

The Influential and the Influenced:

The Plebeians in William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*

By

Evelyn Y. Huang

(FLAL Junior 黃伊婷)

Shakespeare

Dr. Sue-Han Ueng

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In William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, except the major characters, such as Caesar, Brutus, Anthony, and Cassius, in fact, the plebeian characters are everywhere in the play. Although the plebeians do not speak much in the play, the role of the plebeian is indispensable. It is especially important in Rome, in this democratic country, that the support of the plebeian or the citizens is what the politicians need most. It even can be said that if there were no such a role, the role of the plebeian, in this play, there would not be *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. However, it is very interesting and also ironic to point out that although the plebeian play a pivotal role throughout the whole play, they do not have any influence on the politics at all. Actually, they are just led by those politicians by their tricks. In this play, the plebeian in appearance hold the power to influence the politics, but, as a matter of fact, they are the ones who are influenced.

The system of government in Rome in this play is the system of direct democracy, which "comprises a form of democracy and theory of civics wherein sovereignty is lodged in the assembly of all citizens who choose to participate" ("Direct Democracy" *Wikipedia*). Living in the democratic government, citizens can

express their opinions, which politicians should pay attention to. In other words, citizens have influence on politicians; politicians must take responsibility for the plebeian and govern the country in the public interest. Thus, if the plebeian dislike a certain politician, they even can overthrow him to show their discontent; whereas, if they like the politician, their respect and support will, instead, much exalt the politician's reputation. And the case is especially obvious in the situations in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* when Caesar comes back from a conquest (1.1), when Brutus speaks to the plebeian after the assassination of Caesar, and when Antony delivers his persuasive speech after Brutus' (3.2).¹ In these situations, the leaders are, in fact, shaped by the plebeian, for without the plebeian's back-up, they cannot survive in this democratic country.

Nevertheless, it is just this characteristic of the system of direct democracy (citizens mean everything for politicians) that paradoxically shows the plebeian's fickleness and ignorance in this play, which ironically make them have no influence on the politics in the long run.

First, Christopher Holmes and T. W. Smith in their essays both say that in this play the plebeian are all fickle (Holmes; Smith 82). Just in the beginning of Act one Scene one, an officer Murellus' remarks on the plebeian's affections transformed from

¹ All the lines from *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* are from *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition* (1997).

the former governor to Caesar have already foreshadowed the greater fickleness later (Smith 82). As Murellus exclaims, “You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things! / O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome, / Knew you not Pompey? ”.

Then soon, after the assassination in the funeral, the plebeians are shown to contradictorily sway from Brutus at first to Antony subsequently (Holmes). When Brutus is speaking, his argumentation that, “. . . not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?” has aroused a plebeian to shout out “Let him [Brutus] be Caesar” (3.2 20-2; 3.2 47). But just before long, when Antony is addressing his speech, in great contrast, one of the plebeians even yells out, “They [Brutus, et al] were traitors. Honorable men?” (3.2 150). In evidence, without further explanation, it is easily perceived that the plebeians’ stance is changing all the time merely in view of these two cases which are temporally separated by a short time.

Based on how soon the plebeians’ attitude has changed, Smith argues that these fickle behaviors reveal “their ability to hold more than one idea in their heads at once. Their unruliness shows their need of a strong man. . . . They depend on a spokesman or champion” (83). They are under great insecurity, actually. Therefore, anything may agitate them emotionally. And this feeling of insecurity is also why they change so fast that they can rejoice with Caesar in the beginning but mistakenly kill Cinna

violently in the end (3.3). They, in fact, do not know what to do, so what seems reasonable for them and what convinces them will be seen as the only way they can follow. So they are ignorant, indeed.

While someone is ignorant, it is easy to cheat on him or even change his value. And this is exactly the purpose Antony reaches in his public speech in the play. He plays tricks on the emotion-oriented judgment and ignorance of the plebeian and, hence, he succeeds in influencing the plebeian and in changing their attitude and finally defeats Brutus. In Antony's speech, he clearly points out the weakness that every plebeian has: "You are not wood, you are not stones, but men; / And being men, hearing the will of Caesar, / It will inflame you, it will make you mad" (3.2 139-41). Then he practices this weakness personally – he weeps in the public (3.2 103), and every plebeian, stunned, starts to empathize with him and transforms the attitude toward Antony, Brutus, and Caesar gradually. And in the end of the speech, Antony successfully influences the plebeians, and they even forget what Brutus just said and completely believe Antony (Smith 83). Compared with Antony, however, Brutus does not deliver his speech in this way. He speaks to the plebeians in a more rational way than Antony, providing the reasons to convince them (Smith 83). But Antony clearly knows that if he wants to change the plebeian's attitude just after Brutus' speech, giving reasons is not enough, so he "seeks to bring home to [the plebeian] the

greatness of their loss” to make them feel as the way as he (Smith 83). Therefore, that is how Antony succeeds in persuading the plebeian in the end of the speech.

Finally, to discuss how the plebeian influence the politicians in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* is not necessary anyhow, for it seems that it is the politicians who influence the plebeians most. In the play, the plebeians seem to hold the right to affect the politics; however, they do not know that how they affect the politics will have to depend on what the politicians do to them. Especially if the politician, like Antony, knows well the frailty of humanity and manipulates it properly, sometimes even the plebeian do not know that they are indeed influenced, not influencing the politics at all.

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