as a legitimate target for assassination (McMurtry: 1998: 14). Such an atmosphere of conspiracy and sanctioned political violence echoes Stephen Greenblatt's observation that Shakespeare dramatizes the conditions under which tyranny emerges – not only through the figure of the tyrant but through the enabling behaviour of citizens who are swayed by ideology, fear, and populist rhetoric (2018: 150). This historical context highlights the real threat of politically motivated violence that surrounded Elizabethan rule, and it also intensifies the audience's understanding of Shakespeare's Rome, not as a distant antique setting, but as a coded reflection of their own political climate, where the probability of an assassination was more than a theatrical impetus. It is therefore unsurprising that Elizabeth I "thwarted numerous attempts to depose her and install Mary, Queen of Scots, as the ruler of England" (Lyson and Zurcher 2012: par. 4). Additionally, she also confronted "a small (nonreligious) insurrection led by her former favourite Earl of Essex" (Lyson and Zurcher 2012: par. 4). These details not only reveal the Queen's political vulnerability but also suggests that the figure of Caesar might have resonated simultaneously as a warning against tyrannicide and as a tragic image of a leader betrayed. In this way, Shakespeare may be drawing attention to the fragility of state power and the ambiguity of heroic resistance. Politically, the atmosphere was marked by anxiety and suspense because the Queen was drawing to the end, and it was not clear whether she would be replaced by an honest monarch or a dictator – the scenario depends on the religious sympathies of the English public: for the Protestants a Catholic monarch would be regarded as an autocrat, whereas for the Catholics the opposite would be valid. This ideological polarization strongly resembles the divide in *Julius Caesar* between republican virtue and authoritarian rule. The characters' understanding of what constitutes tyranny or liberty is shaped by personal bias, just as Elizabethan subjects viewed political developments through the lens of religious affiliation. Therefore, although the ancient Roman Republic was situated on a faraway ground – both in time and space – it did not seem remote or exotic for the people of the Renaissance England. As Lyson and Zurcher explain further, "[t]he English were also mindful of Rome's role in their early history: Julius Caesar successfully invaded Britain in 54 BCE and the Roman Empire, which succeeded the republic, controlled Britain from 77 to 407 CE" (2012: par. 3). This historical continuity enabled

Elizabethan audiences to view Roman narratives as part of their national lineage, which is not foreign but foundational. By invoking Rome, therefore, Shakespeare could reflect on history and assess the political anxieties of his present. Thus, in the broader perspective, “English people strongly identified themselves ‘free’ in ways that (they believed) citizens of the Roman republic had been and others in Europe were not. They accepted that they were subject to a monarch, but they drew distinction between the just ruler and the tyrant” (Lyson and Zurcher 2012: par. 3), which, as it has been stated above, is directly related to the religious background and the affinities of the monarch. The idea of monarchy can be seen as either rightful leadership or as a form of tyranny, depending on one’s beliefs. This uncertainty is shown in *Julius Caesar*, as people use violence in the name of freedom, and Shakespeare makes the audience think about whether their actions are brave and honourable or harmful and wrong – and whether the distinction between the two can be truly clear.

From Pompey to Caesar

It is possible to sense the implications of the political conflict – which will come to the foreground later – in the opening scene of *Julius Caesar*. Flavius and Marullus, the tribunes who defend the rights of the common people are angry because the crowd has long forgotten about its admiration of Pompey, and now they are celebrating Caesar who defeated the sons of Pompey at the battle of Munda, in Spain. It clearly shows how easily people can change their side – which ironically enough, contradicts with the central values of the Roman world such as friendship, loyalty, valour and constancy. In addition, “[t]he mention of Pompey also reminds us that Rome has been embroiled in civil strife, that bitterness and hatred still persist, and that Julius Caesar is not universally esteemed” (McMurtry 1998: 30). This highlights the enduring conflicts and sets the stage for political instability that permeates the play. It is also important to note that the play opens on the feast of Lupercal which is one of the ancient religious rites of Rome, celebrated every year in February to honour Lupercal (the god Pan) and “to purify the land and secure its fertility and prosperity in the upcoming year” (Gearin-Tosh 1992: 13). This cultural context not only grounds the play in Roman tradition but also introduces a ritualistic atmosphere that foreshadows both renewal and disruption. Apart from functioning as a cultural motif that portrays a vivid picture of the Roman world; the topsy-turvy atmosphere that is created out of the festival mood also challenges the long-established distinctions and the codes of the civilized world. Representing the former order that is linked to Pompey, the tribunes cannot fit themselves into the new order and desperately try to “reclassify the crowd through language” (Haywood 1992: 19). However, their questions are confronted by the playful answers of the Roman citizens:

