

THE TRAGEDY OF CAESAR AND POMPEY or CAESAR'S REVENGE

INTRODUCTION

Spectacle

Marion Lomax defines “spectacle” as “being any form of display, ceremony, show or pageant (however short) used in the course of the drama – encompassing silent, static tableaux as well as singing, dancing, movement and sound effects.”¹ Although at times it has been suggested that the Elizabethan stage was a bare place, with locations and time of day being created solely through the words uttered by the actors, she points to the wealth of information available which contradicts this and comments that:

There are many examples of properties and emblematic devices used on the Elizabethan and early Jacobean stage, throne, crown, hell-mouth, tomb, chariot, arbour. These would hold significant positions in particular scenes and might – like the chariot in *Tamburlaine* or the bower in *The Spanish Tragedy* – be unifying elements in the play as a whole.²

Additionally, R. A. Foakes points out that Henslowe’s 1598 inventory includes tombs, a chariot, a bedstead, and other properties fairly often used, but also two steeples, several trees, two moss-banks, a hell-mouth, and the city of Rome. This last item may have been a painted hanging”.³ This use of painted backdrops as well as “house-like” structures manufactured from “lath, pasteboard, and coarse cloth or canvas”⁴ may lead one to speculate on how Rome and Alexandria might have been represented in *Caesar’s Revenge*. As stated above, there is no proof of this play being performed, and therefore no lists of props, costumes and scenery to give an idea of how it may have appeared to an audience. However, by examining traces of other plays from the era and paying close attention to the text, it is possible to gain some ideas of what might have been achieved by the students of Trinity College, Oxford.

At this time the writer has been unable to find a detailed study of Oxford university Renaissance plays,⁵ but we may infer that their circumstances and production would have been similar to those in Cambridge of which Nelson’s detailed study, *Early Cambridge Theatres: College, University, and Town Stages, 1464-1720*, provides thorough descriptions. He covers the building, breakdown and storage of stages in Cambridge college halls, lists of carpenters and painters and goods for the creation of scenery, props and special effects, and the storage of costumes. These university plays were performed indoors usually during the evening requiring considerable expenditure on lighting; in 1547-8, for example, Queen’s College

¹ Lomax, Marion (1987), *Stage Images and Traditions: Shakespeare to Ford*: p 10.

² Lomax (1987): p 10.

³ Foakes, R. A. (1997), “Playhouses and Players” published in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*: p 19.

⁴ Nelson, Alan H. (2007), *Early Cambridge Theatres: College, university, and town stages, 1464-1720*: p 108.

⁵ F. S. Boas’ 1910 book *University Drama* has been recommended to me, but I have been unable to source a copy at the present time.

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(in addition to paying three men to work on the stage, a smith for two hooks on which to hang costumes, and the purchase and transportation of “a large chest for comic clothes”⁶) “also purchased two lamps, candles, and six bushels of coal”⁷ for lighting and heating the hall for a play.

Indoor staging allowed for sophisticated effects. Nelson mentions that in 1594-5 those “who attended an early afternoon performance of *Laelia*, [experienced] “the day being turned into nyght.””⁸ Without the clarity of daylight, people can appear from the darkness as if by magic and move around unnoticed at the dim rear of the stage, and the machinery of pulleys and ropes for special effects can be invisible to the audience deceiving their senses. A famous incident in an undergraduate theatrical (requiring a beetle large enough to carry a man) suggesting the level of sophistication of such effects is here described by Deborah E. Harkness:

In 1545 a young Londoner, John Dee, was studying Greek and mathematics [in Cambridge] when he agreed to put his mathematical knowledge to work by constructing a mechanical prop for a student production of a classical play that was meant to divert students during the spring vacation. Aristophanes’ *Pax* is an earthy Greek comedy about a farmer’s audience with Zeus, king of the gods, and the plot calls for a dung beetle that flies toward the sun. The beetle, Dee later claimed, was so realistic that the learned audience fled in terror. Few put any faith in Dee’s regular protestations that the gizmo was a simple mechanical device whose inner workings could be understood mathematically and explained to the most uneducated person.⁹

Plays at colleges were a serious business, worthy of considerable expenditure. So, taking this knowledge and applying it to *Caesar’s Revenge*, what elements of spectacle may be held within it?

