

Shakespeare's presentation of the character of mark antony in 'julius caesar'

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We meet the character of Mark Antony three times before Julius Caesar's death, though he speaks little and we do not get much of an indication of his character. Antony fully enters the play exactly halfway through, when he makes a gripping speech, and his eloquence changes the course of Roman history. From this point onwards, Antony becomes a key player in the action and begins to change the nature of events in the play, especially with respect to Brutus and Cassius. He takes part in the struggle for power, and is driven by the need to avenge Caesar's death. Antony emerges as a flamboyant character, but one who is also hard headed, clear-sighted, and ambitious. Mark Antony was Caesar's closest and most faithful friend, confidante, and follower. The two men had fought many campaigns together, and knew each other very well. Antony is the only character in the play who calls Caesar by his first name, 'Julius', a sign of their strong friendship. Antony had also offered Caesar the crown three times, signifying his generosity and devotion. We see clearly Antony's love and admiration for Caesar in the three short statements he makes before Caesar's death, and over his corpse as he says, 'thou art the ruins of the noblest man/ That ever lived in the tide of times'. After the murder, he attempts to act as Caesar would have done. However, Mark Antony is also portrayed as a partier and womanizer, 'that revels long-a-nights' and is 'given/ To sports, to wildness, and much company'. He leads an extravagant and indulgent lifestyle and is also portrayed as powerful and athletic. Antony's many assets emerge throughout the play; by the end his character appears to have developed, and it becomes clear to the audience that he is a loyal general who is militarily accomplished, as well as politically shrewd and exceptionally skilled

at oration. Antony is similar to Caesar in that his power leads to ambition. An important moment in the play showing Antony's power and significance occurs when Caesar asks him to touch Calphurnia as he passes her in his race during the celebration of the feast of Lupercal. According to superstition, the touch of an athlete during this holy feast would make a woman fertile, and the fact that Caesar chooses Antony to touch his wife suggests that he trusts and has faith in him, and possibly even sees him as a protector. However, as Shakespeare kills off the character the play is named for, he maintains dramatic tension by making Antony emerge as even more forceful than he initially appeared to be. Brutus makes a mistake in underestimating Antony's power, believing that he is not interested in politics and that 'he can do no more than Caesar's arm / When Caesar's head is off'. Consequently, Antony becomes a troublesome and dangerous rival to the conspirators. As Antony's power increases, so does his ambition, and after Caesar's death he proves to be a great opportunist, quickly devising a plan for revenge. Antony ensures his servant witnesses his oration so that he can use it to impress Octavius, Caesar's heir and Antony's ally. Antony is planning far in advance, showing his high hopes for the future. From this point onwards in the play, Antony becomes ruthless and calculating, willing to use his power and his abilities for his own purposes. His power over the people and soaring ambition become similar to Caesar's. Antony confirms Cassius' judgement of him as a 'shrewd contriver' when he meets the conspirators after Caesar's murder. He states he is now on 'slippery ground', and his words have a double meaning: both literally with blood, and metaphorically in that he opposes the conspirators, but must

make them believe that he can still do business with them. Although he is initially at a loss for words, Antony's skill as an orator, wit, and ability to deceive and manipulate allow him to cover his feelings, succeed in pretending to befriend the conspirators and persuading them to trust him. He begins by flattering them in order to seduce them, using metaphorical language, naming them 'master spirits of this age'. He has the nerve to call Caska 'valiant' even though he knows that Caska is shifty, and says 'good Trebonius', despite knowing that Trebonius directed him aside so that they could kill Caesar. Although on the surface it appears that Antony has turned traitor to his memory of Caesar, he openly calls himself 'Either a coward or a flatterer', boldly speaking aloud the thoughts that they are evidently thinking to themselves. His ability to apparently see both sides of the argument and relate to the conspirators gives Antony some protection from the ill intentions of these murderers. He is in a delicate situation, but keeps them on the defensive by demanding 'reasons / Why and wherein Caesar was dangerous'. Antony cleverly avoids dealing with Cassius by taking advantage of Brutus' power and gullibility. He flatters him and attacks his weaknesses, naive sense of honour, and nobility. Antony knows that Brutus wants to believe that he will side with them – he had said 'I know that we shall have him well to friend' – and therefore takes advantage of Brutus' hope by deceptively telling the conspirators, 'Friends I am with you all, and love you all'. This construct allows Antony to receive permission to speak at Caesar's funeral, as it gives Brutus time to accept Antony and sympathize with him. Antony also makes a point of shaking each conspirator's hand, and while doing so makes a mental note of each man's name, which allows him to

