

How does  
shakespeare present  
ideas about order,  
rules, and authority in  
julius ca...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, and in the years before and after it, the concept of order was a very important one. This was illustrated by Tillyard, a twentieth century writer, in a description of 'The Great Chain of Being', a six rank order of the universe according to Elizabethans. At the very top of the chain was God, then angels. Man followed, as he had existence, life, feeling, and understanding and so was above other creatures. At the very bottom of the Great Chain of Being, came those things that had mere existence- inanimate objects such as elements, liquids, and metals. Water was seen as nobler than earth, and gold, predictably more noble than lead, but these objects were regarded as inferior.

Roman society, much earlier on, also had very strong ideas about order in the universe. The play Julius Caesar considers a man who is seen to go beyond his place in the order of existence. Julius Caesar appears to want to be King, although this was not his right by birth. Order plays an important part in Julius Caesar from the very first scene of the play, which was referred to as 'a brilliant and daring opening scene' by Frank Kermode (see bibliography).

Marullus and Flavius, two Tribunes (higher than commoners, otherwise known as plebeians) berate the plebeians for their fickleness in welcoming Caesar, who has gained power by fighting with fellow Romans. From a piece of verse spoken by Marullus (who the audience later learns has, with Flavius, been 'put to silence'), the audience is given a specific idea of the ranking order within Rome.

Plebeians are referred to as 'you stones, you blocks, you worse than senseless things', showing an Elizabethan audience the extremely low ranking of these common people, so low that they are at the very bottom of the Chain of Being, at least in the Tribune's opinion). However, Julius Caesar is also referred to by the tribunes, and the audience is given the clear idea that Caesar may have, or be seeking to, move above his rank in the order of things, 'look to the stars', as Cassius puts it later on in the play. This is done using the metaphor of Caesar as a bird, the plebeians as feathers:

' These growing feathers, pluck'd from Caesar's wing,

Will make him fly an ordinary pitch

Who else would soar above the view of men,

And keep us all in servile fearfulness.'

In the Great Chain of Being, birds such as falcons and eagles (the symbol of Rome) were seen as above other birds. Caesar's description as this denotes the view of him as a high flyer, above ordinary men.

From the language used by Shakespeare during this scene, it becomes apparent that the rank order of characters is rated by the style of language they use- for example, in *Al, Si*, only the Tribunes speak in verse, using iambic pentameter, whilst the plebeians speak in prose. This is also shown during Caesar's funeral, when Marc Antony, the more successful of the two speakers, uses verse to address the plebeians, whilst Brutus speaks in prose, although this could possibly be in order to bring himself closer to the people.

In the Roman republic, the country was supposedly run by the senate, a group of elected officials. This would have been seen as the traditional order of things, ever since the former emperor, Tarquin was driven out by Brutus' ancestor. All Romans, even the plebeians, were considered higher than all non-Romans, and to be Roman was considered a badge of honour. This is referred to several times throughout the play, such as in Act I, Scene III, when Cassius says that Casca lacks courage:

' Those sparks of life, that should be in a Roman,

You do want, or else you use not.'

The hierarchy of Roman society at the time of the play was illustrated in 'Julius Caesar', a film version of the play featuring John Gielgud as Caesar. He obviously was considered to be above all other Romans to the plebeians, and a danger to order amongst the senators. Caesar's inflated view of himself is shown in many ways during this film. He is shown to be wearing purple, traditionally a royal colour, and the director portrays his vanity, as Caesar is many times seen grooming himself in a mirror. Caesar in the film is also very arrogant, using a manner of command to all, even his wife, Calpurnia.

In the order of Roman society, women, as in the Elizabethan period, were seen as inferior to men. As the play was written in an age when the Queen herself said ' I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king', the very few women who are featured in the play are portrayed as weak, with the possible exception of Portia, the wife of Brutus. Portia is portrayed as honourable, first by Shakespeare's

description of her courage in addressing her husband almost as an equal, whilst being aware of the position of women at the time:

' I grant I am a woman...

Think you, I am no stronger than my sex

Being so fathered, and so husbanded?'

Portia also later proves her honour, according to Roman tradition, by killing herself.

However, Calpurnia, the wife of Caesar, is viewed in a less favourable light from her first appearance, in *Act I, Scene II*, as she is referred to as 'barren', and having a 'sterile curse'. The idea that infertility in couples was always the fault of the woman was a common concept both in the Roman and Elizabethan periods, and added to their inferior position in both societies.

Disorder within both Roman and Elizabethan society was looked upon by audiences with horror. Although the play is greatly about order, disorder also plays a part in scenes such as Caesar's funeral, where, says Frank Kermode, Marc Antony deliberately rouses the plebeians to cause 'mischief' and disorder:

To perpetuate this order, obviously rules are needed. These mainly run on the principle of hierarchy, following the chain of being that was present in the Elizabethan era. Again, honour is considered an important part of society, and forms the basis for many of the unwritten rules of Rome. It is this honour which leads Brutus to make the fatal mistake of allowing Marc

Antony, as Caesar's closest friend, to speak second at his funeral, where his rhetoric sways the crowd to his side and eventually leads to the demise of the conspirators. The rules of honour also cause Brutus to forbear killing Marc Antony, another mistake, and one which Cassius, apparently unbound by these moral rules, berates him for. Due to these mistakes, Brutus becomes a 'victim of his own idealism', or so Professor Wells suggests in *Julius Caesar*- a critical guide.

