

Ambiguities of Honour: A Response to Carrie Pestritto's "Outlooks on Honor in *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*"*

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"Caesar was ambitious, and Brutus is an honourable man" (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.78-100).¹ Are things really as simple as that? If we follow Carrie Pestritto's arguments in her contribution on the concepts of honour as manifested in two Shakespearean plays, Mark Antony's ironical words should be taken at face value. According to Pestritto, Brutus's honour gives him "an almost Christ-like aura" (64), as Shakespeare's characterization follows Plutarch's "Christ-like, pure image of Brutus" (66). This concept of honour, Pestritto argues, contrasts with that of King Henry in *Henry V*, who "is of dubious morality" (63). Brutus, she says, "will only rigidly adhere to the straightforward, virtuous path," while "Henry V does not care what methods he must use to gain honor: sinful or ethical" (66).

As far as *Henry V* is concerned, Pestritto's argumentation is quite convincing. Honour, as it is understood in his Agincourt speech (4.3.18-67; 22, 28, 31), is indeed "something that one must fight others to win" (65) and is therefore highly ambiguous from a moral point of view. The negative aspects of war and bloodshed are given ample scope in this play. Henry's admonition to the archbishop of Canterbury (1.2.13-32) shows that he is aware of the "waste in brief mortality" (1.2.28) brought about by war, as are his night-time reflections after having assumed a disguise and talked to his soldiers in scene 4.1. In his Harfleur speech the King emphasizes the cruel aspects of fighting, e.g. when asking his soldiers to "close the wall up with our English dead" (3.1.2). War crimes appear to be inevitable, such as the

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debpestritto01701.htm>>.

killing of the boys guarding the luggage, “expressly against the law of arms” (4.7.1-2).² Most notably, the play does not end with the English gaining honour on the battlefield: it may well be the King’s bad conscience which makes him forbid his soldiers to “boast” of their victory (4.8.116) and to give thanks to—or shift responsibility to—God instead (4.8.112-24). These restrictions on celebrating leave room to the final act which is devoted to reconciliation and peace.³

Pestritto’s point can also be strengthened by an examination of the term “honour” as used in the play. It is amazing how often honour is spoken of in contexts where dramatic irony is apparent: At the very beginning of the play the archbishop of Canterbury complains about a bill which would appropriate church funds to the maintenance of many earls, knights and esquires “to the King’s honour” (1.1.12). After the discovery of a conspiracy against him, the King reminds his followers that he was prepared “to furnish him,” i.e. the chief conspirator, the Earl of Cambridge, “with all appertinents/ Belonging to his honour” (2.2.87-88). The French “constable” exhorts his compatriots “for honour of our land,/ Let us not hang like roping icicles/ Upon our houses’ thatch” (3.5.22-24), as the French soldiers were obviously prone to. The French King’s exhortation to his princes to “with spirit of honour edged/ More sharper than your swords hie to the field” (3.5.38-39) will obviously prove fruitless. After the battle of Agincourt Pistol, not distinguished for valiant fighting, complains about getting old: “Old I do wax, and from my weary limbs/ Honour is cudgelled” (5.1.85-86). Even the words of the Chorus, usually taken to be unambiguously ‘pro-war,’ could provoke second thoughts about honour as an end in itself: “[...] honour’s thought/ Reigns solely in the breast of every man” (2.ch.3-4). Is it really a sensible course of action to “sell the pasture now to buy the horse” (2.ch.5); will all of Henry’s followers be able to win “crowns and coronets” (2.ch.10)? Henry’s Agincourt speech is about the only other instance where honour is given as a motive for fighting; and it could be argued that Henry only resorts to this motive because he has to make the best of the situation: the num-

ber of troops appears inadequate, so that only the King's appeal to the surplus of honour to be won can restore his officers' confidence.

