

Mr Bruff

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MR Bruff's Guide To

'Julius Caesar'



Part 4: Analysing Act 1 Scene 1

Shakespeare employs contrasts to introduce the themes of language, class and politics; the contrasting views in this scene will set the tone for future discord, thereby foreshadowing events. At the beginning of the scene, it is clear that the tribunes (or government officials) Flavius and Marullus, hold different views from the 'Commoners': the 'carpenter' and 'cobbler' are excited about Caesar's victory; the tribunes are suspicious. The difference in rank is immediately apparent because the higher-status tribunes speak in **blank verse** while the lower-status characters employ **prose**.

Blank verse is easy to identify because each line begins with a capital letter and the line might not finish at the end of the page (it looks like a poem). It consists of unrhymed lines of ten syllables of alternating stress (if the lines are rhymed, this is called **iambic pentameter**). In the following example, the stressed syllables are underlined:

You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!

The regular rhythm of blank verse is like a beating heart. In this example, it suggests a heart pounding in anger when Marullus berates the plebeians.

Shakespeare does not always stick to the rules for creating blank verse, however. Sometimes, he adds or drops syllables. He also varies the rhythm. For example, in the first line of the play, Flavius states:

Hence! Home, you idle creatures, get you home!

The double stress (which is called a spondee if you want to impress the examiner) and alliteration of '[h]ence! Home' intensify the impact of Flavius's anger, heightening feelings of class divisions and conflict. The plebeians are 'idle creatures'; the adjective 'idle' is unnecessary and insulting while the noun 'creatures' dehumanises the manual workers, who have no individual names in the play. Moreover, Flavius defines them by their work status, indicating that they represent the large number of plebeians of the time who, if they were valued at all, were valued for their labour. The assonance of 'hence' and 'get', coupled with the open vowel sound of 'home', emphasises Flavius's view of the vacant nature of the plebeians, and (except for 'idle creatures'), the use of single syllable words puts greater emphasis on those feelings. The repetition of 'home' at the

end rounds off the alliterative impact. We therefore see that Shakespeare matches the rhythm of his blank verse to the topic and mood of his speeches, and the whole line is a punchy start to a violent play.

A close study of the characters' language reveals a lot about their contrasting social status and attitudes. Flavius first addresses the manual workers with the plural 'you'; then, when he speaks to them individually, he switches to the singular 'thou', typically used when addressing someone of a lower social class. The tribunes also employ lots of interrogatives, which indicate their higher status because they control and guide the conversation. They quiz the plebeians about their class: 'Speak, what trade art thou?'. The tribunes are not interested in names but where the plebeians stand in the social hierarchy. The latter are easily identified because they are wearing their 'best apparel' (clothes). This demonstrates their political allegiance: the Elizabethan audience would have interpreted both clothing and bearing to communicate resistance. By viewing Roman class relationships through Elizabethan cultural assumptions, we therefore see an example of the anachronisms mentioned in parts 1 and 2 of this guide. The fact that the tribunes expect the manual workers to be wearing their work clothes emphasises their status as subordinates whose function is to serve.

We see more contrasts between the two classes when Marullus employs insulting adjectives to establish his authority, calling the second commoner a 'naughty' [worthless] knave' and a 'saucy [cheeky] fellow'. The parallel sets of adjective and noun illustrate his dismissive attitude and sense of entitlement to speak so freely. To a modern audience, his verbal abuse is surprising, as he risks retaliation. This illustrates that the divisions between the classes in Elizabethan eyes were more defined than today—although, as we know, there were changing.

In contrast to blank verse, the plebeians speak in **prose**, which is easy to identify because it looks like paragraphs in a novel. Prose, often used by low-status characters, is also the language of comedy. Thus, we see humour with the cobbler's pun when he says that he is 'a mender of bad soles'. This is a pun on *souls*, suggesting that corruption is rife in Rome. Shakespeare uses this moment of the play to show that the cobbler is quicker witted than his supposed better. He is a typical cheeky, sharp-witted character (a little like the many apprentices in early 17th century literature), and perhaps Shakespeare is stating that we should not take ordinary people for granted. All this feeds into the play's discussion about upsetting the *natural order* of things where everyone is expected to behave in a way appropriate to their rank. In this part of the

scene, we certainly see that the tribunes may be in authority but they do not necessarily have authority. Moreover, Marullus does not understand the cobbler's answers to his questions, symbolising his inability on a wider level to understand why the plebeians are supporting Caesar.

