

‘Et tu Brute?’: The Theme of Betrayal in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*

Paper Submission: 15/12/2020, Date of Acceptance: 26/12/2020, Date of Publication: 27/12/2020



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Abstract

"Et tu, Brute?" (III.i.77) is a Latin phrase, and its literal meaning is 'and you, Brutus?' or 'you, too, Brutus?' The words are also translated as 'You as well, Brutus?' or 'Even you, Brutus?' The quote appears in Act III Scene 1 of William Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar* where it is spoken by Julius Caesar, at the moment of his assassination, to his friend Marcus Brutus upon recognizing him as one of the assassins. In this phrase, it is not the words, but their background, which is important. Brutus had been one of Caesar's closest friends. Caesar could least expect him joining hands with the people plotting his assassination. It is universally believed that, when Caesar saw him among the assassins, he resigned himself to his fate. This phrase has been taken in history as an expression to mean the ultimate betrayal by one's closest friend; which means getting hit where you least expect it. We know that friendship is the basis of life, and it is governed by the principle of trust or faith. However, it sometimes breaks down, and loyal friends become enemies. This sad situation can often be traced to violations of trust or betrayal on the part of a trusted friend(s). Trust is a vital ingredient of life, and so life without faith is unimaginable. Trust allows the formation of bonds of utility, community and intimacy, yet trust can be abused in friendship, causing a friend to feel betrayed. As a theme, betrayal in friendship has appeared in various stories, plays and novels. In *Julius Caesar*, William Shakespeare deftly handles the theme of betrayal in friendship. Living in Rome during 44 B.C., Brutus, an honourable man who starts a friendship with Cassius and Caesar, ends up joining the company of Cassius to betray Caesar with assassination. After the assassination, a civil war develops between the traitors and Antony's group. Because of some confusion, Cassius ends up committing suicide, and then Brutus follows his lead. In the end, the conspirators lose the war. Brutus's friendships with Caesar and Cassius contrast sharply in that Caesar loves with truth while Cassius betrays with lies.

Keywords: Friendship, betrayal, assassination, fate, community, intimacy, trust

Introduction

Literature is, undoubtedly, the study of human passions, emotions and relationships. Among all human passions and relationships, a relationship which has attracted the attention of almost all the writers is the relationship of friendship which is the very basis of human existence. It is vital to all relationships. "Close and meaningful relationships may even be necessary in order to achieve the experience of high well-being" (Diener & Seligman, 2002: 81-84). In ancient times, it was considered a special relationship, but now friendship makes premises of all human relationships. With the advancement of human civilizations, it has almost been accepted that all human relationships must have an element of friendship so that they may last for a long time. Be it a relationship between children and parents, lover and beloved, brother and sister, the relationship among colleagues or neighbours, no relationship can last longer if it is not based on mutual understanding and freedom. "It is not the sharing of private information nor even of very personal information, as such, that contributes to the bonds of trust and intimacy between companion friends. At best, it is the sharing of what friends care about that is relevant here" (Cocking and Kennett: 518). Whatever our conditions or compulsions are, we are permanently susceptible to this relationship as this makes the very necessity of our life. Hence, friendship occupies a central place in our lives, but it needs to be based on loyalty and faith. Unfortunately, there are numerous examples of the betrayal in friendship. "True friendship is an

identity of souls rarely to be found in this world" (M.K. Gandhi, 2013: 18). Betrayal of friendship originates from greed and manifests itself in many ways, such as cheating and disloyalty. The results are serious and can lead to permanent chaos and hatred. The one who is betrayed gets hurt and revengeful while the betrayer may suffer punishment or shame. This issue, i.e. betrayal of friendship has appeared in various stories, plays and novels. *Julius Caesar* is a perfect choice of reading material to understand the concept of friendship and risks attached to this relationship. The notable simplicity of its plot and the directness of its prose make it accessible to every reader. The play explores timeless themes and social issues along with the issue of friendship and the importance people place on it.

