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## **The Revolutions of *Julius Caesar*: from Shakespeare to Napoleon**

Reviewing Shakespeare's play 'in the light of other versions', an old scholar pointed out that its eponymous character was 'only one of many. Caesar has to the succeeding generations of men been everything from Satyr to Hyperion.' (Ayres 1910, 184). In 1582 Stephen Gosson alludes to a 'history of Caesar and Pompey ... at the Theater' (*Plays Confuted in Five Actions*, 60), and Henslowe's diary mentions several performances in 1594 of a '*Seser and Pompeie*'. *The Tragedie of Caesar and Pompey, or Caesars Revenge* later performed by students of Trinity College, Oxford, was probably an academic play.<sup>1</sup> There were references to Caesar in *Tamburlaine*, and of course in *Hamlet*, where Polonius proleptically recalls he on other stages of Europe. Its main source was usually Suetonius, who condemned Brutus for having betrayed his friend, while Dante consigned him and Cassius to the ninth circle of hell with Judas Iscariot. In England, Shakespeare changed the tide by drawing on Thomas North's version of Plutarch (Humphreys 1984, 67) and making Brutus the 'ethical light' of his play (Wilson Knight 2002, 21-22). After him, Caesar and Brutus repeatedly exchanged places in the sympathies of the audience. Because of its ambivalence, his play often did and still does serve to reflect mutability in the political arena. I propose to explore here a few layers of this infinite variety.

### **Early French Caesars**

In France, where Plutarch's *Lives* were known earlier thanks to the translation of Jacques Amyot (1572), the theme proved highly relevant during successive periods of political unrest, beginning with the religious wars under the last reigns of the Valois dynasty. The Caesars of Marc-Antoine Muret (1553, in Latin) and of his disciple Jacques Grévin (1558), were cast out of Plutarch's material, but modelled upon the Senecan Hercules, hubristic braggarts who claimed to be fearless. Muret, the most influential of the two, also inspired

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<sup>1</sup> Entered in the Stationers' registry in 1606, it is based on Appian's *Bellum civile*, and filled with classical allusions.

Orlando Pescetti's *Cesare* (1594), and lent to Garnier some of Caesar's speeches in *Cornélie*, his lion's skin, and the chorus. Muret, Grévin, Garnier, were all part of the tradition to which Voltaire would be introduced at school. Their notion of republicanism, like the historian Jean Bodin's, was by no means incompatible with a monarchical government: it went with a distaste for tyranny, as well as a distrust of excessive calls for liberty. To Bodin 'République' stands for the State, and this power is unequivocally embodied in the king.<sup>2</sup> Grévin, following Plutarch, thought monarchy had become a necessity in corrupted Rome. To complete this line of transmission, William Alexander's *Julius Caesar* (1604) is indebted to Garnier, possibly via Kyd's translation of *Cornélie*, and to the Senecan tradition inaugurated by Muret. However, we need not spend too much time on those precedents, since they visibly influenced Kyd more than Shakespeare. Our old scholar finds no immediate connection with Shakespeare's Caesar apart from features made popular by 'the Ercles vein' on the Elizabethan stage, his boastfulness and self-advertised scorn of danger.

Voltaire's first model before Shakespeare was Corneille who showed him the way with *La Mort de Pompée* (1644). Corneille himself was following trends, an earlier *Mort de Pompée* by Charles Chaulmer (1638), Georges de Scudéry's *Mort de César* (1637), Guyon Guérin de Bouscal's *La Mort de Brute et de Porcie, ou la Vengeance de la Mort de César* (1637), all three dedicated to Richelieu. On the eve of the Fronde, Corneille went against the main stream of intellectuals by dedicating his play to Cardinal Mazarin, thanking Rome for the gift to France of His Eminence, and ending with a wish to see the realm at peace under a virtuous government. However, he followed the historians of his time by portraying a magnanimous Pompey and a hypocritical tyrant. His main source, Lucan, is the most hostile to Caesar: 'I translated from Lucan all that I could find there relevant to my subject', he warns readers. Pompey is killed by the Roman counsellors of the Egyptian king, and Caesar, another disloyal Roman who levied an army against his own nation to gain full powers, is welcomed with Pompey's head when he first enters, at Act III sc. 2. In an afterword to the play denouncing 'the cowardly and cruel politics' of the Egyptian court, who 'sacrificed

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<sup>2</sup> Bodin, Jean, 'De la Souveraineté' in *Six Livres sur la République*, 1576, I, ch. VIII. 'Considering Sovereignty' in *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, trans. J. M. Tooley, Oxford, Blackwell, 1955.

