

Julius Caesar: The Essence and Illusion of Democracy

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Abstract

There is a dividing streak between democracy and autocracy which takes a great deal of insight and endeavors to be identified. William Shakespeare explored that deceptively naïve line of difference and exposed the audience to the illusion of democracy. In the historical play by Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, democracy is sought after by the tribunes of Rome who are unaware of the worthiness of the citizens to live up to the ideals of democracy. That democracy is too unreal to be effected at the heart of this play. On the other hand, we find fascist demagogues who win their bets and emerge victoriously. It becomes conspicuous that the common people of Rome are not suitable for the pure republican state. With power at hand, they do unimaginably unwise actions and more importantly, they are not even corrigible. At the same time, the play expresses a surprising amount of attraction of the common people towards fascist demagogues. This allure is universal and people of all times have fallen into the trap which I have shown with examples of real demagogues in this paper. This paper tries to explore the practical possibility of implementation of democracy and furthermore, it presents the current democratic situation of the world and its relevance to Shakespearean political thought.

Keywords: Republican Rome, Demagogues, Democracy, Fascism.

Abraham Lincoln declared the purest definition of democracy – “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (Gettysburg Address) in 1863, approximately 2300 years after the inception of the concept of democracy. It is a known truth today that democracy originated in Athens in 508 B.C and ever since this mode of government has never been out of the people’s dream. Democracy has been a constant companion of human civilization in different forms and colors. Whereas democracy and republic are used in the same sense broadly, they actually have some core differences. Democracy refers to the rule of the majority. As naive and balanced as it may sound, the perils of it are actually lying behind this ‘seemingly’ perfect concept. The problem lies in the mind of the mass of a country. Since the majority everywhere around the world can never handle the power given to them by the doctrine of democracy. It is bound to happen that the majority will misuse and abuse their newly acquired authority. On the other hand, a Republican state cannot be called purely democratic as it endeavors to put aside the extremities of democracy and have a balance. This is what happened to the Roman republic during the regime of Julius Caesar who wanted to make an equilibrium. However, the illusion of pure democracy made its way through this imaginary balance and ruined it all. While this ruination was unmistakable, it was the magical effort of a demagogue that assisted this path of destruction. The history of human civilization has repeated itself again and again with regard to the roles of demagogues. The period of Julius Caesar is surely no exception that William Shakespeare shows in his play. Shakespeare reveals the eternal truth that history itself has experienced repetitively that is, the common people are worthy of seeking democracy, but ironically not capable of holding it. Rather, people who are enjoying pure democracy take unwise actions every time which leads to not only the annihilation of democracy but also the establishment of autocracy and fascism. Interestingly, this tendency is still continuing in the very current time in which we are living,

namely the 21st century. If we look at the biggest democratic states in the modern world, we find the same fate for them which has been sealed for humanity from time immemorial.

If we look at the play we will find that the Roman republic has always been a dream for the people that they chased ceaselessly. There is no doubt that this dream was hampered because of the arrival of Caesar in power. However, the Senate failed to see the darker side of their dream. Undoubtedly, most of the Senates who were involved in the assassination of Caesar had noble intentions, exceptions were also present, though. Julius Caesar came to power at such a time when democracy was at its low and the elite was seeking it desperately, unknown to the fact that they were actually hankering after an everlasting illusion. By 60 BC, three important people gained eminence and control of the Republican government of Rome, namely, Julius Caesar, Pompey the Great, and Crassus. After rising to the peak of authority and forming the first 'Triumvirate' of Rome, they began to be doubtful of each other. As history has always had it, more than one man cannot hold the summit of supremacy, Caesar emerged to be the all in all of the Roman Republic. In the play, he rejected kingship thrice that was offered to him by the Roman commoners. More interestingly, he collapses into epilepsy while the crowd was cheering for him after rejecting the offer to kingship. Caesar obviously was not someone whom a huge crowd could intimidate. Why did he collapse then? This might be a consequence of his internal conflict as he probably was torn between his temptation to receive the crown and his moral value of democracy for Rome. Nevertheless, such acceptance of Caesar among the plebeians became the source of tension for the Senate. Holland wrote, "The Senate, stupefied by the scale of Caesar's achievements, overawed by the magnitude of his power, had scrabbled to legitimize his victory and somehow reconcile it to the cherished traditions of the past" (326). Therefore from their viewpoint, they were making the right decision of Caesar's assassination. According to them, Caesar was the only obstacle in the path of true democracy in Rome. They failed to see that true democracy is not

