A Clash of Aims: The Use and Abuse of Oratory by Brutus and Antony

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The most blatant and powerful examples in *Julius Caesar* of the use of oratory to achieve personal ends are the famous back-to-back speeches delivered by Brutus and Antony in Rome's main square immediately following Caesar's assassination. This thorough and useful analysis of the speeches is from *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays,* a well-respected work by the noted literary scholar, Derek Traversi. Traversi appropriately calls the oratorical dual a "clash of aims" in which each man tries to manipulate the collective will of the mob, always a powerful force in ancient Rome. Brutus's speech, Traversi states, is well-meaning but ultimately shows the character's self-ignorance and foreshadows his own doom. By contrast, Antony successfully plays on the crowd's emotions, demonstrating that the "fickleness of popular emotion" can be a powerful tool in the hands of an effective politician.

The famous oration scene (III. ii) . . . shows a Brutus caught in the consequences of his own act, deprived—now that the mood of exaltation which accompanied him to it has passed—of the impulse to go further, exposed in his inadequate estimate of himself and his situation. Against it is set an Antony who, in the act of appearing as the adventurer and theatrical orator he is, is also the instrument by which the *truth* about murder, which Brutus' idealism cannot cover, emerges to the light of day. This clash of aims and temperaments takes place before a background provided by

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a new element in the action: the Roman populace. The crowd has not hitherto played a decisive part in events, though its fickleness has been indicated more than once in the early scenes. It now makes the voice of its appetites heard in a more sinister fashion, thereby showing from still another point of view the nature of the forces which Brutus and Cassius have so irresponsibly released from their normal restraints.

There is, indeed, a sense as though of hunger in the insistent clamour with which the scene opens: 'We will be satisfied: let us be satisfied.' A collective will, primitive and irresponsible, but none the less exacting in its demands, has entered the action. The drama to be enacted over Caesar's corpse will take place in the presence of this force, which could well end by devouring both the contending parties. When the Second Citizen announces his intention of 'comparing' the reasons offered by the speakers, a new if unconscious factor of judgement is asserting itself.

The Short-Sightedness of Brutus's Speech

Brutus' oration, as has often been noted, is cold in its balanced abstraction, the utterance of one whose devotion to 'nobility' leads him to the illusion that his 'reasons' need only to be stated clearly and with dignity to command the assent of all right-minded and public-spirited men:

> As Caesar loved me, I weep for him: as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him; but as he was ambitious, I slew him. [III. ii. 26.]

The balanced periods aim, not at emotional appeal, which has no place in the speaker's 'philosophy', but at the statement of propositions demanding assent; and the conclusion—'I slew him'—covers a certain self-sufficiency in its readiness to assume the responsibility for murder. The man who speaks thus is undeniably noble, but his nobility is dangerously close to self-ignorance. 'I have done no more to Caesar than you shall do to Brutus': a note of unconscious irony again asserts itself, together with the incongruous touch of attempted demagogic appeal in the offer of 'a place in the commonwealth' to Mark Antony and his friends: 'as which of you shall not'. Brutus is still unaware of the complexity of his own motives, and this unawareness makes itself felt in the ominous shadow or his conclusion: 'as I slew my best lover for the good of Rome, I have the same dagger

for myself, when it shall please my country to need my death.' [III. ii. 49.]

As Brutus brings this speech of self-justification to a close, the crowd begins to play its part. The acclamation of the republican idealist culminates, with a bitter and appropriate irony, in the suggestion that he, the liberator, should be elevated to replace the dictator he has killed. 'Let him be Caesar': the anonymous acclamation is, in effect, a death-blow to all Brutus' idealistic hopes, and it is evidence of the short-sightedness with which he meets it that his last words, urging his hearers to remain with Antony, though in fact an attempt to turn to his own favour the concession offered to his rival, amount to a connivance at his own doom. Strong in the illusion of self-confidence which his nature demands, Brutus leaves the field to an enemy who is particularly equipped to destroy him.

