



collected sources
for
Julius Caesar



Silver denarius
minted to pay Brutus' soldiers
Roman Civil War 43 BC

Front: Brutus Imperator
Obverse: Ides of March (with liberty cap and daggers)

Anachronism 1

Et tu Brute: a Threat? 10

Dictatorship of Time 11

Casting Mr. Booth 17

Send in the Clowns 22

**Brutus, Dante and
the Red Brigades 28**

Dangerous Puritan 31

Suicide by Lion 32

Scottish Portia 34

Caes Julius
Cesar



Octavianus Augustus



Marcus Antonius



Anachronism

*How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!*

Highbrow critics love to trash productions setting Shakespeare in new eras. They say time-shifting “corrupts the purity of the Canon.”

This is an indirect attack on Shakespeare himself. Shakespeare himself indulged heavily in anachronism. His Roman plays were usually staged with Elizabethan dress, politics and language.



And how the purists hated it. In 1597, Dr. Joseph Hall complained about his “*goodly hoch-poch, when vile Russettings are match’d with Monarchs and with goodly kings.*” Philip Sidney objected to plays that were “*neither Right Tragdies nor Right Comedies, mixing Kings and clownes.*”

Julius Caesar in particular is riddled with so many anachronisms that it seems Shakespeare was deliberately trying to spite his critics.



Alexander Pope was so offended by Shakespeare's reference to Romans' "hats" that he left a blank in his 1725 edition of *Julius Caesar*, as if he were deleting an expletive.

Samuel Johnson was shocked, *shocked*, by the "confusion of the names and manners of different times":

Shakespeare had no regard to distinction of time or place, but gives to one age or nation, without scruple, the customs, institutions, and opinions of another, at the expence not only of likelihood, but of possibility.

- Preface to Johnson's 1765 Edition

Economics of Stage Costume

Anachronism was not so much a dramatic choice as an economic necessity.

Shakespeare's company did not have the budget of a Hollywood studio. The turnover from the close of one play to the opening of the next was less than a week.

Shakespeare's players

normally had to make do with the previous show's costumes. It would have been impossible to stock a full array of Roman military uniforms in the



wardrobe closets of the Globe.

Staging Roman plays in 17th Century costume was not an *avant garde* statement. It was the only way to produce the play within its budget.

Nightcaps



*...the rabblement
hooted, and clapped
their chopt hands,
and threw up their
sweaty nightcaps,
and uttered such a
deal of stinking
breath because Caesar
refused the crown.*

The Elizabethan sumptuary laws made nightcaps mandatory for urban workers.

This sign of the trades became the uniform of the urban uprisings in the French Revolution.



Doublet

Marry, before he fell down, when he perceived the common herd was glad he refused the crown, he plucked me ope his doublet and offered them his throat to cut.

Caesar apparently wore an Elizabethan doublet on stage.



Chimney-tops

*Many a time and oft
Have you climb'd up to walls and battlements,
To towers and windows, yea, to chimney-tops,
Your infants in your arms, and there have sat
The livelong day, with patient expectation,
To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome*



Chimneys were a medieval innovation connected to tall fortifications. They signified a home with central fireplaces, designed as a small fortress. This layout was unknown in plebeian houses in ancient Rome.

Press

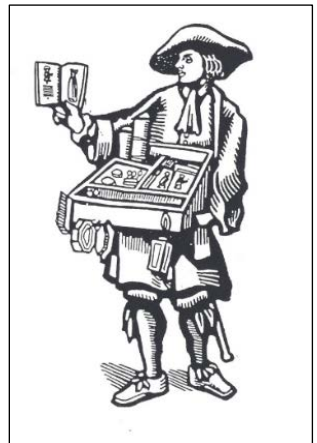
Who is it in the press that calls on me?

The original meaning of *press* comes from Old French *presse*, “crowd, throng, company; crowding and jostling of a throng; a massing together.”



The different sense of *press* as a printing machine comes from the 1530s; the word merged with the older sense of *press* by the 1570s to describe mass popular publishing.

When Caesar demands to know who challenges him in the *press*, the Elizabethan audience heard the old meaning blurred with the new.



