

# Strange Bedfellows: Aristotle, Shakespeare, and *Julius Caesar*

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William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is a deceptively simple play, which may be the reason it is so often taught to high school students. In fact, for many of us, *Julius Caesar* served as our introduction to Shakespeare, never to be read again. This is a great disservice to both the playwright and to the play itself, which can be approached from many directions, all leading to new insights and understandings. One of these is the Aristotelian approach.

On multiple levels, *Julius Caesar* is a play about government: its forms, its functions, its corruption. Aristotle provides a useful and convenient means of examining and understanding the political themes inherent in the play and a moral balance for understanding and evaluating the political motivations and actions of our leaders and ourselves. In fact, it is a measure of the wisdom of both Aristotle and Shakespeare that America's current struggle with Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden raises essentially the same questions as did the intrigue between the antagonists in *Julius Caesar*.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle examines the relationship between the individual and the state and attempts to define the purpose, duties, and actions of the ideal government.

In Book III of the *Politics*, Aristotle states the obvious: "government must be in the hands of one, or of a few, or of many" (114). He distinguishes between those forms which govern for the "common good" and those which exist to serve "private interest" (114). The former he terms "true forms" of government, while the latter he classifies as "perversions" (114). In *Julius Caesar*, we can see the process by which all three forms of government—government by one, by a few, and by the many—degenerate into their perverted forms.

One of the central themes of the play is whether rule by Caesar will be a benevolent and constitutional monarchy or whether it will be despotic. This is the central conflict of the play and is introduced immediately in the opening scene. As Flavius and Marullus mourn Pompey and prepare to remove the adornments from Caesar's statues, Flavius cites the implicit threat posed by Caesar:

These growing feathers pluck'd from Caesar's wing  
Will make him fly an ordinary pitch,  
Who else would soar above the view of men  
And keep us all in servile fearfulness.

(I, i, 75-78)

The debate over Caesar's potential to become a tyrant is seen, in microcosm, in Brutus's internal debate over his best course of action. Early on, Brutus admits that he has no personal grievance against Caesar, nor can he cite any instance of Caesar's ambition. Nevertheless, he notes, it is all too common for those who rise to power to become despotic. And so Brutus convinces himself of the need for a pre-emptive strike against Caesar, not for what he is, but for what he may become:

And, since the quarrel  
Will bear no colour for the thing he is,  
Fashion it thus; that what he is, augmented,  
Would run to these and these extremities;  
And therefore think him as a serpent's egg  
Which hatch'd, would, as his kind, grow mischievous,  
And kill him in the shell.

(II, i, 30-34)

The question of whether Caesar would have become a tyrant is central to the drama and is made most evident in the paired funeral speeches of Brutus and Mark Antony.

Brutus, warned by Cassius not to let Antony speak lest he sway the populace, sets three conditions: Antony must allow Brutus to speak first, he must inform the crowd that he is speaking with Brutus's permission, and he must not utter a word of blame against Caesar's assassins. Brutus addresses the plebeians who are demanding satisfaction; he explains that he loved Caesar but that his greater priority was his love for Rome. He asks the crowd whether they would welcome the prospect of slavery:

Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead,  
and live all free men?

(III, ii, 24-26)

It was Caesar's personal ambition, Brutus insists, that was his sole motivation for slaying the ruler.

Brutus's speech is so effective that the people greet Antony with open suspicion and hostility:

First Plebeian: This Caesar was a tyrant.

Third Plebeian: Nay, that's certain:

We are bless'd that Rome is rid of him.

(III, ii, 75-76)

Antony, however, begins to sway the crowd by seeming to agree with Brutus in words that soon become a refrain:

But Brutus says he was ambitious;

And Brutus is an honourable man.

(III, ii, 92-93)

Antony catechizes the crowd, citing Caesar's contributions to Rome, his thrice-refusal of the crown, his bequests to the people, asking whether these are proofs of ambition. Step by step, Antony undermines Brutus's position, and the words "Brutus is an honourable man" ring more and more hollow, more and more sarcastic, more and more damning. He cleverly sows the seeds of rebellion, while still obeying Brutus's conditions, in a masterpiece of reverse psychology:

Good friends, sweet friends, let me not stir you up

To such a sudden flood of mutiny.

