



27 February 2018

SHAKESPEARE'S POLITICS

PROFESSOR SIR JONATHAN BATE

From the time of Shakespeare's birth until he reached artistic maturity in the late 1590s, there were religious wars between Catholics and Huguenots in France. Ben Jonson served as a soldier and Christopher Marlowe seemingly as a spy in the religious wars in the Low Countries. In 1569, the Catholic nobility of northern England, led by the Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland, attempted to supplant Queen Elizabeth I and place Mary, Queen of Scots on the throne in her place. For these reasons, the fear of civil unrest was pervasive. That is why Shakespeare began a play about the rebellion of an earlier Earl of Northumberland with the king conjuring up sanguinary images of English soil daubing "her lips with her own children's blood", of the "intestine shock / And furious close of civil butchery".

The second half of the fifteenth century had been a time of aristocratic division – of, to follow the title page of one of the first of Shakespeare's plays to appear in print, "The Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster". In his historical novel *Ann of Geierstein*, published in 1829, Sir Walter Scott coined the term "The Wars of the Roses" as a description for those contentions. He did so under the influence of Shakespeare's famous (invented, unhistorical) scene in *Henry VI Part One* when representatives of the rival households of Lancaster and York pluck red and white roses in the garden of the Temple Church in the city of London. The notion that Henry Richmond's victory at the Battle of Bosworth Field and his marriage to Elizabeth York had reconciled the two houses, united the nation and established a new dynasty, was essential to the self-fashioning narrative of the Tudor monarchs.

Their chroniclers accordingly deployed a new term to describe the previous century's divisions. Though the reality was that "the Wars of the Roses" were confined to the great lords and their retinues, with life in much of England carrying on as if nothing had changed, it suited the Tudors to describe the immediate past as a national catastrophe so as to make their people think better of the present. Make them think long and hard, too, about resistance to the reformed regime, which would inevitably bring new broil. In order to press this argument, they looked to ancient Rome, as may be seen from the opening paragraph of the hugely influential book that was a starting point for Shakespeare's thinking about history, politics and government:

What mischief hath insurged in realmes by intestine deision, what depopulacion hath ensued in countries by civill discencion, what detestable murder hath been committed in citees by seperate factions, and what calamitee hath ensued in famous regions by domestical discord and unnaturall controversy: Rome hath felt, Italy can testifie, Fraunce can bere witness ... Scotlande maie write, Denmarke can shewe, and especially this noble realme of Englande can apparantly declare and make demonstracion. For who abhorreth not to expresse the heinous factes comitted in Rome, by the civill war betwene Julius Cesar and hardy Pompey by whose discorde the bright glory of the triumphant Rome was eclipsed and shadowed? ... what miserie, what murder, and what execrable plagues this famous region hath suffered by the deision and discencion of the renoued houses of Lancastre and Yorke, my witte cannot comprehende nor my tounge declare nether yet my penne fully set furthe.

So began Edward Hall's chronicle history, published in 1548 with its argument blazoned in its title: *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre [and] Yorke, beeyng long in Continual Discension for the Crowne of this Noble Realme, with all the Actes done in bothe the Tymes of the Princes, bothe of the one Linage and of the other, beginnyng at the Tyme*



of Kyng Henry the Fowerth, the First Aucthor of this Devisioun, and so Successively proceeding to the Reigne of the High and Prudent Prince Kyng Henry the Eight, the Undubitate Flower and Very Heire of both the sayd Linages. It was a paragraph that burned itself into Shakespeare's political consciousness: he set out to show that what Hall variously called "intestine division", "civil dissension" and "domestical discord" was the worst form of strife. Uncle is set against nephew in *Hamlet*, brother against brother at the beginning of *Titus Andronicus*; the fraternal bond between the thanes is broken in *Macbeth* and the division of the kingdom in *King Lear* leads to war. These are horrors of the kind that, in Hall's phrasing, the wit cannot comprehend nor the tongue declare. Macduff uses the same idiom on discovering that King Duncan has been assassinated, "O horror, horror, horror! / Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee!"

