

# EVENT AND RECURRENCE:

## On the Representation of Astronomical and Historical Time in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*



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*Departing from Reinhardt Koselleck's theory of historical time my paper investigates how Shakespeare represents famous events from the fall of the Roman Republic within a structure of recursivity. Julius Caesar (1599) is a history play which – in a manner typical of the genre – seeks to reduce an extended span of historical time to a linear narrative of decisive key events, but at the same time Shakespeare goes at length in this play to integrate these events within a cyclic structure of time through numerous references to the Julian calendar, to Roman holidays and to the hours of the day. These references are instanced by a widespread confusion among the dramatis personae concerning date and time – a curiosity that scholars explain by reference to the rivalry in Shakespeare's own time between Catholics and Protestants concerning the old Julian and the new Gregorian calendar. My paper will discuss the play's focus on the calendar as an expression of order that serves both historical and political purposes.*

Among the vast and heterogeneous corpus of historical drama from the renaissance, William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599) stands out as one of the few plays, which have regularly been both read and staged since its likely first performance at the opening of the Globe Theatre in London 1599. Roman history was a popular topic in 16th and 17th century historical drama, and *Julius Caesar* belongs to a whole group of Roman plays in Shakespeare's works that were inspired by Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch (these include *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* but not the historical fictions of *Titus Andronicus* and *Cymbeline*). Roman plays were not only popular in Shakespeare's London, but in all parts of Europe where theatre was rising, which attests to the era's remarkable interest in ancient history.

One of the attractions of history plays was that they could imitate history in a way that would allow early modern theatregoers to imagine that they had direct access to the past. The poet John Weever aptly captured Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* as a vantage point to ancient history from where the Globe's spectators could imagine themselves as Romans at the Capitol:

The many-headed multitude were drawne  
By *Brutus*' speach, that *Caesar* was ambitious.  
When eloquent *Mark Antonie* had showne  
His vertues, who but *Brutus* then was vicious?<sup>1</sup>

In a similar vein another writer, Leonard Digges, later praised Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* as a "ravishing" immersion into Roman history that was unlike anything other playwrights had yet achieved:

So have I seene, when Cesar would appeare,  
And on the Stage at halfe-sword parley were,  
Brutus and Cassius: oh how the Audience  
Were ravish'd, with what wonder they went thence;<sup>2</sup>

What theatre gave spectators like Weever and Digges was a perceptible experience of history, something that was sensed with the eyes and ears, as if witnessed directly, without the mediation of a chronicler. However, in so far as we can talk of historical experience in theatre, it is important to distinguish between primary experiences, which appear as singular, and secondary experiences, which are experienced as recursive. It is quite likely that the ancient Romans who first witnessed the orations of Brutus and Mark Antony after the murder of Caesar perceived these events as surprising and unique. Rigorist historians sometimes tend to reserve the notion of historical experience only for those who witness historical events at first hand. However, experiences emerge not only when they are first made, but also when they are repeated, collected and shared for instance by historians or poets. For better or worse, the presumption (fundamental to humanist historiography in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) that we can learn from history is based on this condition. As Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out in an essay on historical experience:

Experiences are singular, when they are made, but even so repeatable, when they are collected. As such every history that is constituted on experience and can be deduced from it, has a double aspect. Singular and even surprising events evoke experiences and call forth (hi)stories (*Geschichten*) but even so will accumulated experiences help to structure (hi)stories (*Geschichten*) at mid-distance.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Weever: *The mirror of martyrs, or The life and death of that thrice valiant capitaine, and most godly martyre Sir Iohn Old-castle knight Lord Cobham*. London: Printed by V[alentine] S[immes] for William Wood, 1601, p. A3.

<sup>2</sup> Digges' "Eulogy" was first printed in the Second Folio edition of Shakespeare's collected works (1632). Quotations from *Julius Caesar* are from David Daniell's edition of *The Arden Shakespeare* (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Koselleck 2000, 27. My translation.