MARULLUS. But what trade art thou? Answer me directly.
 COBBLER. A trade, sir, that, I hope, I may use with a safe
 conscience; which is, indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles.
 FLAVIUS. What trade, thou knave? Thou naughty knave, what trade?
 COBBLER. Nay, I beseech you, sir, be not out with me.
 Yet, if you be out, sir, I can mend you.
 MARULLUS. What mean'st thou by that? Mend me, thou saucy fellow?
 COBBLER. Why, sir, cobble you. (1.1.12-22)

Having realised that they will not be able to handle the situation through a question-answer methodology, the tribunes shift to oratory which “is the dramatic discourse of the government, and contrasts sharply with the carnivalesque language of the ‘senseless’ crowd” (Haywood 1992: 21). This contrast not only marks a shift in rhetorical strategy but also reflects a deeper division between official authority and popular will, which is one of the central tensions within the play. The tribunes start attacking Caesar’s reputation by reminding people of how they had gathered to see and celebrate great Pompey’s passing the streets of Rome – but now they are celebrating the victory of Pompey’s enemy. Building their argument step by step, they directly attack the conscience of the crowd and try to divert them from the sacrilegious mistake they are committing:

MARULLUS. And do you now put on your best attire?
 And do you now cull out a holiday?
 And do you now strew flowers in his way
 That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood?
 Be gone!
 Run to your houses, fall upon your knees,
 Pray to the gods to intermit the plague
 That needs must light on this ingratitude. (1.1.53-60)

The first scene of *Julius Caesar* is important, as it presents the reader/audience a general overview of what is to take place in the following acts. It sets the argument of the play by drawing our attention to the existence of political fractions in the society, the significance of linguistic control in exerting power on the crowds, the fickleness of the people which gives rise to tension and ambiguity that may transform a celebration into a funeral ceremony in the end, or the vice versa. In addition, by stating their intention to disrobe the images of Caesar, the tribunes also place the body of Julius Caesar against its political representation that is signified through his statue. In this way, Marullus and Flavius’s attempts foreshadow those of the conspirators who assume to have destroyed ‘Caesarism’ by spilling his blood. As George Watson explains, “[m]ere death, physical dissolution, does not seem to have lessened the power of the spirit of Pompey over the allegiances of Flavius and Marullus” (1992: 92) This observation underscores the enduring power of political myth, which outlives the individual and continues to shape collective loyalty and perception. Despite Pompey’s death, his influence lingers – an influence that, in the longer run, is mirrored by the re-emergence of Caesar’s ghost, who appears before Brutus in his tent and ominously promises

to meet him again at Philippi (4.3.318-327). In both cases, Shakespeare suggests that the legacy of political figures can become more powerful in death than in life, haunting and shaping events long after they are gone.

The Ideologies of Power

Just as an adept orator carefully selects words and grounds arguments in a stable rhetorical framework, Shakespeare presents the reader/audience with a very well-constructed play. Right after introducing Caesar as an abstract entity that can be visualized through his image/statue in the first scene; the playwright represents him physically in the following scene, thereby setting him as an accessible and somewhat vulnerable figure. This dual representation underscores a central tension in the play: the gap between Caesar as a public symbol and Caesar as a private man. As Marjorie Garber insightfully observes, “[t]here are, in fact, two Julius Caesars, [...] the private man whose wife cannot give him an heir [...] [a]nd there is the public Caesar, whom Cassius so resents, this human being who is ‘now become a god’” (2004: 413). Indeed, this contrast becomes evident when Caesar instructs Antony to touch Calphurnia – as Antony takes part in the holy chase during the celebrations of the Lupercal – so that she can get pregnant, which may be read as a sign of impotency on the part of Caesar himself. Furthermore, the Soothsayer’s telling him that he should beware the ides of March represents Caesar as a figure who is not immune against the dangers that may possibly appear on his way (1.2.21). This early moment introduces a subtle destabilisation of Caesar’s authority and mythic quality by projecting him as a ruler caught between the myth of authority and the reality of human limitation.

