

**REVISITING THE NOTION OF REPUBLIC IN SHAKESPEARE'S *JULIUS CAESAR* AND
*ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA***

Dr. Khem Raj Sharma
Assistant Professor of English
Dept. of English & European Languages
Central University of Himachal Pradesh
Post Box No – 21, Dharamshala
District – Kangra (HP)-176215
E-mail: drrajsharma162@gmail.com

Abstract

Julius Caesar (1599) projects the decline of the ideals of republic and the consequent destruction of Rome. In this play, Brutus and Cassius attempt to create a utopian republican society in the wake of the assassination of the so-called tyrant. Shakespeare believed that the Republic should be a place where equality, fraternity, and liberty reigned. This is what the second triumvirate – Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus, in Julius Caesar hope to achieve, but their reasons for believing in the Republic are neither convincing nor the same. While Lepidus believes in the Republic, and works diligently towards achieving it; Antony uses the concept of the Republic as a carrot for Lepidus and makes him do the hard work. What Antony does is sheer exploitation. By depicting Antony in this manner, the playwright questions the motives of people who sell dreams of Republic to the public. This paper seeks to look at this facet of Antony's character, as depicted in Julius Caesar, keeping in mind Shakespeare's condemnation of him in the approximated continuation to Julius Caesar – i.e. Antony and Cleopatra. It also seeks to show why Shakespeare does this, and what one can garner about his ideas about the Republic alongside his appropriation of the same in the context of the Renaissance.

One of the important ideals that the Renaissance propagated was the idea of Republic. This idea, of course, was neither new nor strange to the English people – as the notion of a society with democratic ideals has always been the focal point of an ideal society for thinkers. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) in his plays tries to propagate these ideals. In *Macbeth*, he speaks about how the notion of equality is challenged by the ambition of Macbeth, and Shakespeare points out how it is a tragic flaw on his part – as it results in his death and general destruction and havoc. In *Hamlet*, too, Shakespeare condemns the conspiracy to take over the kingdom. In fact, Shakespeare's tragedies, be it *Othello* or *King Lear*; condemn such an attitude that is against the principles of democracy and equality – as shown in his vilification of Iago and Goneril. However, Shakespeare does not limit his philosophy regarding Republic to his tragedies. Even in his romances and comedies he grapples with the ideology of Republic. For instance, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the questions that Shylock poses show how deeply Shakespeare felt the inequalities which were present in the society of which he was a part. Such inequalities are also subtly criticised in *The Tempest*, where he criticises the tradition of enslaving individuals and denying them basic rights through the characterisation of Caliban. His historical plays, be they English histories such as *Richard II* or plays based on Roman history such as *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, too critique the government and endorse the ideals of Republic.

Julius Caesar (1599) projects the decline of the ideals of republic and the consequent destruction of Rome. In this play, Brutus and Cassius attempt to create a utopian republican society in the wake of the assassination of the so-called tyrant. Shakespeare believed that the Republic should be a place where everyone could lead a happy life, and where equality, fraternity, and liberty reigned. This is what the second triumvirate – Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus, in *Julius Caesar* hope to achieve, but their reasons for believing in the Republic are neither convincing nor the same. While Lepidus believes in the Republic, and works diligently towards achieving it; Antony uses the concept of the Republic as a carrot for Lepidus and makes him do the hard work. Moreover, he even plans to deprive him of his share in the Republic that is created after the battle with Cassius and other assassins of Caesar. What Antony does is sheer exploitation. By depicting Antony in this manner, the playwright questions the motives of people who sell dreams of Republic to the public. Viewed thus, Shakespeare seems to have put the Platonic notion of the republic under the critical scanner to expose the chinks, fissures and gaps in it. He introduces counter-currents of thought through the lower rung characters to demonstrate how the whole notion of Republic may seem ideal at the conceptual level; its praxis, on the contrary, may be problematic as it privileges the ruling elite thereby keeping out volitionally, a considerable underprivileged chunk of society.

