



Human Virtues and Vices in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar

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Abstract:

The exposition of human nature is at its zenith in Shakespeare's tragic and historical play Julius Caesar which has 'its magnificent scenes and memorable characters.' The play is a study of love, friendship and human relationships. It answers the questions like why does an honest man err? Why do friends misunderstand each other and go to the extent of murdering each other? Why even good qualities like bravery and truthfulness get punished? The present article is a study of the concepts like honesty, bravery and jealousy which emerge from the play. These qualities are portrayed in the personalities of the major characters who become symbols of these qualities. Julius Caesar is a different kind of tragedy because here, all the major characters get killed whether good or bad.

KEYWORDS:

character, tragedy, play,

INTRODUCTION:

“It begins with the events of the year 44BC, after Caesar, already endowed with the dictatorship, had returned to Rome from a successful Campaign in Spain, and when there are fears that he will allow himself to be crowned king. Distrust of Caesar's ambition gives rise to a conspiracy against him among Roman lovers of freedom, notably Cassius and Casca; they win over to their cause Brutus, who reluctantly joins them from a sense of duty to the republic. Caesar is slain by the conspirators in the Senate house. Antony, Caesar's friend, stirs the people to fury against the conspirators by a skilful speech at Caesar's funeral. Octavius, nephew of Julius Caesar, Antony and Lepidus, united as triumvirs, oppose the forces raised by Brutus and Cassius. The quarrel and reconciliation of Brutus and Cassius, with the news of the death of Portia, wife of Brutus, provide one of the finest scenes in the play. Brutus and Cassius are defeated at the battle of Philippi (42BC) and kill themselves.”²

The play can be categorized as a revenge tragedy because here we encounter bloody murder on stage which is a source from Seneca. But in Senecan tragedy we have only reports of murders. The murder would not be acted out on the stage. To satisfy the Elizabethan audience' desires Shakespeare had it on the stage. “The other and much more important development was written for the popular stage, and is called the revenge tragedy, or (in its most sensational form) the tragedy of blood. This type of play derived from Seneca's favourite materials of revenge, murder, ghosts, mutilation, and carnage, but while Seneca had

Please cite this Article as : Bala Swamy , Human Virtues and Vices in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar : Indian Streams Research Journal (Aug. ; 2012)



relegated such matters to long reports of offstage actions by messengers, the Elizabethan writers had then acted out on stage to satisfy the audience' appetite for violence and horror."³

HONESTY

In the play Julius Caesar, Brutus emerges as the most complex character who becomes the play's tragic hero. "Shakespeare was interested in the aftermath of Caesar's death as well as in the events leading up to it, and in the public and private motives of those responsible for it. So, although the Folio calls the play 'The Tragedy of Julius Caesar', Caesar is dead before the play is half over; Brutus, Cassius and Antony have considerably longer roles, and Brutus is portrayed with a degree of introspection which links him more closely to Shakespeare's other tragic heroes."⁴

Brutus is the embodiment of the virtue 'Honesty'. All the characters in the play as well as the audience who watch the play know that Brutus is an honest man. In the play he appears as a husband, a master to his servants, a dignified military leader, a loving friend and above all a powerful public figure. In Brutus' mind, the conflicting value systems that batter with each other as whole are enacted on a microcosmic level. Even after Brutus has taken an active participation in the conspiracy and committed the assassination, questions remain as to whether, in relation to his friendship with Caesar, the murder was a noble, decidedly selfless act or proof of a truly evil callousness, a gross indifference to the ties of friendship and a failure to be moved by the power of a truly great man. "Caesar was regarded as perhaps the greatest ruler in the history of the world, and his murder by Brutus as one of the foulest crimes: but it was also recognized that Caesar had faults and Brutus virtues."⁵

As a reader goes through the play, he understands that Brutus is neither good nor bad which makes him a true tragic hero in the opinion of Aristotle. "Aristotle says that the tragic hero will most effectively evoke both our pity and our terror if he is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly evil but a mixture of both; and also that the tragic effect will be stronger if the hero is 'better than we are,' in the sense that he is of higher moral worth. Such a man is exhibited as suffering a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of a mistaken act, to which he is led by his hamartia- his 'error of judgment' or, as it is often though less literally translated, his tragic flaw. The tragic hero accordingly moves us to pity because, since he is not an evil man, his misfortune is greater than he deserves; but he moves us also to fear, because we recognize similar possibilities of error in our own lesser and fallible selves."⁶