For Hall, the classic exemplar was the "civil war" between Julius Caesar and Pompey. The emotive term at the core of his argument was first recorded in writing by Cicero: *bellum civile*, "civil war". Soon after Cicero gave currency to the idea of civil war as a distinctive category of strife, Julius Caesar began his *Commentarii de Bello Civili*, giving his version of his conflict with Pompey and the Senate. A century later, the poet Lucan wrote antiquity's most influential treatment of the theme, *Bellum civile*, which began with the claim that "no foreign sword has ever penetrated / so: it is wounds inflicted by the hand of fellow-citizens that have sunk deep". Or, as Christopher Marlowe put it in his translation:

Fierce Pyrrhus, neither thou nor Hannibal
Art cause; no foreign foe could so afflict us:
These plagues arise from wreak of civil power.

A century after Lucan, the Greek historian Appian would survey the whole history of Rome, making a key distinction between its "foreign" and its "civil" wars. The English translation of 1578 was entitled *An Auncient Historie and Exquisite Chronicle of the Romanes Warres, both Civile and Foren*: it provided Thomas Lodge with the plot for his play *The Wounds of Civil War* (published in 1594) and possibly gave Shakespeare the raw material for Mark Antony's funeral oration on Julius Caesar.

Contemporaneous accounts of "the wars of the Roses" did not use the term "civil war". That appellation only emerged when the Tudors borrowed from Cicero and Caesar in order to redescribe the wars that Henry VII brought to an end. Thus Roger Ascham, the future Queen Elizabeth's tutor, writing just a few years before the publication of Hall's chronicle:

The bloody Civil warre of England betwixt the house of Yorke and Lancaster, where shaftes flewe of bothe sydes to the destruction of mannye a yoman of Englande, whome foreine battell coulede never have subdewed bothe I wyll passe over for the pyttyefulnesse of it, and yet maye we hyghelye prayse GOD in the remembraunce of it, seyng he of hys provydence hathe so knytte to gether those two noble houses, with so noble and pleasunte a flowre.

Shakespeare makes powerful use of this figure of knitting as political reunion at the end of *Titus Andronicus*: "O, let me teach you how to knit again / This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf." The narrative engrained in the young Elizabeth by her tutor was repeated again and again, not least in the official record of her royal progress to Westminster for her coronation in 1558: "Therefore as civill warre, and shede of blood did cease / When these two houses were united into one."

Shakespeare's history plays, both ancient and modern, are all marked with the Ciceronian idea of the peculiarly heinous nature of civil war. In his Roman world, there are the civil wars of *Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar*: "Domestic fury and fierce civil strife / Shall cumber all the parts of Italy." In his English histories, "civil strife" is the linking theme. *Richard II* introduces it: "the dire aspect / Of civil wounds ploughed up with neighbours' sword". The two parts of *Henry IV* act out "the intestine shock / And furious close of civil butchery" in a "poor kingdom, sick with civil blows!" *Henry V* temporarily suspends it, by means of foreign war, but the shadow is always there, as the King recognizes: "Now, beshrew my father's ambition! he was thinking of civil wars when he got me." In *Henry VI*, it is back. *Part One*: "Civil dissension is a viperous worm / That gnaws the bowels of



the commonwealth.” *Part Two*: “Methinks already in this civil broil / I see them lording it in London streets.”
Part Three:

“Conditionally, that here thou take an oath / To cease this civil war.” But it only does cease with Henry Tudor’s victory at the end of *Richard III*: “Now civil wounds are stopped, peace lives again.”

There was an unintended consequence of the mid-Tudor propagandists’ invocation of the Roman idea of “civil war” in the context of the history that brought the dynasty to power. “Civil war” implies another Ciceronian term: *civitas*, the social body of the *cives*, or citizens, united by law. To redescribe the contention between two noble houses as a civil war was to create an arena for the corporate voice of the *civitas* and thus the notion of the public good (*res publica*). Cicero, after all, was in the business of defending the Roman *republic*, which had been founded – as Shakespeare reminded the Elizabethans in his *Lucrece* – on the expulsion of a monarchy. Binding the nation together after the civil dissension of the fifteenth century was all well and good, but in leaning on the Roman example in its vocabulary of state building, Tudor political discourse was opening the way for the *civitas* to turn against the monarchy – and thus, in the next century, for a genuine civil war.

