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COMMON PEOPLE AND MOB PSYCHOLOGY IN JULIUS
CAESAR AND SHAKESPEARE'S AMBIVALENT ATTITUDE
TOWARDS THEM



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ABSTRACT

The common people in *Julius Caesar* are a great force of the history and destiny of the state depends on them. Shakespeare treats the mob both as a unit and as a group of individuals. He is able to explore the dichotomy of the situation. Human feelings are sympathetically presented, but he does not hesitate to present both the stupidity as well as the viciousness of their recklessness. Thus we see Shakespeare has portrayed the common people in his *Julius Caesar* with a great deal of realism.

KEYWORDS :Mob, Psychology, History, State, Common People, Violence, Manipulation.

INTRODUCTION

The common people in *Julius Caesar* are a great force of the history and destiny of the state depends on them. To this common view everybody will agree but the point of interest which remains in question, is whether the common people are mere instruments to be mechanically manipulated by their leaders or whether there is anything like political consciousness in them or whether they try to judge their leaders and whether we are to view them simply by what is spoken about them by their leaders.

Many critics show Shakespeare's contempt for the common people for their changing of sympathies with the change of rulers. We learn from the Tribunes that the mob welcomes Pompey with "universal show" from which "Tiber trembled underneath her banks" and they put on "best attires" for welcoming the man who comes "in triumph over Pompey's blood". Brents Stirling shapes the basis of his argument from this opening scene. In the very first sentence of his chapter on *Julius Caesar* in his book *The Populace in Shakespeare*, he remarks, "The self interest and the sorry-instability of the Roman populace turns the tide against the conspirators" and assumes that the lines pronounced by Flavius upon the exit of the commoners are pronounced "chorally".

"See, whether their bases metal be not moved; they vanish tongue-tied in their guiltiness". We do agree with Brents Stirling that this opening scene anticipates the role of the common people in the play but we see here, what we shall see later more clearly in the reaction of the masses towards Brutus and Antony, that the "instability" of the crowd is not "sorry" as their sense of guilt is to their credit. We perceive here something very important that the play is concerned with the construing of

things and manipulations of the people. Shakespeare quite clearly hints at this theme at appropriate points. As in this instance Flavius after trying his hyperbolic way of persuasion which is a prelude to the great speeches of Antony and Brutus says "see" if their heart is not moved by their ovation. Brutus also, in his soliloquy, tries to mould his speech in order to convince the common people about the murder of Caesar, "and since the quarrel will bear no colour for the thing he is, Fashion it thus".

Antony also, for his revenge on conspirators, depends on the commoners as he gives direction to Octavius's servants to keep Octavius away from the city in the market place, till he tries:

In my oration, how the people take
The cruel issue of these bloody men;
According to which thou shalt discourse
To young Octavius of the state of the things.

Cassius also takes Brutus into the conspiracy hatched by them knowing that the commoners have a deep respect for him. Thus we see in the leaders a realization of the great force of the masses and their interest and anxiety to manipulate this force to fulfill their vested interests.

We also notice in the beginning of the play that though the masses are simple hearted, they have a respect for their craft, and they know their importance in the society, which is implied in the cobbler's witty and daring replies to the Tribunes. Being easy-going, they are more concerned about the present than with the past or the future. Therefore, the charge of hero-worship on them does not hold water. We see in the opening scene that they feel guilty simply by an appeal to their noble emotion, and it is precisely here that a heroic individual proves to be distinct from the common man as they differ in their capacity to see the motives beneath the designs of the political leaders.

Actually there is nothing for them to feel guilty for as in Plutarch's *"Life of Caesar"* we see it was Caesar, who made wide sweeping reforms, including the distribution of land, for the common masses. Under Caesar the commoners were flourishing a great deal, and, as Plutarch tells us, the upper class whom he calls "the men of deep judgment and learning" were much concerned about the fury and madness of the people. Here, it is significant to note that Roman democracy was not a democracy in the modern sense of the term, it was a sort of aristocracy, where even the Tribunes in their thinking and feeling were alike the aristocrats. The Tribunes addressed the craftsmen in the opening scene as "know you not—being mechanical" this is not a holiday, and rebuke them as "stones" and "worse than senseless things". This speech might have rants in the words spoken by Cassius to Brutus in Plutarch's *"Life of Caesar"* "What! Knowst thou not that thou art Brutus? Thinkst thou that they be cobblers, tapsters, or such like base mechanical that write these bills and scrolls ...?" it is a typical social point of view which Shakespeare brings to the fore in *Julius Caesar*. It is interesting to see that it is the republican Casca, who showed the greatest contempt for the masses, "For mine own part, I durst not laugh, for fear of opening my lips and receiving the bad air". Shakespeare's choice of Casca is significant here. He is a character with cynical partisan humour whom, in the same scene, Cassius has just described as a man of "sour fashion".

Whatever these nobles may call the commoners they are also politically conscious in spite of their simple heartedness. They favour Caesar for his concern about their welfare but they are antagonistic to the idea of Caesar being the emperor. They made out cries of joy each time Caesar refused the crown. Similarly, in spite of all their reverence for Brutus, they want reasons from him for the assassination of Caesar, "We will be satisfied; let us be satisfied" and further weigh the reasons put forward by Brutus with those of Cassius.

