

The Role of the People in the Republic of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar

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Abstract

Shakespeare's plays have been read and analyzed from various perspectives. His plays reflect the society of not only his times but the present times also where the people in the Republic have an imperative role to play. They have the potential energy to challenge the authority of the monarch. It is wrongly said that Shakespeare merely writes for the monarchy and the feudal lords. In this play he has given voice to the people to influence the power of the dominant class.

He has very deftly presented that how the crises of the Roman state got accelerated due to internal corruption and mutual bickering rather than the outside attack. Therefore, the play is not merely the 'Tragedy' of one individual but that of the state and its governance. The Roman crowd is never absent from the play, be it when Caesar enters Rome after registering his victory over Pompey, or Brutus and Antony's speech after Caesar's assassination in the Senate, the people of the Roman Republic were aware of every development in the state. This paper will try to trace out the concept of hegemony

of the ruling group over the weak masses and penetrate deeper into the psychology of the people.

Keynotes:

Roman Republic; Political Crisis; Tyranny; Liberty; Hegemony

William Shakespeare has earned the reputation of being the greatest writer in the genre of English literature. His dramas showcase the diverse cultural and political setup of the bygone era but have relevance in the present world also. Some of his dramas reflect the rich Republican culture of Tudor England which has a glimpse of mixed constitution like the Roman Republic. The period known as the Roman Republic began when the Romans expelled king Tarquin, in 509 BCE, and effectively ended under the rule of Julius Caesar's nephew, Augustus Caesar. The government of the Roman Republic was not based on a constitution- its system of government revolved around members of a wealthy elite, called patricians, largely exercised power for their own interest.

The Roman history is a mirror with great powers of magnification, as the Romans were regarded the upholders of values which subsequently vanished. *Julius Caesar* is a play about political action which hinges upon liberty versus tyranny and its effect on Roman rule. Shakespeare wrote this play in 1599 AD and gathered the material from Plutarch's *The Lives of Caesar* and *The Lives of Marcus Brutus*. The play places focus on how a few power hungry people can ruin the entire governance of the State. Caesar is a boastful tyrant who exercises authority firmly and Brutus is the man of conscience, concerned about his public duty and willing to take any action for the common good. Cassius has an intellectual power yet is tainted by the ignoble sentiment of jealousy. As for Antony, being a loyal friend to Caesar, has a ruthless and clever side to his nature. It is his oratorical power which fires up the mob and get them to do what he wants.

Shakespeare not only brings out the flaws of his major characters but also shows the fickleness of public opinions. He exposes that how the sordid struggle for power can plunge the entire Republic into warfare. He in his attitude towards Caesar figures out the popular idea of Roman character that how an acquired power could be used tyrannously and also the belief that as an accepted ruler of

the State, Caesar was in a position resembling that of a contemporary monarch. When Caesar took over the reigns of Rome, the Roman Republic by that time had already slipped into a state of speedy decline. It was Caesar who was able to seize control of the Rome, saved the empire and tried to solve the long and destructive constitutional crisis of the Republic.

The play has its beginning in Rome with a crowd in commotion to celebrate the victory of Caesar over his enemy, Pompey. Caesar's victory over Pompey showed that he needed victories to secure his position at the pinnacle of the republic's political hierarchy, and to get them he would have to find enemies to conquer so that he can rule the people of the Rome. The commoners have come out in their best attire to see Caesar and rejoice in his triumph. However, two working men are interrupted by Marullus (Tribune), who rebukes them for becoming a part of the celebration where the enterprise of one hero has wrecked the ambition of the other. This is the first indication which shows that the people are so unstable, and fickle minded that they can easily be led this way or that way. Caesar who rejects the crown three times in order to win the admiration of the people, is hoodwinked by the same crowd who in the middle of the play applause Brutus and

Cassius for killing Caesar believing that the republic would return to the good old days. Cassius being a clever politician reminds Brutus that one of his own ancestors destroyed a tyrant for the establishment of the Republican Rome. However, Caesar's plotted assassination on the Ides of March, 44 BC, created a big political crisis in Rome. As Cassius, declares with pride after assassinating Caesar that he along with other conspirators will be called the men that gave their country liberty, however, the purpose behind the conspiracy was to gain personal freedom and power. But, the freedom of the conspirators could not last long. After the assassination of Caesar, Brutus delivers the first speech at the funeral. The scene brings out an imperative actor in the play- the Roman crowd who is never absent from the play. Brutus goes to the forum to render public reason for slaying his dear friend. He tries to justify his act in the following quote:

Not that I loved Caesar less but that I loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living and

Die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live

All free men? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him;

As he was fortunate, I rejoice at it, as he was

Valiant, I honour him: but, as he was ambitious, I

Slew him. (III.ii.21-27)

Brutus gave a reasoned prose speech that his love for Rome was more than his love for Caesar as he could not see a tyrant ruining his beloved Rome. In the following lines Brutus is trying to explain the deed to himself and others on the ground of 'pity to the general wrong of Rome'(III.I.170) the wrong that Caesar may have committed in the future, through this speech he puts himself at the mercy of events. Personal reasons do not weigh with him; it is only the fact that he did not want his state and people to suffer. His internal conflict is a struggle between his friendship for Caesar and his loyalty to the Roman Republic. He thought that all the citizens are on his side. Even the crowd shows its ignorance by buying his justification without even asking for any evidence of how Caesar was ambitious?

