

[1942]

**JULIUS CAESAR**

While I was considering what to say about *Julius Caesar*, I happened to go to a school entertainment. It was a large primary school, and the boys mostly came from working class homes; little boys — the eldest couldn't have been fourteen. They acted some scenes out of this very play. They did not act them well — how should they? They had not had the time to rehearse, they forgot their words and said them too fast, also there was not the money to buy properties with: the Roman Senators wore towels and curtains and anything they could scrounge and a solitary garland of green cardboard was handed from Caesar to Brutus and from Brutus to Antony as the occasion required. The audience was more interested in identifying their offspring than in following the plot. Remarks could be heard such as, "There he is, that one's Tom," and there were squeals from babies who were lifted up in their mothers' arms to see better, and seemed critical of what they saw. I was critical

myself — yet I had an odd feeling of pleasure and of awe, and certain words of Cassius after the murder came into my mind.

How many ages hence  
Shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er,  
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

If Shakespeare had been present with us in that school, he might not have been flattered but he would not have been surprised, for what he expected to occur has occurred: the play lives.

O Julius Caesar! thou art mighty yet!  
Thy spirit walks abroad.

It was walking with us as well as circumstances permitted: it was part of the civilization of England and of all who read English.

The general immortality of Shakespeare is too vast a subject. Let us keep to this particular play. Why has it caught on? It is about some old Romans who murdered one of their number and were finally defeated by his friends. The incident was chronicled by a Greek historian, Plutarch, and Shakespeare read a translation of it and turned out a play somewhere about 1600. It seems to have been a success from the first. And we today, though we may not rank it with the Great Four — *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*, *Macbeth* — always hail it as a typical example of his genius, and are excited when the curtain rises.

It is exciting — that is one reason for its popularity. Although it is not carefully constructed like a Greek play or a classical French play, although it is not as cunning in its advance as *Othello* or *Macbeth*, yet it does succeed in startling us and holding us. It effects this by three well-timed explosions. The first of these explosions is of course the murder itself. The preparation for this is masterly — the

growth of the conspiracy, omens, storms, apparitions, Portia's forebodings, Calpurnia's dream, the tempting of Caesar to the Senate House, the failure of Artemidorus to save him, the luring away of Antony: and then the deed. And the murder is followed by a second explosion: Antony's funeral speech. The excitement is revived and increased instead of dropping. After that indeed there is a lull and a failure to interest, until we come to the plains of Philippi and the third explosion: the quarrel in the tent between Brutus and Cassius. This is so unexpected, so natural psychologically and so touching that it produces a tremendous effect, and after it, his nerves all exhausted, Brutus beholds Caesar's ghost. I do not mean that these three explosions, these three famous scenes, are the only reason for the play's popularity. But they do provide the excitement, and if a drama does not excite the ordinary man it may satisfy its contemporaries, but it has no chance of being acted "in states unborn and accents yet unknown."

The second reason for popularity is the character drawing, and particularly the character of Brutus. Before I come to it, I am going to risk a generalization about Shakespeare. He was an Elizabethan dramatist, and I do not think the Elizabethans were conscientious over their characters; they would often alter them in the middle in order to get on with the play. Beaumont and Fletcher contain glaring examples of this. Good men become bad and then good again: traitors turn into heroes and vice versa without any internal justification. And Shakespeare sometimes does it too. There is an example — not a glaring one — in this play, in the character of Casca. Casca first appears as extremely polite and indeed servile to Caesar. "Peace ho! Caesar speaks," he cries. Then he shows himself to Brutus and Cassius as a sour blunt contradictory fellow, who snaps them up when they speak and is grumpy when they invite him to supper. You may say

this is subtlety on Shakespeare's part, and that he is indicating that Casca is a dark horse. I don't think so. I don't think Shakespeare was bothering about Casca — he is merely concerned to make the action interesting and he alters the character at need. Later on, during the thunderstorm, Casca becomes different again; he walks about with a drawn sword, is deeply moved by the apparitions, and utters exalted poetry. At the murder-scene he wounds Caesar in the neck, and then we hear of him no more. His usefulness is over. Contrast Shakespeare here with a modern writer, like Tolstoy. Tolstoy is conscientious over his characters, he has a personal responsibility to each of them, he has a vital conception of them, and though they are full of contradictions, those contradictions are true to life. Contrast Casca with Dolohov in *War and Peace*. Shakespeare often doesn't mind about his people. And when I am reading him one of my difficulties is to detect when he does mind and when he doesn't. This may be heresy on my part, but it seems to me that a great deal of Shakespearean criticism is invalid because it assumes that his characters are real people, and are never put in just to make the play go. The play's the thing, I suggest.