According to Koselleck this double structure of experience explains why the axiom of recursion has been so fundamental for historians, not least in antiquity and the renaissance.<sup>4</sup> Exemplary in this respect is Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, whose popularity in Shakespeare's time owed to its fulfilment of the Ciceronian doctrine of *historia magistra vitae*, history as a teacher for future generations.

But since events can both be experienced as singular and recursive, Koselleck argues that the axiom of recursion must be complemented with an axiom of singularity. However obsessed renaissance historians were with historical recurrence, the remarkable rise in historical interest that accompanied early modernity owed, as Daniel Woolf has pointed out, to a widespread and deep-felt sense of historical change: history was not just a reservoir of past and repeatable experience, but it also became a means to explore novelty and change.<sup>5</sup> Progressive historians of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century would later privilege singular events over recursion. Yet, as Koselleck points out, singularity and recursion are not exclusive but complementary of one another, and it is therefore often misleading to distinguish between circular and linear historiographies as the discussion of Shakespeare's concept of history tends to do.<sup>6</sup> Just as even the progressive historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who envisaged the course of history as an evolution of monumental events, had to accept that even the most unique historical events are situated within a context of recurrence, so the early modern belief that ancient history could still serve as a guide to political and moral life often met with contradictions. When renaissance humanists and antiquarians sought to uncover the ancient world for present purposes, they would, as the intellectual historian J.G.A. Pocock has noticed, often discover a world that was disturbingly different from their own.<sup>7</sup> One can for instance think of the ancient republican contempt for monarchy, which was radically different from early modern perceptions (which generally saw monarchy as a superior form of government), or one can consider the conflicting views on suicide that separated ancient writers from Mediaeval and early modern readers for whom suicide was a sin. Both themes are important in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Thus, the first two acts of the play explore

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<sup>4</sup> Koselleck 2000, 34–41.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf 2003.

<sup>6</sup> In his influential introduction to Shakespeare's histories, David Scott Kastan distinguishes between two competing models of time in Elizabethan historiography: "one providential and fundamentally linear, derived from the patristic and mediaeval historical writings; and one, exemplary and essentially cyclical, derived from the traditions of late classical historiography", cf. Kastan 1982, 12. As Kastan demonstrates, Shakespeare's histories do not fit easily into any of these models.

<sup>7</sup> Pocock 1987, 1.

republican anxieties towards Caesar's ascension to monarchical power, which lead to their assassination of him in the third act, and in the final act of the play the defeat of the conspirators at the Battle of Philippi leads to a series of spectacular suicides that are performed on the stage.

The interplay of singularity and recurrence also resurfaces when we look at the pivotal event of the play, the assassination of Caesar, both in its original historical context as well as in Shakespeare's dramatic representation. The murder of Caesar on the "Ides of March" in 44 BC was a singular event, a decisive turning point in the history of the Roman republic, but at the same time it was embedded within certain recursive structures that contribute to its meaning. Caesar was thus not assassinated on an arbitrary time and place, but at a Senate meeting during the festival of Mars.<sup>8</sup> Senate assemblies were scheduled to take place with regular intervals in the religious and political calendar of the Roman republic, and as we shall see the date was carefully chosen for both practical and symbolic reasons. For the conspirators it was quintessential that the exceptional event of murdering Caesar could be presented as a restoration of order – an order which had not least been disturbed by Caesar's reform of the old Numan calendar.<sup>9</sup> In this respect event and recurrence are reciprocal, whether we regard history as cyclical or linear, and whether we believe we can learn from history or not.

Academic interest in the historiography of Shakespeare's history plays began with E.M. Tillyard, author of *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1942) and *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944), who emphasised that the Tudor mind was deeply affected by the idea that history repeats itself and iteratively sought to grasp the present through historical parallels. Later Marxist and New Historicist consecrations of early modern histories have on the one hand continued Tillyard's historiographical approach to Shakespeare's histories while on the other hand criticising Tillyard's emphasis on theological order.<sup>10</sup> According to Tillyard, the early modern concept of history "grows quite naturally out of theology and is never separated from it",<sup>11</sup> and for him historical recursion thus expresses a providential idea of universal order in what he calls the "chain of being".<sup>12</sup> Later generations have found it easier than Tillyard to separate history from theology, at least in the case of

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<sup>8</sup> The Shakespearean "Ides of March" (March 15) derives from the Roman *Idus Martiae* and refers to the middle day (*idus*) of the month of Mars.

