Julius Caesar: Tyrannicide Made Unpopular

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The late Elizabethan Period was marked by socio-economic discontent. Amid this, Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar (1599) featured a prominent debate: whether or not tyrannicide could solve problems. Around 1599, Essex formulated a like-minded political revolution only to dismiss it until 1601. Yet, as providentialist and republican debates failed to provide solutions against misgovernment, the 1601 Essex rebellion also proved abortive. Essex was considered another regicide Brutus rather than a saviour. Contrary to the majority of apolitical or ahistorical critical analyses about tyranny in the play, a historicized analysis of Julius Caesar, therefore, illustrates how tyrannicide might have been perceived by Elizabethan playgoers.

The Globe was the first theatre to be owned exclusively by actors and opened with Shakespeare’s play Julius Caesar in 1599. Although the title character of the play seemed to be a mere marketing trick to attract the audience to a newly established playhouse with a popular character, as Julius Caesar was murdered in the beginning of Act iii, the very fact of his absence almost from the entire play afterwards formed the contextual political debate prominent in the Elizabethan period: that is, amid dissatisfaction with the present Elizabethan regime, whether tyrannicide could be approved or not. The majority of the critics of the play have mainly divided it from Elizabethan socio-political incidents, almost in the vein of New Criticism. For instance, M. E. Hartsock makes only a textual reading and focuses on the polysemous nature of the play by making a parallel reading between Plutarch’s and Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar. Similarly, Lucy de Bruyn refers to Shakespeare’s classical education at grammar school and how he twists his sources about Julius Caesar through ‘irony’. R. S. Miola tries to focus on the political side of the play and gives a brief survey of the debates, asks questions how to differentiate tyrants and kings, ‘murderers’ and heroes, and justified and

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unjustified ‘assassination’. Yet, Miola fails to incorporate these debates into the play and does not refer to any contemporary political associations except, yet faintly, that Catholics, on religious grounds, considered Elizabeth I as a tyrant. In a similar fashion, John Roe extensively compares *Julius Caesar* to political works, especially those of Machiavelli, even arguing lengthily on how Julius Caesar’s assassination was received in the Medici period, yet bluntly dismisses the possibility of any associations of the play with ‘Elizabeth I’ and her regime. More recently Daniel Juan Gil even argues that the play is ‘antipolitical’, which can be seen in the lack of any Elizabethan reference throughout the article; despite acknowledging the clash between ‘absolutism’ and ‘elite civic republicanism’, Gil claims that the play is more concerned with individual liberation from the constraints of political structure in the figure of Mark Antony, which, however, downsizes Mark Antony’s political manoeuvres. One of the notable exceptions in the critical tradition is William Rosen and Barbara Rosen’s reading of *Julius Caesar* where they try to associate contemporary fears about the succession question as Shakespeare’s principal authorial motivation, which slightly focuses on the historical resonances of the play. Likewise, a more recent article by Paulina Kewes is important to figure out the need for a historicized political turn in analysing *Julius Caesar*, as the article points out contemporary Jacobean debates, political and literary works about tyranny, and illustrates the political aftermath of James I’s self-portrayal as Caesar. Similar to Kewes’s approach, however, there is a need to historicize the Elizabethan debates about the consequences of amending socio-political grievances that are also depicted in *Julius Caesar*. Therefore, this article will illustrate Elizabethan political tracts about tyranny, analyse how tyrannicide was depicted in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and discuss how issues regarding tyranny and tyrannicide might have been perceived by playgoers in the late Elizabethan period.

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5 Miola, pp. 271–89.


As an extension of the clash between the established feudal order and the emerging capitalist system, the last decade of the Elizabethan regime faced several problems. In particular, the post-Armada period was predominated by socio-economic and socio-political crises and shortage of financial resources. These were rooted primarily in bad harvests, plagues, the rise in the prices, disunited and unsuccessful uprisings, and the hot-cold war with the Spanish in the Netherlands and Ireland.11 The uneven and rather subjective distribution of these limited financial resources within the top-down patronage system that was polarized between the aristocratic circle of the followers of the Earl of Essex and the meritocratic Cecils, whose clash of interests wasted most of these resources in fraudulency or unprofitable war investments,12 further increased criticisms towards the regime that was gradually perceived as a tyranny.

The status quo tried to maintain loyalty to the regime, in spite of its arbitrary policies and the growth of dissatisfaction, through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs).13 Yet, these measures were used by the dissatisfied Elizabethans to support their claims that the rule of Elizabeth I was equivalent to tyranny. As for the ISAs and RSAs, the Elizabethan government aggressively propagated obedience in its subjects through several media. According to the providentialist tradition that preceded her, Elizabeth I, as the head of the government, derived her power from divine ordination through legitimate succession based on


primogeniture. Because of such divine legitimisation, she and the policies of her government were propagandized as perfect and flawless, which made her and her government immune to human intervention.\textsuperscript{14} While royal portraiture, miniatures, engravings, coins, and rare but spectacular appearances of Elizabeth I in progresses and public appearances were used to illustrate the perfection of her body natural and body politic,\textsuperscript{15} homilies put emphasis on passively obeying such rule. Accordingly, ‘it [was] not lawfull for […] subiectes, by force to resist’ since ‘euen the wicked rulers haue their power & aucthoritie from God’\textsuperscript{16} and any resistance to any rule that derived its power from God was ‘rebellion [which was] worse then the worst prince’.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, even criticisms towards the regime, let alone a change of the system, were not tolerated by the state-sanctioned Elizabethan providentialist doctrines where the monarch as the mythical representative of God on earth was responsible only to God.

