One of the first plays that I assigned in my Spring 2017 Shakespeare for the 21st Century class was Julius Caesar. In conjunction with the play, I handed out an article written by political commentator Andrew McGill that explained the decision by West Virginian coal miners, a demographic that had historically voted blue in presidential elections, to cast their ballots for Donald Trump. I asked the class to identify if there were any points of overlap by which we might better understand our recent election and Shakespeare’s play.

On her website and in her speeches to West Virginians, Hillary Clinton placed heavy emphasis on economic diversification and educational improvement in coal-mining communities. Clinton’s message was too abstract, McGill’s article concluded. Her proposed outcomes were not concrete enough to compete with Trump’s promises to West Virginians. He vowed to protect their current jobs and added that, as president, he would always treat them as people, not as “numbers.”

My class, which was comprised primarily of Clinton supporters, lamented that Trump was appealing to voters with limited attention spans, high school educations, and technophobic anxieties. These voters couldn’t see that Clinton’s plan equipped them for a clean-energy “future” that had already arrived. So they opined.

For all the keeness of their observations, students rehearsed many of the dyadic frameworks (red state vs. blue state; educated, white-collar Clinton supporters vs. uneducated, blue-collar Trump supporters) whose oversimplifications were already being questioned by political analysts. We needed explanations that more satisfactorily explained the complexity of human aspiration and anxiety when people were faced with making difficult political choices.

And so we turned to Shakespeare’s play. Several students made some interesting connections between Julius Caesar and the election. One young man suggested that West Virginian voters were as fickle as the nameless characters who switched loyalties from Pompey to Caesar at the beginning of Julius Caesar, and then again from Brutus to Antony after the latter’s funeral oration. “But didn’t this analogy have its limitations?” I asked. If in previous elections, West Virginian coal miners had steadfastly voted Democratic, then how could we interpret their decision to cross party lines and support Donald Trump without presuming that they had made some error in judgment? (For example: Their loyalty to the Democratic Party was mercurial. They were naive in trusting honeyed campaign promises. They willfully refused to see the dire outlook for the future of coal-mining jobs in West Virginia.)

I assigned several excerpts from Matthew Crawford’s 2009 book Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work. Crawford considered the state of what he called “manual competency” in the 21st century. At a time when advances in microtechnology and automation were alienating and fragmenting large segments of the American population from their jobs and themselves, there was a more compelling reason for a return to the stochastic arts than ever before, Crawford contended. Invoking the Aristotelian definition of the “stochastic
arts,” as those arts that involve the cultivation of skills for the care and mastery of things not of our own making, Crawford urged the value of such talents as welding, plumbing, and motorcycle repair because such manual competencies trained a disposition “at once cognitive and moral” (82).

The problem of technology was almost always the opposite of how it was usually posed, Crawford observed. People weren’t fearful of an “instrumental rationality” seizing control from them so much as they were concerned about living in “a world that precisely [did] not elicit our instrumentality, the embodied kind that is original to us” (69; italics in original). The car owner who enjoyed performing maintenance and upkeep on her vehicle wasn’t intimidated by the increasingly sophisticated machinery under her vehicle’s hood, Crawford contended. Rather, she was frustrated because the specialized instrumentation that was engineered into the design of her car engine forced her to depend on “expert technicians.” She was essentially disabled from even changing her own motor oil.

