

# Caesar's Wounds: On the Absolute Master

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Historical and dramatical accounts diverge in details, but it seems that Julius Caesar is dead. According to Shakespeare and Plutarch, he was killed on the senate floor by a handful of conspirators who wanted to defend the Roman Republic against the rule of a tyrant, of a would-be king. Marcus Junius Brutus, surrounded by other conspirators proudly displaying their bloody hands, takes to the streets of Rome and publicly explains the reasons for their deed. His ancestors once expelled the last king from Rome and helped found the Republic, and he personally enjoys great respect as a public servant. As such, Brutus is sure to win the approval of the people—and he does, initially. However, he and the other conspirators make one fatal mistake: they agree that General Mark Antony, Caesar's closest ally, should lead the funeral procession and that he, too, should be allowed to speak to the people of Rome. Brutus and most of the other Republicans assume that Mark Antony is a soldier whose oratory skills are no match for those of seasoned senators. Moreover, they seem to rely too much on the assumption that people are naturally opposed to tyranny and love their own freedom. Obviously, Brutus did not read Spinoza, for otherwise he would have known better, namely, that men often fight as stubbornly for their servitude as if it were their salvation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza writes: “The greatest secret of monarchic rule, and its main interest, is to keep men deceived, and to cloak

In William Shakespeare's dramatization of the historical events, Mark Antony delivers a speech worthy of a Mephistopheles. He uses many excellent rhetorical devices and strategies, masterfully plays with his audience's expectations, and ends up stirring a revolt against Brutus and the Republicans. The scene is quite long and in many ways constitutes the climax of the dramatic action. I would like to focus on one particular part of the speech.

I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts.  
I am no orator, as Brutus is,  
But, as you know me all, a plain blunt man  
That love my friend, and that they know full well  
That gave me public leave to speak of him.  
For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,  
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech  
To stir men's blood. I only speak right on:  
I tell you that which you yourselves do know,  
Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,  
And bid them speak for me. But were I Brutus,  
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony  
Would ruffle up your spirits and put a tongue  
In every wound of Caesar that should move  
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny. (*Julius Caesar*, 3.3.209-222)

What I find interesting about this rhetorical strategy is what might be called a denegation of oratory skill. Mark Antony is, ostensibly, a straight talker, "a plain blunt man," and certainly "no orator, as Brutus is." Mark Antony uses a strategy that is very familiar to us from the experience of contemporary populists—they steal the people's hearts by declaring that they have not come to steal away hearts, that they do not even know how to make speeches, that they can only speak from the gut.

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in the specious name of Religion the fear by which they must be checked, so that they will fight for slavery as they would for their survival [salus]" (Spinoza 2016, p. 68).

This rhetorical strategy is remarkable in many ways. Mark Antony does not simply say that he wishes for the Roman people to rise up against the Republicans. He does not let his desire for power be known, and he does not even speak in his own name. He employs a rhetorical structure that legitimizes the speaker vicariously, with borrowed authority. The speaker merely assumes the position of a close friend of the deceased, and it is in Caesar's name, not in his own, that Antony makes his claim to power. More specifically, since he is not an orator, he functions merely as the voice of Caesar's wounds. It is, Mark Antony claims, the wounds themselves that speak—or would speak if they could—and stir the people to revolt. From the perspective suggested in this scene, political power, or put plainly, Antony's control over the Roman populace, is expressed through rhetorical or even theatrical structure. In Shakespeare's dramatization, which was based on Plutarch's report, it seems that power requires a theatrical form in order to become real or actualized. The presence of the political master survives in the name of Caesar only; it takes the form of the borrowed name of a dead tyrant and is an appearance, a representation, an avatar. According to this rhetorical strategy, there is no master as such; there is no single person who may or may not appear to us as a master. The master exists only as his own appearance, as his own deadly wound.