something that commoners wanted or even deserved. It is the ignorance of the common people along with the power-hunger of a few that destroy democracy.

The play depicts the plebeians as idle but economically stable. From the very beginning, the common people are shown as unwitting. Nevertheless, they are shown to be well placed in their professions. Different occupations, such as that of a cobbler and carpenter are mentioned. In spite of being well off, they lacked the common sense to see that the republic was destroying itself through internal conflict. Caesar was celebrating victory over a fellow Roman general Pompey the great. The plebeians remain foolishly unconscious of this wretched fact. It seems that they only need an occasion to celebrate unwisely. They are unable to see the justice of any action. This is why they are prompt to act on the spur of the moment and at all times prepared to flatter anyone in the position of authority. Their concern in petty things is evident when Flavius catechizes the cobbler for leading a crowd and he replies: “Truly, sir, to wear out their shoes, to get myself into more work. But, indeed, sir, we make holiday to see Caesar and to rejoice in his triumph” (1.1.28-30). Hearing this Flavius bursts with anger and rebukes the citizenry: “You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things! / O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome, / Knew you not Pompey?”(1.1.34-36).

This is quite evident that Marcus Brutus could not judge the situation correctly and made so many blunders along with his consent to Caesar’s assassination being the most dangerous. He could not comprehend the triviality of the commoners whom he was so passionate about. Brutus was so lost in his ideal that he was blind to the fact that Republican rule can no longer function. The council, the Senate, the tribunes and most importantly, the plebeians themselves were corrupted. Corruption was at the heart of the country from which no remedy was accessible. This is apparent when Shakespeare makes a pun out of what the cobbler says about his profession at the very first scene in the play: “A trade, sir, that I hope I

may use with a safe conscience, which is indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles” (1.1.13-14). Interestingly, the word ‘sole’ may sound exactly like another word ‘soul’. This proves that the soul of Rome needs mending. As the citizens of Rome are concerned about only their private interest and do not give any thought to the national interest, it is utter irrationality to hand them over the power of pure democracy. The worthlessness and indiscretion of the common people, who are mentioned as ‘mob’ in the play, touch its limit when they kill a poet mistakenly on a spur of the moment. They do not possess the judiciousness and constancy to analyze any matter to come to a rational resolution. It is the characteristic feature of a mob to take actions hastily that may have a hazardous consequence. Their lack of judgment and humanity becomes evident when they kill Cinna the poet. Even after knowing that they did not attack the conspirator Cinna, they chose to kill the poet Cinna anyway, one of them humorously exclaiming, “Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses” (3.3.28). The utter thoughtlessness of the mob proves that Brutus ‘pure democratic ideal is too unreal to be true.

Jonathan Boucher’s sermon “On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Nonresistance” delivered in 1775 asserted that the concept of equality of all men is a particularly ‘loose and dangerous ‘one, for “without some relative inferiority and superiority” there can be only chaos. This may sound partial despite having truth in it. Brutus lacked this critical ability as he was blind about his own dream of Republican Rome. For this blind love, he could say: “Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more” (3.2.19-20). Because of this extreme passion for the wrong purpose, he made a pile of errors. The first of them is undoubted to give approval to the conspiracy against Julius Caesar. Nevertheless, the decision was not easy for him to make and he had to be divided within himself to do the same. In spite of his faith in his ideal, he could not be stress-free for a moment after participating that conspiracy. He lost his inner tranquility and kept on questioning own