Books



*Let me see, let me see; is not the leaf turned down
Where I left reading? Here it is, I think.*

The Romans used individually hand-copied scrolls, not bound volumes with turning pages.

By giving Brutus a printed book, Shakespeare places the play in the Elizabethan present.

The English Reformation was made possible by the printing press. Brutus reads philosophy in the same format as English Protestants read the Bible. Mass-produced texts in moveable type destroyed the medieval Church's monopoly on knowledge. So when Brutus reads a modern book, it's the same threat to Rome, just a different century.

The *Hamlet* call-back

The Globe's premiere of *Hamlet* opened right after *Julius Caesar* closed. Richard Burbage played Brutus and Hamlet; John Heminges probably played Caesar and Polonius. In the middle of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare made them break character to joke with the audience about last month's play:

Hamlet. My lord, you played once i' the university, you say?

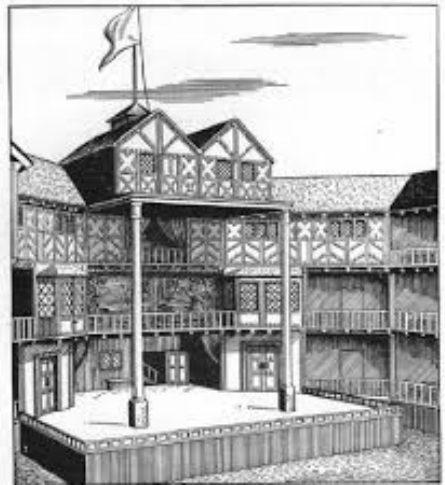
Polonius. That did I, my lord; and was accounted a good actor.

Hamlet.
What did you enact?

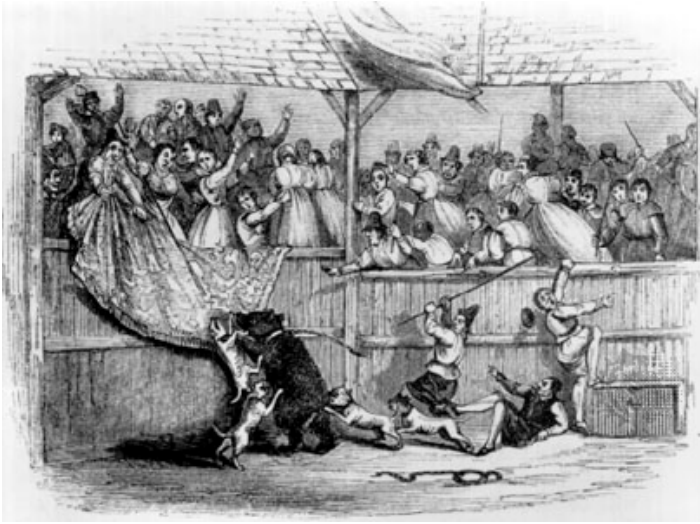
Polonius. I did enact Julius Caesar:
I was killed i' the Capitol; Brutus killed me.

Hamlet. It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there.

A few scenes later, Burbage/Hamlet/Brutus stabs Heminges/Polonius/Caesar yet again.



Bear-baiting



The Globe was in fierce competition with nearby bear-baiting arenas. In 1591, one proprietor filed a lawsuit complaining that sleazy theaters were ruining his reputable bear-baiting business.

Shakespeare constantly played to the crossover audience. Octavius cries, *We are at the stake/ And bayed about by many enemies*. Macbeth uses the same image: *They have tied me to the stake; I cannot fly/ But bear-like I must fight the course*.

Competition dictated how Shakespeare staged the assassination of Caesar: not as a fight, but as a prolonged mass attack on a powerful central figure, a bear-baiting. Accurate history was less important than the spectacle.

Et tu Brute: a Threat?

Shakespeare didn't invent the line "*et tu, Brute.*" Ancient sources like Suetonius report these as Caesar's last words, without a question mark: *καὶ σύ, τέκνον* ('you too, son')



The punctuation makes a difference: not a grievance ("*Brutus, are you stabbing me too?*") but a prediction ("*you too will die like this*" or "*Brutus, you're next.*")

This fits the play. In Roman funeral traditions, the dying could see the future. Caesar will return as a ghost, full of prophecy. So why shouldn't the dying Caesar be a soothsayer, like Macbeth's witches, telling Brutus how the play will end?

