Republican friendship and the fall of the Roman Republic in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean drama

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Abstract
This article synthesises historical scholarship on early modern friendship and classical republicanism to argue that Cicero, through the ideal of ‘republican friendship’, exerted a much greater influence over early modern understandings of Roman history than has previously been realised. Exploring Roman plays by William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, with reference to other classical dramas, it examines how dramatists used the Ciceronian ideal of republican friendship to create a historical framework for the political changes they were portraying, with Jonson using it to inform a Tacitean perspective on Roman history and Shakespeare scrutinising and challenging the nature of republican friendship itself.

Keywords
friendship, republicanism, Cicero, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Roman plays

Résumé
Cet article propose une synthèse de la critique historique sur l’amitié et le républicanisme classique dans l’ère de la première modernité, démontrant qu’à travers l’idéal de ‘l’amitié républicaine’, Cicéron a exercé une influence bien plus importante sur la perception de l’histoire romaine à cette époque que ce qui a été envisagé jusqu’ici. En explorant des pièces romaines de William Shakespeare et de Ben Jonson, et en se référant à d’autres pièces d’inspiration classique, nous analysons le recours à l’idéal cicéronien d’amitié républicaine par les auteurs dramatiques dans le but de créer un cadre historique pour les changements politiques portés à la scène : Jonson l’utilise pour proposer une perspective

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The fall of the Roman republic has prompted many historical reflections across the ages. Early modern England, with its profound interest in and knowledge of classical history, was fascinated by this period and its politics, producing translations, histories and, most famously, dramas exploring this momentous event. Modern scholarship has had much to say about how early moderns related to classical history, particularly the late republic and early empire. A significant element of this early modern historical vision has thus far gone unnoticed, however: the idea that friendship, specifically ‘republican’ friendship derived from Cicero, was often envisioned as being at the centre of the collapse of the republic and its transition to empire.

Conceptions of friendship in early modern England were constructed upon many different strands of thought, from biblical stories to medieval romances. Of these, the classical tradition formed one particularly influential way of conceptualising friendship. This was especially the case when considering the relationship between friendship and politics, because the republicanism of Cicero, upon whose writings much early modern thought about friendship was based, linked this classical strand of friendship discourse to political ideas of equality, liberty and social harmony, forming the cornerstone of ‘republican friendship’. That said, while frequently politicised, friendship was not always envisioned as being inherently so, even in its Ciceronian form, instead often being linked to more personal stories of love, loyalty and sacrifice. The overlapping diversity of friendship discourse must form the backdrop to any exploration of the political implications of early modern reflections on classical friendship. Ciceronian friendship philosophy, and the ideas of republican friendship derived from it, co-existed and intermingled with a variety of other modes of thought, with politics forming one aspect in a wider constellation of friendship-related themes.

Focusing on the relationship between Ciceronian friendship and political republicanism is important, however, because this conjunction of classical conceptions of male friendship and republicanism has been more often mentioned than thoroughly investigated by early modern scholars. For those writing on republicanism, friendship mostly appears, if it appears at all, as a brief sideshow to political ideology. Contrastingly, those writing about male friendship have been relatively unconcerned with its political implications, focusing on its intersection with gender, sexuality, romantic love, and self-hood. Some scholars have tackled the political implications of friendship, including in a literary context; nevertheless, most political explorations of friendship have not focused specifically on republicanism, and, in a literary context, have focused almost exclusively upon Shakespeare’s history plays, neglecting other Shakespearean dramas and contemporary authors.

Although Thomas Anderson and James Kuzner have written on ‘republican
friendship’ in Coriolanus and The Faerie Queene Book IV, respectively, both scholars radically reframe classical republicanism and friendship in explicit opposition to normative historicist reconstructions. The relative lack of historicist scholarship on the overlap between friendship and republicanism is surprising since both discourses frequently drew upon the authority of classical texts, especially those of Cicero. From a literary perspective, one would expect that this triangulation of friendship, politics, and classical history would have resulted in several explorations of their relationship within early modern Roman plays, yet there have only been limited attempts to link the politics of Shakespeare’s Roman plays to friendship, and no criticism exploring friendship in non-Shakespearean classical drama.

This article seeks to redress this absence, investigating the intellectual conjunction of classical friendship and republicanism in early modern England by bringing together historicist scholarly discourse on Ciceronian friendship and neo-Roman republicanism to provide a coherent vision of ‘republican friendship’. This is then used to read a range of plays in order to explore how concepts of republican friendship framed early modern historical reflections on late republican and early imperial Rome. While locating republicanism in Shakespeare and the drama of his contemporaries remains contentious, this article aligns itself with the approach taken by scholars like Markku Peltonen and Andrew Hadfield, who view republicanism as having a widespread influence in early modern England as a cultural phenomenon embodied ‘in a fund of stories and potent images’, not as a constitutional theory incompatible with monarchy.

The classical origins of conceptions of republican friendship make a Roman setting an ideal focus and show that republican friendship played a crucial role in how early modern dramatists portrayed the shift from republic to empire, using it as a means of embodying and exploring republican virtues which acted as a measure against which the politics of both early modern England and ancient Rome could be evaluated.

