

Mark antony: a study of the person

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Mark Antony is known to us through two chief mediums. The first is from the two plays of Shakespeare- ‘ Julius Caesar’ and ‘ Antony and Cleopatra’ where a romanticized and magnified version of his character is presented. The second comes from the historical analysis and commentaries of Plutarch who compares, contrasts and views all the actions of Mark Antony in back-drop his three contemporaries who also happen to be three of the greatest figures of history-Julius Caesar, Octavian (Augustus) Caesar, and Queen Cleopatra of Egypt, and find Antony a man driven more by impulse and caprice than by reason and rationales.

Was he, as we see in the plays of Shakespeare, just a loyal friend of Caesar, a great general of Roman Republic and a passionate lover; or was he, as the historians’ claims, the person whose desire for power and Cleopatra was ultimately responsible for fall of the great Roman Republic and the principles of oligarchy, democracy and plurality. It is indeed a difficult choice to make- where exactly to put Mark Antony? And therefore we need to understand Mark Antony in context of the contemporary Rome and it’s power politics.

Early Life

Most of the information available about Mark Antony comes from the work of ancient Greek historian, Plutarch who has written extensively on the Roman Empire and its leading figures. Plutarch tells us that Antony came from a very noble family which lacked affluence but never found itself short on honor or nobleness. On his mother’s side Antony was related with family of Caesars. Despite Antony was educated well by his mother, in his teens he fell

into a life of dissipation and revelry and even before he was twenty, he was under an enormous debt.

To escape the clutches of the evil company and the suite of debtors, Antony moved to Greece. His sojourn to Greece marked a very important phase in his life. Although in Rome Antony had never earmarked a distinguished place for himself, in Greece he took rigorous military training and exercise and also learned the art of oratory- an art that he mastered to the degree that few have been able to surpass him through entire history. Greece also brought first of the fames for young Antony. He accompanied one of the Greek Counselors, Gabinius, in a campaign against a major Greek antagonist Aristobulus of Syria.

Plutarch is candid here in praise of Antony and he says that in the course of the battle Antony single handed defeated Aristobulus in an intense battle and captured him along with his sons. His exploits continued when in the course of further battles when he won cities after cities, captured garrisons, won over armies that heavily outnumbered his own, displayed dazzling brilliance in strategy and military skills and also showed most human and compassionate side of his nature by respectfully treating his defeated or killed enemies.

By the end of his enterprise in Greece, a youth given to pleasure and gambling in Rome had become the most gallant Roman in eyes of Greece. Association with Caesar Antony's exploits in Greece had made him affluent- both in terms of money as well as friends. He had a genial nature, excellent looks and formidable reputation and he won many friends through top echelons in Rome. The dice in his life was undoubtedly cast when he joined

Julius Caesar's armies in Gaul. Rome was already witnessing a grand clash of personalities between Caesar and Pompey, Caesar's father in law.

Pompey was the leading Roman politician and he viewed Caesar's growing reputation, on account of his commendable victories in Gaul and Germany, as a threat to himself and Roman Republic. More importantly, Pompey had doubts that given the absolute power and authority, Caesar would throw over the democratic government and instate himself as the King or Emperor. Therefore he maneuvered constantly to either keep Caesar out of the power equations. Antony's friendship with Caesar provided a great boost to the Caesar camp.

Antony had already become a peerless orator and his speeches swayed the masses against Pompey and made Caesar an adored and acclaimed hero. Antony and Caesar formed a life-long friendship and Antony's support for Caesar was uncompromising. He was totally devoted in cause of his friend, and was one of the instrumental figures in defeat of Pompey and election of Julius Caesar as Roman Consul. There are many instances of Antony's strong friendship with Caesar and though at times Antony felt disparaged to some degrees by Caesar, especially in public, he did not allow these trifling matters to waver his deep loyalty and friendship.

Caesar, on his own part, had always kept Antony first among his friends and provided him with largest provinces and most influential positions. At the ceremony of Caesar's fifth election as Roman Consul, Antony presented him a tiara in full public view, virtually requesting him to accept the position of Roman Emperor. Plutarch states that this action of Antony was more

frivolous than serious, and despite his many requests, Caesar repeatedly refused to accept the crown and thus the ceremony ended.