The present paper seeks to look at this facet of Antony's character, as depicted in *Julius Caesar*, keeping in mind Shakespeare's condemnation of him in the approximated continuation to *Julius Caesar* – i.e. *Antony and Cleopatra*, which dramatises the destruction of the Roman Republic. It also seeks to show why Shakespeare does this, and what one can garner about his ideas about the Republic alongside his appropriation of the same in the context of the Renaissance.

Shakespeare's notion of republic is an idealistic form of government. Hadfield affirms, "The republic was always an ideal that was in the process of becoming or receding. Its most celebrated writings describe either the hope that came with its foundation or the need to preserve a constitution about to disappear forever" (Hadfield 168). In other words, a working republic is virtually impossible. In *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare demonstrates a political crisis that threatened the safety and integrity of the Roman state. In both works, Shakespeare equates the destruction of Rome with impending upheaval in England deriving from England's kindred political ills. These plays concern the unsettled succession with its potential for civil war and mob rule. As a commentary on republicanism, Shakespeare highlights the fall of Caesar, Brutus, Antony and the small resemblance that this Rome bears to established republican ideals. The juxtaposition of these two Roman plays provides a fascinating study of politics, power, loyalty, and love, and of the rise and fall of two great men: Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony on whom the greatness is thrust upon. The study of these plays attests a constitutional decline replicating that posited by Plato in the *Republic*.

As the Roman crowd awaits the celebration of Caesar's triumph over his arch-rival Pompey, the tribunes, Flavius and Marcellus challenge the exaltation of Caesar into an absolute emperor by tearing down symbolic decoration of his victory and power. In Act 1 Scene ii, despite Caesar's protest, the crowd cheers him on to wear the crown of emperor. But he clearly awaits his elevation into a tyrant by the Roman Senate and is lured to his death by word that his confirmation by the aristocracy lays at hand. Less than half way through the play (*Julius Caesar* Act III, scene i.), Brutus, Cassius, and the other conspirators scheme against Caesar because they thought he fancied himself a god. They stab Caesar and cry out, "Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!" (*Julius*, III, i. 43), and the 'honorable' Brutus declaring that "Ambition's debt is paid." (43)

The conspirators assassinated Julius Caesar because they believed he was destroying this way of life and ushering in a new era of one-man rule, which would replace the republican virtues with the decadence of empire—just what Shakespeare went on to portray in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The men who conspired to kill Caesar were hoping to restore a republican government to Rome. Even though the assassination was successful, the conspirators could not gain support of the public. Without this

support they could not gain the political edge that they desired because they could not manipulate the situation to their advantage. But the sides of Freedom, those who commit regicide in the name of Liberty unleash chaos, mayhem, and then, civil war.

After the assassination the conspirators are quick to convince the Roman citizens that the assassination was a warranted form of cleansing the government. The downward spiral for the conspirators comes when Mark Antony addresses the mob of Roman citizens attending Caesar's funeral. He convinces the crowd that Caesar's death was by no means a justifiable act and that the conspirators were just struggling for power, which is "...conventionally considered the fatal flaw of republicanism: multiple sovereignty. As survival lay in unity, so ruin lay in plurality, which ensured faction, struggle for supremacy, and thus perpetual strife" (Parker, 'From Monarchy' 112). Antony's rhetoric, outrages the plebeians, when they were told that Caesar had made them the benefactors of his will—once again proved the power of rhetoric and the fickleness of the masses. The callous manipulation of the politician gets exposed when, at the scene's conclusion, Antony reveals the will to be nothing but a blank scroll. Shakespeare explores the struggle for supremacy faced by the conspirators and the triumvirate of Caesar's friends.

The play ends with a new group of leaders Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus who will now fight for control of Rome. This continues the circle of strife that is maintained by multiple leaders. This second triumvirate stepped in to fill the power vacuum caused by Julius Caesar's assassination. This triumvirate defeats Brutus and Cassius at the battle of Philippi and became the most powerful men in the Roman world. Octavius takes control of the west including Italy while Antony receives control of East along with Egypt.

