COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE AND SACRIFICE IN SHAKESPEARE'S
JULIUS CAESAR

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The theater deals with human conflict. Curiously, dramatic criticism discusses the subject very little. Can we automatically assume that Shakespeare shares the commonsense view according to which conflict is based on differences? Can we assume that tragic conflict is due to the different opinions or values of the various protagonists? This is never true in Shakespeare. Of two persons who do not get along, we say: they have their differences. In Shakespeare the reverse is true: the characters disagree because they agree too much.

Let me explain this paradox. Why does Brutus hate Caesar? Most people will answer that they stand on opposite sides in a meaningful political struggle. This is true in the sense that Brutus is a sincere Republican and that Caesar's popularity makes him a real threat to the Republic, but the reason for Brutus' hatred of Caesar lies elsewhere.

To understand this hatred we must start from its opposite, which is the love of Brutus for Caesar. Yes, Brutus loves Caesar dearly. He says so and we can believe him; Brutus never lies.

To Brutus, Caesar is what we call today a role model and much more; he is an incomparable guide, an unsurpassable teacher. To a Roman with political ambition—and Brutus' ambition is great, being patterned on Caesar's—Caesar is the unbeatable champion and therefore an insurmountable obstacle. No one can hope to equal him and become another Caesar, and this is what Brutus really wants to be. Far from excluding hatred, Brutus' love for Caesar necessarily leads to it. Caesar is Brutus' rival because he is
his model, and vice versa. The more Brutus loves Caesar, the more he hates him, and vice versa. This ambivalence must be defined not in Freudian but in mimetic terms.

I call the desire of Brutus mimetic or mediated desire. Everything Brutus wants to have and to be, he owes to Caesar; far from having differences with Caesar, he has none, and that is why he hates him. He is like a lover who sees the woman he loves in the arms of another man. The woman here is Rome herself. And Brutus loves that woman because Caesar loves her. My erotic comparison is not psychoanalytical; it is inspired by Shakespeare's comedies, which are as full of mimetic desire as the tragedies.

Mimetic desire is the mutual borrowing of desire by two friends who become antagonists as a result. When mimetic rivalry becomes intense, tragic conflict results. Intense conflict and intense friendship are almost identical in Shakespeare. This paradox is a source of linguistic effects that should not be dismissed as pure rhetoric. They are highly meaningful. Beloved enemy is no rhetorical expression; it is exactly what Caesar is to Brutus.

When mimetic rivalry escalates beyond a certain point, the rivals engage in endless conflicts which undifferentiate them more and more; they all become doubles of one another. During the civil war, Brutus sounds increasingly authoritarian and majestic, just like Caesar. In order to be Caesar, Brutus acts more and more like Caesar. After the murder, in his speech to the Romans, Brutus imitates the terse prose style of Caesar. The shout that rises from the crowd, "Let him be Caesar," is enormously meaningful. Sincere Republican though he is, Brutus unconsciously turns into a second Caesar, and this must be interpreted less in terms of individual psychology than as an effect of the worsening mimetic crisis. Caesar is a threat and, in order to restore the Republic, he must be eliminated, but whoever eliminates him, ipso facto, becomes another Caesar, which is what Brutus secretly desires, anyway, and so do the people themselves. The destruction of the Republic is this very process; no single man is responsible for it; everybody is.

The political genius of Rome is the ability of its Republican
institutions to accommodate the kind of rivalry that exists between Brutus and Caesar. This is true but only up to a point. The Republic is a *cursus honorum*, and as long as rival ambitions keep each other in check, liberty survives. Rival ambitions can become so intense, however, that they no longer tolerate one another. Instead of competing within the limits of the law, the rival leaders turn violent and treat each other as enemies. They all accuse each other of destroying Republican institutions and this false excuse quickly becomes the truth of the situation. All of them together are destroying the Republic.

We cannot say that these leaders have their differences; they all want the same thing; they all copy each other; they all behave in the same way; what Shakespeare portrays is no conflict of differences, but a plague of undifferentiation.

The very first lines of the play suggest that the populace itself partakes of this leveling process. The common people show up on the Forum without the insignia of their profession, reflecting the undifferentiation at the top. The Roman Republic is unraveling from top to bottom:

- Hence! home, you idle creatures, get you home!
- Is this a holiday? What! know you not,
- Being mechanical, you ought not to walk
- Upon a labouring day without the sign
- Of your profession? (I.i.1–5)

These Romans are not soldiers but their regular organization resembles the military, and their departure from tradition recalls the confusion of ranks in the Greek army, such as Ulysses describes in *Troilus and Cressida*, the “choking” or “neglection” of Degree. The word Degree means the differential principle thanks to which the cultural and social order is what it is. In the eyes of Shakespeare, the end of the Roman Republic is an historical example of such a crisis.

