

Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony)

Summary

He appears first as a confidant and a devoted follower of Caesar, and he offers Caesar a crown during the feast of Lupercal. He has a reputation for sensuous living, but he is also militarily accomplished, politically shrewd, and skilled at oration. He is able to dupe Brutus into allowing him to speak at Caesar's funeral and by his funeral oration to excite the crowd to rebellion. He is one of the triumvirs, and he and Octavius defeat Brutus and Cassius at Philippi.

Analysis

Prior to Caesar's assassination, Antony makes four brief appearances in which he speaks a total of five lines. Twice during Lupercal and again at Caesar's house, he makes short statements indicating that he is loyal to Caesar as dictator and as a friend. Caesar's confiding to Antony at Lupercal indicates that he trusts Antony and looks upon him as a friend in return, perhaps even as a protégé. Antony appears at the Capitol at the beginning of Act III, Scene 1, but he does not speak before Trebonius leads him out.

When, during Lupercal, Caesar describes Cassius as a dangerous man, Antony defends him as "a noble Roman and well given." While Antony does not perceive at that time that Cassius is dangerous, and later underestimates the determination of Octavius, as a ruler, he is a perceptive observer who verifies Cassius' assessment of him as being a "shrewd contriver." Following the assassination, Antony quickly grasps that he must deal with Brutus, and he has the shrewdness to take advantage of Brutus' naïveté. When he has his servant say that "Brutus is noble, wise, valiant, and honest," it is clear that Antony intends to flatter Brutus and to work upon those personal qualities of Brutus that represent moral strengths, but that are also fundamental weaknesses when dealing with a more sophisticated man.

Antony's requests for safety and for an explanation for the murder are reasonable in the context of the situation, but Brutus' consent to provide both ensures that, upon returning to the Capitol, Antony can concentrate on his ultimate objective of gaining a forum. At the Capitol, by having Brutus repeat his promises, Antony succeeds in placing him on the defensive and in establishing a means to evade the more difficult questions being raised by Cassius. He is not in the slightest degree deterred by considerations of honesty when dealing with those whom he wishes to deceive or manipulate. He knows that Brutus wants to believe that he (Antony) will join the conspirators' cause, and he takes advantage of Brutus' hope when he falsely tells the conspirators, "Friends am I with you all, and love you all." He will also freely use half-truths and outright falsehoods to sway the mob at the Forum to do what he wants.

Antony faces danger in this meeting from Cassius, who knows him to be a "shrewd contriver," and from the other conspirators, who know him to be a friend of Caesar. He disposes of the threat of Cassius by directing his attention to the more powerful and gullible Brutus, whom he keeps on the defensive by repeating that he will be friends if he receives a satisfactory explanation. He disposes of the remaining conspirators by boldly raising the subject of his apparent hypocrisy in making friends with his friend's murderers and by then shrewdly diverting his comments to the nobility of Caesar. This is much in the manner that he will turn the citizens to rebellion by professing that he does not want to stir them up. Antony, in reality, wants two things: to avenge Caesar's murder and to rule Rome. In order to do both, he must first undermine public confidence in the republicans, and second, he must drive them from power by creating a chaotic situation that will allow him to seize power in their place. The method he chooses is to gain permission to speak at Caesar's funeral, and that is the sole reason he plays the role he does in the Capitol.

In his soliloquy in the Capitol, Antony reveals that he intends to create civil strife throughout Italy, and in his oration he sets it off to a promising start. He is thoroughly the politically expedient man in his speech. He wants to create rebellion and overthrow the republicans so that he and Octavius can fill the vacuum, and he succeeds to the fullest measure. From his soliloquy in the Capitol until the end of the play, he is constantly ambitious, confident, successful, and exceptionally ruthless. He has no concern for the welfare of the citizens of Rome who will suffer in the civil strife he has instigated, he is willing to have a nephew put to death rather than argue for his life, he seeks to keep as much as he can of Caesar's legacy to the poor of Rome, and he openly acknowledges that he will remove Lepidus from power as soon as Lepidus is no longer of use to him.

He has some personality conflict with Octavius, but he is able to relegate it to the background so that their differences are always secondary to their struggle to defeat Brutus and Cassius. Antony is also particularly adept at locating the most advantageous point of attack in all of his confrontations. In the Capitol, rather than confront all of the conspirators, he concentrates on Brutus' naive sense of honour and nobility. In the Forum, rather than construct a reasoned argument against the assassins, he appeals to the emotion with which he saw the crowd respond to Brutus' speech. At Philippi, when Brutus leaves Cassius' army exposed, Antony attacks immediately. At the conclusion of the play, when Brutus and Cassius are dead and the republicans thoroughly defeated, he publicly praises Brutus in order to set about healing the political wounds of Rome. Ironically, Brutus hoped to remove arbitrary government from Rome by the assassination, but by murdering Caesar, he established the conditions for an even more ruthless tyranny to seize power in the persons of Antony and Octavius.