

BEN JONSON AND JULIUS CAESAR

BY

J. DOVER WILSON

If we neglect *Titus Andronicus* as pseudo-classical, and only his by adoption and not by grace (of which it has little enough), *Julius Caesar* was Shakespeare's earliest attempt to try his fortune in the perilous arena of Roman tragedy. And a very bold attempt it was, made by a man equipped with but 'small Latin', under the keenly censorious eye of a learned friend alert for every slip or sign of weakness, to say nothing of a learned enemy, as many suppose Chapman to have been.

When the play was produced in the autumn of 1599 the friendship was probably little more than a year old; for in 1598 Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* had been performed by the Chamberlain's Company, with Shakespeare taking part; and it was Shakespeare who, according to a story which Rowe reports, had "by a remarkable piece of humanity and good nature" introduced the still comparatively unknown dramatist to his fellow-actors and induced them to accept the play.¹ "After this", Rowe continues, "they were professed friends, though I don't know whether the other ever made him an equal return of gentleness and sincerity." Rowe appears to have momentarily forgotten the magnificent *laudatio* which Jonson wrote for the posthumous edition of his 'beloved' friend's plays; but it cannot be denied that his immediate 'return' was rather sincere than gentle. In his next play, *Every Man out of his Humour*, performed in 1599, once again by Shakespeare's fellows, he mocks, not necessarily ill-naturedly, at two passages from *Julius Caesar*. First, in act 3 scene 4, a couple of coxcombs, Clove and Orange, talk 'fustian' philosophy together in the hearing of others to "make 'hem believe we are great scholars"; one of their scraps of spurious Aristotelianism being "Reason long since is fled to animals, you know", which is a patent fling at Antony's

O judgment! thou art fled to brutish beasts,
And men have lost their reason;

and, whether of malice prepense, or as I prefer to think because he missed Shakespeare's point, quoted out of its context as a serious 'philosophical' (that is to say scientific) observation. But Shakespeare was as learned as Jonson or anyone else in the science of his day and put it to better use in his plays than most dramatists. Antony's exclamation makes excellent sense when taken in its context and considered in relation to beast-lore. The best commentary on it is Hamlet's exclamation in the first soliloquy:

O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,
Would have mourned longer.

This proves that Shakespeare was well aware of the Aristotelian doctrine which ascribed the God-given faculty of reason and judgment to man alone;² but shows him equally aware that, despite this doctrine, beasts seemed capable of compassion, which was generally regarded as

BEN JONSON AND JULIUS CAESAR

one of the highest manifestations of reason. For as Anne remarks to the inhuman Richard Crookback:

No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.³

It is just this paradox, this contradiction between scientific theory and a matter of common observation, that Antony has in mind, since like Hamlet and Lady Anne he too is referring to compassion. The passage begins:

You all did love him once, not without cause.
What cause withholds you then to mourn for him?

The exclamation follows naturally thereafter; and is itself followed by a moment or two's silence as Antony gives way to grief; while, when later he succeeds in moving the crowd to compassion, he returns to the same theme:

O, now you weep and I perceive you feel
The dint of pity: these are gracious drops.

But Jonson ignored all this, took the words out of their context and held them up to ridicule as 'fustian philosophy'. Yet it is not to be supposed that Shakespeare was without his defenders, even if he did not defend himself in one of those 'wit-combats' Fuller speaks of. And that the passage became the talk of the town is suggested by an echo of Jonson's gibe which appears in an anonymous play *The Wisdom of Dr Dodipoll* (pub. 1600), and runs "then reason's fled to animals, I see".⁴

Aristotelian psychology being long since out of date, this first of Jonson's jests is more obscure to us than it would have been to his contemporaries. His second no one can miss. In act 5 scene 6 of the same play, when Sir Puntarvolo, after beating the scurrilous Carlo Buffone to put him "out of his humour", proceeds to seal up his lips with wax, the victim's last pitiful cry is "Et tu Brute!" which he addresses to his friend Macilente who treacherously holds the candle for the execution of Puntarvolo's vengeance. And that the use of this tag was at once a good stage joke and a thrust at Shakespeare's ignorance is suggested by Dr Simpson, who notes that "Jonson, who knew his Suetonius, would be aware that what the dying Caesar said was something different",⁵ and something moreover in Greek not in Latin.