<sup>9</sup> In the old republican calendar, the term of the consuls and the censorial financial year began on *Idus Martiae*, and through the first centuries of the empire the Senate assembled on that day cf. Mommsen 2010, 375–77 and Ramsay 2000, 448.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Kastan 1982, 13–15, and Franco Moretti 2005 (originally 1983), 48ff.

<sup>11</sup> Tillyard 1991, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Tillyard 1972, 33–44.

Shakespeare, but often with the consequence of neglecting how history in Shakespeare relates to nature and cosmic order.

The reading of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* I will present in the following seeks to approach the relationship between historiography and nature from a different angle than Tillyard's by investigating the ordering of time in Shakespeare's play. I am particularly interested in this play's focus on the calendar – more precisely the Julian calendar – as an expression of astronomical order that can serve both historical and political purposes. *Julius Caesar* abounds with references to calendars and clocks. The play meticulously counts down the hours to the planned assassination on March 15, but surprisingly the majority of references to clocks and calendars are caused by the characters' repeated uncertainty of time and date. This temporal confusion has often been dismissed as a mere curiosity, but in fact it refers directly to Caesar's most ambitious and conflict-provoking reform, which was the institution of the Julian calendar.

The astronomic ordering of time into a calendar is fundamental to any society, a fact that is perhaps best observed when calendars are reformed, as happened both in the last years of Caesar's reign and again in Shakespeare's own time, when Pope Gregory X revised the Julian Calendar. Two years before his assassination, Caesar replaced the old lunar-based calendar of the Roman republic, with a heliotropic calendar of 365.25 days. This reform was both the result and cause of political unrest. The old Numan calendar, whose institution was an important element in the foundation of the republic, had become unmanageable during the civil wars, as it was based on the phases of the moon and could therefore only be equated with the solar year through occasional addition of intercalary months. The new Julian calendar which was based on the solar year was much easier to handle, as it just required the addition of a single day in leap years, but nonetheless the reform met with serious opposition from members of the Senate, who saw Caesar's calendar reform as an expression of hybris, equivalent to his desire to be crowned. As Plutarch writes in North's translation:

But his enemies, notwithstanding, that enuied his greatnesse did not sticke to finde fault withall. As *Cicero* the Orator, when one saide, to morrow the starre Lyra will rise: yea, said he, at the commandement of *Cæsar*, as if men were compelled to say and thinke by *Cæsar's* edict.<sup>13</sup>

Calendars not only serve the practical organisation of political and religious communities with their recurrent assemblies, activities and feasts, but they are also essential to the presence of history in collective memory. While the anniversary of Caesar's death on March 15 is still noticed in almanacs, not

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<sup>13</sup> Plutarch & North 1595, 786.

least thanks to Shakespeare, the birthday of Alexander the Great or the anniversary of the Battle of Marathon are never commemorated for the simple fact that we are no longer attuned to the ancient Greek calendar.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Temporal Structure of *Julius Caesar*: Continuities and Discontinuities**

Like most other plays of its kind, *Julius Caesar* condenses events covering a long span of time, stretching from the celebration of Lupercal in February 44 BC, when attempts were made to crown Caesar – an incident which provoked the conspirators to assassinate him – and to the Battle of Philippi in October 42 BC, when the armies of the conspirators were defeated. Actions that historically unfolded over two years are thus reduced to a two-hour stage version in which events are presented as they are presumed to have been experienced by the involved persons; that is directly and without the intermediary of a historical narrator or chronicler. As can be seen from the poems of Digges and Weever this way of presenting history directly, without narrative intermediaries, was one of the great attractions of historical drama, and the concealment of all secondary sources (Plutarch, Suetonius etc.) are therefore a precondition of historical mimesis.

