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Shakespeare's Cassius: A Critical Re-appraisal

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Abstract

This thesis examines Shakespeare's characterisation of Cassius in *Julius Caesar*. Although a faint figure in the historical tradition that Shakespeare inherited, Cassius emerges as the second most prominent character in the play (at least in terms of words spoken). My aim is to explain how (and why) Cassius comes to enjoy such a primary role in the tragedy. In Chapter One, I examine the historical information Shakespeare may have consulted to fashion his Cassius. As I hope to show, Shakespeare adapts and appropriates Plutarch to provide a far more nuanced portrait than the predominantly one-dimensional foil for Brutus. In Chapter Two, I examine the Caesar plays of several contemporary European dramatists (e.g., Muret, Pescetti, and Kyd) to compare their depictions of Cassius to Shakespeare's. In Chapter Three, I examine Elizabethan England's influence on Shakespeare's depiction of Cassius. Additionally, I will explore whether or not Shakespeare sought to connect Cassius with the contemporary figure Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex.

The overarching questions that connect these chapters together are: can Cassius be considered the hero or a villain of the play? Is he neither? Is he a "mixed" character? These questions are important, as critics have long been divided over Cassius since the play was first performed. Hopefully, this thesis will show that Cassius is, by the end of the play at least, closer to Vikram Chopra's "Elizabethan patriot" than he is to any other critical iteration. Shakespeare has created a character who is intelligent, patriotic, and passionate, but also personally vindictive. In short, he is every bit as flawed as every other major character in the tragedy.

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Note on Abbreviations and Texts

Journal abbreviations, when employed, conform to the style set out in the *PMLA International Bibliography*. Abbreviations for ancient authors and their works follow the conventions used in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th edition) edited by Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth (Oxford: OUP, 2012). All block English translations of ancient sources are taken from the most recent Loeb Classical Library editions (for details, see the Primary Sources section in the Bibliography). For definitions of Latin words I reference the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (abbreviated to *OLD* in the footnotes) edited by P.G. Ware (Oxford: OUP, 1982). The edition of Thomas North's Plutarch I consulted is: *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes Translated by Sir Thomas North*. 8 Vols. (Oxford: OUP, 1928). All other textual and translation matters are explained in the footnotes.

Shakespeare's lineation is the subject of unending scholarly debate. Accordingly, for the sake of simplicity, I have followed the lineation used in David Daniell's *Julius Caesar: The Arden Shakespeare* (London: Arden, 1998).