**Conceptualising friendship in early modern England**

Classical conceptions of friendship were very influential in early modern England. Cicero’s treatise on friendship, De Amicitia, was particularly popular: one of the earliest printed books in England, it received no less than five English translations between 1481 and 1577. An Elizabethan schoolboy ‘could hardly have…avoided’ reading it. De Amicitia gave a distinctly Roman flavour to the pre-existing discourse of classical friendship stemming chiefly from Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. While the latter had a turbulent translation history in early modern England, with the only printed vernacular translations in the 16th century being patchy and incomplete, it remains significant for its influence on both Cicero and early modern culture more generally.

Cicero’s and Aristotle’s theories of friendship tied it to ideals associated with republicanism. While both authors were writing about friendship in a primarily ethical context, the analysis of virtue embedded in this philosophical discussion necessarily contained political implications, which were further encouraged by the links that they drew between friendship and politics. Notably, Aristotle explicitly politicised equality within friendship by asserting that kingship demonstrates how a lack of quantitative
equality’ between friends disrupts friendship. Aristotle thus suggests that inequality in friendship is conceptually linked to that of monarchs and their subjects, implying that equality of friendship is akin to that of citizens. He makes this more explicit when he relates the different types of constitutions to friendship relations, saying that kingship is most like that between father and son, aristocracy between husband and wife, and timocracy between equal brothers. Taking this further, he says of the ‘bad deviations’ of constitutions that while in ‘tyrannies friendship and justice hardly exist, in democracies they exist more fully; for where the citizens are equal they have much in common’. This connection of political constitutions and friendship seems to promote the more democratic forms of government.

Aristotle’s quasi-democratic vision of friendship was transformed into a theory of republican friendship by Cicero. *De Amicitia* was much more influential than Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* in early modern England and was also considerably more completely and faithfully translated. For example, while John Wilkinson’s translation of Aristotle emphasised proportionality over equality, John Tiptoft’s rendition of *De Amicitia* retained Cicero’s insistence upon equality between friends. Early modern English readers could thus access many similar ideas to Aristotle’s theory of friendship through Cicero’s work, albeit with a Roman republican colouring. His insistence that ‘good men’ are the only possible people between whom friendship can occur, for example, is reminiscent of his distinction between the demagogic *populares* politicians and the virtuous leaders of the republic whom he alternatively calls the *optimates* or *boni*, both of which were often translated as the ‘good men’. Cicero thus implies that true friendship can only exist between righteous defenders of republican virtue. Indeed, Cicero’s emphasis on virtue is a key distinguishing factor between his *amicitia* and Aristotelian *philia*, with the centrality of virtue to *amicitia* linking it more to Roman ideals of glory and public pre-eminence than Aristotle’s eudaemonic vision of friendship. Cicero also locates the wider benefits of friendship within a Roman political context when he describes friendship as the glue which holds Rome together, asking ‘...where may be founde an householde so stable or a cytee so ferme, that may not be overthrown by meane of hate and discord by the whiche it may be sone Jugded how good a thyng friendship is’. Cicero seems to cast doubt upon whether this social glue could be achieved outside a republican system by arguing that Tarquin had ‘no frende...for richesse and power of them that be gretly myghty, exclude trusty frendshippes’. The inherent inequality of Tarquin’s kingship means the glue of friendship which holds together the social fabric of the ‘householde’ and ‘cytee’ is lost, clearly showing the benefits of republican government over monarchy, something Cicero was keen to emphasise since he partly wrote *De Amicitia* to vindicate Julius Caesar’s assassins. The dialogic setting supports this anti-monarchical republican reading of friendship. *De Amicitia* is centred on Laelius reminiscing about his friend, the republican hero Scipio Aemilianus, who was rumoured to have been assassinated by supporters of the Gracchi, whom Cicero believed wanted to revive monarchism. The very framing of the dialogue was thus designed to evoke an image of republican decline under the pressures of monarchical ambition. Cicero therefore entrenched his dialogue on friendship in the politics of republican Rome, building off Aristotle’s theoreisations to present a vision of
friendship in which equal citizens unite against subversive monarchical forces. This classical view of friendship emphasised active republican virtue, promoting a society in which politics was conducted by equal citizens fulfilling their civic duties.

This vision of republican friendship as a positive political force encouraging civic participation by equal citizens was variously adopted by early modern English writers. Foremost were the wider political implications of friendship. Walter Dorke argued that: ‘without Friendship no house can be wel guarded, no Citie well governed, no Countrey safe preserved, no State long continued, no nor anie thing in the use of man rightly ordered’. He then quoted Cicero that therefore there is nothing ‘more profitable’ than friendship ‘to a Publique Weale’.

Nicholas Grimauld’s poem Of Friendship similarly asserts that: ‘Eche house, eche towne, eche realme by stedfast love doth stand: / Where fowl debate breeds bitter bale, in eche devided land’. Friendship is thus the ‘sacred band of blissful peace, the stalworth staunch of strife’. Many early modern writers also emphasised the importance of equality in friendship: Erasmus’ second Adage, for example, is ‘Friendship is equality’. This Ciceronian vision of equal friendship shared significant overlap with humanist ideas of equality between fellow-Christians and was still being drawn upon by Thomas Floyd in his 1600 discourse on the Commonwealth citing Aristotle’s argument that ‘Friendship... requireth equality’. Floyd also cites Cicero on the importance of equal friendship in maintaining harmony within the Commonwealth.