Before we proceed, let us briefly resume the chronological structure Shakespeare's play, which condenses events from two decisive and turbulent years at the end of the Roman republic. Act One opens with the celebration of the Lupercal Festival in Rome after Caesar's victory over Pompey in February 44 BC. Here Brutus, Cassius and Caska discuss Antony's ambiguously failing attempt to crown Caesar in front of the Roman people, and the three conspirators decide to meet the following night; meanwhile a Soothsayer warns Caesar to "beware the Ides of March", a warning that Caesar dismisses. Act Two is set in Brutus' home where the conspirators meet to plan their coup the following day. Act Three begins on the following morning, the Ides of March, when Caesar in spite of bad omens and warnings prepares to go to the Senate, where eventually the conspirators will stab him. This act concludes with Brutus' and Antony's famous speeches on Caesar where Antony manages to pit the plebeians against the conspirators. Act Four displays Antony and Octavian's take-over of power in Rome before it switches to Asia Minor where Brutus and Cassius are struggling to maintain the rebellion. Act Five concludes with the death of the conspirators at the Battle at Philippi, which historically took place in October 42 BC.

The first three acts are presented as an almost seamless sequence and, though the Elizabethans were zealous readers of almanacs, few spectators and

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<sup>14</sup> The Nicene Creed's incorporation of Easter from the Hebraic lunar based calendar into the Julian solar calendar (in 325 AD) offers of course the most important exception to this rule.

readers would have noticed how discreetly Shakespeare joins the famous “Ides of March” with the less famous Roman festival of Lupercal which took place a full month earlier, and where Mark Antony without success tried to crown Caesar.<sup>15</sup> Neither are there any indications from Act Four and Five that two year separate the death of Caesar and the Battle of Philipp nor that the Battle lasted for weeks. Instead Shakespeare gives the impression of a swift confrontation.

The play uses different devices of compressing time: In the final battle Act (a recurring feature in Elizabethan histories) the unity of time, place and action gives an impression of pace, whereas the speed of time is indicated in the first three acts by verbal indications of time and date: The scenes from the Lupercal Festival take place in the middle of the day (cf. 1.1.2), when Cassius, Caska and Brutus agree to meet the following night (1.2.289, 303); In the preceding scene Caesar is warned to “Beware the Ides of March” (1.2.18),<sup>16</sup> and First Act ends with the Caska, Cicero and Cassius who must brave the elements in a “perilous night” (1.3.47). Act Two takes place during the night, beginning with Brutus who gazes the stars and ending with the break of dawn at the Ides of March. Act Three begins after Caesar has awoken from portentous dreams and follows him from hour to hour on his way to the Senate. After his murder, this continuity of time collapses and the spectators are presented with scattered glimpses of horrifying events from the civil unrest that concludes with the final battle. Thus, the dissolution of political order in Rome is expressed through the dissolution of temporal order.

While the temporal structure of the play, at least in the first three acts, follows the astronomical cycle of the day quite fluently, chronology poses a recurrent problem for the central characters of the play. As many commentators have noted, the conspirators are constantly uncertain about dates and the time of the day. This certainly becomes obvious in Act Two which opens with Brutus’ exclamation to his servant: “What Lucius, ho / I cannot by the progress of the stars / Give guess how near to day” (2.1.1–3). The reason for Brutus’ lack of astronomical orientation soon turns out to be that he is uncertain of the date. “Is not tomorrow, boy, the first of March?”, he asks Lucius who does not know and is sent to “look in the calendar”

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<sup>15</sup> Plutarch & North 1595, 786.

<sup>16</sup> In Shakespeare (and Plutarch), only the “Ides of March” is a dangerous day, but other sources such as Suetonius and Valerius Maximus report that the soothsayer (whose real name was Spurinna) had predicted that Caesar would be especially vulnerable between Lupercal and *Idus Martiae*, presumably for the practical reason that he had to be in Rome during this period. Having just returned from the field after his victory over Pompey (which Shakespeare invokes on several occasions in the play), it was Caesar’s plan to launch a new military campaign against the Parthians soon after *Idus Martiae*, where he would be guarded by loyal soldiers. See Ramsay 2000.

