

Power of Persuasion:

A Rhetorical Analysis of Political Discourse in *Julius Caesar*

The rhetorician's business is not to instruct a law court or a public meeting in matters of right and wrong, but only to make them believe.

- Plato

Words have a magical power... Words are capable of arousing the strongest emotions and prompting all men's actions.

- Sigmund Freud

Consciousness is the first step towards emancipation.

- Norman Fairclough

This paper seeks to demonstrate the power of rhetoric strategies to influence individuals and sway crowds through analyzing the political rhetoric in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, long reputed as one of the finest examples in the art of persuasion. The analysis is divided into three sections: three symbolic characters in the play. The first section is dedicated to Cassius, who persuades Brutus into conspiracy by rhetoric and deceit. The second will focus on the patriotic Brutus, who delivers an influential speech after the fall of Caesar. Finally, this paper wishes to analyze how Mark Antony sways the crowd to action through his oratory, driving the citizens of Rome against the conspirators. I will come to the conclusion that tragic consequences can result from underestimating the power of rhetoric and from lacking quality rhetoric, and how mastering the art of persuasion can result in power and control.

1. Cassius

The story is put in motion as Cassius pulls Brutus aside to discuss his perceptions of Caesar and the dangers of Caesar's growing power, in an attempt to persuade a man loyal to Caesar to rebel against him (1.2). With this objective of convincing a man to turn his back on

his friend, Cassius focuses on two specific strategies: to weaken Brutus' devotion to Caesar and to prompt Brutus' sense of civic responsibility. First, Cassius uses devices such as "contradiction" and "juxtaposition." He points out Caesar's shortcomings and juxtaposes him to fellow men, showing no difference between Caesar and ordinary men in comparison. This implies Caesar is just as likely to become corrupted with power, despite him being treated as a god. A case of juxtaposition would be his constant comparing Caesar with Brutus:

Brutus and Caesar—what should be in that "Caesar"?
 Why should that name be sounded more than yours?
 Write them together, yours is as fair a name. (1.2 144-146)

Why is Caesar treated so highly, while they are considered "underlings?" (1.2 143) He forces Brutus to question whether such ordinary and weak men deserve to hold such power, while continually flattering Brutus. Next, Cassius is aware that "knowing the audience" is essential to successfully persuading. Twice in eight lines Brutus uses the word "honor," reflecting the weight he places on honor. Cassius quickly takes advantage of this:

I know that virtue to be in you, Brutus
 As well as I do know your outward favor.
 Well, honor is the subject of my story. (1.2.90-92)

One will discover in the ensuing speeches delivered by Cassius and Antony, respectively in Act I Scene II and Act III Scene II, the chosen wording of "honor" repeatedly appears. Cassius also emphasizes other words that Brutus resonates with, such as "free" and "Rome." In Act III, Brutus finally falls victim to Cassius' tricks and joins the conspirators after receiving Cassius feigned letters, in which fake citizens urged Brutus to lead Rome.

2. Brutus

Brutus makes no attempt to hide his involvement in the assassination of Caesar, and he takes the platform to justify Caesar's death to the people of Rome. He presents his speech in plain prose and aims to appeal to the people's reason. One strategy Homer often

emphasized was the Rule of Three. Through abiding the Rule of Three, the communicator may express concepts more completely and increase the memorability of the message.

According to Andrew Dlugan, the Rule of Three describes triads of all types—any collection of three related elements, such as a series of three successive words or three parallel elements (words or phrases): In the beginning of Brutus' speech after the word of Caesar's death had spread across the city, he calls to the people's attention by addressing them "Romans, countrymen, and lovers!" (3.2 13) Also, by calling the people of Rome "lovers," the audience is instantly reminded of the ethos of Brutus, his authoritative image as a noble man. He proceeds with a more explicit request:

Believe me for mine honor,
And have respect to mine honor that you may believe.
Censure me in your wisdom,
And awake your senses that you may be the better judge. (3.2 15-18)

Brutus swiftly provides an answer to the question the crowd holds. His claim is the frequently quoted "Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more." (3.2 23) In the preceding claim, Brutus implements a device—"antithesis"—contrasting ideas in a balanced construction. Through this technique, one idea could be heightened to importance, while the other diminishes to oblivion. The people will consider Brutus valorous for placing his personal affections beneath his patriotism. He would appear as a man of true honor.