Yet while Ben could mock at Shakespeare's history and 'philosophy' he was not above picking up a 'philosophical' crumb of the latter from under his table. When Shakespeare makes Antony say of the dead Brutus:

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world 'This was a man!'—

he drew upon the Galenic physiology, still orthodox in his day, which, based upon the notion that the life of man doth, as Sir Toby puts it, "consist of the four elements" (viz. earth, water, air and fire), declared that health, bodily and spiritual, depended upon a balance between them. Jonson avails himself of the same conception in the following description of Crites, a character

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

in *Cynthia's Revels* (acted 1600), wherein he draws a picture of his ideal man and does not hesitate to give him features strongly reminiscent of his own:

A creature of a most perfect and divine temper. One in whom the humours and elements are peaceably met, without emulation of precedency: he is neither too fantastically melancholy, too slowly phlegmatic, too lightly sanguine, or too rashly choleric, but in all so composed and ordered, as it is clear Nature went about some full work, she did more than make a man when she made him.⁶

A commonplace of the age, implying no borrowing from either side, it may be said, while it may be argued that so far from the initial impetus coming from Shakespeare the lines just quoted from *Julius Caesar* were probably themselves inspired by *Every Man in his Humour*. Yet even if this last be true the wording of the eulogy on Crites is so similar to that of Antony's on Brutus, that an echo can hardly be questioned. And while Jonson echoed Shakespeare, Drayton in turn echoed both in the following stanza from the 1603 edition of *The Barons' Wars* in praise of Mortimer:

He was a man, then boldly dare to say,
In whose rich soul the virtues well did suit,
In whom, so mixed, the elements all lay
That none to one could sovereignty impute,
As all did govern, yet all did obey;
He of a temper was so absolute
As that it seemed, when Nature him began,
She meant to show all that might be in man.⁷

Here lines 4 and 5 clearly derive from Jonson's "without emulation of precedency", while "so mixed, the elements", a form of words Jonson does not use, seems with equal probability to point back to Shakespeare.

Finally, there is yet a fourth passage in *Julius Caesar* associated with Jonson and better known for being so than any of those already cited; a passage interesting, moreover, as affording in the opinion of many the only known instance in the Folio of an alteration made in deference to literary criticism. It forms the concluding portion of Caesar's speech rejecting the petition of the kneeling Metellus Cimber just before the assassination and runs as follows in the text as it has come down to us:

Thy brother by decree is banished:
If thou dost bend and pray and fawn for him,
I spurn thee like a cur out of my way.
Know Caesar doth not wrong, nor without cause
Will he be satisfied.

And here is Jonson's comment which forms part of his reply, first printed in *Discoveries* (1640), to the players' boast that Shakespeare "never blotted out line":

His wit was in his own power; would the rule of it had been so too. Many times he fell into those things could not escape laughter: as when he said in the person of Caesar, one speaking to him: "Caesar thou dost me wrong"—he replied: "Caesar did never wrong, but with just cause", and such like, which were ridiculous.⁸

BEN JONSON AND JULIUS CAESAR

As thus quoted Caesar's words, though undoubtedly referring to the same situation, correspond with those of the Folio text neither in phrase nor in meaning. We are therefore faced with an alternative: either, as Steevens who first drew attention to the criticism supposed, Jonson "quoted the line unfaithfully" in order to ridicule Shakespeare, or, as Tyrwhitt suggested in reply to Steevens, "the players or perhaps Shakespeare himself, overawed by so great an authority, withdrew the words in question".⁹ Steevens's explanation has found favour with good critics like Aldis Wright¹⁰ and Mark Hunter,¹¹ who agree that but for Jonson's comment "no one would have suspected any corruption in the passage", a contention I find difficult to rebut, though some feel that the last line and a half in the Folio version follow those before with a certain inconsequence. Yet I am confident that Tyrwhitt offers the true interpretation and for three reasons.

