

About Death of a Chief, an Adaptation of Julius Caesar

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Abstract: Originally performed in 1599, The Tragedy of Julius Caesar is one of Shakespeare's most enduring plays. It however, like most of Shakespeare's dramatic works, was not born solely of the author's mind. The story of Caesar, and beyond that the history of Rome, was well known to Elizabethan England. Britons felt their ancestry was tied to the ancient Roman republic, and many felt that parts of London itself (the London Tower, in particular) had indeed been constructed by Caesar. It is therefore of little surprise that the tragedy of Caesar, which Shakespeare illuminates, was already fresh in the minds of Londoners.

Plutarch's Lives of Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus

It is hard to dispute that Shakespeare based this play almost entirely on what he had read from Plutarch's Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans. Translated into English by Thomas North in 1579, the text was popular and Shakespeare certainly had access to it. Although Shakespeare found use for most of the material through his several Roman plays, for Julius Caesar he focused on Plutarch's Lives of Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus. As this investigation will show, the textual similarities between Plutarch (albeit North's version) and Shakespeare are so abundant and definitive that it would be difficult to disprove the association. Like all great writers, however, Shakespeare did more than simply reiterate from the source he drew on. Also to be demonstrated will be the many alterations Shakespeare made to Plutarch's account, including those that change the narration into a dramatic stage format and those that transcend both Plutarch and the theater to reveal something of Shakespeare's own understanding of this Roman history.

As mentioned, it is clear that Shakespeare based his play almost exclusively on Plutarch's narrative of Roman characters. Although there are slight discrepancies between the two, the plot line that Plutarch follows remains intact in Shakespeare's drama. In many cases, Shakespeare changes the language of the narration but retains the essence of the story.

"There Brutus, being afraid to be besieged, sent back again the noblemen that came thither with him, thinking it no reason that they, which were no partakers of the murder, should be partakers of the danger." (Plutarch 126)

Cassius: And leave us Publius; lest that the people, Rushing on us, should do your age some mischief. Brutus: Do so; and let no man abide this deed But we the doers. (III.i.89-92)

Here, the story is contiguous though the language differs. The same can be seen in Shakespeare's transition of the battle scene where Brutus is plotting his suicide.

"Brutus as he sat bowed towards Clitus one of his men and told him somewhat in his ear; the other answered him not, but fell a-weeping. Thereupon he proved Dardanus, and said somewhat also to him. At length he came to Volumnius himself, and, speaking to him in Greek, prayed him...that he would help him to put his hand to his sword, to thrust it in him to kill him." (Plutarch 170)

Brutus: Sit thee down, Clitus; slaying is the word, It is a deed in fashion. Hark thee, Clitus. Clitus: What, I, my lord? No, not for all the world. Brutus: Peace then, no words. Clitus: I'll rather kill myself.

Whispering. Brutus: Hark thee, Dardanius. Dardanius: Shall I do such a deed? (V.v.4-8)

Shakespeare converts some of the narration into stage directions, and the rest into the characters' dialogue, but the scene from one text to the other one is the same. Similarly, when Caesar is speaking to his wife about the nature of the omens she has observed, Shakespeare transmutes Plutarch's narration into Caesar's words.

"And when some of his friends did counsel him to have a guard for the safety of his person, and some also did offer themselves to serve him, he would never consent to

it, but said, it was better to die once than always to be afraid of death.”

(Plutarch 78)

Caesar: Cowards die many times before their deaths;

The valiant never taste of death but once,

Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,

It seems to me most strange that men should fear;

Seeing that death, a necessary end,

Will come when it will come. (II.ii.32-37)

With small exceptions, the entirety of Julius Caesar could be seen in this light of Plutarch's plot being lifted into Shakespeare's drama. The proof of Shakespeare's use of Plutarch as a direct source, however, lies deeper than this. In many instances, Shakespeare quite literally takes the words out of Plutarch's mouth. In what modern society could consider plagiarism, Shakespeare often uses, word for word, a line or phrase from Plutarch. One example of this is apparent in Act V, when Brutus' army is preparing for battle.