(2.1.40–42). At the arrival of the conspirators, Lucius returns to his master with the words “Sir, March is wasted 15 days” (2.1.59). Later in the scene, the conspirators disagree as to where and when the sun will rise, and Caska, who will be the first to stab Caesar, draws his sword and exclaims:

Here, as I point my sword, the sun arises,  
Which is a great way growing of the south,  
Weighing the youthful season of the year.  
Some two months hence, up higher toward the north  
he first presents his fire, and the high east  
Stands as the Capitol, directly here. (2.1.105–10)

Caska’s celestial identification of Caesar with the moving sun is contrasted by Caesar who – in the seconds before the conspirators draw their swords – compares himself at length with the immovable Northern star (“I am constant as the northern Star”, 3.1.60–67).

Comparisons of rulers with celestial spheres were commonplace in the early modern world, and had been so since antiquity, a fact which clearly indicate the tendency to equate historical time with natural time that was dominant before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As astronomy guides the ordering of time in the quotidian practice of measuring time by looking at the sky for Shakespeare’s conspirators, so it did for historians and chroniclers, whose ideas of cyclic recursions refer to the revolution of the celestial bodies. Similarly, cosmic order served as a model of political order, and cosmic disorder as an omen of political unrest.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore highly significant that the murder of Caesar is preceded by unnatural celestial phenomena that were mentioned by several Roman sources and which in Shakespeare’s play are vividly presented, notably in the vivid descriptions by Caska, as the unnatural and “perilous storm”.

### **Anachronisms**

While Shakespeare’s play does not explicitly address the Julian calendar reform, it nonetheless alludes to it indirectly in ways that will not have escaped attention in 1599. For as Siegfried Burckhardt first pointed out in his essay “How not to Murder Caesar”, the frequent anachronisms and

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<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare’s most elaborate expression of this doctrine is found in Ulysses’ speech in *Troilus and Cressida*, where cosmic order is described with political metaphors: “The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre | Observe degree, priority, and place, | And therefore is the glorious planet Sol | In noble eminence enthroned and sphered | Amid the other; whose med’cinable eye | Corrects the influence of evil planets, | And posts like the commandment of a king, | Sans check to good and bad. But when the planets | In evil mixture to disorder wander, | What plagues, and what portents, what mutiny, | What raging of the sea, shaking of earth, | Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors, | Divert and crack, rend and deracinate | The unity and married calm of states | Quite from their fixure!” (1.3.84–100).

confusions of time in the play, which were previously disregarded, had a special significance at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century where the calendar again became an object of controversy, now between Catholics and Protestants.<sup>18</sup> Already in the 15th century it had become obvious that the Julian calendar's determination of the tropical year as 365.25 days was inaccurate by eleven minutes and fourteen seconds. Slowly this inaccuracy became visible as equinox had regressed by one day every 128 years. By the 1560'ies the incongruence between the solar year and the Julian calendar had expanded to 10 days, and it had become obvious that the calculation of Easter as the first full moon after equinox was not exact. For this reason. The Catholic Church decided during the last session of the Council of Trent to reform the calendar, and in 1582 Pope Gregory X introduced a new calendar, which excised 10 days of October. The Gregorian calendar was soon adopted in Catholic countries, but in Protestant countries the calendar reform was rejected for ideological reasons as a product of the Counter-reformation. As a consequence, Protestants and Catholics celebrated the same holidays on different days, though Protestants with a knowledge of astronomy knew that their official calendar was incorrect.<sup>19</sup>

In 1598 and 1599, at the time when Shakespeare wrote and first staged *Julius Caesar*, the difference between the two calendars calculation of Easter came to an extreme with a five-week difference. The confusion and frustrations were best expressed in a Scottish pamphlet that circulated in London in early 1599, when Shakespeare was writing his manuscript:

In the yeare of our Lord 1598 lately by past, according to the decree of the Nicene Councell, and the Late Kalendar, set out by Lilius [author of the Gregorian calendar], Easter day fell upon the twelfth daie of March in the olde Kalendar and Almanacks whereby we yet reckon in England and Scotland: And Whit Sunday upon the last daie of Aprill: And Fastings even upon the twenty foure of Ianuary: Whereas after the vulgare maner and count, Easter daie was celebrate that yeare the sixteenth daie of April; Whit Sunday, the fourth of Iune: And Fastings eve, the last of February. Yee see the distance betweene the one calculation and the other is more then the space of a Month: what error it way growe to by process of time it is easie by this example to perceive.<sup>20</sup>

This pamphlet clearly indicates that Brutus' and the conspirators' difficulty with synchronising the calendar and orienting themselves by looking at the sun and the stars had a deep resonance in 1599, when the discrepancy between holidays calculated from the official Julian calendar and the astronomically

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<sup>18</sup> Burckhardt 1968, 3–21.

<sup>19</sup> Poole 1998, 57–69.

<sup>20</sup> Pont 1599, 61.

more correct Gregorian calendar had brought the distance between Catholic and Protestant holidays to a maximum.<sup>21</sup> But at the same time these calamities only added to the vivid early modern interest in the calendar, which had made almanacs a bestselling commodity in early print culture, second only to the Bible. In publications from the era like John Harvey's and John Dee's almanacs, English readers were carefully introduced to the Julian calendar and its reformation of the old Roman calendar with regard to the leap year.

Holidays, anniversaries and other red letter days played an important role in the lives of the Elizabethans, as can be seen from the immense popularity of almanacs in early modern print culture both in Catholic and Protestant countries. Since calendars serve to produce synchronicity and stability over time, their temporal regimes rarely become an object of political conflict, but as we have seen, this nonetheless happened both in the times of Caesar and after the Reformation when the emergence of national churches led to national articulations of the calendar. During the reign of Elizabeth, the calendar was, as David Cressy has pointed out, transformed into an expression of a distinctively national Protestant culture with celebrations of not only old religious holidays but also anniversaries of national importance like the royal Accession, the defeat of the Spanish Armada etc.<sup>22</sup> The calendar had become a political concern and an emblem of royal power that along with its practical uses served to preserve national memory. As the affirmation of the new Protestant order in which royal power and religious power were united, the Common Book of Prayer thus opened with a perpetual almanac that was authorized by the queen. Critics have speculated that the opening of *Julius Caesar*, in which two zealous tribunes rebuke the Plebians for their celebration of the Lupercal with the words "Hence! home, you idle creatures, get you home! / Is this a holiday?" (1.1.1–2) alludes to the Puritan attacks on old Catholic holidays, several of which were abolished or renamed during the reign of Elizabeth. This was for instance the case of the celebration of Corpus Christi, where annual plays and pageants had been performed, until they were repressed by the Puritans.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, the Romans were also familiar with such attempts to

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<sup>21</sup> On this background the original readers of North's translation must have felt that Plutarch was addressing an issue of recurrent and acute relevance in his discussion of Caesar's calendar reform: "For the Romaines, vsing then the ancient computation of the yeare, had not only such incertaintie and alteration of the moneth and times, that the sacrifices and yearely feastes came by litle and litle to seasons contrarie for the purpose they were ordained; but also in the reuolution of the sunne (which is called Annus Solaris) no other nation agreed with them in account: and, of the Romaines themselues only the priests vnderstood it." Plutarch & North 1595, 785–86.

<sup>22</sup> Cressy 1989, ix–12. See also Hutton 1994 and Poole 1998.

