

MATTHEW N. PROSER

# The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies



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THE HEROIC IMAGE IN FIVE  
SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDIES



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BY MATTHEW N. PROSER

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS • 1965

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L.C. Card: 65-10836

Publication of this book has been  
aided by the Ford Foundation program  
to support publication, through  
university presses, of works in the  
humanities and social sciences

Printed in the United States of America  
by Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All quotations from the texts of Shakespeare's plays are taken from Neilson and Hill's *The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press of Houghton Mifflin Co., 1942. The section on *Coriolanus* appeared in an earlier form under the title "Coriolanus: The Constant Warrior and the State" in *College English*, XXIV (April 1963), 507-512.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Brents Stirling of the University of Washington for his advice and criticism of my work and to note my indebtedness as well to Professors Arnold Stein and William Irmischer of the same university. I would like to thank Professor Robert Frank of The Pennsylvania State University for reading this book when it was still in manuscript form and for giving much needed encouragement. My thanks also to Professor J. Mitchell Morse for advice on the *Macbeth* chapter and to Professors Leonard F. Dean of the University of Connecticut and C. L. Barber of Indiana University for commentary and suggestions. My gratitude also to Mrs. James Holly Hanford of Princeton University Press for her help in preparing this book for the press; to Miss Karen McGuire, a student at the University of Connecticut, for her help in proofreading; and to Miss Carol Babcock, also a student at the University of Connecticut, for her help in preparing the index. To my wife, who has read, typed, reread and proofread, my debt is infinite.



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## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ABBREVIATIONS

<b>APSR</b>	<i>American Political Science Review</i>
<b>AR</b>	<i>Antioch Review</i>
<b>CE</b>	<i>College English</i>
<b>ELH</b>	<i>Journal of English Literary History</i>
<b>EIC</b>	<i>Essays in Criticism</i>
<b>HR</b>	<i>Hudson Review</i>
<b>JEGP</b>	<i>Journal of English and German Philology</i>
<b>KR</b>	<i>Kenyon Review</i>
<b>MLQ</b>	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
<b>MLR</b>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<b>MP</b>	<i>Modern Philology</i>
<b>N&amp;Q</b>	<i>Notes &amp; Queries</i>
<b>PMLA</b>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<b>RES</b>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<b>SAB</b>	<i>Shakespeare Association Bulletin</i>
<b>SR</b>	<i>Sewanee Review</i>
<b>SNL</b>	<i>Shakespeare Newsletter</i>
<b>SQ</b>	<i>Shakespeare Quarterly</i>
<b>SS</b>	<i>Shakespeare Survey</i>
<b>TSLL</b>	<i>Texas Studies in Literature and Language</i>
<b>UTQ</b>	<i>University of Toronto Quarterly</i>
<b>WVUB</b>	<i>West Virginia University Bulletin</i>

## INTRODUCTION

I am interested in the symbolic aspects of the Shakespearean tragic hero's mind and conduct and in the relationship between his thoughts and actions. In these essays I have centered my attention upon five plays: *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

For me the tragedy in each of these plays partly ensues because of the discrepancy between the main character's self-conception and his full humanity as it is displayed in action. Briefly my idea is this: although in each tragedy we find a major character who is confronted by a critical situation, the action the hero takes is as much determined by his conception of himself, his "heroic image," as by exterior circumstances. This heroic self-image is often implied in various key speeches the character makes. It has both public and private aspects. On the one hand, the image suggests a certain public role, a *persona* the hero takes for the sake of action; on the other, it captures what the hero feels are vital aspects of his most personal self. The image is gauge to the hero's hopes, wishes, aspirations—his impulse to play the heroic part. But insofar as the image is a symbolic reality, in its very nature it must fail to capture the entire human reality of the man. The image, in short, is a kind of metaphoric simplification. Or to put the matter another way, the protagonist fails to see or suppresses the ambiguity cast upon the image by the total reality of his situation, and in neglecting this ambiguity he simplifies that situation disastrously.

