Julius Caesar and the Art of Rhetoric

Naphtali Rivkin – is a student,
Washington and Lee University
(Lexington, Virginia, United States)

E-mail: en1226@gmail.com

Approaching politics through literary analysis, Julius Caesar and the Art of Rhetoric aims to answer the question, “what makes a successful politician?” Through a systematic line-by-line scrutiny of Shakespeare's quintessential political play, Julius Caesar, Rivkin isolates “the art of rhetoric” as the single historic constant indispensable in the ever-changing equation of political success.

Beyond the play, Julius Caesar, Rivkin explores rhetoricians and political philosophers like Aristotle, Quintilian, and Ramus who may have contributed to Shakespeare's Early Modern world-view. But Shakespeare seems to transcend his influences, and demonstrates his near presence in a political story that is as historical as it is ahead of its time. Shakespeare touches on the timeless essence of politics, which, if understood, could inform successful political leaders and systems of tomorrow.

Keywords: Julius Caesar, Art of Rhetoric, political.

How a 16th century play about an ancient story can inform our understanding of politics today and our political practices tomorrow.

Everything you need to know about politics you can learn from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. In 1599, Shakespeare captured the timeless essence of politics that we can today distill from Julius Caesar, and tomorrow, reapply in the real world with great effect. Politics implies so much more than “the science of government and the State” (OED). Since people began articulating their rights to self-government in the ancient democracies of Greece and Rome, politics overflowed the realm of “states” and the constraint of “science.” Politics has a hand in every facet of societal life, and manifests itself everywhere from great orations in town squares to intimate communication between lovers. Perhaps politics even penetrates a person’s innermost thoughts and defines his debate with his conscience. Though these encounters between a person and his people, a person and his love, or a person and himself, may very well be within the realm of politics, sometimes they are beyond the realm of calculated “science,” which is why politics seems to be more of an art. Just as each work of art must fit a certain form and yet retain its expressive uniqueness in order to somehow touch and influence the person who experiences that art, so too politics must fit some sort of form and yet be malleable enough to influence people even in the most intimate and unique situations.

The one constant in politics—the tool that every politician has always had to employ and will always have to employ in order to achieve his aim of influence—is a style or styles of rhetoric. Politics, after all, is the art of societal life. Therefore, communi-

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cation with the art of rhetoric is paramount to political success. Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* is, above all, a master class in the art of rhetoric, which is why everything you need to know about politics you can learn from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Rhetoric can be deemed successful or unsuccessful depending on whether or not the rhetorician can influence another person or people to some sort of action or belief. In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare provides us with many examples of rhetoric, six of which this paper will discuss. They are both successful and unsuccessful examples of rhetoric, from which it can be determined that Shakespeare has a clear framework of rhetoric that he believes is effective. This framework is a belief that people cannot fundamentally act against their own nature, and therefore not even the most persuasive rhetoric can change people’s innermost hearts. But rhetoric can remove inhibition, and subtly empower people to act and believe in concordance with their true nature even if they were not acting in concordance with it before. In practical terms, this means that the master rhetorician identifies the desires of his target, and with this knowledge tailors his rhetoric — his art — to suit that desire, resulting in what seems like a change of heart, but is in reality a realization of heart.

Shakespeare’s ideas about rhetoric are not new, nor are they a product of any one single rhetorician or philosopher. Shakespeare seems to have drawn his philosophy of rhetoric from a number of sources including Aristotle, Quintillian, and Ramus, combined with an Elizabethan understanding of human nature. This Elizabethan philosophy is best explained in the oft cited The Elizabethan World Picture, by E. M. W. Tillyard, in which Tillyard explains that “every speck of creation was a link in the chain, and every link except those at the two extremities was simultaneously bigger and smaller than another” [Tillyard: p.26]. Beyond hierarchy, though, The Chain implies caste, and the danger of attempting to change one’s place on The Chain for fear of disrupting the order of the universe. It would be as ludicrous for a plebeian to attempt to become a royal as it would for a rock to attempt to become a plebeian; everything has its place. Similarly, Shakespeare’s ideas about rhetoric revolve around the idea that a person cannot fundamentally change his nature.

