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Shakespeare's Comedies and Tragedies

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Betrayal In Three Acts

“*Et tu, Brutè?* –Then fall, Caesar.” (*Julius Caesar* 3.1.78) So ends Caesar, killed by those he called his equals; betrayed by Brutus, who he called a dear friend. But this is far from the only time within Shakespeare's plays that he plays with betrayal. As a theme it runs through lesser loved plays like *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*, and takes center stage within classics like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, but always to the same structure: a character puts themselves above their duties, which leads to them betraying another character close to them. For a little they exist within the world they've altered, but retaliation is swift to close in and right their wrongs. This pattern plays out the same mechanically within *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, but it is how and why, the methods and motives of the betrayal that leaves these two very different stories.

Macbeth's tale of betrayal starts when he comes across the weird sisters who hail him as Thane of Glamis -which he is- Thane of Cawdor -who he knows is still alive- and king hereafter -which, as he states, is unbelievable. But then the king's messengers hail him as Thane of Cawdor, and suddenly half the witches' claim is true. But could he become king? With a little action on their part, Lady Macbeth believes they certainly could, and so they plot to kill the king while he stays at their castle. But Macbeth is uncertain about committing homicide:

[King Duncan's] here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,

Who should against his murderer shut the door,

Not bear the knife myself (*Macbeth* 1.7.14-16).

He bears a double loyalty to Duncan as subject and host, and as such finds it difficult to go and kill him. But his wife pushes, and Macbeth relents, putting the prospect of personal gain above his two-fold duty. So falls King Duncan, betrayed by the Thane who he praised and hailed only hours before. But this is not the only betrayal Macbeth commits within his story; once he is crowned as king, Banquo -who was with him during the witches' proclamation- has become a threat to his reign and legacy:

There is none but [Banquo]

Whose being I do fear,

When first [the sisters] put the name of king upon me,

And bade them speak to him; . . .

They hailed him father to a line of kings.

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown (*Mac.* 3.1.54-55, 58-61)

If Macbeth wants his family to keep the throne, he must remove Banquo and his bloodline from the scene. But, scarcely a minute before, Banquo gave his loyalty to King Macbeth, pledging his duties which "Are with a most indissoluble tie / Forever knit (*Mac.* 3.1.17-18)." A king has a duty to his subjects just as much as they have a duty to him, but that didn't stop Macbeth before so why should it now? Exit Banquo from the stage of life, and for a time Macbeth's kingship is secured. But the world is not right; one of Duncan's sons should have taken the throne upon their

father's death, not Macbeth, and so in fulfilling the witches' proclamation he has overturned the social order. A common man should not become a king, and Macduff shares that sentiment as he tries to convince Malcolm to return with him to Scotland and overthrow that "untitled tyrant, bloody-scepter'd! (*Mac.* 4.3.1.4)" which they do. Macbeth is slain by Macduff, and the death of the betrayer is seen as a victory, as the world returning to order; for as Macduff claims, holding Macbeth's head high: "Behold where stands / Th'usurper's cursed head. The time is free."

Once the hand of retribution for Caesar's murder, the tables are turned in *Antony and Cleopatra* as Antony is the one to put his own interests over his duty to Rome. He neglects to give Octavius a portion of the land he has conquered and disrespects Octavia by letting her go back to Rome without supplying the proper pomp and circumstance. Though both of these events are betrayals and could be analyzed as such within the same 3 stage process as the murders of Duncan and Banquo, they also jointly function as the instance where Antony puts his own interests above his duty. As triumvirate, Antony is presumed to gladly share his conquests with his co-leaders and as husband is expected to treat Octavia as befitting of both his and Caesar's glory. But the betrayal happens after both of these events, all the way in Egypt in the midst of battle with Caesar. Upon checking why his fleet has not engaged Caesar's in combat, Antony sees that they have yielded and "carouse together / Like friends long lost (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.12.12-13)." with Caesar's men. In defense of the sailors, these are "muleteers, reapers, people / Engrossed by swift impress (*Ant.* 3.7.36-37)" whom Antony has set to face down a Roman fleet. These men have little to no experience in naval combat, expected to face down men who have trained for years in this art. They don't wanna die, and since they were offered the chance to surrender and live, they took it. But Antony doesn't see things from this angle, instead he assumes the worst:

All is lost!

This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me!

My fleet hath yielded to the foe,

...

Triple-turned whore! 'Tis thou

Hast sold me to this novice,

“Clearly there must have been dealings behind my back, for my men would never turn against me!” -which isn’t an unreasonable assumption. Cleopatra has switched her allegiances twice before, first from Julius Caesar and then from Pompey, why wouldn’t she do the same to Antony once he was no longer of use? So he lashes out against Cleopatra:

Enter CLEOPATRA.

ANTONY: Ah, thou spell! Avaunt.

CLEOPATRA: Why is my lord enraged against his love?

ANTONY: Vanish, or I shall give thee thy deserving

And blemish Caesar’s triumph (*Ant.* 4.12.29.1-33)

Antony’s a little more than miffed, he’s thrown away all the honor and prestige of being a triumvirate to show the extent of his love for Cleopatra, and he thinks she’s betrayed him when she’s been nothing but loyal since he came into her sights. Though she never intended it, Cleopatra herself serves as the hand of retribution against Antony, having her servant “go tell him I have slain myself. / Say that the last I spoke was “Antony,” / And word it, prithee,

piteously (*Ant.* 4.13.6-8).” At least in Greek tradition, it was expected for a woman who could be accused of infidelity to kill herself as proof of loyalty to her husband and by that act prove her innocence. In Antony’s mind, the selling out he accused Cleopatra of was her act of infidelity, but since she has “killed” herself with his name upon her lips she has sworn the same promise to Antony as Phaedra faked to Theseus: “I would rather kill myself than be unfaithful to you.” This news brings Antony to despair, and he commits suicide so that he may be once again with Cleopatra. His death leads Cleopatra to truly kill herself, and the play ends in sadness, in a world that finds both her and Antony’s death tragic. As Octavius says to close the play:

High events as these

Strike those that make them, and their story is

No less in pity than [Julius Caesar’s] glory which

Brought them to be lamented. (*Ant.* 5.2.356-59)

Macbeth’s story ended with celebration and a sense of victory towards his death, while the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra come with grieving and a recognition of the tragedy. All of these title characters are betrayers, putting their interests above their duty, but two are remembered fondly while the third is harkened as a scourge, all because of why they were selfish. For Macbeth, he sought personal gain and to keep it no matter the cost when he killed Duncan and Banquo, but Antony was acting for Cleopatra, to put his shows of affection over his duty as testament to how much he loved her. Yet in the end, neither the egocentrist nor the lover survive their story, so the question remains: is putting yourself above your duty, even for another, worth it?

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