

**“NOT THAT I LOVED CAESAR LESS,  
BUT THAT I LOVED ROME MORE”:  
THE POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP IN *JULIUS CAESAR***

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***Abstract:** Through a close examination of the notion of friendship and its intimate connection to politics, the present study aims to discover the intricate ways in which friendship is portrayed in relation to virtue, enmity, and politics in one of Shakespeare’s most politically-charged tragedies, “Julius Caesar”. With a systematic reading of the ancient inquiries on friendship, the study particularly investigates the Shakespearean idea of friendship through the Derridean dichotomy of the friend and its inevitable bond to the enemy.*

***Keywords:** Cicero, Derrida, friendship, politics, Shakespeare*

## 1. Introduction

Here lies a wretched corpse, of wretched soul bereft;  
Seek not my name. A plague consume you, wicked caitiffs left  
Here lie I, Timon, who alive all living men did hate.  
Pass by and curse thy fill—but pass and stay not here thy gait.  
Timon in *Timon of Athens* (V.5.70-75)

Having experienced the failure of the ideal friendship in return for his tremendous acts of generosity, Timon proclaims “I am *Misanthropos*,” and immortalizes the depths of his newfound hatred towards every member of humankind on his final epitaph (IV.3.54). *Timon of Athens*, a play that has been repeatedly considered unfinished or imperfect, perfectly portrays the fatality of the absence of friendship. Timon’s Icarusian fall from society is such a famous event that Cicero (2018: 147) specifically mentions his case in *De Amicitia*: companionship is inevitable in the way that “even a person so savage and fierce by nature that he shuns and loathes human society, like the legendary Timon of Athens, can’t stand not to have someone around him on whom to spew his poison”. His transformation from a man who is “not of that feather to shake off / My friend when he must need me” to a vengeful misanthrope who is “sick of this false world, and will love naught / But even the mere necessities upon’t” renders one of the most tragic downfalls in Shakespearean canon (I.1.104-105, IV.3.371-372). Timon’s final lines, after he finishes writing his epitaph and before he disappears to be never seen again, further emphasize Shakespeare’s interpretation of the idea of friendship in *Timon of Athens*. Timon mends his “long sickness / Of health and

living” through death, which is also his ultimate solution for the disappearance of the friend, who is actually “a knave and flatterer” (V.2.71-72): “Graves only be men’s works / and death their gain. / Sun, hide thy beams. / Timon hath done his reign” (V.2.102). Shakespeare’s plays, especially his Roman tragedies, support a similar structure of the intricate business of friendship and politics.

With these points in mind, the present study aims to discover the Shakespearean friendship in relation to virtue, nobility and enmity in one of his most politically-charged tragedies, *Julius Caesar*, through a close study of the notion of friendship and its intimate connection to politics. Revolving around the progressive reading of the texts on friendship by philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, the study particularly analyses the Shakespearean idea of friendship through the Derridean dichotomy of the friend and its inevitable bond to the enemy.

## 2. “O my friends, there is no friend”

In his extensive study *The Friend*, Alan Bray explores the political nature of male bonding from the twelfth to the seventeenth century and explains that “there has never been a time when male intimacy was possible in a space untouched by power and politics, however much was desired or rhetorically projected”. (Bray 2003: 11). Shakespeare’s recognition of the political and social dimensions of friendship presents itself overtly in his sonnets and plays, but a thorough look at the nature of these relationships discloses the fact that Shakespeare’s idea of friendship often bears little resemblance to the classical ideals of friendship that reigned in the Renaissance:

Shakespeare’s implicit scepticism of the classical ideal is based on two principles... social inequality and competitive rivalry. They are related because of characteristic assumptions in classical writing about friendship that Shakespeare constantly emphasizes: first, that friendship achieved its perfection only between virtuous social equals, and second, that equals who were capable of virtue were more likely to be noble than common. Since noblemen were all but defined by competitive ambition, as Shakespeare emphasizes in his plays that feature Roman stoicism, the space reserved for the classical virtue of friendship is all but eliminated. (Cox 2008: 3)