Finally, just as rhetoric cannot be limited to scientific formulae, it cannot be limited to words, for words only account for 55% of a person’s “likeability” (Mehrabian Principle of Communication). Therefore, this paper will explore the 1970 film adaptation of *Julius Caesar* in order to understand the director’s interpretations of the rhetoric of the body that readers cannot necessarily glean from words on a page. In so doing, I will determine whether or not 20th century rhetoric systems subscribe to Shakespeare’s idea. If they do, perhaps then I am justified in asserting that everything you need to learn about politics you can learn from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

The first instance of successful rhetoric in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* is in act one, scene two, wherein Cassius influences Brutus to believe that Caesar would be a tyrant. Here, too, is the most obvious display of Shakespeare’s stance on the powers of rhetoric; namely, that it can only “discover to yourself which you yet know not of” (1.2. 70-71). Cassius’s rhetoric in his discussion with Brutus is teeming with the language of the eye and vision directed both inward and outward. Words and phrases like “Observe” (1.2.34), “veiled look” (1.2.39), “see your face” (1.2.53), “reflection” (1.2.55), “mirrors” (1.2.58), “discover” (1.2.71), all define rhetoric as revelation rather than, say,
conversion. The word “eye” itself is used five times in this discussion, and in each instance of its use reflects a steady progression of Cassius’s rhetoric from initially unsuccessful to finally successful.

As a master rhetorician, Cassius “observes” (1.2.34) Brutus, the target, and notices that his “eyes” (1.2.36), as a reflection of Brutus’s truest thoughts, are troubled. Brutus admits to “the trouble of my countenance” (1.2.40), and tells Cassius that “Brutus [is] with himself at war” (1.2.48). Neither the audience nor Cassius is ever privy to exactly what, at this time, is bothering Brutus. Perhaps it is Caesar’s impending coronation; perhaps it is trouble at home with Portia, which is evident later in the play. Whatever it may be, Cassius, as a rhetorician, positions himself as a mirror for Brutus’s “eye to see...it self” and explain its own sorrow—an explanation, of course, warped by Cassius (1.2.54). Notably, in this second instance of the use of “eye,” Cassius does not try to tell Brutus why he should be upset about Caesar’s coronation, but rather, tries to bend the mirror into which Brutus looks with the hope that Brutus will see in the reflection of his innermost thoughts distaste for Caesar’s coronation.

Cassius also then “turns your (Brutus’s) hidden worthiness into your eye” (1.2.59), praising Brutus by asking him to internalize and accept his greatness. If the eye is still a metaphor for a man’s innermost soul, as it was in the first two instances of its use, then Cassius is here asking Brutus to internalize in his innermost soul his own great-ness. This proves to be effective, since Brutus will later rely on his own pedigree as an impetus to act against Caesar (2.1.54). But in the very sentence after this praise, Cassius uses the fourth instance of the use of the word “eye” to challenge Brutus, wishing that “Brutus had his eyes” (1.2.64). Perhaps Cassius here is playing on his own use of the word “eye” by implying that Brutus has no inner soul; to put it crudely, “no guts.”

Finally, when Brutus says that if one were to “set honour in one eye and death I’th’other, I would look at them indifferently” (1.2.88-89), he believes that something is amiss with regard to Caesar’s ambition and would die before he saw the honor of Rome defiled. This belief is strangely both due to and at the same time not due to Cassius’s rhetoric. It also further substantiates my claim that Shakespeare believes rhetoric can only accomplish that which the target of that rhetoric subconsciously may already want.

To prove that Cassius’s rhetoric which appeals to Brutus’s nature is effective, while Cassius’s rhetoric that does not appeal to Brutus’s nature, though powerful, is ineffective, I offer examples of both form and content. Before the “flourish, and shout” (1.2. stage direction), Cassius seems to be getting nowhere in convincing Brutus that his innermost self is unsettled with the thought of Caesar, as Brutus asks Cassius why he “would have me seek into myself for that which is not in me” (1.2.66-67)? But after the flourish and shout, Brutus betrays his heart by saying “I do fear the people choose Caesar for their king” (1.2.81-81). Cassius capitalizes on Brutus’s revelation in an en-jambed line by responding with “Ay, do you fear it? Then...you must not have it so” (1.2.83-84). In essence, he reflects back to and amplifies Brutus’s fears. This is successful rhetoric: rhetoric that convinces Brutus of what he already knows to be true in his heart. Or, perhaps, it is successful rhetoric because it reflects a conflict in Brutus’s heart in such a way that Brutus believes the conflict to be a conflict between his love for Caesar (1.2.84) and his duty to oppose him.