The story itself would have been well-known to the spectators, and so holds no surprises. However, the tradition of Revenge Tragedy and the treatment of Roman stories during this era meant that death, previously an off-stage event reported by characters or a chorus to the audience, is likely to be graphically represented. This play contains two murders, one death from wounds and five suicides on-stage, with numerous reported battlefield deaths and executions taking place off-stage. Gory effects using bladders full of liquid to simulate bleeding had been in use for some time; indeed, it is noted in Thomas Preston’s *Cambises* (possibly written in 1560/1) that one character has his skin pulled off on stage (a false skin is mentioned in the stage directions) whilst another has a bladder full of vinegar punctured to simulate

⁶ Nelson (2007): p 34.

⁷ Nelson (2007): p 34.

⁸ Nelson (2007): p 35.

⁹ Harkness, Deborah E. (2007), *The Jewel House: Elizabethan London and the Scientific Revolution*: p 103.

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“the violent realism of bloodshed.”¹⁰ The simulation of bloodshed and death would need to be reasonably accurate for an audience who are familiar with slaughtering their own beasts for consumption and for whom public execution provides another form of entertainment, complete with speeches, ceremony and audience reactions.¹¹

Turning to the text of the play, one is struck by the initial entrance of Discord. She is immediately preceded by “*Sound Alarum then flames of fire*” (1.Prologue). Then, out from the darkness steps a winged figure, gleefully summoning up a series of gory images in the minds of the spectators and setting the scene before leaving the stage to mere mortals. The “flames” might have been torches. However, there is substantial evidence that firearms and fireworks were also in regular use as special effects in plays and pageants: Lomax mentions that “In Elizabeth I’s 1572 progress to Warwick, “A Dragon flieing casting out huge flames and squibes lighted upon the fort and so set fyere thereon.””¹² Nelson also mentions many instances of glass being repaired in halls after plays, perhaps suggesting that these special effects were not just limited to outdoor use. In Act 2 Discord’s entrance is immediately followed by the words “*Flashes of fire*” (2.Prologue) which seems more indicative of fireworks than torches, but none of her other entrances mention flames. I would suggest that the flames are part of her otherworldly character and that they are there each time she appears; their absence from the stage directions seems likely to be an omission by the author, whose stage directions are sketchy to non-existent.

The stage directions fail to inform the reader where each scene is set. I have inserted some locations whilst editing where this seems obvious from the text. However, I would like to highlight a number of scenes that seem totally unnecessary but which may point to items of spectacle about to hove into view. The first of these scenes is Act 1, Scene 4. In this scene Cato Senior rails at the death of the Roman liberty for thirty-three lines. There is no information given as to his location (presumably his home in Rome), and nothing he says adds anything to the action. However, the next scene may hold a clue as to why this scene exists. Pompey and Cornelia are arguing. He wishes to leave her in safety whilst she wishes to go with him and share his fate whatever it may be. It is only when we reach line 59 that their location is provided when Pompey says “But in this ship remain” (1.5.59). Suddenly, it becomes possible to view the scene with Cato not only as a dull rhetorical exercise divorced from the main action of the play, but also as a stalling mechanism. Cato is perhaps standing in front of a curtain whilst behind it frantic efforts are made to wrestle appropriate props and scenery into place to denote the location as being on a ship, or possibly there is an actual ship prop

¹⁰ Fishman, Burton J. (1976), “Pride and Ire: Theatrical Iconography in Preston’s *Cambises*” published in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 16/2 *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*: p 203.

¹¹ For more detail on this see Molly Easo Smith’s paper “The Theatre and the Scaffold: Death as Spectacle in *The Spanish Tragedy*.”

¹² Lomax, Marion (1987): p 27-28.