This conjunction of friendship with ideas of active citizenship would have been amenable to the monarchical-republican elements of early Elizabethan political culture, as well as to late Elizabethan and early Jacobean aristocratic civic consciousness, with figures like the Earl of Essex often combining classical ideas of active citizenship with chivalric ideas of aristocratic nobility in their political self-fashioning.

The same language of Ciceronian friendship was also frequently negatively conceptualised, defining friendship against monarchical structures and linking it to widespread discourses on flattery, factionalism, false friendships, and tyranny. For Thomas Elyot, flattery could not be divorced from friendship because ‘in every motion and affecte of the minde they be mutually mengled together’. In explicit opposition to the Ciceronian focus on loyalty, it was worried that flatterers would prove to be false and disloyal friends in times of need. Thomas Breme’s treatise on friendship, for example, is subtitled ‘how to knowe a Perfect friend and how to choose him’ but it emphasised the difficulty of doing so because ‘those that most liberally offer their friendships are slack in performing’. This widespread emphasis on flattery was tempered by the importance of honest counsel from true friends. For Robert Burton in The Anatomy of Melancholy, the greatest benefit of friendship was in providing counsel, citing Cicero’s friendship with Atticus as evidence of this.

Francis Bacon also made one of the chief benefits of friendship ‘the counsel that a friend giveth’, viewing it as an antidote to flattery.

Monarchs’ disregard for the counsel of their honest friends was seen as a key sign of tyranny, with early modern English writers frequently arguing that tyrants could not have friends. Grimauld wrote of how ‘The tirant, in dispaire, no lacke of gold bewails. / But, Out I am undoon (saith he) for all my frendship fails’. Classical stories of friends opposed to tyrants were often used in discussions of friendship and politics. We can also see some evidence of the more radical suggestion of the incompatibility of even
monarchy with friendship in Bacon’s 1625 essay Of Friendship, which argues that ‘princes, in regard of the distance of their fortune from that of their subjects and servants, cannot gather this fruit [of friendship]’. Bacon then lists several classical examples of the dangerous incompatibility of friendship with kingship, including Decius Brutus and Caesar, and Sejanus and Tiberius. Questioning the compatibility of friendship and monarchy through classical exempla was particularly subversive in early Jacobean England, since James’s use of Roman imperial iconography, association with absolutist monarchy, and the frequent accusations of favouritism levelled at him, made the pairing of classical tyranny with questions of friendship suggestively political. Even in the later years of Elizabeth’s reign, Roman history was frequently used to make political arguments, especially after the 1599 Bishop’s Ban censoring the writing of English history. The overlap of tyranny with factionalism, flattery, and favouritism, all related to friendship discourse, was also prominent in Elizabeth’s late reign, seen in the emergent popularity of Tacitus as a historian of corruption and tyranny. All this made republican friendship discourse an appealing means with which to critique the monarchical establishment.

The classical theories of republican friendship were read with reference to these contemporary concerns about monarchical politics. A copy of De Amicitia in the Cambridge University Library (Inc.3.J.1.1(3497) captures the conjunction of Ciceronian friendship discourse with the dangers associated with monarchy through an underlined warning, the only marginalium in the book, about ‘how sharpe enemeys’ are better than ‘swete frendes’ because they tell us the truth while flatterers never do. That said, there was also at times a rejection of the Ciceronian model of friendship, concurrent with a rising dominance of Tacitean classicism, prompted by the crisis years of Elizabeth’s late reign and Jacobean absolutist propaganda. Bacon, for example, rejects equality as the basis for friendship in his 1625 essay Of Followers and Friends: ‘There is little friendship in the world, and least of all between equals’. Although the Ciceronian model of republican friendship was never completely overturned, many early modern English writers on friendship adapted the classical theories, moving away from a model of equality between active citizens to a vision of republican friendship as virtuous aristocratic counsel opposed to the deceits of flatterers, false friends, and tyrants.

Republican friendship in early modern England was thus a complex amalgamation of discourses, heavily influenced by classical antiquity but also adapted to the political realities of early modern England. An active civic model of republican friendship, drawing particularly on Cicero as well as Aristotle, emphasised the equality of citizens and the importance of political engagement, which early modern English writers used to suggest an ideal of friendship’s positive political role, whether in a constitutional republic like Rome’s or in the ‘monarchical-republican’ elements of early Elizabethan England. Much more dominant, however, was a conception of republican friendship defined negatively against the corrupt aspects of monarchy. Republican friendship in this more negative sense was used as a critique of courtly culture, especially flattery, false friendships, royal favourites, and, more radically, tyranny and even monarchy itself. Although these visions of republican friendship differed on friendship’s precise role, they shared the assumption that friendship was political and could be used to
assess the virtues of both historical and contemporary regimes. The foundational influence of the classical tradition, especially Cicero, on these theories of republican friendship thus left an indelible mark on how early moderns conceived of friendship, politics and Roman history.

The following section examines plays set in early imperial Rome, scrutinising how republican friendship was portrayed under the monarchical and tyrannical structures of the empire, while the section ‘Republican friendship in plays on the Roman Republic’ explores whether any traces of the Ciceronian ideal of active republican friendship can be found in plays about the late Roman republic.