Dictatorship of Time



It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.

George Orwell, 1984

The conspirators are continually confused about time: What day is it? What time is it? When and where will the sun rise? *Is this a holiday? I cannot, by the progress of the stars give guess how near to day.*

The Elizabethans and the Romans were both preoccupied with a calendar crisis. What day it is, what time it is, became a political question. The answer depended on *who is in power*.

The Julian calendar

According to Plutarch, one of the conspirators' main grievances against Caesar was his imposition of the Julian calendar.



In very ancient times there had been great confusion among the Romans with regard to the relation of the lunar to the solar year, with the result that festivals and days of sacrifice gradually got out of place and came

to be celebrated at the very opposite seasons to what was originally intended. Caesar, however, formed a new method which was more accurate than any of them.

To replace the ancient lunar year (304 days, ten months) with a 365-day year with twelve months, Caesar had to order an extra-long year to catch up. Caesar issued an edict making the year 45 BC last for 445 days to restore the months to their seasons. According to Plutarch:

Yet even this gave offense to those who looked at Caesar with envious eyes and resented his power. Certainly Cicero, the orator, when someone remarked that the constellation Lyra would rise next day, remarked: "No doubt. It had been ordered to do so" – Cicero meaning that even the rising of the stars was something that the people had to accept under compulsion.

The night of the conspiracy, Brutus is not sure what date it is. So he tells Lucius to *“look in the calendar and bring me word”* to see what day Caesar has declared it to be.



When Casca argues with Cinna and Decius over when and where the sun will rise, he is saying there is no sunrise unless Caesar makes it so:



You shall confess that you are both deceived. Here, as I point my sword, the sun arises, Which is a great way growing on the south, Weighing the youthful season of the year. Some two months hence up higher toward the north He first presents his fire; and the high east Stands, as the Capitol, directly here.

The Gregorian calendar

Shakespeare's audience was in the middle of its own calendar crisis.

The Julian calendar itself was slightly too long. Over the centuries since Caesar, the calendar year was gradually slipping behind the natural seasons. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII called for this to be corrected, since it led to Easter falling on the wrong day. A new rule was devised



for leap years, and ten days were cut to put the calendar back in line with the solar year. But Protestant countries like England refused to let the Pope cancel ten days of their lives. Until well into the 18th Century, Protestant and Catholic calendars remained ten days apart.

The calendar creep in Protestant countries affected hour-by-hour time as well.

The clearest anachronism in *Julius Caesar* is the repeated reference to striking clocks. The Romans used water clocks, but even the mechanical clocks of 1600 had to be



continually checked and reset against water clocks. These in turn depended on an accurate fixing of seasons, since water-based timekeeping depended on adjustments for cold and hot seasons.

Since the Protestants were stuck with a calendar that put the seasons out of sync, the political divide with the Catholic world meant that Protestant months were less reliably aligned with hotter and colder seasons, which made Protestant water clocks less reliable, and in turn made it impossible to calibrate mechanical clocks precisely.

Every error in timekeeping was a reminder of the price Protestant England paid for rejecting the Pope.

Cassius' birthday

Cassius tells Messala on the eve of battle:

this is my birth-day as this very day was Cassius born.

After the Julian calendar, a Roman who had been born before 45 BC could no longer say when his birthday was. Frederick Douglass said this was a telling fact about his life under slavery – that he did not know his birthday:



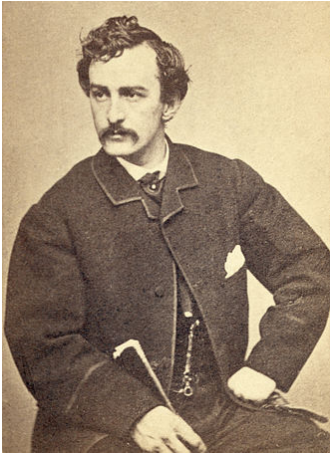
Slaves do not know the day they were born. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters to

keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvesttime, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time.