I think that Shakespeare conceives that crisis exactly as all traditional societies do; his genius does not contradict and yet transcends traditional wisdom. The reason why the mimetic crisis exacerbates more and more is the peculiar logic that it obeys, the logic abun-
dantly exemplified in *Julius Caesar*, the logic of mimetic rivalry and mimetic contagion. The more mimetic desire there is, the more it generates, the more attractive it becomes as a mimetic model.

A conspiracy is a mimetic association of murderers; it comes into being at an advanced but not yet the most advanced stage of a mimetic crisis. Shakespeare dedicates his first two acts to the genesis of the conspiracy against Caesar, and he treats the subject in full conformity with the logic of mimetic desire.

The instigator of the conspiracy is Cassius and his maneuvers are dramatized at length. Once the conspiracy has become a reality, Brutus accepts leading it, but its real father is Cassius, who is the dominant figure at the beginning. Cassius plays the same role as Pandarus, the erotic go-between, at the beginning of *Troilus and Cressida*; he works very hard at instilling in his associates his own desire to kill Caesar.

Cassius' mimetic incitement is very similar to what we have in many comedies, except for the fact that the people he manipulates are mimetically seduced in choosing not the same erotic object as their mediator but the same victim, a common target of assassination.

The conspiracy originates in the envious soul of Cassius. Envy and mimetic desire are one and the same. Caesar portrays the man as a self-tortured intellectual unable to enjoy sensuous pleasures. Unlike his modern posterity, this early prototype of *resentment*—Nietzsche's word for mimetic envy—has not yet lost all capacity for bold action, but he excels only in the clandestine and terroristic type exemplified by the conspiracy.

Cassius reveals his envy in everything he says. Unable to compete with Caesar on Caesar's ground, he claims superiority in small matters such as a swimming contest that he once had with the great man. Had it not been for himself, Cassius, his rival, who helped him across the Tiber, Caesar would have drowned. Cassius refuses to worship a god who owes him his very life.

Cassius' invidious comparisons, his slanted anecdotes, and his perpetual flattery of Brutus are worthy of Pandarus and, therefore,
they recall Ulysses, the political counterpart of the "bawd" in Troilus and Cressida:

- Brutus and Caesar: what should be in that "Caesar"?
- Why should that name be sounded more than yours?
- Write them together, yours is as fair a name;
- Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well;
- Weigh them, it is as heavy; conjure with 'em,
- "Brutus" will start a spirit as soon as "Caesar."
- Now in the names of all the gods at once,
- Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed
- That he is grown so great? (i.ii.142–150)

A little later, Cassius resorts to the language of Ulysses with Achilles in Troilus and Cressida, also for the purpose of stirring up mimetic rivalry in a man obsessed by a successful rival. The two plays are very close to each other from the standpoint of their mimetic operation.

The second man recruited for the conspiracy is Casca; he is superstitious in the extreme. He describes a violent but banal equinoctial storm in terms of supernatural signs and portents exclusively. Shakespeare does not believe in astrology and, in order to refute this nonsense authoritatively, he resorts to no less a man than Cicero, who contradicts Casca's interpretation. This is the philosopher's only invention in the play.

The mimetic seducer, Cassius, is no more superstitious than Cicero; his famous saying on the subject shows it:

- The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
- But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
  (i.ii.140–141)

Cassius does not believe in astrology, but, for the purpose of seducing Casca into the conspiracy, he can speak the language of astrology. Instead of deriding his interlocutor's irrationality, he tries to channel it in the direction of Caesar. What he condemns in Casca is his failure to blame Caesar for the terrifying storm:
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)

Cassius never mentions Caesar by name because he wants Casca to name him first; this credulous man will believe that he discovered Caesar’s evil influence all by himself. Casca finally comes up with the right name:

‘Tis Caesar that you mean; is it not, Cassius?

Cassius literally hypnotizes Casca into believing that Caesar is responsible for the bad weather. If someone must be *most like this dreadful night*, why not Caesar, the most powerful man in Rome? Seeing that Cassius seems angry rather than afraid, Casca feels somewhat reassured and, in his eagerness for more reassurance, he makes the other man’s anger his own; he eagerly espouses Cassius’s quarrel against Caesar.

