Rome Desired; Or, The Idea of Rome*

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The title of this paper explicitly recalls Tony Tanner’s *Venice Desired*, published in 1992¹, a book which explores Venice, a city unique in so many ways, in terms of its special – indeed, unique – relationship to writing. London has Dickens, Paris has Balzac, Saint Petersburg, Dostoevsky, and Dublin has Joyce, but there is simply no comparable writer for, or coming out of, Venice.

Rising mysteriously from the sea, her beautiful stonework suspended impossibly on water, the city is a spectacle in itself; city of marvels *par excellence*, city of art, city as art, simultaneously the greatest and richest republic in the history of the world and watery, dark, silent locus of sensuality and secrecy, of an always double-edged beauty. Loved and rewritten by writers, Muse for so many artists and painters and musicians, the very place – her name itself a dream – seems to lend itself to a whole range of hommages, recastings, hallucinations. With gusto and scholarly competence and a passionate love for, and admiration of, the city, Tony Tanner characterises Venice as an important site for the European imagination, beginning, naturally, with the city’s epiphanic revelation in Shakespeare, and then skilfully layering the myriad ways in which this dreamlike city has been evoked, depicted, dramatised, rediscovered, transfigured, in selected writings through the years.

* This paper was originally read at the conference *Shakespeare 2016. The Memory of Rome*, organised by Sapienza University, Roma Tre University, and Tor Vergata University (Rome, April 2016). It is published here in its original, oral form with notes added by the author.

Not so with Shakespeare’s Rome. Whilst in Wilson Knight’s penetrating study, “The Eroticism of *Julius Caesar*”\(^2\), Caesar and Rome are drawn as requited lovers, for Brutus Rome is less an object of desire and more the manifestation of an idea: an idea and an ideal. The subject of this paper, then, will be not *Rome desired* – in Italian, “il desiderio di Roma”; but rather, *the idea of Rome*, or *Rome as ideal* – “l’idea di Roma”, focusing on a very ‘idealistic’ hero: Brutus.

We know that Shakespeare derived his material for *Julius Caesar* from Plutarch – that is, via Thomas North’s English translation of Jacques Amyot’s French rendering of three biographies – *The Life of Iulius Caesar, The Life of Marcus Brutus, The Life of Marcus Antonius* – which means that Shakespeare had little, if any, access to the original Latin terms in which his Roman subjects would actually have thought and expressed themselves. It is hardly surprising, then, that his Roman characters reflect the values and perspectives proper more to the language of Plutarch’s sixteenth-century translators, North and Amyot. Furthermore, it is quite understandable that, in the process, what Romans regarded as the most compelling aspects of human behaviour and personality should have unwittingly been – what can I say? – distorted? Anyhow, changed.

Of course things *had* changed in the meantime, so much so that in the world of Plutarch’s translators – to mention one particular difference – measures of individual worth were essentially *personal* values and intentions, both conscious and unconscious. Not so for Roman aristocrats, whose lasting measure of personal success or failure was *reputation*. What I mean is that, in reality, the ancient world put no emphasis on interiority: it was not until St. Augustine’s *Confessions* that the irrefutable fact that eternal salvation is ultimately contingent on individual conscience was established.

It is also particularly interesting that throughout the play Shakespeare alludes to the advent of Christianity. Casca evokes “the high east” that stands directly behind the Capitol (II.i.110); Caesar has a “last supper” with his pretended friends (II.ii.126-27), and is killed, as Jesus was, at “the ninth hour” (II.iv.23)\(^3\). Antony compares

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Caesar’s “sacred blood” to that of the Christian martyrs (III.ii.132-39), and Octavius alludes to Jesus’ crucifixion when he describes Caesar’s “three and thirty” wounds (V.i.53). And we can’t forget that the regime that traced its origins back to Mars is about to give way to a religion whose foundational principle is universal love and peace. In this new frame of mind, salvation – which in pagan Rome was collective and political, and marked the achievement of ends to be realised in the human and mortal life – will be individual. And man’s inner freedom will replace the city’s political freedom as the ultimate good.

A naive question recurs constantly when reading the Roman plays: naive, but seemingly inevitable. Is this really what the Romans were like? Individuals driven by intense pressure to compete for power and distinction? And indeed, not just individuals, but family descendants vividly and constantly reminded of their heritage, their ancestors’ achievements in the public sphere, inheritors whose identity depended primarily on the paternal name, inextricably linked to histories of ancestral glory they felt obligated to live up to and extend? Men, male subjects, whose masculinity was defined by action and success – particularly military success – and ambition and rivalry and love of honour? Such are the ways that a new strain of aristocratic statesman sought to communicate the stature of an ideal. Being a man meant assuming an ideal identity based on this code, this model of behaviour. (Incidentally, women, too, defined themselves by the same codes, adopting such male virtues for themselves: Portia is one such example).

