

CAESAR, BRUTUS AND THE REPUBLIC: AN OPINION

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The setting: in 2006, the students of our new unit AHST231 'Ciceronian Rome' (co-ordinated by myself and Dr Lea Beness) were posed the impossible question (as a pre-circulated compulsory element in their final examination): Was Brutus Right? No particular answer was sought, of course. It was intended to provoke wide-ranging discussion of everything that had been covered during the semester. It was prompted, as much as by anything else, by the highly engaging round of discussions that issued from the *Shakespeare and Political Thought* conference held at the Australian National University's Humanities Research Centre on the 12th–14th July that year at which the distinguished Cambridge historian and HRC Visiting Fellow, Professor Quentin Skinner, delivered a paper on "*Julius Caesar and the Justifying of Tyrannicide*"; by the public lecture which Skinner delivered at the University of Sydney on July 24th upon the subject "*Concepts of Liberty*"; and by a number of lectures delivered in the same month at the University of Sydney and at Macquarie University by Professor John Keane on the nature and history of democracy. Amongst the many issues to receive oxygen during that mid-year festival of ideas were the definition of liberty, its price, and the interesting reflection that, in 1599, when Shakespeare staged his *Julius Caesar*, a contemplation of history's most famous assassination was anything but simply entertaining. It was profoundly challenging.

Was Brutus Right? It was 'impossible' to answer (in the context of an examination) in the sense that it can be tackled on so many planes and from so many angles. It is a question of moral philosophy, of historical judgement and political instincts and inclination. If heartfelt, the answers are liable to revision upon reflection and second, third and fourth thoughts. It asks for an assessment of Brutus, Cassius and their confederates (an assessment which reflects both upon ethics and political strategy), for a judgement upon Caesar and speculation as to what it was that Caesar would have brought to Rome had he survived in 44 BC, and for nothing less than an opinion on the worth of the Roman Republic itself.¹

¹ The students were familiar with, *inter alia*, the judgement of Theodor Mommsen that Caesar was "the sole creative genius produced by Rome and the last by the ancient world"; by the more qualified conclusion of Howard Scullard that Caesar *must* have had a grand vision of Rome's necessary transformation, and that it was forever obscured by the rash and ill-considered actions of the assassins ("an outraged group of nobles, many of whom honestly but blindly identified the Republican government of their day with Liberty"—a thoughtless crew who "prevented Caesar from revealing to the world the solution that he would have decided to apply to its ills"); and with Christian Meier's view that Caesar was a player within forces beyond human control (Th. Mommsen, *The History of Rome* [Eng. trans. W.P. Dickson, London 1880] IV. 450; H.H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero* [London 4th ed. 1976] 158; Chr. Meier, *Caesar* [Berlin 1982; now in Eng. trans., London 1995] *passim*. They were also familiar with Ernst Badian's poignant cry, in response to Meier's view that the Republic was undergoing a 'crisis without Alternative', that this effectively denied the role of human agency in history (*Gnomon* 62 [1990] 22–39).

One veteran of our Continuing Education program, a mature age student who was not obliged to sit the examination—a stalwart of many courses and a vocal participant from the floor of many lectures—submitted the following letter at the close of the semester. As an admirably succinct reflection on the issue, we thought it deserved circulation—and we do so with Helen's permission.²

Tom Hillard