choice. G. Wilson Knight wrote about Brutus' state, "two impulses diverge: one urges him to conspiracy and murder, the other reminds him of Caesar's goodness and the normal methods of upright men. He is thus divided- torn between a certain sense of duty and his instinct for peaceful and civilized behavior" (Knight 137). Though Brutus wavered between his considerations, Cassius was consistent enough in his opinion. In fact, he was the one to trick Brutus into approving of the conspiracy. He had to fake many things and exaggerate Caesar's intentions to make Caesar appear an autocrat to Brutus. This fear of autocracy drove Brutus to the verge of hysteria and he was unable to find any other course of action to save his 'ideal' Rome. Despite being sure of Caesar's intents, or at least the limit of his autocrat intents, Brutus hastily gives in to Cassius' plot. It did not occur to his mind that there are chances of complete disorder whereas he wanted to restore republican order. As a matter of fact, he did not even distinguish between republican ideas and democratic ideas while going for the slaying of Caesar. He felt vulnerable by the reputation of Caesar which was quite unthreatening at least at that point in time. Though Cassius was steady in his choice, which does not make his condition any better at the end of the play. For that matter, Brutus' state was worse than Cassius as his agitation started far earlier than Cassius, "it is exactly this incertitude, this wavering between two aspects of reality, which is at the root of disorder" (Knight 156).

The idea of getting rid of autocracy overwhelmed the Senate to such an extent that they overlooked the power of an individual. There is no disagreement in the fact that a great person can make a great difference. Julius Caesar was unquestionably a great person with perfect leadership and strategic quality as his past deeds show. Unfortunately, the imprudence of the Senate gives birth to a demagogue in the place of this leader. From the inception of democracy in Athens, demagoguery has been part and parcel of this system. When a nation lacks a leader, a demagogue takes that place and move the nation to chaos and conflict. This

is what precisely happened with Rome after the demise of Caesar. While Brutus and Cassius were busy in reestablishing democracy, Antony emerged as that inevitable portion of democracy that both of them ignored. It is important to know about the origin of this word and its function. Demagogue refers to a leader of the mob or a popular leader who can also be called a 'rabble-rouser'. He is a leader in a democracy who makes use of unawareness and predisposition of the common people to achieve prominence. Demagogues upturn conventional customs of political conduct or promise or threaten to do so. Manipulation is an unavoidable part of demagoguery which can be noticed in demagogues of all times- from ancient to modern times.

If we consider probably the best demagogue of all times, Adolf Hitler, we would be able to comprehend the qualities and capabilities of such a person. This will also assist us in realizing the eternal attraction of human beings to eloquent speakers. This fatal attraction may lead to severe dysfunction and hazard, as in the case of Hitler. The deleterious power of demagoguery can never be denied, despite the fact that the birth of demagoguery is inevitable in a purely democratic nation. The reason behind the rise of Hitler in Germany has been surprising to people, scholars as well as masses, till now. One of the most vital causes is the articulateness of Hitler that was worthy enough to make common people dream big. There are three things about a demagogue that make him acceptable to the mass, even inconsiderately. First of all, a demagogue, such as Hitler, is capable of analyzing a situation, especially a public one. He knows exactly what to say to exploit the emotion of common people. This happens to be true because of his immense knowledge about human strengths and flaws. Therefore, there is no denying the fact that any demagogue's success depends on his ability to assess human psychology. Secondly, a dramatic essence is needed in a demagogue which is essential for his success. Demagogues are supposed to be inherently theatrical, otherwise, they would not appear appealing to the masses. Hitler was no exception

who infused loads of drama and theatricality in his speeches. Thirdly, a demagogue sets a grand goal in front of the nation which seems so alluring to the people. The magnificence of the vision engulfs the mind of public. Even if there is no possibility of stability, prosper and peace in the near future, the demagogue presents the possibility in such a way that people fall in love with the illusion and remain in that till it is too late. Hitler increasingly presented himself in messianic terms, promising to lead Germany to a new era of national greatness, though he was typically vague about his actual plans.

