Lucius Shines Light on Brutus’ Life

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In William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, Marcus Brutus engages as a conspirator in Julius Caesar’s assassination. Brutus himself displays “binary characterization”; that is, he is a split character. Shakespeare grants access to Brutus’ character through conversation and isolation in public and private realms. One way to understand Brutus comes from his seldom-seen servant, Lucius, whose part in the play is small but crucial. Though his lines are few, Lucius illuminates Brutus’ “binary characterization.” He may appear a simple Roman servant, but Lucius’s name itself contains a lexical Latin meaning that should be *construed*, to use Shakespeare’s term, by understanding that the name’s root “luc” derives from *lux*, which means “light” in Latin; “-ius” is a neuter comparative adjective, making “Lucius” translate as “more light.” Shakespeare’s classical background guaranteed his access to this knowledge, allowing him to use “Lucius” as more than a servant. Instead, Lucius provides “more light” to the complex binaries of Brutus’ public and private personas by moving plot and characterization.

Lucius first enters the drama at Brutus’ call for a taper: “Get me a taper in my study, Lucius. / When it is lighted, come and call me here” (II.i.7—8). Brutus’ first command for Lucius is to provide more light, which Lucius accomplishes, true to his function as a slave -- but also to his name’s natural meaning. Once Lucius leaves to light the candle, Shakespeare has Brutus
deliver the first soliloquy of the play, which sheds more light on Brutus’ true beliefs concerning Caesar and the conspiracy. The soliloquy itself exemplifies Brutus’s wavering thoughts about the situation. For instance, Brutus begins: “It must be by his death; and for my part, / I know no personal cause to spurn at him” (II.i.10—11). Here, Brutus presents the situation with the declarative statement, “It must be by his death”; then, commenting on the subject on a personal level, he explicitly uses the word *personal* to emphasize private persona. Brutus admits he has no reason to *spurn* at Caesar, but according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *spurn* here means to “reject.” Brutus’ private persona’s fundamental use of *spurn* reveals he struggled with the thought of killing Caesar; instead, he merely hoped to prevent or keep Caesar from power.

There is a change in “private” Brutus within this soliloquy as he subtly develops into his public persona. The final lines reveal Brutus’ ability to conceive Caesar’s assassination:

> And therefore think him as a serpent’s egg,  
> Which, hatch’d, would as his kind grow mischievous,  
> And kill him in the shell. (II.i.32—34)

Public Brutus presents Caesar as a simile to best express his feelings towards the situation. The metaphor provides a fundamental distance between Brutus and Caesar, which Brutus did not exhibit when speaking on the personal level. Perceiving Caesar as an egg reveals Brutus’ political belief that Caesar is a threat waiting to happen. In this public persona, Brutus uses the word *kill*, a more direct and explicit word compared to *spurn.*
Lucius returns when the soliloquy ends and announces: “The taper burneth in your closet,” (II.i.35—36), which means that Lucius has completed his task of providing more light for both Brutus and the audience alike. Brutus receives the benefit of the candle, while the audience receives more light on Brutus’s own internal struggle between his private and public personas. With the taper burning, Lucius then allows the drama’s plot to progress by handing Brutus an anonymous letter (which Cassius revealed he would send earlier) meant to portray the Romans’ feelings towards Brutus. After revealing the personal vs. private debate within Brutus, Lucius delivers the letter that impacts the situation, tipping Brutus towards his public persona. “Shall Rome stand under one man’s awe? What, Rome?” Brutus reads, highlighting the devotion to nationalism that his public persona holds (II.i.52). Brutus comments upon the call to action, saying:

To speak and strike? O Rome, I make thee promise,
If the redress will follow, thou receivest
Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus! (II.i.56—58)

