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The Man Who Would Be King: Consolidation of Power in Shakespeare's Plays

The Western world has long followed the traditions of its claimed forbearers, foremost among them Greece and Rome. Despite the difference in their geographical locations, Europe and North America take great pride in replicating the positive aspects of Greek and Roman culture, particularly Roman. The famous playwright William Shakespeare took the plots of many of his plays from the events of the Roman empire, such as *Julius Caesar* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Both of these plays are quite political, and because they are set in another time and another country, Shakespeare could make statements in them that he could not in plays set closer to his day and time. Despite the rising sentiments of increased individual liberties during his time, Shakespeare argues through his Roman plays *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* that more successful governments have power consolidated in one person, regardless of that individual's personal temperament and values.

One of the most famous leaders of all time, Julius Caesar has had an impact on western culture that has lasted millennia. He has been studied by scholars and revered by common culture since the day he was assassinated, so it comes as no surprise that Shakespeare chose to write a play about him. As one of the lone rulers Shakespeare chose to focus on, his characterization is vital to our understanding of Shakespeare's views of government. By the time the play opens, Caesar's reputation has already far exceeded his abilities as a man; in fact, in one of his first introductions, Cassius complains, "this man is now become a god" (1.2 115-6). Everywhere he

goes, crowds gather and shout his name and hold ceremonies in his honor. Caesar himself is portrayed as “a self-important shell - deaf in one ear, prone to fits, suspicious, and constantly referring to himself in the third person. A formerly great man gone to seed, clinging to his reputation and dignity” (Blixt). He is no longer the energetic young politician he once was; he suffers from many physical ailments such as deafness in one ear. These physical infirmities are representative of his failing health and abilities to do what he once could. No longer the great revered ruler, Caesar proves himself to be vain and easily swayed. He reminds other people to “leave no ceremony out” when it comes to the celebration of his accomplishments (1.2 242). When his wife begs him not to go to the council meeting, fearing it will mean his early demise, he agrees, but as soon as a servant walks in and frames it as a test of his courage and manliness, Caesar instantly gives in. While persuading Caesar to go to the council meeting, the servant uses the name “Caesar” five times within nine lines. Caesar also has a tendency to refer to himself in third person, so the servant wisely appeals to Caesar’s vanity and self-importance by repeatedly using his name as a title. Caesar’s propensity to ignore signs and warnings, belief in his own legacy, and weakening will all contribute to his fall from greatness.

Despite these weaknesses, Shakespeare leaves Caesar with some redeeming qualities. Clearly he was a great ruler once, and his enemies still consider him powerful enough to be a threat. He leaves gifts for the people of Rome when he dies, and clearly people are happy with his rule. Ironically enough, the conspirators serve only to substantiate his legacy when they assassinate him. Though he is dead, he manages to permeate every scene; his spirit haunts Brutus at Philippi and Sardis, issuing warnings, causing Brutus’s “blood cold and [his] hair to stare” (4.3 489). Even though Brutus was responsible for Caesar’s death, he still regards the ruler with enough awe that he concludes that Caesar is controlling events from beyond the grave instead of

suggesting more mundane explanations; to Brutus, “the living are no match for the dead” (Herbert 304). With Caesar’s death, the country drops into civil war; the man’s legacy was powerful enough to entice people to fight over it. Octavius, Caesar’s named heir, claims Caesar’s legacy and battles the conspirators in an attempt to gain the kind of power Caesar had worn so well.

Perhaps the most brilliant politician in either play, Octavius manages to first defeat the conspirators in a civil war, then outmaneuver his fellow triumvirates in order to gain sole power over Rome. He is far different from Caesar: while Caesar had a reputation that did a lot of his work for him, Octavius had to earn every step he took closer to the dictatorship (Leeds 14). Octavius is much more detached than either Julius Caesar or Cleopatra; he shows little emotion throughout the play and continually is able to place his own feelings and ambitions aside in order to do what needed to be done to win the war. His consistent “tone of impersonality allows him to convey his own predispositions as objectively-derived truisms. The effect, again, is removal, perhaps a distortion of the concept of the ‘king’s two bodies’” (Leeds 16). Octavius’s “two bodies” allow him to put his own feelings aside and act as a leader. Though he appeared to have regard for his fellow rulers, he also did not struggle with the need to defeat them. Octavius proves himself to be brilliant at maneuvering, always managing to end up on the winning side. In his negotiations, he is usually brief and to the point, preferring to come to an agreement quickly. For example, in negotiations with Pompey, he never speaks more than one line at a time, and remain silent while Antony and Pompey exchange pleasantries (2.6). In this, he is markedly different from Caesar, who was much more adept at speech-making and much more social. However, Octavius’s ability to calculate allows him to overcome first Lucilius, then Antony,

though they might have the advantage. Between his intelligence, patience, and prudence, Octavius manages to outmaneuver several groups of people trying to gain his power.

