

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES SUMMER INSTITUTE
THOMAS JEFFERSON: PERSONALITY, CHARACTER, AND PUBLIC LIFE

Tom, Bill, and Jules

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching
Thomas Jefferson and the Founders &
William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*

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7/26/2013

I. Uncanny Parallels

In a letter to his good friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush in 1811, former-President Thomas Jefferson tells of an exchange between himself and his long-time antagonist and political foil, Alexander Hamilton. During his presidency, George Washington asked Jefferson, his Secretary of State, to call together the various “Heads of departments,” including Vice President John Adams and Secretary of Treasury Hamilton for dinner at Jefferson’s residence. Jefferson, one of the most staunchly anti-monarchical of the Founders, had many times before butt heads with Hamilton, who he considered to be a monocrat in favor of making Washington a king. Jefferson uses this incident to make that case, even after Hamilton’s death.

“The room being hung around with a collection of the portraits of remarkable men, among them were those of Bacon, Newton and Locke, Hamilton asked me who they were. I told him they were my trinity of the greatest men the world had ever produced, naming them. He paused for some time: “the greatest man,” said he, “that ever lived, was Julius Caesar.”

Because there are no reports of this incident from Hamilton, we cannot be sure whether he meant to be ironic and poke fun at Jefferson by praising the West’s single most consequential and controversial dictator, or whether he seriously considered Caesar to be the greatest man that ever lived. In Jefferson’s world of dichotomies of good and evil, his use of this exchange to describe Hamilton’s character is revealing. He was clearly drawing comparisons between Hamilton and Caesar, in much the same way as other great writers would do between leaders of the past and present.

When William Shakespeare wrote *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* in 1599, Queen Elizabeth was 65 years old and refused to name a successor to the throne. This led to concerns throughout the kingdom that civil war would be inevitable following her death. Two hundred years later, President George Washington died on December 14, 1799 at the age of 67, leaving the United States fully in the hands of his unpopular successor, John Adams. Though Washington had been out of the presidency for several years, Adams had been, in a way, haunted by the legacy of the nation's first Commander-in-Chief, a man unanimously elected twice. The following year, the United States witnessed its first fiercely partisan, controversial presidential election between Adams and his vice president, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's supporters viewed his candidacy as being the last hope to save the republic – a republic inspired, at least in part, by the Roman Republic of Julius Caesar's time. Many Americans feared that the Election of 1800 would bring about a civil war. Following Caesar's assassination at the hands of his friends and confidants, Rome broke out into a civil war between two sects of men, each led by close friends of Caesar. These uncanny parallels between the conflicts of the founders and this episode of history that Shakespeare embellishes upon offer educators an opportunity bridge the gap between History and Literature.

II. Humanities: Truly Interdisciplinary

Even if they weren't incorporated into the Common Core Standards, skills of comparison and contrast are required for critical thinking in both history and literature. That they are now becoming codified in a single set of standards for both social studies teachers and English language arts teachers gives additional justification for these two groups within our profession – sects, if you will – to work together and collaborate.

Working in different departments after studying in different majors and having different content-related vocabulary, we often forget that History and Literature are siblings from the same family tree of the Humanities. Studying the Founders of the United States and *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* side-by-side enables us to bring these two subjects together to develop cross-curricular interdisciplinary understanding and application. Not only does it enhance our students' learning, but it should also challenge us to become better masters of content outside of our traditional disciplines, thus enhancing our pedagogy.

III. The Founders, Starring Thomas Jefferson

In Thomas Jefferson's world, there were two types of everything: one good, one bad. In terms of government, there was republicanism (good) and monarchism (bad). As for citizens, there were farmers (good) and aristocrats (bad). France (good), Great Britain (bad). Republicans (good), Federalists (bad). Jefferson (good), Hamilton (bad). Though formal parties as we conceive of them now didn't exist during Jefferson's time, in his *Notes on Professor Ebeling's Letter of July 30, 1795*, he describes the establishment of two distinct groups into which he places all of the individuals in the United States:

"Two parties then do exist within the U.S. They embrace respectively the following descriptions of persons.