There is another moment in Shakespeare's play in which the performative nature of political power is made palpable. In one of the early scenes of *Julius Caesar*, the senators are discussing the future of Rome, and the world, behind the scenes of a grandiose public event in Caesar's honor. In the background, they hear three shouts of public jubilation, and it turns out later that it was some kind of political performance. Antony offered Caesar a mock crown three times, as if in jest, but Caesar refused it, three times. This performance, described by one senator as "mere foolery" (1.2.234), and accompanied by Cicero muttering something in

Greek (1.2.277-283), drew great applause from the crowd.<sup>2</sup> Public officials who dare express republicanism are swiftly “put to silence” (1.2.285); Caesar rules *de facto* as king. Plutarch reports that the two tribunes who dared remove royalistic decorations from the statutes of Caesar were “deprived of their offices” (Plutarch LXI 5, p. 587). By saying that they were “put to silence,” Shakespeare adds an even more sinister tone to this incident. Be that as it may, what interests me here is that Caesar gains public approval and public consent precisely through the public show of *rejecting* the crown. In other words, Caesar legitimizes himself as king by publicly expressing outrage at this honor. Suetonius adds a further detail that fully supports this negative procedure: “Caesar sharply rebuked and deposed them, either offended that the hint at regal power had been received with so little favour, or, as he [Caesar] asserted, *that he had been robbed of the glory of refusing it*” (Suetonius LXXIX 2, p. 103, my emphasis). Clearly, there is glory in refusing regal power, and it seems plausible that Caesar was after it. Shakespeare makes great dramatic use of the theatricality of these events, but it seems that perhaps these events themselves were already theatrical; the point is that the legitimization of political power takes place as a strange kind of performance. The figure of the master (specifically, of the king) takes shape through its own negation.

The second point I want to make about Mark Antony’s speech is the intertwinement of the dimensions of power and truth. Antony rests his argument upon the tacit assumption that truth does

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<sup>2</sup> Plutarch does not doubt that this show of theatrics was arranged by Antony and Caesar in advance, that it was a preconcerted experiment: “[Antony] carried a diadem, round which a wreath of laurel was tied, and held it out to Caesar. Then there was applause, not loud, but slight and preconcerted. But when Caesar pushed away the diadem, all the people applauded; and when Antony offered it again, few, and when Caesar declined it again, all, applauded. The experiment having thus failed, Caesar rose from his seat, after ordering the wreath to be carried up to the Capitol” (Plutarch LXI 3-4, p. 585).

not require any embellishment, that making beautiful speeches and using the right words is not how truth is told. The strategy he uses is the strategy of *nuda veritas*, the naked truth, where it is the facts themselves that speak, and what the facts say directly 'speaks louder than words.' Ancient Greek rhetoricians called this kind of public speech *parrhesia*, which can be roughly translated as saying everything (without restraints, freely). Following this form, Antony speaks "right on," and only "*shows* sweet Caesar's wounds." If we take what he says and how he says it at face value, if we don't immediately assume he is a Mephistopheles simply manipulating his audience—which, of course, he is—his theory of truth is perhaps surprisingly Platonic. In *The Symposium*, which is structured like a contest in giving speeches about love, of eulogies to the God of Love, Socrates begins his own speech by saying precisely what Mark Antony is saying: he declares himself completely inept at giving speeches. Socrates comments on the beautiful oration delivered by his predecessor Agathon:

I was afraid Agathon would conclude his speech by challenging mine with the eloquence of Gorgias, that brilliant orator, and – like the Gorgon – would turn me into stone, unable to utter a word. It was then I realised what a fool I had been in agreeing with you to take my turn and deliver a eulogy of Love, and in saying I was an expert on the subject of love, despite, as it turned out, knowing nothing about how to compose a eulogy of anything. For *in my naivety I thought I had only to speak the truth* about the subject of the eulogy. [...] It now seems that the original proposal was not that each of us should really praise Love but that we should *give the appearance of doing so* (*Symposium*, 198c-e, my emphasis).

The difference between truth and appearance could not be more pronounced. Socrates even seems to explicitly invoke the style of *parrhesia* when he says that he will speak "in whatever words and phrases happen to come into my head at the time" (199b). In fact, Plato has consistently made the claim, throughout

his body of work, that the truth will always defeat the appearance, that it ought to defeat it, and his epistemology as well as his political theory depends on the task of defeating it. The whole notion of the quarrel between philosophers and poets over representation (*mimesis*) is Plato's way of arguing that truth has its value beyond appearance and that all embellishments and poetic artistry must cede ground to truth.<sup>3</sup>

The question of good statesmanship is, for Plato, undeniably a question of knowledge, and by extension, a question of truth. This is why, in the *Statesman*, the discussants go to great lengths to distinguish true political art from mere imitations. Plato writes:

Then those who participate in all those governments—with the exception of the scientific one—are to be eliminated as not being statesmen, but partisans; and since they preside over the greatest counterfeits, they are themselves counterfeits, and since they are the greatest of imitators and cheats, they are the greatest of all sophists (*Statesman*, 303c).