The image itself intimates the sort of action the main character must take if he is to fulfill his conception of his

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heroic identity. But since the image is emotional, not rational, action becomes an emotional matter as much as a practical one. Since the crisis in the dramatic situation places the hero's self-conception in jeopardy, the protagonist is forced to prove to himself that he is the man he believes he is, or at least, hopes he is. From this standpoint, conduct becomes in part a series of symbolic acts, poses, stances, and gestures which seek to define the heroic image in action. The image conveyed to the audience by the protagonist's language becomes, let us say, an enacted image, an enacted "word."

In attempting to enact the image, be it that of the Roman patriot, as in Brutus' case, or that of the constant warrior, as in Coriolanus', the hero sacrifices his humanity and others' as well for the sake of a mental illusion, a heroic conception, which his own human nature ultimately defeats. Thus if the heroic image embodies the man's aspirations and dreams, and his sense of his own capacities, it also embodies the illusory quality of the nobility in the image. Only the hero's death allows us to abstract the nobility that was in the man and to see whether and how much he has made the image a "true" image. For the hero's death converts the living man into an image of himself, and therefore he can, despite his failure in action, become a symbol of the nobility he sought to represent—provided his death is sufficiently heroic in proportion. More broadly speaking, however, the image itself, its reality, to our eyes at least, remains Janus-faced, an index to the hero's triumph and his defeat: to the complete tragedy.

The result of the protagonists' self-dramatizing endeavors, their attempts to enact an image, is a series of

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tragedies which exposes the discrepancy between man's self-conception and himself, between his aspirations and limitations, between his words and deeds. But it is also a series of tragedies in which the human animal is limited by the context in which he finds himself, or which he makes for himself. The kind of context is different in each play, and it is this difference, aside from the distinguishable natures of the heroes, which allows latitude for the variety of approaches I have taken in the respective chapters. Because of the differences in the situations surrounding the protagonists, it is necessary to recognize those special thematic factors complicating my informing idea and to give them their just due. For instance, *Julius Caesar* is a tragedy in which politics and history serve as limitations for the major character. They are the chief contexts, among others, within which Brutus must act. It is important, therefore, to establish the meaning of the contexts while showing how they relate to Brutus and how Brutus relates to them. Intensive study of the self-image arises after we have come to understand the relationship between politics and history implied by the play and their importance as reflections of both Brutus' personal and universal limitations as a man. In order to do this we must investigate other important characters who surround Brutus and, in addition, various constellations of imagery which evoke important historical and political concepts. From these elements and Brutus' connection with them emerges the principal thematic issue: the quandary of the moral man forced into political action, the kind of action which places not merely the man's morality, but all human morality, in doubt.

In *Othello* the situation is quite different. Our context

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is neither political nor historical. Rather, it is intensely personal. The tragedy's suggestiveness is less social than that of *Julius Caesar*, and more "psychological." Therefore we may feel free to investigate intensely "psychological" matters, while we remain aware that an investigation of Othello's psychology is an investigation of universal human nature (just as we must remain aware that an investigation of Brutus' "social" reality is nevertheless also an investigation of his personality as well as of human nature in general). Since we are immediately confronted with personal issues from the outset of *Othello*, the Moor's self-image is a matter of consequence from his very first entrance. With this entrance, Othello presents the domestic and personal problem which is to form the heart of the play: his marriage to Desdemona. The part Othello's self-image plays in the destruction of this marriage, in the destruction of Othello and Desdemona themselves, is one of the principal questions to be resolved in the chapter.

It can be seen that the thematic problems I am dealing with in both *Julius Caesar* and *Othello* are principally moral and psychological, although there is some variation in emphasis on these matters in each discussion. The same generalization can be made about my analyses of *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus*. In the former I have attempted to show the moral implications of Macbeth's self-image while examining his psychological deterioration as a human being. But I might have made this statement in just the opposite way. Clearly morality and psychology are not distinct issues in *Macbeth*, but are two aspects of the same human problem. (This is true, of course, for the other plays as well.) *Coriolanus*, once again, like

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*Julius Caesar*, is complicated by politics. In fact, so paramount are the political issues in their moral importance, so inextricably are the various classes in the Roman state entangled in the tragedy of *Coriolanus*, that we have in this play Shakespeare's most complete tragedy of state. *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, offers new issues and additional complications. Here the moral and psychological questions, though of much importance, are intertwined with another thematic element, one which makes itself increasingly apparent as we move on to the tragi-comedies.