The Anti-republicans consist of

1. The old refugees & tories.
2. British merchants among us, & composing the main body of our merchants.
3. American merchants trading on trading on British capital. Another great portion.
4. Speculators & Holders in the banks & public funds.

5. Officers of the federal government with some exceptions.
6. Office-hunters, willing to give up principles for places. A numerous & noisy tribe.
7. Nervous persons, whose languid fibres have more analogy with a passive than active state of things.

The Republican part of our Union comprehends

1. The entire body of landholders throughout the United States.
2. The body of labourers, not being landholders, whether in husbanding or the arts.”

Jefferson clearly sees a small, but powerful minority of individuals living in the United States as being outside of “our Union,” loyalists and ambitious moneyed elite.

If we think of the Founders as a cast of characters, which will aid in our incorporation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Jefferson would write each into separate camps, one composed of defenders of liberty, and the other tyrannical monarchists. Two characters complicate matters for Jefferson, though. George Washington, though a supporter and implementer of Federalist policies, is spared classification in Jefferson’s dichotomy. He argues in his *Anas, 1791-1806*, “From the moment, where they end, of my retiring from the administration, the federalists got unchecked hold of Genl. Washington.” Although Jefferson was among those who implored Washington to seek a second term, he suggests that Washington’s “memory was already sensibly impaired by age.” Washington has been corrupted by the Federalists, in Jefferson’s view. He is not one of them.

Jefferson’s best friend, turned opponent, turned old friend, John Adams, also defies this simple dichotomy. The two men grew exceptionally close during the Revolution and their diplomatic missions on behalf of the Confederation

Congress. When Adams continued the policies of Washington, policies proposed by Hamilton, Jefferson placed him at the head of the Federalist Party. In the Election of 1800, *ad hominem* attacks between the supporters of the two men severed any relationship they had. It wasn't until both men had retired and time began to heal old wounds that Jefferson and Adams commenced a new friendship based on old memories, shared struggles, and mutual respect. Adams was certainly a Federalist, but Jefferson's willingness to move beyond early feelings of betrayal keep Adams clear of generalization.

The other Founders, however, fit very neatly into these two camps:

The Republicans

Thomas Jefferson: Virginia gentleman planter; author of the Declaration of Independence; Governor of Virginia; First Secretary of State; Third President; Leader of the Republicans

James Madison: Jefferson's Second-in-Command, both in the Republican Party and in government; also a Virginia gentleman planter; Republican Leader in Congress; Jefferson's successor to the Presidency; the only person whose advice Jefferson appears to have taken seriously

James Monroe: Student of Jefferson; also a Virginia gentleman planter; chief diplomat for both Jefferson and Madison; Madison's successor to the Presidency

Aaron Burr: From New York; Jefferson's first Vice President, who would later kill Alexander Hamilton in a duel; dropped from Jefferson's ticket for reelection; under pressure by Jefferson, was tried for treason

The Federalists

Alexander Hamilton: Caribbean-born New Yorker; Washington's Secretary of the Treasury, a financial genius who developed a system of government finance, which Jefferson claimed was unconstitutional; accused of being a monarchist; killed in a duel with Aaron Burr

John Jay: New Yorker; First Chief Justice of the Supreme Court; blamed for very unpopular treaty with Great Britain intended to assert US sovereignty, which became the issue around which the Republicans first organized

John Marshall: Virginian; Entered into the Virginia Bar by Governor Jefferson; vastly expanded the power of the federal judiciary; accused by Jefferson for the "twistification" of the words of his opponents; acquitted Aaron Burr of the charge of treason

John Quincy Adams: son of John Adams; Ambassador, Representative, and Senator throughout the first three presidencies; sixth president after Madison and Monroe