The epistemological point is also a political claim: in political matters, just as in matters of science, truth should triumph over appearances, true knowledge over sophistry. Plato is accordingly somewhat suspicious of great oratory skill displayed in political matters. The oratory skill can be useful inasmuch as it “partakes of the kingly art because it persuades men to justice and thereby helps to steer the ship of the state.” However, “the power of persuading a multitude or a mob by telling edifying stories”

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<sup>3</sup> Bara Kolenc even argues that Plato fears *mimesis*: “As soon as a copy appears, it retrogradely touches the model, which inadvertently gets infected with the effect of its own copy. [...] The original affected by copies cannot preserve the identity with itself, it is corrupted, dirty, and could in the end also be lost since the loss of purity could seriously jeopardize its position of the origin. This means that *mimesis* is not at all as innocent as it would seem at first sight; it does have a certain power and perhaps even a crucial role in the constitution of the world.” (Kolenc 2014, p. 214)

must be subordinated to the art of statesmanship, which solely holds “the power of deciding whether some action, no matter what, should be taken, either by persuasion or by some exercise of force, in relation to any person, or whether to take no action at all” (*Statesman*, 304a-d). The relationship between rhetoric and truth is just as complex as the relationship between poetry and truth, but ultimately, any value we may ascribe to rhetoric or poetry depends, for Plato, on whether or not they serve science and truth. Whether he wanted this or not, with his profound suspicions about oratory skill and with the general idea that truth is the ultimate authority, Plato promoted an entire tradition of appreciation for straight-talkers in the political domain. What Shakespeare shows us in Mark Antony—in a clear rebuke of this tradition—is how the procedure of talking straight can very easily be used by populists to legitimize their positions, to usurp power. The sophist can always don the mask of the philosopher.<sup>4</sup>

Plato was well aware of this difficulty. In *The Symposium*, Socrates distances himself from his own speech not only on the

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<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare's relation to Platonism is a complex matter. My position is that he employs Platonic tropes, themes, and even philosophical concepts, but always playfully and sometimes even ironically. Sonnet 130, *My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun*, is perhaps one the most beautiful sonnets ever written, but it achieves its stunning effect by playfully perverting and even negating the conventions and tropes of the sonnet form. I argue that a similar case can be made about Shakespeare's relation to Platonism, especially with regard to the Platonic stance on oration. In *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony proceeds precisely by decrying his own oratory skills, but finishes in a grandiose rhetoric finale, not unlike what the poet does in sonnet 130, where the final couplet returns to the sonnet form with the forceful “*And yet by heaven, I think my love as rare, As any she belied with false compare.*” That said, I fully acknowledge that this is an open debate, and that one could also argue for a certain naivety in Shakespeare's relationship to language. Jure Simoniti, for instance, argues that the central fantasy of language is the notion that the meaning *precedes* words, and writes critically: “The entirety of Shakespeare's oeuvre, perhaps its naivety, could be reduced to the tension between the inflation of verbosity on one side and the incessant search for the thing that keeps silent on the other” (Simoniti 2023, p. 75, footnote).

formal level, by refusing to employ an embellished language and structure, but also on the level of the content. When he finally delivers his understanding of love, Socrates does not even speak in his own name, but simply recounts the teaching he was given in youth by a mysterious female priest called Diotima (*Symposium*, 201d ff.). The authority of truth thus functions as a kind of borrowed authority: one does not simply speak the truth, one only lends one's voice to it. Ironically, in a kind of revenge of the appearance, Shakespeare has Mark Antony use precisely the same procedure for the people of Rome as the one Socrates does for his audience of aristocrats. Antony does not only deny his own oratory skills but also claims to be nothing but a mouthpiece of some mysterious, other-worldly authority; he is simply giving voice to the "poor poor dumb mouths," which are Caesar's wounds.<sup>5</sup> Evoking the image of putting "a tongue in every wound of Caesar," he is turning those wounds into an almost erotic object.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare demonstrates efficiently and brutally that the fact that authority is bound to the category of truth, just as Plato suggested, does not mean that one can simply disassociate appearances from political power. One cannot simply 'ban' thespians from entering the political domain. Power seems to open

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<sup>5</sup> The motif of Caesar's wounds is not Shakespeare's invention. Plutarch reports: "But when the will of Caesar was opened and it was found that he had given every Roman citizen a considerable gift, *and when the multitude saw his body carried through the forum all disfigured with its wounds*, they no longer kept themselves within the restraints of order and discipline" (Plutarch LXVIII, p. 603, my emphasis).

