

The evil that men do:
mark antony's
machiavellian nature



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From the beginning of time, when societies were first constructed, certain men always knew exactly how to obtain something every person desires—power. Human beings thirst it, crave it. They love to give orders, love to be on top. Once obtained, power becomes like a drug—a person always wants more. Some achieve control in bloody ways; others acquire it through peaceful behavior. How might one reasonably gain and keep power? Niccolò Machiavelli and William Shakespeare agree that the former is generally the best way to remain in power, should the person in control be careful.

Mark Antony's Machiavellian nature demonstrates that the ideal politician must be a good actor and be careful in order to be powerful. During Caesar's funeral, Mark Antony proves to be an excellent actor fit for Machiavelli's prince. He bends the riled crowd to see from his point of view, playing on the crowd's feelings, cleverly directing their emotions to his advantage through his actions: " Bear with me: / My heart is in the coffin with Caesar, / And I must pause till it come back to me" (Shakespeare III. ii. 115 -117).

Mark Antony acts as he cries during Caesar's funeral, manipulating the crowd's emotions through his own tears. After all, if a man as honorable and brave as Antony sobs over Caesar's murder, surely it must be true that Caesar did not deserve death? The speech illustrates the ease in which revered people in positions of power easily sway the common man, because although Antony is not crying for the benefit of Caesar, he appears to be. Thus, he effectively shows the people loyalty, humanity, and honesty—three of five qualities Machiavelli recommends appearing to have.

When comparing Machiavelli's writings and Antony's actions side-by-side, they reveal that Antony is much like the perfect prince Machiavelli describes. Machiavelli advises that a politician plays the tune the crowd wishes to hear, saying that "men in general judge more by the eyes than the hands, for everyone can see, but few can feel. Everyone sees what you appear to be, few feel what you are, and those few do not dare oppose themselves in the opinion of many...for ordinary people will always be taken in by appearances and by the outcome of an action; and in the world there is nothing but ordinary people" (77).

Machiavelli says that a person need not have certain aspects of "honorable" character, for it is not necessary; all one must do is look like he has these characteristics, because people do not listen to the meaning behind words, and they see what they expect to see, a concept that Antony uses to his full advantage with the crowd of Romans when he cries. The crowd sees the tears, but they do not feel the emotion behind the tears, which was calculating and careful. This concept is one that politicians all over the world utilize for their own benefit—the play to the crowd.

Machiavelli and Shakespeare both suggest the same thing about the world: a person can manipulate groups of people like puppets, as long as he knows which strings to pull. After the death of Caesar, Mark Antony demonstrates his Machiavellian nature even further when he kills much of his opposition to obtain his goal. After the occurrence, Brutus and Cassius discuss this slaughter of men in Brutus's tent: "By proscription and bills of outlawry, / Octavius, Antony, and Lepidus / Have put to death a hundred senators" (Shakespeare VI. iii. 199-201).

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Antony and his cohorts condemn men to die, and there is no one they spare, not even their family, which suggests that human nature in itself is wicked, and is not loyal even to those who share the same blood. This is significant because it proposes the idea that men will do anything to gain power—and that this is true for every culture in the world. Murder is worse in the eyes of the people when directed toward family, or when the murder is a massacre. These actions show that the person committing the crimes is determined to gain what they want, and that is dangerous.

Antony kills not only his own flesh and blood, but many others in a mass execution, and so was, for a brief time, considered evil, like Machiavelli. However, although Antony could be deemed as evil because of his actions, he cannot be considered Machiavellian until he spares an opposing soldier. In the midst of battle, where not one person would have criticized him for ordering the death of the captured enemy, Antony instead says, “ Keep this man safe. / Give him all kindness. I had rather have / such men as my friends than enemies” (Shakespeare V. iv. 28-30).

Mark Antony spares the ally of his enemy in contrast of his previous killings of the senators. Like Machiavelli, Shakespeare proposes that there is fine line between brutality and power, and Antony knows how to walk that line. He appears to be gracious because “ in taking a state, its conqueror must consider all those cruelties he has to do and do them all in one stroke so as not to have to renew them every day, and to be able...to reassure men and win them over by benefitting them” (Machiavelli 39).

Antony could have killed the senators and left it at that, but he, in true Machiavellian fashion, demonstrates an act of mercy, so that the people will know he is not a cruel dictator and forgive him more quickly. On the other hand, one could argue that when Antony let the man go, it may not have been his intention to give the people rewards over a long period of time; he may have done it out of his good heart. Similarly, Mark Antony's emotions during Caesar's funeral may have been authentic grief for his friend Caesar, and not a tool to play with the crowd's emotions.

It is, of course, true that Antony's actions may not have been Machiavellian in intent, and that the emotion at Caesar's funeral may have been authentic. However, regardless of his aim in acting the way he did, his exploits lined up with Machiavelli's description of an idyllic prince, and so Antony, willingly or not, is more Machiavellian than not. Power is complicated and intricate, unable to be defined in one category. It has many characteristics, both good and evil, and certainly, the best way to gain power is through immoral ways.

However, Antony is one of the few that knows how to wield power—he is careful, thoughtful, and certain before committing any act that could potentially stand on sand. Unless built by a careful hand, power built on sand washes into the sea eventually. By utilizing Machiavelli's teachings and his own cunning, Antony constructs his structure of rule on solid ground, and proves that being Machiavellian ensures power, which is a strategy all politicians around the world are capable of using.