But Cassius says the day of his death is also his birth-day, because it is the first day he can fix in time by himself:

This day I breathed first: time is come round.

Casting Mr. Booth



The assassination of Lincoln was not really a political act. Lincoln was just a prop for John Wilkes Booth's revenge against his brothers, who had refused to cast him as Brutus in *Julius Caesar*.

John Wilkes Booth was a famous actor, from a family of famous actors. Most educated Americans knew who he was. Walt Whitman said: "He would have flashes, passages, I thought of real genius." The *Philadelphia Press* raved: "Without having [his brother] Edwin's culture and grace, Mr. Booth has far more action, more life, and, we are inclined to think, more natural genius." The *National Intelligencer* praised his Romeo as "the most satisfactory of all renderings of that fine character," especially in the death scene.

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John Wilkes was bitter about the casting. He had wanted to play Brutus. He resented being relegated to Mark Antony, which he regarded as a lesser part. He was furious that his family decided his older brother Edwin was the better actor, entitled to the star role.



From left: John Wilkes (Mark Antony), Edwin (Brutus) and Junius (Cassius)

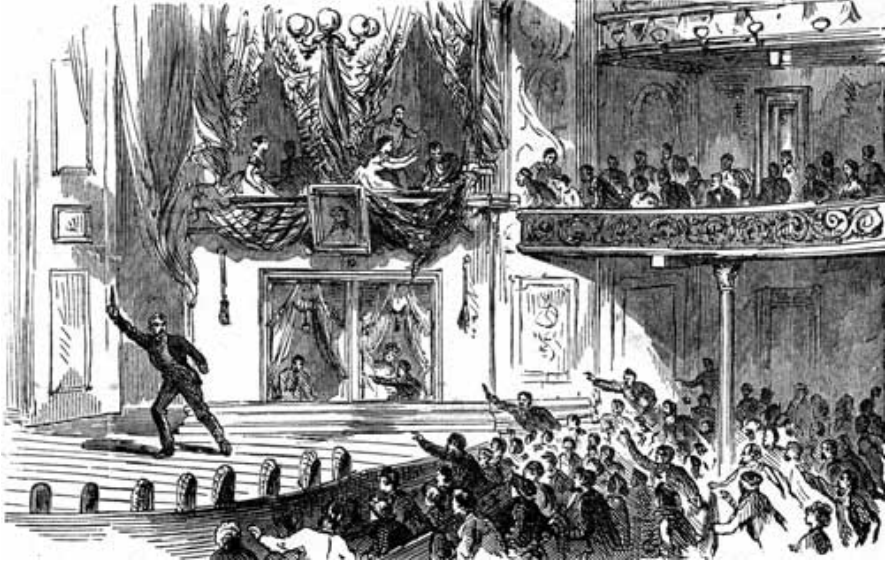
He became even angrier after the New York press gave Edwin rave reviews ("*the greatest Brutus to grace our nation's stage*") without mentioning him.

Before the *Julius Caesar* performance, John Wilkes had done little to plot against Lincoln. After the Winter Garden show, he joined a real conspiracy with other Confederate sympathizers. They initially planned to kidnap Lincoln to ransom Southern prisoners, but this evolved into a plan for outright assassination, as John Wilkes became more obsessed with his secret Brutus identity.

The theater was the natural place. Booth had free access to Ford's Theater, as a popular actor who regularly performed there. He entered through the stage door, and waited in the green room, before he entered from stage right in Lincoln's box seat.

Booth could have escaped through the back of the theater. But instead he jumped down to the stage, true to the acting profession, breaking his leg. He shouted *Sic semper tyrannis!* ("thus always to tyrants"), the phrase attributed to Brutus at Caesar's assassination. During his escape, he wrote in a journal: *With every man's hand against me, I am here in despair. And why? For doing what Brutus was honored for.*





John Wilkes Booth was only enacting a scene.
Shooting Lincoln was just part of the blocking.
What mattered was that Booth had finally avenged
his brothers' insult at the Winter Garden.
He was finally playing Brutus.

Casting decisions can have serious consequences.