However, the restrictions put on the use of legitimate means to criticize the system, such as those put on the petition system and the advisory parliament of the seemingly ‘mixed’ republican government or ‘constitutional monarchy’ of Elizabethan England,\textsuperscript{18} further increased criticism towards the


\textsuperscript{16} Thomas Cranmer, \textit{Certain Sermons, or Homilies, Appoynted by the Kynges Maiestie} (London: Grafton, 1547), sig T1’.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{An Homilie Against Disobedience and Wyfull Rebellion} (London: Richard Iugge, 1571), sig B2’.

failings of the system. In the eyes of the disenfranchised, Elizabeth I was no longer perceived as a fountain of endless favour but as an authoritarian tyrant who distributed favours capriciously. Elizabeth I was likened to figures like Queen Jezebel or the female personification of vanity, that is, vanitas, through which patriarchal norms regarding sexism and ageism were used to criticize the body politic of Elizabeth I by attacking her body natural.¹⁹ Since legitimate means could not be used to criticize the system, dissidents in the radicalized and polarized Elizabethan society tried to formulate through resistance literature how to legitimize opposition to the present regime.

The well-established providentialist political tracts understood the importance of Plato and Aristotle’s theoretical formulations of a balanced political system based on the mixed type of government,²⁰ yet they failed to provide definitive answers for how to maintain such a system in spite of misgoverning rulers. Salisbury, for instance, could describe ‘the tyrant’ as a ruler who ‘supposes that nothing is done unless the laws are cancelled and the people are brought to servitude’, but he could not give guidelines of avoiding such a rule.²¹ Likewise, Aquinas’s De regimine principum (1267) acknowledged that ‘tyranny’ was ‘grievous’, yet urged ‘to tolerate a degree of tyranny’ rather than defy order.²² Similarly, Smith’s De republica Anglorum could not answer ‘whether a good and vpright man, and louer of his Countrey ought to maintaine and obey them, or to seeke by all meanes to abolish them’.²³ Therefore, focusing on the loopholes of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Salisbury, and Smith regarding the legitimate removal of misgoverning rulers that


²³ Smith, sig. B3"
became tyrants, the literati of this resistance literature incorporated the ideas of Cicero and Seneca into their works in order to justify tyrannicide to cleanse the system of such misgoverning rulers. This was also rooted in the fact that contrary to the Greek tradition the Roman tradition provided examples and guidelines regarding social defiance. Cicero, for instance, in *De officiis* focused on social wellbeing to justify the murder of a tyrant as a practical means to end tyranny. Likewise, the dramatic and political works of Seneca supported this moral aspect by providing deserved punishments of tyrants.

Until the 1590s, ideas regarding tyrannicide or the alteration of the system had been advocated primarily by diasporic Protestants and diasporic Catholics who incorporated Judeo-Christian sources in their treatises along with classical sources. References to the New and Old Testament that supported defiance to tyrants, like the words ‘obey God rather than men’ or stories about how tyrants were ‘removed’ were read used to support their claims from a religious standpoint. For instance, *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* (1579) followed the classical pattern of questions and answers, yet inserted religious overtones in answering whether or not to oppose misgoverning rulers by asking ‘whether subjects have to obey princes who command them to act against the word of God; whether princes who make such demands can be resisted; whether princes who ruin their states can be resisted; and whether neighbouring princes have a duty to help the subjects of an oppressed people overthrow their prince’. What is more, the works of Machiavelli were also used to support republican ideas. The Marian exile John Ponet, for instance, in his *Shorte Treatise of Politicke Power* (1556) asked questions in the vein of Machiavelli and gave Biblical and classical examples of how people who suffered under ‘tyrannye and oppre[ß]ion […] altered the state’ and ‘overthr[ew]’ tyrants. George Buchanan in his *De jure regni* (1579) copied Ponet’s ideas that people could overthrow tyrants, ‘Vulgus […] tyrannorum caedem probat’, and even went more in arguing that power


28 John Ponet, *A Shorte Treatise of Politike Power, and of the True Obedience which Subiectes owe to Kynges and Other Cuylde Gouvernours, with an Exhortacion to All True Naturall Englishe men* (Strasbourg: Köpfel, 1556), sigs A2r, A5v.
resided in the people rather than the rulers, ‘Populo enim ius est, vt imperium cui velit deferat’. Similarly, in his Conference (1595), Parsons, in arguments almost identical to Ponet and Buchanan’s, legitimised ‘that a king upon just causes may be deposed’.