Republican friendship in plays on imperial Rome

There was controversy about how to portray imperial Rome in early modern England for although it was a golden age of Latin literature and the foundation of the most powerful monarchy in early modern historical memory, it had been frequently depicted as a tyranny by Roman authors, most notably Tacitus.54 The translation of Tacitus in the late 16th century and subsequent rise of Tacitean neo-stoicism made this critical perspective widely accessible.55 For republican friendship, the Tacitean perspective on early imperial history promoted a negative vision of friendship in opposition to tyranny, associating the more constructive active political virtues with the old republic. And yet, Tacitus’ writings themselves placed little emphasis on friendship. The combination of friendship discourse with Tacitus in early modern Roman plays therefore suggests the overarching influence of Cicero through the theories of republican friendship derived from him, even when Roman history was being considered from a Tacitean angle.

The clearest example of a Tacitean classical drama is Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus his Fall* (1603).56 The negative vision of republican friendship is writ large in Jonson’s depiction of Tiberius’ tyranny, acting as a means for comparing the tyranny of the empire to the virtues of the republic. Flattery and false friendships are ubiquitous in the play. Tiberius’ first appearance is dominated by his hypocritical disdain for flattery which he secretly enjoys,57 suggestively reflecting his usage of the language of republican senatorial legitimacy – ‘The servant of the Senate’ (1.393) – to mask the realities of his monarchical power. The influence of false friendships is clearest in the final scene in which the senators, anticipating Sejanus’ elevation, initially loudly praise him before deserting him when it is revealed that Tiberius is actually ordering his fall. This is all framed in the language of friendship: Arruntius disgustedly denounces Sejanus’ ‘officious friends’ (5.446) for their disloyalty and, at the scene’s beginning, Sejanus praises his ‘dear, noble, trusted friends’ (5.278), unaware that one of them, Laco, has betrayed him. At the climactic moment of his arrest, Sejanus cries out ‘Have we no friends here?’ which is answered only by Arruntius’ dismissive ‘Hushed. Where now are all the hails, and acclamations?’ (5.646–7) Virtuous characters in the play also suffer under the false friendships of tyranny. Sabinus, an upright supporter of Germanicus, is loyal to Agrippina – unlike other ‘friends of the season’ (4.117) – but is betrayed himself by his friend Latiaris. There is also discussion of spies infiltrating the households of the Germanics, creating an atmosphere of paranoia in which friendship cannot flourish.58
In Jonson’s depiction of the tyrannical world of the early empire, flattery and false friendship have played a huge role in reducing the Roman nobility, in Sabinus’ words, to ‘slavery’ (1.11).

In contrast to this ‘slavery’ stands a nostalgic longing for the freedom of the republic, best encapsulated when Silius, bewailing Rome’s current state, relays an image of the republic in which ‘free, equal lords’ who ‘knew no masters’ were able to govern in concert with ‘public liberty’ (1.54, 60–1). Here, a vision of a republic of equals promoting liberty is set against an imperial tyranny whose foundations are the inequality which makes once free men ‘slaves to one man’s lusts’ (1.63). And in contrast with his portrayal of friendship’s corruption by tyranny, Jonson conveys these republican virtues through their positive associations with friendship. Silius emphasises Germanicus’ republican credentials with reference to friendship:

Arruntius. If there were seeds of the old virtue left,
They lived in him [Germanicus].
Silius. He had the fruits, Arruntius,
More than the seeds. Sabinus and myself . . .
. . . were his followers (he would call us friends). (1.119–21, 123)

That Silius draws specific attention to Germanicus distinguishing between follower and friend is crucial: Germanicus’ status as the foremost standard bearer of the ‘old virtue’ of the republic is confirmed by his treatment of Sabinus and Silius, his imperial inferiors, as friends rather than followers. This implies that Germanicus’ ties to the republic are present in his vision of friendship, treating Sabinus and Silius as ‘free, equal lords’ rather than slaves to his imperial will. That this treatment of Germanicus is grounded in questions of the compatibility of equality and monarchy can be seen in Sabinus’ declaration that Germanicus’ decline was because

When men grow fast
Honoured and loved, there is a trick in state
(Which jealous princes never fail to use)
How to decline that growth with fair pretext. (1.159–62)

Jonson draws here on radical republican critiques of tyranny to suggest the incompatibility of equality of virtue with monarchical structures. While this incompatibility is focused on tyranny, the deafening silence on how this might be resolved under a just monarch entails a deeper probing of monarchy itself: the inherent inequality of a monarchical system suggests that, to an extent, all princes will be looking to ‘decline’ those who, in exercising their virtue for the public good, might grow too powerful.