* * *

Among the most widely read classical texts of Shakespeare’s age were Livy’s account of the expulsion of the Tarquins and Cicero’s many defenses of the Roman republic. The former was one of Shakespeare’s sources for *The Rape of Lucrece*. As for Cicero, he actually appears as a character in *Julius Caesar*. And it is his profound influence on Elizabethan and thus Shakespeareans perceptions of the ancient Roman political order that is my subject today.

What were the options for the ordering of a state? When Cominius commends the track record of Coriolanus, arguing that “valour is the chiefest virtue”, his evidence for the martial hero’s supremacy (“The man I speak of cannot in the world / Be singly counterpoised”) takes the form of a memory of the young warrior’s initiation in battle:

At sixteen years,
 When Tarquin made a head for Rome, he fought
 Beyond the mark of others: our then dictator,
 Whom with all praise I point at, saw him fight,
 When with his Amazonian chin he drove
 The bristled lips before him: he bestrid
 An o’er-pressed Roman and i’ the consul’s view
 Slew three opposers: Tarquin’s self he met,
 And struck him on his knee: in that day’s feats,
 When he might act the woman in the scene,
 He proved best man i’th’field and for his meed
 Was brow-bound with the oak. His pupil age
 Man-entered thus, he waxed like a sea,
 And in the brunt of seventeen battles since
 He lurched all swords of the garlands.

This is an extraordinarily rich speech, creating a cast of politically diverse characters. Tarquinius Superbus represents tyranny marching against Rome: in striking him, Coriolanus is defending the republic. The on-field witness is a consul (elected representative of the republic), who has temporarily been given the absolute authority of a “dictator”, under the Roman equivalent of an “emergency powers” act. Coriolanus himself is a boy of sixteen, smooth-chinned and thus perceived as feminine (“Amazonian”), undergoing military pupilage; but such is his valour that he immediately enters manhood and wins a civic crown (*corona civica*) for his action of saving an “o’erpressed Roman”, which is to say a soldier who represents the threatened *civitas*. The dual invocation of Tarquin and the Amazons adds a layer of complexity. In the very act of proving his masculinity by defending the newly-established republic, Caius Martius meets “Tarquin’s self”, raising the fleeting fear that he



may one day become a second Tarquin, a permanent as opposed to a temporary “dictator”. At the same time, the image of an “Amazonian” saviour of Rome foreshadows the saving grace of female authority that will be exercised by Volumnia later in the play.

The dilemma which Shakespeare explores in *Coriolanus* is that to be successful in war a state needs strong leadership, but that the restless man of military action has no time for the inglorious arts of peace. The question of what to do with the returning soldier was all too familiar from the case of the Earl of Essex. The classic example was, of course, the story that Shakespeare put on stage in 1599, possibly as the opening show for the new Globe Theatre, even as Essex was leading an English army in Ireland. The success of Gaius Julius Caesar in his Gallic wars, including his invasion of Britain, gave him supreme military power; fearing the consequences of this, the Senate ordered him to relinquish his command and return to Rome; he refused, and crossed the Rubicon with the thirteenth legion, precipitating civil war; his victories over Pompey at Pharsalus and Scipio at Thapsus meant that he could be proclaimed *dictator perpetuo*. This was the constitutional turning point. *Dictator* was meant to be a temporary role, to cope with an emergency: a dictator in perpetuity was effectively an absolute ruler, who might as well be crowned emperor or monarch. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s earliest example of the word “dictator” in the sense “absolute ruler”, as opposed to “chief magistrate with absolute power, appointed for a limited period”, is Christopher Marlowe in *The Massacre at Paris*: “Guise, wear our crown ... And as Dictator make or war or peace.” And it is with the offer of a crown to Julius Caesar during his triumph that Shakespeare's 1599 tragedy begins.

Julius Caesar's great political opponent, the principal defender of the values of the republic, the most eloquent orator arguing the case against the idea of a *dictator perpetuo*, was Marcus Tullius Cicero. As Plutarch noted in the “Life of Julius Caesar”, Cicero saw the danger from very early in Caesar's meteoric career: “Cicero like a wise shipmaster that feareth the calmnes of the sea, was the first man that mistrusting his [Caesar's] manner of dealing in the common wealth, found out his craft and malice, which he cunningly cloked under the habit of outward curtesie and familiaritie”. Cicero's climactic statement of the republican position came after the event, in his second *Philippic*, in which he poured the blame on Mark Antony for “offering the kingdom to Caius Caesar, perpetual dictator” during the Lupercalia, and thus destroying “laws and courts of justice ... by the substitution of kingly power”: “Was it for this that Lucius Tarquinius was driven out; that Spurius Cassius, and Spurius Maelius, and Marcus Manlius were slain; that many years afterwards a king might be established at Rome by Marcus Antonius though the bare idea was impiety?”