The Rome of Julius Caesar, Brutus, and Antony, as represented by Plutarch, is certainly a society in which political action provides the

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principal standard for judging personal character and values. With Shakespeare, though, things are different – and it is precisely this difference that interests me. Shakespeare, of course, is Shakespeare: we know how dismissive he can be vis-à-vis his sources; how apt he is to change, sift, order anew his material – above all, to read into the material an internal nexus that is often lacking in the source.

He chooses his authority – Plutarch – but treats the material very freely. He has no qualms about creating an entirely new personality for a minor character, disregarding all evidence and instead asserting the reverse. He also makes additions that are all his own: Shakespeare, as I say, is Shakespeare. As with all true writers, it is in the process of writing that he uncovers his theme.

Personally, though, I don’t subscribe to the club of the disparagers of Shakespeare’s Rome. I certainly don’t read Shakespeare to marvel at how off his description of Roman Rome is. Nor does it particularly interest me to ascertain if his Rome is Elizabethan, his Romans flimsily-disguised Englishmen in togas, for all it might be true what some — most — critics claim: that his Caesar, his Cassius, his Brutus are recognisable English characters who would have been perfectly at home under Richard II or Henry IV.

We should remember that Shakespeare wrote this play at a turning point in his career. At this point in his artistic life, Shakespeare is moving from the Histories and pointing ahead to the Tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*. *Julius Caesar* is the first not only of the Roman plays but of the great tragedies. Of Shakespeare’s serious plays, *Julius Caesar* bears most resemblance stylistically to *Henry V* and *Hamlet* (both of which contain references to Caesar), but the connection is stronger with Hamlet than with Henry V, extending to similarities and differences between the two protagonists – both students of philosophy called upon to make a decision for which their temperament and powers do not equip them. In this sense, *Julius Caesar* both is and is not a ‘political’ play. It is a play about politics: an intensely searching and dramatic exploration of the nature and processes of politics and power. It dramatises the collision of multiple points of view through a kind of philosophical impartiality – such ‘philosophical impartiality’ being precisely one of the themes of the play. The impasse – literally, the deadlock – in which Brutus, a political agent, finds himself, arises from the fact that, politics having lost its noble character, philosophy seems to have become the only path
to the reasoning that mitigates, or provides refuge from, the intractable pains and hardships of life.

In this sense Brutus is not, precisely, a politician. As a character, as a hero, he anticipates Hamlet, already asking his question: “What is a man?” Except that in Brutus’ case, the question is rather, “What is a Roman?”

If, for Plutarch, Brutus is the model republican, paragon of private and civic virtue, Shakespeare endows him with the graciousness and dignity his age attributed to the gentleman or noble character described in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Almost a kind of Sir Philip Sidney reincarnate. Shakespeare even invents the character of Lucius to demonstrate how attentive and considerate Brutus is as a master: compassionate and affectionate, caring and loving. He has a soul, a noble and loving soul. However aggressive and overbearing he may appear on occasion, there is an essential modesty we cannot fail to see. Possessed of an elevated mind, he strives to direct his life by just reason; he has schooled himself in fortitude. He is essentially a thinker, a student, a reader. Truly, a reader: even in the midst of his troubles and woes and griefs, he will search for a book in the pocket of his robe, the page corner folded down where he last broke off. Brutus is pure. His Rome, his idea of Rome is animated by what has been defined a ‘spiritedness’ – in war, politics, even in friendship, in love – that love that Caesar, once its supreme exponent, will paradoxically betray – and from this derives Brutus’ sense of duty, of necessity, of a moral obligation to act. And from these, in turn, the ferocious imperative to act against his natural love for Caesar: “It must be by his death” (II.1.10), he says. No desire to kill, no will to kill, no will to power. For Brutus, it is simply that it must be. Which means: he will do that which he does not will, if I can put it like that.

“It must be by his death” – a very singular speech, as Coleridge rightly comments⁵. For surely nothing could seem more out of kilter with our historical preconceptions of Brutus, stern Roman republican, than that he would have no objection to a king, a Caesar, a monarch in Rome. How can Brutus say that he finds no personal cause, none in Caesar’s past conduct as a man? Had Caesar not already crossed the Rubicon? Had he not already entered Rome as conqueror?

