

Eastern Illinois University

The Keep

Plan B Papers

Student Theses & Publications

6-1-1961

Would Aristotle Approve of the Tragedy of Julius Caesar?

Kathryn Robertson

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/plan_b

Recommended Citation

Robertson, Kathryn, "Would Aristotle Approve of the Tragedy of Julius Caesar?" (1961). *Plan B Papers*. 140.

https://thekeep.eiu.edu/plan_b/140

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Plan B Papers by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

WOULD ARISTOTLE APPROVE OF
THE TRAGEDY OF JULIUS CAESAR?

A Paper

Presented To

Eastern Illinois University

Charleston, Illinois

In Partial Fulfillment
Of The Requirements Of The Degree
Master Of Science In Education
Plan B

by

Kathryn Robertson

June, 1961

APPROVED:

DATE: July 3, 1961

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to show that The Tragedy of Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare is a great literary work according to certain principles of Aristotle and that it is not great according to other principles.

OUTLINE

- I. Aristotle's definition of tragedy applies in all respects to The Tragedy of Julius Caesar.
- II. The Tragedy of Julius Caesar contains the parts of a tragedy that Aristotle prescribed but does not give the same emphasis to the parts.
- III. The Tragedy of Julius Caesar follows Aristotle's rule for Unity of Action but does not follow the Unities of Time and Place.
- IV. Brutus fulfills Aristotle's rule that the character must be good, proper, true to life, and consistent.
- V. Brutus, the tragic hero, falls because of some error of judgment.

WOULD ARISTOTLE APPROVE OF THE TRAGEDY OF JULIUS CAESAR?

Aristotle's definition of tragedy applies in all respects to The Tragedy of Julius Caesar. The definition is:

. . .Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious and complete and has sufficient size, in language that is made sweet, and with each of the kinds of sweet language separately in the various parts of the tragedy, presented by those who act and not by narrative, exciting pity and fear, bringing about the catharsis of such emotions.¹

The action in this tragedy is certainly serious, complete, and it has sufficient size. The seriousness and size are realized when it is considered that these events affect an entire country. This is no isolated action. Thousands are affected by the conspiracy and its aftermath.

Tragedy is written "in language that is made sweet."² Shakespeare's language can be cited both for its sweetness and its universality. In Act I, Scene iii, Cicero says:

. . .But men may construe things after their fashion,
Clean from the purpose of the things themselves. . . .³

Surely this is more forceful than saying that men figure out things for themselves any way that they want.

¹Allan H. Gilbert, Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden (New York: American Book Company, 1940), pp. 75-76.

²Ibid., p. 76.

³William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Julius Caesar (New York: The University Society, 1901), p. 40.

to be the valid conclusion; plot is subordinated to character. He carefully shows us Brutus--measured, dispassionate, tinged with disdain, self-conscious, yet self-knowing, kindly to the sleepy page, gracious to guests, calm, noble.¹⁵ Cassius is a mixture of qualities. "He is passionate, but self-conscious; he is an egoist and yet clear-sighted, and yet unwise," says Granville-Barker.¹⁶

He continues:

. . .He [Cassius] is self-willed, but he feeds on sympathy. He is brave and nervous as a cat. He kills Caesar remorselessly; but he swears - and it is no idle boast - that he would take his own life as soon rather than suffer shame. . . .He tricks Brutus, his friend. . . .In all he can do anything but do nothing; he is alert and vibrant.¹⁷

With two men of such differences, Shakespeare adds a third. Antony, the politician, is there as a friend of Caesar, as an orator of supreme skill, and finally as a calculating plotter when he and the others delegate who shall live.

The conclusion is that the development of these characters along with the lesser ones in the play is more important than the plot.

Only one type of diction needs to be shown to evidence Shakespeare's able use of diction. That type is the use of words as symbols--the elevating of the usual to the lofty. There are references to the stars, the ocean, the sun, the moon in connection with idealized kingship. There are several references to fire in the light of general disaster or consuming action.

¹⁵Granville-Barker uses these words to describe Brutus, pp. 55-56.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 65.

Aristotle names melody as making tragedy pleasing. Although music is used while Caesar is enjoying his time of glory in the public place, perhaps the more arresting use is with Brutus. The one person whom Brutus openly loves is Lucius. After the quarrel with Cassius is resolved, Brutus seems to be the only wakeful one of the army. In this quietness, he speaks affectionately to Lucius and asks for music. Thus, the stage is set for the appearance of the Ghost of Caesar.

The Tragedy of Julius Caesar as a spectacle certainly is large and arresting.

The play must be viewed against Aristotle's yardstick of Unities. Let us turn to Butcher again.

The first requirement of a tragedy is Unity of Action. Unity in Aristotle is the principle of limit, without which an object loses itself in the *ἀνέλπιδον*, the region of the undefined, the indeterminate, the accidental.¹⁸

This action does have unity. It has a beginning, a middle part, and an end. The denouement of the plot does arise out of the plot itself. We are prepared for Caesar's spirit to be met again when Brutus said that he wished that it were possible not to stab the body to reach the spirit. This Spirit has lived on, and it is reasonable to meet it at Sardis and to be told of the meeting at Phillippi. In the same manner the reader is ready for the collapse of the conspirators' army. It is the natural outcome. Brutus is no warrior; Antony and Octavius are doing what they are fitted to do. The actions of Brutus have been predicated on the assumption that all men would understand and agree with his deed in removing Caesar. They did not; therefore, disaster is now the only possible end.

¹⁸Butcher, op. cit., p. 275.

