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Shakespeare's Cicero

Brief as it is, Cicero's appearance in *Julius Caesar* (I. iii. 1–40)¹ is as impressive as the circumstances under which it is made. It is under the thundering sky and ghastly lightning that Casca meets Cicero and tells him the “prodigies” he has seen. What with the “tempest dropping fire” and “the hand in flames without being scorched,” what with “the men talking up and down the street all in fire” and “the bird of night hooting at midday,” the scene is filled with almost Dantesque atrocities. Particularly, Casca is so frightened by the lion that stared at him at the Capitol that he has been compelled to draw his sword. He is beside himself and with good reason because “all the sway of earth,” as he witnesses it, “Shakes like a thing infirm.” To Casca what has been happening is beyond natural explanation and must presage something “portentous.” But Cicero, in contrast, stays cool and unmoved, taking the extraordinary phenomenon quite indifferently: he calls it simply “a strange disposed time” and “this disturbed sky.” What enables him to keep such a detached attitude under these extraordinary circumstances is, we are told, his belief that men's interpretation has no objective foundation but merely depends on subjective inclinations.

But men may construe things after their fashion,
Clean from the purpose of the things themselves. (I. iii. 34–35)

If Casca can be described as a man of common sense who is duly liable

1. All references to *Julius Caesar* are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blackmore Evans, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

to superstitious beliefs, Cicero is perhaps meant to be characterised as a kind of agnostic or sceptic who denies human cognition the capacity to know objective truths.²

What is interesting about these characterizations of Casca and Cicero as a man of common sense and an agnostic, respectively, is the fact that their sources cannot be sought in Plutarch-North's *Life of Julius Caesar*. This is a striking fact when we consider that the major elements constituting the whole scene are derived for the most part from Plutarch-North. It is likely that even the lion at the Capitol, which is lacking in the *Life of Julius Caesar*, is suggested by the episode of the Megarian lions in the *Life of Brutus*.³ Against this dominantly Plutarchan background the distinct characterisation of two persons, particularly that of Cicero the agnostic, is outstanding as an instance of distinct Shakespearean addition. For in the so-called sources (the *Lives of Julius Caesar* and *of Brutus*) Casca is registered only as the first among the conspirators to attack Caesar on the Ides of March.⁴ Cicero, similarly, is remembered either as a wise but politically inept man who initially saw through Caesar's deceit but was subsequently put into exile by the latter (*Julius Caesar*)⁵ or as an old "coward" whom the conspirators deem unworthy of their membership

2. Alessandro Serpieri characterises the position of Cicero here as "the emergent relativism or scepticism of the epoch of the «new science»": "Quei segni [the prodigies], tutavia, potevano anche essere neutralizzati in quanto « segni » e ricondotti ad una fenomenologia naturale, pur inconsueta o abnorme, nell' ambito dell' emergente relativismo o scetticismo dell' epoca della « nuova scienza ». Ed e questa la posizione di Cicerone nella scena" in *Nel Laboratorio di Shakespeare delle fonti ai drammi*, vol. IV (*I Drammi Romani*), eds. A Serpieri, K. Elam & C. Corti (Pratiche Editrice, 1988), p. 85.

Recently, in his book *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon P. 1996) Geoffrey Miles also sees in the passage quoted a reflection of the scepticism of Cicero's philosophy. Miles's interpretation, which regards the passage as "a vital choric comment, for the difficulty of construing things correctly and the destructive power of 'hateful Error' (V. iii. 67) are major themes of *Julius Caesar* and the other Roman plays" (p. 25), is promising but one cannot but wish that the point were more substantiated. Chapter 2 "Cicero and the Roman Actors" stands us in good stead in illuminating Cicero's philosophical eclecticism as the Renaissance saw it; the Plutarchan connection, however, does not come within his ken.

3. Cf. The editor's note to this passage in *Julius Caesar* (The New Penguin Shakespeare, 1967), ed. Norman Sanders.

4. *Plutarch's Lives of Coriolanus, Caesar, Brutus, and Antonius* in North's Translation, ed. R. H. Carr (Oxford: Clarendon P., 1906).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 48; p. 58.