Aim of the Study

The paper attempts to find the dimensions of betrayal in friendship as to the causes, consequences and lessons. As stated earlier, the betrayal of friendship is one of the major themes of *Julius Caesar*, and this study is an effort to understand, ponder over and answer the following relevant questions:

- How far should we go to stop a friend from harming our country?
- How far should we go to obtain revenge on someone or some group who destroyed our best friend?
- Is there anything for which we should betray a friend?
- Which is more important to us, friendship or personal principles? Why?

Review of Literature

1. Montaigne's describes friendship as "souls that mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them"(1958: 97).
2. Boyce mentions that the Friendship literature told stories of manly companionship, sometimes disrupted by the love theme but generally restored since magnanimity was standard in this tradition (1996: 672). Likewise, Medieval romances included the friendship and love themes by which the early Renaissance dramatists, as well as Shakespeare, were affected and bore some of their characteristics.
3. Edmund Spenser is another writer whose theory of friendship must be taken into consideration. Spenser was perhaps the most illustrious of Shakespeare's contemporaries. His famous unfinished epic romance *The Faerie Queene* (Book IV, Canto 9) reveals his theory of friendship. This theory is based on certain ideas, most of which clearly have their origins in classical and earlier Renaissance sources, such as those of Cicero and Elyot. Expressed in the simplest terms these ideas are: "(a) friendship is based on virtue, (b) friendship is based on equality, (c) friendship is based on similarity, (d) friends have but one soul, (e) a friend is a second self, (f) false friendship cannot last, and (g) friends' goods are common goods" (Halio, 2000: 80-81).
4. Sir Francis Bacon is another well-known essayist of the 16th century who wrote about male friendship. His thoughts on male friendship

resemble that of Montaigne's. In his essay "Of Friendship", Bacon insists that true friendship is possible only between men who do not otherwise need something from one another-i.e. between social equals. His essay mainly handles the benefits of friendship, such as intimate communication and understanding. The famous proverb 'A solitary man is either a beast or an angel' is the starting point of Bacon's essay. "He also observes that men need friends to carry out the things they cannot do by themselves" (Smith, 2000: 60).

5. Marglit (2017) argues, "Betrayal seems to have lost its grip on the public consciousness in liberal societies, yet it is all around us, dissolving the thick glue of trust that holds friends, families, and communities together."
6. Ben-Yehuda (2018) focuses on the psychological trauma caused by betrayal. He says: "Betrayal is an integral of all psychic trauma...When we betray others, we violate their confidence in us, they pierce the veil of our innocence reliance. Betraying and feeling betrayed are ubiquitous to the scenarios of trauma."

An Overview of Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar returns to Rome in triumph after defeating the sons of Pompey the Great. A large crowd of the Romans come into the streets to celebrate Caesar's victory, whereas Flavius and Marullus discuss Caesar's growing power and resent Caesar's fight against Pompey's sons. When Caesar arrives in the town, he is warned by a Soothsayer to "Beware the Ides of March"(I.ii.23). Caesar dismisses the Soothsayer's warnings, saying that the fellow is a mere dreamer and continues to celebrate his victory. Cassius and some other Roman senators, known as the Conspirators, plan for Caesar's assassination as they have been feeling jealous due to Caesar's popularity. Cassius tries to recruit Caesar's good friend, Marcus Brutus, as a member of their group. With Brutus on his side, the assassination would not evoke much of a protest from the people because Brutus is a well-beloved man and is reputed to be a man of the highest integrity. After much deliberation, Brutus responds favourably to Cassius's suggestion that steps should be taken to prevent Caesar from becoming a dictator in the country. Finally, he decides to join the conspirators to protect Rome and its citizens.