If in plays like *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth* Shakespeare evokes the awful discrepancy between personal ambitions and public aims and reveals an almost anguished concern over this discrepancy, in *Antony and Cleopatra* we receive the impression that Shakespeare has come to recognize that political order, organization, and empire cannot be separated from the personal ambitions of world leaders. The political leader in making order makes his own order. Thus with "stability" necessarily come the calculating strategies and distasteful frigidity of an Octavius Caesar. Equally, Shakespeare recognizes the anarchic quality in the sensual life Cleopatra represents, but he pays homage to the force of Cleopatra's magical power and delineates the claims of the human heart and the imaginative mind. These claims are recognized most fully in Cleopatra's poetry, which magnifies Antony's self-image and her own, even as her more satirical remarks deflate Antony's heroic posture. In the end, Cleopatra's poetic empire stands because of its power to capture our imaginations. Caesar, that most prosaic and practical of men, conquers Egypt; but Cleopatra,



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although we acknowledge her failings, and Antony's, captures us. Her language, gestures, and theatrics—her "artistry"—immortalize her and her lover before our very eyes. Therefore the nature of her artistry becomes a thematic question of some importance in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

It should be evident by this time that in these discussions I am not concerned with the problem of defining tragedy or tragic character except as such definitions are implied by what I more concretely state in the pages to follow. To all intents and purposes I accept those traditional definitions of tragedy which see in its "form" the pitiful and awe-provoking fall of a prince because of fortune, fate, and character. I subscribe as well to those definitions which see in tragedy's "content" an intensified engagement with those high moral and spiritual dilemmas arising out of the universal human predicament. But for me, the whole issue of "heroics" is held up by Shakespeare to the closest scrutiny. In the heroic image each central character chooses can be found the measure of his aspiring nature and the index to the self-deception and even egotism which allows such a man to mistake an image for reality, and to act upon the image. Each man, nevertheless, must be examined in his own right; for in each tragedy our evaluation of the man and his tragedy cannot be separated from our evaluation of the circumstances in which he finds himself. The part the heroic image plays in each chapter is determined by the breadth and quality of the thematic material each drama offers. What I have tried to provide is a certain fullness of interpretation which will not make the plays conform to any single preconception of my own. Instead

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I have tried to show how the preconception plays its role in each of the tragedies; how it is a significant thread tying in any number of other thematic features encompassed in the action and imagery; how it is a force worth investigating in its own right; and how it is used by Shakespeare in conjunction with the other themes and problems which make each play a distinguishable work of art.

# I

## BRUTUS:

### THE IMAGE OF THE PATRIOT

At the heart of *Julius Caesar* lies the issue of freedom—freedom not merely in its political sense, but in its philosophical meaning as well. The conspirators' cries for "liberty," however, are not a call to which *we* should react with the simple emotionalism of the masses; nor should we fail, on the other hand, to admit a certain justice in these cries. Rather, our purpose, and Shakespeare sets it for us, is to hear the cries in a context of limitations which attempt in action to define and expose the term itself. These limitations are, at their narrowest, personal: they stem from important traits of the chief characters themselves. At their broadest, they are universal, presenting as they do an insight into the nature of man. In between come politics and history. These, however, though we must discuss them, are not the real subject of our story. Brutus is. Politics and history are the contexts in which Brutus finds himself, and loses himself.

We begin with history because it is the first limitation Shakespeare evokes in *Julius Caesar*. Caesar, who came "in triumph over Pompey's blood" initiates the typical Elizabethan cycle of divine vengeance. Caesar kills Pompey and disrupts the state; Brutus kills Caesar and disrupts the state; Antony conquers Brutus and temporarily restores the state. In this light both Brutus and Antony become agents of the divine will, even though acting by means of their own will. They are seen as subject to the very roles they choose; indeed, looking

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at their position from this historical standpoint, we might say their roles choose them.

