

For hundreds of years, the kings of England united the realm during their lifetimes, only to have it dissolve into warring states when their sons attempt to rule. Similar, whether they are Native American chiefs or rulers, rulers of Africa, Alexander and any other ruler with the epithet "Great", the long forgotten kings and queens of Europe, many people strive for a political power that time has taught us is ephemeral. The rise and fall of dynasties whose kings once inspired awe and fear now arouse only yawns from bored students.

One of the saddest examples of this comes from the end of the Roman Republic to the early history of the Roman Empire. While many know the outlines of this from a political perspective, when you treat these individuals as humans, with human ambitions and desires, then their story is one of simple futility.

The Roman Republic had endured decades of external strife along most of its borders and internal strife finding ways to pay soldiers to fight in these wars. By the time of the first century BC, there arose three figures set to solve these problems and rule Rome: Pompey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar. From his earliest days, those around Caesar noticed his "ambition for absolute power" and Caesar spent most of his life on grueling military campaigns (e.g., in Gaul) and political schemes to gain this power. Within five years after finally gaining the power he craved, Caesar was killed as an enemy of the Republic. One can think of no more fitting commentary than that of the ancient biographer Plutarch, "The empire and power which he had pursued through the whole course of his life with so much hazard . . . he reaped no other fruits from it than the empty name and invidious glory."

Those who followed in his wake fared little better. Augustus battled Mark Antony to establish a dynasty, and while Antony died his descendants ruled on the Roman throne (e.g., emperor Claudius). When one reflects on this outcome, is there any greater waste of life than the battles between Augustus and Antony?

Considering all of this, it is hard to fault the Trojan prince Paris. When he was forced to award a golden apple engraved with *kallisti* ("To the Fairest") to one of three goddesses, he ignored Hera's temptations of political power and Athena's temptations of prowess in battle and instead awarded it to Aphrodite who promised the most beautiful woman in the world. His choice reminds me of a conclusion reached by many in the Fertile Crescent and even echoed in the Jewish scriptures. Since most will have ready access to *Ecclesiastes* (9: 9-11), I'll just give the conclusion as it appears in the Sippar fragment of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In this, Gilgamesh is distraught over the death of his friend Enkidu, desirous of immortality, and goes to his local pub to have a beer. As bartenders often do today, the alewife Shiduri attempts to console him by explaining the meaning of life:

But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,  
Enjoy yourself always by day and by night!  
Make merry each day,  
Dance and play day and night!  
Let your clothes be clean,  
Let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!  
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,  
Let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!  
For such is the destiny [of mortal men].  
(Si. iii. 6–14)

If you need me later, I'll be following the advice of an ancient alewife and not that of Caesar.

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