Pompey to win the favour of the victorious Caesar', Corneille targeted the politicians ready to wage internecine wars in defense of their own interests.<sup>3</sup>

### England's 'sanguinary Parliament'

French tradition remained divided between opposite views of Caesar, a genius according to Saint-Evremond, a despotic tyrant for Fénelon and Pierre Bayle, and to some degree Montesquieu, even though all condemned the assassination. M<sup>lle</sup> Barbier's *La Mort de César*, performed at the Comédie-Française in 1709, drew on Plutarch's characters but made 'le grand César indignement trahi', the vilely betrayed Caesar, more virtuous than Brutus. After the murders of two French kings, Henri III and Henri IV, and of William of Orange, there was also a constant fear that Brutus might serve as an example for regicides. He would indeed, though much later, directly raise the arms of John Wilkes Booth and of Claus von Stauffenberg. The execution of Charles I under Cromwell's Commonwealth came to lengthen the list of fateful exempla.

On the continent, it was often felt that the driving force behind the Puritan revolution was the English nation's fierce desire for liberty, which was the poet Milton's leitmotiv: his Satan was 'a gigantic dissenter, armed against the monarchy of heaven.' (de Staël, *Dela Literature*, tomo XII). To Fénelon, who explicitly associated Cromwell with Caesar, England had repeated Rome's mistake, the rebellious popular spirit triumphed in a 'sanguinary Parliament' that committed the foulest of crimes, and initiated an era of tyranny: 'Rome and England show us the fatal consequences of sharing sovereign power with the people.' (Fénelon 1721, Ch. XIII, 381). Reviewing John Philip Kemble's performance of Brutus, the *Bell's Weekly Messenger* would reply tit for tat, recalling the execution of Louis XVI during the Terreur, when 'the assassins of France used to cover their atrocities under the name of Brutus.' (Unsigned review, 8 March 1812, n° 831 [Gale 271]).

With few exceptions, French and English authors of Caesar plays largely ignored

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<sup>3</sup> 'Examen de Pompée', *La Mort de Pompée* (1644), in *Œuvres de P. Corneille*, Paris, 1759, tome V, p. 88-89. All translations mine unless otherwise specified.

each other until the eighteenth century. The first to rearrange Shakespeare's in 1726, John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, expanded it into two parts: *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar, Altered*, and *The Tragedy of Marcus Brutus*,<sup>4</sup> which our old scholar consigns to a well-deserved oblivion for their 'artistic worthlessness' (1740, vol. I, 211 and ff. 303 and ff.). Shakespeare had added to Plutarch's Caesar a touch of boastfulness and minor physical infirmities. One of Sheffield's notable alterations was to suppress all that might diminish Caesar's heroic greatness. There was no doubt in his case who was the hero of the play. As to his source of inspiration, it is stated with ambiguous modesty in the prologue:

'Hope to mend Shakespeare! Or to match his stile!  
 'Tis such a jest, would make a stoic smile.  
 Too fond of fame, our poet soars too high...' (Ayres 1910, 185)

But 'Sasper' only came second in the dramatic hierarchy of a noble, Antonio Schinella, from Padua, better known as abbot Conti, translator of Racine and Pope, who considered Addison's *Cato* 'la prima tragedia regolare degl'Inglesi'.<sup>5</sup> It was Buckingham who inspired him to write a *Giulio Cesare* in blank verse (1726), shortly before he translated Voltaire's *Mérope*.<sup>6</sup> Like Voltaire, Conti would dedicate another Roman play, *Giunio Bruto* (1743), to the founder of the Republic. All three dramatists were openly indebted to Shakespeare.

Voltaire prided himself on having been the first to make Shakespeare known in France, a boast not entirely founded,<sup>7</sup> but he was certainly one of his earliest admirers abroad. During his London exile, under the guidance of his friend Colley Cibber, he attended several performances at the Drury Lane Theatre and was especially struck by *Julius*

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<sup>4</sup> *The Works of John Sheffield, Earl of Mulgrave, Marquis of Normanby and Duke of Buckingham*, London, Third edition, corrected, 1740, vol. I, pp. 211 ff. and 303 ff. <https://archive.org/details/worksjohnsheffi00buckgoog/>.