Likeness in virtue and nobility between friends is constantly emphasized especially in the writings of Aristotle and Cicero. In books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1962: 228) clarifies that “[i]f there is a wide disparity between the partners as regards their virtue, vice, wealth, or anything else, they are no longer friends or even expect to be friends”. He (idem: 230) further explains that this is why people who are inferior “do not expect to be friends with kings, nor do insignificant people expect to be friends with the best and wisest men”. The Ciceronian ideals of friendship specifically underline the same notion of the classical affirmation of social equality among friends: Laelius, the fictional speaker of *De Amicitia*, clarifies that “friendship is not possible except good people,” – it is such rare and “selective” a notion that “its affection joins together only two or at most a few people.” (Cicero 2018: 39). Consequently, Laelius concludes that since “virtue itself gives birth to friendship and nourishes it, so that without virtue friendship is not able to exist” (idem: 41). Shakespeare’s interpretation of friendship, however, suggests a deep suspicion of the classical

claims of equality and moral perfection. In one of his most famous references to friendship, Hamlet affirms his own autonomy when he portrays his idea of friendship by describing Horatio: “Give me that man / That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him / In my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart” (III.2.76-78). This intimate friendship, however, is not sufficient to overshadow the social and political inequality between Hamlet and Horatio, since the nature of their companionship is firstly and foremostly underlined by Hamlet’s political superiority over Horatio.

Since Nietzsche’s writings onwards, the classical concept of friendship has transformed itself into its modern equivalent with an emphasis on the individual autonomy and the inevitability of enmity in relation to companionship. In his essay and book with the same title “Politics of Friendship”, Derrida emphasizes “the inseparability of politics from a concept of both the friend and its mirror image, the enemy” (Miller 2015: 176). Derrida repeatedly returns to the apocryphal saying of Aristotle, which is in fact considered to be recorded by Diogenes Laertius: “Oh my friends, there is no friend.” Subsequently cited by Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Blanchot, the adage is considered by Derrida (1993: 353) to be the perfect statement to represent the dichotomic nature of friendship: “On the two sides of a comma or a pause, the two parts of this sentence seem incompatible with each other, destined to annihilate themselves in their contradiction”. This innate contradiction and its consequent annihilation are what render the modern idea of friendship deeply intertwined with politics, hence its necessary component, the enemy:

The true friend, as the saying makes apparent, is the (all but) impossible exception... That rare true friend is portrayed throughout much of the tradition as a veritable second self, as the other of myself who reflects my self to myself. And yet my friend, as friend, remains other. And insofar as my friend remains other, he or she, as my second self, has the potential to call the integrity, the sufficiency, of my self into question. There is a potential violence in friendship: a violence that recalls the passion of love. (Miller 2015: 177)

This potential violence in friendship can be considered to be an echo of Socrates’ arguments on friendship and the threefold distinction between what is good, what is bad, and what is neither good nor bad in Plato’s early monologue *Lysis* (2005). On the other hand, what is common to the ancient idea of friendship and Derrida’s own interpretation is traceable through a similar view that Plato and Aristotle have on friendship, namely that “[t]o desire or feel affection for some person is always, at bottom, to have some reason that has a reference to the agent’s own welfare” (Annas 1977: 536). The friend’s welfare, however, integrates into the existence of the enemy and their public politics since “[t]he friend, we read, possesses the power of a love that threatens the boundaries of both the self and the community, even as it affirms them in their identity” (Miller 2015: 178). This is where the private notion of friendship is transformed into a topic in public politics. Derrida cites Cicero and his requirement of the notions of virtue and reason in friendship, and argues that “[r]eason and virtue cannot be private. They are not able to enter into conflict with the public matter. These concepts of virtue or reason are from the beginning tailored to the space of the *res publica*” (Derrida 1993: 211). This necessarily creates the ground for politics, where friendship represents the power of the other on the self, which represents the friend (*Freund*) and its

counterpart, its potential identification, the enemy (*Feind*). Cicero explores the same conflict in *De Amicitia*:

For he who perceives a true friend, it is as though he perceives a model of himself. Wherefore the absent are present, the poor are rich, the weak are strong, and what is more difficult to say, the dead live: so great is the respect, the memory, and the desire that follows after our friends. Hence for the ones death seems happy and for the others life is worthy of praise. (2018: 43)

Furthermore, in *What is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, Agamben retraces Derrida's logic for the negating notion of friendship. According to Agamben (2009: 26), "it is an analogous, and probably conscious, sense of discomfort that led Jacques Derrida to choose as a leitmotif for his book on friendship a sibylline motto...that negates friendship with the very same gesture by which it seems to invoke it: *o philoi, oudeis philos*". This statement however, necessarily contains its other equivalent, "one to all appearances almost identical, whose significance is nevertheless different and much less mysterious": 'He who has (many) friends, does not have a single friend'" (idem: 27). Agamben defends the fact that Derrida's usage of the motto in its original form indicates his intentions of at once affirming and revoking the idea of friendship, which was essential to his book's strategy.