Although Caesar brushes the Soothsayer’s warning aside and turns a deaf ear to it, in the very same scene we see Cassius using his rhetorical skills on Brutus so that he would take part in the conspiracy to assassinate Caesar. Unlike Caesar who ignores the Soothsayer, Brutus cannot stay unmoved as he has been already bothered by his own fears and anxieties: “I do fear people / Choose Caesar for their king” (1.2.85-86). Cassius tries to bring Brutus to his side, because he knows that Brutus will act as a powerful catalyst in attracting more people to stand against Caesar. Using his friendship as a covering for his strategy, Cassius goes round Brutus – reminiscent of the way Iago poisons Othello’s ear through his lies and Satan tempts Eve in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In relation to it, Ernest Schanzer asserts that Cassius

has clearly much in common with Milton’s Satan. Both resent the dominion of one above them in authority, assert their equality with him, mask as a campaign for liberation what is essentially one for self- aggrandisement, and try in their seduction-scenes to arouse in their victims the same feelings that motivated their own rebellions. (1963: 38-39)

This comparison not only gives us greater insight into Cassius's character but also places Shakespeare's political drama within a wider literary tradition of rebellion and the misuse of persuasive language. Analogous to the way the tribunes have attacked Caesar's public image by stripping his statues of ceremonial decorations, "Cassius 'disrobes' Caesar metaphorically by exposing his physical failings" (Haywood 1992: 22). These include recounting how he once saved Caesar from drowning in the Tiber and how Caesar suffered from a fever in Spain, crying out for a drink "[a]s a sick girl" (1.2.135). This rhetorical strategy aims to humanise and diminish Caesar, stripping away the divine aura that surrounds him. Yet, ironically, as Thomas notes, "[a]ll the images used by Caesar's detractors [...] to disparage him" turn out to "have the effect of reinforcing the image of the demi-god" in the end (1989: 71). In attempting to weaken Caesar's legacy, Cassius and others inadvertently contribute to its mythic dimension. No matter how hard Cassius tries to destroy 'Caesarism,' he cannot dismantle it totally – a paradox reflected in his own words:

CASSIUS. Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates.
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings. (1.2.142-148)

Despite intending to destroy Caesar's stature, Cassius ends up contributing to his mythic status by comparing him to a towering, godlike figure – thus reinforcing the very image he hopes to tear down. As noted earlier, *Julius Caesar* is a carefully constructed play that operates through a pattern of symmetry and reflection. It is placed upon parallel points that complement one another, and this aspect earns a sense of depth to the play. While Cassius formulates an image of Caesar in his mind and tries to pass it on to Brutus; on another level Caesar, too, expresses his perception of Cassius and makes distinctions between him and Antony as follows:

CAESAR. He [Cassius] reads much;
He is a great observer, and he looks
Quite through the deeds of men. He loves no plays,
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music;
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort
As if he mock'd himself and scorned his spirit
That could be moved to smile at anything. (1.2.211-217)

Similarly, even though Cassius and Brutus are both part of the plot against Caesar, they have different reasons for getting involved. While Brutus is primarily motivated by his sense of duty to the republican ideals and the good of the general, "Cassius is depicted as a person to whom abstractions, principles, generalities, mean little or nothing. Personal relations alone concern him; personal loves and enmities lie behind all his actions" (Schanzer 1963: 37). The difference between

political beliefs and personal feelings creates a huge gap between the two conspirators. In his soliloquy, Cassius openly states that “Caesar doth bear me hard; but he loves Brutus. / If I were Brutus now and he were Cassius, / He should not humour me” (1.2.325-327). This shows that Cassius is more motivated by personal feelings than by a sense of public duty, and it sets him apart from Brutus’s idealistic goals. In this regard, Schanzer notes that “if he were loved by Caesar, he would not allow himself to be cajoled into plotting his death” (1963: 41). By contrast, Brutus, – though influenced by Cassius’ rhetoric – lists his ‘just’ reasons to assassinate Caesar in his orchard soliloquy: “It must be by his death. And for my part / I know no personal cause to spurn at him, / But for the general” (2.1.10-12). This moment illustrates Brutus’s tragic commitment to abstract republican ideals that makes him morally complex and politically vulnerable. He is portrayed as a naïve idealist who does not let any personal benefit to dominate his actions. This is why, only after reading the forged letters, which were written by Cassius to speed up Brutus’s decision, does Brutus make his mind to act. He is led into believing that in the eyes of the Roman citizens, Julius Caesar is a big threat standing before the ideals of the Roman Republic. Comparable to the inner strife that is going on between Brutus’s heart and mind, soon after he decides to take part in the conspiracy, the storm breaks, and it marks “the transition to a new phase” by foreshadowing the impending chaos “that continues to develop at the background” (McMurtry 1998: 31). The storm thus becomes a powerful natural metaphor standing for Brutus’s internal turmoil and the larger chaos that his decision will unleash. Rebecca Bushnell argues that Renaissance tragedy often grapples with the uneasy tension between tyrannicide and treason and that Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* complicates this further by refusing to assign moral clarity to the conspirators: “Whether the conspirators properly name Caesar a ‘tyrant’ cannot be decided easily, precisely because the play stages the shifts in definitions of tyranny” (1990, p. 146). In this context, Brutus’s inner conflict reflects a larger Renaissance anxiety about the legitimacy of political resistance, especially when it leads to chaos rather than order.