Antony Casts a Shadow on His Enemies

Faced by the initial hostility of the mob, Antony proceeds with caution. He has come, he says, not to 'praise' Caesar, but merely to bury him. As he warms to his task, however, doubt is cast upon Caesar's alleged 'ambition'—

> The noble Brutus
> Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:
> *If it were so,* it was a grievous fault—[III. ii. 83.]

more particularly by comparison with the tangible horror of his end: 'And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it'. As the doubt begins to come home to his audience, Antony feels strong enough to cast a shadow upon the alleged 'honour' of his enemies, to recall the dead man's generosity and to point to his refusal of the crown. By the end of this process the recognition of Brutus as 'honourable' has turned to the implied doubt of 'And *sure,* he is an honourable man'. It may be, indeed, that the certainty is false, though the moment has not yet come to say so openly:

> I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
> But here I am to speak what I do know. [III. ii. 106.]

All his hearers once loved Caesar, 'not without cause': all therefore have a right, even a human duty, to mourn his passing. It is typical that Antony, who—unlike Brutus—appeals consciously to the emotions and finally rouses an element in man not far removed from the bestial, should claim to speak in the name of reason:

O judgement! thou art fled to brutish beasts,
And men have lost their reason. [III. ii. 110.]

Having reached the opening point in his campaign to assert his control over his hearers, Antony pauses to allow the effect of his insinuations to sink home.

Each stage in the change of dramatic mood is marked by the comments of his hearers. They first greet him with doubt and resentment—"Twere best he speak no harm of Brutus here'—and to this mood the speaker has been careful to defer. 'For Brutus' sake, I am beholding to you' is the ingratiating preface with which he mounts the rostrum: but gradually, as he feels his way to mastery, he rises to the bolder questioning of 'What cause witholds you then to mourn for him?' and ends with the effective gesture of feeling overcoming the power to speak:

My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause till it come back to me. [III. ii. 112.]

The response is just what the orator intended. There is 'much reason' in what he says; the death of Caesar may open the way for a 'worse' to take his place. The ambition so recently condemned in the murdered man has now become 'certainly' no part of his nature; the eyes of the speaker, moreover, by a most telling piece of sentiment, are seen to be 'red as fire with weeping'.

Appealing to the Crowd's Emotions

All this implies, beyond insight into the nature of demagogy [oratory in which the speaker sometimes departs from the truth], something perhaps even more important: the assertion of realities which the conspirators have neglected at their peril and which are already gathering to overwhelm them. The change of emotional climate has become such that Antony can now proceed to a new stage in his manoeuvre. This consists in open play upon the fickleness of popular emotion. Caesar's authority of 'yesterday' is contrasted with his solitude in death: none is now 'so poor to do him reverence'. As always with Antony, genuine emotion is mingled with its conscious exploitation in others. The orator, in the act of disclaiming his intention 'to do Brutus wrong and Cassius wrong', proceeds to stir up his hearers 'to mutiny and rage'. Rather than do them wrong, he will 'wrong the dead', 'wrong myself and you'; and the final reference to 'honourable men' comes, now openly ironic, to point his intention. The culminating moment in this part of the speech is an appeal to the interest of the mob in the reference to the will, which however—following the normal tactic of seeming to withdraw what he offers—he says that he does not 'mean to read'. The height of emotional tension at which he aims has, indeed, still to be reached, and Antony procedes to stimulate it by a sensational use of imagery which unites the evocation of wounds and blood with the 'religious' associations to which his audience most readily responds:

they would go and kiss dead Caesar's wounds
And dip their napkins in his sacred blood,
Yea, beg a hair of him for memory. [III. ii. 138.]

The feeling here typifies the play in its combination of violent external colour and inner emotion. The idea of sacred and bloody relics both heightens the value ascribed to the dead Caesar and points to a deliberate manipulation of popular sentiment.

