

Julius Casesar

Julius Caesar was one of three principal plays by different authors, pitched upon by the celebrated Earl of Halifax to be brought out in a splendid manner by subscription, in the year 1707. The other two were the *King and No King* of Fletcher, and Dryden's *Maiden Queen*. There perhaps might be political reasons for this selection, as far as regards our author. Otherwise, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is not equal, as a whole, to either of his other plays taken from the Roman history. It is inferior in interest to *Coriolanus*, and both in interest and power to *Antony and Cleopatra*. It, however, abounds in admirable and affecting passages, and is remarkable for the profound knowledge of character, in which Shakespeare could scarcely fail. If there is any exception to this remark, it is in the hero of the piece himself. We do not much admire the representation here given of Julius Caesar, nor do we think it answers to the portrait given of him in his *Commentaries*. He makes several vapouring and rather pedantic speeches, and does nothing. Indeed, he has nothing to do. So far, the fault of the character might be the fault of the plot.

The spirit with which the poet has entered at once into the manners of the common people, and the jealousies and heartburnings of the different factions, is shown in the first scene, when Flavius and Marullus, tribunes of the people, and some citizens of Rome, appear upon the stage.

“ Flavius. Thou art a cobbler, art thou?

Cobbler. Truly, Sir, *all* that I live by, is the *awl*: I meddle with no tradesman's matters, nor woman's matters, but with-al, I am indeed, Sir, a surgeon to old shoes; when they are in great danger, I recover them.

Flavius. But wherefore art not in thy shop today? Why dost thou lead these men about the streets?

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

To this specimen of quaint low humour immediately follows that unexpected and animated burst of indignant eloquence, put into the mouth of one of the angry tribunes.

“ Marullus. Wherefore rejoice!—What conquest brings he home?

What tributaries follow him to Rome,
To grace in captive-bonds his chariot-wheels?
Oh you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome!
Knew you not Pompey? Many a time and oft
Have you climb'd up to walls and battlements,
To towers and windows, yea, to chimney-tops,

Your infants in your arms, and there have sat
The live-long day with patient expectation,
To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome:
And when you saw his chariot but appear,
Have you not made an universal shout,
That Tiber trembled underneath his banks
To hear the replication of your sounds,
Made in his concave shores?
And do you now put on your best attire?
And do you now cull out an holiday?
And do you now strew flowers in his way
That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood?
Begone—
Run to your houses, fall upon your knees,
Pray to the Gods to intermit the plague,
That needs must light on this ingratitude.

The well-known dialogue between Brutus and Cassius, in which the latter breaks the design of the conspiracy to the former, and partly gains him over to it, is a noble piece of high-minded declamation. Cassius's insisting on the pretended effeminacy of Caesar's character, and his description of their swimming across the Tiber together, 'once upon a raw and gusty day', are among the finest strokes in it. But perhaps the whole is not equal to the short scene which follows when Caesar enters with his train.

“ Brutus. The games are done, and Caesar is returning.

Cassius. As they pass by, pluck Casca by the sleeve,
And he will, after his sour fashion, tell you
What has proceeded worthy note today.

Brutus. I will do so; but look you, Cassius—
The angry spot doth glow on Caesar's brow,
And all the rest look like a chidden train.
Calphurnia's cheek is pale; and Cicero
Looks with such ferret and such fiery eyes,
As we have seen him in the Capitol,
Being crost in conference by some senators.

Cassius. Casca will tell us what the matter is.

Caesar. Antonius—

Antony. Caesar?

Caesar. Let me have men about me that are fat,
Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep a-nights:
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look,
He thinks too much; such men are dangerous.

Antony. Fear him not, Caesar, he's not dangerous;
He is a noble Roman, and well given.

Caesar. Would he were fatter; but I fear him not:
Yet if my name were liable to fear,
I do not know the man I should avoid
So soon as that spare Cassius. He reads much;
He is a great observer; and he looks
Quite through the deeds of men. 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.
Such men as he be never at heart's ease,
Whilst they behold a greater than themselves;
And therefore are they very dangerous.
I rather tell thee what is to be fear'd
Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar.
Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf,
And tell me truly what thou think'st of him.

We know hardly any passage more expressive of the genius of Shakespeare than this. It is as if he had been actually present, had known the different characters and what they thought of one another, and had taken down what he heard and saw, their looks, words, and gestures, just as they happened.

The character of Mark Antony is further speculated upon where the conspirators deliberate whether he shall fall with Caesar. Brutus is against it:

“ And for Mark Antony, think not of him:
For “he can do no more than Caesar's arm,
When Caesar's head is off.”