Despite the fact that Brutus has been swayed, Cassius continues his rhetoric rather
counterproductively, and is lucky that it seems Brutus was not listening to him. Shakespeare has Cassius continue his rhetoric, now infused with animalistic imagery that does not resonate with Brutus’s inner heart, and so, is unsuccessful. When Cassius tells his stories of himself and Caesar, he refers to Caesar as “such a thing as myself” (1.2.98), “fed” (1.2.99) the same way, capable of the same physical feats. While Brutus ponders the lofty ideas of “honour” and “death,” and worries about the continued shouts indicating Caesar’s now incipient coronation, Cassius degrades everyone involved in the situation—himself, Brutus, and Caesar—to “a wretched creature” (1.2.119). Unlike earlier in the passage, where Brutus reciprocated Cassius’s rhetoric of the “eye,” Brutus luckily does not seem to be responding to Cassius’s “animal” rhetoric, as the text makes him seem preoccupied with Caesar’s coronation.

However, the 1970 film adaptation directed by Stuart Burge seems to agree with this analysis of the text only partly. Burge seems to show Brutus listening to Cassius’s remaining rhetoric, but with only one ear to Cassius and the other to the crowds cheering for Caesar. The film here leaves out Brutus’s crucial lines of “I do believe that the applauses are...for...Caesar” (1.2.134-135); it was seemingly the director’s choice to focus more on Cassius’s rhetoric than Brutus’s response. Perhaps this is indicative of a modern interpretation of rhetoric, which may believe that any words, so long as they are formulated correctly, can convince anyone, regardless of what the target of that rhetoric already believes. I don’t think Shakespeare, of course, would agree that Brutus was paying Cassius any attention. For if Brutus had been paying attention to Cassius’s “animal” rhetoric, he would have surely realized that Cassius’s motives were not as noble as his own.

Cassius is a fundamentally different person from Brutus, which is why some of his rhetoric does not work on Brutus. However, throughout her piece, “Shakespeare’s Classical Tragedies,” Coppélia Kahn seems to equate Cassius with Brutus, culminating with the assertion that “Cassius and Brutus believed that all Romans are brothers, united by their shared belief in the Republic” [Kahn, 2003: p. 214]. Both Cassius and Brutus are certainly “profoundly united” through their murderous collusion, and subsequently by necessity as they stave off Antony and Octavius, but they are in no way united “by shared ideals,” as Kahn claims. Perhaps it is true that Brutus stabbed Caesar out of a “belief in the Republic,” but I think that Cassius stabbed Caesar out of base jealousy.

Cassius’s unsuccessful rhetoric when trying to persuade Brutus is proof to Cassius’s motivations. Cassius’s most profound grievance against Caesar is his relative weakness, as demonstrated by his performance in the swimming race and in fighting a fever. While Brutus would not have “Caesar for their (his) king” out of reverence for the Republic despite his love for Caesar, Cassius does not necessarily disapprove of a king, he simply disapproves of Caesar as king. For “I was born free as Caesar” (1.2.99), and can “endure the winter’s cold as well as he” (1.2.101).