### 3. "Friends, Romans, countrymen..."

It would be good to note that Cicero wrote *De Amicitia* in 44 B.C., right after Caesar's assassination, "a time of political turmoil, when one's friends only too easily became one's enemies, when true friendship was especially precious and rare, and when death lurked on every side" (Miller 2015: 180). As a theme that beautifully haunts most of Shakespeare's tragedies, this ambivalent notion of the possibility of betrayal weaves its way into the politics of friendship in *Julius Caesar*. In his thorough introduction to the play, Arthur Humphreys gives the following explanation:

Anthony's stress on Caesar's love for Brutus, so treacherously repaid, draws on scattered Plutarchan instances of affection. Straight from Plutarch are the glimpses of Caesar covering his face as Brutus prepares to stab, his fall beneath Pompey's bloody statue, and the details of the testament. But though Plutarch provides the bases, the brilliant strategies by which in the play Anthony wins against almost impossible odds, controlling each move until he reads the will to show 'how Caesar loved you', are the inventions of Shakespeare's dramatic imagination. (Humphreys 2008: 19)

Contrary to the Ciceronian ideals of friendship, Shakespeare constructs the play in such a way that the readers do not feel the need to condemn the conspirators in *Julius Caesar*, however distanced they may seem to the commonly-sought concepts like virtue and reason. Cicero explains that a friend should never ask another friend to commit a wrong deed; and even if s/he did, the friend should not follow the other: "Doing wrong for the sake of a friend never justifies that wrong. Remember that friendship is founded on virtue. If a friend expects you to do something evil, it is difficult for that friendship to continue" (Cicero 2018: 75). As a cautious approach to the turbulent politics of his day, Cicero repeatedly

emphasizes that when one asks a friend to betray his country, one commits a most disgraceful deed, and consequently sets the following “law of friendship”: “Never ask a friend to do anything shameful, and don’t do anything shameful if asked” (idem: 77). In *Julius Caesar*, the fear of Caesar’s tyranny over Rome is repeatedly emphasized before Caesar’s assassination:

Let no images  
Be hung with Caesar’s trophies. I’ll about  
And drive away the vulgar from the streets...  
These growing feathers plucked from Caesar’s wing  
Will make him fly an ordinary pitch,  
Who else would soar above the view of men,  
And keep us all in servile fearfulness. (I.1.72-75)

The proposal of a conspiracy is brought about by Cassius’ “lament” that Brutus “have no such mirrors as will turn / Your hidden worthiness into your eye, / That you may see your shadow” (I.2.54-56). Since Brutus “cannot see himself / So well as by reflection, I, your glass, / Will modestly discover to yourself / That of yourself which you yet know not of” (I.2.65). This notion of the friend being the reflection, the mirror, the *alter egom* of a person echoes so loudly the classical idea of friendship that one might argue that Shakespeare must have read Cicero, who elucidates that “whoever looks upon a true friend looks, in a sense, at an image of himself” (2018: 47). This might be the reason why one of the *dramatis personae* is Cicero, who – contrarily – rarely contributes to any notable argument in the play, other than his prophesizing remark about Brutus’ plans of murdering Caesar, yet never being able to deny his deep love towards him: “But men may construe things after their fashion / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves” (I.3.34). Brutus repeatedly states that he has “no personal cause to spurn at him”, and admits that “to speak truth of Caesar / I have not known when his affections swayed / More than his reason,” but Caesar’s death is still inevitable (II.1.10-21).

Although Brutus finally succeeds in silencing the torment of his mind about the conspiracy, he still tries to justify his guilt through a complex praise of Caesar in the final moments before the assassination: he commands Caius that they should be “sacrificers” rather than “butchers,” and wishes he could “come by Caesar’s spirit / And not dismember Caesar!” (II.1.165):

...But, alas,  
Caesar must bleed for it. And, gentle friends,  
Let’s kill him boldly, but not wrathfully;  
Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods,  
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.  
...This shall make  
Our purpose necessary, and not envious;  
Which so appearing to the common eyes,  
We shall be called purgers, not murderers. (II.1. 170-180)

The reader further realizes that the planned murder of a friend coincides with the political purge of a tyrant when Brutus goes through his dilemma. In this dilemma, Caesar’s status as friend clashes with the enemy status of his political self in the eyes of the conspirators. Shakespeare further reflects the upcoming disaster through stage directions that specify thunders and the nightmares of Calpurnia;