Casca’s decision to join the murderers is more disturbing than Brutus’ because, unlike Brutus, the man is obsequious with Caesar and totally unconcerned with abuses of power and other political niceties. He is petty and envious but not talented enough to feel jealous of such a towering figure as Caesar. His real personal rivals belong to a lower type. If Cassius had directed his mimetic urge toward someone else, Casca would have chosen the someone else. His participation in the conspiracy has nothing to do with what Caesar is or might become; it rests entirely on his own mimetic suggestibility, stimulated by fear. Caesar is being turned into what we call a scapegoat, and Shakespeare insists on all the scapegoat signs that designate him to the crowd: his lameness, his epileptic fear, and even a bad ear, an incipient deafness that Shakespeare seems to have invented all by himself. The other physical infirmities are in
Plutarch, and Shakespeare emphasizes them because he understands their importance in the overall scheme of victimization.

After Brutus and Casca, we witness the recruiting of a third citizen into the conspiracy, Ligarius. The man is so susceptible to mimetic pressure, so ready for conspiratorial mischief that, although very ill, as soon as he understands that the gathering around Brutus must have some violent purpose, he throws his bandages away and follows the leader.

Ligarius does not know the name of his future victim and he does not even want to know. Brutus gives no indication that he finds this behavior shocking; his equanimity is as disturbing as Ligarius’s irresponsibility. This virtuous Republican sees nothing wrong, it seems, in a Roman citizen’s blindly surrendering his freedom of choice into the hands of another:

LIGARIUS: Set on your foot,
And with a heart new fir’d I follow you
To do I know not what; but it sufficeth
That Brutus leads me on.

BRUTUS: Follow me then.

(II.i.331–334)

The times are nasty, and normally law-abiding Romans are more and more easily swayed in favor of murder, less and less selective regarding the choice of their victims. Being part of the crisis, the genesis of the conspiracy is itself a dynamic process, a segment of an escalation in which the murder of Caesar comes first, then the murder of Cinna, and finally the ever-intensified violence that leads to Philippi. Instead of putting an end to the crisis, the murder of Caesar speeds up its acceleration.

Let us make the mimetic significance of what we read quite explicit. The intensification and diffusion of mimetic rivalry has turned all citizens into hostile carbon copies of one another, mimetic doubles. At first these doubles are still paired in conformity with the
mimetic history that they have in common; they have been fighting for the same objects and, in this sense, they truly "belong" to one another. This is the case with Brutus and Caesar. Conflicts are still "rational" to the extent at least that each double is truly entitled to call his antagonist "his own."

This element of rationality is still present in the case of Brutus. It seems that Brutus would not have to be recruited at all, since he really hates Caesar, but he is a law-abiding citizen and, were it not for the mimetic incitement of Cassius, his hatred, intense as it is, would never become homicidal.

When the crisis gets worse, this last element of rationality disappears. When mimetic effects constantly intensify, the disputed objects disappear or become irrelevant. The mimetic influx must find some other outlet and it affects the choice of the only entities left inside the system, the doubles themselves. Mimetic contamination determines more and more the choice of antagonists.

At this advanced stage of the mimetic crisis, many people can exchange their own doubles, their own mimetic rivals, for the double of someone else. This is what Casca does. The someone else is Cassius, a mediator of hatred and no longer a mediator of desire. This is a new stage in the process of violent undifferentiation. The more "perfect" the doubles are as doubles, the easier it becomes to substitute one for another.

With each of the three Roman citizens successfully recruited for the conspiracy, this kind of substitution becomes easier and we go down one more notch in regard to these individuals' ability to think by themselves, to use their reason, and to behave in a responsible way.

It is less a matter of individual psychology than the rapid march of mimetic desire itself. As the conspiracy becomes larger, the job of attracting new members becomes easier. The combined mimetic influence of those already attracted makes the chosen target more and more attractive mimetically. As the crisis worsens, the relative importance of mimesis versus rationality goes up.
We have reached a point when dual conflicts give way to associations of several people against a single one, usually a highly visible individual, a popular statesman—Julius Caesar, for instance. When a small number of people clandestinely get together for the purpose of doing away with one of their fellow citizens, we call their association a *conspiracy*, and so does Shakespeare. Both the process and the word are prominently displayed in *Julius Caesar*.

