

THE TRAGEDY OF CAESAR AND POMPEY or CAESAR'S REVENGE

INTRODUCTION

Trinity College and Education

Trinity College in Oxford was founded in 1555 by Thomas Pope, a Catholic who had made a great deal of money out of the confiscation of lands during the Reformation. It officially opened its doors on 30 May 1556. "In most colleges, the majority but not all of the fellows were expected to study theology [...] but under the Trinity Statutes it was theology or nothing."¹ This would seem to make this the ideal location for poor sponsored candidates who "had forfeited their place in the artisan class, but stood a good chance of gaining a livelihood in the Church."² The undergraduate timetable³ began with a daily mass before 6 am, Philosophy (being arithmetic, geometry, logic and philosophy) ran from 6 till 8 am; then a further two hours of disputations working in pairs before dinner which was accompanied by a Narrare (in which one of the fellows had to make an argument on a theme given by the President or the Rhetoric Lecturer). After dinner there was another two hours spent studying the Classical Texts with the Humanities Lecturer, focussing either on Rhetoric or Poetry and Drama. The Undergraduate Reading List covered the Roman and Greek writers Cicero, Valerius Maximus, Suetonius Tranquillus, Florus, Pliny, Livy, Quintillian, Virgil, Horace, Lucan, Juvenal, Terence, Plautus, Euclid, Porphyry, Aristotle, and Plato, and the Renaissance writers Gemma Frisius, Tunstall of Durham, Rodolph Agricola and John Caesar.⁴

Considering that these young men were all supposedly destined for the Church, their Humanist degree studies were based for the most part on pre-Christian thinkers. The ideas to which they were exposed involved societies that believed in a polytheistic universe, accepted pederasty as a natural part of the teacher-pupil relationship, and held up democracy as superior to monarchy. The study of rhetoric and logic encouraged scepticism and questioning in the brightest and best, for it swiftly became apparent that "moral goodness was superfluous to the orator's vocation. Persuasion was simply a means to an end – any end."⁵

The impact of this education can be seen in *Caesar's Revenge*. The classical references are continuous throughout the text, and I have included a selection of examples of rhetorical devices elsewhere in the introduction. Perhaps the best example in this play of the scepticism and questioning of the "natural" order of society prompted by the Tudor university education is given at the end of Act 2, Scene 1. Having killed Pompey, Sempronius (reminiscent of the Vice character from medieval mystery plays) makes a speech which can be addressed only to the audience, beginning as it does "Lo you my masters" (Line 110). He points out the irony that the slaughter of thousands through proxies by great men to satisfy their own ambition wins them titles

¹ Hopkins, Clare (2005), *Trinity: 450 Years of an Oxford College Community*: p 55.

² Riggs, David (2005), *The World of Christopher Marlowe*: p 67.

³ Hopkins (2005): p 62.

⁴ Hopkins (2005): p 64.

⁵ Riggs (2005): p 84.

THE TRAGEDY OF CAESAR AND POMPEY or CAESAR'S REVENGE

INTRODUCTION

such as “brave champions and stout warriors” (Line 114), whilst a man who “kills but one/Is straight a villain and a murderer called” (Lines 110-111); the use of the word “straight,” meaning “quickly,” lends an air of honesty to the lives of simple men that is not present in the actions of the great. This implication is continued in the following simile that shows an honest thief being hung for stealing something which is worthless to its owner, whilst “kings and mighty princes of the world,/By letters patent rob both sea and land” (Lines 118-9); the thief risks his body and pays the price the law demands, whilst kings and princes twist the law to their own ends and risk only pieces of paper for great gain. The word “rob” can here be taken in two senses; either metonymically, in that the sea and the land stand for the people upon them, or in the sense of “to carry off as plunder; to steal” (OED: v 5.a.), in which case the “letters patent” are granting the kings and princes dominion over new territories without honest conquest or treaties. Having established his point Sempronius finally applies it to Pompey, whose “ambition half the world hath slain” (2.1.121).

For those that did not complete their degrees, or despite finishing still failed to find a respectable position, this education was seen as potentially dangerous. Men educated above their station are seen as potential revolutionaries, thinking themselves to be above their menial roots, but having insufficient position for their ambition. Riggs views Baldock in Marlowe’s *Edward II* as “the first in a long line of displaced scholars who become the villains of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies.”⁶ Although Sempronius describes himself as a soldier, and is shown to be a heartless mercenary and a classical stage villain, his arguments in his final speech described above show him to have a scholarly grasp of logic and rhetoric.

⁶ Riggs (2005): p 71.