Shakespeare uses the figure of the dead Pompey to confirm history's cyclical quality in *Julius Caesar*. During the first half of the play our eyes are continually directed back to his image and his image is continually associated with blood, blood which is answered by that of the other characters. The play has scarcely started before Pompey becomes an object of our attention:

O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome,  
Knew you not Pompey? Many a time and oft  
Have you climb'd up to walls and battlements,  
To tow'rs and windows, yea, to chimney-tops,  
Your infants in your arms, and there have sat  
The live-long day, with patient expectation,  
To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome;  
And when you saw his chariot but appear  
Have you not made an universal shout,  
That Tiber trembled underneath her banks  
To hear the replication of your sounds  
Made in her concave shores? (I.i. 41-52)

In a few lines comes the reference to Caesar's triumphant march over Pompey's blood. A little later, when the conspirators are about to seek out Brutus, we find they must first repair to "Pompey's porch." The term is mentioned twice along with a somewhat more interesting one: "Pompey's Theatre." Here the idea of acting out roles, indeed, of acting out historical roles, suggests itself. Finally, when Caesar is murdered he dies at the foot of Pompey's statue, his blood besmearing its base. The death scene is a kind of fulfillment of Calpurnia's dream. In the dream Calpurnia saw Caesar's statue "like a foun-

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tain with an hundred spouts" running "pure blood." Now Pompey's statue runs with Caesar's blood. By reawakening us to the historical referent, Pompey, in this climactic scene, Shakespeare ties together the deaths of the two leaders. That Shakespeare is consciously linking the two deaths with an artistic device of his own can be demonstrated by reference to Plutarch. In Plutarch Calpurnia's dream mentions neither statue nor blood: "For she dreamed that Caesar was slain, and that she had him in her arms." Plutarch also speaks of another version, that given by Titus Livius. In it, once again, no blood or statue is mentioned: ". . . the Senate having set upon the top of Caesar's house, for an ornament . . . a certain pinnacle, Calpurnia dreamed that she saw it broken down, and that she thought she lamented and wept for it." But the blood is described by Plutarch in the assassination scene, and in conjunction with the idea of Pompey's "revenge" on Caesar. Plutarch pictures Caesar as driven ". . . against the base whereupon Pompey's image stood, which ran all of a gore-blood till he was slain. Thus it seemed that the image took just revenge of Pompey's enemy, being thrown down on the ground at his feet, and yielding up the ghost there. . . ." We have evidence, therefore, that Shakespeare, although he may have derived the idea for the cyclical "arrangement" of his play from Plutarch, nevertheless conceived the appropriate artistic method by which this arrangement could be symbolically suggested. The blood "connection" between Pompey's statue and the statue in Calpurnia's dream appears to be Shakespeare's inspiration.

But Shakespeare links the deaths of Pompey and Caesar in two other ways as well. Before Caesar actually dies he allows us to see him as a piece of "living statuary." This

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is in the scene leading up to his assassination, the scene during which he is "immovable" in his "constancy." Shakespeare's third method lies in a word. By having Cassius refer to Caesar earlier as a "colossus," Shakespeare provides us with an image that will be useful for establishing irony in the death scene and one which also relates to the other "statue" images. However, the link between Pompey and Caesar lies not only in the idea that the two men are visualized as statues or that Caesar tends to build verbal monuments to himself (just as Marullus in the play's opening scene builds a verbal monument to Pompey). The link is also the blood spilled in the respective deaths of the two men—blood concretely visualized for us on the stage during Caesar's assassination at the base of Pompey's statue. At this point in the action, if it has not done so before, blood takes on a certain historical significance in addition to the moral significance which first meets the eye. It becomes a river to past and future, and a means to an end.