Very rigidly Brutus follows his greatest virtue 'honesty' which becomes his most deadly flaw. Even when other characters become selfish and self-serving, ambition seems to dominate all other motivations, Brutus remains as 'the noblest of Romans'. However, he miscalculates his position by repeatedly being committed to his principle. In order to stop violence, bloodshed and murder, he rejects Cassius' suggestion that the conspirators kill Antony as well as Caesar. Out of naïve idealism Brutus allows Antony to speak a funeral oration over Caesar's body. So, Antony gets the chance to have the last word which enables him to incite the Plebians to riot against him. Brutus later endangers his good relationship with Cassius by self-righteously condemning what he sees as dishonorable fund raising tactics on Cassius' part. In all of these episodes, Brutus acts out of a desire to limit the self-serving aspects of his actions; ironically, however, in each incident he dooms the very cause that he seeks to promote thus serving no one at all.

Many a time in our lives, we come across people who feel jealous of us. Some of us may even have the experiences of being hurt by them. Here is a great man who is wronged by his close friends who feel jealous of him and finally murder him. The problem of Caesar is not his alone. It looks as though it is the problem faced by almost everyone. So when we see the plight of Caesar, we become cautious of our lives. "The problems probed in a great tragedy are the problems of all people. In pitying the suffering hero and sharing in his fear of the inevitable disaster, the members of the audience become drained of pity and fear and are ready to take up their own lives with clearer and wiser heads."⁷

BRAVERY

Caesar is the embodiment of 'Bravery' in the play and many a time he proudly says that he is a brave man. When Calpurnia tries to stop him from going to the senate because of her nightmarish dreams and bad omens, he at once, rejects all her fears and proves himself to be a man who cannot be stopped by any kind of fears.

Knowing that he is a brave man, he doesn't heed to the advice of the soothsayer who says 'beware of the ides of March'. Thinking that he is brave, Caesar ignores all the points of danger for him. This is the reason for his downfall. Bravery doesn't mean that one should be ignorant of all the dangers; instead one should be brave enough to face the dangers. What Caesar does is, he remains ignorant of dangers so he loses

the opportunity of facing them. His conspirators charge him with ambition, and his behaviour substantiates this judgment: he does vie for absolute power over Rome, reveling in the homage he receives from others and in his conception of himself as a figure who will live on forever in men's minds.

“There is no fellow in the firmament.
The skies are painted with unnumbered sparks;
They are all fire, and every one doth shine;
But there's but one in all doth hold his place.”⁸

Caesar utters these words just before his assassination. The conspirators have come to Caesar in the Senate under the pretence of pleading for amnesty for Metellus' banished brother, Publius Cimber. Caesar replies that he will adhere to his word and not change his earlier decision. Comparing himself to the North Star, Caesar boasts of his constancy, his commitment to the law, and his refusal to waver under any persuasion. This comparison implies more than steadfastness, however: the North Star is the star by which sailors have navigated since ancient times, the star that guides them in their voyages, just as Caesar leads the Roman people. So, too, is the North Star unique in its fixedness; as the only star that never changes its position in the sky. Thus, Caesar also implies that he is peerless among Romans. Caesar declares that he alone remains 'unassailable' among men and his strictness in Publius Cimber's case illustrates this virtue.

Caesar's permanence is established by the end of the play in many ways. His own conspirators both Cassius and Brutus acknowledge Caesar's permanency just before their deaths. Octavius comes to the throne after the demise of Caesar and continues to carry his name.

JEALOUSY

Cassius is the embodiment of one of the seven deadly sins 'Jealousy'. Cassius is too jealous of Caesar and he wants himself to be more famous and accepted by all his friends. But quite contrary to his thinking, Julius Caesar emerges as the most popular one which Cassius cannot digest because in the eyes of Cassius, Caesar is physically weak. He frames a vicious circle in which he makes Caesar a villain and a traitor of Rome and wins the approval of Caesar's own close friends like Brutus. "...more serious is the conspiracy led initially by Cassius, whose aim is to assassinate Caesar on the assumption that only death can stop him. Cassius sees the growing power of Caesar as a sign of the degeneracy of Rome: He would not be a wolf / But that he sees the Romans are but sheep."⁹ But the way he influences others for conspiracy is not through sincere means but by carefully planned strategies. For example, "He appeals to Brutus' family tradition, reminding him that one of his ancestors was a key figure in the expulsion of the Tarquins. But this is part of an appeal to Brutus' personal pride. Cassius does not present a political argument in favour of preserving the republic rather he tells Brutus to weigh his name against Caesar's: Brutus and Caesar: what should be in that 'Caesar'? / Why should that name be sounded more than yours?" He projects on to Brutus the personal jealousy he himself feels when he contemplates Caesar's power."¹⁰ In order to win Brutus, Cassius himself plants the letters in Brutus' chamber.

