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The Representation of Conflicting Ideologies of Power in Some Jacobean Roman Plays

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"Here is Rome at the crossroad". This brief statement by Vivian Thomas in *Shakespeare's Roman Plays* summarises Julius Caesar's Rome as shown in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. According to this critic, the commitment to political life in this play epitomises the most important value of the Roman world. However, this particular "objective involves conflict with the popular leadership of an outstanding individual who embodies Roman greatness or destiny" (Thomas, p. 2). This "outstanding individual", namely the historical figure of Julius Caesar, was portrayed in several early Jacobean plays staging his life and his death with a focus on different episodes, such as his quest for power, his rivalry with Pompey, and his murder. In addition to *Julius Caesar* (1599), which revolves around the varied aspects of the conflict opposing the mighty Caesar and the conspirators, two Jacobean plays shed a different light on the conflict of ideologies inherent in Shakespeare's play by highlighting the rivalry with Pompey. The anonymous *Tragedie of Caesar and Pompey*, probably written and performed in 1607, explores a broader period, since, as the title suggests, this play opens on the rivalry between Caesar and Pompey and draws to a close with Caesar's murder. *Caesar and Pompey,* the only Roman play written by George Chapman, who was more preoccupied with French

history, was apparently never performed but was published in 1631. The whole play is structured around the struggle between Caesar and Pompey and ends with Caesar's victory. Through the historical and literary figure of Caesar, who embodied tyranny and the danger of political idolatry, these three plays explore the construction of an ideology of power and the dramatization of political ideas. While Chapman and the anonymous author lay more emphasis on the struggle between Caesar and his rival Pompey, by staging two ideologies of power in debate and at war, Shakespeare threw light upon the end of Caesar's life, the plot of the conspirators and his assassination, so as to bring to the fore the conflicting perspectives on Caesar's personal dramatization of his own power and ego.

The first acts of George Chapman's *Caesar and Pompey* hinge upon a dual structure, alternating scenes representing the two rival sides, Pompey against Caesar, as if this constant alternation between the two eponymous triumvirs enhanced the struggle between them. Halfway through the play, the tense atmosphere of rivalry is altered by the miracle in Tralleis Temple, which apparently foreshadows Caesar's victory:

> For in Tralleis
> Within a Temple, built to Victory,
> There stands a statue of your forme and name,
> Neare whose firme base, even from the marble pavement,
> There sprang a palm tree up, in this last night,
> That seemes to crowne your statue with his boughs,
> Spred in wrapt shadowes round about your browes. (Chapman, III.ii.59-65)

The growing tree whose branches apparently offer a crown to Caesar's statue anticipates Caesar's victory over his enemy. It also announces the fate of Caesar, who, once a consul, is to be offered a crown in the Roman senate, an episode not shown in Chapman's version but recounted in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (I.ii). However, this idealised vision of Caesar's quest for power stands in sharp contrast with the last scenes of the play, in which Rome's future tyrant's victories are built by shedding the blood of his most faithful followers. In Act Four, Scene Three, Crassinius enters on stage with a sword stuck in his face. This horrifying image of Crassinius' disfigured body is heightened by Caesar's words : "O looke up: he does, and shewes / Death in his broken eyes" (IV.iii.3-4). No sooner has Crassinius passed away than Caesar promises to build a funeral monument to honour his memory:

> Ever ever rest
> Thy manly lineaments, which in a tombe
> Erected to thy noble name and virtues,
> Ile curiosly preserve with balmes, and spices,
> In eminent place of these Pharsalian fields,
> Inscrib'd with this true scroule of funerall.
> *Epitaph*:
> Crassineus *fought for fame, and died for* Rome
> Whose publique weale springs from this private tombe. (IV.iii.10-18)

The idealised vision of the funerary statue contrasts with the mutilated body of the actor on stage. This paradoxical representation of the dead body announces the death of Caesar's closest friend. In the final scene, Cato kills himself on stage with a sword. This suicide is even more dramatic than Brutus's in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, as Cato takes his entrails out before dying on stage ("*He thrusts him [Cleanthes] back and plucks out his entrails*" [V.ii.175 SD]). This scene of self-dismemberment is heightened by the arrival of soldiers who bring Pompey's head. The last scene thus ironically fulfils Cato's prophecy in the opening scene:

> Now will the two suns of our Romane Heaven
> . . . .
> With their contention, all the clouds assemble
> That threaten tempests to our peace and Empire
> Which we shall shortly see poure down in bloud. (I.i.1-5)

The violent struggle between the two suns has spread chaos and confusion and ends in bloodshed. Nevertheless, Caesar rejects this world peopled with mutilated bodies and wishes to build his new empire on solid stony funerary monuments:

> And by the sea, upon some eminent rock,
> Erect his sumptous tombe; on which advance
> With all fit state his statue; whose right hand
> Let hold his sword, where, may to all times rest
> His bones as honor'd as his soule is blest. (V.ii.220-24)

Through the historical rivalry between Caesar and Pompey, Chapman offers a cynical representation of power. The rivalry between two opposed ideologies of power closes on images of bloodshed and sterile funerary monuments.

Even though thirty years earlier Shakespeare chose not to dramatise the conflict between Caesar and Pompey, some secondary characters allude to this

particular episode of Roman history to denounce Caesar's tyranny. In Act One, Scene Three, of *Julius Caesar*, Cassius, one of the conspirators, regards Caesar's Rome as a dark suffocating prison in which men's freedom has been fettered: "Nor stony tower, nor walls of beaten brass, / Nor airless dungeon, nor strong links of iron, / Can be retentive to the strength of spirit" (I.iii.92-94). The images of walls, of dungeons, are evocative of the rigid political system imposed by Caesar. This particular image of Rome as a stony cage seems to be at variance with the idealised image of a free Rome ruled by Pompey:

> Many a time and oft
> Have you climbed up to walls and battlements
> To towers and windows, yea to chimney tops,
> . . . .
> To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome. (I.i.37-42)

When Pompey was still alive, the Roman people were not confined to "wall[s] of beaten brass" or an "airless dungeon". The image of Romans climbing up the walls or towers symbolises an open and free Republic, which has turned into a terrifying prison under Caesar's rule. These allusions to former events reveal that this old rivalry between Caesar and Pompey has created resentment among some Romans, thus leading to a new conflict between Caesar and the conspirators, who perceive the aging Caesar as a tyrant who must be brought down.

In Shakespeare's play, the eponymous protagonist enters the stage for a few minutes only in Act One, Scene Two, as he walks across the stage to the senate, located behind the scenes. He is followed by Brutus and Cassius, who both remain on stage once he has left. The dramatic action has moved from the main character to secondary characters, who are soon to plot against Caesar. This change in focus hints that the audience is to hear another point of view on the consul of Rome. As both characters and the public hear shouts offstage, suggesting that the Romans encourage Caesar to accept the crown, Cassius attempts to convince Brutus that Caesar is unfit to govern. Before revealing his personal vision of Caesar, Cassius uses the well-known metaphor of the mirror: "I, your glass / Will modestly discover to yourself / That of yourself which you yet know not of" (I.ii.68-70). However, the reflection of this new mirror highlights only one aspect of Caesar's multi-faceted character. Cassius claims that he saved Caesar from drowning (I.ii.112 ff.) and saw him on the verge of dying (119-31). He regards Caesar as an ordinary man: "Ye gods, it doth amaze me / A man of such

feeble temper should / So get the start of the majestic world / And bear the palm alone!" (130-33). Nevertheless, this unflattering portrait on stage stands in sharp contrast with the Romans' shouts, which can be heard offstage. The reflection of the mirror is distorted to redirect the audience's attention to another facet of Caesar's personality. The enthusiasm voiced offstage endows Cassius' portrait with an ironical tone and supplies an opposite perspective on Caesar's ability to rule Rome. The ironic dialogue between what takes place onstage and offstage highlights the conflicting points of view on Caesar as a man of power. The implicit debate between the two ideologies about Caesar's power prompts Cassius to take the Romans' point of view into account:

> Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
> Like a Colossus, and we petty men
> Walk under his huge legs, and peep about
> To find ourselves dishonourable graves. (I.ii.136-39)

This image alters Cassius' former portrait of Caesar, as he acknowledges that Caesar has become a new god, a colossal man idolised by the Roman people. This new image of Caesar first enables the audience to visualise the scene offstage: Caesar could well be standing on a platform, while the people standing below encourage him to accept the title of king. However, the contrast between the new Roman Colossus and the Roman people ("we petty men"), as well as the narrowness of the world, draws attention to the image the people of Rome have built of Caesar as a man of power—a new mighty idol that can rival the Roman gods. This image of power has become real in Caesar's mind: he compares himself to Olympus before he is struck down ("Wilt thou lift up Olympus?" [III.i.74]). However, as Samuel Daniel underlined in his historical poem, *The Civile Wars Between the Two Houses of Lancaster and Yorke* (1595), when he described Richard II's fall, every Colossus remains fragile:

> Like when some great *Colossus*, whose strong base
> Or mightie props are shronke or sunke awaie,
> Fore-shewing ruine, threatning all the place
> That in the danger of his fall doth stay,
> All straight to better safetie flocke apace
> None rest to helpe the ruine, while they maie
> The perill great and doubtfull. The redresse
> Men are content to leave right in distresse. (II.6.49-53 [p. 23])

Thus, once Shakespeare's Caesar has been stabbed to death, his gigantic glorious body turns into ruins: "Thou art the ruins of the noblest man / That ever livèd in the tide of times" (III.i.259-60). Indeed, he is to be dismembered by the conspirators, who dream of organizing a cannibal banquet: "Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods, / Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds" (II.i.173-74).

The differences in perspective on Caesar's destiny shown in Shakespeare and Chapman are further enhanced in the dramatization of Caesar's death in the anonymous play. The enactments of Caesar's assassination in *Julius Caesar* and in *The Tragedie of Caesar and Pompey* reveal two different dramatic interpretations of Plutarch's text, the main source of inspiration at the time, which was available in English thanks to the well-known translation of Sir Thomas North:

> But when he sawe Brutus with his sworde drawne in his hande, then he pulled his gowne over his head and made more resistaunce, and was driven, either casually or purposedly by the counsell of the conspirators, against the base whereupon Pompeys image stoode, which ranne all of goare-bloode till he was slain. Thus it seemed that the image tooke just revenge of Pompey's enemie, being throwne downe on the ground at his feete and yielding up his ghost there, for the number of wounds he had upon him. (Plutarch, p. 794)

The author of *The Tragedie of Caesar and Pompey* seems to have faithfully followed Plutarch's description. If Calpurnia's prophetic dream is not mentioned, as it is in Plutarch's text, Caesar is stabbed by the conspirators before the statue of Pompey, lying at its feet. No stage direction suggests that the statue on stage is soiled with blood, as is described in Plutarch. Still, the underlying irony in Plutarch's text ("Thus it seemed that the image tooke just revenge of Pompey's enemie") is taken up, for the contrast between Caesar's mutilated bleeding body and Pompey's statue is clearly underlined by one of the characters:

> How heavens have justly on the authors head,
> Returnd to guiltless blood which he hath shed,
> And *Pompey*, he who caused thy Tragedy,
> Here breathless lies before thy Noble Statue. (III.vi [sig. G1v])

Conversely, in Shakespeare's version, the irony of Pompey's post-mortem revenge seems to have been subdued, even though the actor embodying Caesar is probably lying before Pompey's statue, as Brutus underlines the fact that the former Colossus of Rome is nothing but dust: "How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport, / That now on Pompey's basis lies along, / No worthier than the

dust" (III.i.115-16). The absence of irony in Shakespeare's version aims at drawing attention to the rivalry between Caesar's heirs—on the one hand, Antony, the spiritual son, and on the other, Brutus, the conspirator who killed his spiritual father.