In view of this historical limitation, Brutus' "error" in murdering Caesar may be understood as a kind of violation of history itself. He becomes isolated in the major action with which he is involved. If he sees himself as the possible "savior" of Rome at moments, he does not seem to realize, or at least, realize adequately, that Caesar also probably thinks of himself as the "savior" of Rome; witness Caesar's ready acceptance of Decius Brutus' interpretation of Calpurnia's dream. Decius says the dream "signifies that from you great Rome shall suck/Reviving blood. . . ." Indeed, Brutus fails to realize that Caesar very likely thought he was saving Rome when he triumphed over Pompey, and that Pompey, when he was in power, undoubtedly also saw himself as the state's

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savior. A recognition of this sort might have suggested that "saving Rome" by means of killing a "tyrant" can produce a kind of tyranny in itself, perhaps the very sort of tyranny from which someone else is going to have to "save Rome." Where Brutus is concerned, this of course proves to be the case. Antony and Octavius are to be the new "liberators."

But the recognition mentioned, significantly, is one that Brutus never makes at the point where he could most use it. Quite to the contrary, he feels it morally incumbent upon himself to act in order to avert the tyranny he fears will come from Caesar. He believes, and most humanly, that he dare not wait to see what the future brings. It is in this sense that he isolates himself in one climactic event and in what he envisions as the necessity for that climactic event. The sign of this historical isolation is that in having accepted the role of assassin (which by the very nature of the "liberating" deed he must take on at the same time he assumes the role of "savior") he makes the mistake of not following through and killing Antony. He fails, that is, to provide adequately against future opposition. This, however, might be interpreted as a purely political mistake. On the other hand, it is symptomatic of his ultimate failure to plan any future course of action at all. It is as if he expected Caesar's death to settle everything—to bring about liberty through the magic of the "sacrifice" itself. He attempts to make one act *the* critical act, but a critical act without possible adverse historical repercussions. His error, politically speaking, may be that having decided to take no chances with Caesar he does not follow through and decide to take no chances with Antony. His error, historically speaking, is his not having looked over his shoulder at

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Pompey's statue at the crucial moment to examine it in its broadest historical light. Instead of facing the doubtful qualities in his act, he suppresses them. He cannot concede history's complexity. He simplifies it, shall we say, in order to give himself the "freedom" to act.

The idea of freedom returns us once again to our starting point and to the second limitation we must deal with, that of "politics." Where this subject is concerned in *Julius Caesar* the general critical tendency has been to choose political sides. Thus the questions "Is Shakespeare for republicanism and against Caesarism, or vice versa?" or "Is Shakespeare for democracy and against monarchy?" have seemed to some students of the play extremely important ones.<sup>1</sup> The answers, of course, depend upon our definitions of republicanism and Caesarism, of democracy and monarchy, and upon our corresponding attitudes toward these forms of government. However, since the government of Rome was not a democracy in a strictly contemporary sense and since the term "Caesarism" is not Shakespeare's, it becomes difficult to draw any firm

<sup>1</sup> See introduction to "Julius Caesar," *The Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1949). Wilson finds Caesar representative of tyrannical "Caesarism" and Brutus heroic in the cause of freedom. See also the following: introduction to *Julius Caesar*, New Arden edition, ed. T. S. Dorsch (London, 1955). According to Dorsch we are really supposed to be sympathetic toward Caesar despite his shortcomings. His ambition is an "essential accompaniment of greatness." Brutus, on the other hand, is not to be trusted. His "ineffectual" idealism involves him in a "senseless" and dreadful murder (pp. xxxix-xl); Virgil K. Whitaker, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning* (San Marino, Calif., 1953), pp. 224-250. Whitaker finds Shakespeare not a republican, but a supporter of the Renaissance dicta against rebellion. Caesar is the symbol of monarchy and Shakespeare does more to ameliorate Plutarch's case for Caesar than to denigrate it; James E. Phillips Jr., *The State in Shakespeare's Greek and Roman Plays* (New York, 1940). Phillips suggests that the whole purpose of the play is to point out the virtues of absolute monarchy.