It is agreed that Caesar would be assassinated on the 15th of March. After the meeting, Brutus' wife, Portia observed her husband's anxiety and persuades him to tell her what is happening. But Brutus decides not to answer her questions. The next morning, Calpurnia, Caesar's wife, awakes from a terrible dream in which Caesar was murdered by a group of men. She then urges Caesar to stay home. But Caesar ignores her warnings and departs to the Senate House with Brutus, one of the conspirators. When Caesar proceeds to the Senate House, he passes by the Soothsayer. He addresses him by saying, "The Ides of March are come"(III.i.1). The Soothsayer replies, "Ay, but not gone"(III.i.2). Caesar again ignores this final warning and steps inside the

Senate House, where the conspirators surround him and stab him to death. Brutus delivers the final blow. When Caesar recognizes Brutus, he utters- in total disbelief- the famous phrase, "Et tu, Brute?"(III.i.77) Caesar succumbs to death. The Conspirators now move out of the Capitol and run into the streets, crying, "Liberty, Freedom, Tyranny is dead!"(III.i.78). Alone, Mark Antony, Caesar's close friend, swears to avenge Caesar's death. After a discussion between Antony and conspirators, it is decided that Antony would be allowed to address the Roman people after Brutus has done so. At Caesar's funeral, Brutus speaks first. He tells the citizens that Caesar was assassinated because he had become ambitious and threatened their freedom. Brutus is happy with the approving reaction of the crowd. Then he steps down, allowing Antony to give his eulogy. Antony delivers a wise speech inciting the public to turn against the conspirators. He reminds them of Caesar's goodness. By the end of his speech, the people started shouting in anger that they would avenge Caesar's murder and would destroy the conspirators. Mark Antony, Aemilius Lepidus and Octavius become allies. They declare themselves the Second Triumvirate of Rome and propose to rule jointly. These three also declare a civil war against Cassius, Brutus and the Conspirators. On the other hand, Brutus and Cassius become generals of their army but struggle to maintain mutual trust. One night, when Brutus is reading a book, he is visited by the ghost of Caesar. The ghost warns Brutus that they will meet again at the battle of Phillippi. Brutus is horrified at the appearance of the ghost. Cassius, worn down by Mark Antony's army, decides to send his soldier and friend, Titinius, across the field to know some nearby troops' identity. Cassius loses all hope of victory when his slave, Pindarus, mistakenly reports that Titinius has been captured. He asks Pindarus to stab him, and Pindarus had no option but to give his consent, killing Cassius with the same sword Cassius used to stab Caesar. Brutus continues to fight until his troops are defeated. He despairs and asks his servant, Strato, to hold the sword while Brutus runs on it. Upon finding the body, Antony expresses his admiration for the fallen Brutus, saying, "This was the noblest Roman of them all"(V.v.68). With Cassius and Brutus dead, the Triumvirate takes control of Rome and order is restored.

Textual Analysis

In *Julius Caesar*, William Shakespeare repeatedly focuses on the theme of betrayal of trust in friendship. But this vital issue of friendship has failed to draw sufficient attention of critics as well as readers. The friendship theme found its best expression in Brutus's character who lived in Rome in 44 B.C. Brutus, an honourable man, starts a friendship with both Cassius and Caesar but ends up joining with Cassius to betray Caesar with assassination. After Caesar's assassination, a civil war starts between the conspirators and the triumvirate of Antony, Octavius and Lepidus. Because of some confusion, Cassius commits suicide, and soon afterwards, Brutus also kills himself. In the end, the conspirators lose the war. Brutus's friendship with

Caesar and Cassius contrast sharply in that Caesar loves with truth while Cassius betrays with lies.

What made Brutus deceive *Julius Caesar* is an essential question for discussion. To understand it, we need to know that there are two pairs of friends depicted in the play by William Shakespeare. The first is the bond of friendship between Brutus and Caesar, and the second is between Cassius and Brutus. Brutus is the central figure in both occupying the driver's seat, and we are made to see how miserably he fails at both places. Brutus can be anything in life, but not a good friend. His credulous nature makes him unfit for becoming a good friend to anyone in life. In the beginning, Brutus and Caesar develop a good friendship full of trust and deep respect for each other. On more than one occasion, Caesar openly and frankly shows his love for Brutus. As they are celebrating in the streets, a soothsayer shouts a warning to Caesar, but he is ignored with Caesar's comment "He is a dreamer. Let us leave him-pass"(I.ii.24). In this, Caesar displays his trust for those he loves; those who in turn betray him. Cassius states that "Caesar doth bear me hard, but he loves Brutus"(I.ii.293).