However, while the new triumvirate have the blessing of the public, Shakespeare does not predict a rosy future for it and Rome. This is hinted at in *Julius Caesar* in the manner in which Antony is depicted, and further developed in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Just prior to Brutus' death, Antony's cynicism get exposed in a conversation with Octavius when he calls Lepidus a mere tool, or "property" whose value lies in what other men may do to him and not in his individual human dignity.

This is a slight unmeritable man,/ Meet to be set on errands:...

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 sweat under the business,
Either led or driven, as we point the way:
And having 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 graze in commons. ((*Julius*, 4.1, 61)

Whereas Octavius approves a "tried and valiant soldier" Antony again compares Lepidus to his horse. Antony says that the general can be trained to fight, turn, stop, or run straight—he is a mere body subject to the will of another:

[My horse] 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.
He must be taught, and trained, and bid go forth—
A barren-spirited fellow, one that feeds

On objects, arts, and imitations,
Which, out of use and staled by other men,
Begin his fashion. Do not talk of him
But as a property. ((*Julius*, IV.i. 62)

This derogatory remark by Antony must have compelled Octavius to think deeply about the character and ambitions of Antony whom Cassius calls “a masker and a reveller.” ((*Julius*, V. i. 78) His fraudulence, hypocrisy and deceit could also be judged during Caesar’s funeral speech, when he does not weep out of real emotions but because he had a bad cold—a runny nose and watery eyes.

Julius Caesar ends with the consequence of what Brutus, Cassius and other assassins of Caesar faces. Although Brutus posthumously gets praise from both Antony and Octavius Caesar, as “the noblest Roman”, yet the fate of these two has to be seen as they also grounded their philosophy almost on the same principles as the assassins have.

Antony and Cleopatra (1606), an approximated sequel to *Julius Caesar*, shows the break-up of the triumvirate established between Octavius, Antony and Lepidus to fight the republican army of Cassius and Brutus in the last two acts of *Julius Caesar*. Antony has become enraptured by the queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, but briefly returns to fight alongside his allies to defeat the rebellion of Pompey’s son, the last gasp of republican resistance to the newly established empire, marrying Octavia, Octavius Caesar’s sister, as a sign of his renewed commitment to their cause. Immediate pleasure had overwhelmed his sense of duty, yet Antony’s ambition remained vigilant. Without a second thought for either Cleopatra or the wife of whose death he had just learned, he agreed to a politically advantageous union with Octavia, the emperor’s sister. However, on the advice of his soothsayer, he returns to Egypt, leaving Octavius and Lepidus finally to defeat Pompey when a truce breaks down. Octavius turns on Lepidus and has him executed, then moves to destroy Antony and Cleopatra, who have now declared themselves rulers of the Eastern Empire.

The play problematizes the logic of narrative expansion through alterations that are at odds with the earlier play. Antony at the beginning of *Antony and Cleopatra* is revered by the masses. As he becomes entangled with Cleopatra his political followers begin to turn to Octavius, and this ultimately leads to Antony’s fall and the decline of the republican ideals. Antony’s entry into the feminine Egypt handicaps his power as a ruler. Antony’s words were very powerful in *Caesar* but none of that means anything in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Antony’s ambition gets melted in the heat of Cleopatra’s love as he says, “Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall” (*Antony*, I. i. 35–36).

Antony’s adultery results in drastic decline in the republic of Rome. Antonio is a ‘seasoned republican’ as he used the concept to define his own means. He is an individual beset by lust, a passion that is the hallmark of Cleopatra. Instead of a play that shows the triumph of individual loves, Parker argues, *Antony and Cleopatra* poses a love “rooted in vitiated reason,” one which “dooms the state” (Parker, *Plato* 95). Octavius, in contrast, “preserves the ascetic code of the Stoic ideal, the principal philosophy of the republic, subordinating his emotions and appetites to his rational capacities.” (Hadfield 228) But he uses his abstinence to smooth his way to power, not to preserve a proper detachment from the world. After all, as many of the audience would have been well aware, it was Octavius who had agreed to the murder of Cicero, the guardian of republican values, putting his name down when the triumvirates agreed to sacrifice a man each as a sign of their mutual loyalty. Thus the Second triumvirate, formed to avenge Caesar, ended like the first, with only one man standing, Octavius who decisively changes Roman government by replacing the republic with an imperial dictatorship.