Whereas the *mimesis* of desire means disunity among those who cannot possess their common object together, this mimesis of conflict means more solidarity among those who can fight the same enemy *together* and who promise each other to do so. Nothing unites man like a common enemy but, for the time being, only a few people are thus united, and they are united for the purpose of disturbing the peace of the community as a whole. That is why the conspiratorial stage is even more destructive of the social order than the more fragmented enmities that preceded it.

The forming of a conspiracy is a sinister threshold on the road to civil war, significant enough to call for a solemn warning which the author paradoxically places in the mouth of the conspiracy’s own reluctant leader, Brutus. There is logic in this paradox, however, since Brutus’ purpose is to defend threatened Republican institutions. Brutus himself is aware that his violent medicine could be as bad as the disease and even worse; it could make the recovery of the patient impossible and, indeed, it will. Even though Brutus feels that he must join the conspiracy, this great defender of traditional institutions is horrified by the historical sign that the forming of a conspiracy constitutes:

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BRUTUS: O Conspiracy!
Sham’st thou to show thy dang’rous brow by night,
When evils are most free? O then, by day
Where wilt thou find a cavern dark enough
To mask thy monstrous visage? Seek none,
    Conspiracy!
Hide it in smiles and affability;
For if thou path, thy native semblance on,
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Not Erebus itself were dim enough
To hide thee from prevention.
(I.i.77–85)

The conspiracy is said to have a monstrous visage and it certainly does in the usual Shakespearean sense of uniting contradictory features in some kind of artificial mimetic unity, something which happens only at the most advanced stages of the mimetic crisis.

We should not believe that, because he represents the conspiracy harshly, Shakespeare must feel political sympathy for Caesar. At first sight, no doubt, Caesar seems more generous and kind than his opponents. Whereas Brutus hates Caesar as much as he loves him, Caesar's love is free from hatred. But Caesar can afford to be generous; neither Brutus nor any other Roman can be an obstacle to him anymore. This is not enough to demonstrate that Caesar stands above the mimetic law.

On the morning of the murder, Caesar first follows the advice of his wife, who is terrified because she has been dreaming of his violent death, and he decides not to go to the Senate; but then Decius reinterprets the dream for him and he goes to the Senate after all. It takes only a few words of ambiguous flattery to change Caesar's mind. He has become a mimetic weathervane.

The more the dictator rises above other men, the more autonomous he subjectively feels and the less he is in reality. At the supreme instant, just before falling under the conspirators' blows, in a strange fit of exaltation, he hubristically compares himself to the North Star, the one motionless light in the firmament. His self-sufficiency is no less deceptive than the erotic "narcissism" of certain characters in the comedies.

The more intense our mimetic pride, the more fragile it becomes, even in a physical sense. Just like the crowd and the conspirators themselves, Caesar is an example of what happens to men caught in the crisis of Degree. His common sense has left him, just as it will leave Brutus a few moments later. Because of the crisis, the quality of all desires is deteriorating. Instead of feeling neurotically inferior, as his unsuccessful rivals do, Caesar feels neurotically
superior. His symptoms look completely different, but solely because of his position inside a fragile mimetic structure; underneath, the disease is the same. If Caesar had found himself in the same position relative to some man as Brutus does relative to him, he, too, would join a conspiracy against that man.

Brutus wants the murder to be as discreet, orderly, and "nonviolent" as it possibly can. Unfortunately for the conspiracy, he himself proves incapable of abiding by his own rule. Losing his sang-froid in the hot blood of his victim, Brutus gets carried away in the most dangerous fashion at the most crucial instant, right after the murder. He suggests to the conspirators that they should all bathe their arms in Caesar's blood up to the elbows and smear their swords with his blood.

Needless to say, our blood-spattered conspirators do not make a favorable impression. But they make a very strong one and they provide the already unstable populace with a potent mimetic model, a model which many citizens will imitate even and especially if they reject it most violently. The subsequent events tell the whole story. After listening to Brutus, then to Mark Antony, the crowd reacts by collectively putting to death an unfortunate bystander, Cinna, in a grotesque parody of what the conspirators themselves have done. The crowd becomes a mirror in which the murderers contemplate the truth of their action. They wanted to become mimetic models for the people and they are, but not the kind that they intended.