<sup>6</sup> During the presentation of an earlier draft of this article (in Ljubljana, 2022), Frauke Bernd suggested that the strike of eroticism in the treatment of Caesar's wounds implied in Antony's oration bears some resemblance to the depiction of the wound of the resurrected Jesus Christ in Caravaggio's *Incredulity of St. Thomas*—Jesus leads Thomas' finger deep into his wound—which dates to almost the same period (c. 1600-1601; *Julius Caesar* is believed to have been written in 1599 and was published in 1623 in first folio). While I do not intend to pursue any parallels between Caesar and Christ here, one can certainly say that Caesar's death is depicted as martyrdom in Antony's speech.



up a space where even truth requires its own appearance, its own manifestation, its own stage. Thus it is never enough to speak the truth in order to win an argument, political or otherwise. One must also give the appearance of speaking the truth.

There is one final point I want to make about the quoted section of Antony's speech. The immediate context in which he assumed the role of the speaker is Caesar's death. Antony thus draws his authority from the fact that his oration comes as part of a funeral procession, with the shadow of the recently deceased leader supporting every word he utters and every action he pursues. This allows us to explore one further aspect of the master: if Julius Caesar is one of the historical names for the master, then it is not so much as a living person with certain affirmative qualities, but precisely as someone dead.

Historians usually do not consider Caesar a monarch, even though he was obviously keen on ruling as one. Plutarch remarks poignantly: "of the power and dominion which [Caesar] had sought all his life at so great risks, and barely achieved at last, of this he had reaped no fruit *but the name of it only*" (Plutarch, p. 605, my emphasis). It was Octavian who, after having defeated first the Republicans with the help of Mark Antony and then having defeated Mark Antony himself, became the undisputed single ruler of the Roman world and the first true Roman Emperor. Nevertheless, Octavian formulated his claim to power as Caesar's heir, adopting Caesar's *name*—and so the title of the emperor in many European languages, including Slovenian, is simply a derivation of Caesar's name. Quite literally, Octavian Augustus ruled as '*a Caesar.*' The second Caesar, but the first undisputed emperor. This is not the only time the *name* of Caesar plays a significant role in historical reports; both Plutarch and Suetonius relate an episode when commoners hailed him as king, and he replied, making yet another pursuit of gaining glory from rejecting the honor, that "his name was not King but Caesar," (Plutarch LX 2, p. 583; compare Suetonius LXXIX, p. 103). Caesar's heirloom

was, in a certain sense, *nothing but his name*, and subsequent Caesars donned that name to rule as his heirs, Augustus literally, others metaphorically.

Hegel famously described this interplay between Caesar and Augustus, the difference between Caesar and Caesar, between the original mutation and the series, as a historical repetition: Caesar had to be repeated, so to speak, in Augustus and other emperors, so that the Roman world would accept the rule of one as something necessary, and not a mere coincidence in the person of Julius Caesar (GW 27,2, p. 723). Interestingly, Hegel might have been inspired in this thought, at least partly, by Shakespeare's impassive and impartial dramatization of Plutarch's report.<sup>7</sup> Speaking about the cunning of Reason, Hegel argues that, in history, ideas are enforced or gain reality only through and by the death of individuals, that it is the blood of individuals that is sacrificed on the altar of the idea. In the example of Julius Caesar, we can see very clearly how it was precisely the death of the individual Caesar that helped establish the concept of Caesar as the name of the master, the name of the undisputed emperor (GW 27,3, p. 805).

I believe that William Shakespeare captures this Hegelian point beautifully in Antony's speech; as mentioned before, Caesar does not matter so much as a living individual; he functions as the figure of the master precisely insofar as he is dead, precisely insofar as unlimited political power was his *heirloom* rather than his actual *possession*. In fact, Julius Caesar as 'the king that never was' is a very effective figure of the master and Hegel's concept of the World-Historical Individual should be understood accordingly.