Honour as a value is obviously outdated. It belongs to the discourse of chivalry which Shakespeare, in *Henry V* as elsewhere, obviously rejects.⁴ The concept of going to war in order to achieve honour has become, at least, a highly ambivalent one. I cannot go along with Pestrutto, however, in ascribing this ambivalence to King Henry himself. When he states that "to covet honour" might be a sin (4.3.28), he is obviously being playfully ironical. Pestrutto's comparison to "an Easter egg hunt" (65) is quite pertinent: Henry tries to belittle the dangers inherent in entering battle with an insufficient force. After victory is achieved, however, the King displays both his personal humility and political shrewdness in not making a point of having won honour.

In presenting the character of King Henry V as ambivalent, Pestrutto follows a time-honoured interpretation.⁵ Her most decisive argument, however, is her appeal to Shakespeare's source, Holinshed's *Chronicles* (62). Pestrutto rightly points out that the *Chronicles* include "conflicting evidence or interpretations from different primary sources in their compilation" (62). In juxtaposing incompatible sources, Holinshed does not just show his intention "to present an unbiased history" (62) but also demonstrates a Renaissance love for paradox, which Shakespeare was to make ample use of in his "histories."⁶ To look for "ambiguities and ironies" is not just a fad of "modern criticism," as T. W. Craik suggests ("Introduction" 75), but is based in Renaissance cultural practice.

Let's turn to *Julius Caesar* and its sources. Plutarch's "Life of Brutus" certainly concentrates on the 'noble' qualities of his hero (just like his "Life of Caesar" and, generally, his other lives) and gives voice to sympathies with the republican cause, but does not depict him as blameless. In the passage quoted by Pestrutto, Plutarch does not "idealize" Brutus "as the personification of righteousness" (64) but only records that Brutus was considered as such by his Roman contemporaries. Plutarch also mentions opinions dissenting from those of the

conspirators. Faonius, a philosopher, for example tells Brutus (in Thomas North's translation, published 1579 and used by Shakespeare) "that civill warre was worse then tyrannicall government usurped against the lawe" (336).⁷ Few Elizabethans would have disagreed. In Plutarch's *Lives* Brutus as a Roman is set against Dion, a Greek, who was also a tyrannicide. In his "Comparison of Dion with Brutus" there are quite a few aspects according to which Brutus does not appear the more noble of the two: "[Brutus and Cassius] were driven to hazard them selves in warre, more for there owne safetie, then for the libertie of their contrie men. Whereas Dion [...]" (364). Another point is that Caesar was not really a tyrant:

[...] he rather had the name and opinion onely of a tyranne, then otherwise that he was so in deede. For there never followed any tyrannicall nor cruell act, but contrarilie, it seemed that he was a mercifull Phisition, whom God had ordeyned of speciall grace to be Governor of the Empire of Rome, and to set all thinges againe at quiet stay, the which required the counsell and authoritie of an absolute Prince. And therefore the Romanes were marvelous sorie for Caesar after he was slaine, and afterwardes would never pardon them that had slaine him. (364-65)

Caesar rather appears to be a monarch fitting into the "Elizabethan world picture": God-ordained, restoring order, loved by the people.

Lastly, Plutarch records that Brutus was personally indebted to Caesar:

Furthermore, the greatest reproache they could object against Brutus, was: that Julius Caesar having saved his life, and pardoned all the prisoners also taken in battell, as many as he had made request for, taking him for his frende, and honoring him above all his other frends: Brutus notwithstanding had imbrued his hands in his blood, wherewith they could never reprove Dion. (365)

It is true that Plutarch's emphasis is on his praise for Brutus's sincerity (365) and "marvelous noble minde" (366); Brutus killed Caesar "onely to set his contrie againe at libertie" (365) and "to restore the Empire of Rome againe, to her former state & government" (366). The fact, however, that Plutarch also records contrary arguments is striking. It is

this ambiguity which makes debates possible, debates on politics as well as personal morality; and this ambiguity is certainly an important aspect of the legacy of Plutarch to the Renaissance and to Shakespeare.