This recalls Bacon’s argument that monarchy and friendship are dangerously incompatible because kings must raise up others to be ‘almost equals to themselves’ in order to have friends, which then creates contestation for supreme power. Bacon uses Tiberius and Sejanus as proof of this, and Jonson delivers the same verdict. Tiberius uses the language of friendship with Sejanus, calling him ‘our friend’ (1.534) when praising him to the Senate and using the language of friendship and honest counsel to
advise Sejanus against marrying Livia: ‘Be wise dear friend. We could not hide these things / For friendship’s dear respect’ (3.565–6). However, this friendship is an illusion. While Tiberius has enabled his friendship with Sejanus by ‘mak[ing] thee equal to us’ (3.570), this equality between supposed superior and inferior finally collapses the friendship: Sejanus becomes desirous to ‘to be more, than to be Caesar’ (5.13) and Tiberius becomes concerned that the friendship has undermined his supremacy. He eventually acknowledges that a monarch’s power is inherently based upon inequality – on creating a ‘certain space’ (3.644) between oneself and others – and this inequality destroys friendship. Sejanus’ replacement, Macro, recognises this, acknowledging that ‘the way to rise, [is] to obey, and please’ even if this means disregarding ‘friendship’ (3.732). Macro knows he is a servant, not a friend and, in truth, this was the reality of Tiberius’ friendship with Sejanus too. Tiberius’ use of the language of friendship was really a hollow disguise of the true nature of the imperial regime. Just as Tiberius wants to make it seem as if the political system of the early empire was the same as that of the republic, so too is he committed to the unchanged appearance of friendship. The play suggests, however, that the illusion of political virtue cannot be maintained under tyranny and neither can that of virtuous friendship. Jonson thus draws thoroughly on concepts of republican friendship in emphasising equality between friends, the importance of honest counsel and friendship’s incompatibility with tyranny. Friendship encodes a thoroughly Tacitean historical perspective that the period of the early empire was a moment of moral decline, during which the virtuous friendships of the republic were destroyed by imperial tyranny, combining Tacitus’ historicism with a Ciceronian vision of virtue.

Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606) has a more ambivalent approach to republican friendship and its place within a vision of the virtuous republic destroyed by the corrupt empire. While the play contains elements of anti-tyrannical discourse, it does not draw a simple line between republic and empire. Indeed, the republic is a spent force in the play, with the figure most associated with it, Pompey, son of the republican hero, being motivated more by desire for gain than republican idealism. Against this background, Shakespeare crucially differs from other playwrights in making Antony’s chief friend the mostly invented character of Enobarbus. In Mary Sidney’s translation of Robert Garnier’s *Antonius* (1592), Antony’s chief friend is Lucilius, a prisoner whom Antony had pardoned at Philippi and who is prominently featured in Plutarch. Crucially, Lucilius’ presence links friendship to the republic. Plutarch states that Lucilius was a friend of Brutus, even saving Brutus’ life at Philippi. While not a conspirator himself, being so strongly associated with the tyrannicides’ leader and a republican hero means that Lucilius was reminiscent of the old republic’s virtues. It is notable, therefore, that Lucilius embodies many of the ideals of Ciceronian friendship. While Antony is ‘Left and betraide’ by friends who of Antony’s ‘greatness greatest good receiv’d’, Lucilius, Antony’s friend for friendship’s sake rather than gain, stands by him ‘in spite of Fortunes blastes’. When Antony bewails being ‘beset with flatterers’, Lucilius delivers a broader republican response about the ease with which monarchs can be corrupted since flattery ‘on great kings doth greatest outrage work’. Implicitly suggested here is that Lucilius, embodying republican virtue, is different from the flatterers and is offering
Antony honest counsel. Antony’s relationship with Lucilius in *Antonius* thus utilises several key tropes of republican friendship. Lucilius was also portrayed as Antony’s closest friend in Thomas May’s *The Tragedie of Cleopatra* (c. 1626). Antony’s other friends in May’s play are also linked to republicanism, with Canidius saying that his ‘love’ for Antony is based upon his belief that Antony is more likely ‘Then Caesar, to resigne the government’, thereby restoring the republic.66

In Shakespeare’s play Antony’s association with the republic through friendship does not exist. Unlike Lucilius, Enobarbus has no obvious links to the republic, nor does he express an ideological preference for republicanism. Instead of a Ciceronian model of republican friendship, Shakespeare seems to be portraying a model of friendship under a just monarchy. Enobarbus and Antony are clearly not equals in their friendship, with Antony at one point during negotiations with Octavian curtly telling Enobarbus ‘Thou art a soldier only: speak no more’ (2.2.112).67 Despite this inequality, however, Enobarbus understands Antony better than any other Roman in the play, correctly predicting that Antony’s marriage to Octavia will break the very alliance it was meant to secure.68 He also provides bluntly honest counsel, telling Antony not to be hypocritically sad at the news of Fulvia’s death.69 Most crucially, he honestly and correctly advises Antony not to fight at sea against Octavian, advice dismissively rejected by Antony:

*Enobarbus*. Most worthy sir, you therein throw away
The absolute soldiership you have by land . . .

*Antony*. I’ll fight at sea. (3.7.41–2, 48)

This refusal to listen to honest counsel from friends was a key signifier of tyranny and it is thus unsurprising that Antony’s decision to ignore rational and friendly advice pushes Enobarbus to desert him: ‘When valour preys on reason, / It eats the sword it fights with. I will seek / Some way to leave him’. (3.13.197–201)