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being put together or manhandled into position. Those thirty-three lines can be declaimed slowly if necessary until someone prods Cato, and the curtain is pulled back to reveal the exciting new location and props. There are a number of uses of ship imagery in the play, always connected with loss or confusion: Titinius refers to Rome as a “gallant ship” (1.1.7) about to be wrecked; Anthony refers to himself as a “crazèd bark”¹³ [...] tossed in troubled seas, / Uncertain to arrive in wishèd port” (1.6.125-6) after his first meeting with Cleopatra; and Cassius, feeling sorry for himself during the final battle, declaims the following extended simile:

As those that lost in boisterous troublous seas
Beaten with rage of billows stormy strife,
And without stars do sail 'gainst stars and wind
In dreary darkness and in cheerless night,
Without or hope or comfort endless are,
So are my thoughts dejected with dismay

(5.1.259-264)

The gleeful Discord also points out that “Charon, that used but an old rotten boat, / Must now a navy rig for to transport / The howling souls unto the Stygian strand” (5.1.379-381). There are also mentions of tritons and references to both Pompey and Caesar as Neptune-like rulers of the waves. For a play where almost all the action takes place on land, there is a lot of nautical imagery. Perhaps this points to excitement and pride in a new prop or piece of staging or perhaps the prop grew out of the play; either way, the imagery seems to underline the presence of a ship.

Another potential stalling scene appears after Pompey's murder when Cornelia has a scene to herself in which she bewails his fate and commits suicide. Although it would be much more dramatic for Cornelia to rail at his murderers in person and throw herself onto his corpse to commit suicide, or in the interests of historical accuracy, not to have this scene at all, there it is – all twenty-seven lines of it. However, the following scene is set in Alexandria, as announced by Caesar in Act 1, Scene 6. Is Cornelia's scene simply filling time, whilst behind the curtain people remove the beach scene of Pompey's murder (perhaps mopping up the blood) and replace it with a grandiose set of Alexandria? It certainly seems possible. Something similar appears to be going on in Act 3, Scene 6, where Caesar has conversations with three separate characters (Calphurnia, the Augur and the Praecentor) en route to the Senate-house before he meets Cassius who persuades him to enter. Although the magical number of three warnings with the supernatural nature of two of them (a dream and augury) is good story-telling, there is an inexplicable suddenness with which Caesar goes from the streets of Rome to inside the Senate-house, and the Senators have no stage directions to enter. Perhaps this is another scene being built behind a curtain whilst Caesar “travels” to the location. Trebonius' comment “And Pompey, he who caused

¹³ “bark” – a small ship (OED: n² 1.).

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thy tragedy/Here breathless lies before thy noble statue" (3.6.143-144) may refer to the set as well as pointing out the irony of Caesar's physical position.

Another instance potentially implying a stalling scene appears to be happening with Caesar's funeral procession in Act 4, Scene 1. Octavian enters bewailing his and his country's loss for eighteen lines. The he apparently exits and re-enters with the funeral procession, complete with a hearse. "The procession," according to Lomax "was one of the most popular forms of spectacle in Elizabethan drama."¹⁴ This procession of mourners and grandiose funeral bier must have brought to mind *Tamburlaine's* chariot, particularly with its close proximity to Octavian's vow that "these black and sable weeds,/The outward signs of inward heaviness,/Shall changed be ere long to crimson hue" (4.1.10-12). This echoes *Tamburlaine's* colour-changing countdown to ultimate destruction of a city, as Caesar's bombastic self-praise and over-the-top wooing of Cleopatra echoed the Scythian's rhetoric. Time would be needed to clear away the traces of Caesar's death and the Senate-house, and then to create the procession. This stalling device does not need to be so long as the previous ones because between Caesar's death and his funeral is the Prologue for Act 4, providing a further twenty-two lines. Added together this gives the longest potential stalling time of forty lines. Therefore, it seems that the two longest stalling times are for the two bulkiest items: the ship and the hearse.

The text of this play seems to provide tantalising glimpses of spectacle which we cannot prove as nothing is written in its stage directions. The relative tedium of its speeches perhaps is irrelevant in a performance which contains all the inventiveness of the Elizabethan university stage, as the dramatic effects of words seem to have been sacrificed to the wonders of the spectacle. Of course this is all surmise. In many university plays the speeches were intentionally scholarly and packed with demonstrations of rhetorical devices to display the ingenuity of the writer. However, it is certainly interesting to speculate.

¹⁴ Lomax (1987): p 11.