In fact, the only reason Cassius even engages the rhetoric of “Republic” is because it seems that this is the path to Brutus’s heart. As soon as Brutus says that the people choose “Caesar for their king,” Cassius seizes the opportunity in an enjambed line to stoke Brutus’s suspicions by asking “ay, do you fear it” (1.2.83), as I mentioned earlier. So I must disagree with Kahn’s readiness to put Cassius and Brutus on the same moral plane. Perhaps Brutus really had noble intentions, but Cassius is nothing but a common, jealous, thug.
Yet, despite the fact that Cassius is fundamentally different from Brutus, Cassius is able to convince Brutus, through rhetoric that appealed to Brutus, to believe that Caesar is not good for Rome. Brutus, though, convinces himself that he must act against Caesar. Cassius does not once mention killing Caesar until Brutus says “it must be by his (Caesar’s) death” (2.1.10). Unlike Cassius, who has to tread carefully with his rhetoric when convincing Brutus, Brutus is able state the hypothesis that Caesar must die, and then wrestle with his conscience about the reason. This episode, where Brutus tests his hypothesis that “we [must] put a sting in him (Caesar)” (2.1.16) can be read as a con-version between two different people; Brutus One, who is sympathetic to Caesar as a person, and Brutus Two, who is duty-bound to preserve Rome as a democracy. Brutus One says “to speak truth of Caesar, I have not known when his affections swayed more than his reason” (2.1.19-21). To which Brutus Two responds “but ’tis a common proof that lowliness is young ambition’s ladder...but when he...attains the upmost round... he...turns his back” (2.1.21-27). By creating a debate of rhetoric in Brutus’s head, Shakespeare is saying that rhetoric, and therefore politics, reaches beyond the realm of inter-personal relations, and touches the very soul of a person.

But dividing Brutus’s character into two entities also begs the questions; which Brutus is the real Brutus? This question is, after all, at the crux of Shakespeare’s overarch-ing philosophy of rhetoric. If men cannot act against their nature and rhetoric simply reveals their nature, then the real Brutus is the Brutus whom Cassius was able to con-vince that Caesar was bad for Rome. For Brutus's true nature is ded-icated to Rome and Roman virtue. “O Rome,” says Brutus, “thou receivest thy full petition at the hand of Brutus” (2.1.57-58).

The question of “which Brutus is the real Brutus?” also implies that it is possible for a man, like Brutus, to not know himself, which allows him to be convinced by the likes of Cassius, who can claim to reveal Brutus’s inner nature to him. This is in con-trast to Caesar, who cannot be persuaded to stay home from the Senate because, rightly or wrongly, he knows exactly who he is and what he wants. By comparing the two scenes where Brutus is convinced by Portia’s rhetoric, and where Caesar is unconvinced by Calpurnia’s rhetoric, I will prove that rhetoric penetrates the most intimate moments between a husband and wife. Moreover, I will demonstrate further that Brutus is indeed dedicated to Roman virtue and that Caesar is, as Brutus rightly feared, selfish. But above all else, by determining what Caesar’s and Brutus’s natures are, I will prove Shakespeare’s phi-losophy of rhetoric that no man can be convinced of what he doesn’t already believe in his subconscious.

The goal of Portia’s rhetoric is to convince Brutus to bear his soul to her, a clear allusion to Shakespeare’s philosophy of rhetoric. Portia’s first appeals are met with curt monosyl-labic phrases from Brutus like “that is all” (2.1.256), and “go to bed” (2.1.259). But her en-treaties become more and more successful judging by Brutus’s responses which continue to grow in syllable length and sincerity, ending with the exclamatory phrase “render me worthy of this noble wife” (2.1.303)! Portia is able to convince Brutus to reveal “the sick offense within your mind” (2.1.267) by appealing to Brutus’s sense of roman nobleness which I have already proven is where Brutus’s heart lays. Portia argues that “within the bond of marriage” (2.1.280) “Am I your self”? Which is to say that she should be as privy to Brutus’s thoughts as Brutus is. Brutus’s response is that “you are my true and honourable wife” (2.1, 287), indicat-ing to Portia that honor is his modus operandi.
Portia responds to and capitalizes on Brutus’s love of honor by “giving myself a voluntary wound” (2.1, 299). In so doing, Portia becomes “noble” and therefore something that Brutus loves. Brutus also says that Portia is “as dear to me as are the ruddy drops that visit my sad heart” (2.1, 288-289). Those “ruddy drops” are Brutus’s innermost concerns of Rome. So Portia catalyzes Brutus to compare her to Rome. Thus Portia gains entrance to Brutus’s heart by demonstrating to Brutus that she already embodies all the things in his heart.