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<sup>7</sup> It is not just that Hegel, much like other German thinkers of the period, read Shakespeare with enthusiasm and appreciation—this is well known and well documented. As if following Aristotle's suggestion that dramatic poetry is more philosophical than historiography, Hegel even refers to Shakespeare as a source in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*: "Brutus bei Plutarch und Shakespeare. Als Römer ist sein Charakter herrlich, aber in den ungeheuren Irrthum und das Verbrechen verfiel er." (GW 27,2, p. 723)

Even though this point is not completely unequivocal in Hegel's *Lectures*, I argue that one does not become a World-Historical Individual because they have a set of qualities or because they have achieved great feats during their lifetime; what makes such an individual what they are is that great historical feats and transformations became associated with them, or more specifically, *with their name*. As living individuals, they may have not even survived this process.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Absolute Master*

In the course of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel refers to death in reference to the figure of the master only obliquely. But elsewhere, he does it much more directly. Notably, in the passage on “master and slave,” or “lord and bondsman,” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where death takes center stage. In the following paragraphs, I will first sum up the basic structure of that famous passage in very general terms, and then focus on the question of death.

Recall that the passage recounts the “*Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness*.” The entry point for the discussion is the duality of self-consciousness, the fact that it is *one* and at the same time *twofold*. It is one, but it is duplicated, doubled, and it performs for us, in this process of self-othering and

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<sup>8</sup> Occasionally, Hegel seems to deify Caesar personally and count his achievements as personal greatness, arguing that he was correct to grab all power: “Caesar hat einen neuen Schauplatz der Weltgeschichte eröffnet. [...] Den Boden der Weltgeschichte hat er also gegründet.” (GW 27, 2, p. 723) However, the ultimate verdict of someone's greatness depends not on their specific achievements, but on whether or not those achievements coincide with the purposes of the world spirit: “Der große Mensch in der Weltgeschichte ist nun der, welcher ein Solches sich zum Zweck macht, das auch der Zweck des Weltgeistes ist, das an der Zeit ist.” (GW 27, 4, p. 1173)

self-externalization, the theater of *recognition*. Self-consciousness implies, for Hegel, that “self-consciousness is faced with another self-consciousness” (Hegel 1977, p. 111). Hegel stages a kind of mortal combat between the two, arguing that each has to stake its own existence in order to prove to the other as well as to oneself that they are indeed self-consciousnesses. This is quite essential for Hegel, as he writes: “They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case” (Hegel 1977, p. 114).

It is therefore a question of *proving oneself* to oneself as well as to the other. The natural existence must be *despised* in order for self-consciousness to prove itself. But then, how does the figure of the master even come into play? Perhaps surprisingly, master and slave emerge as the result of an *unsuccessful*, or rather, incomplete life-and-death struggle. Only the extreme opposites die, and natural death does not produce recognition. Hegel writes:

For just as life is the *natural* setting of consciousness, independence without absolute negativity, so death is the *natural* negation of consciousness, negation without independence, which thus remains without the required significance of recognition. (Hegel 1977, p. 114)

Hegel describes death in this passage as a *natural* negation of consciousness, and its philosophical significance is the same as that of life. Just as natural life is independence without absolute negativity, so natural death is negativity without the independence of life. Natural life does not suffice to attain recognition; however, natural death does not help either. This may seem rather obvious, but it is actually a nuanced point. It is only the *natural* death that does not bring recognition; death in the philosophical sense, death as something that operates on the level of spirit, is a different matter entirely — as we will soon look into more closely.

The relationship between the master and the slave thus emerges through an incomplete life-and-death struggle, it emerges

among the living. Initially, their relationship is defined by the fact that one self-consciousness decided to cling to dear life after all, and it is called the bondsman or the slave consciousness. The other self-consciousness, whose independence is now recognized in a mediated way by the first one, is the lord or master consciousness. Hegel describes the relationship between them as concerning the thing, the object of desire, and, by extension, the work and the enjoyment of the fruits of that work.

Therein lies the most important point of the relationship between the two self-consciousnesses: for because the master only retains the *dependent* aspect of the thing (the end product of work), because they have put the slave consciousness in between themselves and the thing, it turns out that the status of independence or self-sufficiency between master and slave is actually inverted. It turns out that it is the slave or the bondsman who is truly independent with relation to work and its fruits: "The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman." (Hegel 1977, p. 177) For my purposes here, what matters is only how Hegel justifies this reversal of roles. In a very well-known passage, one that has worked its way even into the *Communist Manifesto*, Hegel writes:

For this consciousness [of the bondsman] has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord [Master]. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness. (Hegel 1977, p. 117)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Compare the phrases "everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations" and "the absolute melting-away of everything stable" with a

What I want to focus on in this beautiful passage is the idea that death is the Absolute Master. This is quite distinct from death as mentioned in the previous passage, the *natural* death, death that did not bring any recognition. In this passage, death, or more precisely, the overwhelming experience of the fear of death, is precisely that which produces self-consciousness in its purest form. This is death not as a natural process, but as a social and political force.