improvise the act of the murder later in his speech to the crowd. Antony calls some of the conspirators by two names rather than one (for example, 'Decius Brutus' rather than 'Decius', which is unusual in everyday Roman life, though this formality emphasises the tension of the moment). Antony's plan is a gamble, requiring quite some nerve, though he is not dissuaded by dishonesty. In comparison to all the conspirators, and even to Cassius, the most strategic and scheming of them all, Antony is strong and politically cunning. As soon as the conspirators depart, Antony begs forgiveness of Caesar's dead body for being 'meek and gentle with these butchers'. This provides a strong contrast to the 'gentlemen' he spoke of just moments earlier, and therefore makes the audience aware that he is now able to express his true feelings and private thoughts, as well as emphasizing the falsity of his previous actions. Antony is incredibly emotional and filled with grief and anger in this soliloquy. His powerful and passionate words provide him with a sort of redemption and drive him to rouse the people of Rome to rebellion. He prophesizes 'Domestic fury and fierce civil strife' in Italy, and uses horrific images such as 'infants quartered' to predict the many future deaths and the chaos that are to come and to shock the audience. Antony's complete and utter loyalty to 'Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge', reminds us of great Caesar's continuous presence despite his death, and demonstrates the extreme measures Antony will take to avenge his friend's betrayal. His words therefore set the tone for the rest of the play and prepare the audience for the forthcoming turmoil and bloodshed. Antony's soliloquy marks a turning point in the play, which begins with his masterful and manipulative speech to the plebeians to avenge his beloved friend and

to gain power, and ultimately dooms Rome to endure Caesar's revenge. ' Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears'. Mark Antony begins his speech with an appeal for attention before a confused and hostile crowd. Commas punctuate his first line as he speaks slowly to give the retreating people time to hear him. This oration will test their loyalty towards Rome and towards ' Noble Antony'. His speeches take the form of verse rather than prose, which make his words more strong, emotive, and poetic than Brutus'. Antony immediately disables all opposition in the crowd with the words ' I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him'. However, he soon begins to direct his audience's thoughts away from the ' evil ambition' that Brutus spoke of by talking of Caesar's legacy and hinting at his heroism, kindness, and honour. Being a master of rhetorical and political skill, Antony simultaneously maintains Brutus' arguments while highlighting their flaws and suggesting the opposite, and thus is able to appear deferential to the conspirators but nevertheless incite a revolt against them, much as the previous scene, where he damns the murderers while appearing to pay them respect. Here, Antony states that ' Caesar was ambitious' many times, then counters these arguments by using tangible images that appeal to the plebeians and remind them that Caesar brought money to Rome, showed compassion for the poor, and turned down the crown three times. This logical evidence questions the validity of Brutus' argument and makes the crowd feel guilty by reminding them that they all loved Caesar once, though there are ' none so poor to do him reverence' at his death. Antony also repeatedly calls the conspirators ' honourable men' so that it seems that their view of Caesar as ' ambitious' must therefore have been correct, and so as not to go against the crowd,

who are, at this point, still in favour of Brutus. However, the use of this phrase is heavily ironic, as he believes the men are traitors. Antony's repetition of the term 'honourable men' gives his speech power and infuses it with an increasingly sarcastic tone that questions their honour simply by drawing so much attention to it: 'For Brutus is an honourable man,/ So are they all, all honourable men'. The emphasis on this phrase also builds rhythm into the speech which captures the crowd's attention. Antony continues to flatter the conspirators by saying 'I am no orator, as Brutus is', despite offering a speech three times the length of Brutus'. This also expresses his supposed low self-confidence, thereby evoking pity among the crowd in an attempt for support and praise of his great oration. Again demonstrating his ability to manipulate the thoughts of the crowd, Antony introduces the idea of 'mutiny and rage' while claiming to prevent it, then says that if he were as skilled an orator as Brutus, he would stir the people to revenge and riot. Antony then proceeds to flatter the Romans, calling them 'gentle' when they are in fact uncouth. By making it seem as if he is consulting the crowd, and by not explicitly enforcing any opinion, Antony does not appear dictatorial, but rather a statesman. He involves the crowd and gives the impression that they are in control. He asks rhetorical questions, to which he supplies answers. The consultation of the crowd (such as 'You will compel me then to read the will?') takes on a significance, as there is an intimacy among the crowd, the speaker, and the body. Antony uses the will itself as a device to tantalize the crowd as the possibility of money makes the people selfish and excited, meanwhile stating that he cannot read it as it would demonstrate how much Caesar loved his citizens