While these Protestant and Catholic writers of resistant literature could criticize the system from the outside and relatively spread their ideas through illicit means, the works printed in Elizabethan England had to encode criticism because of the (in)effective presence of the censorship mechanisms. For that end, the translations of works chronologically or spatially distant from Elizabethan England were used to spread ideas regarding non-monarchical rule. Translations and works that praised city states that were in the fashion of the old Roman Republic emerged predominantly in the 1580s and 1590s to illustrate these as hoped-for new non-monarchical governments following a change in the system. Valerius in his The Casket of Jewels (trans. 1571) defined ‘Citie’ states as ‘common weales’ governed by ‘Ciuil wisdom’. Likewise, Patrizi’s De institutione reipublicae, which was translated as A Moral Methode of Ciuite Policie in 1576, focused on how these were ruled by ‘Lawes’, ‘Justice’ and ‘Equality amongst Cytyzens’. The egalitarian system of such city states was perceived by Barston in his Safegarde (1576) literally as a safeguard from the ‘tirannie’ of princes. Educated citizens were perceived more fit to rule than the feudal norms dictated, as could be seen in Cyuile and Vncyuile Life (1579), which ‘perswaded that’ a ‘Gentlemen so brought up’, particularly ‘in Court or Towne’ through positive education, was ‘meetest for gouerment’.

Gradually, works appeared that equated London’s civic governance to such

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29 George Buchanan, De jure regni apud Scotos (Edinburgh: John Ross, 1579), sigs B1v–C2r.
30 Robert Parsons, A Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland (Antwerp: Conincx, 1595), p. 61.
36 Cyuile and Vncyuile Life: A Discourse Very Profitable, Pleasant, and Fit to Bee Read of All Nobilitie and Gentlemen (London: Richard Jones, 1579), sigs N3r–N4r.
city states. For instance, *A Breefe Discourse, Declaring and Approving the Necessarie and Inuiolable Maintenance of the Laudable Customes of London* (1584) fashioned London as a city ruled by ‘Lawes’ rather than ‘the word of a Prince’. Guazzo in his *The Ciuile Conuersation* (trans. 1586) maintained that the rule of the people functioned well even in ‘small Townes’ through their assemblies ‘establish orders by comon consent’. Covert praise and allusions cumulated in 1598 into the overt manifesto of the translator of Goslicius’s *De optimo senator*, where the translator directly equated city states to the civic rule of London which should even be strengthened. The next year, Lewkenor translated Contarini’s *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum* and argued that the city state should be used as a model for governance in England, because such a system hindered favouritism and sycophancy, as ‘offices’ were occupied by ‘men of greatest wisedome, vertue and integritie of life’.

Along with the rise of the reinterpretation of classical political works for republican ends, classical historiography was reinterpreted as a means to support resistance literature through the analytical analyses of historical example. Neo-Tacitean historiography following the translations of Livy, Tacitus, Sallust, Plutarch and Suetonius enabled examinations of the similarities and differences between historical and ‘topical’ policies. The publication of Simon Harward’s 1598 providentialist sermon in 1599 against the application of republican models in England, the anti-monarchical history of the constitutional deposition of the tyrannical and arbitrary rule of Richard II in *Henrie the IIII* and the translation of Contarini’s *Commonwealth* in praise of the rule of republican government, published in the same year, were significant to affect discussions regarding the republican voicing and the providentialist silencing of social criticism and the advocacy of deposition

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43 John Hayward, *The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henrie the IIII* (London: John Woolfe, 1599), sig. M3r.
44 Contarini, sigs A2r, A4r.
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or tyrannicide when Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (*JC*), based on Plutarch’s account,45 was performed for the first time.

However, to comprehend that significance, the socio-political realities of 1599 should be analysed further. Ideas about republicanism and providentialism have been so far polarized in academia in an essentialist way, loading each with specific ideologies and advocates. While Tacitean/Machiavellian republicanism has been identified mainly with the newly emerging bourgeoisie who wanted to have an egalitarian system defined by the needs and desires of the base in a bottom-up manner, providentialism has been associated as an ISA of monarchic and aristocratic top down political control. While the emphasis in the first group has been put on the notion of citizenship and commoners in Elizabethan resistance literature,46 the critics of the latter group emphasized that the feudal norms of primogeniture and the Chain of Being were primarily advocated by Privy Councillors and the Queen.47 Nevertheless, analysed from a historicized context, we can argue that such essentialism may be misleading. If we consider that Taciteanism, whether in a bastardized form of baronial oligarchy or constitutional monarchy, was championed by a landed aristocrat, Essex,48 Machiavellianism was used not only by the socially upward climbing meritocrats within the nobility, but also by the aristocrats to secure their ‘interests’.49 What is more, providentialism was also used by commoners both as a means to sustain the

45 *JC* is probably based on former plays like *Caesar and Pompey* (c. 1580) and the two-part *Caesar and Pompey* (c. 1594–95). The dates of performances are consistent with the publication of the major source of the play, that is, North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives* published in 1579 and 1595. Since there was no publication of Plutarch in or around 1599, the debate about tyranny and tyrannicide in 1599, rather than Plutarch on its own, must have made the relatively dated content of the play popular again. For particular reference to Julius Caesar in Plutarch, see Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. by Thomas North (London: Thomas Vautroullier, 1579), pp. 763–96. Also see Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. by Thomas North (London: Richard Field, 1595), pp. 758–91. For evidence regarding the performances of *Caesar and Pompey* (c. 1580), see Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions, Proving That They Are Not to be Suffred in Christian Common Weale* (London: Gosson, 1582), sigs D4r–D5r. For evidence regarding the performances of the two-part *Caesar and Pompey*, see British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue, ed. by Martin Wiggis and Catherine Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011–), iii (2013), 256–57, 293.


