

## CONTENTS

---

|                                    |      |
|------------------------------------|------|
| Introduction by Joseph Pearce..... | IV   |
| Scene Summaries .....              | XI   |
| Dramatis Personae .....            | XIII |

### ACT I

|                |    |
|----------------|----|
| Scene I.....   | 3  |
| Scene II.....  | 11 |
| Scene III..... | 43 |

### ACT II

|                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| Scene I.....   | 61  |
| Scene II.....  | 95  |
| Scene III..... | 109 |
| Scene IV.....  | 111 |

### ACT III

|                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| Scene I.....   | 119 |
| Scene II.....  | 151 |
| Scene III..... | 181 |

### ACT IV

|                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| Scene I.....   | 189 |
| Scene II.....  | 195 |
| Scene III..... | 203 |

### ACT V

|                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| Scene I.....   | 245 |
| Scene II.....  | 259 |
| Scene III..... | 261 |
| Scene IV.....  | 275 |
| Scene V.....   | 279 |

## INTRODUCTION

### BY JOSEPH PEARCE

---

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* was probably written in the latter half of 1599, at the end of one of the most turbulent centuries in English history during which the Tudors had reigned tyrannically. This is important because many of Shakespeare's plays, *Julius Caesar* included, say as much or more about Shakespeare's own time than about the times in which his plays are set. And, as we shall see, they say as much about our own time, and about all times, as they say about Shakespeare's time or Julius Caesar's time. This is why the poet Ben Jonson could write of Shakespeare that "he was not of an age but for all time."<sup>1</sup>

Before we can understand the relevance of *Julius Caesar* to our own time, we need to know a little about England in 1599 as a means of understanding what might have motivated Shakespeare to write the play.

The reign of Elizabeth I was a time of political and religious intolerance in which dissident opinions and practices were suppressed and in which the government employed an elaborate spy network to track down those who it claimed were enemies of the state. This network of spies was overseen by Robert Cecil, the queen's Lord Privy Seal, who was the most powerful person in England except for the queen herself. Shakespeare would vent his spleen against spies and espionage in *Hamlet*, probably written in late 1601, two years after his writing of *Julius Caesar*.

One of the most effective ways of expressing dissident opinion during this time was on the stage. Many of Shakespeare's history plays, while ostensibly about the past, were understood by his audience as thinly veiled

---

[1] Ben Jonson, "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare."

representations of the political situation in contemporary England. This was seen most evocatively in a comment that Elizabeth I is said to have made to William Lambarde, whom she had appointed as Keeper of the Records in the Tower of London in the wake of the unsuccessful Essex Rebellion in 1601: "I am Richard II, know you not that?"<sup>2</sup> The leaders of the Essex Rebellion had paid to have the play (written in 1595) performed on the eve of the rebellion in the hope that it would incite the people of London to rise against the government in echo of the play. The rebellion failed. The Earl of Essex was executed. The Earl of Southampton, William Shakespeare's patron, was imprisoned in the Tower of London for his part in the Rebellion and would languish there until after the queen's death in 1603.

The government's fear of the power of the stage to express dissident opinion was made manifest in June 1599, with the imposition of the so-called Bishops' Ban, which prohibited certain history plays and ordered that no new English history plays be printed or performed without the approval of the government. Prior to the ban, most of Shakespeare's plays had been about English history; after the ban, he would only be able to set plays in England's past if he was willing to have them subjected to state censorship and approval. Evidently unwilling to do this, Shakespeare circumvented the ban by writing history plays set in other lands. The "something rotten in the state of Denmark" depicted in *Hamlet* mirrored the "something rotten" in the state of England. The "something wicked" north of the border in *Macbeth's* Scotland mirrored the "something wicked" south of the border in contemporary England.

Significantly, *Julius Caesar* was probably the first play that Shakespeare wrote after the Bishops' Ban. Prior to the ban, he had written only one play set in ancient Rome, *Titus Andronicus*.

---

[2] The account of Lambarde's conversation with Elizabeth I dates from 1627 and is in the correspondence of Sir Richard Dering: Kent County Council Archives, Maidstone, Kent, England.

Following the ban, in addition to *Julius Caesar*, he would write several more plays set in classical antiquity: *Troilus and Cressida*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*.