“...the greatest and chiefest things among men are most uncertain, and that, if the battle fall out otherwise today then we wish or look for, we shall hardly meet again, what are thou then determined to do...”

(Plutarch 154)

Cassius: Now, most noble Brutus,

The gods to-day stand friendly, that we may,

Lovers in peace, lead on our days to age!

But since the affairs of men rest still incertain

Let's reason with the worst that may befall.

If we do lose this battle, then is this

The very last time we shall speak together:

What are you then determined to do? (V.i.93-100)

The similarities here are greater than a simple transference of the plot. Shakespeare takes the words directly from Plutarch's narrative and incorporates them

into his play. This pattern is also seen in his treatment of Caesar,

“...he should wear his diadem in all other places both by sea and land...” (Plutarch 90)

Casca: And he shall wear his crown by sea and land (I.iii.87) and in his integration of the omen Plutarch writes of.

“For, touching the fires in the element and...also the solitary birds to be seen at noondays sitting in the great market-place...men were seen going up and down in fire; and, furthermore, that there was a slave of the soldiers that did cast a marvelous burning flame out of his hand, insomuch as they that saw it thought he had been burnt, but, when the fire was out, it was found he had no hurt. Caesar self also, doing sacrifice unto the gods, found that one of the beasts which was sacrificed had no heart; and that was a strange thing in nature – how a beast could live without a heart.” (Plutarch 86,87)

Casca: But never till to-night, never till now,

Did I go through a tempest dropping fire...

And yesterday the bird of night did sit

even at noon-day upon the market-place,

Hooting and shrieking. (I.iii.9-13)

...a hundred ghastly women,

Transformed with their fear; who swore they saw

Men all in fire walk up and down the streets. (I.iii.23-25)

A common slave – you know him well by sight –

Held up his left hand, which did flame and burn

Like twenty torches join'd, and yet his hand,

Not sensible of fire, remain'd unscorch'd. (I.iii.15-18)

Servant: They would not have you to stir forth today.

Plucking the entrails of an offering forth,

They could not find a heart within the beast. (II.ii.38-40)

Shakespeare is fairly blatant here, taking the many omens verbatim for his work. He is equally as open about using Plutarch when he has Antony divulge Caesar's will to the people.

"...he bequeathed unto every citizen of Rome seventy-five drachmas a man, and that he left his gardens and arbours unto the people, which he had on this side of the river of Tiber..."

(Plutarch 128)

Antony: To every Roman citizen he gives,

To every several man, seventy five drachmas
(III.ii.139,140)

Moreover, he hath left you all his walks,

His private arbours and new-planted orchards,

On this side Tiber; he hath left them you, (III.ii. 245-247)

All of these connections serve to show Shakespeare's indebtedness to his source, and in fact, further examples are strewn throughout any close reading of the two texts.

Although it is clear that Shakespeare used Plutarch's work extensively, it is not to say that Julius Caesar is without any originality. Shakespeare deviates from Plutarch on many occasions for a variety of different reasons. One issue that Shakespeare dealt with in reworking Plutarch's history was the difficulty of transforming a narrative work into a staged drama. Many people today read Shakespeare's plays and see them through a literary light, but they were originally designed, of course, for the theater. One task Shakespeare had in order to make Plutarch's story "performable" was to change the structure of time in the history.

In Plutarch's account, Caesar triumph over his enemies occurs in 45 BC, and it is not until 42 BC that Antony and Octavius regain control. This period of three years is unworkable for the Elizabethan stage, so Shakespeare was forced to condense the work into what turns out to be five very eventful days. The first day (Act I.i-ii) includes Caesar's return to Rome through the beginnings of the conspiracy between Brutus and Cassius. Shakespeare's second day includes the rest of Act I as well as Acts II and III, which incorporates Caesar's assassination and the dueling speeches of Brutus and

Antony. The play condenses these events into one day – the Ides of March – which historically Plutarch spreads into a much larger span of time. Similarly, the proscription of soldiers by Antony (in Shakespeare, Act IV, scene I) occurs in Plutarch around November, 43 BC, and the pre-battle meeting of Cassius and Brutus (Act IV.ii-iii) several months later in early 42 BC. These are Shakespeare's third and fourth days. Shakespeare's fifth day, which includes all of Act V, relates the final battle of the play, which Plutarch places much later, in October 42 BC. Although these changes make this portion of Roman history seem much more abrupt than it truly was, they are necessary considering the nature of staged drama during this era.

