

March 2019

“Indeed, it is a strange-disposed time:” Julius Caesar, A Game at Chess, and the Politics of Staging

Gabriel A. Rieger

Concord University, grieger@concord.edu

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rieger, Gabriel A. (2019) ““Indeed, it is a strange-disposed time:” Julius Caesar, A Game at Chess, and the Politics of Staging,” *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference*: Vol. 10 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc/vol10/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Literary Magazines at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

“Indeed, it is a strange-disposed time:” *Julius Caesar*, *A Game at Chess*, and the Politics of Staging

Gabriel Rieger, *Concord University*

In the summer past, a major city, renowned for its theatre, experienced a scandal unprecedented in its history. The scandal centered upon a well-established theatrical institution which presented a thinly-veiled dramatic allegory of an unpopular political figure. While allegory was unmistakable, appropriating as it did the distinctive costuming and physical attributes of the figure in question, its purpose was open to conjecture. As a result of this dramatic production, the theatre lost patronage and incurred public wrath for a production which violated not only decorum, but, arguably, law.

You will be forgiven for assuming that I am referencing The Public Theatre’s summer 2017 production of *Julius Caesar*, presented as a part of their Shakespeare in the Park series. That production drew unprecedented attention, as well as boycotts and even death threats, owing to its recognizable representation of sitting president Donald Trump in the titular character, and while this essay will devote some attention to that production momentarily, I’d like to first offer a bit of context with the description of another play, staged in another city 393 years prior, The King’s Men’s scandalous 1624 production of Thomas Middleton’s *A Game at Chess*.

The history of *A Game at Chess* is familiar to those of us within the profession. The play on its surface seems innocuous enough, its central characters being, as the name suggests, chessmen on a chess board: the White King, the White King’s pawn, the Black King, the Black Bishop, *etc.*, and they enact a play reminiscent of a chess match. As the prologue declares, “What of the game called chess-play can be made / To make a stage play, shall this day be played.” (1-2) The prologue goes on to promise “men entrapt and taken ... / Rewarded by their play,” and the eventual “check mate given to virtue’s foes.” The play delivers on this promise, presenting a comedy of living chessmen, the only historical figure identified by name being Jesuit founder St. Ignatius Loyola, whose depiction as a damned soul fled from Hell would in no way have been controversial to the play’s inceptual audience.

The controversy which the play engendered was entirely a product of its staging, which presents an unmistakable allegory. Indeed, the audience is perhaps alerted to the allegory in the Induction, when Loyola calls upon the famous allegorical construction, Error, to explain to him the game. Furthermore, the chessmen in performance clearly allegorized members of the ruling houses of England and Spain, and taken in context, their maneuvers reflect the abortive marriage negotiations between the English Prince Charles and the Spanish Infanta Maria Anna. The staging appropriated distinctive costuming and employed distinctive mannerisms to make the allegory apparent, such that the White King represented King James I, the White Knight represented his son, Charles, and the White Duke represented George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham. The Black King represented King Philip IV of Spain, while a character named the Fat Bishop represented the infamous Spanish traitor and Anglican apostate Marco Antonio Dominis, the Archbishop of Split. (Wilson 480)

The most audacious representation, however, and the one which is perhaps most illustrative of the company's method, occurs in the character of the Black Knight, modelled on the Count of Gondomar, Don Diego Sarmiento de Acuña. As the Lord Chamberlain wrote in a letter to Sir Dudley Carleton, "They counterfeited (Gondomar's) person to the life, with all his graces and faces, and had gotten (they say) a cast sute of his apparell for the purpose, and his lytter, wherin the world says lacked nothing but a couple of asses to carry it." (Chamberlain 579) The litter in this case was Gondomar's "chair of ease," the toilet chair upon which he was carried as a concession to his anal fistula.