When they kill Cinna, the people mimic Caesar's murder but in a spirit of revenge, not of Republican virtue. Mimetic desire is perceptive, and it will immediately detect any discrepancy between the words and the deeds of its models; it will always pattern itself on what these models do and not on what they say.

Cinna is the first totally uninvolved and perfectly innocent victim. He is a poet and he has nothing to do with the conspirator named Cinna; he politely says so to the crowd. His only connection to Caesar's murder is a fortuitous coincidence of names. He
even happens to be a friend of Caesar's and he mentions the fact, but to no avail; one anonymous shout comes from the mob: "Tear him to pieces."

A mob never lacks "subjective" and "objective" reasons for tearing its victims to pieces. The more numerous these reasons, the more insignificant they really are. Learning that Cinna is a bachelor, the married men in the mob feel insulted. Others resent the poet in this harmless individual and one more shout is heard: "Tear him for his bad verse!" Obediently, mimetically, the mob tears the wrong Cinna to pieces.

When it was first organized, the conspiracy against Caesar was still an unusual enterprise that required a rather lengthy genesis; once Caesar is murdered, conspiracies sprout everywhere and their violence is so sudden and haphazard that the word itself, *conspiracy*, no longer seems right for the spontaneous enormity of the disorder. Violent imitation is responsible for this as for everything else and that is the reason we have a single continuous process instead of the discontinuous synchronic patterns that the structuralists want to discover everywhere, in a misguided denial of history.

The general trend is clear: it takes less and less time for more and more people to polarize against more and more victims, for flimsier and flimsier reasons. A little earlier, Ligarius' indifference to the identity of his victim was still an exceptional phenomenon; after Caesar's murder, this indifference becomes commonplace and the last criteria disappear in the selection of victims. *Mimesis* learns fast and, after only one single try, it will do routinely and automatically what seemed almost unthinkable a moment before.

The contagion is such that the entire community is finally divided into two vast "conspiracies" that can only do one thing: go to war with each other; they have the same structure as individual doubles; one is led by Brutus and Cassius and the other by Octavius Caesar and Mark Antony. Shakespeare sees this civil conflict not as an ordinary war but as the total unleashing of the mob:

Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
Shall cumber all the parts of Italy;
Blood and destruction shall be so in use,
And dreadful objects so familiar,
That mothers shall but smile when they behold
Their infants quartered with the hands of war;
All pity chok’d with custom of fell deeds;
And Caesar’s spirit, ranging for revenge;
With Ate by his side, come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch’s voice
Cry “Havoc!” and let slip the dogs of war,
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial.

(III.i.263–275)

Just as Brutus, in Act II, solemnly proclaimed the advent of the fearful conspiracy, Mark Antony informs us in this soliloquy that an even worse stage of the crisis has arrived; his name for it is: domestic fury or fierce civil strife. As each new stage of the crisis is reached, Shakespeare has someone make a rather formal and impersonal speech about it. These speeches do not really tell us anything about the character who utters them; they are unnecessary to the plot; they are speeches about the various stages in the mimetic crisis.

Domestic fury and fierce civil strife culminate in the battle of Philippi, which Shakespeare does not treat as a banal military encounter but as the climactic epiphany of the mimetic crisis, the final explosion of the mob that gathered after the murder of Caesar, when the conspiracy began to metastasize.

As Peter S. Anderson observed, in this battle no one is really where he should be; everything is dislocated; death is the sole common denominator (“Shakespeare’s Caesar: The Language of Sacrifice,” Comparative Drama, 3, pp. 5–6). Instead of a few victims killed by still relatively small mobs, thousands of people are killed by thousands of others who are really their brothers and do not have the faintest idea of why they or their victims should die.

At Philippi, total violence is unleashed and it seems that the point of no return has been reached. No hope remains and yet, in the
very last lines of the play, all of a sudden, peace returns. This is no ordinary victory, no mere overpowering of the weak by the strong. This conclusion is a rebirth of Degree; it concludes the mimetic crisis itself.

The return to peace seems rooted in the suicide of Brutus. How could that be? In two very brief but majestic speeches, the victors, Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar, eulogize Brutus. Mark Antony speaks first:

>This was the noblest Roman of them all:
All the conspirators save only he,
Did what they did in envy of great Caesar;

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world: "This was a man!"

(V.v.68–75)

This famous tribute is not quite truthful; Brutus was free only from the basest kind of envy. This truth is sacrificed to the new spirit now blowing, a spirit of reconciliation.

