

THE TRAGEDY OF CAESAR AND POMPEY or CAESAR'S REVENGE

INTRODUCTION

What's in a Name?

*Caesar's Revenge*¹ is a play suffering from an identity crisis. It is well known that there are two names on the title pages: *The Tragedy of Caesar and Pompey* and *Caesar's Revenge*. Less commented upon is that there is a third title on the printed editions of the play, the running title which is *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. It has also been referred to as the "Academic Tragedy" of *Caesar and Pompey*² by T. M. Parrott. In addition, its entry into the Registers of the Stationers' Company is as "a booke called Iulius Caesars revenge" (Arbers Transcript, III. 323, as quoted by Boas (Boas, 1911: p v) in his introduction to the 1911 Malone Society reprint of *Caesar's Revenge*,³ which neatly conflates the title page names into *The Tragedy of Caesar's Revenge* on its front cover).

If one ignores The Malone Society's revised title, the Stationers' Company's clarification of which Caesar is seeking revenge (this name change may have been to distinguish it from Chapman's *Tragedy of Caesar and Pompey*, possibly written between 1599-1607), and Parrott's classification of the type of tragedy, this still leaves three variations on the theme within the printed text itself.

The Tragedy of Caesar and Pompey could refer to the struggle between Caesar and Pompey. However, this is effectively over as the play commences. The first scene is the aftermath of the Battle of Pharsalus where Caesar's troops broke Pompey's power. Pompey enters as a shamed and defeated man, and despite Brutus' and Titinius' attempts to raise his spirits and encourage him to keep going, his closing words in this scene, "Take we our last farewell then, though with pain:/Here three do part that ne'er shall meet again", leave the audience in no doubt that the war is over. By Act 2 Pompey is dead and by Act 3 he is barely remembered as being the reason for Caesar's triumphant return to Rome. Perhaps this should be more properly entitled *The Tragedies of Caesar and Pompey*, for the second half of the play details Caesar's hubristic rise to power and subsequent downfall and death. Discord point out the parallels between them in the Prologue of Act 2: "Though Caesar be as great as great may be,/Yet Pompey once was e'en as great as he" (2.Prologue.10-11). At the height of his success, it is already clear that Caesar is heading for a fall. This then is the subject of the running title, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*.

¹ *Caesar's Revenge*: All quotations from this play in the Introduction are taken from this current version unless stated otherwise. I have put details of the two online versions available from Early English Books Online in the Bibliography. These are photographic images of the original printed texts from the British Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library respectively.

² Parrott, T. M. (1910), "The "Academic Tragedy" of "Caesar and Pompey"" published in *The Modern Language Review*, 5/4: p 435-444

³ Anonymous (2006/1911 Malone Society reprint), *The Tragedy of Caesar's Revenge*, Edited by Boas, F. S..

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Yet, unlike Pompey's, Caesar's part in the story does not end with his death, and neither does the play. Instead Caesar returns in ghostly form to ensure and oversee the deaths of his murderers. In this, perhaps the title of *Caesar's Revenge* is more apt. One might imagine a mirror of Caesar's ghost in the earlier parts of the play, with Pompey's spirit urging on the faltering conspirators. Yet Caesar himself has already revenged Pompey's very convenient death by killing his murderers, including Ptolomey: for the Elizabethans "the accessory who gives the command is as guilty as the principal who commits the murder."⁴ The spiral of revenge seems to end with Brutus killing himself at the end of the play, allowing Caesar to rest in peace in the Elysian Fields.

The use of the words "revenge" and "tragedy" in the titles suggests that this play belongs in the category of Revenge Tragedy. With its gruesome body count (two murders, five suicides and one death from wounds on stage, along with numerous battlefield deaths and the execution of Ptolomey, Sempronius and Achillas off stage) this play lives up to the expectations of the genre. The speeches are frequently tediously long and the characters barely seem to converse with each other or develop any distinct personality of their own. Yet there is a sense of the ridiculous, a macabre humour in the death scenes which lends an almost pantomime atmosphere to the proceedings. This is particularly visible in moments such as Sempronius' ironic asides shared with the audience prior to the murder of Pompey:

Pompey:

Trusting upon King Ptolomey's promised faith
And hoping succour, I am come to shore
In Egypt here awhile to make abode.