The performance was apparently an unqualified success. Indeed, so successful was the production that it shortly came to the attention of the Spanish ambassador Don Carlos Coloma, who brought it to the attention of His Majesty James in a letter demanding redress. (Wilson 480) As Janet Clare recounts the narrative,

The company were called before the Council and forbidden to play until they were licensed again by the King. A warrant was sent out for the arrest of Middleton after it was discovered that he was 'shifting out of the way, and not attending the board with the rest'. Although his son was examined before the Privy Council, it has not been proved whether Middleton was imprisoned and (as it had been suggested) released after he had written and presented the verse petition which appears in one of the

extant quarto texts. In the long term, the repercussions for the King's Men of the staging of *A Game at Chess* were limited; the Privy Council was informed by Secretary Conway and the Earl of Pembroke on 27 August 1624 that the company were to be allowed 'to act as before' providing that plays had been 'licensed by authority'. (217)

It seems likely that the King's punishments, modest as they were, were intended more to assuage the dignity of the offended Spanish diplomats than to recover his own injured sovereignty (to borrow Foucault's phrase). Indeed, in the play as written, the White house comes out looking reasonably good.

Clearly, the allegory of *A Game at Chess* was readily apparent to its original audience, and its purpose was understood; the Spanish ambassador understood that his nation and its representatives were being mocked, and King James understood that he and his own nation were not. These men, like the rest of the play's audience, were adept at "reading" encoded meanings on the stage. Of course, the job of the Master of the Revels was to prevent such subversive encoding, but by the careful deployment of allegory, specifically visual allegory, the playwright was able to present his subversion on the stage while concealing it on the page.

There exists a substantial critical tradition regarding *A Game at Chess* and the ways in which Middleton and his company used staging to encode this radical satiric allegory, thus bypassing the Master of the Revels, but most to my purpose, this staging tactic, mapping recognizable signifiers onto an otherwise innocuous text, is entirely of a piece with the "subversive encoding" central to Materialist readings of early modern drama, what Dollimore describes as a "sub-literal encoding which bypasses the perfunctory surveillance of the censor," but which "cannot help but be reactivated in performance." (28) As Gary Taylor notes in his introduction to the play in the Oxford *Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*, "censorship created in authors and readers a hermeneutical habit, which located encoded meanings beneath the surface or between the lines." (1775) If we hold with the Materialists, theatregoers of early modern England (including the Spanish ambassador and His Majesty King James) would have been given to this "hermeneutical habit" in ways in which twenty-first century theatre goers are not. This perhaps brings us once again to *Julius Caesar*.

Like *A Game at Chess*, *Julius Caesar* is, on its surface, an innocuous play, at least for a twenty-first-century audience. It is perhaps the most familiar of Shakespeare's tragedies, especially to those who have not studied Shakespeare, engaging as it does with arguably the most famous personage of Western Civilization, apart from Jesus Christ. It is also, owing to its relative lack of bawdry, a staple text in American high schools. To be certain, more people know Shakespeare's reimagining of Caesar's dying words ("*et tu, Brute,*" 3.1.77) than know his actual words ("*Kai su, teknon,*" as reported by Suetonius). (111) If the figure of Caesar is the great icon of both tyranny and majesty in the western tradition, the destroyer of democracy and the archetypal dictator, he has also become familiar to the point of kitsch; he is a casino and pizza chain mascot.

The very familiarity of Julius Caesar and, by extension, his tragedy, masks that tragedy's extraordinary subversion. Familiar though it is, *Julius Caesar* is among the bloodiest of Shakespeare's tragedies, standing alongside *Macbeth* and *Titus Andronicus*. It depicts the onstage butchery of a sitting monarch, and then presents his ragged corpse as an object lesson in the dangers of ... something. Indeed, following the assassination of Caesar, the play's ethics get a bit muddy. The titular character is dead by the third act, traditionally the point of intermission. If he is punished for his hubris or his tyranny, he's punished early, with half a play remaining to grapple with the consequences of his assassination. Is *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* a lesson in the dangers of tyranny, or in the dangers of political violence, or the dangers of hubris, or vanity, or jealousy, or populism? Indeed, one may question whether there is *any* moral to be drawn from the tragedy. For that matter, one may question whose tragedy this even is. Is this play actually the tragedy of Julius Caesar, or should it more properly be called the tragedy of Brutus, or perhaps the tragedy of Cassius? The question is effectively unanswerable, or rather it allows for various answers, depending on the director's vision and the audience's complicity, and this ambiguity may help or hinder the deployment of moral lesson, depending upon one's perspective.