Another brilliant demagogue belonging to the United States of America is Joseph McCarthy who is remembered in history for infamous reasons. McCarthy's demagoguery was motivated by self-centered goals and produced nothing but disharmony. He was a junior senator in the 1950s who came to the limelight only because of his theatricality and impractical solutions to great national as well as international crises. This is truly flabbergasting how people all over the world and at all times have embraced and supported demagogues despite having complete democratic rights.

The Shakespearean demagogue in *Julius Caesar* appeared in a moment of national crisis is common with all demagogues of all times. The crowd has just been informed by Brutus that their leader whom they admired to the extent that they offered him the crown thrice is killed. Although Cassius and Cinna make hysterical scream about liberty and freedom right after Caesar's assassination, the common people are not sure about the intention lying behind this political murder. Brutus, in his speech before Mark Antony, states clearly that their motive is a noble one which is to retain republic ideals of Rome. However, Brutus' blunder is an immense belief in the republican model, most importantly, in the intelligence of the commoners. He could not grasp the fact that the commoners are not capable of handling democracy in its raw form. Common people are always tempted to be taken away by big words and spoil their democratic rights. This is why Antony is able to have

a grip over the crowd from the very beginning of his speech. There is no doubt in the fact that Brutus made a fatal mistake in letting Antony take the public platform.

Brutus, indisputably, is a decent orator who endeavored enough to take the crowd under his sway after the assassination of Caesar. Even for a little while, it seemed that Brutus is successful in his attempt as the crowd appeared to be pacified after his short speech. Brutus mentioned it at the very beginning of his addressing: “and public reasons shall be rendered/Of Caesar's death.” Interestingly, people also appear to be rational at that point of time as one citizen says: “I will hear Cassius; and compare their reasons, / When severally we hear them rendered” (3.2.7-8). Nevertheless, the rationality becomes extremely doubtful when they instantly support Brutus. Additionally, when they cheer for Brutus after his speech that sounds unreasonable too, as one of them screamed: “Let him be Caesar” (3.2.43). This sounds absolutely absurd as the drive behind the assassination is to get rid of Caesar. The crowd never grasps the ideal of Brutus that is why they are quick to support anyone who has the ability to manipulate them. Who can manipulate better than a demagogue? Here, enters Mark Antony with all of his expertise of persuasion and manipulation. Antony started with a crafty trick that instantaneously hooked the crowd, he began by addressing the people as “Friends”. This is a prerequisite for demagoguery to descend to the level of commoners and influence them. He sets out by requesting attention, without interruptions: ‘Be patient till the last’ (3.2.12). The complete opposite is done by Antony “who will let himself be interrupted often and artfully, thus allowing the crowd to believe itself the protagonist of the oratorical (emotional, ideological, political) event” (Drakkais 133). Antony uses rhetorical devices like irony, *paralepsis*, emphasis, and *litotes* for his hidden persuasion. When he says, “I come to bury Caesar not to praise him” (3.2.66). This creates an ironical effect for readers as they know Antony means the exact opposite of what he says. Another ironical effect occurs repeatedly as he keeps on declaring Brutus as an honorable man, for instance, “When that the

poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:/Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:/Yet Brutus says he was ambitious; /And Brutus is an honorable man” (3.2.83-86). Eventually, that phrase sounds hilarious making Brutus a total reverse of an honorable person. Antony’s trump card is the will of Caesar of which he makes the best possible use. In spite of showing the will straightaway, he stimulates the crowd more by pretending prohibition. By the usage of litotes he says, “I must not read it” (3.2.132) and then use *paralepsis* he states, “Tis good you know not that you are his heirs” (3.2.137).

Furthermore, Antony rebukes and praises the crowd at the same time in such an indirect manner that they are bound to be induced as he says, “You are not wood, you are not stones, but men” (3.2.131). Finally, he makes a display of the corpse of Julius Caesar, which is a morbid act. Antony does not hesitate to flaunt his friend Caesar’s corpse which is an extremely shameless act for a decent person to do. In reality, a demagogue is someone who would go to any limit to fulfill his purpose and would not falter to make a profit out of a relationship along with the emotion of other people. Antony’s reverence for Caesar cannot be questioned, however, he uses his own emotion for a purpose.