The Forgiven

George Washington: Virginia gentleman planter; most respected and trusted of the Founders; though not the most educated, his decisions were generally

trusted by both Federalists and Republicans; never embraced the presidency and had to be convinced by Adams, Jefferson, and Hamilton to run for a second term; nearly obsessed with not being perceived as a king

John Adams: Massachusetts lawyer; blustery and quick to anger; honest to a fault; perfect foil to Jefferson's taciturn, almost introverted persona; closer ties to Great Britain than Jefferson, but still a leading Patriot; presidency tarnished by unrealistic expectations and inevitable national disasters

There are, of course, some caveats to each of these descriptions that individual teachers may choose to include or emphasize. This dichotomy, however, serves as a good foundation for the study of the Founders alongside *Julius Caesar*.

IV. *Dramatis Personae* of Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Julius Caesar*

In several of his letters to protégés, Thomas Jefferson includes Shakespeare as one of the writers an enlightened American should read. While there's no way to determine what impact *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* had on Jefferson's political mind, certain aspects of his political ideology, reflected in the Declaration of Independence and other writings, resonate with the themes of Shakespeare's play. The conflict between republicanism and tyrannical monarchism is the clearest site of comparison between these two worlds and histories. The main players, too, have many characteristics in common, such as ambition, loyalty, and betrayal. Shakespeare's *Dramatis Personae* can be split along the same dichotomy as Jefferson split his contemporaries.

The Conspirators

Marcus Brutus: Caesar's close friend and fellow soldier; a Roman praetor; renowned for his honor and loyalty; convinced by Caius Cassius to murder Caesar because of his ambition; commits suicide at the end of the civil war; considered by many to be the truly tragic character of the play

Caius Cassius: Roman senator and soldier; jealous of Caesar's ascension to power; leads the way in convincing Brutus to bring together the other Conspirators

Servilius Casca: Roman politician who joins Brutus and Cassius in convincing the other Conspirators that Caesar is ambitious and must be stopped

Caesar's Avengers

Mark Antony: Youngest of the men; close friend and confidant of Caesar; excluded from the group of Conspirators; uses his famous oratory to turn Rome against the Conspirators following Caesar's assassination; goes on to become entangled in a love affair with Cleopatra; his ambition would lead Octavius to turn against him and Cleopatra

Octavius: adopted son of Caesar; joins with Antony to lead the way against the conspirators; would go on to become Caesar Augustus, the First Emperor of the Roman Empire

Lepidus: Third member of the Triumvir, with Antony and Octavius; wholeheartedly trusted by Octavius, though Antony has doubts

The other characters in Shakespeare's play cannot be placed into these two groups as easily. Julius Caesar, the titular character who dies before the halfway point in the play, has more impact in death than in life. He goes on to haunt the Conspirators and lead them to their deaths. Cicero, the great orator, gets caught up in the civil war and is executed at the order of Caesar's Avengers, though he appears to have no direct hand in Caesar's death. Other characters, including bystanders, conspirators, and citizens, take on the roles of lemmings, following the person with the best, most passionate argument. Looking forward, these individuals could be compared and contrasted with the American voting public in the Elections of 1796 and 1800.

V. Bridging the Gap: Themes, Comparisons, and Contrasts

The novelty and utility of teaching the history of the Early Republic as told by Jefferson and the history of the Early Empire as told by Shakespeare side-by-side is found in common themes and characteristics. Topics for discussion can range from the broadest, such as the revolt against monarchism and tyranny, to the existential, such as ambition, honor, and loyalty, and to the more specific, political assassinations and the power of oratory. In ELA/Literature Classes, these topics can be used to analyze rhetoric, author's purpose, and literary themes and tropes. The same topics can be covered in the History class, where social interactions, alliances, political ideologies, and the power of words to spur action can be explored in detail.