Shakespeare does not follow the Unities of Time and Place. Six days are represented on the stage.¹⁹ Obviously, the Unity of Place is not followed. What a strange play this would have been if it had been observed!

Brutus fulfills Aristotle's obligation that the character must be good, proper, true to life, and consistent. No one would deny that Brutus is good. Antony recognizes that in summation upon finding Brutus' body. His actions are appropriate. At first reading, his references to Portia's death appear inappropriate. However, this idea is discarded when it is remembered that he is a Stoic. He is not inconsiderate. Is Brutus true to life? This is the difficult part of the definition of character until persons outside the play are examined. How many individuals are known who think as he did that honor is the first principle of living? Enough are known to decide that it is applicable. The fourth point is consistency. Brutus is consistent. He maintains his attitudes and qualities to the end. Once his course is set, he does not waver. Honor is the steadfast standard of living.

Aristotle says that the proper tragic hero falls because of some error. How did Brutus err? Here is a man clothed in honor to the extent that he loves it more than he fears death. How can his judgment be wrong? His errors fall into two classes.

In one type, he puts his faith in himself, and, in the second type, he relies on weak men. In relying on himself, he makes two errors.

¹⁹The historical period is from October, 45 B.C., to autumn, 42 B. C.

First, he concludes that Caesar will become a despot; therefore, he should be killed. Later, he assumes that his conduct of the war will be more fruitful than the ideas of Cassius. In judging the first error, we deal with Brutus' lofty ideals and his clinging to the idea of the republic of his fathers, the Rome of old. He sees the Rome of Caesar and Caesar himself as wrong. He would have the country as it had been and not what it will become. He sees Caesar's future acceptance of the crown as the sanction of this corrupt way of life. Will Caesar not be a despot? Brutus exclaims: ". . .He would be crowned: How that might change his nature, there's the question. . . ." ²⁰

When Brutus has decided that Caesar would be a tyrant and Rome would be doomed, Brutus has committed the first fatal error of judgment. Saying ". . .It must be by his death. . . ." ²¹ puts Brutus in the position of judging another human, and no one is allowed to do that in comparable circumstances. What did he think the consequences would be? Evidently, he was so encompassed by his own personal virtue that he reasoned that all wrong would now be righted, and all would be well. It would be sad to dispose of one he loved, but the people would benefit from the deed. Life would automatically revert to more honorable times. Of course, his reasoning was faulty.

The second error concerning faith in himself has him failing to relinquish the conduct of the war to Cassius. It is curious how he must have concluded that his judgment was better than that of Cassius. He

²⁰ Shakespeare, op. cit., p. 45.

²¹ Ibid., p. 45.

was a thinker, not a man of action. Why would he assume that his was the better way? Why would he insist that the armies meet Antony and Octavius at Phillippi? We can almost see Brutus drawn to the battle ready to fight like Gareth in Idylls of the King by Alfred Lord Tennyson. Lancelot had given Gareth several points to remember when Gareth met Death, the evil knight. Gareth said, "I know only one - to dash against my enemy and to win." Brutus must have felt that he would be Honor dashing against Dishonor. Brutus was above Cassius in the virtue of honor, but it was false to assume that his honor would lead them to victory. He made the decisions and led them down the road to defeat.

The second type of fatal error that Brutus made was trusting weaker men. The conspirators were not Caesars; they could not take his position. Trusting them to eliminate Caesar with a plan for Rome afterward was foolish. Their end was Caesar's death. Stronger men would have planned for it to be a beginning. Brutus' trust in this seems child-like. Brutus' ideals led him to the stabbing, but it was Cassius' hate and jealousy that worked its way on Caesar. Even Antony recognized the difference in the qualities of the men when he said,

. . .All the conspirators, save only he,
Did that they did in envy of great Caesar. . . .²²

Brutus placed his trust in this same Antony, a weaker man, when he allowed him to live. Brutus was not a practical man, or he would have foreseen the danger of Antony. Again, he trusted him when Antony asked to speak at Caesar's funeral. Brutus consented, judging Antony by his own high standards. By Brutus' standards, Antony would have spoken all

²²Ibid., p. 114.

good he could devise of Caesar and would not have blamed the conspirators. Antony was not a man of Brutus' moral scruples, and he turned the citizens against the conspirators.

These are all fatal errors of judgment. Brutus first appears to be "so wrapped in honor. . ." ²³ that he is completely above the average realm, but when we see him commit these errors, we see him fitting the role of Aristotle's tragic hero - a person of lofty position but one able to err like ourselves.

Would Aristotle approve of The Tragedy of Julius Caesar? In this paper, certain of Aristotle's principles have been applied to the drama. The play follows these principles with two exceptions. It does not follow the Unities of Time and Place. It does not have the plot the most important part of the tragedy. Character is more important. We must conclude that it is most fortunate that Shakespeare deviated from the principles. Otherwise, The Tragedy of Julius Caesar would have been a historical play of lesser value.

²³Ibid., p. 72.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Butcher, S. H. Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art. With a critical text and translation of The Poetics. Third Edition. London: Macmillan and Company, Limited, 1902.
- Gilbert, Allan H. Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden. New York: American Book Company, 1940.
- Granville-Barker, Harley. Prefaces to Shakespeare. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, Limited, 1927.
- Knight, G. Wilson. The Imperial Theme. London: Oxford University Press, 1931.
- Shakespeare, William. The Tragedy of Julius Caesar. With introductions, notes, glossary, critical comments, and method of study. New York: The University Society, 1901.