47 Hadfield, Republicanism, p. 25; Peltonen, pp. 85, 102–03; Black, pp. 217–18.


49 Montrose, Subject, p. 229.
maintenance of the deferential relationship\textsuperscript{50} and as an illusion in an ironic manner by the meritocratic commoner-nobility Cecils to sustain their hold on the patronage system.\textsuperscript{51} Thus, the performance of Shakespeare’s \textit{JC} amid such an atmosphere showed a far more complicated constitution of questions on tyranny and tyrannicide.\textsuperscript{52}

Shakespeare’s \textit{JC}, for instance, pointed out the paradoxical constitution of the necessary social superiority of a ruler which s/he could misuse. Accordingly, Elizabethan political thought, based on Fortescue’s ideas, pointed out the necessity of the greatness and ‘might’ of a ruler, whereas it acknowledged that such necessity might spoil him and transform him into a tyrant who might use his powers for ‘oppression’.\textsuperscript{53} That possibility was voiced in \textit{JC} in particular when one of the tribunes of the people, Flavius, emphasized that Julius Caesar’s success and power might create overconfidence in him, make him look down upon other people and ‘keep’ these ‘in servile fearfulness’ (i. 1. 73–76). Although there were multiple constraints to hinder the emergence of tyrannical rule in a mixed government like the Roman Republic, the historical example of Julius Caesar proved that even in a republic, the constitutionally chosen leader among equals might turn into a tyrant through his single hold on power. In particular, because of his strength and success, Julius Caesar was so over-confident that he considered himself as a super-human being immune to ‘fear’ and threat (i. 2. 210–11, ii. 2. 1–107). By referring to himself in the third person singular throughout the play, Julius Caesar loaded himself with greatness again and again. For example, when there were supernatural omens against his departure from his home, Julius Caesar even defied divine powers superior to him, let alone inferior human powers of other aristocrats or commoners:


\textsuperscript{51} Hammer, pp. 332–33.

\textsuperscript{52} The printing of Harward, Hayward and Contarini’s works in 1599 coincided with the production of Shakespeare’s \textit{JC}, which dealt with historical examples from the Roman period: republicanism from the Roman Republic and tyrannicide of the Roman ruler Julius Caesar. Tyrannicide had been supported, ironically, by Shakespeare’s Richmond to incite his army against the tyrannous rule of Richard III several years before. See William Shakespeare, \textit{Richard III}, ed. by Anthony Hammond (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2000), v. 5. 22–40. Yet, the moral and political problems regarding tyranny were problematized in \textit{JC}.

\textsuperscript{53} John Fortescue, \textit{A Learned Commendation of the Politique Lawes of England} (London: Thomas Wight, 1599), sigs 87’–88’.
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The gods do this in shame of cowardice.
Caesar should be a beast without a heart
If he should stay at home today for fear.
No, Caesar shall not. Danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he.

(II. 2. 41–45)

This uncompromising character manifested itself in decisions regarding mercy. For example, when Metellus and other members of the higher strata petitioned for the repeal of banishment of Metellus’s brother, Publius Cimber, Julius Caesar did not listen to their petitions but disregarded them in a cold manner (III. 1. 31–74). Yet, the fact that people could play on Julius Caesar’s megalomania through flattery made his assertions about just decisions questionable. This could be seen when Decius, one of the conspirators, abused his weakness for flattery. Decius fashioned himself as a good advisor praising Julius Caesar’s greatness and even warning him against ‘flatterers,’ despite being one himself (III. 1. 193–210). Consequently, Julius Caesar as depicted in Shakespeare’s play was an illustration of how the necessary greatness in a ruler might transform him/her into a despot.

Similar to Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, Elizabeth I put emphasis on herself and her political power and disregarded bottom-up advice as much as possible. She restricted the function of the petition system and Parliament as advisory tools by putting forward her prerogatives whenever she did not want others to interfere with her own policies.54 What was more, by bestowing a monopoly of the patronage system on the socially inferior Cecils, Elizabeth I disproportionally favoured them, while others felt themselves oppressed by the capricious decisions of the monarch and the manipulations of the Cecils. After the death of old and strong patrons in the post-Armada Period, the meritocratic Cecils had a great impact on allocation of the royal patronage,55 which led to the anger of aristocratic supporters of the Earl of Essex who argued that they were disenfranchised from having a say in domestic politics, particularly in the appointment of offices, and international policy.56 The accumulation of decisions in favour of the Cecils made Essex’s aristocratic followers perceive Elizabeth I as an authoritarian and arbitrary tyrant and

her government as a form of tyranny.\(^{57}\) Thereby, the very power of Elizabeth I in decision-making in spite of her aristocrats and commoners depicted that the strength which was necessary in a ruler could possibly turn him/her into a despot.