Marullus's speech, in blank verse, is the more formal, educated rhetoric of the upper-classes, which contrasts with the sarcastic impertinence of the quick-witted cobbler. Which, implies Shakespeare, is the more authentic and effective way of speaking? The answer is that each has its place.

The power of words—or oration—to change the opinions of others is dominant in the play. Marullus's speech emphasises his authority and contains a range of rhetorical devices to challenge the crowd's beliefs:

Why celebrate? What victory is he bringing home with him?
 What captives are following him to Rome
 To pay honour, in fetters, to his chariot wheels?
 You blockheads, you stone-hearted, unfeeling people,
 Oh you hard-hearted, cruel men of Rome,
 Didn't you know Pompey? Many times, very often
 You've climbed up the walls and battlements,
 To the towers and windows, and even to the chimney tops,
 With your babies in your arms and sat there
 The whole day long, patiently waiting
 To see great Pompey pass through the streets of Rome.
 And as soon as you saw his chariot appear,
 Didn't you make a universal shout, so loud
 That the river Tiber shook her banks
 On hearing the echo of your shouts
 Resounding against her shoreline?
 And now are you putting on your best clothes?
 And now are you taking a holiday?
 And now are you strewing flowers in the path of Caesar
 Who comes celebrating victory over Pompey's sons?
 Be gone!
 Run to your houses, fall on your knees,
 Pray to the gods to withhold the disaster
 That you deserve for such ingratitude.

Rhetorical questions encourage the crowd to reflect on their thoughts and behaviour.

Paired adjectives apply both to head and heart i.e. sense and sensibility. These are emotive to make the crowd feel guilty.

Rhetorical question followed by highly personalised anecdote to make them feel individually guilty. Contrast between then and now.

The River Tiber is personified to emphasise the passion that the crowd held for Pompey.

Lists of rhetorical questions to emphasise his disgust with the crowd's current behaviour that contrasts with their previous behaviour. Repetition (anaphora with 'And now are you-' at the start of each line) emphasises his feelings. He adds extra syllables with the final question, indicating his revulsion at their behaviour. This also contrasts with the short line which follows.

Lists of imperatives. The first is a short line to emphasise his command and anger. Note the rule of three with the list 'run', 'fall' and 'pray' to emphasise his belief that the crowd's behaviour is so bad that that they are at risk of punishment from the gods.

One of the major themes of the play is oration: the power of speech to change people's minds with the weapons of rhetoric—or military power when all else fails. It is worth emphasising that rhetoric was deemed as important a skill in Elizabethan England as it was in Ancient Rome. Marullus's speech is a paler foreshadowing of Antony's oration to change the minds of the crowd at Caesar's funeral. Antony will manipulate the plebeians through a range of emotions, some of which we now see with the tribunes. You might be familiar with the *good cop, bad cop* technique in which a suspect is subjected to harsh interrogation by a bad cop, and then a gentler line of questioning from the good cop, who wins the co-operation of the grateful suspect. In this scene, after Marullus's threats of 'disaster' from the gods because of the crowd's 'ingratitude', Flavius follows with a softer approach, addressing the crowd as 'good countrymen', telling them to 'weep' on the banks of the Tiber. This has the desired effect, as seen in the embedded stage direction when 'they vanish tongue-tied in their guiltiness'.

Flavius and Marullus's speeches are interesting on other levels. Firstly, the fickleness of the crowd had contemporary relevance in Elizabethan England, as it reflected concerns that, if Elizabeth did not name an heir, there might be another civil war (the previous one had been the Wars of the Roses between the houses of York and Lancaster, 1455-1485). Secondly, some members of the audience might recall the disturbances that took place under Elizabeth's rule and that of her predecessors. Thirdly, the rhetoric illustrates how a crowd can be swayed, preparing the audience for Brutus's and Antony's speeches to influence public opinion after Caesar is later assassinated. A modern audience might additionally reflect on the role of rhetoric in more recent times. Churchill and Hitler, for very different purposes, used powerful rhetoric to mobilise public opinion.