The class deftly linked the ramifications of Crawford’s observations to the 2016 West Virginia election outcome. Students intuited that Clinton’s economic diversification and educational improvements efforts felt too alienating to West Virginian coal miners. Instead of dismissing this sense of alienation as “technophobic,” students now became more empathic, more interested in understanding the cognitive and moral disposition of the troubled West Virginian coal miner. Students noted that a computer couldn’t replace a coal miner’s particular skill set because the individual had cultivated, through years of experience, mental maps, cognitive faculties, and decision-making apparatuses that were personalized. Some in the class noted that even if these miners were retrained as expert computer operators, the cognitive wealth of their years of manual experience would likely be supplanted or perhaps even go unused in the performance of their new duties. Most of the class concluded that the author of the coal-mining article, Andrew McGill, denigrated the cognitive faculties and decision-making abilities of West Virginian coal miners when he suggested that Clinton’s proposal was too “abstract.” They wondered if some miners hadn’t turned away from Clinton’s proposals because they had felt offended by them, instead of feeling inadequate to their challenges. As one student wondered, “Could Clinton’s emphasis on opportunities for receiving job and educational retraining have been perceived as a slight to the skill sets and cognitive competencies that West Virginian coal miners already possessed?” Students asserted that if a voter felt like his or her intellect, labor, and worth were being belittled by the policies of the party to which they were affiliated, then the promise of being treated like a whole person could be provocation enough to switch party loyalties. In doing so, a West Virginia coal miner who had historically voted blue might still feel as if he or she was staying true to his or her core values.

Since we were willing to rethink our interpretation of the coal-mining article, I asked the class if they would be willing to rethink their interpretation of Julius Caesar as well. We returned to that first scene of the play wherein several of Caesar’s supporters were vilified for their fickle support for Caesar. These supporters were identified by their occupations: Carpenter and Cobbler. Caesar’s detractors, Flavius and Marullus, castigated these craftsmen by calling them “mechanical,” “blocks,” “stones,” and “the vulgar” (1.1.16, 1.1.34).

Students observed that these named characters repeatedly demeaned the political preferences of the nameless characters by first associating their occupations with foolhardiness. Upon reading Caesar’s lines, "the rabblement hooted and clapped their chapped hands and threw up their sweaty nightcaps and uttered such a deal of stinking breath . . . that it had almost choked Caesar,” one student noted that occupations that were denigrated were consistently manually associated (1.2.242–46). It seemed as if Shakespeare was alluding to the same idea of the stochastic arts and the cognitive capacities of the manually competent that Crawford was referencing.

Students hypothesized that Shakespeare may have been drawing our attention to insecurities about the aptitudes and intellectual capacities of stochastic artisans through characters such as Flavius and Marullus. Their dismissive terms, like McGill’s “too abstract,” might have revealed their deficiency in recognizing the capacities and aptitudes of the manually competent. Or if they did
understand these capacities and aptitudes, then epithets such as ’mechanical,’ ’blocks,’ ’the vulgar,’ and ’chapped hands’ would be evidence of Flavius, Murellus, and Casca’s respective insecurities about the manually competent. The haughtiness of such insults would mask such insecurities.

By this point in our discussions, students had begun to raise consequential questions for our own time. Who among the throng of Shakespeare’s Romans and West Virginia’s coal miners felt their sense of individual worth so insulted by a political figure’s disregard for their manual competencies and intellect that he or she felt that the only way to preserve their integrity was through a change in political alliance? Could the existence of such a group among the throng of Roman citizens account for a simmering discontent and an eventual shift in loyalty from the party of Brutus—the party of Flavius, Marullus, and Casca—to the party of Marc Antony?

The class noted that stochastic concerns were often unaddressed in election-cycle political discourse—a failing of both the Republican and Democratic parties. And because these concerns cut across political divisions, the cognitive contributions of the manually competent, significant though they might have been, remained as unidentifiable as the carpenters and cobblers among Shakespeare’s Roman crowd. Our class readings had begun to attune us, I hoped, to listen for such fleeting, fugitive voices in our own time.

**Works Cited**


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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Another way to use *Julius Caesar* is shared in this lesson plan. Students begin by evaluating the universal theme of betrayal from multiple perspectives. After reading time period scenarios as well as reflecting on personal experiences, students use critical thinking skills to explore and identify interventions for each betrayal scenario, including their personal examples. Students research Roman history, the setting of Shakespeare’s drama *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Applying this research, students write their own critical perspective of a scenario depicting plausible betrayal scenes from Roman times. http://bit.ly/2gMOH0K

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