However, Plutarch and many other historians believe that this childish act of Antony was one of the immediate reasons behind execution of his best friend. Brutus, Cassius and many people had interpreted the bandy of tiara between Caesar and Antony as a pretext for Caesar to end the Roman Republic and instate himself as the King. When Caesar was killed in the senate house, Antony's first steps were to restore a sense of order and security in senate and he even spoke on behalf of both Brutus and Cassius.

The speech greatly calmed down tempers and many felt that a major civil war was averted by Antony. However, at the funeral of Caesar, Antony revealed to full gathering of people the horrors of crime perpetrated against their beloved Consul. His magical speech turned the tidings at once against Brutus and Cassius, both of whom, along with their supporters fled the Rome the same night to escape an enraged mob that consisted of almost entire Roman public. Second Triumvirate Until the death and funeral of Caesar, Antony shows himself a remarkable character and a truly worthy friend of a great general.

But after Caesar's demise we start to see a new Antony. This Antony is a man who, for a time a being, is at helm of the power, and also who is largely unchecked. It must be remembered here, that when Caesar was alive, he kept a rein on Antony through his gentle but firm remonstrations. As this was no longer the case, Antony took many an inept decisions, and the foremost among them was his injudicious treatment of young Octavian-Caesar's

nominated heir, whom he tried to strip of his legacy and monetary possessions.

Mark Antony, despite his bravery, valor and friendship with Caesar, was hardly liked in the Senate due to his strong ambitions and desires for power and youth-held inclination for dissipation. Therefore upon hearing his mistreatment of Octavian, the Senate turned against him. For a brief period of time, Antony fought a double edged war-both against Caesar's assassin and Caesar's supporters and ultimately he even joined hands with Octavian and Lepidus to defeat Brutus and his army, a feat which this Triumvirate accomplished under generalship of Antony in 42 BC.

Antony and Cleopatra Post the defeat of Brutus, Antony headed to east to pursue his goals of personal expansions. In this quest he married Egyptian queen Cleopatra, who was former wife of Julius Caesar. The relation of Antony and Cleopatra largely defined the second phase of Antony's life. Antony won numerous territories in and around Egypt, but instead of presenting them to Octavian and Roman Senate, he distributed them among his and Cleopatra's children. But his most important step was declaration of Caesar's and Cleopatra's son as the only true heir of Caesar.

Antony was also instrumental framing claim that Octavian had usurped Caesar's original will and had unlawfully claimed power. Although this politically astute move was made to strip off Octavian's claim of being Caesar's true heir, it essentially backfired on Antony. It marked final end of his tryst with Octavian. Octavian decided to destroy Antony both politically and militarily in a series of calculated moves. Antony's loyalty for Cleopatra

over his loyalty for Rome was exploited; his allegiance was questioned as were his decisions to start wars without permission of senate.

The intense propaganda left even his supporters in Rome divided. Finally the Roman senate declared Antony a traitor and declared war upon Egypt.

Antony, ever the smartest and most cunning of politicians, had met a match in Octavian. Finally Octavian and Antony met in a naval battle near Greece in which the combined fleet of Antony and Cleopatra was defeated and they fled back to Egypt. Octavian continued to pursue them even in -land, finally forcing Antony to committed suicide, in the mistaken belief that Cleopatra had already killed herself to avoid the ignominy of defeat. Cleopatra committed suicide a couple of weeks later.

Antony's and Cleopatra's death removed the final impediments from Octavian's path to his un-questionable ascend to power. The person and character of Antony offers a very colorful and instructive study in dramatic rise and fall of an extremely competent, brave but power hungry politician. He was intimately involved with three of the greatest figures of all times- Julius Caesar, Octavian Caesar and Cleopatra, profoundly influencing the life of each of the three. There are many people of the view that if Antony had refrained to exhibit his desire for power and ascension, the Roman Republic would had remained unscathed.

Others see him as a catalyst who led to rise of the Octavian (Augustus) the Great, the greatest among all Roman emperors. But then, it is that a single virtue triumphs over a many a flaws and none of us can deny that Antony's deep sense of loyalty, whether with Julius Caesar or Cleopatra, can be

marked as his defining virtue and it's this virtue that s shines over his desire of power and glory.