<sup>5</sup> Preface to his edition of *Il Cesare*, 1726, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> Conti wrote two more Roman tragedies, *Marco Bruto* (1744) and *Druso* (1748). Voltaire mentions both Buckingham's and Conti's plays in 'Préface des éditeurs', *La Mort de César*, critical edition by D. J. Fletcher, *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, general editor W. H. Barber, The Voltaire Foundation, vol. 8, 1731-1732, Oxford, 1988, Appendix II, p. 250-51.

<sup>7</sup> In the *Journal littéraire de l'an 1717*, La Haye, p. 158-206, a 'Dissertation sur la poésie angloise' probably written by Justus van Effen, dedicated ten pages out of sixty to Shakespeare, and ten to Milton, whom Voltaire also claimed to have discovered.

*Caesar*, which drove him to write his first Roman play.<sup>8</sup> ‘The tragedy of *Brutus* was born in England’, he writes to Milord Bolingbroke, dedicating it ‘to you who could teach me how to give back to my language this strength and this energy inspired by the noble freedom to think.’<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare is Voltaire’s excuse for alleged novelties and hints that a few exceptions to the rules might be allowed, as the Greeks did. In this ‘Discours sur la tragédie’ he records the powerful impression made on him by the forum speeches of *Julius Caesar*, one of the greatest among many ‘admirable scenes’ in English drama, and praises the freedom of English versification, though he criticizes the play’s ‘gross irregularities’. Still, French spectators might dislike the rabble-rousing exhibition of Caesar’s corpse, but it is the duty of ‘custom, queen of this world, to alter the tastes of nations and turn into pleasure the objects of our aversion.’<sup>10</sup> His own plot focuses on the dilemma of the founder of the Roman Republic who, ‘with a soul both Roman and paternal’, condemned to death his son Titus for having conspired to restore monarchy. Shortly after its creation at the Théâtre-Français, William Duncombe adapted Voltaire’s play for the London stage under the title *Junius Brutus* (1734), and claimed in the preface that much rewriting was needed to make it suitable to English taste, suggesting a wide gap between true English genius and Voltaire’s image of it.

### ***La Mort de César***

Voltaire was already working on another Rome-inspired project, and pursuing several goals with it. His juvenile enthusiasm had led him to include in his ‘Discours’ to Bolingbroke his own translation of Marcus Brutus’ forum speech to the Romans. Until now, he explains in a foreword to the 1736 edition of *La Mort de César*, only the worst of Shakespeare has been circulated, so he means to show the best. He was pressed by friends to translate the whole

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<sup>8</sup> On Voltaire’s English acquaintances, see Ian Davidson, *Voltaire: A Life*, New York, Pegasus Books, chap. VII, ‘In England 1726-1728’.

<sup>9</sup> Completed in 1729, first performed at the Théâtre-Français in December 1730, it was prefaced by his ‘Discours sur la tragédie à Mylord Bolingbrooke’, 1731.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Examen du *Jules-César* de Shakespeare’, in ‘Discours’, *Œuvres complètes*, Garnier, 1877, tome II, p. 317-18.

play, but this proved impossible, owing to its many monstrosities.<sup>11</sup> Instead, he resolved to offer them ‘a *Julius Caesar* that, without resembling Shakespeare’s, would nevertheless be entirely in the English taste’.<sup>12</sup> Yet another case of tit for tat. *La Mort de César* is presented as a compromise, in which he translated as much of the original as he thought compatible with an artistically satisfying form, especially in his last two scenes, the final one being ‘a faithful enough translation of Shakespeare’s’.<sup>13</sup> His other declared aim is to revitalize contemporary French theatre with new energies. The neoclassical frame is becoming inadequate, unable to integrate new ideas and sensibilities. The performance at Drury Lane made him appreciate the emotional appeal of striking scenes, and deplore that the feelings voiced by Addison’s Cato over the dead body of his son would not be well received in Paris (‘Exemple du *Caton* anglais’, in *Discours*, 315). His respect for the classical unities makes him end the play after Caesar’s death, but he begins *in medias res*, the offer of a crown, and introduces low-born characters on stage, ‘des espèces de chœurs’, choruses of sorts, (Letter D 905 to Joseph de Seitres, Marquis de Caumont, 25 August 1735, 191) far less unruly than Shakespeare’s mob, but equally despised by his aristocratic republicans. Voltaire drew the line at showing the tearing apart of the poet Cinna. The murder of Caesar takes place offstage, but within earshot, and Antony is allowed to exhibit his corpse to inflame the plebs.