On the topic of politics and government, the two histories portray republics at opposite ends of their lifespan: the birth of the American Republican Experiment and the demise of the Roman Republic. The same concerns exist at both ends of the timeline. Washington and the Republicans' emphatic opposition to anything royal in hue are nearly identical to the fear of tyranny Cassius stokes in Brutus, which leads him to betray and murder his friend. The reverence of republicanism and the fear of tyrannical, even dictatorial monarchy permeate both histories. The opportunities for the History or Government classes are fairly obvious: contrasting values and principles of forms of political order. Less obvious is the application of this topic to the ELA/Literature class. We can place the Federalist Papers alongside the speeches of Brutus and Antony at Caesar's funeral to analyze argumentation and rhetoric. The history of rhetoric is a great area for interdisciplinary exploration and elaboration.

In both Literature and History, characters teach students character. To spur debate and in-depth character analysis, students might be asked to cast the Founders in the roles of Shakespeare's play. Casting George Washington as Caesar would be an easy starting point, but one that students should be asked to evaluate. Both men proclaim in public their desires to not be made into kings. Both men are doubted. Washington's actions in this regard are significantly more convincing than Caesar's. This leads to more intensive analysis and a bit of moral and political interpretation. If George Washington is Caesar, who is Brutus and Cassius? From Jefferson's perspective, Adams makes a stoic Brutus, while Hamilton could match Cassius's manipulative skills. That would place Jefferson,

Madison, and Monroe in the roles of Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus. The irony here would be that Octavius would go on to become the First Emperor of Rome. There are nearly infinite iterations of these hypothetical castings that students can make. If you posit Jefferson himself as Caesar, Aaron Burr makes an interesting Cassius. A writing assignment that asks students to engage with these sorts of comparisons and contrasts could be an effective summative assessment tool for both Literature and History.

Depending on the interests of the teachers and students, the comparison of these two histories can allow for exploration of a number of smaller, more specific topics. Caesar's murder and Hamilton's death can be combined into a lesson on politics and assassinations. Students could also be asked to compare the relationships of Caesar, Brutus, Jefferson, and Adams with their wives. The role of women, particularly wives, in politics before women's suffrage is a great topic to look at critically. The role and manipulation of the proverbial "mob" can also be debated amongst students. How is "mob rule" different than democracy? Both *Julius Caesar* and Thomas Jefferson offer insights into this topic.

VI. Why the dichotomies of Jefferson and *Julius* help our students

In pursuing an interdisciplinary approach to teaching about the history of the Early Republic in the US and the end of the Roman Republic, not only do collaborating teachers enrich their individual topics, but also breakdown some of the artificial barriers schools have made between different disciplines. Having separate English, Math, History, and Science classes allows students to learn

from teachers who have a professional depth of knowledge, but keep students from seeing connections between each. Students who struggle in one subject could be better supported when aspects of a preferred topic are brought into that classroom. Bringing Jefferson into the same Literature classroom as *Julius* engages more historically-minded students in a topic in which they might otherwise struggle. Likewise, book worms who have little interest in History classes might find new inspiration in studying historical figures alongside the poetry of Shakespeare. If whole departments begin to embrace interdisciplinary studies, Jefferson's work in agriculture and gardening could enhance a Life Sciences class. Roman architecture could offer students the opportunity to apply what they learned in Geometry. Connecting topics doesn't distract us from our specialized content areas; it makes our content more meaningful in a context beyond our individual classrooms.

Note on Resources: Both Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Julius Caesar* and Thomas Jefferson's writings are available in a number of publications and digital resources.

Print:

Jefferson, Thomas, and Merrill D. Peterson. *Writings*. New York, NY: Literary Classics of the U.S., 1984.

Shakespeare, William, Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Andrew Gurr. *The Norton Shakespeare*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. Freeman, Philip. *Julius Caesar*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.

Digital:

Shakespeare, William. "Julius Caesar: Entire Play." *Julius Caesar: Entire Play*. MIT, n.d. Web. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/> 23 July 2013.

"Founders Online [Back to Normal View]." *Founders Online: Home*. N.p., n.d. Web. <http://founders.archives.gov/> 25 July 2013.