As for *Julius Caesar* itself, it's a play about power. It's about those who possess it and those who want to. It might be seen as a reflection on the adage that "power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely."<sup>3</sup> Although this aphorism by Lord Acton would not be coined until 1887, almost three centuries after the premiere of Shakespeare's play, the principle and truth it enunciates were as well known to Shakespeare's age as they have been well known to all ages. Indeed, these words of Lord Acton, along with the sentence which followed them, serves perfectly as an epigraph to *Julius Caesar*: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

*Julius Caesar* is about four great men who are corrupted by power or the desire for power. They might not always be bad men but they are certainly not good men.

The play is bereft of heroes insofar as we consider heroism in the sense of being connected to virtue, the laying down of one's life for others; if, however, we perceive heroism in the classic and tragic sense in which a great man, exhibiting nobility, is ruined by a tragic flaw in his character, we can say that *Julius Caesar* has no fewer than four classically tragic heroes: Caesar himself, Cassius, Brutus, and Mark Antony.

Beginning with Caesar, there is a chasm that separates the real man from the image he presents of himself to the people, and perhaps even the self-constructed, self-deified image that he presents to himself. Perhaps the mask masks the man so well that the man has disappeared behind it, making Caesar's very actions a mere masquerade. He appears to be playing a part and setting himself apart from those around him, including his own

---

[3] Lord Acton in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton (1887).

wife, whom he ignores with ultimately fatal consequences. He falls for the flattery of those who wish him ill and refuses to listen to those who wish him well. On the rare occasions when the real human Caesar emerges from behind the inhumane mask, he shows great perception. Take, for instance, his confession to Mark Antony of his mistrust of Cassius, which is based, in part, on Cassius' insensibility to the presence of beauty:

He loves no plays,  
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music:  
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort  
As if he mock'd himself, and scorn'd his spirit  
That could be mov'd to smile at any thing. (1.2.203-207)

Shakespeare's audience would have seen in this representation of Cassius' crass insensibility to the beauty of art, theatre, and music a figurative appearance of a contemporary Puritan. In Elizabethan England, the Puritans were growing in influence. They detested the theatre and sought the removal of music from liturgical worship. They perceived sacred art to be idolatrous, spurning all but the simplest of images. When they gained political power in England in 1649, fifty years after Shakespeare's writing of *Julius Caesar*, they closed all the theatres and even banned the celebration of Easter and Christmas.

Shakespeare's own view of such iconoclastic Puritanism would be enunciated most memorably in the words of Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;  
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,  
And his affections dark as [Erebus]:  
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music. (5.1.83-88)

Such words have the mark of prophecy with respect to England's future but also resonate with Caesar's justifiable mistrust of Cassius. Caesar knows what Lorenzo knows, and what Shakespeare knows, and what we should know: Those who have no sense of beauty are not to be trusted. They are fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.

Cassius, the originator of the plot to kill Caesar, is clearly the overarching villain of the play. He has few, if any, redeeming features. He reminds us of other cynical Machiavels in Shakespeare's works, particularly Richard III and Iago.

As for Brutus, he possesses a nobility of character that makes his actions possibly worse than those of Cassius. In purporting to be fulfilling his patriotic duty, he is willing to betray his friend. He reminds us perhaps of other figures in history who have allowed their fanatical adherence to political ideals or political ideologies to justify the killing of others. Perhaps Robespierre and the Reign of Terror that he instigated after the French Revolution comes to mind, or we might think of Lenin and Stalin and the similar reign of terror following the Russian Revolution, or the genocidal terror of Hitler and the Nazis. It might seem a trifle unfair to place the noble-spirited patriotism of Brutus in the company of such monsters, but it is intriguing that the poet John Weever, a contemporary of Shakespeare, should write a poem in 1599, the year in which *Julius Caesar* was written and first performed, in which Brutus is singled out as the villain:

The many-headed multitude were drawne  
By Brutus speech, that Caesar was ambitious,  
When eloquent Mark Antonie had showne  
His vertues, who but Brutus then was vicious.<sup>4</sup>

---

[4] John Weever, *The Mirror of Martyrs or the Life and Death of Sir John Oldcastle*; quoted in Oscar James Campbell and Edward G. Quinn, eds., *The Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare* (New York: MJF Books, 1966), 411.