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To these pertinent questions of Coleridge’s, the only answer is that yes, this Elizabethan Brutus finds no just cause in Caesar’s previous career. And only now, persuaded by Cassius, does he begin to perceive that “Something is rotten in Caesar”.

For all it may be an exaggeration, perhaps those who say that Shakespeare’s Brutus would be quite at home under a constitutional king, and need not have found life intolerable even in Tudor England, may have a point. At any rate, what is clear to me is that Shakespeare had very little interest in faithfully representing the classical standpoint of a public-spirited Roman citizen; to the extent that Brutus seems willing to find a rational justification for violent measures only by looking ahead to Caesar’s future and not his past.

What I have said, then, is that Shakespeare presents Brutus as a virtuous Roman who will murder Caesar – master-spirit of his own age – out of a disinterested sense of duty. This is easy enough to understand, for Shakespeare would know – if not from his own experience then via his well-thumbed translation of Montaigne – that the best of men – the aristoi – are impelled in their sense of just action by preconceptions of race, class, education and the like. What’s more, as I have said, Brutus is a student of philosophy who would not accept, or submit to, the prevailing codes without first scrutinising and aligning them with his own understanding of the world.

*Being* and *acting*, in his mind, are connected by *duty*. A *duty* the protagonist feels in so far as he is subject to a moral imperative. To an ideal.

But if Brutus is an idealist, Shakespeare is not. As a playwright, as proven in the Histories, Shakespeare has a generous tolerance for the practical statesman dowered with patriotism, insight, resolve. And there are moments when we might feel that perhaps Caesar is not so bad after all, if the only serious charge brought against him is his ambition. Being ambitious is not, of itself, wholly a sin, with the capacity to bring forth good as well as evil fruit. Certainly Caesar is spirited – possessed by the spirit of Caesar, the idea of Empire – and of his ideal he has become both means and vessel... He speaks of himself habitually in the third person; in his person, he feels the majesty of Rome to be exemplified. He has become the Imperium incarnate. So much so that one of the paradoxes of the play is that the idea of Caesarism doesn’t fall with Caesar; if anything, it becomes still more invincible. The spirit of Caesar becomes the ghost of Caesar, celebrating the final triumph at Philippi.
(That, incidentally, is the reason why *Julius Caesar* is the right title for the play: because the imperialist idea dominates, because Caesar is understood as the exponent of Imperialism.)

Undoubtedly, in his representation of Brutus, Shakespeare significantly extends the process of idealisation that Plutarch had started. Throughout the Renaissance there were divided and ambivalent readings of both Brutus and Caesar – Caesar as boastful tyrant, Brutus as liberator and patriot – and indeed, there are ambivalences in Plutarch himself... This notwithstanding, by the sixteenth century a number of writers openly admired Brutus and his reputation seems to have increased after Shakespeare’s time – understandably, perhaps, as the monarchical principle faded and waned.

The period of Roman history from Julius Caesar to Augustus was of particular importance for a number of Elizabethan and Renaissance political thinkers in confirming the argument in favour of monarchy. In the stability Caesar achieved under his rule, in the civil strife that followed his assassination, and in the peace that returned with the imperial rule of Augustus, Tudor theorists found proof that under monarchy, states flourish; under divided authority, they decline.

I mention this only to give an idea of the wealth and weight of material, the body of inconclusive opinion and interpretation, upon which Shakespeare could draw when he turned to write this play he chose to call *Julius Caesar*.

And certainly, in its own way, the play aims to establish its own peculiarly Roman identity: the Elizabethan audience *is* instructed to feel the distance, not to conceive of the events on stage as happening in a thinly-disguised England. But the audience can also recognise a central question that constantly recurs in Shakespeare’s plays. The question of power, a question of heredity and inheritance: by no means a straightforward question in a patriarchal society.

By Shakespeare’s time, as I have said, Caesar and Brutus had acquired symbolic identities in the popular imagination. In other Shakespearean plays, Caesar is invoked almost without exception with admiration, at the very least, if not something more. In *Hamlet*, he is referred to as “the mightiest Julius”, and Rome as a “most high and palmy state” (I.i.112); the age of Julius Caesar is represented as

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the zenith of Roman history. Shakespeare’s audience seems to have regarded Caesar’s death, as Theodore Spencer has it, as one of the great crimes of history, many having been in sympathy with the medieval apotheosis of Caesar (and with Brutus, of course, located at the very bottom of Dante’s *Inferno*).