(*Brutus*).⁶

Shakespeare's Cicero as presented in *Julius Caesar* is admittedly a composite of fragmentary descriptions and characterizations, which the reader is expected to piece out. Outside his appearance in person in I. iii. his name is mentioned but four times in total.⁷ In the first instance (I. ii. 185), he is described by Brutus as extremely displeased and offended by Caesar's coronation—"Cicero/Looks with such ferret and such fiery eyes /As we have seen him in the Capitol, /Being cross'd in conference by some senators." The implication is that his republican creed finds Caesar's tyranny-oriented ascendancy repulsive. In the second instance (I. ii. 278), an interesting image of his "speaking Greek" is presented by Casca as he reports to Cassius what has happened in the market place on the occasion of Caesar's coronation. Asked by Cassius what was Cicero's response to Caesar's unexpected swooning and fall at that time, Casca reveals Cicero's peculiar behaviour: "he spoke Greek." He adds that he does not understand Greek, "but those that understood him smil'd at one another, and shook their heads." This may suggest, as one commentator takes it,⁸ Cicero's "cautious, if not evasive, mode of behaviour or his habit of expressing witticisms in Greek." But it can be equally possible, I think, to interpret this as a sign of his cowardice. The third instance (II. i. 141–153) occurs when the conspirators make deliberations as to whether they should let Cicero in on the plot. While Cassius, Casca, Cinna and Metellus all argue for the positive membership because of his "gravity" which they think is conducive to the popular support as well as the legitimization of their act, Brutus alone takes exception and persuades them all out of it, arguing that "he will never follow any thing/That other men begin." He would not like to be told to do anything but would rather take the initiative: he prefers to play a leading role. This trait of his can be in its essentials attributed to his much-discussed "vanity." And the last reference (IV. iii. 178) is made, not without impact, when Brutus and his followers talk of the order of proscription by which Cicero was killed.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

7. Outside *Julius Caesar* Cicero is mentioned only twice: once as a martyr ("A Roman sworder and bandetto slave/Murder'd sweet Tully" (2 Henry VI, IV. i. 136); and secondly as the author of *De Oratore* ("Ah, boy, Cornelia never with more care/Read to her sons than she hath read to thee! Sweet poetry and Tully's Orator" [*Titus Andronicus*, IV. i. 14]).

8. Marvin Spevack in his note on the line in his edition of *Julius Caesar* (The New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge UP., 1988).

To complete the fragmentary descriptions of Cicero in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: on the positive side, he is a firm believer and a distinguished representative of the republican ideal and as such he commands popular support. Also he can be cautious and witty in his public behaviour. On the negative side, however, he is a frustrated and coward republican who is vain enough not to take orders from others, always taking it for granted that he should lead the way. And in addition to this characterization, which is sufficiently complex, there is what we call Cicero the agnostic.

The uniqueness of Shakespeare's Cicero has long since been noted by Anna-Brunhilde Modersohn, who made an important survey on Cicero's cultural presence in sixteenth-century England.⁹ After taking a close look at various aspects of the transmissions and transformations of Ciceronian ideas, Modersohn sums up Shakespeare's Cicero as follows;

Shakespeare gave Cicero an ever-lasting image in *Julius Caesar* (1599), which is essentially formed on the basis of Plutarch. He is presented in the play as an authoritative man with gray hair. With his influential power he could have helped the conspiracy; but the conspirators did not let him in because, they thought, his vanity would never permit him to be in a position of a mere follower without taking the initiative himself. He is made aware of the critical importance of the moment by both Casca's talk and the unusual phenomenon of the burning heavens. And yet cowardice takes him back home. When the people see Caesar reject the offered crown without hesitation they are impressed by him, while Cicero, it is noted, speaks Greek. As politician he attracted no special attention from our poet, but the report of his death seems to have left a deep impression. He was admired as a writer. Shakespeare, a lover of contradictions, first drew attention to this self-contradictory nature of Cicero's life. (trans. mine)¹⁰

That Shakespeare's Cicero "is essentially formed on the basis of Plutarch" [-North] would be the view most plausible were it not for the fact that

9. Modersohn, Anna-Brunhilde. "Cicero im englischen Geistesleben des 16 Jahrhunderts," *Archiv für das Studium der neuen Sprachen and Literaturen* 80 (1926), (Band 149): 33–51; 219–45.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

such distinctive features as "gray hair," "vanity" and "self-contradictory nature" are lacking in Plutarch-North's *Lives of Julius Caesar* and *Brutus*. It may be that Cicero's vanity, the deeply ingrained characteristic much talked about by Plutarch in his *Life of Cicero* but not particularly in the *Lives* in question, may have happened to affect Shakespeare's characterisation. But it is Shakespeare who adopts this specifically Ciceronian trait of vanity as the main reason for which Cicero is not to be let in on the conspiracy. In Plutarch-North (*Brutus*), as we have noted, his age and cowardice rather than vanity is the cause that keeps the conspirators from having him as one of their members. Her overall view that Shakespeare's Cicero is "self-contradictory" and this in perfect accord with the dramatist's poetic disposition and temperament is indeed attractive and can be largely justified. Modersohn makes a mistake, however, in thinking that Cicero reveals himself as a coward when exposed to the disturbances of the elements, which forebode the crisis of the moment. As we have seen, Cicero in that extraordinary scene is represented not as a coward but a kind of agnostic -the characterisation very much unique to Shakespeare. Had she rightly understood this uniqueness Modersohn would not have stated that Shakespeare's Cicero "is essentially formed on the basis of Plutarch."

