

# THE TRAGEDY OF CAESAR AND POMPEY or CAESAR'S REVENGE

## INTRODUCTION

### The Romans and National Identity

One of the origin myths of Britain in common usage during the Renaissance concerned the Trojan/Roman prince, Brutus, grandson or great-grandson to Aeneas. After accidentally killing his father with an arrow, Brutus was banished from Italy. In his wanderings he located two groups of Trojans living in exile and recruited them. They spent some time fighting in Europe and eventually settled in Albion, currently an empty land, home only to a few giants. Brutus and the Trojans destroyed the giants and took the land for their own, renaming it Britain. This myth links the English monarchy to a heroic past rooted in the classical tradition and provides them with a line of descent from the gods themselves. Taking this tradition, enables the English to view themselves as the direct inheritors of the Roman Empire (for Virgil in his *Aeneid* has usefully traced Octavian's blood line through Julius Caesar back to Aeneas).

This belief that the English and the Romans are both Trojans permeates English Renaissance society. Roman plays were used to provide a forum for many current issues, and, in particular, in the late Seventeenth Century provided a location for criticising the Stuart Monarchy. Playwrights used the Roman era to tackle "political debate [...] about the best system of rule;"<sup>1</sup> this seems logical as the Romans moved from a monarchy to a republic and finally to an empire, encompassing different systems. However, in a society that considered itself to be the Romans, this took careful handling, as plays about replacing the monarchy do not usually go down well with the reigning monarch.

The figure of Julius Caesar was immensely popular. He "was the paradigmatic Roman [...]. He paradoxically expressed both the height of Roman achievement and the depths of its vulnerability to female temptation in the shape of Cleopatra, a figure who regularly casts a shadow over the image of Rome as home of heroism and manliness."<sup>2</sup> However, in *Caesar's Revenge*, despite flattering her outrageously and granting her largesse, Caesar's proclaimed love lacks any feeling of reality. It is couched in the language of the sonnet; Caesar desires to adorn her "golden yellow locks,/Which in their curlèd knots my thoughts do hold,/Thoughts captive to thy beauty's conquering power" (1.6.39-41), and grants her "[n]ot only Egypt but all Africa" (1.6.29) from Zanzibar to the Pillars of Hercules, similar to the language used by Tamburlaine, Marlowe's Caesar-inspired dramatic creation, to woo Zenocrate. Yet the scene ends with an extremely business-like Caesar instructing his followers about their next actions. His words, focussed on the action of the present, compare sharply with those of Anthony, who is completely distracted by Cleopatra. It is clear that although Caesar is involved in a pleasant dalliance, he is still in command of himself and the world: Anthony, by contrast, has lost control of himself and his grasp on the

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<sup>1</sup> Hopkins, Lisa (2008), *The Cultural Uses of the Caesars on the English Renaissance Stage*: p 7..

<sup>2</sup> Hopkins (2008): p 9.

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world around him. When Anthony's Bonus Genius approaches him in Act 3, however, and lists his previous "manly" joys, one can quite see why he might prefer to be "captive, bound in beauty's bonds" (3.2.107).

Assuming that the dating of the play to the mid-1590s is correct, *Caesar's Revenge*, with its strong focus on a period of Roman civil war with the powerful statesmen of Rome destroying their Empire instead of expanding it, killing one another rather than external enemies, highlights a very real Elizabethan fear. Just over one hundred years previously the country had been torn apart by the Wars of the Roses, ended by Elizabeth's grandfather Henry VII; Queen Mary's grim attempts to re-convert England to Catholicism were still in living memory; and Elizabeth was getting older. If she were to die without naming a successor, England could be plunged into internecine warfare by the power struggle for the throne. Caesar speaks of the horror of civil war: "Here lieth one that's butchered by his sire/And here the son was his old father's death:/Both slew unknowing, both unknown are slain" (1.2.40-42). Civil war means families torn apart and lost in the anonymity of the battlefield, the blindness of blood-lust and fear in the thick of the fight. Elizabeth's perspective is also summed up succinctly in Brutus Words: "But O, who doth remember good turns past:/The rising sun, not setting, doth men please" (2.4.35-36). Elizabeth's fear that her court would abandon her to win favour with the monarch-in-waiting was probably justified but left her people feeling very insecure.

It is worthy of note that although this play frequently denies royalty, with its constant references by the conspirators to the expulsion of the Tarquins from Rome, with Caesar's firm rejection of a crown, the use of the word "prince" is excessive. Anyone who is considered to be noble or worthy is described as a "prince". The word could be being used in the context of "a person who has the chief authority in any society or group; a ruler, commander, governor" (OED: n 3.a.). However, the constant use of the word, particularly in relation to Caesar, underlines the fact that he is absolute monarch in all but name.