When Brutus proclaims in *Julius Caesar* that “ambition's debt is paid” with the death of Julius Caesar, these words take on ironic force as the play proceeds, for “ambition” is quickly resurrected in

Antony. The Antony who roused the plebeians at Caesar's funeral was a man who had seized the moment; thrust into the spotlight in a time of crisis, he rose to the occasion, but he soon reverted to his more familiar character. Octavius also underwent a startling transformation as he moved through the two plays. Appearing at first as petulant, inexperienced, and more than a little spoiled, he developed into a devious, calculating, and ruthless tyrant.

Antony's ignoring Rome in the hope that Cleopatra will become the loadstar of his existence becomes the ultimate ground for his fall, yet he doesn't know whether she is truly loyal to him. Caesar falls because he doesn't listen to the call of people and behaves like God. He does not listen to his wife Calpurnia and the Soothsayer regarding going out on the *Ides of March*. Similarly Brutus also doesn't pay heed to what Portia says. The real public stands ignored here and which in turn causes the fall of Rome and the consequent decline of republic. Also, Shakespeare seems to emphasise that whosoever tries to play with the ideals of republic will have to commit suicide in order to save their honour as it happens in the case of Cassius and Brutus in *Julius Caesar* and with Antony and Cleopatra in the play of same name.

Shakespeare has anchored his plays solidly on precepts in Plato's Republic, precepts by which he has explained the downfall not only of his major characters, but of Rome itself. Initially engendered by abolition of monarchy, Caesar's Rome, with its mob supremacy, is the final consequence of a state shorn of its ruling principle. Caesar is the embodiment of this decline: debased by his association with the masses, he has sunk from a prince to a tyrant, enslaved by the very elements he champions. Brutus' decline is the microcosmic parallel of Caesar's and results from a similar defilement. An idealistic philosopher, Brutus supremely exemplifies the rare and noble nature vitiated through contamination by society's basest elements. Precisely, because of that nobility, he destroys Rome. In these two plays, the republican values just receded to the public badge of murder. "The triumph of the many makes Caesar and then Brutus and Antony vulnerable in *Julius Caesar*, while *Antony and Cleopatra* shows how 'the shifting alliances of the rulers ethically replicate those of the fickle masses' and government takes on the metaphor of whorishness. (Kinney 343)

Shakespeare's remarks on Renaissance England juxtaposed with imperial Rome allows for subtle observations on the reign of Queen Elizabeth and the unsettled nature of the citizens. Shakespeare exemplifies from contemporary politics to appeal to his audience. His attention to political details associates Shakespeare as a writer of republican thought which he ascertains in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* although he suggests that assassinating the political figure does not guarantee any of the desired changes. Also Shakespeare seems to be suggesting with *Julius Caesar* that the government, including the English monarchy, cannot prosper without the will of the people.

Works Cited:

- Hadfield, Andrew. *Shakespeare and Republicanism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.
- Kinney, Arthur F. "Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Rome: A Political Study of Roman Works (Review)." *Renaissance Quarterly*, 58.1, 2005.3 42-43. Web. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ren/summary/v058/58.1kinney.html>>
- Parker, Barbara L. *Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Rome: A Political Study of the Roman Works*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004. Print.

- . "From Monarchy to Tyranny: *Julius Caesar* among Shakespeare's Roman Works." *Julius Caesar: New Critical Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 111-26. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra*. New Delhi: Peacock Books, 2007. Print.
- . *Julius Caesar*. New Delhi: Peacock Books, 2007. Print.