Perhaps owing to some combination of its familiarity, its subversion, and its complex, even ambiguous ethics, the play has long lent itself to the kind of allegorical appropriation seen in the 2017 Public Theatre production. The most famous example, perhaps the first in a long line of such productions, is probably Orson Welles' 1937 production at the

Mercury Theatre, which appropriated the iconography of Italian Fascism. As Charles Higham writes, in that production “Caesar wore a Sam Browne belt and a dark green uniform, exactly like Mussolini; the conspirators bent on the assassination of Caesar wore fedora hats turned down at the brim and turned-up coat collars, like gangsters in Hollywood ‘B’ movies; and Brutus wore an ordinary civilian suit, not unlike that which a politician might sport during a campaign.” (“Orson Welles’ *Julius Caesar*”)

The staging of the production likewise evoked contemporary politics, setting the action on a set of platforms against a red brick backdrop ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Caesar_\(Mercury_Theatre\)#/media/File:Caesar-Mercury-1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Caesar_(Mercury_Theatre)#/media/File:Caesar-Mercury-1.jpg)). As one of the actors in the production recalled, “At the time we used to see newsreels of the Nuremberg rallies, with the great stream of light going from the ground to the heavens--very effective theatrically. And Orson thought Julius Caesar might be adapted to parallel that, to Hitler...he put these beams in the floor, and at the appropriate moment they lit the stage.” (*Ibid.*) The cumulative effect was to evoke the chaos and horror unfolding in Europe, and, by all accounts, the production was supremely effective in this.

Welles’ allegorical encoding, like Middleton’s, was visual, and essentially superficial in that it sat literally on the surface of the production; Welles did not substantively alter the play text. Also like Middleton’s production, Welles’ production was largely in keeping with the populist sensibility of his time. Middleton could anticipate that his audience would not be offended by his moral vision; opposition to the Spanish cause, and the proposed marriage between the Prince and the Infanta, ran high. Likewise, Welles’ production was not terribly controversial, at least not in the way that we imagine controversy in 2017. Americans in 1937 generally agreed that the rise of Fascism in Europe was an undesirable thing, even if they were divided on what, if anything, was the appropriate response to it. No one was likely to be offended by a depiction of Benito Mussolini, or his avatar, assassinated on the stage, regardless of how bloody that depiction proved to be.

Of course, Welles’ production was merely the first in a series of overtly politicized stagings which would emerge over the course of the ensuing decades. Despite its familiarity, or perhaps because of it, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* has long lent itself to political allegory. As Marvin Spevak notes

Since the 1930s, it has become customary to suggest analogues with political personalities, situations, or issues. Politicians like Mussolini or Hitler, Charles de Gaulle, Fidel Castro, Tito and Ceausescu – or even Margaret Thatcher (in Ron Phillips’s adaptation performed at the Barons Court Theatre, London, 1993), who was thought by some to be ‘the archetypal Caesar’ – have been used as models for updated Caesars (and sometimes for updated conspirators) in the theatre. In David Thacker’s 1993 production at The Other Place (Stratford-upon-Avon), Caesar was ‘a silver-haired Ceausescu figure’, and the programme notes additionally informed the audience about the ‘political thrust’ of the production, *i.e.* ‘various political uprisings from 1985 to 1993 in Poland, the USSR, the Phillipines, China, Czechoslovakia, Chile, Haiti, and other countries, along with striking photographs of revolutionary moments in Berlin, Prague, Beijing, and Romania – all in 1989.’