It is delightful when the characters are real, when Shakespeare does bother about them. Brutus is real, so is Cassius, so is Antony, so perhaps is Caesar himself. Brutus is an intellectual who can do things, who is not (like Hamlet) hampered by doubts. He can do things — but he always does them wrong: his advice is invariably fatal, from the moment of the murder down to the battle of Philippi. He cannot realize that men seek their own interests, for he has never sought his own, he has lived nobly among noble thoughts, wedded to a noble wife. He is kind to his servant. Everything he does is touched with fineness. Yet Brutus is not frigid. He just avoids being a prig. We are able to take



him to our hearts. And with him is associated the worldly but far from contemptible Cassius. Those two speak the same language though they sometimes use different words. And against them is opposed Mark Antony — brilliant, sensuous, devoted to Caesar, but heartless otherwise, and treacherous. These three support the play. The character of Caesar is — difficult: Shakespeare does not present him sympathetically. He makes a few fine remarks like

It seems to me most strange that men should fear;  
Seeing that death, a necessary end,  
Will come when it will come.

But goes on to talk bombast and to assert that he and Danger

. . . are two lions litter'd in one day,  
And I the elder and more terrible.

Do you detect a contemporary voice here? I do. It is Mussolini's. His infirmities are insisted on: his epilepsy, his deafness. He is pompous, conceited, showing off, dictatorial. Indeed, some modern producers have stressed this and have presented *Julius Caesar* as a study in Fascism. But when Caesar is dead, his spirit is mighty, and haunts Brutus and wins. I don't know what to make of this. If Shakespeare were a modern writer I should be more clear about his conception. I should be certain that he has planned Caesar to be little in life and great in death. But, being an Elizabethan, is it possible that he may be altering Caesar as he alters Casca, for the sake of the play?

Excitement — and enough real people. Here are two of the reasons why *Julius Caesar* lives, and why, after more than three hundred years, it is acted by primary school boys. At the end of the performance to which I have referred, after Brutus, aged twelve, had suicided himself, and fallen with rather a thump, another of the children came forward

his little brown suit, to speak the epilogue. The epilogue was not by Shakespeare. It ran as follows:

I come to say our play is done  
We hope you have enjoyed the fun.

The child then retired. He had spoken briefly but justly. Shakespeare is fun. There are murders and ghosts, jealousy, remorse, despair, there is *Othello*, there is *Lear*, there is even *Timon of Athens* — but — how shall I put it? Shakespeare never grumbles. He denounces life but he never complains of it; he presents even its tragedies for our comprehension and enjoyment.

#### STUDYING THE ESSAY

1. Why would Shakespeare not have been flattered by the performance Forster saw? Why might Shakespeare say of this performance, however, "I told you so"?
2. Why is *Julius Caesar* still popular?
3. If you have read the play, describe in detail the "three well-timed explosions."
4. A member of the class should give a brief report on Mussolini in order to make clear the reasons why Forster compares him with Caesar.
5. What kind of essay is "Julius Caesar"? Refer to the Introduction (pp. ix-xv), if necessary.
6. Words to learn: *properties* (theatrical), *masterly*, *omen*, *apparition*, *foreboding*, *servile*, *subtlety*, *heresy*, *prig*, *sensuous*, *bombast*, *Fascism*.

#### COMPOSITION TOPICS

1. Amateur Shakespeare Performances I Have Seen
2. The Time I Played Brutus (or Cassius or Caesar or Antony)
3. Audiences, Good and Bad