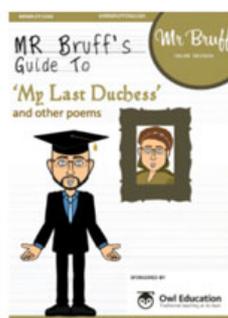
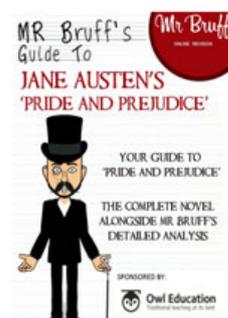
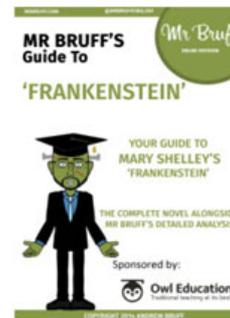
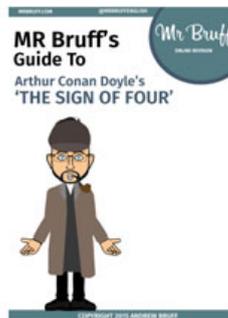
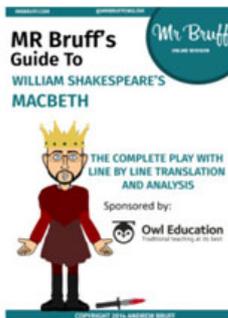
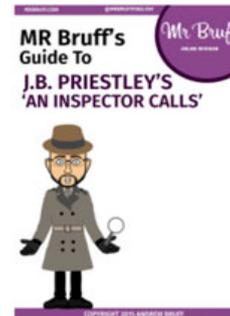
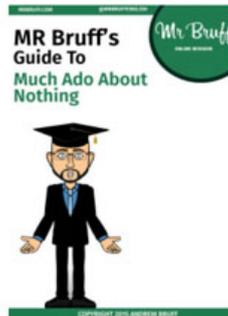
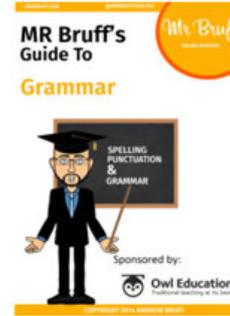
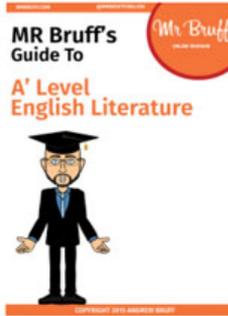
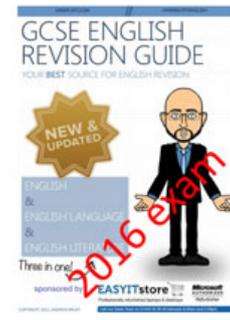
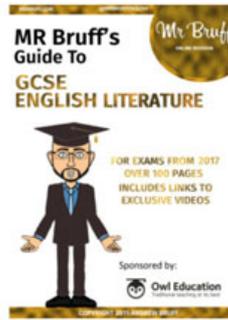
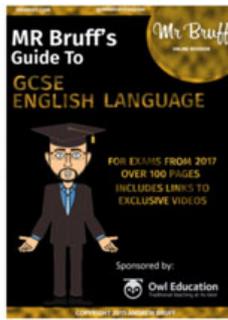
Flavius and Marullus's concern about Caesar's sudden rise to power might be a metaphor for the Elizabethans' apprehensions about the potential for very sudden and catastrophic political change in England (possibly engineered by Catholic Europe). In sixteenth century Europe, French and Spanish monarchs had absolute power; this threatened the English political system, in which nobles and elected representatives could to a certain extent work with Elizabeth I. As we are aware, when Caesar came to power, this marked the end of the Roman Republic. By deciding to include the thoughts of Flavius and Marullus, Shakespeare is drawing the audience's attention to the dangers of European centralisation of power.

There is irony in that one aspect of Flavius's and Marullus's behaviour reflects that of the mob. At the end of the scene, they plan to '[d]isrobe the images'

(take the decorations off the statues). Just as the crowd will take the law into its own hands after Caesar's funeral, the tribunes now consider breaking the law themselves.

The function of the statues is similar to political advertising campaigns today: they aim to persuade. Caesar's supporters have erected the statues because Romans associated statues with important politicians and Gods. They were therefore establishing Caesar's position in society, planting the subconscious thought that he is associated with the gods. Caesar's politically astute campaigners are also preparing the masses for his coronation, thus enabling a smoother transition to power. The symbolic purpose of the statues is therefore similar to the persuasive rhetoric of the tribunes in the scene.

The 'disrobing' of the statues is not only an attack on the ancient customs of the religious feast of Lupercalia, a Roman public holiday, but also an attack on symbols which celebrate Caesar's imminent arrival. Taking away the decorations represents a breakdown both of traditional cultural identity and the current political order. This anticipates the breakdown of social and political relationships to come.



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