(III, ii, 214-215)

The people, outraged over Caesar's death, are now set to "fire the traitors' houses," and they storm away, a riotous mob ready to destroy the city—benches, windows, and all (III, ii, 260).

Antony has provided what may, on the surface at least, be construed as evidence that Caesar was not ambitious, as Brutus has alleged. Yet the audience, privy to scenes and dialogue not known to the populace, have seen evidence to the contrary. We have learned that "Marullus and Flavius, for pulling scarves off Caesar's image, are put to silence" (I, ii 289-291). We have seen that Caesar, reluctant to go to the Forum on the Ides of March, is persuaded to attend by appeals to his vanity and reputation; most potent, however, is Decius's suggestion that the senators are preparing to offer Caesar a crown, and that his absence might cause them to reconsider. And, indeed, in our very first view of Caesar, he instructs Calpurnia to stand where Antony may touch her during the course of the race. He similarly reminds Antony to touch her as he passes:

Forget not, in your speed, Antonius,

To touch Calpurnia; for our elders say,

The barren, touched in this holy chase,

Shake off their sterile curse.

(I, ii, 6-9)

From this passage, it is possible to infer that Caesar has dynastic ambitions, adding further weight to Brutus's arguments.

But even after the paired funeral speeches of Brutus and Antony, and despite Antony's having the "last word" and popular support, the debate over Caesarism is not resolved; it continues to haunt the rest of the play. Indeed, haunt it does, as Caesar's ghost, both in the literal and figurative senses, stalks each scene, each character. And at the end, even as Antony and Octavius enjoy victory over the conspirators on the field of battle, they pay honor to Brutus. Antony concedes that Brutus, alone among the conspirators, acted not for personal considerations, but for the "common good" (V, v, 72). And although Octavius ends the play with references to "this happy day," the day and the play end with preparations for the burial of Brutus, who even according to Antony "was the noblest Roman of them all" (V, v, 81; V, v, 63).

But an examination of government in *Julius Caesar* is not limited to the true and perverted forms of government by the one; the play also provides dramatic examples of government by the few and by the many as they, too, degenerate into their perverted forms.

Government by the few is presented in the two conflicting aristocratic groups, the conspirators who kill Caesar and the triumvirate of Octavius, Lepidus, and Antony who rise up after Caesar's death. Aristotle uses the word *aristocracy* to mean government by the few. He says that this form of government is also called "the rule of the best . . . either because the rulers are the best men or because they have at heart the best interests of the state and of the citizens" (114).

Immediately following his funeral oration, Antony learns that Octavius and Lepidus are awaiting him at Caesar's house. Caesar has not yet been buried, yet the triumvirate that will succeed him has already been established. Antony's rejoicing at the news seems entirely self-serving:

Fortune is merry,  
And in this mood will give us anything.  
(III, iii, 271-272).

We next see the triumvirs in Antony's house, planning political murders. Antony presents a list of those marked for death. The triumvirs engage in cold and cynical life-swapping. When Octavius includes the name of Lepidus's brother, Lepidus readily agrees to his death on condition that Antony's nephew, Publius, also be killed. Antony agrees without hesitation. Once Lepidus has departed, Antony tries to convince Octavius that Lepidus is unworthy to share their power:

This is a slight unmeritable man,  
Meet to be sent on errands: is it fit,  
The three-fold world divided, he should stand  
One of the three to share it?  
(IV, i, 12-15)

The scene that follows provides an interesting parallel. Unlike the triumvirs, the conspirators have been honorably motivated, their goal being the best interest of Rome and her people. Up to now, at least, they have acted in the way described by Aristotle in his analysis of aristocracy. However, within Brutus's tent, Brutus and Cassius are discovered in the midst of a heated quarrel. Cassius berates Brutus for condemning Lucius Pella for bribery, despite Cassius's letters asking for clemency; Brutus responds by accusing Cassius of accepting bribes himself. The argument degenerates into name-calling and threats and finally peaks when Cassius unsheathes his dagger and invites Brutus to kill him. Then, anger spent, the two make up, much like two lovers after a quarrel.