Along with this breach of decorum, Voltaire’s most daring innovations were a three-act structure and the absence of feminine roles: the love interest has become too frequent and too mollifying on the neoclassical stage for his taste. He condemns the ‘ridiculous pettiness’ of mademoiselle Barbier who portrayed both Caesar and Brutus as jealous and in love (‘Préface des éditeurs’, ed. Fletcher, 250-52). The core of his own plot is the inner struggle of Brutus, who learns half way through the conspiracy that he is César’s son, and will be a parricide if he persists in planning his death. When the play was privately

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Avertissement’ by Abbé de La Mare, ed. Fletcher, Appendix I, p. 245-47.

<sup>13</sup> Letter D 937 to M. l’abbé Asselin, 4 Nov. 1735, *Correspondence and Related Documents*, vol. III, May 1734-June 1736, Letters D 731-D 1106, *Complete Works*, 1969, p. 245.

performed by the students of the Jesuit Collège d'Harcourt, Voltaire made Brutus refuse to take part in the assassination, but in the edition of 1736 he restored the parricide 'for those who do not want things half-tragic, who want the horror carried to its climax.' (Fragment of a letter to Asselin, 15 Jan. 1736, D 989, 321).

The printed 'Avertissement' is followed by the French translation of a letter by the poet philosopher Francesco Algarotti, which Voltaire found faulty, but still included with some amendments in the 1736 edition.<sup>14</sup> Algarotti defends Voltaire's innovations: the despotic rule of love has too long prevented other passions from taking its place on stage. And there are admirable precedents to the three-act structure, Racine's *Esther*, Aristotle's *Poetics*. The author just did not want to weary the audience with three hours of debate on liberty and politics. The death of Caesar, which takes place almost within sight of the spectators, spares them a long cold narrative. The link between father and son, historically founded, brings new interest to the plot. France must show the example, and overstep boundaries. As Vergil did with Ennius, Voltaire imitated passages from Shakespeare, in which he saw, with reason, 'errori innumerabili e pensieri inimitabili, *faults innumerable and thoughts inimitable*.' He showed great tact in borrowing from the English theatre, transporting 'nel teatro di Francia la severità delle loro tragedie senza la ferocità'.<sup>15</sup> His imitation of the last two scenes will enrich French culture thanks to the import of foreign goods. Here, the translation replaces Algarotti's original mention of rivalry between France and England by the superiority of France's politeness and cultivation.<sup>16</sup>

In the wake of Voltaire, we enter a labyrinth of texts, forewords, warnings to the readers, translated fragments, replies to critics, changes of heart and ulterior revisions. Several versions were printed, some pirated, some authorized, some with variants by Voltaire himself. Depending on the occasion he declared *La Mort de César* to be in the

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<sup>14</sup> See the three versions of this letter, the original Italian, the faulty translation and a revised one, in Voltaire's *Théâtre*, Paris, Delangle, 1829, tome III, p. 21-39.

<sup>15</sup> 'Lettera del signor conte Algarotti al signor abate Franchini', 12 October 1735, ed. Fletcher, p. 169-72. On its inclusion, see Appendix III, p. 253-58.

<sup>16</sup> About this translation, see Appendix V, p. 264-66. Algarotti wrote from England during the summer 1736 to Madame du Châtelet to tell her he had seen Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in London.

English taste, in the Jesuit taste, unlikely to please young men at court, inspired by Shakespeare, indebted to Corneille, or an entirely new play. The Preface to the Amsterdam edition points out the genius and character of English writers exhibited in this ‘supreme love of liberty and these audacities rarely found in French authors’. Dennis Fletcher in his remarkable edition of *La Mort de César* mentions as relevant to the issue of regicide the Eighth ‘Lettre philosophique’, which contrasts the absolutism of ancien régime with British limited monarchy (Fletcher, *La Mort de César*, Introd.11). ‘No civil war was fought in pursuit of ‘une liberté sage’, a wise mode of liberty, Voltaire writes, but those in France were ‘longer, more cruel, more fertile in crimes’ than in England. Charles I was ‘defeated in pitched battle, captured, tried and condemned in Westminster’ under rule of law, whereas Henri IV suffered numerous murdering attempts, the last one depriving France of this great king (‘Lettre VIII sur le Parlement’, *Lettres philosophiques*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Garnier, tome 22, 104-105). Voltaire whose ideal government was a just, liberal, enlightened monarchy, and who made Henri IV the tolerant hero of his *Henriade*, visibly prefers the mild moderate dictator to the idealistic doctrinaire, recalling how Brutus wrote to Cicero and Antony that for the sake of the Republic he would kill his own father (Letter to Asselin, 4 Nov. 1735). For all his admirable virtues, the parricide was a fanatic, ‘unable to listen to nature when his country was at stake.’ (*Essai sur les mœurs*, ed. René Pomeau, Paris, Garnier, 1963, tome I, 181) The conclusion gives the last word to Antony who swears revenge and promises further political instability instead of the desired freedom.