It is noteworthy that the Cicero as presented in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* exceeds the one which can be collected from its sources, Plutarch-North's two *Lives of Julius Caesar* and *Brutus*. What they, Shakespeare and Plutarch-North, have in common as Ciceronian characteristics are cowardice and political ineptitude. And others, including the contradictory one of authoritative dignity and self-centered vanity, seem to come from somewhere else. Some may have been borrowed from the most unlikely quarters; others may have originated in Shakespeare's invention. The question naturally arises as regards their provenance and significance.

Particularly interesting is the case with Shakespeare's presentation of Cicero as an agnostic. Where then does it at all come from? There seem to be two main possibilities: one from within the bounds of Plutarch-North's two lives, the other from the more general image of Cicero that apparently was prevalent in the Renaissance.

The characterisation of Cicero in both Shakespeare and the Plutarch-North of *Caesar* and *Brutus* is so meager and unphilosophical that it would be hard to find any part of it to which his agnosticism could be

attributed. However, if we turn our eyes outside the Cicero-related passages and look around, there is in the *Life of Brutus* a passage that could possibly have been used by Shakespeare to characterise Cicero. The passage in question is the one that gives a memorable description of Cassius's Epicurianism:

Cassius being in opinion an Epicurean, and reasoning thereon with Brutus, spoke to him touching the vision thus. "In our sect, Brutus, we have an opinion, that we do not always feel or see that which we suppose we do both see and feel: but that our senses being credulous, and therefore easily abused (when they are idle and unoccupied in their own objects), are induced to imagine they see and conjecture that which they in truth do not. For our mind is quick and cunning to work (without either cause or matter) anything in the imagination whatsoever. "And therefore the imagination is resembled to clay, the mind to the potter: who without any other cause than his fancy and pleasure, changeth it into what fashion and form he will. And this doth the diversity of our dreams show unto us. For our imagination doth upon a small fancy grow from conceit to conceit, altering both in passions and forms of things imagined. For the mind of man is ever occupied, and that continual moving is nothing but an imagination."¹¹

According to Cassius, Epicurean philosophy is predicated on the fundamental discrepancy between the senses and the imagination. The mind, deprived of communication with the senses, enjoys its autonomous power, producing without "cause or matter" anything in the imagination: the mind is to the imagination what the potter is to clay. As might easily be expected, such mental self-generation of imaginary things with no reference to the outer world reminds us of the agnostic attitude Cicero expresses in the extraordinary scene: "But men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves." The Ciceronian men construing "things after their fashion" correspond to the Epicurean "potter," who changes clay/things "into what fashion and form he will." Is there then a possibility that Shakespeare found Cassius's Epicurean philosophy (as set forth in Plutarch-North's *Julius Caesar*) useful

to characterise Cicero rather than Cassius himself? It is indeed unimaginable that Cicero should be placed under the category of Epicureanism, let alone, be called Epicurean, and yet the passage explaining the Epicurean tenet of mental autonomy may have left Shakespeare an impression strong enough to be taken advantage of. Although this will inevitably lead us to ask for what purposes Cicero is characterised by such agnostic mental autonomism—the interesting question that anyway remains without any clear answer—the hypothesis seems to be partly corroborated by Shakespeare's omission of the passage in question in his dramatization. Instead of letting Cassius expound his philosophical position, Shakespeare simply puts it as follows:

You know that I held Epicurus strong,
And his opinion; now I change my mind,
And partly credit things that do presage. (V. i. 76–78)

Here as in its source passage Cassius decides to abandon his creed of Epicurianism, whose agnostic mental autonomism has so far shielded him from superstitious habits like belief in omens. In this respect, too, Cicero's agnosticism (as Shakespeare characterises it) is made to serve the same function.

