

Shakespeare's "Monstrous State": Divination, Typology,
and the Book of Nature in *Julius Caesar*

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Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known.
(1 Cor. 13:12 [KJV])

In nature's infinite book of secrecy
A little I can read.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*)¹

Between November of 1577 and January of 1578, a fiery object appeared above the sky over northern Europe, inspiring widespread wonder and fear. Dubbed the "Great Comet," it was one of the most well-documented astronomical objects of the sixteenth century. From his observatory on the island of Hven near Copenhagen, the Danish astronomer and mathematician Tycho Brahe concluded that the comet was at least fifty thousand German miles away from earth. At that distance, it produced no parallax, meaning that it moved through area of the heavens where Aristotle had argued that stellar movement was impossible. Brahe's precise calculations helped to usher in a new era of astronomical discovery in Europe, leading ultimately to the rejection of Aristotle's model of the cosmos, but his approach was by no means narrowly empirical. Like many of his contemporaries, he understood the Great Comet as both a divine creation and a work of divination. "From the beginning of the world," he observed, "comets have been held to be the greatest of all wonders seen in the heavens"

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1. The soothsayer speaks these lines to Cleopatra's followers in William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1.2.9–10) in the edition edited by John Wilders in 1995 for Routledge, which was reprinted as the Arden 3 edition of the play (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). All subsequent citations from *Antony and Cleopatra* are to this edition, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line numbers.

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and to be the product of a God both "unfathomable and unknown." He predicted that it foretold storms, dry spells, earthquakes, spoiled harvests, illness, and "great disunity among reigning potentates, from which follows violent warfare and bloodshed."²

For Brahe, precise calculation, political prognostication, and divine wonder could coexist without causing significant epistemological rupture. As we know from historians of science, moreover, he was not alone among natural philosophers in combining theology, astronomy, and judicial astrology in this way.³ In England, John Dee, the mathematician and court astrologer to Queen Elizabeth, reported "great fear and doubt" in the face of the blazing comet, suggesting that many regarded it as a bad omen for the planned marriage between the queen and Rudolf II. Dee also urged the queen to consider its larger eschatological significance as a sign of the end of days, but he found it difficult to dissuade the court from more local political interpretations.⁴ Such political interpretations of the Great Comet were mainstays throughout the sixteenth century, as in the influential 1555 study of comets by the mathematician and prognosticator Leonard Digges that linked them directly to earthquakes, famine, death, war, and the "changing of kingdoms."⁵ The Protestant polemicist John Bale made a similar argument in his *Pageant of Popes* (pub. 1574), where he noted that plague, famine, and earthquakes accompanied a comet in 985 during the reign of Pope John, which Bale interpreted as a sign of God's disapproval of the pope's behavior.⁶ For Bale and Digges, these assessments were justified by the Christian concept of the Book of Nature, in which observers scrutinized the created world for what Robert Grosseteste called "vestiges of God."⁷ Attending to such vestiges allowed natural philosophers and other

2. Tycho Brahe, *Opera omnia*, ed. John Louis Emil Dreyer, 15 vols. (Copenhagen: Nielsen & Lydiche, 1913–29), 4:385–86. The English translation is from John Robert Christianson, "Tycho Brahe's German Treatise on the Comet of 1577: A Study in Science and Politics," *Isis* 70, no. 1 (March 1979): 137.

3. See Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 15–17, and *The Fall of Man and the Rise of Science* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also Peter Harrison, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. chaps. 2 and 3 (by John Henry and Jonathan R. Topham, respectively).

4. See Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjuror: The Science and Magic of Dr. John Dee, Advisor to Queen Elizabeth I* (New York: Holt, 2001), 142–43. Glynn Parry argues that Dee spent a week at Windsor Castle trying to dissuade the queen from accepting specific, political interpretations of the comet offered by others in her court; see *The Arch-Conjuror of England: John Dee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 128–29.

5. Leonard Digges, *A Prognostication of Right Good Effect* (London, 1555), sig. B2r. Spelling in early modern sources has been silently modernized throughout.

6. John Bale, *The Pageant of Popes* (London, 1574), fols. 62v–63.

7. Servus Gieben, "Traces of God in Nature according to Robert Grosseteste, with the Text of the Dictum, 'Omnis creature speculum est,'" *Franciscan Studies* 24 (1964): 146.

observers of nature to comprehend the miracle of divine creation more fully, while also raising new questions about the study of nature.⁸

Early modern approaches to interpreting comets and other wonders of nature as signs of divination also depended in important ways on classical accounts of the life and death of Julius Caesar. In his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (121 CE), for example, Suetonius had recounted the “unmistakable signs” (*evidentibus prodigiis*) that foretold Caesar’s death, including the discovery of a tablet in a newly disturbed grave that predicted the death of a “son of Ilium” (*iulio prognatus*) and the weeping of horses that Caesar had used to cross the Rubicon. Suetonius also described what would become the most celebrated event surrounding the death of Caesar—a comet that shone for “seven successive days” during his funeral games and that was “believed to be the soul of Caesar, who had been taken to heaven.”⁹ This reading followed Pliny, who included an account of Caesar’s translation to the stars or “catasterism” in his *Natural History* (77 CE) and noted how unusual it was for Romans to regard comets as anything other than portents of evil.¹⁰ Shakespeare’s central source for his Roman plays, Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (ca. 100 CE), alludes to the comet as one of many “strange and wonderful signs” at Caesar’s death—others include a flaming sky, nocturnal birds appearing during the day, “spirits running up and down in the night,” and various body parts engulfed by flame.¹¹ Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (ca. 8 CE) likewise describes the comet or “blazing star” as evidence of Caesar’s lasting fame and triumph.¹²

8. See, e.g., Harrison, *Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science*, and *Fall of Man and the Rise of Science*. See also Peter Harrison, “‘The Book of Nature’ and Early Modern Science,” in *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History*, ed. Klaas van Berkel, Arie Johan Vanderjagt, and Arjo Vanderjagt (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 1–26.

9. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library 31, 38 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 1:136–37, 146–47.

10. Pliny, *Natural History: Books I and II*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 330 (Cambridge University Press, 1938), 2.93–94. See also Emma Gee, *Ovid, Aratus and Augustus: Astronomy in Ovid’s “Fasti”* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 158–59. Romans had been prepared for Caesar’s dramatic catasterism by virtue of the cult of divinity, or *Divus Iulius*, that Caesar himself developed on the model of Romulus, who was “hailed as a god” after his death according to Livy in his *History of Rome*, vol. 1, *Books I and II*, trans. B. O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library 114 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 1.16. The myth also had antecedents in classical Greece and Egypt. For example, the Greek rulers Alexander and Tigranes were thought to have ascended to heaven after their deaths.

11. Plutarch, *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. Thomas North (London, 1579), 796, 792–93. This is the edition of Plutarch that Shakespeare likely used himself.

12. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding, ed. Madeleine Forey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 15.834–42. Livy’s compendium of Roman prodigies—his *Julius Obsequens*—adds additional portents, including a rainbow that pointed directly to Octavianus Caesar (later Augustus) on his return to Rome following the defeat of the conspirators,

Although Shakespeare does not stage the comet directly in *Julius Caesar*, the play includes many acts of divination, including the soothsayer's warning to Caesar to "beware the Ides of March" and the strange portents that appear during the storm scene in act 1, scene 3.¹³ Collectively, such scenes of divination help to shape the play's interests in politics, religion, and natural philosophy in ways that many scholars have overlooked.¹⁴ *Julius Caesar* demonstrates how Shakespeare treats divination with more nuance and complexity in his Roman plays than in his history plays, where it is often associated with demonic practices.¹⁵ Both "natural" divination (in which portents appear unwillingly and demand interpretation) and "artificial" divination (in which augurers and haruspices seek signs of the future by perceiving the movement of birds or the physical signs of a sacrificed

the toppling of a statue of Cicero by a sudden "tornado," and the overflowing of the banks of the river Po. See Livy, *History of Rome*, vol. 14, *Summaries; Fragments; Julius Obsequens*, trans. Alfred C. Schlesinger, Loeb Classical Library 404 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 308–11. A translation of the Alsatian encyclopedist Conrad Lycosthenes, published in London in 1581 and entitled *The Doom Warning All Men to Judgment*, includes all of the "tokens and prodigies" mentioned in this paragraph, along with other supernatural events (110–13).

13. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell (London: Cengage Learning, 1998), 1.2.18. All quotations from the play are to this edition, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number.

14. In a classic account of the play's politics, Allan Bloom argues that Roman gods "had to do only with political success or failure and did not give indications of a new transcendent dimension to life beyond that provided by civil society" ("The Morality of the Pagan Hero," in *Shakespeare's Politics* [University of Chicago Press, 1964], 78). More recent accounts of the politics of the play downplay divination and the role of the gods. See, e.g., the Althusserian reading of Adrian Phoon, "'A Vision Fair and Fortunate': Ideology, Politics, and Selfhood in *Julius Caesar*," *Sydney Studies in English* 30 (2004): 21–41; and an approach through Agamben's theory of biopower in Daniel Juan Gil, "'Bare Life': Political Order and the Specter of Antisocial Being in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*," *Common Knowledge* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 67–69. A counterexample to this trend is Robert D. Moynihan, who argues that divination reinforces the "conservative interpretation" of the play that the assassination of Caesar violates natural law, and that Brutus remains "ignorant of meaningful design" in the universe ("Stars, Portents, and Order in *Julius Caesar*," *Modern Language Studies* 7, no. 2 [Autumn 1977]: 26, 31).

15. On prophecies and prodigies in the history plays, see Howard Dobin, *Merlin's Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry, and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford University Press, 1990), 154–65. Noting a general "distrust of Sibyls and Sibylline lore" in Shakespeare, Jessica L. Malay nevertheless acknowledges key differences in the representation of divination in his history plays, tragedies, and Roman plays in *Prophecy and Sibylline Imagery in the Renaissance* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 96–120. Of course, as Moody Prior observes, it is possible to depict history both providentially and realistically at the same time; see *The Drama of Power: Studies in Shakespeare's History Plays* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 17. On the historical representation by poets and astronomers of a comet in 1402 marking Owen Glendower's revolt, see Mark Williams, *Fiery Shapes: Celestial Portents and Astrology in Ireland and Wales, 700–1700* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 131.

animal) invite central questions about politics, epistemology, and prophecy in the play.¹⁶ Although divination often fails to provide characters with certain knowledge, it also reveals a larger typological structure at work in the play, in part by inviting the audience to employ its historical knowledge about the future that is invisible to the characters themselves. The soothsayer and the augurers in *Julius Caesar* are correct in their prophecies, but only up to a point. They require supplemental knowledge that can only be supplied by a future that they themselves cannot see. Unlike Cassius, Brutus, and Antony, for example, Shakespeare's audience has access to the knowledge that the fall of Caesar brings on the Roman Empire with Octavius "Augustus" Caesar at its helm—and that his rule, in turn, led to the *Pax Romana*, or "universal peace," that made possible the emergence of Christianity. Divination influences typological meaning across both *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, especially as both plays show Octavius, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, assuming greater authority. Divination thus sutures the pagan past to the Christian present while encouraging the audience to regard the theater as a medium that transforms elements of the Book of Nature into artificial signs that demand interpretation.

TOKENS OF THE GODS

Shakespeare was clearly familiar with the divination surrounding Caesar's life and death. In *Hamlet*, Horatio alludes to the "stars with trains of fire and dews of blood" that marked the sky "a little ere the mightiest Julius fell."¹⁷ Such an account follows the early modern practice of interpreting the comet not as a sign of Caesar's catasterism after death, but rather as a warning of his impending demise. In a study of comets translated into

16. Marjorie Garber explores divination in relation to questions of "character and consciousness" (*Julius Caesar*, in *Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974], 48). John W. Crawford addresses the role of fate and the gods in controlling destiny in the play—including the debate between Stoicism and Epicureanism in shaping meaning in the play—in "The Religious Question in *Julius Caesar*," *Southern Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (April 1977): 297–302. Mark Rose argues that, even if Antony himself is a disenchanted "manipulator of the plebeians," the play itself, "with its ghost, its soothsayer, its prophetic dreams and supernatural prodigies, is not" ("Conjuring Caesar: Ceremony, History, and Authority in 1599," *English Literary Renaissance* 19, no. 3 [Autumn 1989]: 297–98). Although David Carson makes a brief argument for the significance of prodigies, he focuses mainly on the fact that the conspirators overlook the ominous portents in the sky during the garden scene; see "The Dramatic Importance of Prodigies in *Julius Caesar*," *English Language Notes* 2 (1965): 177–80.

17. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Arden 3 ed., ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 1.1.116, 113.

English in 1577, for example, the German astronomer Frederic Nausea asks rhetorically, "Who is ignorant, that after the appearance of a Comet in the time of *Julius Caesar*, not only civil wars followed, in manner most lamentable, but also the death & murdering of *Julius Caesar* his own person, which was most miserable?"¹⁸ Shakespeare does not stage the comet directly in *Julius Caesar*, even though Calphurnia does note that "when beggars die there are no comets seen" and that the "heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes" (2.2.30–31). Yet the storm scene highlights and multiplies the divination in several of Shakespeare's sources, mixing a "tempest dropping fire," lions walking the streets, bodies engulfed in flame, and nocturnal owls hooting at midday (1.3.10–27). Caska names these visions "prodigies" and reads them as "tokens" and "heralds" sent from the "most mighty gods" to "astonish" Romans (1.3.55–56), prompting Cassius to provide a different interpretation of such "portentous things" (1.3.31):

You are dull, Caska, and those sparks of life
That should be in a Roman you do want,
Or else you use not. You look pale, and gaze,
And put on fear, and cast yourself in wonder,
To see the strange impatience of the heavens.
But if you would consider the true cause . . .
Why all these things change from their ordinance,
Their natures and preformèd faculties,
To monstrous quality, why, you shall find
That heaven hath infused them with these spirits
To make them instruments of fear and warning
Unto some monstrous state.

(1.3.57–62, 66–71)

Assuming the stance of a natural philosopher, Cassius seeks the "true cause" of the disorders of nature, drawing on the Latin root of the word "monster," *monstrare*, as "to demonstrate" or make visible. For Augustine, for example, "monsters are signs by which something is demonstrated," just as "'Sign' [*ostentum*] comes from 'to show' [*praeostendere*]; and 'prodigy' [*prodigia*] from 'to speak of what is far away' [*porro dicere*], that is, to foretell the future."¹⁹ For Cassius, the monstrous transformation of nature from its "preformèd faculties" turns natural philosophy into a kind of political theology. Resisting Caska's passive amazement, he urges action, seeking to align the "wonder" of the storm with his own campaign against Caesar.

18. Frederic Nausea, *All Blazing Stars in General*, trans. Abraham Fleming (London, 1577), sig. C7v.

19. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. and ed. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge University Press, 1998), §21.8 (1063).