Of course, the very necessity of program notes delineating the historical cycles of dictatorship and revolution speaks to the twentieth-century absence of the “hermeneutical habit” which, as Taylor noted, allowed seventeenth-century audiences to “locate ... encoded meanings” within theatrical stagings. Thacker’s program notes were a concession to audiences untrained in recognizing allegorical referents or purposes.

Perhaps the recent Public Theatre production would have benefitted from such extensive notes. As it stands, that production applied some of the same methods of staging to construct an allegory of political disorder considerably closer to home. In this production, director Oskar Eustis set the tragedy’s action against a white, neo-classical backdrop which suggested the architecture of the United States capitol building. (<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/jun/12/donald-trump-shakespeare-play-julius-caesar-new-york#img-1>) Beyond this, the titular tyrant clearly evoked the sitting President Donald Trump, with a halo of blond hair and a badly-tied necktie. The allegorical representation extended to Calpurnia, as well, represented with a Slavic accent and designer gown suggestive of First Lady Melania Trump. (<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/jun/12/donald-trump-shakespeare-play-julius-caesar-new-york#img-2>)

If the signifiers Eustis employed in his production were not in doubt, their purpose nevertheless was. Eustis’ production evoked a sitting United States president, and presented his brutal murder on the stage.

Was the play condemning the president's perceived tyranny, or was it warning against his assassination? Was it endorsing it? Was it suborning it? Does the play as written endorse the assassination of Caesar?

Eustis clarified his vision, after a fashion, in a letter posted to the main page of The Public Theatre's website in which he declared that "*Julius Caesar* is about how fragile democracy is. The institutions that we have grown up with, that we have inherited from many generations of our ancestors, can be swept away in no time at all.... When history is happening, when the ground is slipping away from under us and all that is solid melts into air, leadership is as transitory and as flawed as the times." (Eustis) Such a declaration suggests that the play is a condemnation of Caesar's tyranny (and the implicit tyranny and "flawed" leadership of his referent, President Donald Trump), if not necessarily an endorsement of his assassination. Nevertheless, the assassination is always the center point, literally and figuratively, of any staging of the tragedy.

The conspirators who undertook that assassination in Eustis' production were recognizably diverse; women and people of color, representatives of those constituencies who are most offended by President Trump and his policies, and who form the bulk of his opposition. (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4600364/New-York-Public-Theater-defends-Julius-Caesar-production.html>) In this, however, the allegory broke from contemporary politics. In the tragedy, Julius Caesar is assassinated by his allies and his colleagues, including his most-trusted Brutus, his adopted son. If Eustis were to follow the contemporary political allegory through the text to its logical terminus, Caesar's assassins would have been racially homogenous men, the Senators who had suffered him to seize power and who now found themselves humiliated by his tyranny. Such an allegory would have mirrored more closely the actual opposition to Donald Trump within his own political party, some members of which had already begun to question his competence for office by the summer of 2017 and who threatened, and who as of this writing continue to threaten, a bloodless coup.

Instead, Eustis's staging presents the much more incendiary image of a racially diverse mob overthrowing a hated enemy, an image which deviates, at least in one sense, from the text, in which Brutus constructs the assassination as a "benefit" to the dictator, entreating the conspirators to "kill him boldly, but not wrathfully," "carv[ing] him as a dish fit for the

gods” rather than as “a carcass fit for hounds.” (2.1.172-173) In Eustis’ production, Brutus’s character, with all of its inner conflict, is all but overshadowed by the force of Caesar, or perhaps by the force of his avatar, Donald Trump. Reviewing the production for *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Nick Moschovakis describes Corey Stoll’s performance of Brutus as “coherent and convincing,” but declares that “next to the jarring irruption of associations that was Caesar, [his] distinguished performance ... couldn’t compete.” In Eustis’ production, Julius Caesar’s signifiers, his costuming and manner, do not merely build upon the potentially subversive elements lying dormant (at least for a twenty-first-century audience) within the play text; they alter the fundamental meaning of that text.