Caesar’s narrative – his fate – had been dramatised repeatedly in Latin and the vernacular, in French and in English. Shakespeare himself was drawn to it, clearly fascinated by Caesar’s glamour. From the perspective of his playwriting, Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* was probably the most important book Shakespeare ever read. But if Shakespeare’s dependence on Plutarch is indisputable, at the same time it is impossible to overstate how much he alters and adds and modifies and amplifies. It is absolutely fascinating to observe the instinctive skill with which he transforms narrated episodes into dialogue and scenes, selecting and dramatising certain critical events and not others, furnishing them with additional elements he considers important and, of course, bridging the gaps between them. He has to select pregnant moments, deciding what are to be the ganglia, as it were, where the multiple vital lines will meet. The choice, the range and filiation of events are all important, and what he leaves out, of course, is just as important: the way in which he handles the passage of time; the way he reorders certain episodes that in Plutarch are differently sequenced, more paratactically-rendered, more anonymous; the description of the prodigies, the apparition of the ghosts, the strangeness of the portents acquire a deeper quality of awe, rendered more dramatic by Shakespeare’s treatment. And the way he evokes Casca’s panic so as to induce in us the same fear, for instance. It truly is as though we experience such events and emotions ourselves.

So there is much that Shakespeare invents. But why must he invent an infirmity for Caesar? Why must he insist that Caesar be without heir, Calpurnia barren?

According to Cassius Dio, writing in Greek, Caesar died saying “kai su, teknon”\(^7\), translated in poetic Latin as “Tu quoque, Brute, fili mi!”, that in Shakespeare becomes “Et tu, Brute? Then fall, Caesar!” It may be the stuff of legend, but Shakespeare accepts it, and the relationship between Caesar and Brutus is certainly of a filial kind. The *filial*

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bond – how smoothly the past issues into the future through the loins of the father: a theme that resonates throughout the Shakespearean Histories, as well in the Tragedies to come – *Hamlet, King Lear*.

It is the Oedipal theme played out once again. In political terms, the Roman republic is a self-perpetuating oligarchy – great families governing in the name of the Father. Republican Rome corresponds to the classical definition of an aristocratic state, governed by a Senate. Lord Brutus and his fellow-conspirators are, effectively, a privileged elite who mix socially as well as politically. They are the sons of great men, educated together, marked out for government from childhood.

But Caesar is different. Caesar is a man with no lineage. Instead, what he has is a personal biography. Caesar is not connected to Rome’s great past through familial heritage – he is a self-made man in many ways. His claim to power comes not from noble birth. He is nobody’s son. Rather, his is a case of the cult of personality. If Shakespeare invents infirmities that do not appear in Plutarch or any other classical source, it is to stress that yes, Caesar is a man, a soldier – he is a *vir* in the full sense of the Roman concept, he has *vis* – force, strength, might. Virility is the ideal that sustains his personal charisma, his charm; but throughout the play we are also repeatedly reminded that his physical strength is limited. And we are led to believe that Caesar is changed, no longer what he once was. He has turned against his own class, championing the commoner’s cause with lavish favours, artful flattery and shameless demagoguery. Indeed, he has usurped the power of the tribunes, and is using the people to subvert the Senate: Rome is not Rome without the freedom for Romans to compete for high honours. And Caesar is a deep dissembler: there is something in him of the actor playing different parts with different people.

But more importantly, Caesar is a weak father-figure. A father-figure whom Brutus, a good son of Rome, must kill out of love for the motherland, his homeland. This is how Brutus motivates his planned murder: Rome’s lover, Caesar, is on the brink of abusing his high position. Lover no more, instead he has turned rapist.

Is it necessary to stress how un-Roman such reasoning is? Would it ever occur to a genuine republican that justification was needed for dispatching a man who sought to usurp the sovereign city? No, this is as distant from the position of an ancient Roman as it is possible to be. The point is that what interests Shakespeare in his own here and now is not so much to represent the Roman republican idea of power and
politics, but rather the question of self-examination, the craving for an inward moral sanction that will satisfy the individual conscience. This is as natural to the modern mind as it is alien to the classical mind. But this is precisely what alters the chemistry and transforms the whole story... The character of Brutus is transmuted; and, with the mind and feelings of the protagonist, all else is transmuted too. This soul-searching Brutus is no Roman at all. He is Shakespearean, Hamletic.

Indeed, Brutus again anticipates Hamlet here. What I mean is that Shakespeare transfigures the Roman Brutus by infusing into his veins a strain of present, contemporary sensibility that in certain essential ways transforms his character. Of course, in changing the central character: well, as Henry James would say, the whole story changes. The story, not history, of course.

The point is that Shakespeare can resuscitate the past through its protagonists, its characters, precisely because he endows it – this past – with his own form of life: his life, the life of his age.