In his preparation of the work, however, Shakespeare did more than simply modify the duration of Plutarch's time. In some cases, he altered its sequence. Taking quotes directly from Plutarch's history, Shakespeare occasionally separated the actions in one event and put them into the dialogue of several different acts. An example of this occurs in Plutarch's narration of Caesar's murder. Plutarch recounts "...that Caesar turned him nowhere but he was stricken at by some, and still had naked swords in his face, and was hacked and mangled among them, as a wild beast taken of hunters." (Plutarch 94), and that "[Caesar] was driven, either casually or purposely by the counsel of the conspirators, against the base whereupon Pompey's image stood...it is reported that he had three-and-twenty wounds upon his body." (Plutarch 95) Shakespeare rearranges Plutarch's use of language without altering his substance, beginning in Act III,

Antony: Here wast thou bay'd, brave hart;

Here didst thou fall; and here thy hunters stand, (III.i 204,205)

Even at the base of Pompey's statue,

Which all the while ran blood, great Caesar fell,
(III.ii.192,193)

and continuing the scene later in Act II. Octavius: Never,
till Caesar's three and thirty wounds Be well avenged.
(V.i.53,54)

Shakespeare is clearly borrowing from Plutarch in the creation of these scenes, and the changes he makes in rearranging the language serve as a dramatic aid, flashing back to prior events and relating material that was to the audience yet unknown.

In addition to using this technique to capture the audience's attention, Shakespeare uses suspense to

keep their focus on the stage. Plutarch, however, was not a master of suspense. His narration of Caesar's story is concise and to the point, leaving little room for plot speculation. For Shakespeare's dramatic purposes this was unacceptable, and some of the changes he makes from Plutarch are designed to invigorate the tale with uncertainty. The effects of this are present in Shakespeare's adaptation of the moments before Caesar's assassination. As the conspirators prepare to finally undertake the action they had been plotting, Popilius Lena approaches them and warns that their plan is not entirely secret.

"I pray the gods you may go through with that you have taken in hand. But withal, dispatch I read you, for your enterprise is bewrayed." When he had said, he presently departed from them, and left them both afraid that their conspiracy would out." (Plutarch 121)

Plutarch creates no ambiguity concerning the statement. Popilius Lena clearly favors the assassination and informs Cassius and Brutus that the cat was out of the bag. Although Shakespeare certainly derives his scene from Plutarch, he treats the incident somewhat differently.

Popilius: I wish your enterprise today may thrive.

Cassius: What enterprise, Popilius?

Popilius: Fare you well.

Brutus: What said Popilius Lena?

Cassius: He wish'd today our enterprise might thrive,

I fear our purpose is discovered. (III.i.13-17)

Here, Popilius Lena's statement is much less direct and offers no certainty about knowledge of the conspiracy, much the opposite of that which Plutarch offers. By changing the scene in this manner, Shakespeare infuses it with suspense, which was a vital part of captivating what must have been an unruly Elizabethan audience.

Though many of the changes Shakespeare made from the source material seem designed for a stage production, some were perhaps merely for his own amusement. As the leading stage writer of his day, Shakespeare was undoubtedly subjected to criticism from any quarters. It would therefore not be surprising to see him poke fun at his critics from this public venue. One scene, which he changed considerably from Plutarch's text, could be seen as such a jab. In Plutarch's account, the angry mob that Antony had incited was moving through Rome when they came across Cinna the Poet. The mob, "...thinking he had been the Cinna who

in an oration he made had spoken very evil of Caesar, they falling upon him in their rage slew him outright in the market-place." (Plutarch 129,130) Shakespeare remembers the attack differently, relating how the innocent Cinna attempts to fend off the onslaught.