Cassius's "monstrous state" reframes the classical story of Caesar's fall in relation to futures that characters in the play cannot anticipate, including Christian debates about interpreting the Book of Nature developed by patristic authors beginning with Origen of Alexandria, who sought new strategies for reading the natural world as signs of invisible and spiritual truths. For Augustine, no portent or prodigy could be "against nature" (*contra naturam*), since all things in nature have been created by God.²⁰ What we take to be monstrous derives in truth from our ignorance of God's plan for the universe. But for later authors, including Isidore of Seville, portents, omens, monsters, and prodigies "show [*monstrare*] and predict future things," since "God wishes to signify the future through the faults that are born . . . by which he forewarns and signifies to peoples or individuals a misfortune to come."²¹ God uses natural and supernatural signs as a way to warn Christians about impending social and political disorder. To read the Book of Nature was thus to engage in a form of political interpretation.

The Book of Nature was itself increasingly centered on modes of political prophecy in Protestant Europe. Despite the hostility that many Protestants showed toward divination because of its claims to forms of knowledge possessed only by God, England during the sixteenth century was awash with prophetic texts, including adaptations of the Greek and Roman Sibylline prophecies designating the pope as the Antichrist and pamphlets anticipating the Second Coming. John Foxe, for example, incorporated apocalyptic writings from a book of Sibylline prophecies in the 1570 edition of *Acts and Monuments*, while authors from Stephen Batman to John Merbecke utilized Sibylline imagery to advance Protestant nationalism.²² The "monstrous state" described by Cassius was familiar to those Protestants in Europe who sought to justify their critiques of Catholicism through the explication portents and prodigies in the natural world. The 1561 *History of Strange Wonders* by the German Protestant and follower of Melanchthon, Joachim Camerarius, for example, interprets a number of strange sights around Europe in terms of the Second Coming and the struggle between Protestants and the Roman "Antichrist."²³ Against the naturalistic explanations of prodigies by Epicurus and his followers,

20. *Ibid.*, 1064.

21. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX* 11.3.1–4, quoted in Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 50 (translation by authors).

22. John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (London, 1570), 913. See also Stephen Batman, *The Doom Warning* (London, 1581), and *The New Arrival of the Three Graces, into Anglia Lamenting the Abuses of This Present Age* (London, 1580); and John Merbecke, *A Book of Notes and Common Places, with their Expositions* (London, 1581). See also Sheltoe à Gevern, *Of the Ende of This World*, trans. Thomas Rogers (London, 1577).

23. Joachim Camerarius, *History of Strange Wonders* (London, 1561), sig. A7.

Camerarius insists that the strange wonders are "above nature" and have been sent by God to warn of future calamities: "Therefore these things showing themselves so often times, and so wonderful, verily we ought to understand and to think, that the moving and working of nature is wrested out of frame, and the state and condition of men to be turned out of course, & that the effects of nature being weak & sick may no longer continue nor endure: for even as monstrous births do not live long, so likewise the degenerate and monstrous state of this corrupt world shall not last long."²⁴ In keeping with other post-Augustinian readers of the Book of Nature, Camerarius viewed monstrosity as ephemeral, linked to the degenerate and fallen condition of the contemporary world.

The brief appearance of Cicero in the storm scene of act 2 invites readers and viewers to connect Shakespeare's tragedy with classical debates about divination and divine providence. Like Plutarch, Shakespeare seeks to balance the representation of individual character and providential structure. A priest at Delphi for the last thirty years of his life, Plutarch pays particular attention to religious signs in his *Lives*. To remedy what he regarded as the vulgarity of his sources in Thucydides, Nepos, and Suetonius, moreover, Plutarch paid special attention to portents in his biographical studies of Roman and Greek men in order to rationalize the nature of divine portents and to provide an overarching theme to the moralistic narratives he was writing.²⁵ At times, Plutarch merely alters the sequence of events he found in his sources, as when he places Caesar's dream of intercourse with his mother just before he crosses the Rubicon rather than, as in his sources, when Caesar was at war in Spain. Elsewhere, Plutarch subtly alters existing accounts to make the supernatural sources appear to be more rational and logical, as in his removal of snakes from the list of animals that supposedly led Alexander to Siwah.²⁶ And even though Plutarch emphasizes free will throughout his narrative of paired lives, the gods also frequently manipulate his heroes with omens and portents.

Plutarch also approaches divination in the *Lives* through the lens of natural philosophy. In his life of Pericles, for example, he describes a tension between natural philosophy and prognostication in relating the competing interpretations offered by the natural philosopher Anaxagoras and

24. *Ibid.*, sig. D2v. On the religious implications of monstrous-birth broadsides, see Jennifer Spinks, *Monstrous Births and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (2009; repr., London: Routledge, 2016), 54–55, 74–76.

25. See Frederick E. Brenk, *In Mist Apparelled: Religious Themes in Plutarch's "Moralia" and "Lives"* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 186, 210.

26. The account of talking snakes that lead Alexander to Siwah, where he apparently consulted an oracle that gave him rule over the world, was first promulgated by his official historian, Kallisthenes, and subsequently echoed by others, including Aristoboulos. See Matthew Dillon, *Omens and Oracles: Divination in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 147.

the diviner Lampon over a strange object that Pericles once acquired: a ram's head with one horn in its middle. Lampon interprets the omen as a sign that the government of Athens, which at the time was divided between followers of Thucydides and Pericles, should unify around Pericles, but Anaxagoras, after cutting into the skull to examine the irregular brain of the ram, dismisses this interpretation as mere superstition. Plutarch, however, emphasizes that both could be right, since the natural philosopher determines the natural "cause" of the object while the diviner provides an account of its "end" or purpose.²⁷

Plutarch thus assumes a skeptical but balanced approach toward divination in his *Lives* that echoes the work of Cicero, who wrote the most influential treatises on divination in ancient Rome. Cicero's *On Divination* and *The Nature of the Gods* were not printed in English until 1683, but they may have circulated earlier in England in manuscript form and in printed editions in French.²⁸ Both treatises anticipate in striking ways the role of divination in *Julius Caesar*. *The Nature of the Gods* features the Stoic philosopher Lucilius Balbus, who sets out to prove not just the existence of the gods, but also their character and ability to shape human action. For Balbus, divination demonstrates without doubt that the gods look out for the best interest of humans by giving them advance knowledge of the future. "The Gods," he argues, "take care of great things and disregard the small," while for "truly great men" all "prosperity" is given.²⁹ His interlocutor, the Epicurean senator Cotta Velleius, does not reject the existence of the gods, but challenges the attribution of divinity to even the smallest creature on earth (118) as well as the implication that "some Deity appoints and directs" the tide (113). For Epicureans such as Cotta, the numerous gods and their attributes celebrated by Balbus are only so many "stories" that have accumulated over time to produce a complex and illogical set of "fables" (126–27). Cicero expands on this debate in his dialogue *On Divination*, where Quintus mounts a defense of the gods similar to that of Balbus, while Marcus adds to the skeptical claims of Cotta. For Quintus, both "natural" divination in the form of dreams, meteorological events, and supernatural visions and "artificial" divination, such as the interpretation of birds or sacrificial animals by augurs, haruspices, and other diviners, demonstrate that "everything

27. Plutarch, *Lives*, 170.

28. Camerarius cites *On Divination* in relation to "monsters and wonders" that demand interpretation (*History of Strange Wonders*, sig. B2), while Lycosthenes alludes to the same Ciceronian text with reference to a farmer who suddenly heard the voice of a "child . . . old in wisdom" while plowing his fields (*Doom Warning All Men* [n. 12 above], 46).

29. Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, in "*The Nature of the Gods*" and "*On Divination*," trans. C. D. Yonge (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997), 105. All English quotations from these two works by Cicero are to this translation, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

is filled and pervaded by a divine intelligence and eternal sense," suggesting that the soul of mankind is in communication with gods who bestow on us the "signs and indications of futurity" (190). Particular examples of this futurity for Quintus include the "prodigies" surrounding Caesar's death, such as the absent heart in the sacrificial ox discovered by Caesar's augurers (193). Against Stoic claims by Quintus defending divine intervention in human affairs, Marcus suggests that, even if Caesar had known the future, he would not have wanted to, since had he foreseen his own death, "in what wretchedness would he have passed his life?" (209). Marcus thus identifies a paradox at the heart of his brother's defense of divination, namely, that Stoics regard everything in the universe as both predetermined by fate and subject to chance: "If we cannot foresee anything which happens by chance, since that thing is necessarily uncertain, therefore there is no divination; and if, on the contrary, things are to happen can be foreseen because they happen by an infallible fatality, there is no divination, because you say that divination only relates to fortuitous events" (210). A related paradox for Marcus is that divination apparently reveals universal sympathy between earth and the heavens, even though there is no inherent connection between, for example, the "cleft of a liver" and the "universal nature of things" (213). Not only haruspicy, but also augury and the interpretation of dreams make false assertions about the relation between universal and particular. Divination for Marcus avoids the real motivator of human action—virtue—by ascribing such action to the gods (233). The only solution, Marcus ultimately claims, is to "reject" all forms of divination as overly "conjectural" and "superstitious" (262).

Cicero did not let his skepticism toward divination affect his faith in the necessity of augury, however. Even as he describes divination as both superstitious and erroneous in *On Divination*, he acknowledges the importance of the "science" of interpreting signs in order to uphold "Religion and the State" (211). Divination may have been bad metaphysics according to Cicero, but it was good politics. Cicero was himself a member of the college of augurs in 53 or 52 BCE, though he noted in a letter to Aulus Caecina that he did not need to make a study of the flight of birds in order to make political prophecies based on the study of individual characters and the circumstances that surround them.³⁰ It is thus understandable that Cicero's account of divination privileges outcomes over causes (*eventa, non causae*). As Quintus observes, "even if I do not know how everything is done, I nevertheless do know what is done" (148). The point of divination for Quintus and his fellow Stoics, in other words, is not to

30. See Jerzy Linderski, "Cicero and Roman Divination," *La Parola del Passato* 37 (1982): 12–13, and "The Augural Law," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung* 2.16, no. 3 (1975): 2146–312.

explain causes about why something happens, but rather to “give notice of what will happen unless you provide against it” (158). Divination in Cicero, as for many later authors, was more than just an antiempirical superstition. It was an essential aspect of cultures where a divine presence (or *Logos*) was taken as a given and in which the belief that the gods are immanent in creation flourished. Even though divination was almost totally rejected by Christian theologians from Augustine to Calvin, it was solidly embedded in popular traditions and intimately associated with literature, especially in the genres of epic and tragedy.³¹

MONSTROUS SIGNS

Like his other tragedies, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* does not represent the gods directly, meaning that the divination largely depends on human intervention.³² The tragedy, which was probably the first play produced in the newly constructed Globe theater in 1599, establishes both the importance and anxiety surrounding the interpretation of signs from its opening lines.³³ In questioning the plebeians marching in the streets, for example, the tribune Flavius warns those who follow “mechanical” trades (1.1.3) that they must have the “sign” of their professions about them (1.1.4). Once he has dispersed the crowd, moreover, Flavius orders his fellow tribune Murellus to disrobe Caesar’s statues of “images” that threaten to

31. See, e.g., Brenda Deen Schildgen, *Divine Providence, A History: The Bible, Virgil, Orosius, Augustine, and Dante* (London: Continuum, 2012), 54–55. Of course, Homer’s *Iliad* begins with a debate over the interpretation of portents, and in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and other works, epic itself helped the Greeks to understand the gods themselves. Many Christians interpreted Virgil’s fourth eclogue as a prophetic anticipation of the birth of Christ, while *The Aeneid*—according to the tradition of *sortes Virgilliane*, or “Virgilian lots”—was often used, like the Christian Bible, as a source of instant divination by opening to a random page in response to a question. See, e.g., Edward Morgan, *The Incarnation of the Word: The Theology of Language of Augustine of Hippo* (London: Continuum, 2010), 118.

32. Characters frequently invoke the gods in the play, but the gods themselves remain invisible. In act 1, scene 1, Marullus orders the plebeians to disperse, return home, fall upon their knees, and “Pray to the gods to intermit the plague” that is sure to meet the “ingratitude” they have shown to Pompey by celebrating the triumph of Caesar in the streets of Rome (1.1.54–56). But the tribunes are of course attempting to repress the public worship of Caesar, marked by festive holiday and the decoration of Caesar’s statues with images. In the next scene, Caska claims that Marullus and Flavius are “put to silence” for pulling “scarves” from Caesar’s statues (1.2.284–85), suggesting a conflict between the will of the gods and the actions of Caesar.

33. It is likely that the play was produced in 1599. Using both internal and external evidence, for example, Stephen T. Sohmer argues the play was first performed in the new theater on the summer solstice of 1599; see *Shakespeare’s Mystery Play: The Opening of the Globe Theater, 1599* (Manchester University Press, 1999), 36–70. See also *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell, 12–22; and E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), 2:364–65.

elevate Caesar "above the view of men" (1.1.68, 74). In the second scene, efforts to police the social body of Rome give way to the efforts of Cassius to read the body of Brutus and of the conspirators in order to interpret Caesar's character. Cassius observes that Brutus does not proffer the "show of love" he used to (1.2.34) before offering himself as a mirror or "glass" by which Brutus can see himself (1.2.68). Later, Caesar describes Cassius to Antony as a "great observer" who "looks / Quite through the deeds of men" (1.2.201–2), the trait of someone who is a potential concern for leaders such as Caesar. This kind of attention to the simultaneous power and ambiguity of signs accords with the play's focus on divination as a system of interpretation.

Caesar's hasty rejection of the soothsayer's warnings about the coming Ides of March in act 1, scene 2 joins a larger pattern of misinterpreting signs in the play, including dreams, portents, prodigies, and even the time of day. Cicero cautions Caska against the misinterpretation of the "portentous things," warning him in the spirit of Academic skepticism that "men may construe things after their fashion / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves" (1.3.34–35). Cassius nevertheless regards portents as the product of a heaven that has "infused" nature with "spirits" in order to protect against tyranny (1.3.69). The dream of Calphurnia about a statue of her husband spouting blood into the hands of "many lusty Romans" (2.2.78) is also central to the acts of divination foregrounded in the play.³⁴ This vision, which seems to be Shakespeare's own invention, appears in the play around the same time that Caesar sends augurs to sacrifice an ox that turns out to lack a heart. Initially refusing to change his course in response to either form of divination, Caesar reluctantly agrees to remain at home instead of journeying to the Capitol, but Decius arrives to offer a reinterpretation of the dream as an image of "reviving blood" that will nourish the Roman people (2.2.87). This act of reinterpretation casts Caesar as a Christlike figure whose blood produces nourishment for his followers, deriving perhaps from the "Fountain of Life" motif in medieval and early modern Catholic manuscripts that celebrated the eucharistic body of Jesus as a source of sustenance.³⁵ In describing great men flocking to the statue who will "press / For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance" (2.2.88–89), Decius makes Caesar into an object of idolatrous worship. At the same

34. For a psychoanalytical account of the relation between the interpretation of dreams and the construction of character, see Marjorie Garber, "Dream and Interpretation: *Julius Caesar*," in *William Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar": Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1988), 43–52.