and therefore stir them up. Here, again, he is deviously employing the craft of the rhetoric, as a riot is precisely what he wants. He plays with their desire and strengthens it by holding back information until exactly the right moment, which consequently makes the mob even more passionate and dangerous. When Antony finally reads the will, Caesar's generosity in bequeathing his private gardens and orchards and seventy-five drachmans to each citizen emphasises the injustice of the assassination and sends the crowd into a frenzy. Often, actions speak louder than words, and Antony successfully uses theatrics in his oration to create a dramatic effect that will have a lasting impact on the crowd. He initially makes a powerful entrance by entering the Forum bearing dead Caesar's body, which moves the audience, and from this moment onwards, all eyes are turned towards him. He makes a final lasting image when he uncovers Caesar's body and reveals his wounds, at which point one plebeian responds with 'O piteous spectacle'. I have seen a production of Julius Caesar at The Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, and the constant presence of the dead body at the forefront of the stage, draped in white fabric with the bloody head uncovered, increased and sustained the dramatic tension and suspense throughout Antony's speech, while the dim blue lighting created a sombre mood and cast shadows on the characters, achieving an air of mystery. Antony thus uses the power of theatre to prolong the strife following the assassination by shocking the audience with a improvisatory account of the death, claiming to know which conspirator made each wound. He deliberately uses hyperbole such as 'O, what a fall was there, my countrymen! / Then I, and you, and all of us fell down', to aggravate his audience. Harsh 'k', 'r' and 't' consonants in words

like ' unkindest cut' emphasise the brutality of the murderous assault, while soft ' f' and ' l' sounds echo Caesar's fall. By recounting the murder in a production filled with tragic pathos, he and all the citizens of Rome are forced to relive the traumatic experience. Antony's oration is clearly based more on emotion than on reason. His passionate mourning and sorrow, as shown by his genuine tears over the corpse, and his sentimental reminiscing about Caesar throughout his speech win over the feelings of the crowd and contrast with all the other characters' actions and language. Antony's long speeches are actually motivated by grief for another individual, horror, and outrage, and the audience is enchanted by such a display of loyalty. Antony states, ' He was my friend', taking on a softer, more reflective tone.

Concerns such as friendship are ones they can all understand, and the crowd can therefore empathize with him. Antony shows how much he has been hurt by Caesar's death, stating, ' My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar'. At this point, he feels the need to ' pause' to recover himself, and it is precisely here where the crowd instinctively began to change sides. Moved by his emotion, the fickle crowd begin to sympathise with Antony, commenting ' Poor soul, his eyes are red as fire with weeping'. Caught up in their own emotion, they accept everything he says. The reason Antony's speech is so successful is because he employs theatrical effects and colorful language in a way that is powerful and attractive to the audience. He is clearly not the ' plain blunt man' he claims to be, and instead proves himself to be eloquent and articulate, with a knowledge of managing crowds. Antony skilfully uses every piece of information he can to win over the crowd. His speech is well received, and public opinion turns against the conspirators. It is by targeting

the masses that Antony is able to create a chaotic situation that allows him to seize power in place of the republicans. He even later attempts to dissuade Octavius from entering Rome, possibly to avoid sharing power. By means of his ruthless show of grief and persuasive rhetoric, Antony has convinced the unruly mob to revolt against the conspirators. They are enraged to the point of rebellion and violence, and leave to cremate Caesar's body with due respect, burn the houses of the conspirators, and incite general mayhem. Consequently, Brutus and Cassius flee Rome. Antony's ruthlessness becomes ever more apparent as he personifies his mischief, saying 'Mischief, thou art afoot: / Take thou what course thou wilt'. Delighted that the crowd is now acting to his advantage, Antony immediately thinks of ways he can profit from this chaos, and visits Octavius and Lepidus at Caesar's house. Utterly confident about his military strategy, Antony personifies fortune, stating 'Fortune is merry, / And in this mood will give us anything'. By readily trading the lives of the conspirators for his own political success, Antony's merciless nature is revealed. Henceforth, he uses his current position of leadership to defeat his opponents. At the beginning of Act V, as the two opposing sides argue before the battle, Shakespeare shows that language has gone past the point of having an effect. It is ironic, though, that Antony accuses the 'Villans' of 'kissing Caesar's feet' while their 'vile daggers / Hacked one another in the sides of Caesar', when he did the same by betraying Brutus' trust and friendship while turning the crowd against him at Caesar's funeral. Nevertheless, no measure of insult or accusation will deter the inevitable violence brought on by that which has already been spoken. The war at Philippi that follows reveals much about Antony's