Send in the Clowns



Tolstoy hated Shakespeare. He published a propaganda pamphlet in 1906 featuring an essay, *Shakespeare's Attitude Toward the Working Classes*.

The essay denounces Shakespeare as a royalist, a lapdog of the ruling classes. In contrast to revolutionaries like Shelley, Byron or Robert Burns, Shakespeare was a reactionary snob: *Royals and nobles are the only serious characters in the plays. The lower classes are invariably stupid, dishonest, dirty, fickle, and cowardly.* Especially in *Julius Caesar*, we see Shakespeare endorsing the patricians' contempt for the "rabblement's chapped hands, sweaty night-caps, stinking breath" so bad that Casca "durst not laugh, for fear of opening my lips and receiving the bad air."

Worst of all, says Tolstoy's pamphlet, Shakespeare treated the working classes as *clowns*.



His opinion of them is indicated by the insulting names he gives them. Bottom, the weaver; Flute, the bellows-maker; Snout and Sly, tinkers; Quince, the carpenter; Snug, the joiner; Starveling, the tailor; Smooth, the silkman; Dogberry and Verges, Fang and Snare, sheriffs' officers; Mouldy, Shadow, Wart, and Bullcalf, recruits; Potpan, Peter Thump, Simple, Gobbo, and Susan Grindstone, servants; Speed, "a clownish servant"; Slender, Pistol, Nym, Sneak, Doll Tear-sheet, Jane Smile, Costard, Oatcake, Seacoal, and various anonymous "clowns" and "fools." These names fasten the stigma of absurdity upon the characters, and their occupations.



The insult is particularly cruel in *Julius Caesar*. The plebeians don't even have names. They are fools who cower before the patricians in the first scene, who are easily manipulated at the funeral, who revel in killing the wrong Cinna, and who only want crumbs from the table of Caesar's Rome. Why should modern progressives tolerate this play?

Orwell on Tolstoy on Shakespeare

No one answered Tolstoy until George Orwell's counter-essay *Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool* (1947).

Orwell acknowledged that what Tolstoy says is mostly true. But Orwell refused to agree that Shakespeare's use of Clown is class oppression.



Individually, Shakespeare's workers are often silly and ignorant. But taken collectively, the working class is the only *immortal* character in *Julius Caesar*. It



acts like a Greek chorus, standing in for the gods and the audience. Warring nobles like Antony can manipulate the people, but they cannot win victory without the masses.

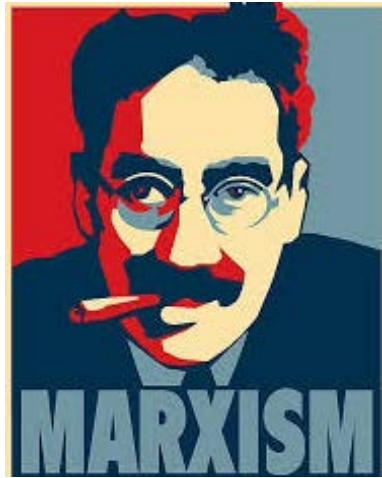
Sarah Gazdowicz argues that we should not refer to the current President as a “clown,” since Clown is a state of compassion and wit, a humane dance with the irrationality of power. This echoes Orwell, who describes Lear’s Fool as something like a rodeo clown, a low-status performer trying to distract his royal charges from lunacy and self-destruction.



Shakespeare locates his highborn men in a variety of historical worlds, but his commoners belong to the ephemeral present, the modern world of the theater. Shakespeare’s commoners, descended from the Vice character of the morality plays, would often provide an absurd intrusion into the play for purposes of puncturing its status as an “official history.”

Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History* (1991)

The clowns could understand the rhetorical stylized speeches of the central noble characters, but they could intentionally misunderstand it, invert it, garble it, or incorporate it into wordplay that revealed a more deeply knowing worldview. The figures close to the audience, especially the clowns and the fools, are the ones who perpetuate the subversive tradition.



Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater* (1987)



The plebeians in *Julius Caesar* are the only characters who are *enjoying themselves*. What Tolstoy misses (says Orwell) is that the ruling class has an audience, not just in the pit, but in their surrogates on stage - the citizens, cobblers, carpenters - without

whom there is no play and no Rome.