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conclusions on the subject. If, for instance, we focus our attention upon Caesar's conduct during the scene in which his death occurs, we may be able to build up a case against Caesar the Tyrant. This would be true even though we are aware the conspirators' appeal for Publius Cimber is very possibly a put-up job. Caesar's attempts at self-glorification are distasteful whatever the reason;<sup>2</sup> they are even threatening. But the question is, do they make him a complete tyrant? The answer must be "no" if we are considering real acts of tyranny prior to the scene of the assassination.<sup>3</sup> We may condemn him for his pompous manner, but pomposity alone does not make a tyrant. The fairest attitude to take toward Caesar when considering him next to Brutus and when considering the parties they represent is that suggested by Adrien Bonjour: "... we are emotionally attracted, and repulsed, by both sides; our sympathies are made to oscillate from one hero, and one party, to the other, according to the side of the Roman medal we are shown, obverse and then reverse, until the swing of the pendulum eventually ceases, suspended as it were between two equal forces, and then the sympathies are perfectly divided between

<sup>2</sup> The issue of the "braggart" or "thrasonical" Caesar is one of the most discussed in the criticism of this play. To consider the spread of interpretation and its background, see: M. W. MacCallum, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Backgrounds* (London, 1925), pp. 179-180; Wilson's introduction to *Julius Caesar*, p. xxiii; Harry Morgan Ayres, "Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*," *PMLA*, XXV (June 1910), 183-227; Ernest Schanzer, "The Problem of *Julius Caesar*," *SQ*, VI (Summer 1955), 297-308; and Joan Rees, "'Julius Caesar'—An Earlier Play, and an Interpretation," *MLR*, I (April 1955), 135-141.

<sup>3</sup> The same question might also be asked of the disappearance of Flavius and Marullus, "put to silence" for disrobing Caesar's images. The expression, which seems patently ominous when first considered, after further thought takes on a disturbing ambiguity.

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the victim of the crime and the victim of the punishment."<sup>4</sup>

Again, looking more closely at Caesar, who in a sense is practicing for the role of king throughout the play, we might ask ourselves if it is not, after all, merely the commanding pose he strikes, the image he presents, which frightens and alienates the conspirators and convinces them he already *is* a tyrant; in short, we might ask ourselves if it is not this very pose which ironically brings about his death, rather than his deeds themselves. Thought of in this light, Cassius' dialogue with Casca in Act I, scene iii is particularly rewarding. Cassius, in sounding out his friend, works himself up to a high pitch of "oratory" during which he and Casca list some of Caesar's offensive "deeds." A careful look at these "deeds" is revealing. And we ought to note that this scene occurs before Caesar tries to play god at the capitol. *That* offense has not occurred yet and hence can play no part in Cassius' argument. Cassius says:

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

(I.iii.72-78)

A few lines later Casca says:

Indeed, they say the senators to-morrow  
Mean to establish Caesar as a king;

<sup>4</sup> Adrien Bonjour, *The Structure of Julius Caesar* (Liverpool, 1958), p. 24.

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And he shall wear his crown by sea and land  
In every place, save here in Italy. (I.iii.85-88)

By line 103, Cassius is saying:

And why should Caesar be a tyrant then?

The speech in which this line occurs is followed by an important response by Casca:

Hold,—my hand.

Be factious for redress of all these griefs,

And I will set this foot of mine as far

As who goes farthest. (I.iii.117-120)

However, we might react to Casca's statement concerning "all these griefs" by simply asking "what griefs?" since Cassius and Casca have presented not one concrete deed by which Caesar may be condemned. Instead Cassius constructs a frightening analogy which substitutes for concrete detail. Caesar has grown as "prodigious" and "fearful" as "this dreadful night" of prodigies, which "thunders, lightens, opens graves, and roars." Moreover, though attempting to prove that Caesar is a "man no mightier than thyself or me," he apparently misses the deeper implications of Caesar's common humanity even as he points it out. It is as if he actually took the image of the "prodigious" Caesar for the real thing. Cassius and Casca respond, so to speak, to a picture of Caesar they have in their minds, the picture, strangely enough, Caesar himself at moments tries to present.<sup>5</sup> But they, like Caesar, do not seem to realize that the picture is not

<sup>5</sup> Schanzer takes a similar position in "The Problem of *Julius Caesar*," pp. 305-306. For him Caesar remains nothing but an image in the eyes of the various other characters throughout the play; indeed, Caesar himself is constantly constructing an image of himself for his own and others' benefit.