Hegel is speaking about the fear and trembling, about an *Angst* that is not simply an occasional fear of something particular in someone's life—this consciousness's "whole being has been seized with dread"; it was anxious *um sein ganzes Wesen*. This notion of anxiety in existentialist proportions was notably picked up by Heidegger in his *Being and Time*. Moreover, Heidegger follows Hegel in distinguishing between death as a naturally occurring, mundane experience on the one hand and death as a phenomenon *par excellence*, as precisely that existential disposition that determines the temporality and finality of human existence on the other hand. But perhaps there is also a point of distinction in Heidegger's understanding of death; for him, death and anxiety seem to always function as instances of isolation of self-consciousness. For Heidegger, the split of self-consciousness (of *Dasein*, as he calls it) does not appear along the lines of dependency and independency, which are reflexive categories, but rather along the lines of the authenticity and inauthenticity of being. It is only from the point of view of the inauthentic mode of existence that human beings are simply said to die; death is thus obscured as a phenomenon precisely in its mundaneness. From the perspective

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passage where Marx and Engels describe the perpetual changing of the system of production and with it the system of social arrangements under the Bourgeoisie in the *Manifesto*: "Everything fixed and stable vanishes, everything holy and venerable is desecrated, and men are forced to look at their mutual relations, at the problem of Life, in the soberest, the most matter of fact way." (Marx and Engels 2015, p. 263)

of Dasein's authenticity, which is to say, when we analyze Dasein in its phenomenological and ontological distinctness, death becomes the privileged site of inquiry which enables Heidegger the determination of Dasein as being-toward-death: death as the ultimate possibility of Dasein, the possibility of its own impossibility. However, by grounding this phenomenological analysis in the experience of anxiety and of the ultimate "mine-own-ness" (*Jemeinigkeit*) of death, Heidegger appears to codify his concept of death within the framework of ethical individualism.<sup>10</sup> Even when he discusses social phenomena such as the call of conscience, his account can only serve as a basis for individual morality, for personal responsibility, where one's highest duty is to one's own authentic self, and only as a consequence also to the community. In Hegel's philosophy, in the section on master and servant, on the contrary, death is something inherently social and even political: death does not only serve as a framework of a life and death struggle, but also as the force—*qua* the Absolute Master—that forms what appears to be the fundamental social and political bond between the master, the servant, and the object of desire/thing. If death is the absolute master, then any historical figure of the master is only possible through the mediation of death.

In a different section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this social, ethical, and political nature of death comes even more to the foreground. Chapters on ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) discuss Sophocles' *Antigone* and other Greek plays and myths where the burial rites figure as the fundamental ethical injunction of every family, granting the deceased family member the status of someone who belonged to the spiritual (social, political) community. The burial rites have precisely the function of denying

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<sup>10</sup> Heidegger writes: "Mineness belongs to existing Da-sein as the condition of the possibility of authenticity and inauthenticity. Da-sein exists always in one of these modes, or else in the modal indifference to them." (Heidegger 1996, p. 49)

that a person died but a natural death—the burial rites add to the natural death a movement of consciousness, and of an action, a deed. Hegel writes:

This universality which the individual as such attains is *pure being, death*; it is a state which has been reached immediately, in the *course of Nature*, not the result of an action *consciously done*. The duty of the member of a Family is on that account to add this aspect, in order that the individual's ultimate being, too, shall not belong solely to Nature and remain something irrational, but shall be something *done*, and the right of consciousness be asserted in it. (Hegel 1977, p. 270)

Someone died—and their death had a meaning, a social and political significance. The ritual of burial is the essential work of the family because it is in this ritual that the family achieves its purpose beyond the natural bond between family members.

There is also a similar process underway in the institution of political community (*Gemeinwesen*), which, as Hegel insisted, must be upset by the government from time to time by war so that the systems of particular interest that constitute the community do not become fixed and so that the individuals “are made to feel in the task laid on them [namely, in war] their lord and master [ihren Herrn], death” (Hegel 1977, p. 273). This is Hegel's functional explanation of war, which he consistently argued for. In his *Philosophy of Right*, for instance, Hegel is quite explicit about the ethical and historical importance of wars: “To be sure, war produces insecurity of property, but this real insecurity is nothing other than a necessary movement. [...] Wars occur when the nature of the case requires. The seeds burgeon once more, and talk is silenced by the solemn recurrences of history” (Hegel 2008, p. 308).

