Julius Caesar

Summary

A successful military leader who wants the crown of Rome. Unfortunately, he is not the man he used to be and is imperious, easily flattered, and overly ambitious. He is assassinated midway through the play; later, his spirit appears to Brutus at Sardis and also at Philippi.

Analysis

In using Julius Caesar as a central figure, Shakespeare is less interested in portraying a figure of legendary greatness than he is in creating a character who is consistent with the other aspects of his drama. If Brutus and Cassius were eminently evil men insidiously planning the cold-blooded murder of an eminently admirable ruler, Julius Caesar would be little more than a melodrama of suspense and revenge. On the other hand, if Caesar were wholly the bloody tyrant, there would be little cause for Brutus’ hesitation and no justification for Antony's thirst for revenge. In fact, Shakespeare creates in Caesar a character who is sometimes reasonable, sometimes superstitious, sometimes compassionate, and sometimes arrogantly aloof. In so doing, he has projected Caesar as a man whom the nobility have just reasons to fear, yet who is not a villain.

Flavius concludes his criticism of Caesar in Act I, Scene 1, by expressing his fear that Caesar desires to "soar above the view of men / And keep us all in servile fearfulness." His opinion is given credence when, moments later, Casca and Antony's attitude toward Caesar demonstrates that they consider him a man whose every wish should be considered a command by the citizens of Rome. Caesar's opinion of himself throughout shows that he complies with that attitude. He does not fear Cassius because he believes himself to be beyond the reach of mere humans, and he caps his explanation of his incapability of experiencing fear by observing, "... for always I am Caesar." However, his reference to his partial deafness provides an obvious contrast between the conceptions of the vain man who perceives himself in godlike terms and the actual, ageing man who stands in imminent danger of assassination. His potential for evil is further emphasised by the swiftness with which he summarily has Flavius and Marullus "put to silence." Finally, at the very moment preceding his death, Caesar compares himself to the gods of Olympus in his determination to continue his arbitrary administration of Roman justice.

Caesar's teeming arrogance and pride more than offset his proven ability to reason. He expresses a fatalistic acceptance of the inevitability of death when he tells Calphurnia how strange it is to him "that men should fear; / Seeing that death, a necessary end, / Will come when it will come." But it is not his belief that the hour of his death has been predetermined and thus cannot be avoided that causes him to ignore the portents, his priests, and Calphurnia. Instead, he ignores them because of
Decius' challenge to his sense of pride and to his ambition. Caesar, who is so perceptive in his analysis of Cassius, cannot always look "quite through the deeds" of a calculating deceiver.

From his first appearance, Caesar openly displays a superstitious nature, but also from the beginning he displays a propensity to ignore warnings and signs that should alert a man of his beliefs. He enters the action of the play by advising Calphurnia to seek a cure for her sterility by ritual, and he exits fifteen lines later, dismissing the soothsayer as "a dreamer." He ignores the soothsayer, Calphurnia, the many portents, his priests, and finally Artemidorus because he has ceased to think of himself as a fallible human being, and because he passionately wants to be crowned king. He does not fear Cassius, although he knows him to be a danger to political leaders, because he believes that he and Cassius occupy two separate levels of existence. Cassius is a man; Caesar, a demigod. He even comes to think of himself in terms of abstract qualities, considering himself older and more terrible even than "danger." His sense of superiority to his fellow humans, as well as his overriding ambition to be king, ultimately prevent him from observing and reasoning clearly.

Caesar as a viable character in the play endures beyond his assassination. Brutus wants to "come by Caesar's spirit / And not dismember Caesar." In fact, Brutus and the conspirators succeed in dismembering the corporeal Caesar, but they fail to destroy his spirit. Antony invokes the spirit of Caesar first in his soliloquy in Act III, Scene 1, and he uses it to bring the citizens of Rome to rebellion in Act III, Scene 2. The ghost of Caesar appears to Brutus at Sardis and again at Philippi, signifying that Brutus has failed to reconcile mentally and morally his participation in the murder, as well as signifying that his and Cassius' fortunes are fading. Caesar's spirit ceases to be a force in the play only when Cassius and Brutus commit suicide, each acknowledging that he does so to still the spirit of Caesar.