Calpurnia is not as successful at convincing Caesar through her rhetoric. Though Caesar agrees to stay home from the Senate, he does it “for thy (Calpurnia’s) humour” (2.2.56), not because Calpurnia has convinced him to stay. It is always possible to coerce a man to do something without the use of rhetoric, and in Caesar’s case “my wife stays me at home” (2.2, 75) is an expression of coercion as it implies that Caesar is not staying himself at home. Because Calpurnia was unable to convince Caesar that he should stay himself at home, her rhetoric is a failure. Of course, Shakespeare makes this abundantly clear when in an instant, Decius, a more potent rhetorician, is able to tell Caesar what Caesar wants to hear, and convince him to go to the Capitol despite Calpurnia’s misgivings.

Calpurnia fails because from the very onset of her rhetoric she places herself at odds with Caesar’s spirit, defined by his “will.” In fact, in the first 110 lines of act two, scene two, Caesar uses forms of the words “shall” and “will” no fewer than fifteen times. Caesar tells Decius outright that “the cause is in my will; I will not come” (2.2, 71). Of course Caesar is referring to the cause for his refusal to appear at the Senate, but “my will” could also be interpreted as the cause for anything Caesar does or believes.

Calpurnia initially opposes Caesar’s “will” by telling Caesar that “you shall not stir out of your house today” (2.2.9). Caesar then responds with an expression of his will, that “Caesar shall go forth” (2.2.10). Calpurnia, however, does not get the hint, and continues to butt heads with Caesar on the rhetoric of “will.” At the end of their argument, Calpurnia still tells Caesar that Antony “shall say you are not well today” (2.2.53), to which Caesar reluctantly obliges, but with which he does not agree. Decius, on the other hand, avoids the rhetoric of will altogether, implicitly yielding to Caesar’s. He has no new rhetoric with which to convince Caesar, he simply manipulates and nullifies Calpurnia’s, proving that Calpurnia’s rhetoric was not lasting or effective.

The last notable examples of Shakespeare’s rhetoric in Julius Caesar are Brutus’s and Mark Antony’s famous dueling eulogies. Comparing those two side by side is beyond the limits of this paper, and has been done by scholars and middle school students the world over. My comparison of the two speeches will be limited to proving that both of the speeches fit the Shakespearian mold of rhetoric that this paper set forth.

The reasons behind why Antony is successful in winning over the Plebeians and why Brutus is not, is popularly attributed to the fact that Antony speaks second, or that Brutus’s rhetoric is too lofty for the Plebeians to really internalize whereas Antony’s rhetoric is more “down-to-earth.” Analyses of how Antony builds momentum in his speech and slyly dams the murders as he praises them from the pulpit are also widely available, and I won’t elaborate on them here. What I will address though, are the speeches’ implications of the Plebeians’ low status and unity, and how that status and unity allows the rhetoricians room for devious yet potent rhetoric.

The crowd which Brutus and Antony address is referred to as “the Plebeians.” To highlight the Plebeians’ boorishness, Shakespeare does not have them speak in iambic
pentameter. Of course, neither does Brutus when he gives a speech in prose, but his prose comes off as supercilious and preening, especially given the content. To highlight the group unity amongst the Plebeians, Shakespeare sometimes has them speaking in unison, and at other times they finish each other’s lines, as when Fifth Plebeian responds “Caesar’s better parts shall be crowned in Brutus” (3.2.48-49) to Third Plebeian’s “Let him be Caesar” (3.2.47). The Plebeians seem to be a single, boorish unit—a whole which swallows the identities of its nameless, numbered parts.

One might think then that Shakespeare did not hold the “Plebeians,” or lower classes, in high regard. But Shakespeare himself was not of noble stock, and most of his audience members would be considered the English equivalent of “Plebeians.” Instead, it seems that Shakespeare’s treatment of the Plebeians reflects commonly accepted Elizabethan societal hierarchy. And since Shakespeare establishes that the Plebeians are lesser people than the people addressing them, he can draw on Aristotle who, in Book 1.9 of Rhetoric, “allows a certain amount of cleverness in obtaining legitimate ends, given the unsophisticated nature of popular audiences” [Kennedy, 2007: p. 79].