35. See Jack Heller, "'Your Statue Spouting Blood': *Julius Caesar*, the Sacraments, and the Fountain of Life," in *Shakespeare's Christianity: The Protestant and Catholic Poetics of "Julius Caesar," "Macbeth," and "Hamlet,"* ed. Beatrice Batson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 77–93.

time, it is important to note that Caesar, unlike Christ, is not a willing participant in ritualistic sacrifice, nor is he historically situated to understand this layer of Christian imagery.

The specter of divination surrounding Caesar aligns him with contested modes of knowledge in the play. Most of what we learn about Caesar himself comes secondhand and is liable to misinterpretation, just as Cassius and Brutus misinterpret the scene in the forum in act 1, scene 2, where Antony offers the crown to Caesar. As we later learn (1.2.214), Caesar refuses the crown three times rather than putting it on his head, as Cassius and Brutus had assumed. Adding to the confusion, Caesar himself takes contrasting positions on the role of providence—in act 2, scene 2 he asks, “What can be avoided / Whose end is purposed by the mighty gods?” (2.2.27–28), to which Calphurnia responds with her warning about comets blazing to caution princes and not commoners. Caesar displays a comparable attitude a few lines later when he observes that “a necessary end / Will come when it will come” (2.2.36–37). In his very next breath, however, he asks the augurers what they have learned from the ritual animal sacrifice he has asked to be performed (2.2.37). The sense of crisis brought on by the storm and Calphurnia’s dream begins to impinge on his own heroic self-regard, even as he announces that he is more dangerous than “Danger” itself (2.2.44–45). This kind of self-aggrandizing gesture, amplified by his later claim that he is as “constant as the northern star” (3.1.60), confirms the fears of Caesar’s fellow patricians who feel threatened by his power.

Here and elsewhere, Shakespeare highlights the fissure between Caesar’s idealized descriptions of himself and his frail existence. For instance, the play highlights Caesar’s partial deafness (1.2.213) and his susceptibility to epileptic fits (1.2.250–51). And Cassius emphasizes the fragility of the general in his story to Brutus about having to rescue Caesar from drowning in the Tiber (1.2.100–115). Such mortal vulnerability may shape Caesar’s anxious surveying of the world around him, not just in his reliance on augury but also in his fear of Cassius because of his “lean and hungry look” (1.2.193). According to Cassius, Caesar has grown “superstitious” in relation to dreams and “ceremonies” that he once rejected (2.1.194–96).³⁶ We see, for example, that Caesar urges Antony and others to “leave no ceremony out” in observing the Feast of Lupercal (1.2.11), in which priests historically struck women with thongs made from the skins of sacrificed animals as part of a fertility ritual. David Kaula links these pronouncements with Caesar’s “pontifical manner,” his Christlike desire to be

36. The historical Caesar seems to have been quite willing, on numerous occasions, to reject or reinterpret unfavorable divination, as for instance on signs related to his departure against Pompey and in his campaign in Africa. See Stefan Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 98, 116, 342.

regarded as Rome's "redeemer," but the play renders such manner ambiguous and denies its characters the prophetic powers of insight they might otherwise claim.³⁷

Earlier, Cassius famously observes to Brutus that the "fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings" (1.2.139–40), thus downplaying stellar influence in the way that that later agent of political transformation, the bastard Edmund in *King Lear*, will rail against the superstitious belief in comets and eclipses.³⁸ As with Edmund, Cassius's skepticism is also self-serving in its capacity to justify political violence. Cassius thus acknowledges the power of divine signs to produce a "monstrous state," but he argues that only individual agents can affect social change. This position reflected the common motto of early modern astrology originally attributed to Ptolemy: *Sapiens dominabitur astra* (The wise man will dominate the stars).³⁹

Confusion over the interpretation of the signs of divination produces a degree of epistemological fog in Shakespeare's Roman tragedy, yet the play also aligns different stances toward divination held by specific characters in *Julius Caesar* with different schools of classical philosophy. Caska, for instance, follows the Stoic position that all natural, preternatural, and supernatural signs are produced by the gods in order to inform mankind of their will. He rejects the argument that such signs might stem from natural causes. The skeptic Cicero cautions against the subjective interpretation of divine signs. Yet despite his professed faith in the deterministic philosophy of Stoicism, Brutus does not attempt to interpret the portents, prophecies, and other signs of divination of the play in Stoic fashion. His only response to the "exhalations whizzing in the air" is to observe that they provide light to read with at night (2.1.44–45). In this regard, he resembles Antony, who likewise shows little interest in portents or other forms of divination in the play. These central antagonists of the tragedy, for all of their differences, thus share a vision of politics in which human action rather than divine providence drives history.

37. David Kaula, "'Let Us Be Sacrificers': Religious Motifs in *Julius Caesar*," *Shakespeare Studies* 14 (1981): 203–4, 212. As these words suggest, Kaula also locates a central "typological mode of thought" in Shakespeare's play (212), but his focus on Caesar as an emblem of Christ ignores larger typological structures.

38. For an account of Edmund's relationship to early modern debates about nature as law (*nomos*) versus nature as a physical and material life force (*physis*), see Robert J. Bauer, "Despite of Mine Own Nature: Edmund and the Orders, Cosmic and Moral," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 10, no. 3 (Fall 1968): 359–66.

39. The phrase was attributed to Ptolemy, although it does not appear in his extant writings. Variations do occur, however, in the poetry of Dante and Gower, as well as in the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, and in many works of astrology throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. See Theodore Otto Wedel, *The Mediæval Attitude toward Astrology, Particularly in England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1920), 68, 135–37.

The failure of Brutus to live up to his professed Stoic philosophy gives him both a sense of tragic irony and a touch of humanity. Somewhat surprisingly, he does not appear during the storm scene, and he takes no heed of the portents and prodigies that arouse the interest of other conspirators. Shakespeare also shows him to be out of synch with both time and the natural world. As act 2, scene 1 opens, for example, Brutus reveals his uncertainty about the time of day and the date of the month. He believes it to be the first of March (2.1.4), before hearing from his servant Lucius that "March is wasted fifteen days" (2.1.59). Then, as the conspirators gather in Brutus's garden, a debate breaks out between Decius, Caska, and Cinna about where the sun will rise ("You shall confess that you are both deceived," argues Caska [2.1.104]). At stake in this seemingly petty argument is the relation of the conspiracy to interpretations of the natural world and the role of divine providence in relation to Caesar's assassination. Brutus and other conspirators misunderstand the operation of providence because they fail to give adequate attention to the natural and supernatural portents that surround them, rendering them out of step with the movement of the heavens and thus with fortune more generally.⁴⁰ Speaking to himself in the garden before the conspirators gather at his house on the eve of Caesar's assassination, Brutus admits that he has no "personal cause" why he must destroy Caesar, yet he develops a shadowy sense that Caesar "may change his nature" by becoming a tyrant if he is crowned (2.1.11–12). Brutus views Caesar as a tyrant *in potentia* or a "serpent's egg" that portends future harm (2.1.10, 17, 32). Brutus makes his prophetic assertion not by consulting omens or reading supernatural signs, but rather on the basis of logic, however flawed, that overlooks inconvenient facts, including Caesar's refusal to accept the thrice-offered crown during the festival of Lupercal.