Apart from Shakespeare, Corneille is the only dramatist to whom Voltaire acknowledges a debt, if a critical one. He pays tribute to his art of political discussion in *Mort de Pompée* or *Cinna*, but finds ‘the struggles of the heart always more attractive than political reasonings.’ Brutus must not appear insensitive, he needs to be more heart-rending than ‘cette furie’ Emilie, the heroine of *Cinna*, who is ‘truly a parricide’ (*Commentaires sur Corneille*, ed. David Williams, *Complete Works*, 1974-75, vol. 54, 134-35.). Fear and pity are the two lynchpins of tragedy but pathos, that Corneille too frequently abandoned, must be its soul (‘Remarques sur *Œdipe*’, Act IV sc. 5, *Commentaires*, vol. 55, 817). The truest applauses are tears. Unlike Shakespeare’s, Voltaire’s Brutus is the prime mover of the conspiracy to kill Caesar, until he



is informed of his parentage: ‘Indeed it is this terrible circumstance, and this single combat between the tenderness and the fury of liberty that could alone make the play interesting.’ Both protagonists are portrayed as ‘condamnables mais à plaindre’, deserving to be condemned, but also to be pitied. (Letter D1034 a M. de Lamare complaining of mistakes in this edition, 15 March 1736, 386).

Voltaire would renege on his youthful enthusiasm for Shakespeare. The publication in *Journal encyclopédique*, 15 October 1760, of an article translated from the English that placed Shakespeare above Corneille drove him to write an urgent *Appel à toutes les nations de l’Europe* (1761). Antoine de La Place with his *Théâtre anglois* failed to make Shakespeare properly known by using excessive French refinement to spare readers from his boorishness. Voltaire’s literal translations of extracts in blank verse are now designed to expose the extent of their barbarity. Witness this speech from *Julius Caesar* he rendered ‘line by line. I can assure you it is the grossest extravagance one could ever read.’ (Letter D 10483 to Etienne Noël Damilaville, 4 June 1762).

Chateaubriand confirms that it was Voltaire who made Shakespeare known in France, though he too considers this was a mixed blessing, for Shakespeare had genius, but no taste, and no knowledge of the rules: ‘M. de Voltaire had turned England, a country little known at the time, into a kind of wonderland where he placed the heroes, ideas and opinions he might need’, and understood too late he had helped, in his own words, ‘raise an altar to the monster’.<sup>17</sup> Germaine de Staël will express similar reservations about Shakespeare, but her main interest is for the emotions and passions in the theatre, and she salutes him as ‘le roi des épouvantements’: ‘Twenty years of revolution had given the imagination other needs than those it felt when the novels of Crébillon depicted love and the society of his time.’ (*De l’Allemagne*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris 1836, vol. 2, ch. XV, 81). The same Crébillon had refused to license Voltaire’s play, thus delaying its performance at the Théâtre-Français for nearly two decades. Owing to its potentially dangerous material, *La Mort de César* only

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<sup>17</sup> Chateaubriand, ‘Shakespere ou Shakespeare’, *Mercur de France*, April 1801, repr. in *Mélanges littéraires, Œuvres complètes de M. le Vicomte de Chateaubriand*, Paris, Pourrat, 1838, tome VIII, p. 38-60.

received a ‘permission tacite’ from the authorities (Letter D 999 to Thieriot, 2 Feb. 1736, 332). When the Minister Maurepas urged the censor Crébillon to correct the offensive lines, he requested the addition of a passage in favour of monarchy to counterbalance them. The play was at last performed on 29 August 1743, to rather thin applause. The magazine *Mercure de France* imputed its mediocre reception to the lack of a love interest, and thus of actresses. Its revival twenty years later with Lekain as Brutus was barely more successful. Then in 1783, a series of eight performances inaugurated a period of comparative popularity.

By then, the play had travelled all over Europe. The earliest translation, in Dutch, 1737, was followed in the Netherlands by three more. There were five Italian translations between 1752 and 1786, by the Jesuit Antonio Maria Ambrogio, abbot Melchioro Cesarotti, Agostino Paradisi, Gerolamo Castaldi, Gianfrancesco Corradi. Over the same period, three plus a number of translated extracts appeared in England, one of them in volume XIII of *The Works of M. de Voltaire*, translated by Smollett and others (1761-63), as well as Aaron Hill’s ‘retaliatory’ adaptation, *The Roman Revenge*.<sup>18</sup> Plus three German, four Polish, one Portuguese, one Swedish, one Russian, and at the turn of the century four came to print in Spain.