Weever's rhyming of "ambitious" with "vicious" seems to encapsulate the dark spirit that pervades *Julius Caesar*. The connection between political ambition and the viciousness and violence that accompany it is at the core of the tragedy.

And this brings us to the fourth of the great men who allow their striving for power to turn them into bad men. Mark Antony's desire to avenge the betrayal and murder of Caesar appears to be justified. Indeed, it might be. The problem is that he becomes as treacherous as his enemies as soon as he has power and begins to wield it.

If one of the keys to understanding *Julius Caesar* is to be found in the key characters, all of whom are flawed and eventually corrupted by political ambition and power, there are other key elements that it would be perilous to overlook, even though they are often overlooked because they are understated and seemingly less important. One element is the art of rhetoric, especially in the funeral orations, which exemplify the dangers attached to eloquence if it is not tempered by virtue. Rhetoric without virtue becomes sophistry, the art of telling a lie. Its power can be seen by the way that the views of the people can be swayed from one extreme position to the other through its artful employment. As for the people themselves, *Julius Caesar* shows that they are all too easily manipulated and all too ready and willing to become a mindless mob unleashing its violence on the innocent along with the guilty. The play seems to be showing that politicians should not be trusted—but also that the people should not be trusted either.

The final key element of the play is the role played by women, or rather the role that they are prevented from playing. There are very few female characters in the play, and each of them has very little to say. And when they do say something, they are ignored. If Caesar had listened to the wisdom and warnings of Calpurnia, his wife, the plot against him would

have failed; if Brutus had listened to his wife, Portia, he might have reconsidered his role in the murderous plot. The feminine voice is silenced, or, in any event, is unheard and unheeded. The consequences are fatal.

It is intriguing that Shakespeare's approach to the tragedy of Caesar's assassination harmonizes with the account that Plutarch had given fifteen hundred years earlier. Like Plutarch, Shakespeare represents the people as being fickle and untrustworthy; like Plutarch, he shows how the unscrupulous use of rhetoric can have disastrous and destructive consequences; like Plutarch, he is more concerned with conveying the moral character of the protagonists than with strict adherence to historical facts; like Plutarch, he employs history in a parabolic sense, as a means of showing perennial truths about the unchanging nature of humanity. This is why Plutarch and Shakespeare are worth reading. It's not merely the beauty of their work, which speaks across the centuries to our own time, but the way they show us the goodness of virtue and the vicious consequences of its absence. Their works and their wisdom present timeless truths about who we are and how we relate to each other. To end as we began, with the wisdom of Ben Jonson, the great writers and the great books that they wrote are not of an age but for all ages.

## SCENE I

*Rome. A street.*

*[Enter FLAVIUS, MARULLUS, and certain  
COMMONERS over the stage.]*

FLAVIUS.

Hence! home, you idle creatures, get you home:  
Is this a holiday? what! know you not,  
Being mechanical, you ought not walk  
Upon a labouring day without the sign  
5 Of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou?

CARPENTER.

Why, sir, a carpenter.

MARULLUS.

Where is thy leather apron and thy rule?  
What dost thou with thy best apparel on?  
You, sir, what trade are you?

COBBLER.

10 Truly, sir, in respect of a fine workman, I am but, as you  
would say, a cobbler.

MARULLUS.

But what trade art thou? Answer me directly.

COBBLER.

A trade, sir, that I hope I may use with a safe conscience;  
which is, indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles.

FLAVIUS.

15     What trade, thou knave? thou naughty knave, what trade?

COBBLER.

Nay, I beseech you, sir, be not out with me: yet, if you be out, sir, I can mend you.

MARULLUS.

What mean'st thou by that? mend me, thou saucy fellow?

COBBLER.

Why, sir, cobble you.

FLAVIUS.

20     Thou art a cobbler, art thou?

COBBLER.

Truly, sir, all that I live by is with the awl: I meddle with no tradesman's matters, nor women's matters, but withal I am, indeed, sir, a surgeon to old shoes; when they are in great danger, I recover them. As proper  
25     men as ever trod upon neat's-leather have gone upon my handiwork.

FLAVIUS.

But wherefore art not in thy shop to-day?  
Why dost thou lead these men about the streets?

COBBLER.

Truly, sir, to wear out their shoes, to get myself into more  
30     work. But, indeed, sir, we make holiday, to see Caesar and to rejoice in his triumph.