And if Casca sneers at the unwashed masses, they are also sneering back at him. Because they are after all the only audience that matters.



If the tag-rag people did not clap him and hiss him, according as he pleased and displeased them, as they use to do the players in the theatre, I am no true man.

Brutus, Dante and the Red Brigades



Brutus' reputation has fluctuated dramatically since the Middle Ages.

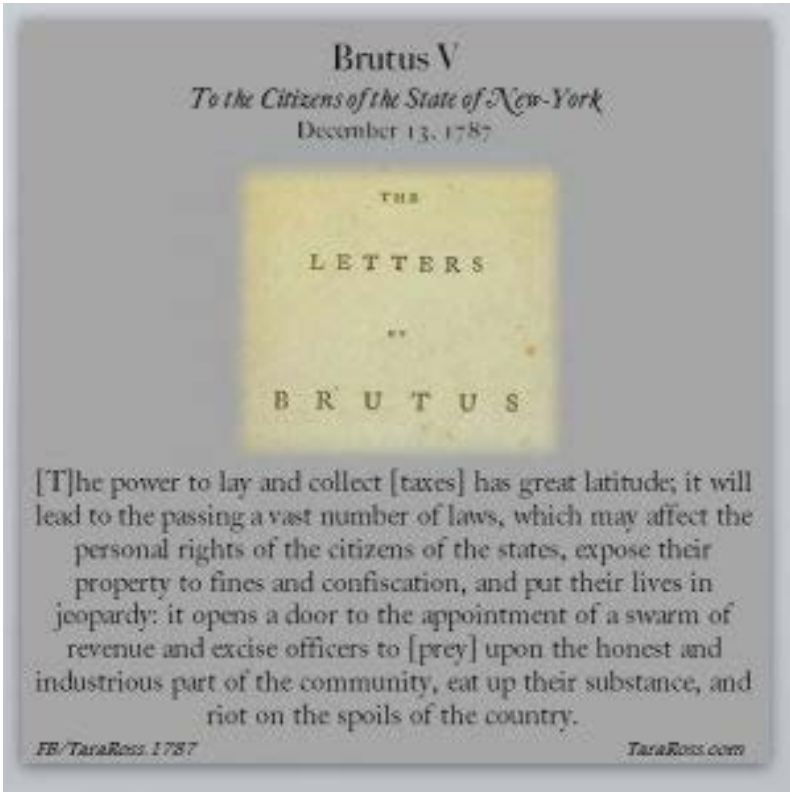
Brutus did not fare well in classical and medieval literature. Dante's *Inferno* makes Brutus, Cassius and Judas the very last exhibits on his tour of the Underworld.

They are the three traitors gnawed in Satan's three mouths in the lowest level of Hell.

Satan chewed a sinner between his teeth, with every mouth, like a grinder, so, in that way, he kept three of them in torment. The Master said: 'But night is ascending, and now we must go, since we have seen it all.'



After the Reformation, Brutus began to be associated with liberty rather than treason. His comeback in Shakespeare continued through the American Revolution.



The leading Anti-Federalist used the name “Brutus”: he argued against the 1789 Constitution in protest of an undemocratic Senate and against the three-fifths compromise rewarding slavery. “Brutus” is credited with the successful demand for the Bill of Rights four years later.

But the bloody association still follows the Brutus legend. In 1978, the Red Brigades claimed to be Brutus's heirs when they kidnapped and killed Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro:



It is now time for the country render to Caesar that which is Caesar's — twenty-three blows of the dagger! Events will force the Italian proletariat to make its own the phrase of Brutus: "I swear that I will never let either this person or any other govern Rome!"
- Red Brigade manifesto 1978

As in 44 BC, the Italian masses did not cooperate:



In the terrorists' minds the killing of the 'father' would set change in motion. Instead, the masses reacted to the killing of Aldo Moro the way the Roman people did to the killing of Caesar.

When the terrorists, like Brutus, tried to force a new political era by killing the 'tyrant,' they became the victims of the people's will rather than its heroes.