Quite in line with such offstage significance, in *JC* one of the leaders of the dissidents considering such a possibility, Cassius, foregrounded that a leader did not possess a transcendental superiority over other people. He said ‘I was born free as Caesar […] [a]nd this man | Is now become a god, and Cassius is | A wretched creature and must bend his body | If Caesar carelessly but nod on him’ (i. 2. 97, i. 2. 115–18). Such demystification could be observed in the anonymous *Breefe Discourse, Declaring and Approvying the Necessarie and Invioable Maintenance of the Laudable Customes of London*, wherein London was shown to surpass ‘citie’ states of ‘Italie’ as a republic ruled by people with ‘Lawes,’ in which ‘a Prince’ was emphasized to be only a ‘mortall man’.\(^{58}\) The demystification stated in Elizabethan republican literature and played on the Elizabethan stage gained importance for two reasons. First of all, it emphasized that since even a constitutional ruler might become a tyrant, it made it much easier for a divinely sanctioned monarch responsible only to God to become an authoritarian ruler over his/her subjects. Secondly, it downsized the ruler from a divine position and protection, making him/her prone to criticism and correction by human agents.

Following criticisms towards Julius Caesar’s authoritarian rule, the disenfranchised aristocrats form a faction in order to amend its oppression. They felt themselves responsible for restoring the principles of the Republic. All in all, tyrannous rule was depicted on the stage as a result of passive servitude where people did not defend their rights. Accordingly, Cassius maintained that the ‘yoke and sufferance’ under tyranny was the result of their passive behaviour (i. 3. 84). Quite interestingly, in the 1590s, the Protestant academician Robert Ashley at Oxford pointed out in his *Of Honour* that ‘Tyrantes’ could bring merely ‘dull spirited’ and stupid people into their oppressive rule, while ‘those of more witt and accomplishement wilbe obedient to none but such a one as ruleth by laws and institucions and gouerneth iustly’.\(^{59}\) Similar to Ashley’s assertion, Cassius further stated in *JC* that Caesar would be ‘tyrant’ because ‘he would not be a wolf | But that he

\(^{57}\) Similar to Julius Caesar who disregarded the advices of his wife Calphurnia (ii. 2. 8–107), Essex’s advices were disregarded by the arbitrary decisions of Elizabeth I. Thereby, Essex’s claims to heroic aristocratic masculinity were subordinated, silenced and feminized according to patriarchal norms.

\(^{58}\) *Breefe Discourse*, pp. 3–6, 14–16.

sees the Romans are but sheep. | He were no lion, were not Romans hinds’ (i. 3. 103–06). Tyranny was the result of passive obedience and it could be acted against only in an active and aggressive way.

Furthermore, such active policy was a responsibility for the higher classes that possessed the necessary power base and relations among other members of the higher classes to effect a change in the system. It was a burden for the ‘general good’ as pointed out by Brutus (i. 2. 85), which was also felt by some of the disenfranchised Elizabethans in a similar way, since ‘many saw Elizabeth as a remote and arbitrary monarch who had little interest in her subjects’. They perceived her as a tyrant and urged the aristocracy to take matters into their hands as a responsibility, to establish a genuine constitutional regime where government should be in the hands of able citizens and aristocrats. Foord’s Synopsis politica (1582) and Sansovino’s The Quintesence of Wit (trans. 1590) argued that personal excellence depended on personal commitment for ‘the commonwealth’ and ‘Common-weal’. In line with social hierarchy and impact factor, the majority of this commitment ought to be made by the aristocracy, similar to the governors of city states as described in Lewkenor’s translation of Contarini. Lewkenor’s association with the Earl of Essex, the champion of aristocracy, was in this sense not a coincidence, as the translation by Essex’s patroness reflected his own aspirations for aristocratic exceptionalism. As a result of the humanist education, aristocrats like the Earl of Essex had a strong sense of responsibility to supervise society. Essex, in particular, bore the burden of Protestant aristocrats, like his father, Leicester, and Sidney, and the demands of a relatively big Protestant base, which increased his sense of duty. Thus, around 1599, when Essex was losing his strength more and more in the Privy Council, he felt a burden similar to Shakespeare’s Brutus in asserting his rights to have more say in decision-making for what he perceived as the general good.

