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THE STAGE HISTORY

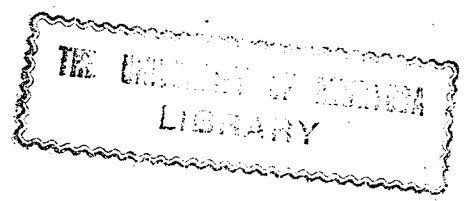
of

SHAKESPEARE'S "JULIUS CAESAR"

by

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THE STAGE HISTORY OF SHAKESPEARE'S
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INTRODUCTION.

In "Julius Caesar" Shakespeare availed himself of a theme already a favourite with the theatre-goers of his day. The story of the overthrow of the foremost man in all the Roman world, the progress of the conspiracy against him, the fall of this mighty prince of antiquity, and his revenge upon the murderers, furnished material well approved as a tragic theme for dramatic art. The subject was a very popular one, and had an abiding fascination for Shakespeare himself. That he made a special study of the character of Caesar is evident from the fact that no other historical personage is so frequently mentioned by him in such laudatory terms.

When the play opens a great political struggle, extending over many years, is reaching its crisis. The Roman republic has grown old and inefficient, it is ruled by a dictator, by a king in all but name, who has risen to a place of power such as no man has occupied in the world before, and republicanism and royalty, as rival principles, divide the community into two camps.

As an historical authority Shakespeare followed North's translation of the Greek biographer Plutarch. From the lives of Julius Caesar, Brutus, and Antony the dramatist took his materials for the play, judiciously selecting such incidents as might form the picture he intended to give of the declining days of the republic. Nevertheless, he gave to the actors that individuality which only a great dramatist can create, and the characters of Brutus, Cassius, Caesar, and Antony are revealed to us by their own deeds and words, and by what others say of them.

PART #1. "JULIUS CAESAR" IN ENGLAND.

The exact date of the first production of "Julius Caesar" on the stage is very uncertain. Malone assigns it to the year 1607. Craik supposes that it "can hardly be assigned to a later date than the year 1607", but that "there is nothing to prove that it may not be of considerably earlier date". Collier goes still further by maintaining that there is good ground for thinking that it was acted before 1603, and that there is no reason for believing it may have been performed in May, 1601. From "Henslowes Diary" we learn that Drayton, Webster, and others were engaged at that date on a tragedy dealing with the same subject, called

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(1) "Henslowe's Diary".

"Caesar's Fall". When a play was a success at one theatre, a drama on a similar subject frequently followed at another, and we know that Henslowe had several playwrights working at this material in the early summer of 1602. Consequently, the probable date of its first production is 1601.

- This variety of drama had already been tried in the popular taste. A series of medley dramas, the work of Thomas Heywood, dealing with classical mythology had been popularized on the London stage during the nineties of the preceding century. Moreover, this particular subject had been frequently used for drama before. "The first day of February, at nyght, 1562, witnessed "Julius Sesar" played at Court, "the earliest instance", Collier declares, "of a subject from Roman history being brought upon the stage". In 1578 a "Caesar's Tragedy" was published at Paris, and in 1579 a "Caesar and Pompey" was mentioned by Gosson. The latter is no doubt the same play as was performed in 1562. A
- (1) play called the "Storie of Pompey" was acted before Queen Elizabeth at Whitehall by the children of St. Paul's in 1580, and two year's later a Latin play on the subject of the death of Caesar, the work of Dr. Richard Rades, chaplain to the Queen, was produced at Christ Church College. Two editions of an anonymous English play of Shakespeare's age entitled "The Tragedy of Caesar and Pompey" or "Caesar's Revenge", have also come down to us. One bears the date of 1607, the same year in which Alexander's "Julius Caesar" was printed at London, and the other was apparently published earlier. The first performance of the anonymous play took place in 1594. Malone points out that "in the running title it is called "The Tragedy of Julius Caesar" the better to impose it on the public for the performance of Shakespeare". On November 8th of the same year Henslowe records a "seser and pompie" as acted by the Admiral's men at the Rose Theatre, followed by a "2 pte (part) of sesore" on June 18th, 1595. Thus a wide popularity had been aroused for the life of the greatest man of antiquity, and when Shakespeare's play appeared in 1601 it gave a new vogue to the subject. No doubt its
- (2) great success provoked rival companies to an extraordinary effort, for on May 22, 1602, Henslowe records a "sesers ffalle" produced by the joint efforts of Munday, Drayton, Webster, and Middleton, and in 1604 Lord Stirling's "Julius Caesar" appeared.

- Leonard Digges is the authority for the statement that Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" roused the emulation of all the theatres immediately on its appearance, and was acted with great applause before crowded houses during the poet's life. In the following lines he praises its scenic attractiveness at the expense of Ben Jonson's Roman plays:-
- (3)

"So have I 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!"

- (1) "History of Dramatic Poetry" Collier: Vol.1.p.180.
 (2) "Elizabethan Drama": Schelling: vol.2.pp.21-22.
 (3) ("Shakespeare: Commentaries": Prof.Gervinus.
 ("William Shakespeare": George Brandes: p.302.