With the conspiracy now underway, Brutus emerges as its intellectual leader, gradually evolving into a self-deluding rationalist who places uncritical faith in his own judgement. Despite the warnings of Cassius to kill Antony and to prevent him from addressing the Roman citizens, Brutus wants to implement his own agenda from this point of onwards. He begins to assert his authority by implementing decisions grounded more in idealism than in political realism – decisions that ultimately prove disastrous. In this manner, paradoxically enough, Brutus starts behaving like the very image which he has been trying to fight against: blinded by the idealistic projections of his own ego, Brutus gets ‘Caesarified’ and cannot foresee the outcomes of his actions. This

transformation demonstrates the tragic irony inherent in his character: in trying to preserve the Republic, Brutus adopts the very autocratic tendencies he claims to eliminate. Perhaps it is this realisation that informs his final act, when he runs on the very sword used to kill Caesar: “O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet; / Thy spirit walks aboard and turns our swords / In our proper entrails” (5.3.105-107). Here, Brutus acknowledges that Caesar’s influence has only grown stronger through martyrdom, and that the conspiracy has paved the way for the very chaos and disorder that it aimed to prevent.

Silenced Wisdom: Calphurnia, Portia, and the Gendered Politics of Exclusion

Obviously, although Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus are seen as political opposites in the play, they share common traits such as ambition and inflexibility. In parallel to Brutus’s ignorance of Cassius’s warnings, Caesar, too, dismisses the omens of the Soothsayer by calling him a “dreamer” (1.2.29). Moreover, Caesar and Brutus also overlook the premonitions coming from the private sphere represented by their wives, Calphurnia and Portia, respectively. No matter how insightful and intuitive the warnings of the wives are, public duty and political desire are prioritised over private/domestic wisdom. To illustrate, embracing the ideals of Stoicism and emotional restraint, Brutus intends to hide the conspiracy from Portia because he wants to protect her from any upcoming political danger. It shows how adamant and unbendable Brutus is, as he continues pushing personal relationships into the background. Brutus’s sense of public duty and loyalty to Rome wins over the personal loyalty and affection that he feels for Caesar and Portia. However, Portia rises above the conflict between these two domains by projecting herself as a woman who is not merely restricted to the domestic sphere. As a last resort, she wounds her thigh to prove her emotional and physical strength so that Brutus will share the secret with her:

PORTIA. Tell me your counsels; I will not disclose ’em.
I have made 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. (2.2.321-325)

Shakespeare uses Portia to further complicate the traditional gender roles and categories represented by masculine virtue and feminine strength in the play. Causing herself physical pain, Portia is trying to prove that just like any other honourable Roman man, she is strong enough to endure pain and to display Stoic heroism. It is a direct challenge to the representation of women as being weak and fragile, because through Portia, it is seen that women are physically and emotionally powerful enough to bear the burdens of public life. Respecting the bravery and loyalty

of his wife, Brutus eventually agrees to unburden himself by uncovering the “sick offence” within his mind (2.1.288):

BRUTUS. O you gods,
Render me worthy of this noble wife!
[.....]
And by and by thy bosom shall partake
The secrets of my heart.
All my engagements I will construe to thee,
All the charactery of my sad brows. (2.1.326-332)