These rules of Roman society ultimately lead to the downfall of the two main characters- Marcus Brutus and Julius Caesar. Caesar is murdered by those closest to him as he broke the rules of a republic, and attempted to set himself up almost as a god.

Ancestral rules bound both Elizabethans and Romans, but the bonds were far stronger in 44BC, when Julius Caesar was assassinated. When Cassius attempts to win Brutus around to his cause, he plays heavily on the duty of Brutus to follow his ancestor's footsteps in ridding the country of a would-be tyrant- Lucius Junius Brutus helped to drive out Tarquin the Proud in 509BC, and established the republic of Rome (this information comes from 'Shakespeare and the Romans', where it was adapted from Plutarch's 'Lives of the Greeks and Romans').

These rules of tradition are also evident in the feast early on in the play- Lupercal, where the young men race through the streets and touch 'barren women' (Caesar's wife Calpurnia being one of these, according to her husband) to free them of their 'sterile curse'. As a rule, men in both Roman

and Elizabethan society were very proud of their own virility, so if they could not have children, the woman was always held responsible.

Various characters in the play have authority over others in Julius Caesar. Obviously Caesar, as the last surviving member of the ruling triumvirate (one died naturally, the other, Pompeii, fought against him, with Brutus and Cassius), has the most authority, but at the cost of his true self. Edward Dowden says that 'the real man Caesar disappears for himself under the greatness of the Caesar myth'. This is illustrated in the many instances where Caesar refers to himself in the third person, and 'projects himself into allegory', as Leggat puts it in 'Shakespeare's political drama...':

' Danger knows full well

That Caesar is more dangerous than he.'

Throughout Julius Caesar, Shakespeare projects one impression to the audience- power corrupts. This, he suggests, is a political message, which will be relevant throughout the rest of history, and the solution of assassination will always be seen as the final solution. This is encompassed in one verse:

' How many ages hence

Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,

In states unborn, and accents yet unknown?' All, Si.

In 'Julius Caesar- a critical guide', Dr Smallwood suggests that when he wrote the play, Shakespeare was well aware that this scene would be re-enacted- 'both in theatre, and in political situations to come'.

It is clearly seen that Caesar's total authority over Rome is a negative thing- both for the country and himself. Caesar, we are shown, begins to think himself almost superhuman. This, Derek Traversi suggests, is best shown in his rejection of the soothsayer's warning to 'beware the ides of March'. This arrogance born from Caesar's complete power is his downfall, and also, ultimately, the downfall of the republic of Rome, as, after his death, Plutarch informs us, Caesar's nephew Octavius took the power, and became emperor, ending the 500 year old republic.

However, Caesar's authority, absolute as it is, severely undermined the power of the elected senate, of which the conspirators were a part, and reduced the democracy of the Roman State. If the audience examines the conspirator's point of view (or at least Brutus', as he is presented as the most selfless of the group), Shakespeare shows a conundrum- should Caesar have been left to rule, his 'serpent's egg' left to hatch and possibly cause tyranny, or was murdering him best, despite the consequences of leaving 18 year old Octavius to rule in a triumvirate with Marc Antony, who was 'well known to be a "a masker and a reveller"' (as Cassius taunts him), according to Shakespeare and the Romans.

Brutus' authority over the plebeians and his fellow conspirators is also another important factor in Julius Caesar. This is ably demonstrated in All, si. Casca, during a seemingly innocent discussion about sunrise, says 'Here as I



point my sword, the sun rises'. This line is largely dependant on the interpretation of different actors and directors, but can be used to signify the rising of Brutus as the new authority in Rome, as it was in the film, Julius Caesar, with John Gielgud.

Shakespeare uses a great deal of language to portray Brutus as a 'gentle conspirator', says Kermode. It is told throughout the dialogue that Brutus is an important person in Rome- his ancestors were famous, and he himself is a magistrate. Even Marc Antony, his future enemy, says at Caesar's funeral speech that 'Brutus is an honourable man', and whether he means it mockingly or not, the audience perceives this fact to be true.

Brutus authority over the other conspirators is clear- from the start all of them, especially Cassius, are eager to enlist Brutus to their cause. Once he has agreed, in All si, however, it is immediately clear who is in charge. On several issues Brutus overrules the others (mainly Cassius, who is perceived as being the second most important conspirator) in simple matters such as the swearing of an oath, to more complex issues like the murder of Antony. Here the audience later sees that although Brutus has the authority, he does not necessarily have the wisdom, as allowing Antony to live ultimately turns out to be a mistake.

Although it is not obvious, Shakespeare hints to the audience that the common plebeians also have power. The senate was supposedly fairly elected by the plebeians, but this is not the true source of their authority. This lies in their sheer numbers, as collectively they changed the tides, from

Brutus' favour, supporting the assassination, to causing ' mischief', under Marc Antony's direction.

Marc Antony is one of only three characters who the audience perceives to have any real power over the fate of Rome. This appears to be mainly derived from his status of ' beloved of Caesar', but another source of this power is his skill in oratory, most ably demonstrated in All Sii, the famous ' friends, Romans, countrymen' speech.

His power is consolidated in the post Julius Caesar world by his leading position in the new Triumvirate. Marc Antony is clearly the driving force in this group- at least in the beginning of the history, or in the play, as Plutarch informs us that soon after the triumvirate was formed, Octavius took the title of ' princeps' (' chief one'), calling into doubt Antony's true authority in Rome.