The current world presents us with demagogues in new forms, though the essence of a demagogue can never change. The presence of a demagogue is an inseparable part of both a democratic and a republican country. As a matter of fact, a republican country is a type of representative of democracy. If we consider the countries of today’s world we will find that all ideas of a country where people enjoy equal rights and fair means are adopted for every course of action come to a futile end. The existing world politics does not seem fascist or autocrat apparently, but if it is observed closely, the veil of democracy is bound to fall down. For that matter, fascism and autocracy are not easy to define. It is challenging to confine these concepts within any boundary. These are capable of residing in any seemingly democratic or republican country deceptively.

Fascism has become an all-purpose word. We often use it to describe people and things we dislike. It is applied indiscriminately to figures in authority. To modes of behavior, to ways of thinking, to kinds of architecture. What 'Fascists' have common is that they are the enemies of liberal or left-wing thought and attitudes. They can be seen as threatening, aggressive, repressive, narrowly conservative and blindly patriotic. (Hood & Jansz 4)

When Fascist ideals are taken as natural ones in a country, it falls into the category of an autocratic or totalitarian state. Nowadays, many countries are on the verge of rejecting democratic and republican ideals, if not accepting autocracy completely. Major reasons behind this include the demagoguery of politicians and the failure of the citizens to differentiate between a true leader and a demagogue. For instance, the United States of America considered the most powerful republican country with a democratic ideal in the world, has chosen a president who fulfills almost every category of a demagogue and is feared for imminent fascist attitudes by critics and scholars everywhere currently. Though it is true that he cannot be called a fascist in its exact theoretical sense, his political doctrine and totalitarian tendencies are alarming for the rest of the world as well as that country itself.

To call this fascism does not do justice to fascism. Fascism had, in some measure, an ideology and occasional coherence that Trump utterly lacks. But his movement is clearly fascistic in its demonization of foreigners, its hyping of a threat by a domestic minority (Muslims and Mexicans are the new Jews), its focus on a single supreme leader of what can only be called a cult, and its deep belief in violence and coercion in a democracy that has heretofore relied on debate and persuasion (*America Has Never Been*).

The rise of him in power and the reason behind this are burning issues in the current world. Undoubtedly, the quality of demagoguery assisted him to a great extent. The current president left no stone unturned to be in the center of public attention before the presidential election, and that is a vital criterion of a demagogue. He has been in the news for all the

wrong reasons. However, the important fact is his presence under the limelight. Therefore, people have come to know him and talk about him. This shows the incredible imprudence, profligacy, and prejudice. Since a demagogue's success depends on his ability to assess human psychology, Trump has done his part well. Furthermore, the theatricality and grandeur, needed for the success of a demagogue, are ample in him. He shrewdly tempted the common citizen with an enthralling dream of "making America great again". Despite any constructive strategies for this goal, common people are taken away by his eloquence and drama. People no longer believe in the authority of public institutions, which amounts to a loss of faith in a constitutional democracy. That Trump made it this far proves that the country can be whipped into a frenzy and that fascism is only an election away. (The people's Tyrant)

As a final point, we may look back to Plato who believed that political regimes follow a pattern where oligarchy is supposed to yield to democracy and democracy to tyranny. Oligarchy fails when the elite becomes extremely corrupted. Democracy follows but not for long as common citizens cannot handle the maximum opportunity to have equal right and power. They give in unknowingly to a demagogue's persuasion and fall or the trap of tyranny subsequently (Plato, 2008, Book VIII). Shakespeare was not a political theorist. However, *Julius Caesar* opens up a profound political doctrine which makes him worthy to stand in the line of great political thinkers. Since democracy remains an illusion even today, Shakespearean political thought as expressed in the play is still relevant in the present world.

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