However, Portia’s symbolic penetration into the traditionally masculine sphere proves tragic for her, as she eventually commits suicide in the play. Following the assassination of Julius Caesar and the ensuing civil war that marks Brutus as a murderer/traitor, Portia not only bears witness to the impending physical and political danger threatening Brutus’s life and honour but also foresees the collapse of the Republican ideals. Therefore, instead of interpreting her death as an escapist solution to run away from grief and public humiliation, it should be remembered that she might have articulated her suicide as an act of defiance against a tyrannically masculinised world because in such an oppressed atmosphere her political voice would never be able to express itself freely. In this manner, the way she dies by swallowing hot coals is highly symbolic and functional, as she cancels out her own voice without waiting for any masculine sphere to block her access to it. However, paradoxically, it is her death that makes Portia much more vocal and audible than before. Similar to Caesar, who continues resonating throughout the play via the spirit of Caesarism, Portia, too, asserts her agency by reclaiming authority over her own body and fate. In other words, she rises above the standardised projections of femininity and traditional gender roles by deliberately going for an overtly masculine form of death. Choosing such a painful and violent method to end her life, Portia makes a direct statement of valour and perseverance that has deep roots in Stoic philosophy and the heroic codes of Roman world. Perhaps, that is why, although the assassination of Caesar drives the plot, the courageous death of Portia shakes Brutus the most. Totally devoting himself to the republican ideals and to the public sphere, it is ironic that Brutus is emotionally consumed by the heartaches emanating from the private domain. Displaying a Stoic response to his wife’s death, however, Brutus attempts to suppress his emotions by focusing on the political crisis at hand and by quickly changing the topic during their talk about Portia with Cassius. He asks Cassius to “[s]peak no more of her.—Give me a bowl of wine.— / In this I bury all kindness, Cassius” (4.3.183-184). Here, Brutus tries to distract himself by finding solace in wine rather than fully experiencing his pain, which is an irrational action for a soldier on the battlefield. Brutus’s failure to mourn for his wife, and the strategically wrong decisions he makes during the war demonstrate the extent of the inner struggles he is going through – both emotionally and

philosophically. Although he appears calm on the outside, his unwillingness to confront his pain makes him more fragile and vulnerable than before. It shows how the ideal standards to which he has blindly dedicated himself gradually disconnect him from true human emotions and authenticity. In trying to be the ideal Roman citizen, Brutus finds himself to be totally dominated by a sense of public duty and moral rigidity. Hence, Brutus does not realise that in his struggle to exterminate Caesarism, he ends up with creating his own version of authoritarianism, which may be termed as ‘Brutism.’ Within this context, Brutism can be described as an absolutist devotion to norms and ideals that is quite likely to result in chaos and disillusionment. It is ironic that though motivated by a desire to stop the rise of tyranny and despotism, Brutus paves the way for the establishment of the imperial rule by Octavius Caesar. In other words, the most honourable man of Rome, who has devoted all his life to the Roman Republic, brings about its fall in the end.

In line with Shakespeare’s representation of Brutus and Portia, the relationship between Caesar and Calphurnia should also be analysed to understand how Caesarism creates its own angels and demons in the longer run. Before that, it is beneficial to reflect on the similarities and the differences between these two perspectives, namely Caesarism versus Brutism. Unlike Marcus Brutus who mainly relies on moral authority and philosophical principle, Julius Caesar attempts to build his dominance through military conquests – the play begins by celebrating Caesar’s defeat of Pompey’s sons, thereby underscoring his eminence as a general. For Caesar, it is crucial to have the popular support of the Roman citizens, because as the political and physical body of the nation, citizens play a crucial role in driving the major turning points in *Julius Caesar* – such as the way they announce Brutus as a traitor right after Antony’s manipulative speech. For Brutus, however, other than the popular support of the masses, the help and the guidance of a reasonable elite should be sought after – as it is testified by his participation in the secretive conspiracy against Caesar. However, over time, Caesarism runs the risk of transforming into an autocratic rule by abusing the power of populism. Along similar lines, foregrounding the supremacy of reason and moral idealism at the cost of losing the support of the masses, Brutism, too, tends to rely on abstract virtues in order to justify violence and radical action – as it is exemplified through the brutal assassination of Caesar and the conspirators’ bathing of their hands in Caesar’s blood which they claimed to have shed for the future of Roman Republic. Moreover, both Caesar and Brutus fail to strike a balance between their subjective worldviews and the objective reality represented by the warnings directed at them. Brutus’s failure to pay attention to the admonitions of Cassius and Portia is reminiscent

of Caesar's disregard for the Soothsayer and Calphurnia, who both attempt to dissuade Caesar from going to Capitol on the ides of March.