For the Elizabethans, Cicero was the embodiment of the Roman republic. As consul, he was responsible for the suppression of the conspiracy of Catiline, which was read – and dramatized by Ben Jonson – as a victory for the principles of the constitution over the ambition of the aristocracy. In denouncing Julius Caesar and then Mark Antony, Cicero risked and eventually lost his life in the name of the republic. It is intriguing, therefore, that Shakespeare plays down his role in the conspiracy of Brutus and Cassius against Caesar. Early in the play we hear of him as a looker-on with “such ferret and such fiery eyes”. Then Cassius asks Casca whether Cicero said anything in reaction to Caesar's initial refusal to accept the offer of a crown. “It was Greek to me”, replies Casca, setting up the image of Cicero as a learned and loquacious intellectual, a thinker and not a man of action.

In the following scene, the character of Cicero speaks his only four speeches in the entire play. First, he greets Casca: “Good even, Casca: brought you Caesar home? / Why are you breathless? and why stare you so?” Casca replies by describing the stormy weather, suggesting that it portends either “civil strife in heaven” or impending destruction of the earth. Cicero pushes him further: did he see any other strange events? Yes, says Casca, a panoply of unnatural occurrences: the hand of a slave flaming like a torch but remaining unscorched; a lion wandering peacefully strolling past the Capitol, ignoring the passers-by; a hundred women looking like ghosts because they thought they had seen men all on fire walking through the streets; and an owl hooting at midday. “Indeed, it is a strange-disposed time”, replies Cicero, in his only speech of real substance, “But men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.” His last speech is merely a goodnight and a suggestion that it might not be wise to walk out under such a “disturbed sky”.

We do not see him again, but he is the subject of two further exchanges. When Cassius and his co-conspirators go to the brooding Brutus the night before the ides of March, to discuss who will join them in carrying out the



assassination on the morrow, he asks “But what of Cicero? Shall we sound him?” Cassius is convinced that “he will stand very strong with us”, an intuitive view in the light of Cicero’s track record of defending the republic. Casca and Cinna strongly agree, and Metellus Cimber comes up with a powerful argument of the buck-passing kind:

O, let us have him, for his silver hairs
Will purchase us a good opinion
And buy men’s voices to commend our deeds:
It shall be said, his judgment ruled our hands;
Our youths and wildness shall no whit appear,
But all be buried in his gravity.

Brutus slaps down the suggestion: “O, name him not: let us not break with him; / For he will never follow any thing / That other men begin.” Cassius and Casca defer to his view and agree to “leave him out”, Brutus having swiftly shown that “he is not fit”. But non-participation in the actual assassination does not save Cicero: on the eve of the battle of Philippi, he is singled out as one of the seventy senators who have been put to death by the opponents of Brutus and Cassius, the triumvirate of Octavius, Lepidus and Mark Antony.

How are we read this brief sketch of Cicero? His speaking Greek, his gnomic remark about misconstrual of the signs in the skies, his exclusion from the conspiracy, and his death by order of Caesar’s supporters, one of whom will eventually become the Emperor Augustus, another of whom is the Mark Antony against whom the historic Cicero delivered his blistering philippics? In the “Life of Marcus Brutus”, Plutarch claims that the conspirators did not include Cicero because they were afraid that he was “a coward by nature”, made more cowardly by old age, and that he might “quenche the heate of their enterprise, the which specialie required hotte and earnest execucion, seeking by perswasion to bring all things to such safetie, as there should be no peril”. Shakespeare very easily have given Brutus a versification of this line of reasoning:

Born a coward, his fear increased by age,
He’ll quench the heat of this our enterprise,
Which requires earnest execution:
Let him not persuade in name of safety
When this necessity calls for peril.