Cinna: Truly, my name is Cinna.

1st Plebeian: Tear him to pieces; he's a conspirator.

Cinna: I am Cinna the poet, I am Cinna the poet.

4th Plebeian: Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses.

Cinna: I am not Cinna the conspirator.

4th Plebeian: It is no matter, his name's Cinna; pluck but his name out of his heart, and turn him going.

3rd Plebeian: Tear him, tear him! (III.iii.11-17)

Shakespeare takes the attack to a new level. Rather than it being the result simply of the mob's frenzy, he gives the group enough coherency to discern that this was not actually the Cinna they were seeking, yet they find an excuse to kill him anyway. Shakespeare's humor comes in the form of that excuse. Cinna defends himself as a poet (much as was Shakespeare), and the mob declares that he should be torn for his "bad verses." Beyond Cinna's protestations that he was not a conspirator, the mob replies "It is no matter, his name's Cinna," attacking him for his name more than anything. Shakespeare likely felt the same way, his fame preceding him to the point where some might criticize him even without respect to his works. In any case, Shakespeare made significant changes to Plutarch's text in order to adapt it to his stage, though the ties to that source are still clearly visible.

To this point, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar in relation to Plutarch's work has been seen in light of the alterations necessary to bring the history to the stage. Yet unconsidered, however, is the effect Shakespeare's own reading must have had on the adaptation. As in all of his plays, much can be said about how his characters reflect his own views and opinions. Shakespeare's opinions, of course, were defined by the world he lived in, and that Elizabethan world was quite different from the Roman one he was writing about. The simplified Julius Caesar finds Brutus leading a group to murder Rome's "king," and they pay the ultimate price for this at the hands of Caesar's avengers. This type of action would have been condemned in England, as they viewed their kings (and just as importantly, queens) as ruling through divine right. Despite this, however, Shakespeare paints Brutus in a

favorable light. He is a noble character that does what he does because he believes it is the right thing to do, and Shakespeare never places personal motivations as a factor in his actions. Brutus goes so far as to murder his friend, Julius Caesar, because he deems it the right course of action for his country. He is torn between something he loves, Caesar, and something he believes in, freedom from tyranny. It would seem that perhaps Shakespeare identified with this. Shakespeare himself seems to be torn between his loyalty to the crown, and his obvious admiration for Brutus' unshakeable honor and noble character. This can be seen in Shakespeare's development of Caesar and Brutus' personalities.

It would be difficult to place too much importance on Shakespeare's reverence for the English crown. Though he may not have sincerely loved his rulers, it was by their grace that he was allowed to make his livelihood, and therefore was in no hurry to displease them. In that respect, it is easy to see why he changed some of Plutarch's story in order to portray Caesar as he did. Shakespeare does his best to show Caesar as a principled man who was not seduced by power to take the position of Emperor. In the scene where Calpurnia urges Caesar to keep from the senate, Plutarch writes "For she dreamed that Caesar was slain, and that she had him in her arms." (Plutarch 88) Shakespeare interprets this somewhat differently, as related in Calpurnia's dream from the play.

Caesar: She dreamt to-night she saw my statue,

Which, like a fountain with an hundred spouts,

Did run pure blood. (II.ii.79-81)

The reason for the change is so that Shakespeare can make his Caesar out to be a more noble character. In Plutarch, when Decius Brutus hears that it is Calpurnia's dream that keeps Caesar from the senate, he mocks him and warns that such a rumor could embarrass Caesar and keep the senate from offering him the crown. Caesar then dismisses the omen, favoring his ambition for power over his own safety. The purpose Shakespeare has in changing the dream is to show another motivation behind Caesar's actions. When Calpurnia dreams that "Caesar was slain," it is hard to imagine the omen in any favorable light. Shakespeare's dream, however, allows for a second interpretation, and he gets it from Decius who says:

Decius: Your statue spouting blood in many pipes,

In which so many smiling Romans bath'd,

Signifies that from you great Rome shall such

Reviving blood, and that great men shall press

For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance.