Enobarbus’ desertion of Antony stands in stark contrast to the loyalty of Lucilius in both Sidney’s and May’s plays, highlighting the limits of hierarchical friendships. While the positive republican friendship of equals is more resistant to ‘Fortune’s blastes’ because it is premised on the Ciceronian notion of friendship for friendship’s sake, Shakespeare’s Antony forfeits the loyalty of his followers by failing to heed their advice, disrupting the ‘continual accommodation’ necessary for friendship between those with ‘unequal bonds’.70 In Enobarbus’ words: ‘The loyalty well held to fools does make / Our faith mere folly’ (3.13.42–3). The ease with which the friendship between just monarch and follower slips into a tyrant’s rejection of friendly and honest counsel, despite Antony’s own intention to be a virtuous leader, raises serious questions about the stability of hierarchical friendships. Thus, despite the later repentance of the collapse of the friendship by both parties, Antony and Enobarbus’ relationship, while at first seeming to provide a positive adaption of republican friendship under monarchy, in the end suggests its fundamental limitations. Octavian, the emblem of the new imperial order, suffers no illusions about the compatibility of friendship and monarchy, never using the language of friendship with his loyal followers Agrippa and Maecenas.71 In contrast to the appealing nobility of Antony, the qualities which mean Octavian is without friends – his
cold, rational ruthlessness – make him a far more effective political operator, one able to bring about ‘The time of universal peace’ (4.6.4).72

This represents a more complex vision of friendship’s place in the historical transition of Rome from republic to empire than that found in Sejanus. Like Jonson, Shakespeare suggests that the imperial period was incompatible with friendship through the breakdown of Antony and Enobarbus’ relationship, and Octavian’s friendlessness. However, while Sejanus contains republican sceptics who denounce the corruption of friendship under the empire, the absence of a republican alternative in Antony and Cleopatra suggests that friendship’s incompatibility with monarchy means that it has been rendered politically redundant by Octavian’s new world order. This marks a radical discarding of the Ciceronian ideal in which friendship is crucial for social harmony and political stability.73 Nevertheless, friendship is not totally rejected. For although Octavian comes out as the political winner, the nobility of Antony, especially as demonstrated in his friendship with Enobarbus, grants him a kinder remembrance by future generations, as Enobarbus recognises when he says that ‘he that can endure / To follow with allegiance a fall’n lord / Does conquer him that did his master conquer, / And earns a place i’th’story’ (3.13.43–6). Antony was widely regarded as immoral, brutal, and cruel, a view largely derived from Plutarch’s relatively critical biography.74 However, even the most negative portrayals, including Plutarch’s, admitted Antony’s magnanimity and generosity. Plutarch relates how he won ‘wonderfull love’ by giving ‘all to the soldiers’ and keeping ‘nothing for himself’.75 Shakespeare distils this affability down into his relationship with Enobarbus and it is this friendship, especially the final generosity of sending on Enobarbus’ treasure, which more than anything makes Antony sympathetic and heroic. That this heroism is embodied in selfless magnanimity, drawing on Cicero’s insistence on friendship for virtue’s sake, grounds Antony’s nobility in the Ciceronian ideal of republican friendship. Shakespeare thus resists Jonson’s republican nostalgia, drawing on the Ciceronian ideal of friendship in his characterisation of Antony’s friendship with Enobarbus to give it a tragic grandeur by suggesting that this was part of a wider historical moment in which the ruthless new world of the empire was rendering the nobility and idealism of the old world politically redundant.

Republican friendship in plays on the Roman Republic

In contrast to plays set in the empire, one might expect portrayals of Cicero’s own life and times, as well as portrayals of the republic more broadly, to present the ideal of Ciceronian friendship at the height of its power. But what is surprising about friendship in many plays set in the late republic is that the active Ciceronian model is mostly invisible, replaced instead by the association of friendship with conspiracy and factionalism. Even when an active Ciceronian model of republican friendship is portrayed, such as in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, it is under pressure and ambiguous in its virtue.

The portrayal of republican friendship in Jonson’s Catiline (1611) forms an ambiguous contrast to that found in Sejanus. While in Sejanus friendship was politicised in an explicitly republican manner, in Catiline idealised Ciceronian friendship is not used to create a positive image of republican virtue. Most strikingly, Cicero, the play’s central
character, is not strongly associated with republican friendship. Although Cicero does use the language of republican friendship in a broader political sense to refer to his fellow senators and citizens, he never expands upon this in a more idealistic manner. Nor does Jonson show him as having any close friends: the real Cicero’s best friend, Atticus, does not appear in the play, despite historically being present for its events, and although there is mutual respect between Cicero and Cato, this is never framed in the language of friendship. Cicero, the chief theorist of republican friendship and the figure in the play most associated with the republic, is thus surprisingly not associated with friendship in Catiline.78

The only articulations of Ciceronian republican friendship in the play are instead delivered by Catiline, Cicero’s enemy, who infects the language of friendship with that of conspiracy. Catiline uses the Ciceronian language of similitude in friendship to rally his conspirators to his cause: ‘I taste in you the same affections / To will or nill, to think things good or bad / Alike with me, which argues your friendship’ (1.34–6). Furthermore, friendship discourse penetrates Catiline’s usage of the language of liberty in legitimating the conspiracy: ‘Wake, wake braue Friends, / And meet the Liberty you oft have wish’d for’ (1.409–10). Catiline repeatedly usurps the republican conjunction of citizenship with equal friendship, addressing his conspirators as ‘Friends’ as Cicero does his fellow senators.79 Catiline’s usage of the language of friendship and liberty to legitimise the conspiracy is patently hollow, however, since Catiline outlines to Aurelia his tyrannical ambitions and how he intends to manipulate his fellow conspirators.80 But although Catiline’s usage of the language of republican friendship is insincere, no other character uses republican friendship discourse as consistently as him. Indeed, Cicero even seems to suggest that friendship is incompatible with republican ideals of the common good, telling Fulvia that her revelation of the conspiracy means: ‘You have learn’d the difference, / Of doing office to the public weal / And private friendship’. (3.67–9) Cicero’s description of ‘private friendship’ here is the opposite of the positive and active civic friendship of equals found in De Amicitia, instead suggesting corrupt factional friendships opposed to the public interest. This seems to support Blair Worden’s conclusion that although Catiline is a play about the republic chiefly based upon Cicero’s writings, Jonson was reading the republic from a Tacitean and imperial perspective.81 Just as Jonson excises the distinctive republican feature of the conflict between the aristocracy and the people, a feature which could be found in sources like Sallust and was portrayed in other dramas like Coriolanus, so too does he reformulate republican friendship to fit an imperial perspective on republican history.82 Instead of portraying friendship in the republic as functioning effectively between equal, active citizens, he displaces the false friendships associated in Sejanus with the empire into the republic in the form of Catiline’s conspiracy.