However, how to effectively amend grievances and how to support these measures from a moral perspective still remained questions on and off the stage. The onstage characters of the Roman Republic wanted to assassinate

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60 Hadfield, Republicanism, p. 41.
62 Contarini, sig. A2v.
63 Hadfield, Republicanism, p. 92. I prefer the term ‘patroness’ to refer to the base of the patronage system, since the term ‘client’ reduces vertical relationships to their financial aspect. The term ‘patroness’ encompasses both the monetary and, most importantly, social relationship between different social strata in a hierarchical structure like the Elizabethan patronage system.
64 Peltonen, pp. 97–98; Hurstfield, p. 63.
Caesar. The hope was that once the tyrant was dead, his arbitrary system would give way to a more Republican form of government. It was an ‘honourable’ but ‘dangerous’ ‘enterprise’ (i. 3. 123–24), which necessitated the support of a large group of people from the higher social strata and the commoners. Accordingly, Cassius had ‘already’ ‘moved’ ‘certain of the noblest-minded Romans’ (i. 3. 121–22), yet he lacked the support of Brutus, whom the population favoured as a noble man. In order to win him and thereby the support of the population, Cassius employed Machiavellian tactics. Almost as an agent provocateur, Cassius contrived false testimonies of public opinion through fake letters in different handwritings to affect Brutus’s ideas about public opinion and incite him for the good of the public (i. 3. 300–19). Real questions regarding tyrannicide lay behind Brutus’s initial lack of eagerness to be a part of the conspirators. In particular, it was Brutus who stated the moral problematics of justifying the murder of a ruler for the benefit of the society. While the conscience of Brutus lay on one side, on the other side were ideas that reminded of Cicero’s doctrines ‘that a tyrant […] should be exterminated’ in the manner of ‘fierce and savage monsters’ or ‘members’ that ought be ‘amputated’ for ‘the health of the other parts of the body of […] humanity’. Similar to the claims about the moral justification of tyrannicide to cleanse society of misbehaving rulers, Brutus stated the dilemma he faced as follows:

It must be by his death: and for my part
I know no personal cause to spurn at him
But for the general. He would be crowned:
How that might change his nature, there’s the question.
[…]
Th’abuse of greatness is when it disjoins
Remorse from power; and to speak truth of Caesar
I have not known when his affections swayed
More than his reason. But ’tis a common proof
That lowliness is young ambition’s ladder
Whereo to the climber-upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend. So Caesar may.
[…]
And therefore think him as a serpent’s egg
Which, hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous,
And kill him in the shell.

(ii. 1. 10–34)

66 Cicero, p. 299.
Struggling between ‘public virtue’ and ‘private crime’, Brutus contemplated as an aristocrat what could be better for the welfare of the people. Brutus mused whether killing Julius Caesar would free them from the possibility of despotism and whether killing someone for the benefit of the majority would be morally justified. Therefore, when Brutus convinced himself and joined the conspirators, he further emphasized that the killing of a ruler should be fashioned and formulated as a necessity. For that reason, only Julius Caesar should be targeted. As an aristocrat with an aristocratic burden, Brutus declared the faction against Julius Caesar as ‘sacrificers’, who should avoid being seen as ‘butchers’ by killing only Julius Caesar (ii. 1. 161–65). Killing only the authoritarian ruler would be morally justified as a ‘sacrificial catharsis’ purging society. Therefore Brutus emphasized that

Caesar must bleed for it. And, gentle friends,
Let’s kill him boldly, but not wrathfully:
Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods,
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.
[…]. This shall make
Our purpose necessary and not envious,
Which so appearing to the common eyes,
We shall be called purgers, not murderers.

(ii. 1. 170–79)

The principal aim of this purgation was to liberate the Roman Republic from the oppression of tyranny. Accordingly, the aristocrats would ‘correct’ the ‘political’ ‘imbalance’ that was created by the socially mobile Julius Caesar’s despotism. That was why the conspirators cried ‘Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead! […] Peace, Freedom and Liberty’ when they killed Julius Caesar (iii. 1. 78, iii. 1. 110). In a similar vein, Essex aimed at a purgation of society from the policies of Elizabeth I and the Cecils that deprived most of the aristocracy from having a say in political decision-making. In the year JC was performed, Essex departed to his Irish mission, where at a certain moment he considered an invasion and violent turnover of the Elizabethan government assisted by 3,000 soldiers and his supporters among the disenfranchised nobility. His aim was to use his military power to capture the Queen, depose her and

69 Wayne, pp. 88, 90.
place James VI as new king through parliamentarian consent and eliminate his factional foes, the Cecils, who used the royal patronage as they wished. Aiming at reconstituting aristocratic privileges by eliminating meritocrats and placing James VI as a new monarch, who was used to being governed primarily by the advisory mechanisms of Parliament and the Privy Council, Essex wanted to liberate the disenfranchised nobility from the tyranny of Elizabeth I and Sir Robert Cecil. Although these plans were known only by few people and were aborted because of the lack of support from the higher nobility in 1599, the significance of the passage about liberation from tyranny in JC might still have resonances in the consciousness of the Elizabethan playgoers. ‘On the 21st of September [1599]’ JC was described by the contemporary account of the Swiss traveller Thomas Platter as ‘an excellent performance’. Taking into consideration that the ‘three-dimensional’ acting through the ‘thrust stage’ in Elizabethan amphitheatres enabled a much more effective audience-actor interaction, the metatheatrical commentary upon the reception of these liberators in subsequent theatrical performances in the distant future might have provoked reaction from the Elizabethan playgoers. Whatever other initial responses of the individual audience members might have been about the assassination of Julius Caesar, it was a fact that his assassination did not end the problems regarding the perception of tyrannous rule. Rather, tyrannicide led into two other problems: the shattering of order through the disorderly assassination might first create disorder, leading to a power vacuum and then to a domestic war.