Moreover, Brutus eloquently uses "rhetorical questions" or reverse psychology to augment his argument: "Had you rather Caesar were living and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?" (3.2 24) It is more than likely that men would refuse to become slaves and feel disposed to freedom. Linguist Antonio Reyes believes questions imply connections with the audience, since they are formulated in the here-and-now moment of discourse. "They lower the formality of the speech event, establishing a fake dialogue where the politician seeks confirmation from the audience. Therefore, these questions constitute confirmatory questions, used often as solidarity devices." (Reyes 192) This is a

rhetorical technique commonly used by Brutus in his speech; he proposes question after question to the people:

Who is here so base that would be a bondman?
 If any, speak—for him have I offended.
 Who is here so rude that would not be a Roman?
 If any, speak—for him have I offended.
 Who is here so vile that will not love his country?
 If any, speak—for him have I offended. (3.2 31-33)

Here Brutus utilizes another technique “epimome,” the frequent repetition of a phrase or question to manifest one point. Nearing the end of his speech, he swears to take his own life if the people were to demand his death. The people spiritedly shouted in response, “Live, Brutus! Live! Live!” (3.2 45) Through this remark, Brutus demonstrates consistency with his taking the life of his friend, for killing himself would prove his commitment in placing the good of Rome above all personal affections. Surely he loved Caesar, but most people would believe he cherishes his life as much as that of his friend’s, if not even more. Brutus delivers his oratory in a potent and brief style, basing his arguments largely on appealing to the audience’s logos and their patriotic love of Rome.

3. Antony

Antony’s speech is a classic example of powerful rhetoric. It is widely believed Shakespeare composed Antony’s speech following the rhetorical guide of Thomas Wilson’s 1560 book *Arte of Rhetorique*. The book explains the theories in rhetoric as well as includes examples of how to fit an argument to different circumstances. One example is when your listeners are not on your side, precisely the situation Antony is in as he begins to speak. Wilson heeds that “nothing should be spoken at the first, but that which might please the Judge.” Antony initiates his oratory with the following confession, though we will find that it is contrary to his underlying intentions:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. (3.2 73)

In carefully choosing the wording of “lend me your ears,” Anthony applies the device “metonymy,” where he associates two concepts—the ear and the act of listening. With metonymy, Antony effectively grasps the audiences’ attention. In the words of Wilson, “and when the hearers are won, we may say that ...we ...speak nothing at all against our adversaries... Neither were it wisdom openly to speak against them, which are generally well esteemed and taken for honest men.” Now, the crowd has calmed down and has become less reluctant to hear Antony’s words. Antony carries out his speech referring to Brutus an “honorable man,” which he would repeat several times throughout the text. The people were pleased to hear Brutus praised. However, this is in Antony’s favor, for he will use the same repeated phrase to spark the audience into doubt. Antony cunningly combines the use of “juxtaposition” and “repetition.”

Come I to speak in Caesar’s funeral.
 He was my friend, faithful and just to me.
 But Brutus says he was ambitious,
 And Brutus is an honorable man. (3.2 83-86)

In the lines above, Brutus connected two facts with each other as one: Brutus says Caesar was ambitious, and Brutus is an honorable man. When two facts are juxtaposed as such, if one of them has proven questionable, both the facts will become doubtful. Anthony aims to prove Caesar was not ambitious, and by doing so, Brutus’ honor and honesty will become shaken. To justify his point of view, Antony appeals to Aristotle’s appeal, logos, in giving three evidences of Caesar’s moderate ambition—Caesar paid ransoms, implying his generosity. Caesar wept for the poor, implying his compassion for the people. Caesar refused the crown three times, inferring his lack of ambition. Antony creates a logical chain connecting Julius Caesar’s behavior to his lack of excessive ambition. This technique is called, “exdoxa” by the Sophists, which is the manipulation of commonly held beliefs. Through recalling certain

events citizens have witnessed, he supports his position. Antony appeals to the emotion of the audience, also known as Aristotle's pathos, through fully conveying his grief for Caesar:

O judgment! Thou art fled to brutish beasts,
 And men have lost their reason. Bear with me.
 My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
 And I must pause till it come back to me. (*weeps*) (3.2 103-106)

This emotional response contrasts heavily with Brutus' stern demeanor. While Brutus firmly states his emotions, Antony conveys it through his actions. "If you have tears, prepare to shed them now," he says as he shows the people Caesar's gashed and bloody cloak. He even walks down in to the crowd; combined with his emotions, Antony seems more of a man of the people than Brutus, who spoke from a heightened platform in an elevated manner.

Finally, he appeals to the self-interest of the crowd, who under the terms of Caesar's will should all inherit money and the enjoyment of his private gardens. Here, Antony again uses a rhetorical device to emphasize his point (the will) through seemingly passing over it—"paralepsis." In other words, he is mentioning by not mentioning:

Have patience, gentle friends. I must not read it.
 It is not meet you know how Caesar loved you.
 You are not wood, you are not stones, but men.
 And, being men, bearing the will of Caesar,
 It will inflame you, it will make you mad.
 'Tis good you know not that you are his heirs.
 For, if you should—Oh, what would come of it! (3.2 139-145)

Persuasion appears in many forms in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, either in the form of flattery, deception or the art of rhetoric. They are all used to sway the minds of the Roman people as well as leaders in power. Cassius persuades and deceives the noble Brutus into conspiracy, while Brutus is blinded by patriotism and sly deception. Brutus delivers a powerful speech based on reason, but underestimates the rhetoric powers of Mark

Antony, which ultimately leads to the tragic end of Brutus and Cassius. Even in modern days, identifying rhetoric techniques in political discourse is important, since the consequences can be significant. The power of persuasion and quality rhetoric cannot be underestimated.

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