The appeal to emotion produces the desired effect. The crowd demand to hear the will. Antony, still pretending to refuse, hints ever more definitely at its importance—'It is not meet you know how Caesar loved you'—and rouses the very passions he ostensibly condemns. 'It will enflame you, it will make you mad': the words, seemingly designed to restore calm, create the very excess which they deprecate. The determination of the mob makes itself felt in repeated calls for 'the will'; it is the irony of the situation that the people affirm their power to obtain their desire—'You shall read us the will, Caesar's will'—as they are in fact being moulded to Antony's purpose. One more reference to the 'honourable men' whose daggers 'have stabb'd Caesar', and Antony judges that the time is ripe; but, before acceding to read the will, he makes a last show of unwillingness—'You will *compel* me then to read the will'—and prepares for his disclosure by calling upon his hearers to form a ring about the corpse. In full sight of the wounds, and as Antony descends to still closer contact with his audience, the emotional content of the situation will effectively reinforce the appeal so variously made to simple gratitude, base cupidity, and blind ignorance.

Making Caesar's Body a Religious Relic

The third long part of the oration is devised to bring the crowd to join in the speaker's own brilliant, colourful flow c

emotion: 'If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.' Once more, the emphasis is on wounds and on the blood which, spilt by traitors, flows with an ease which answers to the emotion now being expressed. Brutus was 'Caesar's angel', so that the dead man's blood, when it followed the withdrawn dagger, was, as it were,

> rushing out of doors, to be resolved
> If Brutus so unkindly knocked, or no. [III. ii. 184.]

Here and in the following re-creation of Caesar's fall, Antony's appeal to sentiment, his calculated release in others of the emotions which it is his own nature easily to feel, reaches its culminating point. He is now able to appeal to the natural pieties—

> O now you weep, and I perceive you feel
> The dint of pity: these are gracious drops—[III. ii. 198.]

before he makes his last and supremely effective gesture by turning from 'Caesar's vesture wounded' to the body of the victim, 'marr'd, as you see, with traitors'.

It is, indeed, now a religious relic that is being displayed to call for its own intensity of responding feeling. The response comes in broken exclamations, which stand out against the wonderfully facile flow of what has gone before, and leads finally to the sinister call for death and revenge: 'Revenge! About! Sack! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay!' To the last Antony follows his method of inciting his hearers by disclaiming the very ends he has in mind. He begs them not to be stirred up to 'such a sudden flow of mutiny'. Caesar's assassins are still 'honourable', though the reasons for their deed are beyond the understanding of one who is, like those who hear him, 'a plain blunt man',

> That love my friend: and that they know full well
> That gave me public leave to speak of him. [III. ii. 223.]

It is essential to the irony which prevails at this point that this, in part, is precisely what Antony is: though it is equally true that the conscious orator in him, in asserting this 'plainness', is using it for calculated ends. His self-assumed part is that of one who has

> neither, wit, nor words, nor worth,
> Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,
> To stir men's blood, [III. ii. 225.]

one who can 'only speak right on'; and, having said so much, he returns by contrast to the rhetorical devices which are the secret of his success:

> I tell you that which you yourselves do know;
> Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,
> And bid them speak for me: but were I Brutus,
> And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
> Would ruffle up your spirits, and put a tongue
> In every wound of Caesar, that should move
> The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny. [III. ii. 228.]

It is the familiar mixture for the last time: the disclaimer of the oratorical gifts and graces he is using, the personification of Caesar's wounds, the rousing of his hearers to mutiny through the mention of 'the stones of Rome'.

Chaos Is Let Loose

The effect is immediately gained. The mob, moving off to burn the houses of Brutus and his followers, forget to listen to the terms of the very will which they so passionately demanded to hear; Antony's reminder—'You have forgot the will I told you of'—is one of the most effective strokes of the scene. As they go off, his last comment is a revealing disclaimer of responsibility. 'Now let it work': the orator, resting on his laurels, looks with satisfaction on his achievement, dwells with a certain pleasure on the chaos he has let loose:

> Mischief, thou art afoot,
> Take thou what course thou wilt. [III. ii. 265.]

The final effect is a revelation of irresponsibility accompanied by sinister pleasure:

> Fortune is merry,
> And in this mood will give us anything. [III. ii. 271.]

That, later on, she will assume other moods, ultimately less congenial to the speaker, remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the sinister little episode (III. iii) of the destruction of Cinna the poet for a chance coincidence of name, comes effectively to announce the brutality which will from now on so frequently preside over the course of events.

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