Addressing *Rome* in the vocative case and the public with the intensity of the exclamation point places the public Brutus in a position of declaration towards his nation. The syntax and grammatical choices evoke nationalism and protection as Brutus’s most important desire. Lucius’s deed stimulates the plot, shedding light on Brutus’ need to appease his public and nationalist desires. The deliverance of this appeal allowed Brutus to decide upon his public persona, which keeps the drama on track with the historical account of Caesar’s death by Plutarch.
Further along in the same scene, we learn that Lucius is asleep. Portia now provides Brutus company instead. Brutus confides to Portia: “I am not well in health, and that is all” (II.i.257). Brutus’ refusal to reveal the troubles of his public persona to his wife further illuminates the character shift between Brutus’ public and personal self. Since Brutus is in his public persona, he does not deem it appropriate to tell his wife of his matters at that time, though he does eventually confide to her off stage. This scene also provides evidence for Lucius’s ability to shed light on Brutus’s inner thoughts and beliefs, since Lucius interrupts the discussion to bring forth Ligarius, whom Brutus deems worthy of his public persona. Brutus immediately dismisses Lucius with a stark and strong command: “Boy, stand aside” (II.i.312). This command places Brutus in an authoritative position and public Brutus delivers his plan off-stage – a plan that he at first refrained from admitting to his wife, yet gleefully admits to Ligarius, who was brought forth by Lucius.

At the end of Act II, Lucius provides more light now shed on Portia, who is a crucial component of Brutus’s private life. With Lucius doing her bidding, Portia reveals her insecurities when she asks Lucius to seek out Brutus and find out who surrounds Caesar. Portia reveals she is torn between being the faithful wife who asks no questions and seeking answers from her absent husband. She explicitly states this tear in herself with a caesura in line 7: “I have a man’s mind, but a woman’s might.” This caesura exhibits the balance between Portia’s will for
knowledge and her desire to be a dutiful wife -- revealing a binary conflict inside of Portia, similar to Brutus.’

This binary conflict falls out of balance as Portia progresses to command Lucius, whereas before, Portia acted calmly in the face of worried Brutus in hopes that she could understand his hidden motives. In contrast, she now says:

Yes, bring me word, boy, if thy lord look well,
For he went sickly forth; and take good note
What Caesar doth, what suitors press to him. (II.iv.13—15)

Portia’s rhythm in this instruction appears smooth, but the caesuras in the lines present the choppiness and uneasiness in her character. Notice how the mid-line punctuation marks are off-center, showing imbalance in her command, unlike in line seven when she first presents the binary. The caesuras and the rational decision of the command shed light on Portia’s uneasiness with Brutus’ absence. Again, an inner battle of the self is revealed with Lucius present, although he does not seek these revelations; his nature, rather than coincidence, brings forth this insight.

In IV.iii Brutus speaks to Lucius in a more understanding tone, much like he did when Lucius first appeared. Brutus asks, “Canst thou hold up thy heavy eyes awhile, / And touch thy instrument a strain or two?” (IV.iii.256—257). Notice how Brutus asks, rather than commands, Lucius to play his instrument. He pleads with the boy and again projects his private self rather than his public one where he would appear authoritative over his servant. Lucius plays his lyre and then Brutus bids him sleep, allowing himself
solitude with his reliable slave still present. With Brutus in his private persona, Caesar’s ghost appears. Brutus mentions how the taper burns dimly, referring both to how candles grow faint when a ghost is near and also to the taper that Lucius lit for him earlier, which provides more light on Brutus’ inner self. This scene, though short, sheds light on a deep understanding of Brutus’ private conscious about the assassination. Caesar’s ghost introduces himself as: “Thy evil spirit, Brutus” (IV.iii.282). This assertion leads to suspicion about whether Caesar’s ghost is actually the ghost of Caesar or a manifestation of Brutus’ consciousness. Lucius, the first responder, unconsciously comments upon that debate: “The strings, my lord, are false” (IV.iii.291). Again, Lucius serves the nature of his name by shedding light upon the situation and providing access to the true perspective of the scene.

For such a complex character as Brutus, Lucius’s access to Brutus’ role makes sense considering the movement of the plot and substance of Brutus’ character. Though his lines are few, Lucius becomes involved in heavy turning points in the action of the drama, shedding light on fixations deep inside Brutus’ divided personas and even delivering a further understanding of Brutus’ wife. Unlike a simple slave boy, Lucius remains true to his name’s lexical meaning, for which he is named and through which his nature remains crucial to both the plot of the drama and the understanding of Brutus’ personas.