Nevertheless, this vision of friendship is not entirely isolated from a wider historical perspective. For while the conspiracy is defeated, Caesar’s presence reminds the audience of the continuation of Catiline’s corruption.83 Although the play is to some extent a portrayal of the properly functioning republic, embodied in Cicero’s victory, the conspiracy itself, strongly tied to the language of corrupted republican friendship, is suggestive of the fall the republic will undergo subsequent to the play’s events. The lack of
any examples of virtuous republican friendship, combined with Catiline’s manipulation of this language to legitimise his conspiracy, is thus suggestive of the wider problem the republic is facing: the corruption of virtue. This vulnerability to corruption could be seen as linked to the lack of republican friendship and the virtues it is associated with, the glue which, according to De Amicitia, holds cities and households harmoniously together. That friendship in the play is dominated by Catiline and not Cicero acts as a warning sign of the republic’s instability and suggests the limitations of Cicero’s personal triumph. The absence of republican friendship in the late republic suggests its incipient collapse.

Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, in contrast, does portray a politically active friendship among equals in the late Republic through Brutus and Cassius. Cassius frequently invokes the idealistic Ciceronian language of friendship, even using Cicero’s metaphor of a friend as a mirror ‘lykenesse of himself’: ‘since you [Brutus] cannot see yourself / So well as by reflection, I, your glass, / Will modestly discover to yourself / That of yourself which you yet know not of’ (1.2.67–70). Brutus reciprocates Cassius’ use of Ciceronian friendship discourse, assuring Cassius of his ‘love’ and calling him one of his ‘good friends’ (1.2.43–4, 166). While Brutus is also torn by his friendship with Caesar, in Cassius’ eyes Caesar has forfeited the loyalties of friendship because his political supremacy has destroyed the equality necessary both for friendship and liberty: ‘Brutus and Caesar: what should be in that “Caesar”? / Why should that name be sounded more than yours?’ (1.2.95–6) The inequality of Brutus’ friendship with Caesar implicitly stands in contrast to the equality of his friendship with Cassius. Brutus himself comes to view his friendship with Caesar as being at odds with the common good whereas his friendship with Cassius seems to unite personal friendship with public duty in an exemplary Ciceronian manner. This is all the more notable because it is a departure from Shakespeare’s immediate source: Plutarch emphasises not their friendship but their kinship ties. This republican vision of friendship is given further expression in the portrayal of republican political activity. Unlike Jonson, Shakespeare dramatises the popular arena of Roman republican politics and does so with frequent usage of the language of friendship. Citizens are consistently addressed as friends throughout the play. Brutus, taking to the rostrum following Caesar’s assassination, asks that the assembly ‘give me audience, friends’, before using the language of affective friendship to address the crowd: ‘Romans, countrymen, and lovers’ (3.2.2, 13). Influenced more by widespread Ciceronian ideals of republican friendship than by his historical sources, Shakespeare therefore delivers a more complete picture of the republic and its political practice than Jonson, and he places republican friendship, embodied in Brutus and Cassius and the language of citizenship, at its centre.

However, this republican friendship is not idealised. Act 4 of the play is dominated by Brutus and Cassius fighting, with Brutus accusing Cassius of being ‘A hot friend cooling’ and Cassius complaining that: ‘A friend should bear his friend’s infirmities, / But Brutus makes mine greater than they are’ (4.2.19, 4.3.86–7). The argument is in part provoked because of the difficulties of reconciling their affective friendship with the realities of political action, with the dispute over bribes causing Brutus’ idealism to clash with Cassius’ pragmatism. The fragile idealism of Brutus and Cassius’ friendship is evident even before this conflict. Instead of friendship for virtue’s sake, Cassius’ use of
the language of selfless Ciceronian friendship is partially borne out of necessity, with Cassius informing Casca of ‘our great need’ of Brutus ‘and his worth’ (1.3.161–2). Cassius also manipulates Brutus, sending anonymous letters urging him to act against Caesar. To some extent, therefore, Cassius, like Catiline, manipulates the language of Ciceronian friendship to achieve his political ends.