Concerning “honour,” we should note that in North’s Plutarch this term is not used. Brutus’s qualities are his “vertue” (333), “good name” (333), “estimacion” (335), “great calling” (337) and honesty (see 335 and 342). In Shakespeare’s play, however, “honour” is part of Brutus’s conception of himself. As he tells Cassius he “love[s] the name of honour more than [he] fear[s] death” (1.2.89). Pestrutto rightly points out that Brutus’s concept of honour is more sophisticated than King Henry’s, being “something that a man possesses inside of him” (66) rather than “a material possession to collect and hoard” (66). Brutus’s honour corresponds to definition 2.a. in the *OED*: “Personal title to high respect and esteem; honourableness; elevation of character; ‘nobleness of mind, scorn of meanness, magnanimity’ (J.); a fine sense of and strict allegiance to what is due or right”; whereas Henry only understands the term in the sense of definition 1.: “High respect, esteem or reverence, accorded to exalted worth or rank; deferential admiration or approbation [...] c. As received, firmly held or enjoyed: Glory, renown, fame; credit, reputation, good name.” Honour, according to definition 1., is certainly connected to chivalric discourse: Knights set out to achieve honour, in the sense of personal reputation or esteem, usually by fighting and overcoming antagonists who are less strong and valiant than themselves. Definition 2., first recorded in 1548 (in Edward Hall’s *Vnion of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*), could be considered to belong to the discourse of Renaissance humanism. The *locus classicus* is perhaps Erasmus’s pronouncement in his “*Institutio Principis Christiani*” (1515): “[puer] discat istos non veros esse honores, qui vulgo vocentur. Verum honorem decus esse, quod virtutem et recte facta suapte sponte consequatur [...]” (130-32).

If Brutus is (or considers himself) an honourable man in the modern, humanistic sense, we should note that honour according to other

definitions is also present in *Julius Caesar*, and that different kinds of honour are juxtaposed in a tantalizing way. When Brutus tells Cassius about his honour, Cassius takes up the thread, referring to honour according to definition 1.: “honour is the subject of my story” (1.2.92).⁸ What he means is no inside quality but the fact that he, being a free man, is no longer esteemed as highly as another free man, Caesar (1.2.93-118), that he has become “a wretched creature, and must bend his body/ If Caesar carelessly but nod on him” (1.2.117-18). While Brutus and Cassius are having their conversation, “new honours” are being “heaped on Caesar” (1.2.133); this is an instance of yet another definition in the *OED*: “Something conferred or done as a token of respect or distinction; a mark or manifestation of high regard; *esp.* a position or title of rank, a degree of nobility, a dignity” (5.a.). In his speech to the Romans after the assassination Brutus makes an appeal to his honour:

Believe me for mine honour and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe [...] As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him: but as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears, for his love; joy, for his fortune; honour, for his valour; and death, for his ambition. (3.2.14-28)

Brutus’s argument is quite simple: being an honourable man he declares that Caesar was ambitious; this is why Caesar had to die. In establishing this connection he inadvertently admits that Caesar is also entitled to “honour,” if only in the chivalrous sense of reward for his valour. Since Brutus’s audience did not have access to the *OED* or to the virtual dictionary in Brutus’s mind, they could not be expected to notice these fine distinctions; and members of Shakespeare’s audiences might have asked themselves if Brutus’s honour was really superior to Caesar’s. This ambiguity is the central weakness of Brutus’s argument, and an opening for Mark Antony to tear Brutus’s honour to pieces. Mark Antony is an unscrupulous demagogue, but his ironies could not be so effective if they were wholly baseless. In trying to act according to his notions of honour, which force him to suppress ambition in others, Brutus unconsciously displays his own ambition, i.e., he

assumes a role which—according to Elizabethan concepts of cosmic law—is not, and should not be his.⁹ The effects of his honourable deed are disastrous: while Caesar could be accused of having banished one person unjustly (3.1.33-57), the new incumbents of power will draw up long lists of people who are to be executed immediately (4.1.1-17). The disturbance of the natural order caused by the murder of Caesar of course culminates in a civil war—the ‘horror of horrors’ to Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries.¹⁰