There is an important common theme that links these scenes. Octavius, Lepidus, and Antony act without principle, motivated by personal animosities and private gain, and the eventual collapse of the triumvirate is presaged by their evident power struggle. Cassius and Brutus, though generally honorable and certainly less cold and ruthless than their counterparts, are nonetheless susceptible to perceived personal slights. Their tempers flare easily and, though quickly extinguished, reveal a petty and unseemly concern with self, short-lived though it may be.

Government by the many fares no better in *Julius Caesar*. Constitutional government is the third of Aristotle's true forms of government; its perverted form, which Aristotle, unfortunately, labels *democracy*, can best be understood by the modern term *mob rule*. According to him, the weakness of this form of government is that the populace is readily susceptible to manipulation by charismatic leaders and demagogues. This is evident in the first scene of *Julius Caesar*, in which Flavius and Marullus chastise the commoners for their fickleness: a short time ago, they revered Pompey, and now they prepare to honor his vanquisher:

And do you now strew flowers in his way  
That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood?  
(I, i, 54-55)

The commoners' reverence for Caesar is based on emotion, not logic. Casca describes how, after Caesar thrice refused a crown and then fell into a fit, the people gave him their love and support unquestioningly:

. . . if Caesar had stabbed their mothers, they would have done no less.  
(I, ii, 277-279)

That public opinion is based on emotion and highly volatile is made more evident in the plebeians' response to Brutus and Antony following Caesar's death. Demanding satisfaction, they are quickly appeased by Brutus. However, the main thrust of Brutus's argument, that Caesar's ambition threatened their very freedom, is evidently lost on them as they call for Brutus to be another Caesar:

First Plebian: Bring him with triumph home unto his house.  
Second Plebian: Give him a statue with his ancestors.  
Third Plebian: Let him be Caesar.

(III, ii, 54-56)

Such mindless acceptance is easily changed, especially by a skilled demagogue. And such a man is Antony. Armed with the dramatic props of Caesar's bloody body and his will, Antony skillfully manipulates the plebeians. Step by step, in a masterpiece of oration, Antony plays to their emotions. He appeals to their pride. And, ultimately, he speaks to their self-interest as he summarizes the terms of Caesar's will; each citizen is to receive seventy-five drachmas, and parts of Caesar's land will become public parks. With these blandishments, Antony completes the reversal of the people's beliefs and loyalties. Brutus and his fellows, whom the plebeians had shortly before regarded as noble and honorable, are now "traitors." In the scene that follows, the mob is in a frenzy of revenge and destruction. They are prepared to murder Cinna the poet for no reason other than his name:

Sec. Plebian: Tear him to pieces; he's a conspirator!  
Cinna: I am Cinna the poet, I am Cinna the poet!  
Fourth Plebian: Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses!  
Cinna: I am not Cinna the conspirator!  
Sec. Plebian: It is no matter, his name's Cinna; pluck but his name out of his  
heart, and turn him going!  
Third Plebian: Tear him, tear him!

(III, iii, 30-40)

The last we see of the plebeians is a rabble, answerable to no one, bent on satisfying their own blood-lust.

And so, in government by the one, government by the few, and government by the many, *Julius Caesar* shows the swift and inexorable degeneration from each of Aristotle's true governments to its corresponding perversion. And all three cases share the same crucial characteristic. Whereas all true governments exist for the common good, those that exist to serve personal and private interests are, quite simply, perversions.

*Julius Caesar* invites us, by its very title, to examine the politics inherent in the play, and, once again, it is Aristotle who provides a useful means of analysis. Few of us stop to ask the

fairly obvious question, “Why is the play named after Caesar?” After all, he dies early in the third act, less than half way through the play. In contrast, Macbeth’s death is the culmination of his tragedy, and doesn’t occur until practically the end of Act V; the same is true for Hamlet, Othello, and Lear. Since Caesar dies early, unlike other eponyms of Shakespeare’s histories, how can he be the hero of the play?

For the answer we may turn to Aristotle’s famous essay, “On the Art of Poetry,” often referred to simply as his *Poetics*. Written in about 330 B.C., Aristotle’s *Poetics* examines the great Greek dramas, notably the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, and, from them, extracts the common qualities of great drama, to this day misinterpreted as Aristotle’s “rules” for the drama.