These mistaken predictions reveal the limitations of logic and human reason in a world suffused with divine providence.⁴¹ Brutus also fails to predict the future in his misguided concession to Antony to speak in public after the assassination (3.1.226) and his disastrous decision to go to battle against Antony and Octavius instead of waiting for their armies to march first (4.3.201–9). In both of these decisions he overrules Cassius, who demonstrates a more acute sense of the dangers at hand. But even Cassius is limited in his ability to anticipate the future or even read the signs of the "monstrous state" he describes; only the audience has the knowledge

40. It is possible that the conspirators are seeing the portents in the sky without knowing it, as argued in Carson, "Dramatic Importance of Prodigies," 179. Brutus returns to the scene before Decius, Cinna, and Caska resolve their debate over the location of the sunrise.

41. See Ernest Schanzer, "The Tragedy of Shakespeare's Brutus," *ELH* 22, no. 1 (March 1955): 9–10.

and necessary historical perspective to piece together the signs and wonders of the play.⁴² Unlike Shakespeare's characters, we can anticipate the fall of Caesar, which gives rise to the empire of "Augustus" Caesar (27 BCE–14 CE), which in turn ushers in the birth of Christ. This kind of knowledge exposes the limitations of divination within the play, while also linking divination with futures yet unknown.⁴³

FUTURE HISTORIES

Most of the scenes of divination in *Julius Caesar* occur prior to the assassination of Caesar himself, echoing early modern accounts that focus on the portents and prodigies warning of Caesar's death. But the act of killing Caesar ruptures both time and fortune in the play, as Brutus and the conspirators take charge over the contingencies of chance events. In rejecting the proposal of Cassius that the conspirators also kill Antony, Brutus argues that they should be "sacrificers" rather than "butchers" (2.1.165). After the murder of Caesar, Brutus tries to enact a sacrificial ritual by making all of Caesar's killers dip their hands in his blood (3.1.105–7). But Antony disrupts and reverses such efforts as he arrives on the scene and shakes the hands of each conspirator, turning the blood ritual into a bloodbath and calling on the goddess of discord Ate to unleash the "dogs of war" in Rome (3.1.273). The contrasting funeral orations by Brutus and Antony are united in their efforts to frame Caesar's death less as the consequence of divination than as the result of human action. Where the portents, prodigies, and omens of the first three acts create an atmosphere of providential history that is one degree removed from human agency, these scenes return political agency to human speech and action, largely stripped of divination. Neither Brutus nor Antony in fact invokes the gods, although Antony refers to the Christlike "drops" of Caesar's blood (3.2.193) and alludes to a passage from Luke 19:40 ("If these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out") in a way that further links Caesar's death with the sacrifice of Christ (3.2.222–23). Brutus confines himself to explanations

42. Julian Rice argues that the request by Brutus to his fellow conspirators that they judge by their senses is ironic in a play in which such judgment is so often misguided. Rice suggests that the illusions of Brutus and others demonstrate "the play's general Pyrrhonism, which finds man's knowledge and beliefs to be determined more by fear and hope than by reason" (Julian Rice, "Julius Caesar and the Judgment of the Senses," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 13, no. 2 [Spring 1973]: 247).

43. Maurice Hunt argues that the play aligns Caesar and Christ in a "positive" way that is also occasionally "parodic" and that the opening scene, with its allusion to cobblers and "souls," establishes important "Christian overtones" in the tragedy ("Cobbling Souls in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*," in Batson, *Shakespeare's Christianity*, 112). His main argument is that Shakespeare develops for the first time in *Julius Caesar* a Christian sense of the soul as empathetic to the "frailties and sufferings of others" (126).

of the immediate past in murdering Caesar for his ambition, while Antony links the past to the future and turns the corpse of Caesar into an object of prophetic anticipation.

In recalling the scene of the assassination of Caesar that he did not witness himself, Antony spins a powerful tale that links individual holes made in Caesar's robe with the violent thrusts of his murderers, enfolding his audience into the story of the fall of the great man: "O what a fall was there, my countrymen! / Then I, and you, and all of us fell down, / Whilst bloody treason flourished over us" (3.2.188–90). For the first time in the scene, the plebeians begin to speak of vengeance against the conspirators (3.2.198). In his highly theatrical gesture of reading the will of Caesar, Antony emphasizes Caesar's generosity in leaving his personal walks and orchards to the "common pleasures" of the people (3.2.241). The will functions as both a rhetorical prop for Antony and as a promised vision of the future that motivates political change.⁴⁴ After the commoners vow to "pluck down forms, windows, anything" (3.3.250), Antony relishes the "Mischief" he has unleashed upon the world, which can take whatever "course" it likes (3.3.251–52). Anticipating his alliance with Octavius, Antony relishes the idea that "Fortune is merry" and will give the two of them "anything" (3.2.256–57), since Antony himself has shaped fortune in a politically advantageous manner. But the spirit of vengeance conjured by Antony turns quickly away from its intended target in the murder of Cinna the Poet by four plebeians who kill him because he has the same name as Cinna the conspirator. The list of political enemies marked for death that Antony, Lepidus, and Octavius compile in the opening scene of act 4 parodies in an obscene way the will of Caesar that Antony has read in the previous scene. Both acts of inscription attempt to shape the future, but neither is entirely successful. Soon, tension emerges between Lepidus, Octavius, and Antony that ends in deadly conflict. Externally, the demands of the military campaign against Brutus and Cassius restrict their ability to establish rule in Rome. Similar forces strain the relationship between Brutus and Cassius, who argue violently in act 4, scene 3. Such internecine conflict appears stripped of the supernatural and providential armature of the opening acts. Antony and Octavius cannot even muster allusions to the gods, while Brutus and Cassius do so only in passing (4.3.41, 46, 155).

44. In Plutarch, it is unclear if the will is read initially in the senate and then by the commoners or if it is discovered by the commoners. In either case, the reading of Caesar's "testament" is what ignites the violence of the plebeians toward the conspirators and causes them to burn the body of Caesar and then light the houses of the conspirators on fire with "firebrands" from the funeral pyre (Plutarch, *Lives*, 795).

In debating with Antony about whether to march toward Philippi or wait for Antony and Octavius to come to them, Brutus offers a new image of the power of fortune:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

(4.3.216–19)

Brutus's declaration of faith in the future contradicts his use of the metaphor of a "tide" in the "affairs of men," since that language implies multiple, shifting times in which to seize the moment and suggests that every ebb will be met, sooner or later, with an equal and opposite flow.⁴⁵ As it happens, Brutus turns out to be as misguided about his own agency as Caesar was about his. Both, in fact, struggle in vain against forces they cannot understand. The fateful decision by Brutus to march on Philippi triggers two other divinatory events in the play, beginning with Caesar's ghost, whom Brutus refers to as a "monstrous apparition" and who appears just long enough to announce that he will see Brutus again at Philippi (4.3.275). Like other forms of divination in the play, this one is anticipatory and its meaning enigmatic, though Brutus musters only the most prosaic response—"Well: then I shall see thee again?" (4.3.282)—demonstrating once again surprising indifference toward divination for one who is supposed to adhere to Stoic "philosophy" (4.3.143).

For Plutarch, the appearance of the ghost is a clear sign of the judgment of the gods against the murder of Caesar, but in Shakespeare his appearance is open to a broader range of interpretations.⁴⁶ Unlike the ghost of Hamlet's father, who is also an instrument of vengeance, Caesar's spirit speaks few words and reveals no insights about the political state of the world or his own condition in the afterworld. On one hand, of course, Caesar's ghost embodies the "spirit" that Brutus hoped to kill without shedding blood. On the other, the ghost announces himself as the "evil spirit" or demonic other of Brutus himself (4.3.279). In both cases he reminds Brutus of his failure to eliminate Caesar's spirit and that the conspirators have, in fact, released Caesar's spirit by murdering him. We do not witness

45. Such a "tide" of time is part of a larger pattern of rising and falling action that John Velz describes as the "undular structure" of the play; see "Undular Structure in *Julius Caesar*," *Modern Language Review* 66, no. 1 (January 1971): 21–30.

