

# Antony in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar

## -- A Machiavellian Perspective

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### Abstract

**Julius Caesar is a historical play written by Shakespeare based on the true events from Roman history. Characters in this play take the instruments of violence, eloquence or schemes to realize republican dream or seek personal gain in the political struggle and wrestling, of whom Mark Antony is a strong performer. His personality and political tactics echo with the image of a true leader advocated in the well-known Italian politician, Niccolò Machiavelli's The Prince. This paper analyzes Antony's Machiavellian aspect with an aim to prove he is a prudent and practical politician.**

### Keywords

**Julius Caesar; Antony; Niccolò Machiavelli.**

### 1. Introduction

Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, based on Sir Tomas North's translation of Plutarch's Parallel Lives, was firstly performed in 1599. The play was extremely popular with the original audience and Leonard Digges wrote about the enthusiastic audience as late as the 1620s. What makes Julius Caesar distinctive is the complexity and ambiguity of the characters, who can not be simply categorized as either hero or villain. The personality of the characters and political tactics they use indeed display a multivalent reaction to Machiavellian themes. The types of political behavior which are discussed with apparent approval by Machiavelli in The Prince were regarded as shocking by contemporaries, and its immorality is still a subject of serious discussion until today.

In fact, critics have discussed Shakespeare's links to Machiavelli for a long time. Hugh Grady claims in his paper that one of the most vulnerable but discontinuous traditions of Shakespeare studies has been the view that Machiavellian ideas were a prime ingredient in the Elizabethan theater, particularly for Marlowe and Shakespeare.(2000) Almost all of Shakespeare's historical plays including Julius Caesar and the tragedy Hamlet have exhibited the relationship between politics and ethics similar to Machiavelli's idea. It is unclear whether Shakespeare himself is a Machiavellian believer but he did express his views. He wrote in a line by Richard of Gloucester in 3 Henry VI:

I can add colors to the chameleon,  
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,  
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,  
And set the murtherous Machevil to school.(3.2.191-93)

If "Murtherous" is Shakespeare's judgment of Machiavelli, then Richard III is Machiavellian with the same case of Claudius in Hamlet. However, among all the works in recent treatments of Shakespeare's Machiavellism, Julius Caesar receives little attention. Meanwhile, the majority study of this play is rolled around the real protagonist or the tragic hero, Brutus and Caesar, not

giving enough research about another interesting character, Mark Antony, who is a more successful politician and more Machiavellian.

Therefore, this paper aims to analyze Antony's personality and political tactics from Machiavellian perspective. It is divided into three parts: the first one is Antony's performance and theatrical image, the second is his manipulative behaviors and the last is himself as instrumental power seekers.

## 2. Analysis of Antony as the Prince

### 2.1. The Prince of Apperance

Antony was a supporter of Julius Caesar, and served as one of his generals during the conquest of Gaul and the Civil War. At the very first scene of this play, He appears as the right-hand of Caesar who loves music and theatre, both gamesome and full of quick-spirit. He was a dedicated and loyal follower of Caesar, and said, "When Caesar says 'Do this,' it is performed." (1.2.9-10) The image of Antony at very first is an outgoing, simple-minded man who cares games more than politics. But one point to be noticed is that Antony is the one who presents the "crown" thrice to Caesar. It clearly explicates that at least he is not a republican defender as Brutus and very probably he himself knows that he can climb to the second place as soon as Caesar becomes Roman emperor. In terms of his comments, Brutus understated him as "a limb of Caesar" while Cassius obviously has more insights dealing with Antony, calling him "a shrewd contriver". The later scene proves that Antony is more than a limb and he didn't fall down after Caesar's death. These two different judgments toward Antony constitute an important factor of their failure in the end.

All this shows that Antony is good at deceiving and knows well that politics is something to be performed. He wears different appearances when working with different people. He follows an ironclad and Machiavellian rule: appearances are the very essence of politics. Machiavelli holds in *The Prince* that a prince must employ a fox skills but "it is necessary to know well how to disguise this characteristic, and to be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are so simple, and so subject to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived." (Machiavelli 200; ch. 18) According to Machiavelli, it is unnecessary for a prince to hold all the good qualities but it is imperative to appear to have them, appear to be faithful, humane, religious and upright. Antony appears to be game-some and blindly loyal to Caesar, which deceived many people including Brutus who totally looked down upon his role and power.

### 2.2. The Prince of Manipulation

According to Machiavelli, the prince must understand people and social situation so he can grow a quick spirit of manipulative behaviors. Antony's manipulative techniques are clearly seen in the scene of making business with Brutus and Cassius as well as his famous funeral speech.