First, any idea that Jonson invented out of sheer malice the line he criticizes seems to me quite incredible. Even if we accept in full and without question Drummond's well-known description of him as "a contemner and scorner of others, given rather to lose a friend than a jest",¹² that only means that he enjoyed retailing scandal or making unkind jokes at his friends' expense, not that he would go to the length first of concocting an absurdity and then of falsely attributing it to a fellow-dramatist in order to lampoon him. Such a piece of mean treachery is irreconcilable both with what we know of Jonson's frank if splenetic character and with the admiration and affection which breathe from the lines to Shakespeare already spoken of. As for the other two reasons, they would be valid whatever views we hold about him, since they are inescapable inferences from indisputable dates.

The criticism, I have said, is to be found in Jonson's *Discoveries*, a posthumous publication but compiled for the most part between 1626 and his death in 1637,¹³ that is to say after the publication of the First Folio in 1623. Is it really conceivable that Jonson proposed to pass this absurdity off as Shakespeare's when the story could be checked and confuted by a simple reference to the printed text, a text moreover for which he had himself written two sets of commendatory verses? To do so would be to court instant exposure as a lying traducer, an exposure the more certain that, as he was aware, the dead Shakespeare had energetic partisans among literary men. One of these was Leonard Digges, who, having in his lines for the First Folio named *Julius Caesar* as unequalled among contemporary dramas, made the point still more explicit in an expanded version of these, printed a generation later, as follows:

So I have seen, when *Caesar* would appear,
And on the stage at half-sword parley were
Brutus and Cassius, oh how the audience
Were ravished, with what wonder they went thence;
When some new day they would not brooke a line
Of tedious, though well-laboured, *Catiline*;¹⁴

and so on, comparing play with play of the two authors and ever in Jonson's disfavour. This appeared in 1640, when Jonson too was dead; but it shows what some had long thought, and what Jonson must have known they thought.

The third reason is, I think, more cogent still. That the line as quoted in *Discoveries* was, at least in general tenor, well known to the theatre public is proved by its appearance in one of Jonson's plays; and, as with "O judgment, thou art fled to brutish beasts", he puts it in the mouth

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

of a character to raise a laugh. The play is *The Staple of News*, first acted "by His Majesty's Servants" in 1626 and the allusion, which occurs in the Induction, is thus printed in the 1631 text:¹⁵

EXPECTATION. *I can doe that too, if I haue cause.*

PROLOGUE. *Cry you mercy, you neuer did wrong, but with iust cause.*

The difference of type shows that a quotation was intended, and there can be no doubt that the audience was expected to recognize it as such. It must have been a pretty familiar quotation too, since source and author are not even hinted at. And yet in 1626 *Julius Caesar* was already twenty-seven years old. The lines cited above from Digges explain the mystery. *Julius Caesar* retained its hold on the affections of playgoers long after its original production; and though our very imperfect theatrical records give no trace of a revival at the beginning of Charles I's reign, the allusion in *The Staple of News* is itself strong evidence that in 1626 Caesar's words were fresh in mind, that is to say had been recently heard on the stage; the same stage, for both plays belonged to the King's men. In face of all this, to contend that

Caesar did never wrong, but with just cause

was a distortion of Shakespeare's meaning on Jonson's part not merely does wrong to Jonson's memory, it does a wrong for which no cause whatever can be shown. In other words, Shakespeare must have written what Jonson reports or something very like it, and what he wrote must have remained in the prompt-book and been spoken by the player taking Caesar's part at least three years after the other version had appeared in the First Folio.

It remains to inquire why the change was made, what precisely the change was, and who made it. None of these questions can of course be answered with absolute certainty, but one or two probabilities may be ventilated. As to the last, some have jumped to the conclusion that the change was made by Jonson himself, whose commendatory verses in the Folio suggest that he might have had a hand in the preparation of its text. If this means that *Julius Caesar*, in copy or proof, was passed on to him for correction as a classical expert, the supposition is disproved by the presence in the revised text of many other features which he would have considered solecisms and have amended, a glaring instance being the Italian form given to some of the Latin names. If, on the other hand, it means that the scribe who prepared the copy for the printer made the change at Jonson's instigation or in deference to his condemnation of the passage, that seems very probable, and is as far as we are likely to get with the answers to the first and the third questions. It is even possible that he asked Jonson to rewrite it for him, since it is hard to believe that a mere scribe invented the Folio reading. Tyrwhitt, it is true, suggested in 1766 that what originally stood in Shakespeare's manuscript was:

Know, Caesar doth not wrong, but with just cause;
Nor without cause will he be satisfied;

a reconstruction which ingeniously combines the meaning that Jonson recollected with the words of the Folio text; and if this be right then any scribe might have made the change by simply deleting four words. Tyrwhitt's solution, however, involves two difficulties: first, it implies that Jonson's verbal memory, well known for its accuracy, was less precise than usual; secondly, the line as he recollected it is so manifestly superior to the line and a half of Tyrwhitt's reconstruction that it is hard to believe the recollection anything but exact.