This by Calphurnia's dream is signified. (II.ii.85-90)

By getting this positive opinion, Caesar's trip to the senate seems less an ambitious act and more a regular day in the republic.

This same type of reinterpretation occurs in Shakespeare's version of Caesar's walk to the senate. When Artemidorus approaches Caesar, warning him of the urgency that his note holds to Caesar's person, Caesar replies "What touches us ourself shall be last served." (III.i.3) Caesar is seen as a virtuous leader whose primary obligation is to the people, and only lastly to himself. This is quite contrary to Plutarch's account which relates that "Caesar took it of him, but could never read it, though he many times attempted it, for the number of people that did salute him," (Plutarch 91) showing that it was only the multitudes approaching Caesar that kept him from examining the document. By Shakespeare's version, Caesar is clearly portrayed as a noble and righteous leader, something that reflects his own attitudes toward the monarchy he lived under.

Though Shakespeare makes Caesar out to be an upright dictator, by no means does he reflect upon Brutus as being any less in moral character. Quite the opposite, Shakespeare's Brutus is a man imbued with honor whose actions are undertaken only for the good of the people. Shakespeare plays him as the consummate leader, whose dignified character commands the respect and following of those around him. Again, Shakespeare expands upon Plutarch's Brutus to achieve this end. As the conspirators meet to discuss who should partake in their plot, Cicero is suggested as a potential member. Though in both versions he is rejected, it is by different means that Cicero finds himself excluded. In Plutarch, the group expresses their love for him, but they ultimately decide that his cowardly nature would hinder the achievement of their goal. In Julius Caesar, the decision is made by Brutus alone.

Cassius: But what of Cicero? shall we sound him?

I think he will stand very strong with us.

Casca: Let us not leave him out.

Cinna: No, by no means.

Metellus: 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 by said his judgement ruled our hands;

Our youths and wildness shall no whit appear,

But all be buried in his gravity.

Brutus: O, name him not: let us not break with him;

For he will never follow any thing

That other men begin.

Cassius: Then leave him out.

Casca: Indeed he is not fit. (II.i.141-153)

The other conspirators are clearly in favor of asking Cicero to join their plot, but their minds change abruptly upon dissent from Brutus. Shakespeare has Brutus taking charge of the situation, and other follow him without question because of their respect for his character.

Shakespeare's Brutus is more than just a man of the people though. He is a fully rounded character, whose heart is found in his home as well as in his country. Plutarch finds Brutus at home with Portia, who is trying to pry at Brutus and have him reveal the source of his melancholy. To prove her worth, Portia stabs herself in the thigh. Brutus is taken aback by her loyalty and lover for him, but rather than give in to her request, Brutus appeals to the Gods to "give him the grace he might bring his enterprise to so good pass." (Plutarch 119) Shakespeare takes this opportunity to show Brutus as an endearing husband, who cannot help but fulfill the requests of someone as close to him as Portia.

Brutus: O ye gods,

Render me worthy of this noble wife!...

Portia, go in a while;

And by and by thy bosom shall partake

The secrets of my heart.

All my engagements I will construe to thee,

All the character of my sad brows. (II.i 302-308)

As a faithful husband and a respected leader, Shakespeare has begun to portray Brutus as the noble hero of the play.

It is not by his actions alone, however, that Brutus is made out to be the man Shakespeare shows him as. Plutarch's history shows the conspirators as a group with a common goal of ridding Rome of a tyrannical Caesar. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare separates Brutus from this commonality to expose him as something greater than those others involved. The other major conspirator in the play is Cassius, and in Plutarch's portrayal, he is much the same as Brutus in relation to the conspiracy. Early in the narrative, Plutarch comments on Caesar's physical condition.

"...concerning the constitution of his body, he was lean, white, and soft skinned, and often subject to headache, and otherwhile to the falling sickness...but yet therefore yielded not to the disease of his body, to make it a cloak to cherish him withal, but, contrarily, took the pains of war as a medicine to cure his sick body, fighting always with his disease..."