In short, death has a social and political importance for Hegel, and it is far from an isolating force where one finds oneself ultimately alone in their authentic experience of being. When Hegel considers death as the absolute master, which he does consistently,



it is more than just a convenient phrase he uses for dramatic effect. It indicates that any other figure of the master, like a monarch, is necessarily a kind of appearance, enabled only by the mediation of death. One must note here that the idea of the political master as essentially an appearance does not simply mean a *false* appearance, as if there existed a true master somewhere, in hiding. To return to a point I made with regard to Julius Caesar (both the play and the historical figure), it simply means that there is something irreducibly theatrical in the way the master exists.

In a footnote to the *Capital*, Marx gives us an example of some Hegelian determinations of reflection that can perhaps serve as his own phrasing of the relationship between the lord and bondsman: "One man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the other hand, imagine that they are subjects because he is king." (Marx 1976, p. 149) For Marx, perhaps even more clearly than for Hegel, the structure of servitude or bondage is an imaginary structure, and what I call an appearance or theatricality of political power is analyzed in the Marxist tradition as ideology. In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare gives us his own version of the idea that relations of domination are an ideological formation, and that what keeps us in chains is nothing but our "servile fearfulness" (*Julius Caesar*, 1.1.76). Cassius, a republican senator, formulates this point clearly:

But life being weary of these worldly bars  
Never lacks power to dismiss itself. [...]  
That part of tyranny that I do bear  
I can shake off at pleasure. [...]  
And why should Caesar be a tyrant then?  
Poor man, I know he would not be a wolf  
But that he sees the Romans are but sheep.  
He were no lion, were not Romans hinds. (*Julius Caesar*, 1.3.96-106)

For Cassius, as for Marx, the burden of tyranny is borne by the bondsman himself, and what makes the tyrant a tyrant is

precisely the fact that the bondsman still clings to “these worldly bars,” to dear life.

It has become somewhat fashionable, following the ‘performative turn in humanities,’ to describe all social life as in a sense theatrical, since all social and political practices can be considered performances of sorts, where every actor is given a specific role to play. If we put it this way, however, then the concept of the master I am proposing here would not designate simply another such performance, but rather the very operator according to which all other performances are executed, the element of the curtain falling in the theater of everyday life. This means that within the Hegelian theory of society, we cannot abide without the master, without such an operator of our social interactions. It seems that for Hegel, throughout his body of work, but especially in his *Philosophy of Right*, this also meant that, quite literally, a political community requires a figurehead, a monarch. We may find Hegel’s position on this question rather unsatisfying, unimaginative, or conformist, to say the least.

But perhaps it could be demonstrated that the relationship between what Hegel conceptually attributes to the institution of the *monarch* and his concept of the *master* is actually a complicated one. One indication in this direction can be formulated with the help of a quip Napoleon uttered when addressed by the emissaries from a recently captured Erfurt, who addressed him as “*notre prince*” — “our prince,” “our ruler,” but perhaps we can translate it here as “our monarch.” Napoleon told them: “*je ne suis pas votre prince, je suis votre maître*” (“I am not your monarch, I am your master”). Hegel discusses this anecdote in order to distinguish between the monarch and the conqueror: “The monarch comes on the scene as the head and a part of the constitution, but it has to be said that there is no constitutional identity between a conquered people and its prince. A rebellion in a province conquered in war is a different thing from a rising in a well-organized state.” (Hegel 2008, p. 275). Regardless of

this specific context, the distinction between a monarch and a master that is implied in Napoleon's quip is perhaps an example that allows us to claim that Hegel's political theory is not entirely unfit for the contemporary understanding of how the master functions. Arguing in favor of the concept of the master should not be confused with arguing in favor of monarchy or dictatorship.

Let us return one final time to Julius Caesar. Was he a conqueror or a prince? In a sense, he was both: the province he had to ultimately conquer in war was the very homeland, Italia. Nevertheless, the distinction still applies. The function of the master must be considered as strictly separate function from the one of the monarch. So when the people greeted him as king, what else could he have responded but that "he was not king, but Caesar?"

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