character. We primarily see that he is a skilled military leader, as he makes better decisions on the battlefield than any of the other generals and is proficient at pinpointing the best point of attack; for example, when Brutus leaves Cassius' army exposed, Antony attacks immediately. Even when Antony takes the inferior 'left hand of the even field' he is victorious, while Octavius is defeated. Allowing Octavius to take the more advantageous right hand side of the battlefield could suggest Antony's modesty and reason, as it shows that he is loyal to Caesar's great-nephew and heir and acknowledges his superiority. On the other hand, Antony and Octavius argue, as they are both power-craving. There is some personality clash, though they are both able to place their differences secondary to their shared aspiration to defeat Brutus and Cassius. To do this, however, they must be expedient and practical. Antony recklessly changes Caesar's will, which he previously used to manipulate the Romans, by looking for ways to 'cut off some charges in legacies'. He wants to reduce the amount of money left by Caesar to the poor of Rome, and instead keeps it for the triumvirate and to cut costs for his army. He also proves to be cold and hard-hearted in discussing the deaths of any senators with power who may threaten his reign (for example, by curtly stating that his own nephew, Publius, 'shall not live', rather than attempting to argue for his life). Antony's actions are filled with irony, as he is now assassinating people who he feels have power, just as the conspirators did to Caesar. Similarly, he goes behind the back of Lepidus, his ally, criticising him and using him resourcefully to do their 'errands' and to ease themselves of 'diverse slanderous loads'. Antony thus compares Lepidus to his horse, and plans to withdraw him from power as soon as they are done using him,

despite him being a ' tried and valiant soldier'. His plan is to then assume power in Lepidus' place. In this scene Antony appears very controlling, and by talking down to Octavius, who defends Lepidus by reminding him that he, Antony, has ' seen more days' than him and thereby implying that he is wiser, he comes across as pompous and self-important. By this point in the play we see how much Antony has changed. The generosity of Octavius that Antony himself used to manifest contrasts sharply with his personality now. The triumvirs, particularly Antony, defeat the conspirators, though they do so with no regard for cruelty, tyranny, and betrayal. As it stands after the battle, Antony and Octavius are both competing for domination. Antony has underestimated Octavius' determination to rule Rome, and there is no clear winner, though Antony's prospects remain high. However, we have to question whether Antony would truly be a good ruler. He has been given power by the people of Rome, and they are clearly in favour of him, even though since his oration his principles appear to have changed. Although his actions have been carried out on behalf of Rome, he has adapted them for personal gain. It becomes evident that as a ruler Antony would be prepared to forget truth, loyalty, and basic principles as he has done in the past, thus losing his nobility. However, he is still able to recognize and commend nobility among others, as in the final scene Antony pays tribute to Brutus, calling him ' the noblest Roman of them all', recognizing that of all the conspirators he was the only one who acted with good intentions, rather than out of ' envy of great Caesar'. This public show of praise has the added purpose of uniting the people of Rome. The future of Rome now seems to lie in Antony's hands. Brutus killed Caesar to create democracy and to prevent

a one-man state, but the murder appears to have failed to solve their political problems, as Antony's climb to power indicates that he too will be a dictator like Caesar. Antony has little concern for the plebeians who will suffer due to the civil strife he has created. It is ironic that Antony hails Brutus as being a 'man' rather than a god like Caesar was, but nevertheless is set out to be a similar type of leader. The future of Rome is the audience's primary concern in this scene, though the fact that the play ends with a sense of uncertainty means that many decisions are left up to the audience. Following the assassination we have 'a mourning Rome, a dangerous Rome', and since the political structure as it is at the end of the novel is largely how it was to begin with, the most likely conclusion is that little will change in the future. This is due to the overwhelming desire for power and authority among the ruling class. There is no prospect of hierarchy in the political system the triumvirate has created. These men should unite and work towards bringing Rome to stability, working for the good of the people, but they are in fact divided by their pride and self-interest, and their constant attempts to undermine each other. These concerns have preoccupied their minds, and as a result they have overlooked the qualities of honor and dignity that should be characteristic of all Romans. The tragedy of Julius Caesar therefore lies not only in the murderous assault on the central character, but also in the crisis of a powerful nation which rules one third of the world. Throughout 'Julius Caesar' Mark Antony proves himself to be a sophisticated and artful public speaker, a successful military leader, and a sly politician, meanwhile fulfilling Brutus' assessment of him as a 'wise and valiant Roman'. Antony has a romantic side to him, which encourages his

emotion to influence both other people, and many of his own decisions. His emotional oration over Caesar's body is deserved and allows him to stand up for what he feels is right, though this emotion also provokes political unrest in Rome. Antony also embraces reason, particularly in his speech to the plebeians, and his outstanding charisma demonstrates the power of oratory, as it overwhelms the Roman people. However, his deliberate misuse of language reveals his calculating personality, which during the battle becomes brutal and cruel. Two contrasting sides of his personality are thus exposed: the logical and reasonable, and the ruthless. Antony thus symbolizes both the problem and the solution for Rome, which is the reason for the indefinite consequences of the action and events in the play.