So much so, Cassius is aware of the fact that both Brutus and Caesar are on good terms with each other. It makes Cassius anxious regarding the success of his conspiracy. But we see how Brutus finally gives his consent to be the part of the conspiracy after some initial hesitation. Caesar is assassinated. His last words tell us a lot about the kind of relationship he shared with Brutus: "Et, tu Brute?" It shows how much Caesar loved Brutus and how much betrayed and shattered he felt at Brutus's cruel action. So much so, Antony also refers to this sacred bond in his speech which makes mob furious. Antony does everything to prove how dishonourable Brutus was in his action as he murdered one of the noblest men of Roman history. Here is an example from his speech

"Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabbed;
And as he pluck'd his cursed steel away,
Mark how the blood of Caesar followed it,
As rushing out of doors, to be resolved
If Brutus so unkindly knocked, or no;
For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel:
Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him!
This was the most unkindest cut of all
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquished him: Then burst his mighty
heart"(III.ii.180-90).

Though Antony is fabricating all kinds of arguments to seek revenge upon Brutus and company, yet we cannot ignore that there is at least some truth in what Antony says. Not investigating the matter or taking Caesar's version into consideration before killing him shows how Brutus failed to appreciate that bonding Caesar valued so much.

Here, it is essential to discuss the friendship of Brutus and Cassius. Their friendship appears to be true outwardly while in reality, Cassius uses his power of manipulation to persuade Brutus to kill Caesar. Their personalities differ significantly, and each makes

up for what the other lacks. Cassius uses faulty persuasive techniques such as pointing out Caesar's physical ailments. "He fell down in the marketplace and foamed at mouth and was speechless"(I.ii.243). By showing these physical ailments, Cassius convinces Brutus to join him. Cassius dislikes the fact that the people of Rome treat Caesar like God: "Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world Like a colossus, and we petty men Walk under his huge legs and peep about To find ourselves dishonorable graves"(I.ii. 136-38).

Cassius had personal as well as intellectual reasons for hating *Julius Caesar*. He understands how the political world works and is shrewd and cunning. However, Brutus seems to be a novice in comparison to Cassius as his decision to join conspiracy is founded on the supposition that if crowned, Caesar would change his nature. Geoffrey Bullough argues, "His (Brutus) tragedy, therefore, is that of a man of the noblest principles whose idealism blinds him to the realities of politics, and to the nature of his fellow-conspirators and the Roman populace"(1968:92).

Brutus is not rational in his approach and actions. He betrays *Julius Caesar* and then fails to understand Cassius and his planning. They are almost near to success, but he refuses to listen to the wise words of Cassius and allows Antony to speak over Caesar's funeral. This blunder cost them dearly, and funeral speech of Antony turns all the previous tallies. All the conspirators have to flee, leaving everything to Antony. However, the height of foolishness prevails when Brutus instead of finding any solution to the crisis in which they are entangled indulges in a blame game and accuses Cassius of playing foul with him. He passes all the bucks to Cassius. It does not merely annoy Cassius but also grieves him. He cannot understand how Brutus can do such a mean thing to him. A very emotional argument takes place in which Cassius almost surrenders before Brutus and urges him to learn the art of friendship. He tells him what duties a friend owes to another friend. Here is an excerpt from that dialogue

"Come, Antony, and young Octavius, come,
Revenge yourselves alone on Cassius,
For Cassius is a weary of the world;
Hated by one he loves; braved by his brother;
Check'd like a bondman; all his faults observed,
Set in a notebook, learn'd, and conn'd by rote,
To cast into my teeth. O, I could weep
My spirit from mine eyes!
There is my dagger,
And here my naked breast. Within, a heart
Dearer than Plutus' mine, richer than gold.
If that thou best a Roman, take it forth;
I, that denied thee gold, will give my heart.
Strike, as thou didst at Caesar; For, I know,
When thou didst hate him worst, thou lovedst him
better
Then ever thou lovedst Cassius"(V.iii.93-107).