However, Octavius's remoteness also turns out to be a disadvantage in his rule. It was Mark Antony who won the people to their side after the assassination of Caesar. Shakespeare never provides Octavius with a single inspirational speech or memorable rhetoric; in fact, he rarely speaks more than two or three lines alone (Barroll 104). This makes Octavius more of an enigma to his people as well the audience, keeping them from his innermost thoughts and feelings. Though Octavian is certainly capable of leading the people, he does not know how to gain people's loyalty or passion; he is often characterized as "callow and cold" and even petulant (Shuttleworth). Certainly he cannot command the kind of love that drove Enobarbus to kill himself in remorse for having betrayed his master. Interestingly enough, it is the teamwork of the triumvirate that gave them the ability to win the war against the conspirators, but Octavius manages to take control on his own. However, Octavian's emotional distance can also lead him to misjudge people. He originally loses a battle with Antony and Cleopatra because he misjudges the strength of their alliance and the emotional value they put in each other. This is quickly rectified, however, when Cleopatra recognizes the prudence of siding with Octavian and unexpectedly allies with him. By Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian no longer needs Antony's rhetoric or Lucilius's advice. This suggests that Shakespeare sees the sharing of power as a move of amateurs, which one can grow out of, and which Octavian proves himself above in his final steps to taking power. Though Cleopatra joins him and abandons Antony, their alliance lasts for the space of a battle and ends in Cleopatra's suicide: another victory for sole reign.

Cleopatra, the powerful Egyptian queen, is completely different from either Caesar. When she first enters the play, she seems to be childish, petty, and spoiled, and we never see her

pay any attention to affairs of state. The only hint that she is queen early on is that large number of attendants around her and the wealth of her court. Unlike Julius Caesar, who spends most of his time during the play in meetings or giving speeches, or Octavius Caesar, who is always calculating and scheming for power, Cleopatra seems content with where her country is politically. She spends most of her time onstage either flirting with or pining for Antony; when a messenger from Rome first appears, her only comment is, “How much unlike art thou Mark Antony!” (1.5 44). Because she makes ridiculous comments like asking for a potion to help her sleep away Antony’s absence, her handmaidens must consistently flatter and comfort her. One reviewer observed that her waiting women are as much her PR flock as they are her servants (Shuttleworth). Cleopatra appears to have the respect of her subjects, but not of the Romans; in her first mention of the play she is called a “strumpet” by a couple of Roman attendants, who mourn that their leader Antony has been foolish enough to love her (1.1 14). She spends the rest of her time in Egypt sending her servants to spy on Antony’s wife, and taking great pleasure in the reports of the other woman’s plainness.

Cleopatra, however, proves herself to be a savvy leader when it matters. When she recognizes that fighting Octavian is pointless, she joins with him in an attempt to save her country, effectively betraying Antony and bearing responsibility for his loss. Antony immediately goes into a rage and she takes the consequences of her decision with dignity, remaining silent against his accusations (4.12 43). Despite her love for Antony, Cleopatra is not foolish enough to tie her country to a lost cause, and makes a courageous move to protect her people. This ability to put affairs of the state over her personal feelings and preferences hints at why Cleopatra is so beloved amongst her people; despite her passionate and sometimes childish personality, she shows wisdom in critical moments. This passage can also be taken as

commentary by Shakespeare: in this battle, it is Cleopatra, not Antony, who recognizes a losing battle when she sees it and makes a move to prevent further loss of life. Though Cleopatra is a lot more like Antony than she like Octavius she reveals in this scene that she has something in common with him: the ability to calculate and make the wisest decision. This also suggests why her country is so prosperous and stable: she does not lengthen pointless wars for personal satisfaction. Her love for Antony never overcame her duty to Egypt. This is why Egypt has a stability that Rome does not at this moment: Egypt is led by a single ruler with no one to fight against for power, and this ruler is able to keep her country relatively free from the kind of slaughter that pervades Rome.

