

A Closer Look at "Friends, Romans, countrymen..."

**This speech is spoken by
Marc Antony in Act 3, Scene 2 of
Julius Caesar.**

Who's Marc Antony?

Marcus Antonius, or Marc Antony, was a politician in the final years of the Roman Republic. A friend, ally, and protégé of Julius Caesar's, Antony was a senator at the time of Caesar's assassination. This pivotal event in Western history, the plot leading up to it, and its aftermath are depicted in this play.

Marc Antony is portrayed as an athlete and a lover of plays who 'revels long a-nights'. Before Caesar's assassination, the conspirators briefly consider also killing the loyal Antony, but they decide against it. In the civil war that follows, Antony forms a 'triumvirate', or three-way power-sharing alliance, with Octavius (later named Caesar Augustus) and Lepidus. Shakespeare picks up this story in his later play *Antony & Cleopatra*.

What's happening when this speech is spoken?

A large group of Roman senators led by Brutus and Cassius have assassinated Julius Caesar in the Capitol. Marc Antony has asked for permission to speak to the people of Rome at Caesar's funeral. Cassius doesn't think this is a good idea, but Brutus agrees as long as Antony doesn't blame the senators and only says good things about Caesar.

Brutus decides to address the crowd first, to explain that the senators took this action to protect Rome from Caesar's dangerous ambition. The crowd is so moved by Brutus's speech that they declare, "Let him be Caesar!" and "Caesar's better parts shall be crowned in Brutus!" The crowd is initially skeptical of Antony, only agreeing to stay and listen because Brutus requests it.

The speech

MARC ANTONY:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it.
He was my friend, faithful and just to me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
But here I am to speak what I do know.
You all did love him once, not without cause:
What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him?
If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.
(Holding up Caesar's outer robe)
Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through:
See what a rent the envious Casca made:
Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabb'd;
This was the most unkindest cut of all;
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquish'd him: then burst his mighty heart;
And, in his mantle muffling up his face, great Caesar fell.
O, what a fall was there, my countrymen!
Then I, and you, and all of us fell down,
Whilst bloody treason flourish'd over us.

Note:

In Shakespeare's play, this speech is interrupted by the crowd of Roman citizens who are attending Caesar's state funeral. The full text of what Marc Antony says is 136 lines long, and can be found in Act 3, scene 2, lines 82-266. We've created a shorter 27-line version for you to explore here.

The speech: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?

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Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

- **oft** – short for ‘often’
- **interred** – put into the ground, buried
- **ambitious** – desiring success, in this case to an excessive degree
- **grievous** – serious or heavy
- **just** – loyal and faithful
- **honourable** – deserving respect, honour, and esteem
- **disprove** – to invalidate or prove something to be false
- **withholds** – restrains or holds back
- **mantle** – a piece of clothing worn over a shirt, often a loose, sleeveless cloak
- **look, in this place** – this refers to a garment that Caesar wore, which Antony is holding for the crowd to see (those lines have been cut from this version of the speech. We have added staging directions in its place.)
- **rent** – a large tear, especially in a piece of fabric
- **envious** – this can mean jealous, but had an added level of malice and spite in Shakespeare’s day
- **vanquish’d** – defeated
- **muffling** – covering or hiding from view
- **whilst** – while
- **treason** – betrayal or violation of trust, especially to the state
- **flourish’d** – thrived or triumphed

Explore the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex? What’s the effect of this language?
- If you’re a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?
- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change?
- What might the length of the thoughts tell you about what’s happening for this character? Why do you think Marc Antony makes these choices?

Explore the ideas: Politics and Persuasion

- Who are the most persuasive speakers you can think of?
- What techniques do they use to influence people’s opinions?
- Which techniques work especially well to sway your thinking?
- Can you think of a time when someone changed your mind because of the way they speak?
- What techniques do you use when trying to persuade people?

Explore the character

- What do you think about Marc Antony’s strategy when giving this speech?
- If time allows, compare Marc Antony’s speech to the one Brutus delivers just before (act 3 scene 2, lines 13 -44. What do you notice about the differences in the two speeches?
- What do you think of the result? (The people turn violent, rioting and even killing a poet who happens to have the same name as one of the senators. This happens in Act 3, scene 3).
- Do you think Marc Antony intended these consequences? What evidence do you find in the play to support your answer?
- What is your opinion of Marc Antony’s actions?

Challenge the words

William Shakespeare wrote his plays and poems more than 400 years ago, and his experience of the world was different from ours today. The meaning of words changes over time, as does their resonance. We encourage you to explore and interpret Shakespeare's language in your own ways, to discover how it resonates for you.

What do you do when specific words or phrases in Shakespeare's text feel hurtful or problematic? What about language that doesn't include you, or everyone you would like to include?

In the speech above, is there anything you want to challenge? For example, when Marc Antony says, "The evil that men do lives after them..." who is included in that statement? Do you think it's meant to include everyone? What possible alternatives can you imagine?

Make it your own

Performance

Learn some or all of the speech by heart and perform it. Discover what it all means, and what it means to you, so you can truly make it your own. If you like, think about staging, costuming, props, lighting, etc. What happens if you add the crowd who listens to the speech? Share your work with an audience of family and/or friends.

Ask someone to film your performance so you have a record of it. They can either film your live performance, or you can create a special opportunity for filming. Collaborate to find the best location, lighting, camera angles, sound, titles, etc. for what you'd like to create.

Art

Create a drawing, painting, sculpture, still life, photograph, or film that expresses what the speech means to you. Decide how you would like to share your creation.

Music

Express what the speech means to you through music. Choose a song or piece of music, build a playlist, or even compose an original piece that conveys your feelings about the speech. Decide how you'd like to share what you've created.

Creative Writing

Compose your own poem, speech, or story inspired by the speech. Imagine a similar situation of trying to persuade a crowd of people to think about a big event in a certain way. What language would you use? How would you get them on your side?

How would you respond to Marc Antony? Write a response in the form of a poem, speech or story. You can respond to the speech itself, or to the violence it inspires. What would you say to Marc Antony?