BEN JONSON AND JULIUS CAESAR

The first critic to bring out this last point, as far as I know, was the late John Palmer in 1945. He noted that the words

Nor without cause will he be satisfied,

which belong to the text both of Tyrwhitt and of the Folio, and imply that Caesar "might be satisfied if cause were shown", make a very lame conclusion to a speech the whole tenor of which is that the decree of banishment is irrevocable, and seems quite inconsistent with "constant as the northern star" in the speech that follows. On the other hand, Jonson's single line,

Caesar did never wrong, but with just cause,

is "dramatic, significant and in character". Its very isolation and abruptness give it just that hint of menace and air of inflexible finality which the end of such a speech demands. "It is Shakespeare's finishing touch to the portrait of a dictator. It is the last, if it be not also the first, assumption of the man who lives for power that the wrong he does is right."¹⁶ I am of course aware that 'wrong' does not necessarily mean wrongdoing in Shakespeare, though Jonson evidently assumed it did, and that the line might be interpreted "Caesar never punished a man unjustly". The sense Palmer places upon it seems, however, the more likely because dramatically the richer; or Shakespeare, as often elsewhere, may have deliberately used an ambiguous word to allow his audience a choice of meanings. Anyhow, in neither case is the meaning the least 'ridiculous'. As with "O judgment, thou art fled to brutish beasts", Jonson has taken the passage as a logical or philosophical proposition without reference to context or character.

And that, I think, explains a point which Palmer has not squarely faced: the protest "Caesar, thou dost me wrong" which Jonson reports as the occasion of Caesar's contemptuous reply. Some critics have given it to Metellus Cimber and made the dialogue run:

Caesar: . . . I spurn thee like a cur out of my way.

Metellus: Caesar, thou dost me wrong.

Caesar: Caesar did never wrong but with just cause

Metellus: Is there no voice . . .

But that, by associating 'wrong' with 'spurn' etc., would empty Caesar's line of its larger dramatic significance, to say nothing of degrading it from its position as an exceedingly effective close to the preceding speech. Moreover, as Aldis Wright objects, "for Metellus to interrupt Caesar with the petulant exclamation . . . is out of character with the tone of his speeches before and after, which is that of abject flattery". Take it how you will, such a protest cannot be fitted into the context. Yet what is there surprising in this? Is it inconsistent to suppose that Jonson's memory, so clear as to Caesar's 'ridiculous' words, was vague about the dramatic occasion on which they are used? His highly critical intelligence, prejudiced against the play directly he learnt that Shakespeare was attempting a theme so far, as he considered, out of his element, seized upon anything he could quote or laugh at as absurdities and paid little or no attention to the context, in which he was not interested. In the *Discoveries*, however, some kind of peg for the quotation was necessary and what he supplied was harmless and good enough for the purpose.

That we should have four instances of Jonson criticizing this one play, and that the criticisms should extend over a period of twenty-five years or more, suggest something of an *idée fixe*. It was Sidney Lee's belief that the famous 'purge' which according to *The Return from Parnassus*

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

Shakespeare had administered to Jonson was the writing of *Julius Caesar* in which he "proved his command of topics . . . peculiarly suited to Jonson's classicised vein and had in fact outrun his churlish comrade on his own ground".¹⁷ However that may be, a play on such a theme by one who was no scholar could hardly have been anything but a standing offence in his eyes. That it brought throngs to the theatre would not surprise him; he knew the 'barbarism' of the London public. And when it continued to do so after he had shown in *Sejanus* and *Catiline* how plays on classical themes, based on the original historical sources not on some English translation of a French translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, ought to be written, he could console himself with