Though here Brutus, through his rhetorical question in an academic manner, succeeds in persuading the audience to admit to the rightness of his cause "who is here so rude, that would not be Roman? If any, speech; for him have I offended". The answer is inevitably "none". Notwithstanding the audience's temper, he fails in giving them an insight right into the heart of the matter, as Plebeians, superficially impressed by the sense of Brutus' idealism, cry "Let him be Caesar" and "Caesar's better part shall be crowned in him". It is this mob which Shakespeare seems to despise. He feels that as soon as the commoners start acting in mass, they forget their identity as well as their critical faculty. However, we see that the commoners, when not acting in mass under emotional charge, are quite noble and this is the basic reason that unites their sensitive human nature. Brutus appeals to their patriotic zeal which, however abstract and ego-centric it be, unites them.

However, when critics denounce these people for their fickle-mindedness, they forget the fact that the change in their attitude is not entirely mechanical, fickle-minded or senseless. We do see the people who, a moment before, were praising Brutus, are soon moved to emotional excitement by Antony. As a matter of fact, they are still unconsciously and emotionally connected with "Caesar's better part" which is very evident in the play. In Plutarch's *Life of Caesar* "When Brutus began to speak they gave him quiet audience: how be it immediately after they showed that they were not at all contented with the murder when one another called Cinna would have spoken, and began to abuse Caesar, they fell into a great uproar among them and marvelously reviled him". Though about Cinna's speech, there is no mention in *Julius Caesar*, yet this dramatic change of sympathy in one sense is an extension of the scene from Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*". Here Shakespeare wants to show that the commons do try to see the reasons but they ultimately abide by the reality. Brutus stresses the ambition of Caesar while Antony stresses the achievements of *Julius Caesar*. To compare both the facets of a man in this situation is difficult for an ordinary person. That is why Plebeians fail to see the motives beneath the speeches of their leaders. Instead they are moved by emotions though noble ones. Antony knows this fact very well. He is no expounder but an evoker of emotions. He gazes, sighs and waits for the desirable responses from the formerly hostile crowd. The crowd soon reciprocates, "Poor soul! His eyes are red as fire with weeping" and "There is not a noble man in Rome than Antony". Plutarch gave a very precise and apt description of Antony's speech in one formula, "When he saw that the people were gladly desirous to hear Caesar spoken and his praises uttered, he mingled his oration with lay man table words and by amplifying of matters did greatly moved their hearts and affections". This essence of Antony's oration shows his fine analysis of audience's temper and Shakespeare's grasp of it. Antony employs the most potent device of concrete imagery and illustration as he knows that the audience believes in action and not in motive, and so he evokes the emotional response by reminding them how Julius Caesar "hath brought many captives to Rome, whose ransoms did the general coffers fill".

And at the same time Antony also makes the crowd realize that, "Mark'd ye his words? He would not take the crown; therefore 'Tis certain he was not ambitious." Meanwhile Antony refers to Caesar's will for the commoners and delays reading of it till he has secured considerable emotional momentum by awakening their instinctive human sympathy by showing them Caesar's ghastly stabbed body and associating with it the cruelty of the conspirators and goes on paying ironic respect side by side to the conspirators by calling them "honourable" which evokes contempt for them. Thus the people are convinced at heart because Antony makes them think that they are convincing themselves. Now the individual human emotions of the common people are turned into latent animal instinct and this behaviour of the mob which once having got the momentum goes on heaping destruction. But at this point Shakespeare makes us aware of the self interest of the leader in the manipulation of the mob as

Antony says "Now let it work mischief thou art afoot, take thou what course thou will!".

These unregulated emotions result in unwanted violence for example the murder of Cinna the poet. The bullying questions asked to the poet are none in Plutarch's "Life of Caesar" yet their basis which is the "mob mentality" is there." Therefore, this scene is not a new invention altogether but only an addition of keen psychological insight into the behaviour of the mob as to what happens when the power is disordered and comes into the hands of an unruly mob? As for instance, everybody in the mob starts asking questions to Cinna the poet, 'what is your name?', "Whither are you going?" "Where do you dwell?" "Are you a married man or a bachelor?" and everybody commends him for answering the questions "briefly, wisely, all truly". At last the innocent poet is killed for no fault of his but for his name being similar to a conspirator and ironically "for his bad verses". This mob of Shakespeare anticipates the class conflict in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* where human emotions are left aside and the mob kills innocent people without trial.

Thus Shakespeare treats the mob both as a unit and as a group of individuals. He is able to explore the dichotomy of the situation. Human feelings are sympathetically presented, but he does not hesitate to present both the stupidity as well as the viciousness of their recklessness. Thus we see Shakespeare has portrayed the common people in his *Julius Caesar* with a great deal of realism. We too get moved by the appeal of the Tribunes, Brutus and Antony. We feel that we too would have been swayed and could have also been wild, if we had found ourselves in the critical situation in which the mob in *Julius Caesar* finds itself. So the charge leveled by Tolstoy and some other critics that Shakespeare shows contempt for the common people does not hold water as the common people are presented not only as they usually react all the world over but also as they ever will.

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