Sensing a political master stroke, Octavius Caesar consecrates the new Brutus by granting full military honors to him. By absolving Brutus of envy, Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar sanctify his political motives. Only the loving side of his ambivalence toward Caesar remains visible; we remember the words of Brutus after he killed Caesar: "I slew my best lover"; we remember his words before he killed himself:

>Caesar, now be still,
I killed not thee with half so good a will.

(V.v.50–51)

It seems that both Caesar and Brutus accepted giving their lives for the same cause, in a mysterious consummation that makes *Pax Romana* possible once again.

Up to that point, unanimity had eluded both parties; neither the Republicans nor their opponents could achieve it. Caesar's death was divisive: one part of the people united against Caesar and
around Brutus while another part united against Brutus and around Caesar. If Brutus and Caesar become one in death, then all the people can unite against and around the same double-headed god.

To Brutus, this posthumous apotheosis would seem the ultimate derision, the supreme betrayal. It makes him a junior partner in the enterprise that he was desperately trying to prevent, the creation of a new monarchy. But the real Brutus no longer matters; a mythical figure has replaced him inside a newly emerging structure of meaning. According to this new vision, the Roman Emperor is both an absolute monarch and the official protector of the Republic, its only legitimate heir.

Caesar's murder has become the foundational violence of the Roman Empire.

What does it mean for violence to be foundational? Mimetic theory has its own interpretation of this and it throws a great deal of light on what Shakespeare is doing. Mimetic theory believes in the reality of the mimetic crises portrayed by Shakespeare, and, from their nature, as well as from a great many other clues, it speculates that these crises, in primitive societies, must be concluded by unanimous mimetic polarizations against single victims or a few victims only; this hypothetical resolution is the original sacrifice, and I call it foundational murder, foundational violence.

This original sacrifice means that human communities unite around some transfigured victim. There is nothing genuinely transcendental or metaphysical about the foundational murder. It is similar to mimetic polarizations of the conspiracy type except for one difference, crucial no doubt from a social viewpoint but in itself minor: it is unanimous. Unanimity means that the people suddenly find themselves without enemies, and, lacking fuel, the spirit of vengeance becomes extinguished. The unanimity is the automatic end-product of the mimetic escalation itself; it can almost be predicted from the constantly increasing size of the mimetic polarizations that precede it. Shakespeare sees the importance of this question and that is why the rivalry of Brutus and
Mark Antony first takes the form of rival speeches in front of the Roman mob. The real battle is a battle for the interpretation of Caesar's murder.

The conclusion is not the only reason for defining the origin and substance of sacrifice as I just did. There are many indications in Julius Caesar that Shakespeare espoused this idea.

I see a first reason in the references to the collective expulsion of the last king of Rome, Tarquin. Both Cassius and Brutus invoke this event as a precedent and a mimetic model for the murder they contemplate; here is what Brutus says in his soliloquy of Act II.i:

Shall Rome stand under one man's awe? What, Rome?
My ancestors did from the streets of Rome
The Tarquin drive when he was call'd a King.

(II.i.52-54)

Initially, the violence against Tarquin was an illegal act, one more violence in a violent escalation, just as Caesar's murder is when it is committed, but Tarquin's expulsion met with the unanimous approval of the people and it put an end to a crisis of Degree; instead of dividing the people along factional lines, it united them and new institutions sprang from it. It is the real foundation of the Republic.

Brutus sees the murder of Caesar as a ritual sacrifice ordained by the murder of Tarquin. He says so in his great speech to the conspirators:

Let's be sacrificers but not butchers, Caius,

Let's kill him boldly but not wrathfully;
Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods.

(II.i.166–173)

Brutus interprets sacrifice as a re-enactment of the foundational violence, the expulsion of Tarquin, with a different victim, Caesar. The sole purpose is to rejuvenate the existing order. This is the definition of sacrifice according to mimetic theory, the re-enactment
of the foundational violence. The coincidence between mimetic theory and Shakespearean tragedy is perfect.

In connection with this foundational violence, another passage of *Julius Caesar* which I already mentioned is essential, Calphurnia's dream. If we go back to it and to its reinterpretation by Decius, we can see immediately that it is more than a prophecy of Caesar's murder; it is a literal definition of its foundational status at the end of the play.

First, let us read Caesar's initial account:

She dreamt to-night she saw my statue,
Which, like a fountain with a hundred spouts,
Did run pure blood; and many lusty Romans
Came smiling and did bathe their hands in it.
And these does she apply for warnings and portents
And evils imminent, and on her knee
Hath begg'd that I will stay at home to-day.

