



# "All are punished": Studying Varying Loyalties in *Julius Caesar*

By Carolyn P. Henly

One of the endless fascinations for me in studying Shakespeare's texts is the fact that he does not content himself with one view of any given problem. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, he does not settle for a simple look at the evils of those who engage in feuding, but he factors in many variations on the theme: people who actively engage in feuding die, people who condone feuding suffer, and people who claim that they do not approve of feuding but who lack the courage or strength to actively oppose or stop it also pay the price for their folly. Romeo and Juliet die for their rashness. The Montagues lose two family members for their feuding, as do the Capulets. Even the Prince suffers the loss of family members because, he says, he ignored the wrong-doing. All are punished. Similarly, in *Julius Caesar*, an even-handed justice is meted out to a number of people who fail to live up to an appropriate standard of loyalty to others.

To help students examine the various guises of loyalty in *Julius Caesar*, I set up a simple graph on

an overhead transparency, and we chart the progress of the shifting motivations. Along the left-hand side, which I label "Degree of Loyalty," the criterion is the degree to which characters act out of a motivation to help others. At the bottom of the scale is

"Loyalty to Self"; at the top of the continuum is "Loyalty to Others." Time is the element I use across the bottom of the graph, so that the left-hand end of the line is labeled "Act I" and the right-hand end of the line represents the end of the play.

A class can choose to chart as few or as many characters as it wishes. I have generally asked students to follow the development of Brutus, Cassius, Antony, Portia, and Calpurnia. Using a different colored marker for each character, we graph the point in each act, or in important scenes, which represents each character's current degree of loyalty to others as exhibited by words or behavior. Because this calls for interpretation, graphs may work out to be slightly different for each class that tries this activity, but I have found that the general patterns are similar.

Mark Antony, for example, begins the play strongly loyal to Caesar, and his actions through the death of Caesar in Act 3 are clearly motivated by his desire to support Caesar's cause. Something goes wrong somewhere, though, as by 4.1 Antony is engaged in dividing up the spoils, sending people

to their deaths, and scheming against his partners for personal gain. We generate considerable discussion over this transformation, and a class must engage in very close reading of the text to determine the cause and the signs of change. Issues for discussion include whether Antony is carried away by personal power, whether he is driven by desire for vengeance to assuage his personal grief, and whether these things constitute a desire to act for his friend or for himself. Antony's final speech is essentially a repeat of Brutus' rhetoric following Caesar's murder, and Antony's transformation is complete. The finished graph line begins with a dot at the top of the loyalty scale in act one, a sharp downward drop near the funeral oration (wherever the class determines that the change occurs), a dot at the bottom of the loyalty scale by 4.1 and no change after that.

Cassius' loyalty line goes the other way. In the beginning he is out to set himself up in a position of power, and through Caesar's death he continues to act out of self-interest. By the end of the play, however, he has developed a sense of loyalty to Brutus and to Titinius. The class must determine when and why this transformation occurs.

Brutus's pattern lies somewhere in between Antony's and Cassius's. In the beginning of the play most students feel that Brutus' loyalty is ambiguous. Although he seems loyal to Caesar, he is swayed by flattery to himself. By 2.1, when he

makes the decision to participate in the murder, Brutus seems to be acting out of self-interest, though he disguises it in a rationalization of the good of the country. I find that students often engage in a really interesting discussion of the subtle shifts in Brutus' use of language; he shifts, for instance, to the use of the royal "we." By the end of the play Brutus, like Cassius, develops a sense of loyalty to his new comrades, and his last words, like Cassius's, are a self-condemning recognition of guilt. Brutus's line on the chart will generally begin at the middle, drop to the bottom, then rise to the top.

All of these characters pay for their decisions to place self-interest above the good of others; Brutus and Cassius die in ritual self-executions, and Antony, though he survives this play, will pay the price of his greed in the next: his punishment comes around in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Interestingly enough, Shakespeare does not leave the theme of loyalty to simplistic cause and effect. His treatment is more complicated than maxims such as: "if you act out of self-interest, you will suffer for it." I ask students to look carefully at Calpurnia and Portia. Both women are unceasingly loyal to their husbands, and students will generally portray them on the graph as straight lines across the top. For all their unswerving loyalty to others, though, they pay the same price as their husbands—they too end up dead. Why? Their mistake, perhaps, is not that of egocentrism or but of ill-

judgment. By supporting their husbands' folly, they support their husbands' evil deeds.

Shakespeare gives us, in *Julius Caesar*, a study of the ramifications of a variety of failures to remain true and honorable, and by the end, all are, indeed, punished.

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Last updated March 30, 2003.

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