### **Killing the king**

*La Mort de César* had its hey-day during the revolutionary period, when it served as ‘political barometer’, Fletcher observes.<sup>19</sup> In July 1791, while the Assemblée was preparing the transfer of Voltaire’s remains to the Panthéon, the Comédie-Française was torn by fierce conflicts between conservative actors and fervent patriots who pressed them to follow the

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<sup>18</sup> Helena Agarez Medeiros, *Voltaire’s La Mort de César: a play entirely in the English taste?* Brussels, Peter Lang, 2013, p. 272-80. After multiple revisions, Aaron Hill’s *Roman Revenge* was published posthumously in 1753.

<sup>19</sup> Fletcher, Introd. p. 105. See Laurence Marie, ‘Art oratoire et Révolution française: jouer Jules César sur les scènes française, anglaise et allemande’, [http://lettres.sorbonne-universite.fr/IMG/pdf/CRHT\\_Laurence\\_Marie\\_Art\\_oratoire\\_et\\_Revolution\\_francaise\\_jouer\\_Jules\\_Cesar\\_sur\\_les\\_sce nes\\_francaise\\_anglaise\\_et\\_allemande-2.pdf](http://lettres.sorbonne-universite.fr/IMG/pdf/CRHT_Laurence_Marie_Art_oratoire_et_Revolution_francaise_jouer_Jules_Cesar_sur_les_sce nes_francaise_anglaise_et_allemande-2.pdf).

lead of the ardent revolutionary Talma. For the feasts of the Fédération Talma wanted to stage democratic plays like ‘La Mort de César, les Horaces, Brutus, Charles IX etc.’, but all they wanted to perform were ‘plays infected with the most slavish adulation for kings and for the most disgusting aristocracy’, he deplored.<sup>20</sup> During the trial of Louis XVI, there were repeated representations of both *Brutus* and *Mort de César*. In Paris, loud cheers broke out at the Théâtre de la Nation when Cassius proclaimed after killing Caesar ‘Vive la liberté ! ma main brise vos fers.’ According to the monarchist *Chronique de Paris* the actor Naudet who played Antony would also have been soundly applauded had not the audience feared to seem to approve his principles (*Chronique de Paris*, 1 Dec. 1792). And yet the ideological tenor of the play was felt so ambiguous that the then minister of Justice, Louis-Jérôme Gohier, replaced the Shakespeare-inspired dénouement by an impeccably republican finale. In his version, the one that was regularly staged from then on, Antony and Dolabella are arrested by the lictors, and instead of Caesar’s body, the Statue of Liberty is revealed. The play ends with the Romans’ tribute to Brutus:

We swear to emulate his heroic valour.  
Long live our liberty. Long live the Republic.

Gohier and his fellow ministers firmly believed in the power of drama to advance the political education of the people: by a decree of the Convention, several theatres in Paris were under the obligation to perform a certain type of plays three times a week, one paid for by the government, among them Voltaire’s *Brutus*, and ‘other dramatic plays retracing the glorious events of the Revolution and the virtues of the defenders of freedom.’ (Convention, decree of 2 August 1793) The manager of the Théâtre de l’Estrapade expressed a similar wish to ‘instruct the people with patriotic plays like *Brutus*, *La Mort de César* and others.’<sup>21</sup>

A Scottish traveller records that during the trial of Louis XVI, pedlars stood selling copies

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<sup>20</sup> Letter to M. Compigny, à Saint-Domingue, 25 Dec. 1790, repr. in Appendix to M. Moreau’s *Mémoires historiques et littéraires sur F.-J. Talma*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Paris, 1827, p. 122.

<sup>21</sup> In a letter to the Ministry of Justice, quoted by Henri Welschinger, *Le Théâtre de la Révolution, 1789-1799 avec documents inédits*, Paris, 1880, p. 86.

of *Procès de Charles I<sup>er</sup>* to the crowds massed outside the doors of the Assemblée (John Moore 1793). Inside, the auditorium was packed. With references to the Roman and English precedents, Saint-Just encouraged the Conventionnels to try the king without delay, ‘for there is no citizen who does not have over him the right that Brutus had over Caesar’ (Convention, 13 November 1792, in Charles Vellay ed. 1908, tome I, 364-72).

