

THAT'S DEBATABLE: THE TWO-SIDED NATURE OF JULIUS CAESAR

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POLITICIANS LOVE TO DEBATE—OR AT LEAST PEOPLE LOVE SEEING THEM DEBATE. And this isn't new. A public forum for structured arguments was the foundation of the Roman governmental system two millennia ago; senators took turns debating, and eloquence in persuasive speech meant power. When Shakespeare imagined life in ancient Rome, he knew that rhetoric was at the center. His works tend to raise questions rather than give answers, but this is especially true of *Julius Caesar*. The play is full of impressive rhetorical speeches as characters try to convince one another that their position is the correct one. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* itself offers a balanced look at these issues—in a sense, the drama is a forum for the debates to continue.

The central question for the characters in *Julius Caesar* is: what kind of government is best? Is it better to have a monarchy, or a republic? Rome was proud of its status as a republic, and history viewed Julius Caesar as the decisive turning point toward rule by a dictator rather than a group of senators. The contradictions within Shakespeare's Caesar, however, make it difficult to reach a definitive conclusion about the play's own political stance. Is he a tyrant, as Cassius and others suggest? Or is he a benevolent ruler who takes

the best interests of his people to heart, as Antony suggests? Shakespeare gives evidence on both sides, but never answers the question. In the famous funeral oration scene (3.2), Brutus and Antony each articulate a position, and the changeable crowd is evidence that they both have a point. But the fickle mob leads to another topic of debate: can the people even be trusted to know what's best for them, or should they be led by someone wiser and more astute?

In addition to exploring political theory, Shakespeare delves deeply into human psychology. Even though Caesar is the eponymous character, he dies at the beginning of Act 3, and we understand very little about him. All knowledge is mediated through others, but details about this colossus of a leader (his deafness in one ear, his limited swimming ability, his epilepsy) point to the important fact that he's a human, not a god. And it is the nature of human psychology that interests Shakespeare most. In contrast to the opaque Caesar, Brutus is a fascinating character precisely because his psychology is thoroughly explored. Through his soliloquies and dialogue we come to understand that the greatest debate is that which is going on within Brutus; he is torn between loyalty and love for his friend Caesar on the one hand, and for his country Rome on the other.



Utah Shakespeare Festival's *Julius Caesar*, 2001

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The public and private lives not only of Brutus, but also of Cassius, Antony, and Portia, show them struggling with collisions between deeply held principles that are sometimes at odds with one another. Romans loved words such as “virtue” and “nobility”—ideals that point to laudable human aspirations. Yet such words are not absolute, and intentions can be misunderstood as surely as a political spin can distort the speaker’s message. How do the characters negotiate this complex world? Sometimes they seem caught up in forces larger than they are, beset by soothsayers, omens, and portents. For his part, Cassius insists that humans make their own way: “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings” (1.2.140-1). Yet when the ghost of Caesar helps to defeat the conspirators, and the natural world reacts in upheaval to the assassination, we’re presented with the possibility that supernatural forces do in fact direct our fate. Perhaps the ghost is an external force of this sort, or perhaps he’s a reflection of the conspirators’ guilty conscience. Once again Shakespeare gives evidence on both sides, refusing to provide a clear-cut answer.

Shakespeare’s time show that the actors were costumed in a hybrid manner, with a combination of Elizabethan and Roman elements. The structure of debate involves a separation into diametrically opposite poles so that we can delineate problems and issues more clearly. But life is about negotiating the middle of the middle—the both/and of existence. Writing about history is not ever solely about the past, but about this kind of synergy between time periods. In one of *Julius Caesar*’s most powerful moments, just after the assassination, Cassius looks not backwards, but forwards:

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!
(3.1.111-113)

This line often elicits laughter from audiences because of Shakespeare’s prediction of his own era and language, but also because we have become part of that story. We inhabit Cassius’ imagined future, the unborn nation of the United States. At the same time, the awareness of an unknown future is an invitation to let the play itself change and speak in different ways to reflect the contemporary world.

In this year’s Shakespeare in the Schools production of *Julius Caesar*, traditionally male roles such as Antony and Casca are played by female actors. Changing gender in this way provides a different lens, allowing a new way to look at Shakespeare’s explorations of power, persuasive speech, and the high stakes of politics. *Julius Caesar* is absolutely a play for the 21st century, demanding the difficult and risky entrance into debate. When Antony asks for “friends, Romans, and countrymen” to lend him their ears, Shakespeare is also asking for his audience to listen. Elizabethans thought of the political structure of the state as a body; this body politic means that we’re all part of the same system, whether we like it or not. The health of the body necessitates members work together, and that requires not just listening, but speaking. When the Soothsayer warns Caesar about the Ides of March, Caesar pauses for a moment, asking, “What sayst thou to me now? Speak once again” (1.2.22). Every performance and discussion of *Julius Caesar* is this kind of opportunity—to speak again. Sometimes these debates might even change the outcome.



Sara Zwangobani as Mark Antony
in the Bell Shakespeare 2018 production of *Julius Caesar*.

In 1599 Shakespeare wrote about events that happened in 44 BCE; the timeline shows that Shakespeare is much closer to our modern world than he was to Caesar’s ancient one. Was he writing a history piece, or was he writing about his own time period? Surviving drawings of Roman plays from Shake-