46. See Plutarch, *Lives*, 796. John Roe suggests that Plutarch both attributes revenge on the conspirators to the gods and designates Caesar's ambition as the cause of his downfall; see "'Character' in Plutarch and Shakespeare: Brutus, Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony," in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 176.

the promised reappearance of Caesar's ghost at Philippi, but Brutus invokes him in his final lines of the play as he runs himself against his own sword, crying, "Caesar now be still; / I kill'd not thee with half so good a will" (5.5.50–51).

Yet the play returns to divinatory signs in staging the deaths of Brutus and Cassius. In the confusion of the battle at Philippi, Cassius confesses that he has changed his position on the capacity of portents to predict the future in response to the appearance of "ravens, crows, and kites" that have replaced the place of two "mighty eagles" that had perched nearby the day before and fed from the hands of his soldiers (5.1.80–87). The eagle, which was affiliated with Zeus, and the raven, with Apollo, were the two most significant birds in Greek ornithomanteia.⁴⁷ The substitution of raven for eagle conventionally suggests a lessening of divine support, since the eagle was an omen of military victory.⁴⁸ This avian vision sways Cassius, at least "partly," away from his previous Epicurean position against portents (5.1.89), and he suggests to Brutus that the gods remain "friendly" toward their own armies against Antony and Octavius, even if the "affairs of men rest still incertain" (5.1.93–95). The birds who trouble Cassius and his soldiers are not signs in need of interpretation of the sort that Caesar's augurs might have undertaken. Instead, they indicate that the "tide in the affairs of man" that Brutus thought he was seizing is actually helping the other side.

Both the ghost of Caesar and the birds challenge Brutus's interpretation of providence while reaffirming that the tide of fortune has shifted in Antony's favor. The unpredictable contingencies of fortune serve the ends of a history that few in the play can anticipate. As with the dream of Calphurnia, the apparition of the birds reveals more to the audience than to Cassius. The audience knows that such signs, like the portents and prodigies on the eve of Caesar's assassination, confirm what history has already demonstrated—namely, that the murder of Caesar unleashed uncontrollable vengeance that pushed Rome into civil war and then into the new political era of empire. Octavius, who earned the moniker "Augustus" following the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra in 30 BCE, actively promoted the deification of Julius Caesar following his death. As we have seen, the rise of his empire was made possible by the successful control of narratives about divination.

The typological function of divination also helps to explain why Shakespeare chooses not to stage Caesar's comet in *Julius Caesar*. The dialectical movement of history that informs both *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* displaces Caesar with Augustus and then Christ, whose birth famously silences the oracles that anticipated his arrival. The Incarnation neutralizes

47. See Dillon, *Omens and Oracles*, 3.

48. *Ibid.*, 147.

pagan divination and rescues Christians from classical anxiety about the contradictory signs of the gods. The final acts of *Julius Caesar* offer glimpses of such as-yet unrealized futures by staging the rise of Octavius at the expense of Antony. Discerning members of the audience may observe a shift in relations between the two men, for instance, in their brief exchange before the battle at Philippi, where Octavius contradicts Antony's idea about which direction to lead his army: "I do not cross you," Octavius vows, "but I will do so" (5.1.20). Shakespeare also gives Octavius rather than Antony the final lines of the play, in which he claims the "glories of this happy day" (5.582). Examples of these glories include the construction of an imperial Rome. According to legend, Augustus inherited a city of bricks and left an empire of marble.⁴⁹ While Octavius focuses in his final speech on the "glories" of battle, Antony celebrates Brutus not as a god but as a "man" whose life was "gentle" and in whom the elements of nature were perfectly mixed (5.5.74–75). Antony's final praise for Brutus—"This was a man!" (5.5.76)—may represent a humanist ideal, as David Daniell suggests in a note to his edition of the play, but it also looks forward to the *ecce homo* of Pontius Pilate as a statement about the corporeal presence of Jesus.⁵⁰ In place of the famous comet that announced the deification of Caesar in his sources, Shakespeare offers the fallen, self-mutilated body of Brutus, free from supernatural signs. The corpse of Brutus echoes and re-presents the corpse of Caesar, while also anticipating the crucified body of Christ. Cicero's imperative from the storm scene—that men interpret natural and supernatural signs only as "the things themselves"—is thus inadequate. Shakespeare's Roman plays reveal the impossibility of such an approach, since it is only through knowledge that cannot yet be understood that the meaning of divinatory signs can be interpreted.

The fall of Rome makes way, typologically, for the rise of Christianity, as outlined in narratives such as *The Seven Books of History against the Pagans* by Paulus Orosius (written at the request of Augustine), which reads the birth of Christ as a punishment for the "pride" of the Roman republic, particularly the "unjust slaughter" wrought upon Rome and its enemies by Julius Caesar.⁵¹ This Christian afterlife of the assassination of Caesar and the rise of the Roman Empire also help to explain why few characters produce accurate interpretations of the portents, dreams, and prodigies in the play. These pre-Christian characters see the world, as it were, through a glass darkly. In this sense, Philippi gains in significance as both the place where republican Rome dies on the sword and where Christianity begins its

49. See, e.g., Kathleen S. Lamp, *A City of Marble: The Rhetoric of Augustan Rome* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013).

50. *Julius Caesar*, ed. Daniell, 321.

51. Paulus Orosius, *The Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 266–67, 288.

advance as a central location for Paul's evangelical efforts to spread the new gospel of Christ. Such a Pauline context links Caesar's assassination by Brutus with the betrayal of Christ by Judas and the vengeful spirit of Caesar as a typological figure of New Testament spirituality.⁵² It also adds a new layer of meaning to the declaration by Titinius and Cassius that Brutus is the "last of all the Romans" (5.3.99).

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare signals the typological function of Octavius more directly by having him observe in act 4 that "the time of universal peace is near" (4.6.5). Plutarch had noted in his life of Antony that it was "predestined that the government of all the world should fall into Octavius Caesar's hands,"⁵³ though Shakespeare in his treatment of this mode of divination ironically places the pronouncement by Octavius just before his defeat at Alexandria by Antony. In other words, the claim signals Octavius's own lack of knowledge about the future even as it, somewhat ironically, anticipates a future that only the audience can appreciate. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony also begins to take more of an interest in augury, asking the soothsayer in act 2 to predict, for instance, whether his or Caesar's fortunes will "rise higher" (2.3.15). On hearing the soothsayer's prediction that Caesar will win the day, Antony orders him to silence but then admits that he is correct, not because the gods are on Caesar's side but only because he tends to beat the "odds," as in cockfighting where Caesar's cocks "do win the battle" (2.3.37, 35). The "boy" Octavius remains throughout the play the antithesis of the aged, pleasure-seeking Antony; ascetic detachment and instrumental rationality help Octavius defeat Antony in battle. Soothsaying and other forms of divination occupy Egypt rather than Rome in *Antony and Cleopatra*, while in *Julius Caesar* Rome is both a place of political gamesmanship and divinatory knowledge. And yet, even as the victorious Octavius observes the deaths of Cleopatra and her women with forensic detachment, his servant Dolabella calls him "too sure an augurer" for his earlier prediction that Cleopatra would take her own life (5.2.333). Although Octavius does not consult agents of divination in conquering his rivals, he is himself an agent of a divinatory future, both within the play and without.