Art hath an enemy called Ignorance.¹⁸

But when the players insisted on praising their Shakespeare for the wrong things he was bound to speak out. That he "never blotted out line" was the man's weakness; how much better the plays might have been had "he blotted a thousand", as anyone who knew his Horace¹⁹ could have told them. And this, he protested, and honestly protested, was not malevolence on his part but sound criticism. Even to speak of it as "ridiculously patronising"²⁰ is unfair. After all, did not Matthew Arnold criticize Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats in much the same fashion and much the same spirit? Poets are apt to misapprehend each other, especially when they belong to the same period. The very brightness of their genius blinds them to the peculiar excellences of a genius differing from their own. Certainly Jonson quite failed to understand Shakespeare; his praise of him in the First Folio proves that. He even missed the point of the passages he picked out for laughter or censure in *Julius Caesar*. Misunderstanding, however, does not quite account for all. There was rancour in the cup; the unconscious realization by a proud spirit of another's superiority. Jonson won a great place for himself, a great following, and he deserved them.²¹ But it was his fate to live from beginning to end of his career in the shadow of one by whom his genius was

rebuked, as it is said

Mark Antony's was by Caesar.

NOTES

1. Rowe does not mention the title of the play in question, but it can hardly have been any but *Every Man in his Humour*. See *Ben Jonson*, ed. Herford and Simpson, I, 18.

2. Cf. *Hamlet*, IV, v, 83-5:

"poor Ophelia,
Divided from herself and her fair judgement,
Without the which we are pictures or mere beasts."

3. *Richard III*, I, ii, 71. See also *Henry VIII*, II, iii, 10; *Titus*, II, iii, 151; *Winter's Tale*, II, iii, 186-9.

4. First noted by E. Koeppl in *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, XLIII (1907), 210.

5. *Notes and Queries*, II February 1899.

6. *Cynthia's Revels*, II, iii, 123 ff. I quote from *Ben Jonson*, IV, 74, modernizing the spelling.

7. Canto III, stanza 40. In her notes on this Mrs Tillotson cites *Julius Caesar*, V, v, 85-7 and adds: "the lines are not in *Mortimeriados* [1596], so there can be no doubt that Drayton is the imitator, and the verse is in fact nearer to its model in 1619 than in 1603. His collaboration in the lost play *Caesars Fall* in 1602 may have made him especially familiar with Shakespeare's play." (*The Works of Michael Drayton* (1941), v, 67.) She does not notice the link with *Cynthia's Revels*.

BEN JONSON AND JULIUS CAESAR

8. *Ben Jonson*, viii, 583-4 (spelling modernized).
9. See Boswell's *Malone* (1821), xii, 75-6.
10. *Julius Caesar* (Clarendon Press Series), note on iii, i, 47-8.
11. *Julius Caesar*, ed. App.D. This edition ("The College Classics", Madras, Srinivasa, Varadachari and Co., 1900), though little known in England, contains a full and interesting commentary, in which the editor's friend Dr Percy Simpson had a large share.
12. See *Ben Jonson*, i, 151.
13. *Ibid.* i, 104.
14. From *Poems: written by Wil. Shakespeare Gent*, 1640 (reprinted in Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, ii, 232-4), in which 'Catilines' is misprinted for 'Catiline'. Again I modernize the spelling.
15. *Ben Jonson*, vi, 280.
16. John Palmer, *Political Characters of Shakespeare*, pp. 44-6. Harbage (*As they Liked It*, 1947, p. 83), who also accepts Jonson's version, finds a less sinister meaning in it. He cites "Bassanio's plea to Shylock's judge, 'To do a great right, do a little wrong'", and notes that Shakespeare constantly uses the moral dilemma in an experimental or provocative way.
17. *Life of Shakespeare* (1916), pp. 353-4.
18. *Every Man out of his Humour*, Induction, i, ii, 9.
19. See *De Arte Poetica*, ll. 291-4.
20. Hunter, *op. cit.* p. 390.
21. I do not think these concluding remarks are inconsistent with G. E. Bentley's monumental *Shakespeare & Jonson: Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared* (University of Chicago Press, 2 vols. 1945), or with his inaugural address, *The Swan of Avon and the Bricklayer of Westminster* (Princetown University), which came to my hand after this article was already in type.