One of the conspirators, Decius Brutus, immediately reinterprets the dream:

This dream is all amiss interpreted,
It was a vision fair and fortunate.
Your statue spouting blood in many pipes,
In which so many smiling Romans bath'd,
Signifies that from you great Rome shall suck
Reviving blood, and that great men shall press
For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance.
This by Calphurnia's dream is signified.

(II.ii.76–90)

The author found Calphurnia's dream in Plutarch, as well as her terrified reaction to it, but, as far as I know, Decius' reinterpretation is a pure invention of Shakespeare's and there are very few in this play. From the point of view of our foundational violence, it is the essential text.

The two texts together are a superb definition of the foundational murder, the original sacrifice, a definition that takes its
mimetic ambivalence into account. The two interpretations seem to contradict each other, but in reality they are both true. The first corresponds to what Caesar's murder is at first, during the play, a source of extreme disorder, and the second to what the same murder becomes in the conclusion, the source of the new imperial order. Brutus' death triggers this transformation but its role is secondary. It is the first ritual sacrifice of the new order, ordained to a new divinity, Caesar himself. Ironically, Brutus, who wanted to sacrifice Caesar to the Roman Republic, is the one who ends up carved as a dish fit for the gods, and the real god is Caesar. Caesar is a god because his murder is the paramount event, the pivot upon which the violence of the crisis slowly revolved in order to generate a new Roman and universal Degree.

There is a question the critics have always asked regarding the composition of *Julius Caesar*: why did Shakespeare locate the murder of Caesar in the third act, almost at the precise center of the play, instead of locating it at the conclusion, as a more conventional playwright would have done?

Can a play in which the hero dies in the wrong place be a real tragedy; in other words, can it be satisfactory as entertainment? Is it not the juxtaposition of two plays rather than a single one, a first tragedy about Caesar's murder and a second one about the murderers?

The answer is clear: *Julius Caesar* is centered neither on Caesar nor on his murderers; it is not even about Roman history but about collective violence itself. The real subject is the violent crowd. *Julius Caesar* is the play in which the violent essence of the theater and of human culture itself are revealed. Shakespeare is the first tragic poet and thinker who focuses relentlessly on the foundational murder.

Shakespeare is not interested primarily in Caesar, or in Brutus, or even in Roman history. What fascinates him obviously is the exemplary nature of the events he portrays; he is obviously aware that the only reason why collective violence is essential to tragedy
is that it has been and it remains essential to human culture as such. He is asking himself why the same murder that cannot reconcile the people at one moment will do the trick a little later; how the murder of Caesar can be a source of disorder first, and then a source of order; how the sacrificial miscarriage of Brutus can become the basis for a new sacrificial order.

To shift the murder from the conclusion to the center of this play means more or less what it means for an astronomer to focus his telescope on the enormously large but infinitely distant object he is studying. Shakespeare goes straight to what has always been the hidden substance of all tragedy and he confronts it explicitly.

Tragedy is a by-product of sacrifice; it is sacrifice without the immolation of the victim, an attenuated form of ritual sacrifice, just as ritual sacrifice itself is a first attenuation of the original murder. Like the great tragic poets of Greece but much more radically, Shakespeare turns sacrifice against itself, against its own sacrificial and cathartic function, and he uses it for a revelation of the foundational murder.

_Julius Caesar_ was written in such a way, however, that it can be read and performed sacrificially and cathartically. Traditional interpretations and stage performances almost invariably turn the play into some kind of monument to the glory of both the Republic and the Empire, of ancient Rome as a whole. Shakespeare wrote the play at two levels, the traditional one which is sacrificial, and the anti-sacrificial one which I am trying to formulate.

If we consider the amount of collective violence in this play, even in purely quantitative terms, we will see that collective violence and sacrifice are its real subject. Not counting Philippi, three instances of collective violence are either displayed on the stage or prominently mentioned: the murder of Caesar, the lynching of the unfortunate Cinna, and the expulsion of Tarquin.

Of the three, Caesar's murder is the most important, of course, and no fewer than three different interpretations of it play a significant role in the play; first, we have the Republican sacrifice of Brutus, before the murder occurs, then we have this same murder
as total disorder, and then, finally, this same deed becomes the founding of a new order, the original sacrifice from which great Rome shall suck reviving blood. There is not one thing in this play that does not lead to the murder if it occurs before it, and that does not proceed from the murder if it occurs after it. The murder is the hub around which everything revolves. Who said that this play lacks unity?