This is in contrast to much of Aristotle’s work on rhetoric, which is moralistic, and formal. His ideal form of political discussion is not oration, but rather “dialectic, [where] only logical argument is acceptable” [Kennedy, 2007: p. 28]. Aristotle, though, admits that “emotions awakened in the audience can contribute to persuasion” [Kennedy, 2007: p. 28]. Indeed, Antony successfully appeals to the emotions of the Plebeians by appearing vulnerable as he openly weeps and says, “my heart is in the coffin there with Caesar” (3.2, 103). In the Burge film, Antony only pretends to stutter and cry, but then the director shows that Antony’s is not crying at all, though he is letting the Plebeians think he is crying. For this reason, I credit Antony’s “crying” as rhetorical technique rather than genuine emotion.

These are the sorts of emotional tricks which, according to Aristotle, sully the noble art of rhetoric. Perhaps Shakespeare’s Brutus agrees with this assertion, which is why Brutus appeals to “honor,” “wisdom,” and “judgement” (3.2.15-16). But Quintillion, in his work Institutes of Oratory, “insists that an orator must be ‘a good man’ but allows him to bend the truth when he regards it as necessary” (Kennedy 79). For this reason, Shakespeare paints Antony as a more sympathetic character than Brutus, though Brutus killed Caesar for Rome, since “Caesar was ambitious” (3.2.75).

But not all of Shakespeare’s examples of great rhetoricians are good men. In fact, earlier, this paper asserted that Cassius was both a master rhetorician and a base thug. Perhaps, then, Shakespeare draws on his contemporary Petrus Ramus for his “Arguments in Rhetoric against Quintillion.” Ramus’s argument is that “a definition of any artist which covers more than is included in the rules of his art is superfluous and defective” [Bizzel, 1990: p.565]. In short, Ramus suggests that a master rhetorician should not be expected to also be a master moralist. Similarly, a master rhetorician certainly cannot, like Brutus, expect to be convincing as a rhetorician on the grounds of his superior morality.

At heart, Brutus may be a more moral character than Antony, seeing as Antony is a lover of “sport” (1.2.31). Yet Antony is ultimately still a more successful rhetorician because he offers the Plebeian unit what it wants, in a way, revealing to the Plebeian unit its true self. Shakespeare treats the Plebeians as a single unit with a single desire, for Antony to “read the will” (3.2.152)! Brutus’s failure to appeal to the Plebeians’ desire

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is his failure as a rhetorician. Whereas Brutus tries to exonerate himself in his speech, Antony tries to give something to the Plebeians he was trying to convince.

Dale Carnegie, in his book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* — which 20th century CEOs, politicians, and professors of rhetoric swear by—would ascribe Antony's successful rhetoric, in part, to Antony's desire to give rather than defend himself. In a story about himself, Carnegie writes "I had made more headway in two hours by becoming genuinely interested in him and his problems than I could have made in ten years by trying to get him interested in me" [Carnegie, 1981: p. 70]. That interest in someone else is what defines a successful rhetorician in real life, and in *Julius Caesar*. In *Julius Caesar*, interest in someone else translates into an understanding of another person's inner soul and playing to it and its desires rather than trying to change that soul. Shakespeare the Elizabethan, of course, doesn't believe people can change fundamentally.

It turns out, then, that even in a modern world where caste is taboo and any person can change himself through enterprise, Shakespeare is fundamentally right about what people want and what influences them. In the words of *Mad Men*’s Donald Draper, people “want reassurance that whatever you are doing is OK” (Season 1 Episode 1). That is as much the maxim of modern American advertising as it is the maxim of Shakespearean rhetoric and politics. Politics, after all, is just the art of letting others have your way, and rhetoric is as much the tool for it today as it is in *Julius Caesar*. Perhaps then, both politics and *Julius Caesar* boil down to the rhyme that "a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still" [Carnegie, 1981: p. 97]. For this reason, everything you need to know about politics, and everything you will ever need to know about politics, you can indeed learn from *Julius Caesar*.

## References