Caesar states that “Nor heaven nor earth have been at peace tonight. / Thrice hath Calpurnia in her sleep cried out / ‘Help, ho! They murder Caesar!’” (II.2.1-3). Calpurnia’s detailed nightmares represent omens of the murder of the friend/enemy through the imagery of death, blood, and ghosts: “A lioness hath whelped in the streets, / And graves have yawned and yielded up their dead. / Fierce fiery warriors fight upon the clouds / In ranks and squadrons and right form of war, / Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol.” She continues that “[t]he noise of battle hurtled in the air, / Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan, / And ghosts did shiek and squeal about the streets” (II.2.20-25). Although Caesar is warned through different omens about the upcoming disaster, he chooses to read them in his own way, since “Caesar should be a beast without a heart / If he should stay at home today for fear” (II.2. 40-45). The famous *Et tu, Brute?* scene, which perfectly summarizes Caesar’s death at a betraying friend’s hands, is followed by the overtly political cries of Cinna, who exclaims “Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead! / Run hence, proclaim, cry is about the streets!” (III.1.78). The image of the friend and the enemy becomes one in the character of Brutus, who states right after the assassination that they have done Caesar a favour by murdering him: “Grant that, and then is death a benefit. / So are we Caesar’s friends, that have abridged / His time of fearing death” (III.1.103). Although the political friend is finally murdered, his death does nothing more than emphasize his hauntological existence through its remembrance. Anthony mourns Caesar’s death next to his body, and questions how he will be able to side with the conspirators, knowing they have murdered his friend:

...If then thy spirit look upon us now,  
 Shall it not grieve thee dearer than thy death  
 To see thy Anthony making his peace,  
 Shaking the bloody fingers of thy foes,  
 Most noble! In the presence of thy corpse?  
 Had I as many eyes as thou hast wounds,  
 Weeping as fast as they stream forth thy blood,  
 It would become me better than to close  
 In terms of friendship with thine enemies. (III.1.195)

Anthony prophesizes the return of Caesar’s ghost by speculating that he would be watching Anthony make friends with the conspirators; this return underlines the Derridean notion of mourning for a dead friend. The same theme of mourning constitutes the fictional setting of *De Amicitia*, in which Laelius, having lost his close friend Africanus a few days earlier, commemorates him through his recollections of their friendship. Brutus’ tone, when addressing the public after Caesar’s assassination, is also one of mourning, but it also contradictorily presents his Ciceronian defence of the political betrayal of his friend and governor:

Romans, countrymen, and lovers, hear me for my cause, and be silent, that you may hear. Believe me for my honour, and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe...If there be any in his assembly, any dear friend of Caesar’s, to him I say that Brutus’ love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer – not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. (III.2.16)

He further states the risks of letting Caesar reign over Rome and questions the state of the country in a manner suited to the Ciceronian ideals of keeping friendship on

condition that the friend does not commit a wrong deed to his country: “Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?” But since the answer is supposedly clear, he continues: “As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him; but as he was ambitious, I slew him” (III.2.24). Thus, Brutus carries out the responsibilities of Ciceronian friendship.

#### 4. Conclusion

In her thorough study on *Timon of Athens* and the concept of friendship, Raducanu explains Timon’s words on the virtue of a friend as a “desperate plea for the infinite extension of a shared meaning of friendship, which he both hopes for and deeply doubts”:

We remember the apocryphal appeal: “Oh, my friends, there is no friend”. Timon’s address to the Lords is similar in that, to employ Derrida’s words: “it makes a sign towards the future: be my friends, for I love or will love you [...] listen to me, be sensitive to my cry, understand and be compassionate, I am asking for your sympathy and consensus, become the friends to whom I aspire”. Even if you now are only imperfect friends (one remembers the “imperfect speakers” who toyed with Macbeth’s search for the absolute truth), maybe, if you listen to my passionate plea, we can all reach the state of the Aristotelian *homonoia*, thinking alike, being one in thought. (Răducanu 2020: 147)

The politics of friendship, death, and mourning of the friend through remembrance are deeply intertwined in *De Amicitia* just as they are in *Julius Caesar* through the politics of murdering one’s own friend for the good of one’s country. This intertwined notion of the death of a friend governs Derrida’s “Politics of Friendship”; he concludes, through a close reading of *De Amicitia*, by stating that “A friendship, of the Ciceronian kind, would be the possibility of citing myself in an exemplary manner, by signing in advance my own funeral oration, the best, perhaps, but it is never certain that the friend will pronounce it standing on his own feet when I will no longer be” (Derrida 1993: 21). In his thorough analysis of Derrida reading Cicero, Miller (2015: 181) comes to the conclusion that “[p]erhaps then we should then take Derrida at his word too: there is a reason why Cicero leads off the *Politics of Friendship*. It too is a haunted text. Haunted by the friends who are no longer friends – “oh my friends, there are no friends!” – haunted by the friends who are no more”. Maybe that is why, not being able to cope with the death and the haunting presence of his friend, Brutus decides to take his own life with the same dagger which has murdered Caesar.

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