Is Brutus really represented as acting according to the demands of honour? His reputation is essential to the conspirators’ purpose because, as Caska remarks to Cassius, “that which would appear offence in us/ His countenance, like richest alchemy,/ Will change to virtue and to worthiness” (1.3.158-60). In other words, alchemy is needed to render a black deed a white one. This alchemy is to be provided by Brutus’s honour (*OED* 1.). In his subsequent soliloquy Brutus is also aware that a change of colour is needed to justify the killing of Caesar:

And since the quarrel
Will bear no colour for the thing he is,
Fashion it thus: that what he is, augmented,
Would run to these and these extremities. (2.1.28-31)

In order to be justified, the deed in question needs re-fashioning, re-colouring. In Brutus’s case, this is a process going on in his own mind, not (as with Caska and Cassius) in the public opinion of Rome. His honour (*OED* 2.) is obviously involved. However, while his honour appeared to guarantee the qualities of calmness and “patience” (1.2.168), so central to Stoicism (the school of philosophy which to Shakespeare’s contemporaries obviously epitomizes Roman virtues), at the time of his conversation with Cassius, his mind has since lost its balance.¹¹ This can be seen from the contorted syntax of his soliloquy as well as from his subsequent admission:

Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar
I have not slept.
Between the acting of a dreadful thing

And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream: [...] (2.1.61-65)

His torment of mind foreshadows that of later tragic Shakespearean heroes about to go wrong, most notably Macbeth (see, e.g., *Macbeth* 1.3.134-42 and 2.2.34-42).¹² The natural order of Brutus's mind rebels against killing Caesar, no matter what his honour (def. 2) may tell him. Even if understood in the 'modern' and humanist way, 'honour' appears to be ultimately meaningless.

No, Brutus is not Christ-like. His noble self-sacrifice does not have any redemptive power. He is—a Roman, embodying Roman qualities and faults: nobleness of mind and disregard for his personal safety and welfare as well as pride and excessive trust in his own virtues.¹³ When in his later quarrel with Cassius Brutus remarks that he is "armed so strong in honesty" (4.3.67) that Cassius's threats do not impress him, his "priggish claim to self-sufficiency [...] is reminiscent of Caesar in 2.2 and 3.1," as David Daniell quotes Richard Proudfoot.¹⁴

As a Roman, Brutus is an instance of fallible humanity. His noble qualities and good intentions cannot save him from his responsibility for the death and suffering of many fellow-Romans nor from his own tragic fate. It is through the means of ambiguity and paradox that Shakespeare constructs (if not 'invents,' as Harold Bloom seems to contend) "the human," and it is the ambiguities and paradoxes of his sources, Holinshed as well as Plutarch, which provided Shakespeare with the material for this construction.

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NOTES

¹References are to the Arden editions of Shakespeare's works, see "Works Cited."

²Cf., e.g., Morse, esp. 61.

³Cf. Kullmann, "Shakespeare and Peace" 47.

⁴Cf. Kullmann, "Chivalry and Courtesy" 300-01.

⁵Cf. e.g. Bradley 254-60; Rabkin; Leggatt 114-38; Greenblatt 56-65; Kullmann, *William Shakespeare* 134-42.

⁶Cf. Kullmann, "Biographische Geschichtsschreibung."

⁷Quotations from North's Plutarch are taken from the Appendix to the Arden edition of *Julius Caesar*.

⁸Cf. *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell, 1.2.85-9 and 92, notes, and Miles 136-37.

⁹Cf. Traversi's assessment: "'Honour' is in the way of becoming a trap set for those who, like Brutus, fail to temper idealism with a proper measure of self-awareness" (25).

¹⁰Cf., e.g., *Romeo and Juliet*, "Prologue," 3-4; *Richard III* 5.5.35-39; *Richard II* 1.3.127-28; *Henry IV, Part 1* 1.1.9-13 etc.

¹¹Cf. Kullmann, *William Shakespeare* 151-55.

¹²Cf. *Julius Caesar* 2.1.63-65, note.

¹³On the 'Roman' qualities of Brutus's suicide cf. Miles 144-48.

¹⁴*Julius Caesar* 4.3.67, note; Proudfoot is quoted from a private conversation.

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