Sempronius:

[*Aside*] Faith, longer, Pompey, than thou does expect!
(2.1.41-44)

Likewise, Cassius' speech leading up to his suicide, where he sits moaning about his state (5.1.278-315), and Titinius' frankly comic return with good news just too late provide a strong sense of the ridiculous:

Brutus doth live, and like a second Mars
Rageth in heat of fury 'mongst his foes.
Then cheer thee Cassius. Lo, I bring relief,
And news of power to ease thy stormy grief –
But see where Cassius weltereth in his blood,
Doth beat the earth – and yet not fully dead.

(5.1.316-321)

⁴ Bowers, Fredson (1966), *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642*: p 9.

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By the time Titinius has decided to revenge himself upon the knife by staining it with his “baser blood” (5.1.344), one is left with the feeling that Rome is better off without the whole pack of them. Surely they should have been commanding the army or fighting, rather than soliloquising in the dark. Brutus appears to have been the best of them, for despite his visit from Caesar’s ghost (or perhaps because of it), he is at least still fighting like “a second Mars” (Line 316).

Moving on to the title of the “Academic Tragedy”, highlighted by Parrott⁵ this seems to relate to its provenance as well as its content. The title page of the 1607 printing states that it was “Privately acted by the students of Trinity College in Oxford”, locating it firmly in the university town. Although there are no records of its actual performance, the British Museum copy has a list of years (1608-1615) handwritten under the year “1607”, which Parrott suggests “may ... refer to performances of the play at Trinity in those years.”⁶ The play contains two direct references which may strengthen its academic ties to Oxford and university life. Cleopatra asks if Caesar would like to visit Egypt’s “academic schools,/Or hear our priests to reason of the stars?/Hence Plato fetched his deep philosophy,/And here in heavenly knowledge they excel (2.3.58-61) in her attempts to cheer him up after Pompey’s death; no doubt frightfully jolly if one is an academic, but hardly the sort of entertainment designed to distract a man of action from melancholy thoughts. Later, as Caesar boasts of his bloody conquests, he includes the lines “And Isis wept to see her daughter Thames/Change her clear crystal to vermillion sad” (3.2.82-83); this latter is a clear reference to Oxford for the River Thames is known as the Isis further upstream.

The content of the play is renowned for its “copious draughts from classical sources.”⁷ “It is” says Parrott, “crowded to a most unusual degree with classical allusions such as would appeal to an academic audience,”⁸ and he cites the fact of two printed editions as a sign of its popularity. (It is worth noting here that Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* was first performed between 1606 and 1607. It may be that this gave rise to popularity for these characters, and may have created a demand for other plays containing them.) It is also filled to the brim with rhetorical devices, some examples of which are given later. This may be in part due to the author’s heavy debt to the Latin texts he used as sources. However, it speaks loudly of someone extremely well-versed in the university education of the time.

Finally, although all variations of the name of the play focus on Caesar, it is hard to view him as the hero or central actor of the piece. The only character which is provided with any kind of development appears to be Anthony. Initially his speeches are interchangeable with those of the rest of Caesar’s entourage. However, he is later shown at odds with his fellows,

⁵ Parrott (1910): pp 435-444.

⁶ Parrott (1910): p 435.

⁷ Ayres, Harry Morgan (1915), “Caesars Revenge”, published in *PMLA*, 30/4: p 771.

⁸ Parrott (1910): p 444.

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moonning over Cleopatra, and then gets a warning visit from his Bonus Genius, allowing his true Roman character to show through. The Bonus Genius device allows the author to foreshadow Anthony's own up-coming tragedy, perhaps signalling that this is the play the author is really interested in writing.