Even though he knows that Brutus is an honest man, without his consent he tries to raise money unlawfully for which he loses the trust of his strong supporter, Brutus. Cassius miscalculates that Brutus was totally won by him but Brutus supports Cassius only in the assassination of Caesar. When Cassius advises him to kill Antony, Brutus refuses instantly. And when Antony requests Brutus for a permission to speak on the funeral, Brutus turns down the proposal of Cassius for not allowing Antony. Even though Cassius is calculative and intelligent, he cannot win the total approval of Brutus. In a world of self-serving men, rigidly honest man like Brutus and egotistically brave man like Caesar do not have a place for life. So finally, in the play, Cassius survives.

CONFLICTS AND BREAKDOWNS

The play Julius Caesar is full of conflicts and breakdowns. Antony and Octavius always disagree with each other. When Antony says that Lepidus is a slight unmeritable man with whom power cannot be shared, Octavius says that he is willing to share and accepts Lepidus as one of the triumvirates. During the battle Antony tells Octavius to take the left side of the field, Octavius insists on taking the right, and when Antony asks "Why do you cross me in this exigent?" Octavius replies, 'I do not cross you, but I will do so.'¹¹

In the first part of the play there are a number of scenes where Brutus contradicts with Cassius. When Cassius proposes that Antony also must be murdered along with Caesar, Brutus says a strong 'no' to him. After the assassination, Cassius feels that only Brutus must address the people but Brutus provides the

last chance to Antony to address the gathering which proves fatal for him.

The male characters in the play are not capable of maintaining intimate relationships. They can neither maintain true friendship with each other nor true intimacy with their wives. There is a total emptiness at the personal level. Even though Brutus and Cassius proclaim their friendship many a time, there is actually no warmth in their friendship. The matters they discuss are political and military. Their minds do not meet at all at any time. In his last moments Cassius describes Titinius not Brutus, as his best friend. When Cassius dies, Brutus doesn't express any sentiment of true friendship.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

“Of all Shakespeare's roman plays Julius Caesar gives the smallest role to women.”¹² The male characters in the play don't take the female characters seriously. But we find instances where these women plead their husbands to be taken seriously. Caesar takes the words of Calpurnia for granted even though there is some truth in her nightmares. He doesn't heed to her advice of not going to the Senate. Caesar goes to the capital and to his death. Her nightmares become a reality but we don't have the reactions of Calpurnia as she is dead by this time.

Portia also expresses her concern for her husband Brutus. She is also put aside and not given any prominent role. Even though she makes an eloquent appeal to her husband to be taken seriously, Brutus gives more importance to a knock of the door than her. She even goes to the extent of wounding herself in the thigh to display the courage and valour of a soldier. The last we hear of her is Brutus' report of her terrible death. Grieving at her husband's absence and at the growing power of Antony and Octavius, Portia commits suicide by swallowing fire. Humanity is totally lost in the play at the altar of a false show of human vices and virtues.

CONCLUSION

The present article makes us understand that the human nature makes an interesting study. It seems to tell us that it doesn't matter whether we are right or wrong, we should learn to behave according to the signs of time or else we may lose the battle of life like Caesar. The article makes us be cautious of jealousy people like Cassius and take necessary actions to be away from them to safeguard our lives. One should be extremely careful not to believe everything that our friends tell us. We should use our own discretion and common sense before we take an action or else we would be behaving Brutus.

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Swamy, Bala. "Human Virtues and Vices in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar." *Indian Streams Research Journal* 2.7 (2012). Yu, Jeffrey J. "Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Erasmus's De Copia, and Sentential Ambiguity." *Comparative Drama* 41.1 (2007): 89. Academic Search Complete. Web. 19 Feb. 2014. Kelsi Lynelle. Shakespeare's account of the Roman general Julius Caesar's murder by his friend Brutus is a meditation on duty. First performed around 1599, when the English royal succession was uncertain, Julius Caesar confronts the dangers of political turmoil. Read a character analysis of Brutus, plot summary, and important quotes. Summary. The Tragedy of Julius Caesar (First Folio title: The Tragedie of Ivlivs Cæsar) is a history play and tragedy by William Shakespeare first performed in 1599. Although the play is named Julius Caesar, Brutus speaks more than four times as many lines as the title character, and the central psychological drama of the play focuses on Brutus. Brutus joins a conspiracy led by Cassius to murder Julius Caesar, to prevent Caesar becoming a tyrant. Antony stirs up hostility against the conspirators. Rome becomes