Aristotle defines *tragedy* as the presentation of a noble character, the hero, who experiences suffering or death; the incidents surrounding this “reversal of fortune” create vicarious feelings of fear and pity in the audience, which Aristotle terms the “catharsis of emotion.” It is the crucial irony of tragedy that the very qualities that make a character noble are those which set into motion the events or forces that will lead to his suffering: this is the essence of tragedy—its *inevitability*.

Clearly, Caesar does not meet Aristotle’s criteria for the tragic hero. His military greatness is alluded to but never described, assumed but never presented; Caesar’s greatness is implicit. However, we do get an explicit description of Caesar’s weakness. He admits to Antony that he is deaf in his left ear (I, ii, 212), and we learn that “he hath the falling-sickness,” or epilepsy (I ii, 254). In addition, Casca describes Caesar in moments of weakness. In a swimming contest, Caesar called to Casca to rescue him from drowning. And in Spain, as a result of fever, he behaved like “a sick girl” (I, ii, 128). Casca is incredulous that the world holds up as a god such a weak creature as Caesar:

’tis true, this god did shake;  
His coward lips did from their colour fly,  
And that same eye whose bend doth awe the world  
Did lose his lustre; I did hear him groan . . . .  
(I, ii, 121-124)

We also see Caesar’s superstition and his vanity, especially when Decius and Calpurnia present arguments that Caesar should go to the senate-house or stay at home (II, ii). The Caesar seen by the plebeians is not the Caesar seen by the audience.

In addition, Caesar’s death is caused not by what he has done, but by what he *might* do, what he *might* become. Will he accept the crown and become a dictator, or will he preserve republican rule? These two opposing forces are set up in Act I and permeate the entire play. The question of Caesar’s ambition forms the crux of the conflict between the conspirators and Caesar’s followers, and it is this that motivates his assassination. Significantly, Caesar’s death does not cause immediate or lasting grief among the Roman populace, nor does it arouse strong emotions within the audience. Caesar’s death may or may not be justified; his death is historically accurate; it may be regrettable; but there is no sense of the *tragic*. Julius Caesar is the embodiment of one-person rule; he is thus the *subject* of the drama, not the hero. The debate over Caesarism—the prospect of dictatorship based on popular favor—is the central issue of the play.

Nor are Antony and Cassius fit candidates for the role of hero. Cassius is a malcontent, motivated by a personal grudge against Caesar. His grievances against Caesar seem personal and petty, motivated by jealousy:

And this man  
Is now become a god, and Cassius is  
A wretched creature and must bend his body  
If Caesar carelessly but nod on him.  
(I, ii, 115-118)

Cassius thus

lacks the nobility of character that would make his death tragic. Antony likewise cannot qualify. Though he is the skillful orator, the master at manipulating others, the clever dissimulator, his

support of Caesar seems personally motivated. He experiences no suffering beyond political and military reverses, temporary and superficial. He does ultimately pay homage to Brutus at the end of the play, but he himself lacks nobility of character, revering no moral authority.

Brutus, however, is, indeed, the “noblest Roman of them all” (V, v, 68). The descendant of a noble Roman who drove kings from Rome, he embodies the idea of liberty. The ideal Roman patrician, Brutus resists the importuning of the conspirators until he convinces himself of the righteousness of their actions. He is motivated not by power or self-aggrandizement but by the ideal of Roman liberty. Indeed, it is his impractical idealism that comprises his tragic flaw. He laments the fact that it is impossible to kill the spirit of Caesar without killing the body as well; he believes that the conspirators can act as sacrificers, not as butchers; he believes that they act from the same nobility of motive as he does; and he has faith in the populace to accept the conspirators’ actions as “necessary and not envious” (II, i, 178). His crucial miscalculation in permitting Antony to deliver a funeral oration—after his own speech to the people—is rooted in his sense of fairness and honor, and in his implicit faith that Antony will be similarly fair and honorable. His self-torment, his undiminished love for Rome, his fatalistic acceptance of his own death, make his death tragic indeed. Like Antony, the audience sees his death as a great loss, a great waste. Antony points out that only Brutus was motivated by principle, the “common good,” and not by envy (V, v, 72). As Octavius orders funeral honors, we, too, mourn Brutus’s death as the tragedy of the play. Yet his fate is not the center of the play.