Caesar's dead body gives rise to two conflicting interpretations of his power and of power in general. After Caesar's assassination, Brutus attempts, in Act Three, Scene Two, to convince the Roman people that the assassination was justified by showing that Caesar was nothing but an ambitious man. His long rhetorical speech is then interrupted by Antony's dramatization of the assassination, as he enters with Caesar's dead body. This new perspective creates a sharp contrast between Brutus's rhetoric, based on words, and Antony's rhetoric of image. After giving his speech in the pulpit to honour Caesar's memory, Antony steps down from the platform and invites the plebeians to gather around Caesar's corpse: "Then make a ring about the corpse of Caesar" (III.ii.159). Antony's visual rhetoric is enhanced by the subtle use of Caesar's mantle and the analysis of the holes in it. The shredded mantle metonymically embodies Caesar's mutilated body. This new perspective on the assassination of Caesar convinces the people and paves the way for the second conflict of ideologies in Shakespeare's version, which opposes Caesar's faithful followers and the conspirators.

In *The Tragedie of Caesar and Pompey*, the author focuses on the rivalry between the two eponymous characters, alternating scenes of funerals and descriptions of funerary monuments. Hence, when Caesar hears about Pompey's death, he decides to build a monument to honour his memory:

> But yet with honour shalt thou be Intomb'd,
> I will embalme thy body with my teares
> And put thy ashes in an Urne of gold,
> And build with marble a deserved grave
> Whose worth indeede a Temple ought to have. (II.iii [sig. D1r])

This honourable thought is not to save Caesar from death—he is stabbed in front of Pompey's statue in Act Three, Scene Six. Act Four opens on Caesar's funeral, where his coffin is followed by a devastated Calpurnia. Their son Octavius promises to build a temple in memory of his father:

> Now on my Lords, this body lets inter:
> Amongest the monuments of *Roman Kinges,*
> And build a Temple to his memory:

Honoring therein his sacred Deity. (IV.i [sig. G3v])

This image is ironically reminiscent of the temple Caesar wanted to build to his old enemy's memory. This perfectly symmetrical parallel is endowed with a cynical tone, when Cassius underlines the vanity of funerals and of tombs:

> The spoyles and riches of the conquered world
> Are now but idle Trophies of his tombe.
> His laurell garlandes do but crowne his chaire
> His sling, his shilde, and fatal bloudy speare,
> Which hee in battell oft 'gainst Rome did beare
> Now serve for nought but rusty monuments. (IV.ii [sig. G4r])

This scepticism concerning funerary monuments is evocative of another contemporary tragedy written by Ben Jonson, *Sejanus His Fall* (1603), where Tiberius (ironically) affirms that tombs cannot honour the memory of the dead unless virtuous deeds are also remembered:

> These things shall be to us
> Temples, and statues, rearèd in your minds,
> The fairest, and most during imagery:
> For those of stone, or brass, if they become
> Odious in judgement of posterity
> Are more contemned, as dying sepulchres
> Than ta'en for living monuments. (I.i.484-90)

This particular quotation setting at variance "dying sepulchres" and "living monuments" offers a highly ironical conclusion to this study. The idea that collective memory epitomises the only monument that can truly honour a man's memory undoubtedly figures in the broader debate between sculptors and poets which is exemplified by Shakespeare's Sonnet 55, whose last lines affirm that the value of a man can live on in people's eyes and judgements: "So till the judgement that yourself arise, / You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes" (ll. 13-4). Likewise, in the opening scene of *The Tragedie of Caesar and Pompey*, Brutus underlines the fact that Pompey's virtue is enshrined in the people's collective memory: "O what disgrace can taunt this worthinesse / Of which remaine such living monuments / Ingraven in the eyes and hearts of men" (I.i [sig. A3v]).

Thus, the true living monument raised to Caesar is built on the collective memory, which is sustained by literature, more particularly drama. It should be

remembered that, according to Thomas Nashe, historical plays have the power to revive historical figures at each new performance: "valiant acts, that have lain long buried in rusty brass and worm-eaten books, are revived, and they themselves raised from the grave of oblivion" (p. 113). The same might be claimed for past ideologies. Accordingly, during each theatrical performance the figure of Caesar, with his complex, multi-faceted character, lives and relives in the audience's mind, as their eyes capture his shadowy embodiment on stage.

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