<sup>23</sup> According to Sohmer, Julius Caesar's markers to the liturgical calendar employs the technique of the York Cycle of Corpus Christi plays, cf. Sohmer 1999, 71–74.

invent or redefine holidays for political purposes. To mention just two telling examples, a resolution of the Senate from 45 BC elevated the anniversaries of Caesar's major victories to the status of *feriae* (holidays), whereas Cicero and Brutus in their resistance to Mark Antony sought to institute an annual commemoration of Brutus' famous ancestor, Junius Brutus (who expelled the last king of Rome and became a founding father of the Republic).<sup>24</sup>

While Shakespeare thus had plenty of historical reasons to relate the temporal regime of Julius Caesar to his own present, *Julius Caesar* has nonetheless frequently been accused of anachronism. When Brutus sends his servant to look in the almanac, he seems more modern than ancient to many readers (though this probably bothered Shakespeare's later critics more than his contemporaries). In particular, the frequent mentioning of clock strikes in Act 2 has disturbed critics because the Romans measured time by sundials and clepsydrae, not by mechanical clocks with bell strikes.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the symbolic function of the clock strike is important, because it serves to stress Caesar's temporal regime and a sensible and recognisable way. As Shakespeare and his contemporaries knew from Caesar's *Commentaries* (cf. 2. *Henry VI*, 4.7.56), he not only reformed the calendar, but also set the clocks of Rome. Certainly, it is no coincidence that all exact indications of time in the play relate to the person of Caesar, and consequently they disappear from the play after his death. In particular Act Two is obsessed with calculating time. In scene 1, the conspirators' nightly meeting is interrupted by a clock strike ("BRUTUS: Peace! Count the clock. CASSIUS: The clock has stricken three," 2.1.191). The following scene takes place at Caesar's house in the morning, where the senators have come to bring him to the Senate, and it portrays the tight schedule of a Roman pontifex maximus, who must carefully plan his political business by the hour (2.2.114–21):

CAESAR: (...) What is't o'clock?

BRUTUS: Caesar, 'tis stricken eight.

CAESAR: I thank you for your pains and courtesy.

[enter ANTONY]

See Antony, that revels long a-nights,  
Is notwithstanding up. Good morrow, Antony.

ANTONY: So to most noble Caesar.

CAESAR: Bid them prepare within.  
I am too blame to be thus waited for.

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<sup>24</sup> App. B Civ. 2.442; Dio Cass. 43.44.6; Cic. Ad. Brut. 23.8. See Rüpke 2011, 122.

<sup>25</sup> Dohrn-van Rossum 1996, 17–28.

Now, Cinna. Now, Metellus. What, Trebonius,  
I have an hour's talk in store for you...

Precision and constancy are decisive for Caesar, who in spite of bad omens refuses to cancel his meeting in the Senate (this predilection is stressed by his final self-comparison with the North Star). But while he makes his way to the Senate, a nerve breaking race against time is taking place as Portia and Artemidorus are simultaneously trying to reach him in order to intervene with the impending catastrophe. In the crowd, Portia accidentally meets the Soothsayer, who warned Caesar against the Ides of March, and she asks him what time it is (“PORTIA: What is't o'clock? SOOTHSAYER: About the ninth hour, lady,” 2.4.23–24).

According to Burckhardt, it is not Shakespeare who must be accused of anachronism but Brutus who stubbornly adheres to the old calendar and has not reckoned with “the new Caesarean style”, which manifests itself with the clock strike.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, there are plenty of indications that Brutus seeks to recur to the old order of the Republic. What urges him to act is the legacy of his famous ancestor, Junius Brutus, who delivered Rome from monarchy. In this way, the doctrine of *historia magistra vitae* and its underlying idea of historical recurrence drive him to act, but instead of instigating a rebirth of the Republic (a revolution in the original, astronomical meaning of the word), the assassination of Caesar leads to an entirely unexpected situation with Mark Antony and Octavian as the new autocrats.