- Piccolomini, *The Brutus Revival* (1991)

Dangerous Puritan



*He loves no plays,
He hears no music;
Seldom he smiles, and
smiles in such a sort
As if he mock'd himself and
scorn'd his spirit
That could be moved to
smile at any thing.*

Shakespeare hated Puritans, who wanted to (and later did) close down the theaters. He caricatured them as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, Jaques in *As You Like It*. Even Shylock is a Puritan thinly disguised as a Jew.



Cassius is the clearest sketch of a Puritan in a tragedy: a joyless revolutionary, consumed with hatred in the name of justice. And whose side are you on? The one who hates your enemy or the one who loves the play?

Suicide by Lion

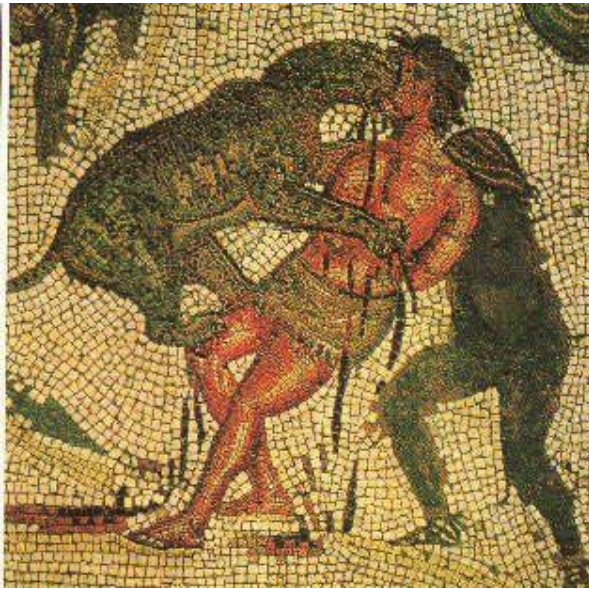
Everyone's obsessed with lions. Casca sees one walking past him in the city, Cassius compares Caesar to one, Calpurnia is terrified that lions are giving birth in the streets, Caesar roars that he is one, the oldest and most terrible.

The Carthaginians and Parthians occasionally tried to use lions as weapons of war. But siccing hungry lions against oncoming infantry didn't work in combat, because lions aren't loyal to their masters. You can't be sure whom they will attack.



Plutarch reports what happened when the Greek city Megara unleashed lions against Caesar's legion:

The beasts are said to have brought great calamity upon the Megarians. For just as their city was captured, they loosed the animals, in order that they might obstruct the oncoming foe, but the lions rushed among the unarmed citizens themselves and preyed upon them as they ran, so that even to the enemy the sight was a pitiful one.



Lions on the streets of Rome are bad omens, not because they're powerful, but because they don't distinguish between their masters and their prey.

A fitting image for *Julius Caesar*: power as suicide.

Scottish Portia

Some say Shakespeare only wrote a dozen characters, and recycled them from play to play. Brutus becomes Hamlet becomes Macbeth; Katharina mellows into Beatrice. So with Portia.

A noblewoman's husband is plotting to kill the king. She wants to know about it. She insists the bonds of marriage make her privy to the conspiracy.



She says her gender shouldn't held against her, that she has male fortitude unsexed from her womanhood. She is capable of self-mutilation to prove her courage. She ends up committing suicide when she thinks her husband is doomed. He feels bad about it, and says philosophical things.

Shakespeare based Lady Macbeth on Portia. He had to: his main source Holinshed barely mentions that Macbeth had a wife. Only Plutarch described a passionate wife of a conspirator, and Shakespeare used the story twice.



*No, my Brutus;
You have some sick offence
within your mind,
Which, by the right and
virtue of my place,
I ought to know of: and,
upon my knees,
I charm you, by my once-
commended beauty,
By all your vows of love
and that great vow
Which did incorporate and
make us one,*

That you unfold to me, yourself, your half

*What beast was't, then,
That made you break this
enterprise to me?*

*When you durst do it, then
you were a man;
And, to be more than what you
were, you would
Be so much more the man.*





PRAXIS STAGE

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The Gunpowder Plot

lighting a fuse
under official theater