Republican friendship discourse is also severely distorted following the assassination, when Brutus attempts to justify killing Caesar by arguing that the conspirators are really ‘Caesar’s friends’ since they ‘have abridged his time of fearing death’ (3.1.104–5). This almost parodic claim contributes to a wider delegitimisation of the Ciceronian ideal, most cynically utilised in Antony’s funeral speech when he directs the language of republican friendship and equal citizenship against the conspirators: ‘Good friends, sweet friends, let me not stir you up / To such a sudden flood of mutiny’ (3.2.200–1). Antony’s use of the language of republican friendship to further his attacks on the republic’s defenders mirrors his usage of Roman republican political structures, namely the citizens assembly and rhetoric. The problem for the conspirators is that friendship, like rhetoric, is a double-edged weapon: on the one hand it provides the language of equal citizenship which holds the republic together and allows Brutus to justify his actions through love of Rome, but it also encompasses Antony’s personal friendship with Caesar and use of the language of self-interest. For while Brutus in typical Ciceronian fashion puts love for Rome above private friendship, Antony’s sole focus is on the individual benefits of friendship to himself and the citizens: ‘He was my friend, faithful and just to me’ (3.2.77). Thus, while Brutus still clings to the Ciceronian ideal of republican friendship wedded to the common good, Antony uses the power of rhetoric to redirect the language of public friendship towards private ends, just like Catiline. The conspirators helped to enable this through flimsy attempts to justify Caesar’s assassination by appealing to friendship and because ambition and self-interest influence the conspirators themselves, with Cassius at least being partly motivated by ambition and spite of Caesar. The tensions between personal friendship and public duty revealed in the argument of Act 4 thus continue the pervasive corruption of friendship discourse in the republic, present even among the conspirators themselves. Republican friendship in *Julius Caesar* is much more fully portrayed than in *Catiline*, but it is also more complex, representing a politically limited and highly corruptible form of republican virtue.

Nevertheless, as with *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare still leaves room for the virtue and nobility of republican friendship. Although Cassius and Brutus’ friendship has not lived up to the Ciceronian ideal, their final farewell and joint suicides form the emotional and tragic climax of the play. Importantly, in contrast to Antony and Enobarbus, Brutus and Cassius’ friendship does not collapse under the pressures of defeat. Act 4 may show the problems of unifying personal friendship with political action, but the fact that the friendship survives not only the argument but also the catastrophe of Philippi suggests that republican friendship engenders something admirable, if politically ineffectual. The sacrificial nobility of Lucilius in helping Brutus escape capture is also a testament to this. Similarly to *Antony and Cleopatra*, but this time under the republic, *Julius Caesar* questions the efficacy of republican friendship as a political
model while celebrating its capacity for personal virtue. The tragic nobility of Brutus and Cassius’ friendship, even with all its flaws, is suggestive of the lingering power of the Ciceronian ideal.

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Republican friendship played a crucial but hitherto unnoticed role in encoding early modern attitudes to Roman history. It acted as an abstract ideal, one which always remained elusive but provided a political vision of Roman and contemporary politics which anyone who was attuned to Ciceronian friendship discourse could engage with. Dramatists fitted friendship and its association with republican virtues into a broader historical framework, emphasising its corruption during the late republic, leading to the republic’s collapse and the establishment of the Principate, under which republican friendship was finally extinguished. Jonson used this to complement his Tacitean perspective on Roman history while Shakespeare focused more on the Ciceronian ideal itself, exploring the complexities of combining it with political realities, both republican and monarchical. In presenting the loss of the republican virtues embodied in friendship, such as equality, civic duty and friendly counsel, they also drew on and contributed to contemporary political narratives which criticised absolutist tendencies in monarchy and promoted a more monarchical–republican style of politics.\textsuperscript{94} Neither Jonson nor Shakespeare was a political theorist, however, and on a more literary level, the politicisation of Roman republican friendship and its decline allowed both playwrights to draw out the tragic grandeur in the historical figures and events they were portraying.

Jonson’s two plays clearly draw on the historical narrative of the corruption of friendship’s virtues. \textit{Sejanus} offers a stark vision of the crushing of republican friendship under the empire while \textit{Catiline} portrays the beginnings of this corruption during the late republic. Reading Jonson’s two plays in tandem allows a full appreciation of the dominance of his Tacitean perspective on Roman history, portraying the virtues of the late republic in the light of what came next: in \textit{Sejanus}, republican friendship operates as an ideal against which the empire should be judged but in \textit{Catiline}, Jonson demonstrates his lack of interest in the complexities of the intersection of this ideal with the political realities of the republic, instead simply relocating the corruption of the empire back into it.

Shakespeare presents a much more ambiguous historicisation of the place of friendship in the collapse of the Roman republic. Putting \textit{Julius Caesar} and \textit{Antony and Cleopatra} in dialogue, it becomes clear that Shakespeare envisioned friendship as a key element of Roman politics, not only mostly inventing Antony’s friendship with Enobarbus but also portraying Brutus and Cassius’ friendship in considerably more Ciceronian terms than Plutarch. Shakespeare differs from Jonson in that he neither idealises friendship nor uses it to essentialise Roman history from a Tacitean perspective. He has a stronger sense of the inevitability of the republic’s decline and more probing doubts about its political possibilities in both monarchies and republics: while Antony on one hand, and Brutus and Cassius on the other, are all to some extent personally redeemed by the heroic virtues of friendship, they are defeated by more effective political operators. Shakespeare sought to come to terms with the political inefficacy of friendship, even while offering a realistic celebration of its nobility and virtues in which echoes of Ciceronian idealism can be distinctly heard.
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