One member of the Assemblée quotes Voltaire’s *Henriade* and pleads for banishment, not death, reminding them that monarchy was soon reborn from the ashes of Charles I, whereas Rome remained free after driving away Tarquin.<sup>22</sup> Another tells them that he consulted history before he resolved to vote for prison and banishment, again with the examples of Rome and England in mind. ‘Consult history, soon comes the retort, you will find that despots never forgive their country’: Tarquin, Coriolanus, returned at the head of an army to imperil the Roman Republic. The most radical consider that the execution of Charles was of no use to the people because the nobility survived monarchy, ‘and wherever this parasite exists, you will find growing anew the poisonous plant of king or oppressor under another name.’ Charles Stuart was a tyrant, but his judges had no mandate from the nation: ‘Charles was the victim of an ambitious hypocrite; we have no Cromwell here in the republican parliament, and I can see more than one Brutus’.<sup>23</sup>

The heroes of Antiquity became the new saints of the revolutionary cult, the first Brutus, Junius, founder of the Republic who sacrificed his son for the good of the city, and his self-proclaimed descendant Marcus who sacrificed his friend on the altar of freedom. (Claude Mossé 1989, 88-98).

It was as Voltaire’s characters that they were mostly known. No reviewer of *La Mort de César* discusses the fact that its Republican protagonists, Brutus included, feel only scorn for the popular crowd. As for the Conventionnels, they were more concerned with the preservation of liberty against coalitions of despots than with the individual rights of the citizen. Robespierre makes numerous references to both the elder and the younger Brutus

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Opinion de L.A. Devérité, sur le jugement de Louis XVI, in *Histoire impartiale du procès de Louis XVI, ci-devant roi des Français, recueil complet et authentique par L.F. Jauffret, homme de Loi*, tome VIII, Paris, 1793, ch. cxiii, p. 11, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Allasseur, député du Cher, 227; Bazire, Côte d’Or, 230; Claude-Charles Prost, Dôle, ch. cxiv, p. 28-29.

and to Caesar, sometimes connecting them directly with Voltaire, for instance when he pleads that Virtue should come first before Genius, urging them to be all Catos: ‘Caesar was a man of genius; Cato was a virtuous man, and indeed, Cato was more worthy than Caesar. Voltaire created Brutus. Voltaire was a man of genius, but the hero of the poem was more worthy than the poet’.<sup>24</sup> Alas, history shows that the benefactors of humanity like Cato and the second Brutus were its martyrs (*Lettres à ses commettants*, 1ère série, n° 7, 30 Nov. 1792, *Œuvres*, tome V, p. 114). Robespierre’s own enemies threaten him with the fate of Caesar (*Papiers inédits trouvés chez Robespierre*, 1828, n° 58, p. 152), and he bitterly complains when he finds himself isolated among the Comité de Salut Public: ‘What difference does it make that Brutus killed the tyrant? Tyranny still lives in the hearts and Rome no longer exists but in Rome.’ (Discours du 17 pluviôse an II (15 Feb. 1794), *Œuvres*, p. 355).

Chateaubriand’s *Essay on Revolutions* asserts that Robespierre’s fatal decrees, like the sanguinary laws of ‘the inexorable philosopher’ Draco, were favourable to insurrections (Chateaubriand (1797) 1815, 24). Later historians, attempting to erase the Terreur from the revolutionary record, and Robespierre from the Republican pantheon, would accuse him of being an opportunist like Cromwell (Levin, *Revolution Française.net*, 23 May 2014, <https://revolution-francaise.net/2014/10/06/585-l-antiquite-modele-dans-le-moment-republicain-de-1791>). After Thermidor, the references to Antiquity became sporadic, more a matter of fashion, like the dress ‘à l’Antique’, than politics. When the Théâtre-Français, renamed Théâtre de l’Égalité, launched on a new venture with Voltaire’s original version of *La Mort de César* in January 1795, Brutus was booed, while Antony’s final speech raised warm enthusiasm – the exact reverse of a performance four years earlier when all the parallels with present tyranny had caused rowdy reactions, and Antony’s speech was hissed.

### **Talma in Erfurt**

The most spectacular performance of *La Mort de César* took place in Weimar during the

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<sup>24</sup> Discours du 3 brumaire an II (24 Oct. 1793), *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, PUF, 1967, tome X, p. 158. Hervé Leuwers, author of a *Robespierre* (Fayard, 2016) to whom I owe this quotation, tells me that Cesare Vetter, *La Felicità è un’idea nuova in Europa*, Trieste, EUT, t. I, 2005, found 76 references to Caesar in Robespierre’s works and 92 to either Brutus.