Such alteration may call into question, or at least invite a further examination of, the functions of dramatic allegory. What is the function of dramatic allegory upon a text, particularly a canonical text such as *Julius Caesar*? Does allegory make the text more current, and thus more accessible? Does it clarify the production? Does it allow for a point of view, effectively weaponizing the text as a satiric instrument? Does it create any obligations, either moral or aesthetic, in the audience of the production? Might it do any or all of these things?

We may find it difficult to say precisely what the allegory was doing in the Eustis production, not because the referent was unclear, but because the vehicle, *Julius Caesar*, is itself so complex. Caesar in the tragedy is without question tyrannous, comparing himself in 3.1 to “the northern star,” having “no fellow in the firmament.” (3.1.60-62) Similarly, the audience for this production, the artists and intellectuals who seek out Shakespeare in performance in the twenty-first century, are generally opposed to the policies and presidency of Donald Trump. Nevertheless, the aftermath of Caesar’s assassination is horrifying, both on the page and in Eustis’s production. As Nick Moschovakis notes, “[T]he Public updated and escalated the violence of the play’s second half, both in urban unrest and in all-out civil war. Riot gear was donned; automatic weapons were employed; heavy artillery was heard. The onstage death toll was accordingly large, mounting steadily in a series of graphic scenes. The main conspirators were methodically shot—Casca, Cinna, Decius Brutus, Metellus Cimber, Trebonius, felled one by one by Antony’s firing squad. There followed a mass execution of the other proscribed senators, at the

edge of what might have been an open pit, their mass grave. And then there were all the dead extras: scores of Romans, in protesting or desperate mobs, mowed down in barrages of gunfire.” How might we read this allegory in the face of such complex referents? Where is Eustis seeking to position his audience, assuming that he is positioning them? What was his purpose? Given the ambivalence of his moral direction, one might logically posit that Eustis’ purpose was, at least in part, the generation of controversy.

If this was his purpose, he achieved it, without question. On Friday, June ninth, the director’s wife reported death receiving death threats via the telephone. (Frank) A week later, on the sixteenth, two protesters disrupted the production by jumping on to the stage, shouting “Stop the normalization of political violence against the right” and declaring of the performers “You are all Goebbels.” (Paulson) If we accept Oskar Eustis’ claim that he intended his allegorical production to serve as a meditation on the fragility of democracy, the violence of the response suggests that at least some members of the audience, lacking the “hermeneutic habit” necessary to interpret the allegory, substantially misread it.

That said, they may have read the allegory with a greater subtlety than was initially apparent. The death threats remained anonymous, but one of the protesters who disrupted the performance, Laura Loomer, subsequently identified herself as, a “right-wing investigative journalist and activist” and former collaborator with the conservative provocateur James O’Keefe, the founder of Project Veritas, the non-profit organization whose attacks on progressive organizations (and organizations popularly perceived to be progressive) have employed what might charitably be called distortions of the truth in order to make their political points. (Shafer) Were Laura Loomer, and her fellow outraged viewers, actually misreading Eustis’ semiotic encoding, confusing his allegory, or was she simply reframing (if not reconstructing) that allegory to her own purpose, that being a narrative of political victimhood? Was Eustis’ dramatic allegory misread by an audience lacking the “hermeneutical habit” necessary to understand it, or was in fact appropriated by members of a political movement eager to redeploy that allegory to their own purposes?