Like Portia, who senses that Brutus is feeling anxious due to a secret scheme, Calphurnia foresees the impending danger that will threaten her husband, and she tries to warn Caesar about it. She urges her husband to stay at home and not to go to the Capitol on the ides of March, as in her ominous dream she sees that Caesar's statue was bleeding and "many lusty Romans / came smiling and did bathe their hands in it" (2.2.83-84). Although Caesar is convinced to stay at home, soon enough he changes his mind because Decius Brutus, one of the conspirators, reinterprets Calphurnia's dream from a totally different perspective: "This dream is all amiss interpreted. / It was a vision fair and fortunate" (2.2.88-89). In the end, however, Caesar listens to Decius Brutus and decides to go to the Capitol: "How foolish do your fears seem now, Calphurnia! / I am ashamed I did yield to them. / Give me my robe, for I will go" (2.2.110-113). Instead of relying on the true insights of his wife, Caesar chooses to believe in the false version of Calphurnia's authentic dream because Decius Brutus uses flattery and manipulative tactics on Caesar. Decius claims that the blood running from the statue signifies Rome drawing strength from Caesar, and the Senate is planning to crown him. In addition, Decius implies that if Caesar does not go to the Capitol, the senators might criticise him for yielding to the whims and fears of a woman. In such a patriarchal and militaristic society as Rome, public image and patriarchal honour are expected to come before one's love and affection towards his wife. Evidently, the threat to Caesar's public authority and manhood is far greater than the mortal risk to his private/biological self. That is why, though unreasonable and false, Decius's misinterpretation of the dream appeals to Caesar's ambitious nature and strengthens his projection of himself as an invincible figure who is not afraid of anything: "Danger knows full well / That Caesar is more dangerous than he" (2.2.47-48). As Calphurnia aptly points out, Caesar's "wisdom is consumed in confidence" (2.2.53), and he prefers flattery and public validation over true intuition and love. In other words, Caesar chooses to allow Caesarism to operate on both the supernatural and the political level, as the bleeding statue not only dramatizes the sacrifice and the quasi-divine representation of a potential ruler but also heralds his assassination – which, while destroying Caesar's body, renders his ideological self-image even more powerful than before. In addition, Decius's manipulative interpretation of the dream also displays how symbols, omens and ideas – like Caesarism itself – can be used as a political weapon to control the masses, and how the body and the legacy of a political/military leader transforms into an abstract symbol that continues hovering throughout the play – like the spirit/ghost of

Caesar destroying both the biological body of Brutus and the republican ideals that Brutism represents.

No matter how hard they try to avert the dire results of Brutism and Caesarism, Portia and Calphurnia's insightful and genuine attempts to break into the masculine domain are brushed aside by their husbands. Their exclusion from public life points to the devastating consequences of rejecting emotional insight and female wisdom during political meaning making processes. Although both women foresee the catastrophe that will cost the lives of their husbands; in such a patriarchal environment where Roman honour code is characterised by the service to the state and the prioritisation of public identity over the private, women – as the ultimate members of the domestic realm – are either ignored or silenced. As Mary Hamer also points out: “Both women bring into the world of the play knowledge that is unwelcome, knowledge that has been acquired by accurate observation on their part” (1998: 38). This observation highlights how both Portia and Calphurnia possess a form of intuitive intelligence that the men around them fail to recognise, reinforcing the play's criticism of gendered power dynamics and emotional repression. While Portia's emotional strength and direct desire for getting closer to her husband challenges Brutism as an ideology that rests on moral absolutism, Stoic detachment, and suppression of sensations; her voice is drowned out by the very belief that she has tried to warn against. Similarly, Calphurnia's pleads and insistence to convince her husband so that he would prefer domestic realm over public sphere – by not going to the Capitol – also threaten Caesarism since it relies heavily on patriarchal pride, masculine image, and self-gratification. However, like Portia, Calphurnia cannot defeat Caesarism either because the patriarchal ideologies are deaf to any trace of wisdom and common sense that is not based on masculine supremacy and male logic.

The Aftermath of Assassination: Ideology, Rhetoric, and Political Violence

The Roman male can play with knowledge and bend it according to his advantage, which do not necessarily have to be shaped through physical evidence or acute observation. It is best exemplified in Brutus and Antony's respective speeches where they both try to justify their cause by applying to rhetorical skills to be able to influence the crowd. While Brutus intends to justify the reason behind Caesar's death by projecting the murder as a sacrificial act for the general good of the public and the republican ideals – as he himself states, “not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. [...] As Caesar loved me, I weep for him. As he was fortunate, I rejoice at it. As he was valiant I honor him. But, as he was ambitious, I slew him” (3.2.23-28); Antony, on the other hand, constructs a counter argument and provokes the crowd against the ‘justified’ cause of Brutus – by