In the servant lines to Brutus on behalf of Antony:

Thus did Mark Antony bid me fall down;  
And being prostrate, thus he bade me say;  
Brutus is noble, wise, valiant and honest;  
Caesar was mighty, bold, loyal, and loving.  
Say I love Brutus and honor him;

Say I feared Caesar, honored him and loved him. (3.1.123-29)

This message, as related by the servant, foreshadows Antony's ability to manipulate both people and situation with his words. He knew that Brutus was a noble and honorable man so

he didn't speak ill of Caesar, only appealing to Brutus vanity by calling him "noble, wise, valiant and honest". He used "is" to express his present love to Brutus while "was" to depict his past feeling to Caesar. He deliberately put "feared" as the first emotion towards Caesar instead of "love" in order to gain Brutus vouchsafe for safety. He also added if his safety shall be promised and he could be told about the reason of Caesar's death, he would follow Brutus with all true faith. Barring accidents, Brutus ignored Cassius' opinion and let him speak at Caesar's funeral. Antony was a great orator by manipulating the mob's hearts. According to Tylor, it was his speech that persuaded people to protest Ceacar's killing. (1973) Interestingly, Machiavelli has an innovative explanation about how to persuade people, "the nature of the people is variable and whilst it is easy to persuade them, it is difficult to fix them in that persuasion and thus it is necessary to take such measures that, when they believe no longer, it may be possible to make them believe by force." (Machiavelli 147; cha. 6) Antony followed precisely the two steps, words and force. He used material wealth, Caesar's will, to lure people's heart and he tended to be more emotional than Brutus. For the audience, a man held in such high regard moves the crowd to silence and sympathy at this public display of emotion. His tears, genuine grief over the loss of Caesar and promise of the gold enflamed the crowd. Hartsork states her essay that we respond to antony's rhetoric and cringe before his opportunism. (1966) Finally, he moved to the second step, force. He took advantage of the mob's violence against the conspiracy group and launched an army.

### 2.3. The Prince of Instrumentality

According to the study of Hugh Grady, Machiavelli is fascinated with the gap between political power and morality. Sometimes, we can see in Shakespeare's characters an ambivalence, a simultaneous attraction to Machiavelli's cool analytics and a revulsion at their ethical neutrality. (2000) Many critics have discussed the instrumentality of Machiavelli's theory about princes. Scholars often note that Machiavelli glorifies instrumentality in state building, an approach embodied by the saying "The ends justify the means." (It should be noted that this quote has been disputed which may not come from Machiavelli and his writings.)

Anyway, here Machiavelli's instrumentality is a clear separation between politics and ethics. He takes ethical neutrality towards a prince who aims to seek power. For example, in Chapter 15, he mentions, "a man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore it is necessary for a prince, who wishes to maintain himself, to learn how not to be good, and to use knowledge and not use it, according to the necessity of the case." (Machiavelli 190; ch. 15)

In this regard, Antony is also an instrumental power seeker to some extent which is explicitly shown in Act VI, Scene I. Act VI opens on an horrific notes as Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus casually assemble a list of men who are to die. Some of the names belong to their relatives. This illustrates the viciousness and atrocities of the three men. Antony's instrumental reason in politics is further revealed as the scene progresses. After Lepidus has left, Antony said,

And though we lay these honours  
 And though we lay these honours on this man  
 To ease ourselves of divers sland'rous loads,  
 He shall but bear them as the ass bears gold,  
 To groan and swear under the business,  
 Either led or driven as we point the way;  
 And brought our treasure where we will,  
 Then take we down his load, and turn him off  
 (Like to the empty ass) to shake his ears  
 And gaze in commons.(6.1.19-27)

Then Octavius tried to argue that Lepidus was a brave and experienced soldier. He continued to give this Machiavellian instruct to Octavius.

So is my horse, Octavius, and for that

I do appoint him store of provender.

It is a creature that I teach to fight,

To wind, to stop, to run directly on,

His corporal motion governed by my spirit.

And in some taste, is Lepidus but so.(6.1.29-34)

Antony treated Lepidus, who was their ally and companion, as horse and ass. He regarded him as nothing but “property”. So in Antony’s mind, whether be relatives or ally, there are only two types of people--serviceable and unserviceable.

### 3. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to prove Antony is a Machiavellian but rather some of his characters and political tactics reflect the themes in Machiavelli’s works. Machiavellian in this paper is a neutral word instead of a derogatory term. In comparison with Brutus as an idealist, Antony is more prudent and practical as a realist thus making him a more successful politician in Julius Caesar. Obviously, he did own other qualities such as bravery and ambitiousness which are also advocated by Machiavelli that when a country is unstable, the prince must take risks and bold steps. Shakespeare is a genius who is good at presenting the complexity of characters in his play. Therefore we can also see an image of Antony who appraised Brutus as “the noblest Roman of them all”. All in all, politics and humanity is a major theme in Julius Caesar and some of the politic wisdom or plot shown by the characters in this play is also most relevant in modern times which deserves our consideration from time to time.

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