Ultimately, divination in both *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* works to resituate Roman political history within the universalist theology

52. Roy Battenhouse briefly outlines a "dark-shadowing of Christian pattern" in the play, reading the Feast of Lupercal as a parody of the Christian Passover and the assassination of Caesar in terms of the betrayal of Christ (*Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969], 92–93). This shadowing receives more substance in W. Nicholas Knight, "Julius Caesar: A Case of Pre- and Post-Christian Story," *Christianity and Literature* 28, no. 4 (Summer 1979): 27–35, who sees the play primarily as Christian allegory.

53. Plutarch, *Lives*, 997.

of Christianity. The "monstrous state" that Cassius identifies in Rome under Julius Caesar figures a providential history that finds its realization in the Christian overcoming of divination itself. It also recalls Augustine's transformation of the promise of eternal empire to Rome from book 1 of *The Aeneid* into a form of apocalyptic history. Augustine, whose own pagan upbringing included careful study of Plato, Cicero, and Varro, among other authors, offers his description of the City of God as a divine supplement to the history of the City of Rome.⁵⁴ Although some Gnostic sects appropriated Roman divination early in the history of Christianity, most patristic authors tried to suppress divination. Both Origen and Augustine, for example, worked to restrict supernatural foreshadowing to the canonical forms of prophecy recounted in the Old Testament and the clearly demarcated signs of the apocalypse in Revelation.⁵⁵ Augustine elevates Christ as the only acceptable medium between mankind and the divine, relegating artificial divination to a lowly discipline that allows for skills to be cultivated but has not virtue or sense of purpose. At the same time, perhaps influenced by Stoicism, Augustine embraced divine providence.

DIVINATION AND TRAGEDY

In conclusion, the typological superstructure of divination in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* resolves the hermeneutic ambivalence of the signs of nature in the future anterior tense.⁵⁶ Divination emerges in and

54. See Schildgen, *Divine Providence*, 74–75.

55. Diviners in the Christian Bible often stand in contrast to true prophets, e.g., as in Deut. 18:10 and 1 Sam. 28. Isaiah mocks the "star-gazers" and "monthly prognosticators" who look to the heavens for true revelation (Isa. 47:12–14), whereas those who receive God's wisdom do so without looking for it (see., e.g., Isa. 1:1; Amos 1:1). Isaiah (8:19, 19:3), Deuteronomy (18:11), and Leviticus (19:31) all condemn necromancy, while the author of Ezekiel mocks the king of Babylon for stopping at a crossroads to cast lots, consult idols, and perform haruspicy of the liver (21:21). Yet in other places certain modes of divination find greater acceptance, as in the interpretation of dreams produced by Jacob (e.g., Gen. 31:10–14) and Daniel (Dan. 1:17, 2:1–49), as well as in the prophetic dreams of Joseph recorded in the New Testament Gospel of Matthew (1:20, 2:13). Likewise, Aaron seems to cast lots in deciding on a sacrificial animal for Yahweh in Lev. 16:7–10, while Joseph performs what looks like a kind of hydromancy in Gen. 44:5. In Judges, the prophet Gideon looks for and receives a sign from God in the form of dew that appears overnight on a piece of wool or fleece (6:36–40). The enigmatic objects of Urim and Thummim ("light and darkness"), placed near the breastplate of Jewish high priests, are often sources of divinatory knowledge, used for example by Samuel in selecting a king (1 Sam. 10:20–22) and by Saul in his war against the Philistines (1 Sam. 14:36–37). Talmudic wisdom suggested that the objects were associated with the patriarchs Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac and shone with divine presence to help them make important decisions.

56. Jacques Derrida defines the *futur antérieur* case in reference to the genre of prefaces in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 7. Marjorie

through hermeneutic devices that both constrict and expand its significance. It also serves the cessation theology outlined by Lafeu in *All's Well That Ends Well*, who refers to miracles as “things supernatural and causeless.” Challenging the commonplace notion that miracles have ceased in the (early) modern age, Lafeu urges us to embrace “unknown fear” rather than seek to reduce these fears to “trifles.”⁵⁷ As a broader statement about the kind of knowledge produced in Shakespearean drama, however, Lafeu’s statement invites us to consider the dialectical layering of forms of belief and forms of knowing. Divination in Shakespeare’s Roman plays produces the kind of knowing ignorance that Marsilio Ficino attaches to Hermes in his *Pimander*. For Ficino, Hermes is an “ancient Heathen” who is “guided . . . by a mighty sense of the interior Excellency of the Soul of Man, and the boldness he assumes is not profane, but . . . countenanced here and there in the Holy Scriptures.” Recognizing Hermes as guilty of “some Errors,” Ficino still praises him as a witness to the truth of Christianity, even as he fails to understand what he is seeing.⁵⁸ Divination for Ficino constitutes one of the many pagan practices around which Christianity must construct itself. It defines a kind of insight through blindness that anticipates forms of knowledge that are not immediately accessible.

Divination also produces tragic irony in the sense that it represents and reproduces the classical struggle between fate and fortune—*fata* and *fortuna*—that motivates classical theater. We have already seen how Brutus makes his prophecy that Caesar will turn into a serpent was not based on his observation of the stars or from augury of the kind requested by Caesar, or even on his empirical observation of the natural world, but rather as a logical syllogism similar to the claims he makes to justify his murder of Caesar in act 3, scene 2. But the play reveals this kind of logic to be just as flawed as the failed efforts to interpret signs of divination. In a broader sense, however, such misinterpretation produces the future that only the audience can anticipate—namely, that Caesar’s assassination led to a civil war from which emerged the first emperor of Rome, Augustus Caesar. The age of empire, in turn, established a “universal peace” that both

Garber invokes this essay and makes passing reference to *Julius Caesar* and *Antony Cleopatra* in “‘What’s Past is Prologue’: Temporality and Prophecy in Shakespeare’s History Plays,” in *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History and Interpretation*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 302–7.

57. William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well* 2.3.2–5, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Andrew Gurr (New York: Norton, 2016).

58. Marsilio Ficino, *Christian Ethics*, quoted in Sarah Hutton, “Platonism in Some Metaphysical Poets,” in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 172.

enabled the birth of Christ and, according to Christian theology, silenced the pagan oracles.

By multiplying the signs and modes of divination in his Roman plays, Shakespeare also makes it difficult for any single character to recognize his own position in relation to the gods.⁵⁹ The typological structure of both *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* resolves some indeterminacy about the nature of divinatory signs themselves while introducing further questions about how to read those signs. In this sense, Shakespeare's theater reproduces an epistemological confusion similar to that faced by Brahe and other astronomers in their efforts to understand the Great Comet of 1572. In the pre-Cartesian and pre-Baconian ethos of Elizabethan England, no form of scientific knowledge can ever produce certainty, given the ultimate unknowability of God. Divination in Shakespeare's Roman plays would therefore seem both to confirm and challenge the definition of tragedy offered by Timothy Reiss—namely, that "tragedy brings about rationality by showing what can be termed the irrational within that rationality."⁶⁰ Tragedy in Shakespeare's Roman plays may attempt to realize the inexpressible through performance, but such performance also relies on an ambiguous system of signs in which human action and thought remain, in Brahe's terms, both "unfathomable and unknown."

59. I therefore disagree with Daniell's claim in his introduction to the Arden 3 edition of *Julius Caesar* that Shakespeare has "withdrawn the gods from Rome" (60).

60. Timothy Reiss, *Tragedy and Truth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 284. For an insightful critique of this position in relation to other theories of tragedy, both classical and modern, see Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 18–21.