“impassioned oratory and deft manipulation of the mob’s hunger for melodrama (the bloody corpse) and money (Caesar’s will)” (Campbell 1992: 83). Here, it is observed how Antony weaponizes spectacle and populist appeal, effectively undermining Brutus’s logic-driven rhetoric by appealing to primeval emotion and personal advantage. Along similar lines, Emma Smith highlights how Antony “sets out the incompatibility of the evidence of Caesar’s generosity against the claims made about his ambition by Brutus” and he deliberately repeats the expression, “Brutus is an honourable man” (3.2.91), “until it has completed the 180-degree turn to mean its opposite: Brutus, is for Antony, very far from honourable” (2019: 152). Antony’s funeral speech thus becomes a performative act that not only sways the crowd but also reconstructs their collective understanding of Brutus and Caesar. Antony’s skill in moving the crowd shows its effect quickly, as soon after his speech is over, the plebeians – convinced that Caesar has been slaughtered and stirred by Antony’s emotionally charged eloquence – tear apart Cinna the poet just because he shares the same name with Cinna the conspirator (3.3.30-40), and the Roman Republic is brought to the brink of a civil war:

FIRST PLEBEIAN. Tear him to pieces! He’s a conspirator.
CINNA. I am Cinna the poet, I am Cinna the poet!
FOURTH PLEBEIAN. Tear him for his bad verses, tear him
for his bad verses!
CINNA. I am not Cinna the conspirator.
FOURTH PLEBEIAN. It is no matter. His name is Cinna.
Pluck but his name out of his heart, and turn him
going.
THIRD PLEBEIAN. Tear him, tear him! (3.3.29-37)

The death of Cinna the poet serves as a powerful commentary displaying the destructive consequences of ideological extremisms represented by Caesarism and Brutism. Since Cinna’s ‘unreasonable’ death happens right after the failure of Brutus’s idealistic appeal to reason in his speech, it also marks the collapse of rational political discourse during chaotic times. Brutus’s Brutism, which has been heavily relying on Stoic self-control, suppression of extreme emotions, and noble intentions, proves ineffective in the face of violence and irrationality. Once moved by manipulative rhetorics, the Roman citizens can easily turn into a dangerous mob that is only driven by passion and vengeance. It shows that when totally disconnected from the reality of political control and human emotions, Brutus’s naïve moral idealism can even cause the death of innocent figures in the society. Similarly, although Julius/the body is dead by now, Caesar/the spirit is resurrected through Antony’s speech and Caesarism evolves into an ideological tool that triggers a chain reaction of violence, including the civil war, the death of the random targets like Cinna the poet, and the dissolution of the Republic’s moral boundaries. In this manner, the play criticises the

extremist ideologies which cannot develop a more comprehensive, emotionally intelligent, and morally grounded perspective – represented through Calphurnia and Portia. Their perspective clearly contradicts with the rigid and authoritarian mindset of their husbands as they both offer a middle course between the extremist nuances of Caesarism and Brutism. Only with an emotionally controlled political wisdom, would it be possible to prevent the outbreak of the civil war and to introduce a truly democratic society. In this manner, the play makes a statement about the true characteristics of a realistically ideal society and a form of government where people would not be manipulated by rhetorical power and public action; instead, they would value emotional intelligence, private conscience, and gendered perspectives equally. Thus, by highlighting the overlooked wisdom of Calphurnia and Portia, the play suggests that true political stability and democratic progress can only be achieved when emotional intelligence, private moral judgment, and diverse gendered perspectives are fully integrated into public discourse and decision-making.

Conclusion

Julius Caesar is an “enigmatic play” since it is constructed around the axis of shifting perspectives that “frustrate any certain judgement” (Kahn 2013: 226). Paradoxically enough “[w]hile the presentation of the story is clear-cut and relatively straightforward, the presentation of the characters is emotionally complex” (Watson, 1992, p. 98). In this regard, it can be concluded that Shakespeare’s characterisation resists simplistic interpretation, hereby enabling the audience to engage with ambiguity rather than clear-cut morality. Therefore, it is hard to put the characters into clear categories, as the play does not give us a final answer or blame just one person. Instead, it shows how fixed beliefs can lead to confusion, disorder, and uncertainty. That is why it is difficult to say for sure if Caesar was a tyrant or a victim, if Brutus was truly noble or just driven by ambition, or if Cassius and Antony were loyal friends or just taking advantage of the moment. As Kahn also remarks, “[b]y making the motives and the personalities of Caesar, Brutus and Mark Antony so richly ambiguous, Shakespeare involves us in their political dilemma as if it were our own” (2013: 226-227); hence, the play is also imbued with a timeless appeal that continues to raise questions about the current socio-political setting of the 21st century. On the other hand, *Julius Caesar* presents a profound critique of political extremism represented by Caesarism and Brutism, the dire outcomes of masculine pride, and the exclusion of political wisdom and emotional intelligence from governance. Although Caesarism and Brutism seem to be opposites, they have more in common than they differ in that they both operate as ideological apparatuses. The suppressed and overlooked voices of Calphurnia and Portia demonstrate how foresight, empathy, emotional