Instead, he offers an explanation based on vanity: Cicero would be unwilling to play second fiddle in another conspirator’s orchestra. The purpose of this is to reflect well on Brutus: his agonizing over whether or not to join the conspiracy is entirely out of principle, his doubts have nothing to do with a desire not to play second fiddle to Cassius.

His line of reasoning in this key scene goes: I have nothing personal against Caesar, but absolute power will corrupt him; I owe it to my forefathers to defend the republic (“My ancestors did from the streets of Rome / The Tarquin drive when he was called a king”); I hesitate, because my state of uncertainty is a nightmarish phantasmal form of inner “insurrection”; I hesitate still more because the conspirators come under the cover of darkness, suggestive of duplicity and evil; I do not like the idea of binding ourselves to the deed by way of an oath, because I believe that if we are to do it we should do it out of “honesty” (integrity) and inherent Romanness; no, don’t involve Cicero; no, don’t kill Antony as well as Caesar, for that will make us seem too bloody and vengeful. The conspirators then depart without Brutus making an explicit commitment to join them. Portia’s entrance raises the possibility that his wife might dissuade him, but before he has the opportunity to share with her the secrets of his heart, he is interrupted by a knock at the door and the entrance of Caius Ligarius, who says that Brutus’ participation will cure him of his sickness.

This is the thing that finally persuades Brutus: he will participate not out of his own ambition, but in order to cure a close friend. He has said of Caius Ligarius, “He loves me well, and I have given him reasons”. The cure of Ligarius serves as what a Professor of Rhetoric would call a *synecdoche* for the salvation of the state (*synecdoche* is the rhetorical figure in which the part stands for the whole, the particular for the general). Shakespeare is nearly



always careful when making the choice of which lines to give to which character. It is Metellus Cimber who has the idea of involving Caius Ligarius as a way of winning over Brutus. And he has it in his next speech after the one in which he suggests involving Cicero. Metellus is clearly thinking: get Cicero and we'll have both the dignity of age and the leading voice of the republican ideal on our side, and that will be enough for Brutus. Brutus, however, recognizes that Cicero is "ambitious, and desirous of praise", so rejects the idea of his involvement; the image of him standing aloof and speaking Greek has also suggested his arrogance and the sense that he is not a team player. Metellus is accordingly forced to come up with the alternative idea of using Ligarius. If Brutus won't be persuaded in the name of Ciceronian ideology, he will in the name of friendship. When Ligarius appears, he credits Brutus with his instant recovery:

By all the gods that Romans bow before,
I here discard my sickness! Soul of Rome!
Brave son, derived from honourable loins!
Thou, like an exorcist, hast conjured up
My mortified spirit. Now bid me run,
And I will strive with things impossible;
Yea, get the better of them. What's to do?

Kill Caesar, and redeem the state, that what's to do, Brutus replies. Cicero was often regarded as the soul of Rome: in 63BC, after the Catiline affair, the Senate conferred upon him the title *pater patriae*, father of the fatherland. Here, though, it is not his idealism but the spirit of personal friendship that spurs the action forward. Brutus construes Ligarius' psychosomatic transformation as a sign that it is his destiny to restore Rome from sickness to health, yet Cicero's earlier words still echo: "men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves". Shakespeare leaves open the possibility that there is in fact no causal logic in the connection that Brutus makes. Just as Cicero questions Casca's assumption that the signs of the skies are signs of the times, so it may occur to the audience that Brutus is removing the cure of Ligarius clean from its purpose.

The second half of the play tells the story of the unravelling of the conspirators' hopes for Rome and their bond of friendship in action more than speech. We move swiftly to the battle of Philippi, with no time for the delivery of the *Philippicae* in which Cicero tarred Antony with the brush of Caesar's ambition and tyranny. The irony is that in the course of his campaign against Antony, Cicero, who by this time bitterly regretted that Brutus and Cassius had not killed Antony as well as Caesar, legitimized the private army of Octavius, thus inadvertently hastening the eventual demise of his beloved republic that came with Octavius' assumption of the title *princeps* and the name Augustus Caesar. Although Cicero does not appear again, his death is invoked as a symbol of the death of the republic. Like the dismemberment of Cinna the poet, mistaken for Cinna the conspirator, and indeed the suicides of Cassius and Brutus, it is a reminder to the audience that insurrection brings only chaos. Though Shakespeare does not use the detail, it is notable that in Plutarch's "Life of Brutus", immediately after the passage about the exclusion of Cicero from the conspiracy, there is a marginal note giving the reason proffered by the followers of Marcus Cato – Cicero's right hand man in putting down the Catiline conspiracy – for not participating: "Civill warre worse than tyrannicall government". Cicero would not have agreed, but, on balance in the 1590s, with the shadow of the past century's civil wars and religious divisions, it might just have been politic for Shakespeare to offer his implicit assent.