As we trace the role of government throughout these two plays, we see a clear pattern emerge. Caesar's Rome is portrayed as a content, prosperous place with a content populace. In fact, in the very first scene of the play the commoners "make holiday, / to see Caesar and to rejoice in his triumph" (1.1 63). Try as they might, the two tribunes can't quench the crowd's enthusiasm, and all attempts by the conspirators to turn the crowd against Caesar fail. It is later revealed that Caesar left seventy-five drachmas for every citizen of Rome upon his death, so the civilians', and the audience's, opinion of him grows even more favorable (3.2 174). Shakespeare strikes the real blow against decentralized power after Caesar has died and Antony, Lucilius, and Octavius have formed the triumvirate. The triumvirate lasts only a short time, and that period is characterized by civil war and popular unrest. Even at the end of *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare takes the time to hint at the future failure of the leaders: upon learning about Brutus's suicide, Lucilius remarks rather pointedly, "I thank thee, Brutus, / That thou hast proved Lucilius' saying true" (5.5 312-3). Throughout the rest of the conversation, the other two try to one-up each other

and issue orders on what to do with Brutus's body. Though it is subtle, the cracks of the triumvirate are already showing; three ambitious men cannot share power for long.

Throughout *Antony and Cleopatra*, the triumvirate crumbles, first gradually and then more and more rapidly. Each leader turns on the others, whether out of fear, desire for power, or self-defense. Shakespeare takes this opportunity to tell the audience that no organization built on shared power can last long. The continued jockeying for power that has characterized every government in human memory overcomes the triumvirate's ability to work together. This characterization has a powerful effect on the audience, and it is a relief for any reader or viewer when Octavius finally takes sole control of the state. While during the time of the triumvirate pirates ravaged the lands, foreign alliances crumbled, and civil unrest grew, Rome is implied to have returned to a state of relative stability and unity at the end of the play.

Egypt, also ruled by a sole leader, reflects its queen; with a personality so strong, she came to symbolize her country (Miles 1). Under Cleopatra, Egypt is flourishing. There are no hints of poverty, political scheming, or unsafe alliances within Cleopatra's kingdom; all the servants are loyal and apparently content with their station, unlike Antony's servants who worry that he has erred in judgment and eventually betray him (1.1 64). Cleopatra actually managed to expand Egyptian territory during the tumultuous last days of the Roman Republic (Miles 1). When asked about the state of her kingdom, Cleopatra always has favorable answers, such as when she boasts, "I have sixty sails, Caesar none better" (3.8 62). Again, Shakespeare portrays a place under a sole leader as peaceful and stable, while Rome is torn up by civil war. Shakespeare goes out of his way here to shock the audience with the characterization of Cleopatra; she is nothing like the other rulers we have thus far encountered, and a viewer might wonder at first if

she is qualified to be queen. However, despite her frequent lack of regard for the affairs of her country, Egypt still flourishes while Rome suffers.

During Shakespeare's time, England did not exist under what we could call a democracy or even a republic. Queen Elizabeth I held most of the power in the state and could do more or less whatever she wanted. Though the British monarch's power had been restricted by the Magna Carta in 1215, the Queen still held most of the political power in her country. However, the fact that England had a Parliament and any kind of shared power was unusual for her day.

Throughout Europe, absolute monarchs were taking power, consolidating all influence and power in a single ruler (Wiggins 43). Shakespeare seemed to support this policy, portraying nations ruled by sole monarchs in a positive light and those ruled by shared power in a negative one. His plays regularly warn of discontent, power jockeying, and betrayals amongst co-rulers. Ironically enough, shortly after Shakespeare's time would come some of the most famous political theorists in the western world arguing for lesser governmental power and increased individual rights (Wiggins 57). Shakespeare's opinions reflected more heavily the influence of Europe than the mindset of the English in his time. Rome has been a source of inspiration for westerners for millennia, and Shakespeare portrayed all its glory and greatness in a way that England could emulate – and one of the prime ways he suggested was keeping power in one stable ruler.

Throughout his plays, Shakespeare glorifies the consolidation of power into a single ruler. He acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of each ruler he portrays, but ultimately each country is better off when it is led by a single leader. When people attempt to share power, they destroy themselves through jealousy, attempted takeovers, and competition. This in turn leads to civil war and destruction for the people they are supposed to govern; only in a sole ruler

is there found peace and stability again. Shakespeare cleverly placed these themes in plays about Rome which he knew that westerners are always eager to emulate; by making these suggestions about a civilization his countrymen admired, he made his opinions less pointed and more desirable. Sadly for Shakespeare, the world has moved away from the kind of government he admires, though it certainly doesn't seem to have gotten any more stable. Perhaps we ought to give Shakespeare's method a try; maybe Rome was right about one more thing.

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