Cassius. Yet do I fear him:
For in th' ingrafted love he bears to Caesar—

Brutus. Alas, good Cassius, do not think of him:
If he love Caesar, all that he can do
Is to himself, take thought, and die for Caesar:

And that were much, he should; for he is giv'n
To sports, to wildness, and much company.

Trebonius. There is no fear in him; let him not die.
For he will live, and laugh at this hereafter.

They were in the wrong; and Cassius was right.

The honest manliness of Brutus is, however, sufficient to find out the unfitness of Cicero to be included in their enterprise, from his affected egotism and literary vanity.

O, name him not: let us not break with him;
For he will never follow any thing,
That other men begin.

His scepticism as to prodigies and his moralizing on the weather—"This disturbed sky is not to walk in"—are in the same spirit of refined imbecility.

Shakespeare has in this play and elsewhere shown the same penetration into political character and the springs of public events as into those of everyday life. For instance, the whole design to liberate their country fails from the generous temper and overweening confidence of Brutus in the goodness of their cause and the assistance of others. Thus it has always been. Those who mean well themselves think well of others, and fall a prey to their security. That humanity and sincerity which dispose men to resist injustice and tyranny render them unfit to cope with the cunning and power of those who are opposed to them. The friends of liberty trust to the professions of others because they are themselves sincere, and endeavour to secure the public good with the least possible hurt to its enemies, who have no regard to anything but their own unprincipled ends, and stick at nothing to accomplish them. Cassius was better cut out for a conspirator. His heart prompted his head. His habitual jealousy made him fear the worst that might happen, and his irritability of temper added to his inveteracy of purpose, and sharpened his patriotism. The mixed nature of his motives made him fitter to contend with bad men. The vices are never so well employed as in combating one another. Tyranny and servility are to be dealt with after their own fashion: otherwise, they will triumph over those who spare them, and finally pronounce their funeral panegyric, as Antony did that of Brutus. All the conspirators, save only he,

“ Did that they did in envy of great Caesar:
He only in a general honest thought
And common good to all, made one of them.

The quarrel between Brutus and Cassius is managed in a masterly way. The dramatic fluctuation of passion, the calmness of Brutus, the heat of Cassius, are admirably described; and the exclamation of Cassius on hearing of the death of Portia, which he does not learn till after the reconciliation, 'How 'scap'd I killing when I crost you so?' gives double force to all that has gone before. The scene

between Brutus and Portia, where she endeavours to extort the secret of the conspiracy from him, is conceived in the most heroic spirit, and the burst of tenderness in Brutus:

“ You are my true and honourable wife;
As dear to me as are the ruddy drops
That visit my sad heart—

is justified by her whole behaviour. Portia's breathless impatience to learn the event of the conspiracy, in the dialogue with Lucius, is full of passion. The interest which Portia takes in Brutus and that which Calphurnia takes in the fate of Caesar are discriminated with the nicest precision. Mark Antony's speech over the dead body of Caesar has been justly admired for the mixture of pathos and artifice in it: that of Brutus certainly is not so good.

The entrance of the conspirators to the house of Brutus at midnight is rendered very impressive. In the midst of this scene we meet with one of those careless and natural digressions which occur so frequently and beautifully in Shakespeare. After Cassius has introduced his friends one by one, Brutus says:

“ They are all welcome.
What watchful cares do interpose themselves
Betwixt your eyes and night?

Cassius. Shall I entreat a word? [They whisper.]

Decius. Here lies the east: doth not the day break here?

Casca. No.

Cinna. O pardon, Sir, it doth; and yon grey lines,
That fret the clouds, are messengers of day.

Casca. You shall confess, that you are both deceiv'd:
Here, as I point my sword, the sun arises,
Which is a great way growing on the south,
Weighing the youthful, season of the year.
Some two months hence, up higher toward the north
He first presents his fire, and the high east
Stands as the Capitol, directly here.

We cannot help thinking this graceful familiarity better than all the formality in the world. The truth of history in Julius Caesar is very ably worked up with dramatic effect. The councils of generals, the doubtful turns of battles, are represented to the life. The death of Brutus is worthy of him—it has the

dignity of the Roman senator with the firmness of the Stoic philosopher. But what is perhaps better than either, is the little incident of his boy, Lucius, falling asleep over his instrument, as he is playing to his master in his tent, the night before the battle. Nature had played him the same forgetful trick once before on the night of the conspiracy. The humanity of Brutus is the same on both occasions.

“ —It is no matter;
Enjoy the honey-heavy dew of slumber.
Thou hast no figures nor no fantasies,
Which busy care draws in the brains of men.
Therefore thou sleep'st so sound.

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