It was an ancient belief that the shades of the departed were inarticulate or mute until they had supped a libation of warm blood; then, they would speak forth their secrets. In the same way, it is the life-blood of Shakespeare’s own passion and thought – and that of his time – that pulses in the veins of these unsubstantial dead and gives them human utterance once more.

The dead speak, but they speak through the life that Shakespeare has given them. This is how the past is brought back to life in drama – but it is, as I say, precisely a resuscitation, not the literal existence of before. The ghosts of history can reclaim embodied form and physical animation in no other way. Shakespeare is less than scrupulously representative in his reproduction of the Roman world, not because he is not a scholar – an intellectual, a university wit – but because in his fervid imagination, he is looking for something else. That’s what Shakespeare does: he uses the past to throw light onto our present. And I think this is one of the right uses of the past, one of the ways in which the past may help us live our present.

Furthermore, this is a play where proper nouns have a particular quality. Names count here, acquiring descriptive meanings, like common nouns. They become attributes, appellatives, they nominate, they qualify; they are names that speak; they declare the qualities of the character.

So, what does Brutus mean? Firstly, there is the relation to a family: he can’t forget – and indeed Cassius won’t let him – the part his ances-
tors played in expelling the Tarquins. And in bearing such a name, Brutus cannot acquiesce to the coronation of Caesar: to do so would make him the basest outlaw. A great historic name grants its bearer scant liberty. Reminders of his lineage surround him; in Brutus, there is no hint of detachment.

Secondly, *brutus* is an adjective which alludes to something ‘crude’, ‘raw’, ‘coarse’, as in, “it was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf” (III.ii.101): thus Hamlet, mocking Polonius, who has boasted of playing the role of Julius Caesar and being killed by Brutus in the Capitol. To pursue this chain of fluctuating meanings still further: *brute* also denotes something unsophisticated, heavy, unwieldy, solid, massive, stout; even someone boorish, dull, stupid. Brutus’ very role is a “brute part”, in Hamlet’s words – another similarity between Hamlet and Brutus, Brutus being in his own way a “tardy son” (III.iv.103). Certainly ‘dull’, given that all his decisions turn out sooner or later to be errors of judgment. And it is interesting to notice that here, again, Shakespeare departs from his authority, Plutarch, to make the duping of his hero more conspicuous. Brutus is misled by the inventions of Cassius – which he misinterprets as the general voice of Rome – and thus he errs, making one error after another. Duping: there is the important clue. I will dwell on this word by way of conclusion.

As always, playing with words, Lacan makes us hear in “les non-dupes errent” a resonance of *le nom du Père*, the name of the Father. Sons and fathers, sons and lovers – that’s the theme of the Shakespearean play.

The truth is that Brutus, though he plays the ideal son of Rome, is less this than he thinks. Acting the part of the ideally wise and virtuous man, sensible to the obligations of lineage and position, he fashions himself as one whose greatness rests on his moral ascendancy, a sensitive and finely-tuned spirit, with morality the guiding principle of his character. But he is already an existentially-tormented soul – two sets of moral forces at war in his heart. Brutus the idealist is a votary of duty, a literal visionary. Very serious, heavy, prone to err.

In this sense, in the play there is a relation between a man’s name and his genius, or *daimon*: through Brutus’ name glints his nature. And in this sense, his name, his proper name, is fatal to him. It is almost

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as fatal to this visionary to be called Brutus as it is to the poet to be called Cinna.

Brutus is a tardy, dull son, a literalist; what Jung defines the ‘introvert’ type: a conceited egoist or fanatical doctrinaire, in Jung’s definition, constantly subject to an unconscious power-complex. A fixed and highly-generalising mode of expression, which excludes every other view from the outset, as Jung explains⁹; and enigmatic in the sense that, to the introvert, a subjective standpoint is perceived as superior to the objective situation. An attitude, or mode of being, that perfectly encapsulates Brutus’s personality, who performs according to the ideal, without even realising how profoundly he is seduced into his act. Not acting, but acted upon.

The triumph of history as mechanism in the play is the extent to which role subordinates character. The extreme dominance of role effects a ‘dissociation of personality’, that is, a disease. The conscious resistance to any subjection of the ego to unconscious reality and to the determining reality of the unconscious object, leads the subject to a condition of dissociation, which has the character of an inner wastage.

It seems to me that this is what all Shakespeare’s Romans suffer from: inwardly, they are extinguished, driven instead by some external force. As Rome disintegrates, they cling to the images or illusions of what they are meant to be, for Rome’s sake. The point is that they are not up to it. All they do is make manifest how deep such inner wastage runs in a dying world. And how very Roman that is!

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