The dramatic process I have described contradicts all political interpretations of Julius Caesar. Political questions are all of the same differential type: which party does Shakespeare favor in the civil war, the Republicans or the monarchists? Which leader does he like better, Caesar or Brutus? Which social class does he esteem, which does he despise, the aristocrats or the commoners? Shakespeare feels human sympathy for all his characters and great antipathy for the mimetic process that turns them all into equivalent doubles.

Political answers are one of the ways in which our insatiable appetite for differences satisfies itself. All differentialism, pre-structuralist, structuralist, or post-structuralist, is equally unable to grasp the most fundamental aspect of Shakespearean dramaturgy, conflictual undifferentiation. We can see this in the fact that the most opposite political views can be defended with equal plausibility and implausibility. The case for a Shakespeare sympathetic to the Republic and hostile to Caesar is just as convincing, or unconvincing, as the case for the reverse political view.

Undecidability is the rule in Shakespeare as in all great mimetic writers, but it does not stem from some transcendental property of écriture, or from the “inexhaustible richness” of great art; it is great art, no doubt, but carefully nurtured by the writer himself who deals with human situations mimetically.

One of the errors generated by the twentieth-century love affair with politics is the widespread belief that the mob-like propensities of the crowd in Julius Caesar must reflect contempt for the common man, a distressingly “conservative” bias on the part of Shakespeare himself.
His pleasantries about the foul-stinking breath of the multitude seem deplorable to our democratic prudishness, but this sentiment had not yet been invented circa 1600. The mob-like propensities of the plebeians are even less significant because all social classes are similarly affected, not only in *Julius Caesar*, but in the other Roman plays and in all crises of Degree, really. Ligarius and Casca, two aristocrats, are no less prone to irrational violence than the idle workers in the first lines of the play.

The crisis turns not only the lower classes into a mob but the aristocrats as well, via the conspiracy, or via their degrading idolatry of Caesar. Our preoccupation with class struggle distorts our appreciation not only of Shakespeare but of tragic literature in general. Our virtuous defenders of the proletariat see only the symptoms that affect their protégés.

Marxism confuses tragic undifferentiation with a vain striving for political neutrality. If Shakespeare does not lean in one direction, he must necessarily lean in the other, even if he pretends that he does not. So goes the reasoning. According to this view, politics is so intrinsically absorbing, even the politics of fifteen hundred years ago, that not even Shakespeare can be even handed in his treatment of it; his apparent impartiality is only a devious way of playing politics.

Shakespeare does not try to be “impartial.” We must not see the practical equivalence of all parties in conflict as a hard-won victory of “detachment” over “prejudice,” as the heroic triumph of “objectivity” over “subjectivity,” or as some other feat of epistemological asceticism that historians of all stripes should either emulate or denounce as a mystification.

Mimetic reciprocity is the structure of human relations for Shakespeare, and his dramatization of it is no painstaking obligation, but his intellectual and aesthetic delight. In his approach to a great historical quarrel, the objects in dispute, momentous as they seem to us, interest him much less than mimetic rivalry and its undifferentiating effects.

Like “true love” in the comedies, politics in *Julius Caesar* is
always a direct or indirect reflection of what is taking place on some mimetic chessboard. Caesar’s politics of imperial reconciliation are a move on this chessboard, and so is Brutus’ defense of republicanism. Even the poetry of Shakespeare is inseparable from this undifferentiation, which tends to confound contraries, as Shakespeare would say, and to generate countless metaphors and other figures of speech.

I do not want to imply that political questioning is always out of place in Shakespeare. Until the mimetic logic that erases differences is established, it is premature; after this logic is in place, to inquire about the political significance of the logic itself is not only legitimate but imperative.

The perpetual “plague on both your houses” in Shakespeare must not be void of political significance. When I read *Julius Caesar* I see no utopian temptation, but I also see an author more nauseated with the aristocratic politics of his time than critics usually believe. I see more satire than most critics perceive. I see an antipolitical stance in Shakespeare that suggests a rather sardonic view of history. On political subjects, he reminds me of two French thinkers who are themselves closer to one another than it appears, Montaigne and Pascal. But Shakespeare’s mimetic vision, which is artistic form as well as intellectual insight, always takes precedence over other considerations.

(1989)