Erfurt meeting with Tsar Alexander. Napoleon had taken the Théâtre-Français there to play a selection of tragedies by Racine, Corneille, Voltaire and Crébillon, promising their star actor Talma he would perform before ‘un beau parterre de rois’, have kings for groundlings (Markovitz 2012/13, 67-80). These noble groundlings watched Voltaire’s play as in a trance, not knowing whom to applaud, fearing by a gesture, a glance, to betray some tacit approval of Brutus’ maxims. Only the Emperor seemed to enjoy ‘the painful constraint of these powers of the earth to whom he dictated his laws, but whose mighty coalition five years later would overthrow the colossus that in Erfurt had held them in thrall.’<sup>25</sup> When Talma asked him the reason of this strange choice, Napoleon answered he had done it to show he was still a Republican. According to other testimonies, he seemed to challenge the German people, daring them to deal him the treatment suffered by Caesar. The Duchess of Weimar wrote to her brother that at the end of the performance the Emperor had whispered to her: ‘Strange play, this Caesar! A republican play! I hope it will have no effect here!’<sup>26</sup>

Republican or not, the hubristic conqueror of Europe no doubt felt affinities with Caesar, like him a victorious strategist, whom assassins prevented from ascending the throne. He had already offered Talma the benefit of his advice on how to play Nero in *Britannicus*; in *Mort de Pompée*, the actor must make it clear that Caesar does not believe a word he says when he wants to convince the Romans he holds the throne in horror, a suggestion that Talma followed. (*Mémoires*, 50-51.) Surprisingly enough, Fletcher does not mention the Erfurt event, and he misquotes Napoleon by making him dismiss *La Mort de César* as ‘une mauvaise pièce’. The Emperor used those words about another of Voltaire’s plays, *Mahomet*, telling Goethe who was planning to translate it that he should instead ‘write *La Mort de César*, but in a manner much more dignified and grandiose than Voltaire did [...]. In this tragedy, one would need to show how Caesar could have made the happiness of humanity,

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<sup>25</sup> On 6 Oct. 1808 in Weimar. *Mémoires sur F.-J. Talma*, 53. On the Erfurt episode, see also ‘Vie de Talma’, unsigned, in Talma, *Mémoires sur Lekain et sur l’art dramatique*, Bruxelles, Delavault, 1827, p. 28-29. Alfred Copin, *Talma et l’Empire: Etudes dramatiques*, Paris, Didier, 1888, p. 175-77.

<sup>26</sup> Henriette von Knebel to her brother Karl, Weimar, 12 October 1808, in *Aus Karl Ludwig von Knebels Briefwechsel mit seiner Schwester Henriette (1774-1813), ein Beitrag zur deutschen Hof- und Litteraturgeschichte*, ed. Heinrich Düntzner, Jena, Mauke, 1858, p. 348.

had he been allowed time to accomplish his vast plans.’ After the Weimar performance, conversing with Goethe and Wieland, he owned that he did not understand Shakespeare – perhaps the reason why he had to content himself with Voltaire – but he thought tragedy should be the school of kings and of their peoples.<sup>27</sup> Recalling literary conversations with Général Bonaparte, another of his oldest friends, Antoine-Vincent Arnault confirmed that, from the start, theatre and politics were intimately linked for the young man: ‘The interests of nations, of passions applied to a political aim, the development of the Statesman’s projects, the revolutions that change the face of empire, this, he said, is the matter of tragedy.’ And added, as if taking a leaf from Voltaire, ‘the other interests intermixed with those, the love interests especially, which dominate French tragedies, are only comedy within the tragedy.’ (Antoine-Vincent Arnault 1833, livre XIV, ch. 2, 99).

To conclude, after this momentous episode, *La Mort de César* had only one brief revival in 1892, under the Third Republic, again embellished with Gohier’s republican denouement.<sup>28</sup> Voltaire’s play did not renew classical tragedy as he had hoped, but it kept Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* away from the French stage for another century. Shakespeare’s text was first performed in a French translation in 1906 at the Odéon under the direction of André Antoine. Thirty years later, Charles Dullin, who made his début playing Antony in the Odéon production, would revive it at the Atelier, in the part of Cinna the poet. Now Shakespeare was there to stay. After years of waiting under disguise, the English Caesar had conquered the French stage.

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<sup>28</sup> Three performances in September 1892, and a final one the following year. Fletcher, p. 109.

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