As for the first problem, tyrannicide in JC left a political vacuum where former pleas to purge society became void because the majority of the liberators transformed into tyrants themselves, oppressing people through corruption. As Ribner maintained, ‘noble instincts violate their own natures’ following the suspension of order. For instance, Cassius’s man and Cassius himself were accused of taking bribes, for which Brutus had condemned

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72 James, pp. 441–42.


75 Ribner, p. 22.
Cassius’s man. Cassius misused his power: through his ‘itching palm’ he used ‘[t]o sell and mart […] offices for gold | To undeservers’ (iv. 3. 10–12). Thereby, Cassius contradicted himself, and the cause, to kill Julius Caesar. Brutus asked Cassius,

[d]id not great Julius bleed for justice’ sake?
What villain touched his body, that did stab
And not for justice? What, shall one of us,
That struck the foremost man of all this world
But for supporting robbers: shall we now
Contaminate our fingers with base bribes?]

(iv. 3. 19–24)

Brutus asserts that they killed Caesar to re-establish justice by killing a tyrant. Yet, by misusing power, the liberators became tyrants as well.

As for the second problem, the suspension of order created uncontrolled disorder. This problem echoed providentialist ideas that figured out how human intervention and agency might complicate socio-political grievances. For instance, Aquinas had argued that ‘[taking] action against the tyrant [would] incur many perils more grievous than the tyranny itself’.

Propagandist works still used in the Elizabethan period based their ideas on Aquinas and frequently underscored the necessity of order. For instance, while Cranmer pointed out that ‘where there is no righte ordre, there reigneth all abuse’, the *Homilie Against Disobedience* underlined the ‘vnkindnes, vnnaturalnesse, wickednesse, mischeuousnese’ that created such disorder. In line with these guidelines, providentialists used the incidents following Julius Caesar’s murder as an example to be taken. For example, Smith in his *The Common-welth* maintained that the civil war after Julius Caesar’s assassination proved how disorder emerged because of human intervention in God’s affairs. For ‘it is alwaies a doubftfull and hasardous matter to meddle with the changing of the lawes and gouernment, or to disobey the orders of the rule or gouernment, which a man doeth finde alreadie established’. This was reflected in Shakespeare’s *JC* in a very dramatic way. Following the unsuccessful persuasion of Brutus to justify their cause in killing Julius Caesar (iii. 3. 12–62) and Mark Antony’s successful oratory proving the contrary (iii. 2. 74–252), the population ran amok to ‘Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay!’ (iii. 2. 198). Indiscriminate of guilt or innocence, the mob psychology of lynching did not spare women, like Portia, Brutus’s wife (iv. 3. 145–68), or passers-by, like Cinna the poet who was killed although he proved himself not to be his namesake Cinna the conspirator (iii. 3. 1–38).

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76 Aquinas, p. 18.
77 Cranmer, *Certain Sermons*, sig. S3'; *Homilie Against*, sigs B4r–s.
78 Smith, sig. B3’.
Hence, rather than amending problems, tyrannicide created more problems that sprang from the subsequent power vacuum.

Furthermore, this political power vacuum created more issues as it was contested by powerful political actors who proved each other’s multiple constraints in factional quarrel. Francis Bacon, once the friend and patron of Essex, pointed out in his *Essays* (1597) that factionalism had hazardous effects on society, because it was based primarily on reciprocal ‘discontentment’ rather than simply on self-interest. The fierce competition for ultimate economic and political control against political opponents created a polarized society governed by suspicion. As Cicero observed in his *De officiis*, the aftermath of Julius Caesar’s assassination created a political vacuum which made the creators forget about their initial noble intents:

> Those who propose to take charge of the affairs of government should not fail to remember two of Plato’s rules: first, to keep the good of the people so clearly in view […] regardless of their own interests […] second, to care for the welfare of the whole body politic and not in serving the interests of some one party to betray the rest. For the administration of the government […] must be conducted for the benefit of those entrusted to one’s care, not of those to whom it is entrusted. Now, those who care for the interests of a part of the citizens and neglect another part, introduce into the civil service a dangerous element — dissension and party strife. The result is that some are found to be loyal supporters of the democratic, others of the aristocratic party, and few of the nation as a whole. As a result of this party spirit[,] […] in our own country not only dissensions but also disastrous civil wars broke out.