Shakespeare derived the detail of Brutus' cure of Ligarius from his principal source, Plutarch's "Life of Marcus Brutus, but there is no doubt that he also read the "Life of Julius Caesar". So, for example, Caesar's "Cowards die many times before their deaths. / The valiant never taste of death but once" (Nelson Mandela's favourite lines in Shakespeare) is clearly derived from what was marked in the margin of North's translation as "Caesar's saying of death": "it was better to dye once, th[a]n always to be affrayed of death". By the same account, it is hard to imagine a mind as inquiring as Shakespeare's ignoring the life of Cicero in his copy of North. There he would have found the outline of Cicero's life and thought.

Born on the margins of Rome, outside the political class, as a child Cicero was noted for his wit, but also for being thin and physically weak. He studied in Greece and declaimed in Greek, and was thus the embodiment of



the importation into republican Rome of Greek politics and ethics. He studied the actor Roscius in order to turn himself into an orator. A fine taunter, he was on the one hand noted for diligence, justice and lenity, on the other for ambition and the desire to be praised. He had the sweetest of tongues: Suffolk in *Henry VI Part 2* calls him “sweet Tully”. He was the exemplar of the man who could argue both sides of a case, refute any argument, move between praise and invective, evisceration by irony and by forensic logic. He was famous for his “subtile and pleasant sayings” – none better known than the oft-quoted tag on the decline of the times, *O tempora, O mores*. He turned to philosophy in moments of exile and defeat, his career in politics and the active defence of the republic being mixed. His hostility to Mark Antony was his eventual undoing and in that sense there is deep irony in Shakespeare giving Antony the most effective piece of Ciceronian rhetoric in his entire canon: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears”.

The irony is doubled by the fact that Cicero had addressed his history of Roman eloquence to Brutus, whose prose oration is so much less effective than Antony’s superbly structured sequence of set pieces in verse. Plutarch gives no details of Antony’s funeral oration. Scholars usually assume that Shakespeare took some hints for it from Appian’s *Civil Wars*, but verbal parallels are lacking and there is no firm evidence that he knew this source. From a structural point of view, the ultimate debt is to Cicero. Antony’s argument progresses from ironic praise of Brutus to sincere praise of Caesar’s generosity to the people to emotive action – the display of Caesar’s bloody clothing, which is the final straw that provokes the plebeians into violent reaction against the conspirators. This follows Cicero’s account of how Antony’s oration progressed from *laudatio* (praise) to *miseratio* (condemnation of Brutus’ betrayal of Caesar’s friendship) to *cobortatio* (the incitement of riot).

Shakespeare would also have found in Plutarch’s life of Cicero the backstory explaining Metellus’ lines “Caius Ligarius doth bear Caesar hard, / Who rated him for speaking well of Pompey”. Caesar had accused Ligarius of treason for having supported Pompey during the civil wars, and the only thing that saved him from execution was the persuasive power of his defense counsel, Cicero. “The force of Ciceroes eloquence, how it altered Caesar”, as the marginal note has it in North’s translation. Plutarch’s account of this moment is one of his most memorable instances of the transformative power of rhetoric:

Ligarius being accused to have bene in the field against Caesar, Cicero tooke upon him to defend his cause: and that Caesar sayd unto his frendes about him, what hurte is it for us to heare Cicero speake, whome we have not heard of long time? For otherwise Ligarius (in my opinion) standeth already a condemned man, for I know him to be a vile man, and mine enimie. But when Cicero had begonne his Oration, he moved Caesar marvelously, he had so sweete a grace, and suche force in his words: that it is reported Caesar changed divers colours, and shewed plainly by his countenance, that there was a marvelous alteracion in all the partes of him. For, in thend when the Orator came to touche the battell of Pharsalia [in which Caesar had defeated Pompey], then was Caesar so troubled, that his bodie shooke withall, and besides, certaine bookes he had, fell out of his hands, and he was driven against his will to set Ligarius at libertie.

