

Virtue and ambition in julius caesar

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ENG3500 Shakespeare Essay Assignment 1: Julius Caesar —language, character, theme Virtue and Ambition in Julius Caesar Shakespeare's Julius Caesar is a play which displays the contrasting themes of ambition and virtue. The background of this renowned play is set in republican Rome, where the importance of virtue is at its peak. Virtue embraces honour, nobility, love and responsibility for their nation. The Romans believe that truly virtuous men are consistent in their private and public political life. Ambition, on the other hand, has no place in Romans' virtues. In the play, when Caesar begins to display signs of power-hungry, arrogance, increasing ambition and even the idea of tyranny, which clashes with the Roman republican virtues, the tension is built. While Shakespeare shares his definition of virtue through Brutus, as a role model of republican virtue, he creates the tension in the story as Brutus conflicts with ambitious characters like Caesar, Cassius and Mark Antony. Shakespeare begs to question whether virtue or ambition makes a successful leader. In the following essay, I shall discuss the contrasting themes of virtue and ambition in the play. At the play's end, Antony concluded Brutus's life honoring him as " the noblest Roman of them all". Brutus stands firm on his set of virtuous principles. Throughout the play, he struggles to maintain Rome as an idealistic republic. He makes all his decisions only based on what is best for his nation, striving to put aside all personal emotions and desires. Yet, every time he takes the virtuous path which he believes in, he ironically hurts the very idea he seeks to protect. We are put in doubts, of why such constant principles and true virtue can go wrong. Making use of Brutus's nature, Cassius easily convinces him Caesar's ambitious nature as a great threat to the republic and must be

assassinated. Cassius manipulates his “ honorable mettle may be wrought From that it is disposed”, tactfully planting the seeds of Caesar’s ambition and tyranny in his mind, along with a forged letter from the plebeians to Brutus complaining of Caesar. Brutus enters into an internal conflict as to the nobility of this conspiracy and murder, and eventually comes to a conclusion that he is a “ purger”, sacrificing for his nation, which is in line with his virtuous nature. Even among the conspirators, conflict between virtue and ambition is obvious. Besides Brutus, the conspirators plan to murder Caesar derives from selfish desires, envy and ambition. Antony’s speech about Brutus that “ He only in a general honest thought And common good to all made one of them”, draws a line between Brutus’s virtue and others’ ambition. Clearly, Metellus desires power to free his brother, and Cassius is jealous of and ambitious like Caesar. In his conversation with Brutus, he considers himself better than Caesar as he challenges that “ A man of such feeble temper should So get the start of the majestic world, And bear the palm alone. ” He continues to show his jealousy by comparing Caesar with Colossus, where “ we petty men Walk under his huge legs and peep about To find ourselves dishonorable graves” Finally, Brutus is unhappy about Cassius as he discovers that Cassius and others have been involved in bribery to gain money, further drawing a line between virtue and personal desires and ambition. Again, ambition and virtue clashes in the play upon the glory Caesar has ascended upon. As soon as Caesar was introduced in the play, we hear from Cassius that he started to behave like a god. Even when he makes his appearance, Calphurnia and Antony addresses him as “ my lord”. Caesar continues to display various signs of increasing ambition and arrogance,

such as Casca's amusing account of Caesar's thrice refusal to the crown when it was obvious he wanted to accept it. His ambition and arrogance is at its peak in the play as he states that he is "constant as the Northern Star, Of whose true fixed and resting quality There is no fellow in the firmament." It is evident that he sees himself the greatest of all Romans and intends to rule the nation. With his Roman principles and virtues, Brutus is against such ambition. He believes that murder and death is the only way to deal with it. As soon as Caesar dies, he rejoices "Ambition's debt is paid", and he convinces the public that even though he loved Caesar, "But as [Caesar] was ambitious, I slew him". It is ironic as he tries hard to prevent any possibility of ambition in growing into tyranny, yet in the end, the Roman republic is destroyed in his hands, when virtue clashes with ambition. Claiming that killing Antony is "Like wrath in death and envy afterwards", Brutus strives to remain the most noble and virtuous man by separating the death of Caesar from a dishonorable violent deed. In his opinion, murder was righteous and virtuous upon his speech, "Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers" to his fellow conspirators. Even after Caesar's death, he continues to be motivated by his virtue that Antony would sympathize with him, which is proven to be a naïve mistake. Anthony on the other hand, is power-hungry and ambitious, making use of the opportunity of Caesar's death to rise into power. Antony manipulates the crowd shrewdly by his rhetorical speech which questions the 'ambitious' nature of Caesar which has no true evidence. He moves and triggers a riotous crowd, and thus leads to revolution and bloodshed, where Rome will never be the same again, and he could rise in power to rule. As we compare Brutus's speech in the square with Antony's, we see that Brutus

displays true virtue and only true love for his nation and people. Though, he can win some support of the plebeians, the true meaning behind his actions and his virtuous principles, which is to preserve Rome as a republic, is totally lost. It is ironic as the public respond by glorifying “ Caesar’s better parts Shall be crowned in Brutus”, which is exactly opposite to what Brutus hopes to see. While virtue is honoured and promoted in the society, Shakespeare questions the practicality of such virtue in reality of a government or head of nation. To conclude, it is important to recognize that Brutus is doomed to die from the start as he continues to uphold his principles and virtues. As the perfect exemplar of a Roman, he made decisions by sacrificing and overcoming personal desires and emotions, only for the good of the nation. Yet, it is justified through the play through his actions that virtue does not make a good political leader, because it is too idealistic and neglects the emergence of ambition, which is the motivation and driving force of political leaders throughout history.