Though the reconciliation between them occurs, the scene again shows Brutus's infirm nature, an inconsistent fellow.

In *Julius Caesar*, Cassius may have been the chief conspirator, but Casca, Ligarius, Metellus Ciber, Decius, Brutus, and Cinna also conspire against *Julius Caesar*. These men are of aristocratic origin and are afraid of the popularity of Caesar. Artemidorus reads a letter aloud that lists Caesar's many enemies. He says: "There is but one mind in all things man, and it is bent against Caesar. If thou beest not immortal, look about you"(II.iii.5-7).

Then Decius uses flattery and persuasion to form a strong union with Caesar. Decius is an active member of the Conspirators, so he is very motivated into getting Caesar to go to the Senate House. The first thing that Decius says when he walks into Caesar's house is "Caesar, all hail! Good morrow, worthy Caesar"(II.ii.58). Decius would also refer to Caesar as "most mighty". This would only make Caesar grow comfortable with Decius. Julius had lost all feelings of doubt. Decius would deceive Julius into thinking that they had a resilient friendship by using his devious words. Caesar was not able to foresee his real and faithful friends, such as Antony.

Finally, the conspiracy of the senators proves to be successful. On March 15, the Ides of March, Metellus Cimber gives the signal for the attack on Caesar. He was earlier one of Caesar's strongest supporters, and Caesar granted him the governorship of two provinces. Casca was the first to stab Caesar, the others followed. Caesar tries to fight back against the attackers, but Caesar resigns himself to his fate when he sees his closest friend Brutus stabbing him. After killing Caesar, Brutus says, "Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more"(III.ii.20). The attackers choose to justify their action, making it clear that they committed this act for Rome and not for their own interests. After the murder, Brutus tells Antony to be patient while he explains, "Why I, that did love Caesar when I struck him, Have thus proceeded"(III.i.186-187). Brutus felt that he did the right thing for Rome. Brutus wielded the ultimate betrayal to Caesar because of his deep loyalty to Rome. The other senators, through trickery, persuaded Brutus into joining the conspiracy against Caesar. Brutus is the only central character in the play intensely committed to fashioning his behaviour to fit a strict moral and ethical code. Brutus believes that the senators have allowed a man to gain excessive power; therefore, they have the responsibility to stop him. In the end, Brutus commits suicide. Of all the conspirators, Brutus was the only one to believe Caesar's death was for "common good to all, made one of them"(V.v.72). According to Antony, even in death, Brutus was noble. Thus, critical analysis of the play helps us understand the ideals of friendship that we need to maintain for a better life. This study may help the reader to learn a lesson from the episodes of the play *Julius Caesar*.

Conclusion

It is through the character of Brutus that Shakespeare has expressed his idea of friendship. Though Brutus is ideal in more than one way, yet he does not know the basics of friendship. Being an idealist himself, he expects others to be ideal and

forgets that those in power and those out of power are bound to behave differently. He fails to take the side of Caesar, whom he interprets as a dictator. He does not know what it means to be in a relationship. How one has to be forgiving in relations! Time and again, he imposes his ideals of life on others and is left disappointed at the end. He is not responsible for destroying his own life only, but he has put the whole of Rome in grave danger. First, he assassinated the ruler of Rome, and after that, he ruined the whole conspiracy. Everything passes to Antony who is not at all a deserving claimant for Rome's throne. Through the failure of Brutus, Shakespeare wants us to realise that friendship is all about a tolerant approach. It takes courage to be friend with someone. You can carry any relationship in life smoothly, but there is always a litmus test which most of us fail to qualify when it comes to friendship. Brutus tries to justify his action, but it is a case of self-deception. Arthur Sewell believes that "Brutus, with some intellectual dishonesty, uses a form of self-deception to cheer him up"(1968:37). Brutus passions lead him to the wrong reasoning, which he realises in the end when he says, "Caesar, now be still:/I killed not thee with half so good a will" (V.v.50-51).

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