There could be no better example of the manner in which courtroom oratory has theatrical power: Caesar’s mind is troubled, his face changes colour and the persuasive words provoke a bodily reaction, the dropping of his book. These are exactly the kinds of effect that Shakespeare’s characters strive for in their on-stage orations.

That Ligarius owes his life to Cicero’s rhetorical genius binds the two characters together and reinforces the significance of Metellus’ invocation of them one after the other. It is noteworthy, then, that Ligarius is the one conspirator who is not actually present for the assassination. His absence stands in for Cicero’s exclusion. And yet, after Brutus’ rhetoric persuades the plebeians to “Revenge! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill Slay!”, having torn Cinna the poet to pieces (mistaking him for Cinna the conspirator), they set off with brands to set fire to the houses not only of the conspirators who stabbed Caesar, but also to that of Ligarius. Cicero the orator, Cinna the poet, and Ligarius, the man whose life is saved by Cicero’s rhetoric and who later rises from his sickbed and has “heart new-fired” are thus joined as men of words who will lose their lives as a result of the actions of the conspirators.

* * *



The importance of Cicero in Shakespeare's classical imagination is not dependent on breadth and depth of reading in the actual sources: all educated men and women in the sixteenth century knew something of his life, death, talents and ideas. This was an influence transmitted by osmosis as well as by education. After all, Cicero had articulated the very basis of the kind of mixed constitution under which the Elizabethans believed they lived. In *De Republica*, he argued that *potestas* resides with the magistrates (upholders of the law), *auctoritas* with the senate (the makers of law), and *libertas* with the people (*in populo*, the beneficiaries of the law, whose elected representatives were the tribunes). Despite the difference between the Roman legislative code and the English common law tradition of precedent, this division provided a model for the separation of powers: *potestas* resided in the law courts, *auctoritas* among the aristocracy and *libertas* in the House of Commons. This model was inevitably in tension with the idea of monarchy: as Cicero frequently reminded his listeners, the republic was built on the expulsion of King Tarquin and the proclamation of Julius Caesar as *dictator perpetuo* signalled the beginning of its end. Prudent as it was for Shakespeare to marginalize Cicero in *Julius Caesar*, the structural analogies between the Roman and the English state meant that his republicanism inevitably shadows the play, heightening the sense that there are alternative models to the one in which a supreme leader wears a crown.

The republican virtue espoused by Cicero was not only bound up with the matter of representative government against the idea of an *imperium*. It was also, in some ways more centrally and certainly more influentially, a code of civic duty. The core argument of *Pro Ligario*, his oration in defence of Ligarius, was that the state depended on reconciliation and clemency, with no place for vengeance, a code that, says Cicero, belongs to "fickle Greeks and savage barbarians", not Roman citizens. This distinction was frequently made in Cicero's speeches; in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, the carrying out of revenge killings in Rome is a sign, the distinction between civilization and barbarism has broken down, that republican values have degenerated. As an exemplary plea for clemency, argued with extreme eloquence, *Pro Ligario* is a classic precedent for Portia's courtroom speech in *The Merchant of Venice*, "The quality of mercy is not strained ..." Though she Christianizes the argument, she makes the same move as Cicero: acknowledging the authority of "temporal power" but then suggesting that "mercy" (*miser cordia*) is positively godlike: "Of all your many virtues, there is none more admirable, none more beloved than your mercy, for there is no action by which men make a nearer approach to the gods, than by conferring safety on others". The underlying thrust of *Pro Ligario* is the desire for reconciliation between the rival powerful families of Rome.

How should those relationships among the powerful be regulated? Unquestionably the most influential of Cicero's treatises was *De Officiis*, "of benefits", his last major work before his denunciations of Antony. Though written in the form of a letter of advice to his son, its target audience was all young men of the ruling class. In Shakespeare's England, it was widely read in schools and universities. The task that Cicero sets himself is in the realm of practical ethics: to balance individual integrity and social integration.