The disastrous effects of a political power vacuum in the form of suspicion against each other and polarization manifested itself in Shakespeare’s *JC* in the multiple forms of factional quarrels. Apart from the inter-factional civil war between the forces of Mark Antony and Octavian against Brutus and Cassius, there happened to be intra-factional friction between Brutus and Cassius (iv. 3. 1–91) and Mark Antony and Octavian (v. 1. 16–20). Julius Caesar was a powerful figure, whose strength was perceived as a threat to constitutional liberties in the Roman Republic, which should maintain the balance between the forms of monarchy, aristocracy, and politeia. Yet, the lack of even a misgoverning head of the state created a misbalance, which would haunt the factionalists until their decimation to a single ruler. Therefore, Julius Caesar in his spectral appearance on the stage towards the very end of the play also showed how tyrannicide may haunt its actors. This spectral haunting was the


80 Cicero, p. 87.
result of the lack of a charismatic leader, who did not have a network power-base to fill the vacuum. Brutus’s republican ideals made him reject filling such a vacuum, whereas Mark Antony’s rhetorical schemes caused him to procrastinate taking the imperial crown for himself immediately. Thus, we may conclude that the success of a tyrannicide resided in the ability to fill the authority vacuum in a clear-cut way, which was depicted on the Elizabethan stage to be almost impossible.

Similar to the on-stage depiction of the unpopular results of tyrannicide, the failure of the Essex rebellion two years after the performance of JC showed that the Elizabethan audience did not consider Essex as a possible charismatic leader to fill a vacuum created by a possible deposition of Elizabeth I. Essex shattered his public image right after the failure of the Azores campaign in 1597. Yet there was still hope when he launched war against Ireland, as could be seen in the epilogue to Henry V, in which it was indicated that Essex could become another Henry V or ‘conquering Caesar’. However, Essex exhausted his popular image as a military leader on horseback, depicted in several engravings, with his military failures in Ireland, which made most of his genuine adherents, like Francis Bacon, lose faith in him, and made his mediocre adherents and parasites incite him to a rebellion. Although his 1599 invasion plans were aborted in the same year, following the removal of his patent for Sweet Wines in 1600, the only option for him to regain his former socio-economic and political position within the royal patronage remained a coup de état. However, Essex disregarded the loss of popular support to him, which reality manifested itself in the actual performance of the rebellion when the Sheriff of London along with his 1,000 retainers and the commoners of London refused to support his rebellion. Essex’s rhetorical schemes to incite the Londoners to help him were as ineffective as Brutus’s oration about the necessity of murdering Caesar. Essex was not a

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81 Hammer, pp. 382–84.
83 Montrose, Subject, pp. 215–18.
84 Williams, pp. 373–76; Harrison, p. 140.
85 James, pp. 441–42.
86 Williams, p. 373.
87 Harrison, p. 146; James, pp. 438, 449–50; Hammer, pp. 269–76; Williams, pp. 375–76.
88 Contemporary records likened Essex to Caesar. See Henry V, v. Chorus. 22–34; Hadfield, Republicanism, p. 183; Shapiro, pp. 128–29; Wayne, pp. 100–06. Yet, most of the critics, including Wayne, fail to perceive that Essex did not consider himself as Caesar. Rather, Essex considered himself as an aristocrat who had a burden to care for society according
militaristically successful Cromwell of the 1640s but an Elizabethan courtier deluded with the simulacra of chivalric ideals performed in tournaments and tilts, which could not be practised in real-life military campaigns. This delusion made him a popular and possible candidate for a Tacitean government but, like the impracticality of Taciteanism in general, Essex could not make others believe in its realisation. Essex was not perceived as a possible nation-builder Richmond, but rather a regicide Brutus in the eyes of the late Elizabethan audience.

To conclude, JC was performed amid a period when tensions regarding the perception of tyranny and factionalism were at their zenith. Apart from the clash of taken-for-granted privileges and newly emerging ones, JC showed the internal struggle of Brutus considering the morality of tyrannicide. Set against the Roman context in which the murder of Julius Caesar brings civil war, even the possibility of removing a tyrannous ruler metaphorically on the stage would bear complex resonances in the Elizabethan context. The disenfranchised aristocrats around Essex and their commoner patronees considered the Elizabethan government, ruled by Elizabeth I’s capricious policies manipulated by Robert Cecil, as a form of tyranny, in which their ancient rights of being active in decision-making through parliamentary and Privy Council advice were restricted. For that reason, they thought about a possible turnover of the system. Their aim was to replace arbitrary rule with a new mixed form of government incorporating classical and native tradition. Essex might have had similar intentions as Brutus and he might be ‘the noblest’ of the dissidents just as Brutus was (v. 5. 68). Yet, just like Brutus again, Essex would fall victim to the bottom-up pressures and the misreading of possible consequences of the attempts to alter a tyrannous rule that were made unpopular through the depiction of subsequent civil war in JC.

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to his own paradigms, just like Brutus. What is more, pro-regime writings rather tried to fashion Elizabeth I as Caesar. For example, while trying to underline the immunity of the monarch from any criticism, Nisbet in his Caesars Dialogue (1601) likened Elizabeth I to Caesar: She was ‘so absolute a Soueraigne, and so soueraigne an Empresse’ to whom one had ‘not onely to obey, but most principally draw others to obedience to our Caesar’. E. Nisbet, Caesars Dialogue (London: Purfoot, 1601), sigs A1′, A4′, fol. 4.