(Plutarch 37)

Shakespeare takes and alters this moment, letting Cassius be the mouthpiece. In Act I, scene II, Cassius attacks Caesar for his physical weakness, not once alluding to the manner in which Plutarch says he strengthened himself by it. He calls him a "sick girl" (I.ii.128) with "coward lips" (I.ii.122) and cannot understand how this man could take power. Cassius vocalizes his anger towards being politically subservient to Caesar.

Cassius: ...And this man

Is now become a god, and Cassius is

A wretched creature, and must bend his body

If Caesar carelessly but nod on him. (I.ii.115-118)

This change serves to show Brutus in a different light next to his co-conspirators. He changes Cassius from Plutarch to have a vein of ambition and show a personal agenda, and perhaps vendetta, toward dethroning Caesar. This of course, is non-existent in Brutus.

Another major player in the conspiracy is Casca, and Shakespeare also uses him to illuminate Brutus. Plutarch's history shows Casca as the first to strike Caesar in the assassination, but his failure to deal Caesar a mortal blow gives room for the conflict to stir. Caesar retaliates and Casca cries out in Greek for aid from the conspirators. This is of note because of the way

Casca is depicted by Shakespeare in a chronologically earlier moment from his play. When Brutus and Cassius press Casca for information regarding what Cicero had said upon Caesar's return to Rome, he replies that he had said something, in Greek. Questioned further, Casca states "...those that understood him smil'd / at one another, and shook their heads; but for mine / own part, it was Greek to me." (I.ii.282-284) Casca is made to look like a fool, and as he exits Brutus further comments on him, "What a blunt fellow is this grown to be!" (I.ii.295) The point of Shakespeare's alterations from the source again appear to be to strengthen Brutus' position among them, and as Casca is the first to strike Caesar in the murder scene, it makes his questionable motives all the more scrutinized.

It is apparent that many of the changes Shakespeare made in the conversion of Plutarch's text are used to aggrandize Brutus' position as the valiant people's man and defender of the republic, but it is perhaps something that Shakespeare retained that is the definitive show of his character. Writing of the attack on Caesar by the conspirators, Plutarch states "But when he saw Brutus with his sword drawn in his hand, then he pulled his gown over his head and made no more resistance..." (Plutarch 94,95) Though the language differs, the effect is the same when Shakespeare's Caesar utters "Et tu, Brute! Then fall Caesar!" (III.i.77) Caesar and Brutus held a mutual love for each other, and the attack by such a friend erased Caesar's will to defend himself further. Deeper than that, however, is the idea that Shakespeare's Caesar was designed to see Brutus much as Shakespeare himself did. Attacked by this man whose righteous ideals were second only to his will to carry them out, Caesar folds, understanding that Brutus by his own morals could only choose the right path, and hence, that Caesar himself was not on it. He falls to Brutus because he knows that Brutus' cause, by his nature, must be worthier than his own. By the end of the

play, Shakespeare has created a character of Brutus that is noble and true to his beliefs, which are themselves true to Rome.

A review of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar in comparison to Plutarch's Life of Julius Caesar and Life of Marcus Brutus would clearly show that Plutarch is indeed the source from which Shakespeare derived his material for the play. The similarities are undeniable, and even when Shakespeare strays from Plutarch, the continuity of the story is little changed from one version to the next. It is understandable that Shakespeare would make certain alterations for a stage adaptation, and in many ways those changes enrich the story, bringing out character personalities which are of original design. Most intriguing, of course, are the ways in which Shakespeare expanded upon the characters, in particular, Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus. Despite having to fall as a dictator, Caesar is warmly portrayed and set as a man not built of ambition, but rather as a tragic leader, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Brutus is cast in a similar light, taken far beyond that which Plutarch had intended. Shakespeare gives Brutus infallible convictions and shows him as a testament to honor, even when honor's course leads him down an undesired path. Shakespeare pays homage to his crown in his characterization of Caesar, but it seems that in Brutus is where the true definition of a Shakespearean hero lies.

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