The case for the agnostic Cicero as derived from the Epicurean Cassius of Plutarch-North thus seems to be strong and plausible. But it is perhaps worth considering whether there are other possibilities, which could be found both in and outside Plutarch-North. In the first place, there is Plutarch-North's *Life of Cicero*, a must for any biographical investigation. It is difficult to gauge the extent of Shakespeare's knowledge of North's Plutarch (an issue of debate in this volume), but in case he read it, the chances then are not slight that he came to form an image of Cicero as a philosopher of Academic scepticism.¹² The component of that philosophical position, however, is not so much evident to the reader of the *Life* as in need of exposition, so that the identification of Cicero with Academic scepticism alone does not straightforwardly guarantee the production of such an agnostic epistemology as Shakespeare attributed to

11. "Plutarch," op. cit. *The Life of Brutus*, p. 145.

12. "Cicero had most affection unto the Academics, and did study that sect more than all the rest": *The Life of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, in Volume 8 of *Plutarch's Lives Englished by Sir Thomas North in Ten Volumes* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1899), p. 184.

Cicero. If we are to suppose that the philosophical position Shakespeare's Cicero takes was that of Academic scepticism, it is necessary to assume that there existed a strong general trend of scepticism which was at the same time closely associated with the name of Cicero. Was there actually such a trend? The answer, as is usual in a case like this, is both yes and no.

The latter half of the sixteenth century, it is said, saw the ascendancy of sceptical thought, particularly Academic skepticism as it was endorsed by Cicero's *Academica*. As one of the specialist works, *Academica* can hardly be considered as influential as Plutarch's *Lives* in its cultural dissemination and saturation, but according to Charles B. Schmitt's detailed study of this specific work and its influence in the Renaissance,¹³ the possibility cannot be entirely denied that it "played an important role in bringing sceptical ideas before the public."

This work of Cicero [the *Academica*] played an important preliminary role in preparing the way for a more significant flowering of sceptical thought after the reintroduction of Sextus Empiricus [in the 1560s]. Undoubtedly the fact that so eminent a thinker as Cicero endorsed Academic scepticism made it more palatable to the Christians of Renaissance Europe. For thinkers of the period, whatever Cicero had written was worthy of serious consideration. By a series of historical accidents Cicero's work was generally known some years before the writings of Sextus. Consequently, it played an important role in bringing sceptical ideas before the public and making it aware of some of the far-reaching consequences to be derived from them.¹⁴

But still I am perhaps not alone in thinking that the fortune and influence of one piece of work does not provide a sufficient evidence to convince us of the prevalent image of Cicero as an Academic sceptic in the Renaissance. As a matter of fact, Schmitt himself draws attention to the fact that the variety of philosophical positions discernible in Cicero's works eventually led to the questioning of his philosophical personality, "various interpreters seeing him as a Stoic dogmatist, as an Academic

13. Schmitt, Charles B. *Cicero Scepticus: A Study of the Influence of the "Academica" in the Renaissance* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

anti-dogmatist, or an eclectic."¹⁵ The image of Cicero the sceptic, be it of various descriptions, may have been in the air for Shakespeare to catch hold of. But other philosophical denominations, it seems highly likely, were equally accessible.

Be it of the Epicurean or the Academic-sceptic kind, the agnostic Cicero of Shakespeare gives us an occasion to reflect on the different ways that existed in the Renaissance of dealing with Cicero.¹⁶ Particularly conspicuous is Robert Greene's original attempt at the romanticization of Cicero's youthful years. His *Ciceronis Amor or Tullies' Love*¹⁷ is a "pastoral romance" in which is fabulously drawn what the extant (then as now) biographical documents have nothing to say about; young Cicero's courtship of Terentia, his future wife. It cannot have been a matter of interest for him alone that the Cicero, whom "the upstart crow" produced, had some distinction. In sharp contrast to Greene's fabulous romance and Shakespeare's unfounded distinction, Ben Jonson's Cicero in his *Catiline* is almost a dramatic reconstruction made out of the relevant works by Sallust, Tacitus and Cicero. The chances are that the "small Latin" is reflected in the figure of Cicero the agnostic, whom, as we have seen, it is difficult to assign to any particular learned tradition.

15. *Ibid.*, p.168.

16. Among the significant ways Plutarch's Cicero played the role of cultural renovation in Europe, Bruni's Latin translation of *The Life of Cicero* seems crucial. On this see Edmond Fryde, "The Beginnings of Italian Humanist Historiography: The *New Cicero* of Leonardo Bruni," *English Historical Review* 95 (1980): 533–52. For the Latin translations of Plutarch in general, see Vito R. Giustiniani, "Sulle Traduzioni Latine delle 'Vite' di Plutarco nel Quattrocento," *Rivista dell'Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento*, seconda serie vol. 1 (1961), pp. 3–62.

17. Robert Greene, *Ciceronis Amor: Tullies' Love*, ed. Charles H. Larson (U. of Salzburg, 1974).