At its core, then, *Julius Caesar* is a play not about a particular leader, but a play about government itself. Whether Shakespeare read Aristotle is moot (we do know that his contemporary, Ben Johnson, was familiar with Aristotle). Deliberately or not, Shakespeare created a work in which Aristotle’s analysis of government is brought to life in all its parts. In *Julius Caesar*, we see Shakespeare making the same observations and coming to the same conclusions that Aristotle did nearly 2000 years earlier. These shared perceptions make them political compatriots, strange bedfellows indeed.

And it is these very same political insights that lend *Julius Caesar* a particular relevance to our own day. They can provide a moral balance scale with which to weigh events and leaders. For example, any United States President may invoke “executive privilege” or “national security” to justify a decision. He may, in short, withhold the crucial information that led to a specific course of action. Is he doing so for the good of the nation? Or is he acting like Caesar, who, in an exercise of pure power, refuses to explain why he will not go to the Senate:

The cause is my will: I will not come;  
That is enough to satisfy the senate.

(II, ii, 71-72)

Surely Saddam Hussein provides us with a dramatic example of a dictatorial leader motivated by the ruthless exercise of power. But an examination of how Saddam acquired—and solidified—his position reveals that he was assisted by U.S. officials seeking to protect vital oil supplies during Iraq’s war with Iran. Was this the moral course, motivated by the common good; was it mere expedience, motivated by nationalistic interests; or was it cynically political, based on a reluctance to face an electorate angered by a potential increase in oil prices? Has the recent talk of war been motivated solely by the desire to remove a ruthless dictator, or was its timing influenced, as has been suggested by some in the media, at least in part by a desire to direct the public discourse away from the economy, especially in the weeks prior to an election? These questions, and hundreds more like them, are founded on the concept of *cui bono*: for whose benefit? In other words, who stands to gain?

The search for the answers to such questions can help us to make moral judgments about our leaders and their actions. This is the basic function of a free press. But here again, similar questions must be asked and answered. For members of the media constitute an aristocracy of sorts, a small group of highly-placed, powerful people—the Fourth Estate. They may exercise their power on behalf of the general public, ensuring a well-informed electorate. Or they may, like the triumvirs in *Julius Caesar*, abuse their power for fame, for gain, for greater power. When

reporters ask tough questions, or expose fraud, or reveal an impropriety, or publicize a scandal, are they serving their readers or enjoying the sheer exercise of power? In the world of business, where Enron has become synonymous with greedy and rapacious corporate leaders, how do we know where to invest? Are the chief officers of a corporation acting for the good of the consumer? Of their employees? Of the stockholders? Or of themselves?

And we, the public at large, must be subject to the same moral tests. When we cast a ballot, are we basing our vote on morals and principles, the common good? Or are we voting our pocketbooks? Our own self-interest? How many of us support low-cost public housing, drug-treatment centers, and public mental hospitals, but “not in our own back yard”? How many citizens begrudge paying taxes for education because they have no children in school? How many Americans support or oppose foreign policies based on the predicted effect on gas prices? Will we invest in a company that produces annual dividends despite the fact that it pollutes the environment?

These are not easy questions. The answers may make us uncomfortable. But if we act, not out of concern for the common good, but for self-interest, we will be the very “democracy” that Aristotle decries and that Shakespeare presents so dramatically in *Julius Caesar*. We will be a rabble, a mob, vulnerable to propaganda and rhetoric, pawns in the hands of those who know how to manipulate us. We must use the “moral balance scale” to weigh not only our leaders but ourselves—lest some modern-day Antony “[c]ry ‘Havoc!’ and let slip the dogs of war” (III, i, 273).

The daily news seems to be dominated by political conflict, both at home and abroad, and by scandals in government, in business, in sports, and even in the church. It is the genius of Aristotle that he provides us with the moral balance scale with which to form judgments. And it is the genius of Shakespeare that he continues to speak to us, movingly and meaningfully, in every age.

*Aristotle’s Poetics and Politics are readily available in inexpensive paperbacks. My quotations from the Poetics are standard translations common to all texts; therefore I have not given any page references. Translations of the Politics do vary; my references are to the Dover Thrift Edition, translated by Benjamin Jowett and edited by H.W.C. Davis (Mineola: Dover, 2000). References to Julius Caesar are to the classic Yale edition, edited by Lawrence Mason (New Haven: Yale UP, 1919).*

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