Brutus' speech is followed by Antony's funeral oration where he has the incredibly difficult task of shifting the mind of a crowd that has been to some extent soundly convinced by Brutus. He starts cautiously as the crowd is against him. He addresses the people as 'Friends, Romans, Countrymen' (III.ii.74) and requests them to listen to what he has to say about Caesar.

Lend me your ears; I came to bury Caesar,
Not to praise him. (III.ii.75-76)

Slowly Antony starts to count the good qualities of Caesar. The central aspect of the Republic at its height is the art of persuasion. The speech is so cleverly knitted that it starts moving the crowd against Brutus and begin to sympathize with the corpse of Caesar. Antony further highlights the concern of Caesar for the common man in the following quote:

He hath brought many captives home to Rome

Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:
Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?

When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:

Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:

Yet Brutus says he was ambitious. (III.ii.89-94)

Then Antony retorts with ‘I thrice presented him a kingly crown which he did thrice refuse.’ (III.ii.97) There is a clear argumentation which proves the claim of Brutus wrong that Caesar was ambitious. The lines above only prove that how distant Caesar was from the monarchy. His motive was to serve the Rome and work towards the welfare of the people of his Republic which is clearly mentioned by Antony when he acquaints the crowd with Caesar’s will which leaves money to each Roman citizen, access

to Caesar’s private parks, and landholdings to the city of Rome. It is noteworthy to see how the poor crowd is used first by the conspirators and later by Antony for their respective political motives. The crowd gets worked up when Antony expresses his feelings that he will ‘wrong the honourable men’ (III.ii.128) whose daggers has stabbed Caesar and shouts for the honourable men as ‘traitors’. The Roman crowd raises the slogans of ‘Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay!’(III.ii.196) As stated earlier, Antony has proven to be a keen observer of people and splash the crowd with emotionally laden speech. It is tempting to note that the people have successfully beguiled by the men holding political powers by rejecting monarchial ‘tyranny’ in the name of republican ‘liberty’.

Antony’s speech electrifies the crowd with the spirit of revenge against the conspirators and the mob surges through the city of Rome, looking for the conspirators. Amid the chaos and violence, the innocent poet, Cinna, is confused with the conspirator, Lucius Cinna, and is murdered by the rampaging Roman mob. The unwillingness of the crowd to listen to Cinna, expresses the death of not only order, but also of reason. It’s natural when head is gone the Republic of Rome begins a mad rush towards destruction. When the

International Journal of Research (IJR) Vol-1, Issue-10 November 2014 ISSN 2348-6848

government is ruled by the people, they have the power to bring changes either for good or bad. In order to take control of the Roman world the entire country is plunged into the civil war. This act further strengthens the hegemony of the ruling group over the weak masses. The crowd in the entire play is seen acting like a puppet with strings in the hands of their masters. The poor Romans do not trouble their heads at all. As they do not have 'political minds', but they admire their country's great ones. They do not show any sign that they feel themselves to be victims of any sort of oppression. Infact, they show the sign of acceptance of servitude. That is why one sees the crowd from the outside, only through the eyes of their leaders and manipulators. *Julius Caesar*, being thus a drama concerned with politics and the state affairs, there is little of human compassion and reason. Even the human relations of this play do not attain the paragon of the great emotions.

The story of this play reveal a good deal about political sensitivities at the time and about the extent to which the issues Shakespeare explore in *Julius Caesar* reflected contemporary concern with the uses of the republican, tyranny, censorship, political spin, and the silencing of opposing voices. On one side Shakespeare presents

Roman political society flourishing under a defacto monarchy, with all of its degrees conforming to the pattern ordained by universal law. Against this he sets a group of men who are sincerely convinced that such political organization is a menace to the common wealth and who believe that the earlier aristocratic government must be restored. It is the restoration of the republican virtues that made Brutus kills Caesar. Ambition has no place in Brutus' Republican virtues, and this is what he claims to be Caesar's downfall. He acknowledges that such a great ambition has to pay a heavy price in the Roman Republic and as Caesar falls dead in a pool of blood, he cries out that 'Ambition's debt is paid.'(III.i.82) However, he refuses to comprehend the end of the traditional Republic as he knows it. The death of Caesar did not put the Republic into better order. Even, the death of Brutus symbolizes the destruction of Republican virtues and Cassius' death marks the end of an era as Titinius explains 'The sun of Rome is set. Our day is gone.' (V.v.38) This naïve obstinacy becomes the first of many errors that accelerate the destruction of the Republic.

The nation must place limits on their leaders, so that they can be great only to a certain extent. To Brutus, there is nothing as important as the preservation of the Republic,

International Journal of Research (IJR) Vol-1, Issue-10 November 2014 ISSN 2348-6848

and the Republic as he knows is based on the rule by the people. Hence, the idea of king does not fit into his views of Roman government. The crisis of the Roman Republic was more due to internal corruption and infighting rather than reactions to outside enemies. It was not these enemies that caused the collapse of the Republican government, but rather, Rome's own vices. Of all Shakespeare's works, *Julius Caesar* is a play that centers upon rhetoric- both as the art of persuasion and a ploy used to hide intent. It is a play about great public events, in which politics are the realm where, whatever the particular interests involved, the issues are to some extent simplified and generalized and

therefore seen in abstract and schematic terms.

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