insight, and political wisdom fail in offering a remedy to the sharply dissected division of the dogmatic ideologies. The failure inevitably gives rise to the eruption of a civil war, the murder of Cinna the poet, and, in the long run, the replacement of the republican ideals by the empire – an outcome that, from a broader perspective, underscores Shakespeare’s insightful criticism and warning about the tragic consequences of deifying and mythologising power, as well as the threatening dissection of emotion and affection from reason. In such a polarised and tense world, it is no surprise that ideals like democracy and humanity begin to break down, and they get replaced by violence, fear, war, and chaos. So, the play presents not just a political tragedy, but a moral one too – where losing the balance between reason and emotion, public and private, guilt and innocence, or even friend and enemy leads to disaster. Still, Shakespeare does not give us just one clear answer. As Cicero states in the play, “[i]ndeed, it is a strange-disposed time. / But men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves” (1.3.33-35). This shows that *Julius Caesar* is a complex play with many ways to interpret it, which is why its message still feels powerful today.

References

- Bushnell, R. W. (1990). *Tragedies of tyrants: Political thought and theater in the English Renaissance*. Cornell University Press.
- Campbell, P. (1992). Brutus: “Noblest Roman of them all”? In L. Cookson & B. Loughrey (Eds.), *Longman critical essays: Julius Caesar* (pp. 79-90). Longman.
- Garber, M. (2004). *Shakespeare after all*. Anchor Books.
- Gearin-Tosh, M. (1992). The opening of *Julius Caesar*. In L. Cookson & B. Loughrey (Eds.), *Longman critical essays: Julius Caesar* (pp. 9–16). Longman.
- Greenblatt, S. (2018). *Tyrant: Shakespeare on politics*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hadfield, A. (2005). *Shakespeare and republicanism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hamer, M. (1998). *Julius Caesar*. Northcote House.
- Haywood, I. (1992). “A savage spectacle”: Reproducing *Caesar*. In L. Cookson & B. Loughrey (Eds.), *Longman critical essays: Julius Caesar* (pp. 17–27). Longman.
- Kahn, C. (2013). Shakespeare’s classical tragedies. In C. McEachern (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Shakespearean tragedy* (pp. 218-239). Cambridge University Press.
- Knights, L. C. (1987). Personality and politics in *Julius Caesar*. In P. Ure (Ed.), *Shakespeare: Julius Caesar* (pp. 121-139). MacMillan.
- Lyson, H., & Zurcher, A. (2012, October). Shakespeare’s Romans: Politics and ethics in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. *The Newberry Digital Collections*. <https://www.newberry.org>
- McMurty, J. (1998). *Julius Caesar: A guide to the play*. Greenwood Press.
- Mowat, B. A., & Werstine, P. (2011). Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. In W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (pp. xiii–xv). Folger Shakespeare Library.
- Schanzer, E. (1963). *The problem plays of Shakespeare*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Shakespeare, W. (2011). *Julius Caesar* (B. A. Mowat & P. Werstine, Eds.). Folger Shakespeare Library.
- Thomas, V. (1989). *Shakespeare’s Roman worlds*. Routledge.
- Thomas, V. (1992). *Harvester new critical introduction to Shakespeare: Julius Caesar*. Harvester.
- Ure, P. (1987). Introduction. In P. Ure (Ed.), *Shakespeare: Julius Caesar* (pp. 11-24). MacMillan.

- Smith, E. (2019). *This is Shakespeare*. Pantheon Books.
- Watson, G. (1992). The spirit of Caesar. In L. Cookson & B. Loughrey (Eds.), *Longman critical essays: Julius Caesar* (pp. 91–105). Longman.
- Wilson, R. (1992). Drama as pretext: Plot and pattern in *Julius Caesar*. In L. Cookson & B. Loughrey (Eds.), *Longman critical essays: Julius Caesar* (pp. 106–114). Longman.