

The use and acquisition of authority in Julius Caesar and the Prince

[History](#), [Ancient History](#)



A comparative study of two texts reveals context as the primary influence upon the interplay between pragmatism and personality morality in an individual's pursuit and consolidation of power. Driven by an overarching contextual desire for stable government, Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513) and William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599) demonstrates the incompatibility of personal morality and political success across their respective discussions of effective authority. Implementing his extensive diplomatic experience among Italy's warring city-states, Machiavelli's didactic treatise operates within a value system supremely favoring ruthless pragmatism over ethics in establishing and maintaining authority. While the relative liberality of the form enables Shakespeare to problematize Machiavelli's binary perceptions of human nature, his ultimate desire to preserve the stability achieved under Elizabeth I's reign leads him to favor pragmatism over morality in exercising authority. Therefore despite depictions of human nature nuanced by differing purposes, shared contextual priorities drive these composers to present aligned intertextual perspectives privileging pragmatism over morality in an individual's pursuit of power.

Due to the volatile nature of politics, a leader's success in maintaining authority is determined by their ability to suppress moral reservations and make calculated decisions to ensure political advancement. Upon the observation of Italy's warring oligarchies rife with espionage and shifting alliances, Machiavelli offers opportunistic pragmatism as an infallible approach to maintaining authority to the treatise's dedicatee, Lorenzo de Medici, in an attempt to re-enter Florence's diplomatic elite. He dictates that

a ruler “ must pamper people or destroy them”, with high modality tone typical of an advisory handbook demonstrating Machiavelli’s binary perceptions of human conduct. He instructs his reader to “ eliminate the family of the previous ruler” in a bid to establish authority over mixed monarchies, a euphemism detaching the moral implications of murder from the political advancement it yields. To palliate these controversial claims in his predominately Catholic context, he cites “ Hannibal’s tremendous cruelty” as the leading factor in the general’s immovable authority, an allusion providing historical validation for his violation of the virtues espoused by leaders in the ‘ Mirror of Princes’ genre.

Faced with a differing contextual purpose to both entertain and stimulate his seasoned theatrical audience, Shakespeare problematizes Machiavelli’s binary depictions of human nature. Brutus is referred to frequently with the epithet, “ honourable”, endearing him to the audience for the very moral character that Machiavelli rejects. Furthermore Brutus struggles to suppress his innate morality, stating that he is “ with himself at war”, a military metaphor demonstrating the complexities of negotiating pragmatism and morality. However Shakespeare, impressed with Queen Elizabeth’s ethically unsound methods of securing authority such as the legalization of torture against disobedient subjects, demonstrates the ultimate failure of leaders guided by blind idealism. Brutus makes a plea to spare Antony, calling for the conspirators to be “ sacrificers, not butchers”, with this religious lexical choice signifying his politically unwise attempt to idealize Caesar’s assassination. Brutus’ trusting nature foolishly pushes him to permit Antony

to address the plebeians, with Cassius pointing out, “ Know you how much the people may be moved...?” This rhetorical question emphasizes and foreshadows the failure of Brutus’ idealism in the face of fickle public support. Therefore while differing purposes and forms present nuanced views of human nature, a shared value for the primacy of stable authority pushes both composers to value pragmatism over personal morality.

While the adherence to blind moral idealism is a hindrance to maintaining authority, an impression of it is necessary to preserve the symbiotic relationship between a ruler and his subjects. As civilian and interfamilial hostility spelled the downfall of many Italian oligarchies, Machiavelli suggests that a leader’s duplicitous nature is integral to maintaining authority over subjects. A ruler must “ seem and sound wholly compassionate, wholly loyal...wholly religious.” Repetition of “ wholly” amplifies the depth of public deception Machiavelli perceives as paramount for maintaining power. A leader should give the “ impression of greatness, spirit, seriousness and strength”, a tetracolon of qualities Machiavelli believes a leader should display but not put into practice. He advises leaders to “ overcome obstacles by force or fraud...(by studying) the politics of Cesare Borgia”, a contemporary allusion demonstrating his respect for Borgia’s reputable cunning, which Machiavelli keenly observed firsthand upon years of service in his court.

Shakespeare consummates Machiavelli’s precepts in his characterization of Antony, whose stirring public rhetoric finds its roots in the cult of individuality and propaganda perpetuated by the “ Virgin Queen” as a highly

effective measure of unifying the English embittered by years of religious conflict under the unified authority of her image. However, Shakespeare presents Antony as a morally ambivalent character as he pleads with Caesar's corpse in a preceding soliloquy to "pardon (him)" for his false civility with the conspirators. Imperative demonstrates that Antony too is subject to stings of morality which Machiavelli disregards nonchalantly as a factor affecting humans seeking political authority. However Shakespeare supremely exalts Antony's political cunning as he repeats emphatically in his oration to the plebeians that "Brutus is an honourable man". Antistrophe allows Antony to project an impression of his own virtue while simultaneously undermining Brutus and the conspirators' motives. Shakespeare includes stage directions to "come down from the pulpit", placing Antony in close proximity to his audience, enhancing his plea to them as "friends" and thus equals. The success of Antony's false virtue in seizing political authority is exemplified by the plebeians' reaction, "Revenge! Seek! Burn! Slay!" This series of exclamations exemplify the success of Antony's manipulations through rhetoric, echoing reactions to Elizabeth's 'Tilbury speech'. Therefore, like instances of civilian dissension in their respective contexts push both composers to advocate for false displays of virtue as paramount to preserving authority.

The overarching desire for stable government across the contexts of both Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* negates the effects of their differing purposes and forms to present aligned intertextual perspectives promoting pragmatism over morality for an individual's

acquisition and exercise of authority. Perhaps the nuanced discussions of human and morality across both texts constitute a true testament to the endless complexities of negotiating human nature in an individual's pursuit of power.