If the referent for Eustis’ allegory was ambiguous, the reviews of the production were likewise. In a June ninth review, *The New York Times* declared “Hang on to your comb-over because the theatrical Trump storm

is now approaching gale force,” before praising the production for its “vivid ... stag[ing]” and regarding it as “a deeply democratic offering, befitting both the Public and the public — and the times.” (Green) A very different review appeared in the June thirteenth edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, in which Edward Rothstein declared that “[i]n this production, the real tyrant is not Caesar, but its director, Oskar Eustis. He more clearly comes across as ambitious, inconsistent ... manipulating his audience” with his “grade school notions” and “the tyrannical vision he crudely enforces....” (Rothstein)

Where, then, does this leave us as we attempt to evaluate this study in (potentially) subversive twenty-first-century encoding? In 1.3 of *Julius Caesar*, Cicero, responding to Casca’s account of the various portents of the night preceding, declares “Indeed, it is a strange-disposed time: / But men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.” Cicero’s words proved prescient in the summer of 2017, when The Public Theatre’s production of *Julius Caesar* was beset by protests, boycotts, and even death threats in response to their conscious invocation of President Donald Trump, specifically in the representation of Caesar’s assassination. The production was “construe[d]” after the fashion of its observers, leaving the actual (as opposed to stated) purpose of the thing itself, even in retrospect, a matter of conjecture.

Works Cited

- Chamberlain, John. *The Letters of John Chamberlain*. Ed. N. E. McClure. Philadelphia, 1939. II. 578
- Clare, Janet. *Art Made Tongue-Tied By Authority: Elizabethan and Jacobean Dramatic Censorship*. Manchester UP, 1999.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. Third Edition. Duke, 2004.
- Frank, Priscilla. “Theater Community Receives Death Threats Following ‘Julius Caesar’ Controversy.” *Huffington Post*. <https://huffingtonpost.com/entry/julius-caesar-death-threats_us_594bbba4e4b0a3a837bd5b87>. Accessed 12 January, 2018.
- Green, Jesse. Review: “Can Trump Survive in Caesar’s Palace?” *The New York Times*.

- <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/theater/review-julius-caesar-delacorte-theater-donald-trump.html>>. Accessed 12 January, 2018.
- Maschovakis, Nick. Review of the Public Theatre's *Julius Caesar*. *Shakespeare Quarterly*. June 2017.
https://shakespearequarterly.folger.edu/web_exclusive/public-theater-julius-caesar/ Accessed 21 August, 2018.
- 'Orson Welles' *Julius Caesar*." Orsonwelles.org.
<<http://www.orsonwelles.org/2012/08/orson-welles-julius-caesar.html>>. Accessed 12 January, 2018.
- Paulson, Michael. "Two Protesters Disrupt 'Julius Caesar' in Central Park." *The New York Times*. <<https://nyti.ms/2txkkMb>> Accessed 12 January, 2018.
- Rothstein, Edward. "'Julius Caesar' Review: A Tyrant in the Director's Chair." *The Wall Street Journal*.
<<https://www.wsj.com/articles/julius-caesar-review-a-tyrant-in-the-directors-chair-1497390407>>. Accessed 12 January, 2018.
- Shafer, Jack. "Is It Ever OK for Journalists to Lie?: What the latest Project Veritas flop can teach us about undercover media work." *Politico.com*.
<<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/11/30/fourth-estate-project-veritas-james-okeefe-215991>>. Accessed 26 January, 2018.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Ed. David Daniell. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series. Bloomsbury, 1998. 2006.
- Spevak, Marvin. Introduction. *The New Cambridge Shakespeare Julius Caesar*. Cambridge U P, 2003 (1988).
- Suetonius. *The Twelve Caesars*. Trans. J. C. Rolfe. Harvard U P, 1913. Rprt 1960. 111.
- Taylor, Gary. Introduction. "A Game at Chesse: An Early Form." *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*. Ed. Gary Taylor, et al. Oxford, 2017. 1773.
- Wislon, Edward and Olga Turner. "The Spanish Protest Against A Game at Chesse." *Modern Language Review* 44 (1949).