Book one argues that actions should be judged according to whether they are *honestus* (honourable) or *turpis* (immoral). A good man will be judged by his public reputation (*eudaimon*, being well regarded). His key attributes are *fides* (trustworthiness, loyalty), *societas* (commitment to the bond of fellowship), *decorum* (seemliness), *dignitas* (dignity and good standing) and *gravitas* (seriousness, respect). These qualities should be exercised both in personal friendship (*amicitia*, another of Cicero's core values) and in service to the state. What Cicero promulgates is essentially the code of the gentleman that was inculcated in the education of the English elite for centuries. Mark Antony's repeated mantra "Brutus is an honourable man" derives its ironic force from this idea of *honestus*: the sub-text is that if he truly were honourable, he would have been loyal to his friend Caesar. In another part of the forest, Othello's outsider status means that he fails to recognize how Iago is undermining him by faking the gentlemanly values of *fides* and *societas*. The audience is tempted to scream out, "No, Iago is *not* an honest man".

In books two and three Cicero sets out to show how the code of honour may be translated into social relationships by means of the practice of giving and receiving *benefits*. This is the meaning of the noun *officium*: it denotes a voluntary service, a kindness, favor, courtesy, obligation or duty. Harmony between powerful families, friends, political allies and participants in a network of patronage operated through the exchange of services: the act of helping someone creates a bond whereby he will be obliged to offer reciprocal help in the future. Often, the benefit would take the form of appointment to a position of public service, for which the term was also



officium. With such benefits came duties or responsibilities, for which, again, the term was *officium*. This sense of public duty was the absolute basis of what may properly be described as the Ciceronian ethos of the ruling class from Shakespeare's time until the mid-twentieth century. Shakespeare uses the word "duty" nearly two hundred times and "office" nearly three hundred. One of his great themes is indeed that of *De Officiis*: the potential for division between person and office, often with the particular spin provided by his monarchical culture, where, as he explores so acutely in *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, the king has two bodies, a double self as both an individual and the embodiment of the realm, sanctioned by God.

When Brutus and Cassius fall out, it is precisely over breaches in the code of benefits. Cassius accuses Brutus of condemning Lucius Pella for taking bribes and in so doing "slighting off" Cassius' letters "praying on his side". Cassius' assumption is that Brutus owes him a benefit that he wishes to pass on to Lucius Pella. Brutus responds that it is Cassius who has broken the code: "You wronged yourself to write in such a case." Furthermore, Cassius himself has defied *officium* by selling and marting his "offices" for "gold". To bring bribery within the system of benefits is *turpis*, and especially reprehensible because if one begins to wonder "what is the difference between a favour and a bribe?", the answer might be "not very much". Cicero devotes a whole section of *De Officiis* to exactly this question. His conclusion is that bribery is abhorrent because it is motivated by avarice. The public official should be Spartan in private life, subordinating personal greed to service of the state.

Brutus has a further accusation. He says that he is "so strong in honesty" (*honestus*) that he cannot be hurt by insults, but that what riles him is Cassius' failure to confer a benefit:

I did send to you
For certain sums of gold, which you denied me.
For I can raise no money by vile means.
He is so exercised by this that he says it twice:
I did send
To you for gold to pay my legions,
Which you denied me: was that done like Cassius?

This failure is castigated as supremely un-Roman because the practice of benefits is so central to the working of Roman society. It may not be coincidental that news of the murder of Cicero comes just a few minutes later, as if to symbolize the desecration of the old republican code of mutual obligation that he had recently anatomized in *De Officiis*.

Cunningly, Shakespeare forever holds opposing forces and ideologies in balance, never openly advocating insurrection or assassination, mocking the plebeians even as he gives them voice and ultimately subordinating systematic Ciceronian republicanism to his fascination with the interior life of the self as his patrician characters wrestle with *honestus*, *amicitia* and *officium*. He preserves his neutrality, never speaking for a particular faction. But by dramatizing breaches of the code of obligation – on the London stage and, when called upon, in commissioned performances in great houses or at court – and showing how such breaches lead to personal humiliation and civil broil, he was implicitly offering warnings as to the dire consequences of division between present-day patricians such as Leicester and Burghley, Essex and Cecil. In this, Shakespeare was the Cicero of his age.