While Burckhardt was certainly correct to recognise that the clock strike in Act Two is more than a notorious blunder, he is too quick to exculpate Shakespeare of anachronism. In a previous scene, we hear for instance of the Roman plebeians throwing their hats in the air, as only modern men would do. Such anachronisms are important, and not only for pedants of historical correctness, because they indicate a sense of continuity between Shakespeare's own world and that of his Romans. In spite of different views on suicide and kingship, the Romans and the Elizabethans share for him more or less the same world of experience. Such a view is in accordance with humanist historiography, as expressed by Machiavelli in his declaration that “he who would foresee what has to be, should reflect on what has been, for everything that happens in the world at any time has a genuine resemblance to what happened in ancient times.”<sup>27</sup> While Shakespeare in all his historical plays antedating the death of Queen Elizabeth (who had produced no Tudor heir) was fascinated with succession crises and the violent deposition of rulers, his portrait of the fall of the Roman Republic does not herald the advent

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<sup>26</sup> Burckhardt 1968, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Machiavelli 1970, 517.

of the empire as a historical necessity. Historical progress was not an issue for him, and certainly not in the way it became for later generations of writers and historians.

### Concluding remarks

What captivated spectators like Weever and Digges who watched *Julius Caesar* in performance was perhaps not merely the illusion of looking directly into the past, but also the possibility of recognising their own presence from a different perspective. The way Shakespeare refers to clocks and calendars certainly invited them to do so. As philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes in his *Time and Narrative* “the time of the calendar is the first bridge constructed by historical experience between lived time and universal time.”<sup>28</sup>

At the basis of astronomical observations, the calendar orders time along units of cosmic recurrence that imply the lived cycles of the day and the year, while at the same time serving to calculate the separation of years over long time spans such as the one separating the death of Caesar from the reign of Elizabeth. As we have seen, Shakespeare’s invocation of the Julian calendar and the measuring of time served to stress the continuity between ancient Rome and his own present in a way, which must have been recognisable to his audience.

But though calendars derive from astronomical observation, they are never transparent expressions of natural order. As both Julius Caesar and Pope Gregory experienced, calendar reforms were perceived as exactly the opposite, as disturbances of order and custom. “Ce fut proprement remuer le ciel et la terre à la fois” (It was a right removing of Heaven and Earth) writes Michel de Montaigne, advocate of recursive experience *avant la lettre*, in an outburst of indignation about the papal reform which he deeply resented.<sup>29</sup> That calendars are not innocent translations of natural order, but instruments of political organisation, was felt even more deeply in Protestant countries like England which, while maintaining the old Julian calendar, reshaped the religious and national holidays in a significant way that served to shape collective memory for political ends. Shakespeare knew this, as the conflict with the tribunes (“Is this a holiday”) makes explicit. Tillyard was undoubtedly right to relate the early modern doctrine of history repeating itself to a wider idea of natural order, but before subscribing to any further theological interpretation on behalf of Shakespeare, we must beware that that history in his *Julius Caesar*, does not repeat itself in the image of nature’s

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<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur 1990, 105.

<sup>29</sup> Montaigne 1962, 1002, but see also p. 988. Montaigne reflects on the calendar reform in essays 10 and 11 (“Des mesnager sa volonté” and “Des boytteux”) from the third volume his *Essais* (1585). The English translation is John Florio’s.

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perfection, but rather in the image of an imperfect and politically contested calendar that nonetheless binds his own age to that of the Romans.

Like other successful histories, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* exploits, as we have seen, what Koselleck has termed "the double aspect of experience", and he does it for his own dramatic purposes, balancing the singular and extraordinary event – the assassination of Caesar – against a structure of recursion that makes it possible for audiences to relate their own experiences to the unfamiliar and remote past. Many narrative representations of past history seek to do so in one way or another. Yet the extraordinary thing about Shakespeare's representation of great historical events in *Julius Caesar* is the way in which he uses the temporal regimes of the calendar and the clock as a recursive structure to complement, translate and commemorate a pivotal moment in history. The recurrent confusion of time and date in the play, which relates the time of Caesar to Shakespeare's own era, can be seen as an example of history repeating itself, but instead of thinking of recurrence as repetition, it would perhaps be more accurate to see it as displaced (or parallel as Plutarch would say). For as the history of the Julian calendar shows, recurrence always involves displacement.

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