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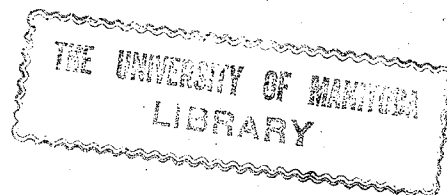
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**THE CAESAR OF SHAKESPEARE: A study in Historic and
Dramatic Portrayal.**

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INTRODUCTION.

Human Progress follows lines of conquest: only a conquering race may view the glories of Truth and Beauty and Goodness. Challenging a groping intelligence are giant problems set by the Infinite - the mysteries of Life, of Death, of the Soul, the great forces of Earth, the nature of God, and the like. Spurred by his problems, by the spell of the problem unsolved, Man reaches his highest achievement. It is Shakespeare's great merit and perhaps his chiefest charm that, touching all the problems of human existence he withholds enough of himself, and his art, to place the spell of the unsolved problem over all his work.

"Julius Caesar" is no exception. From the problem in the title itself, to that in a resolution extended through two closing acts the play abounds in questions. One concerns the titular hero himself. Does Shakespeare understand the historic Caesar and so portray him, or does he do the great Roman an injustice in his portrayal? This problem will be attacked herein, first by an inquiry into History as affecting the Rome of Caesar's time and into the character and achievement of the man himself, then by an investigation of Shakespeare's knowledge of Caesar, and, finally, by reference to the views of the commentators concerning this problem of the play.

I. THE CAESAR OF HISTORY.

(1) The Rome of Caesar.

In the last century of the Roman Republic there appear two outstanding features, which may be noted as indicative of decline in that stern old democracy. The first is a moving away from those political and social virtues of which the Romans were wont to boast; the second is the appearance, successively, in the Roman State of great men - "colossal individualities" Hegel describes them - who took into their own hands the guidance of public affairs hitherto controlled by the popular will. The second, obviously dangerous to democracy, was a consequence of the first. The general disintegration of political and social life left the political avenues open to the ambitious and venturesome. The state itself wanting unity, firmness and consistency "strong men were impelled to restore that political unity which was no longer to be found in men's dispositions" (a). Had the Rome of Caesar been the democratic nation that she once was and that Cicero and Cato imagined she would be but for these "colossal individualities", such autocratic proceedings as the proscriptions of Marius and Sulla could not have taken place, the rivalry between Pompey and Caesar could not have commenced and the rise to power of the Great Emperor himself, as well as that Empire to which his genius gave form, would have been impossible.

The first of these features, the regular disappearance of those rugged characteristics common to the earlier Romans,

(a) Hegel - Philosophy of History - 310.

is attributable to various developments, dating, in general, from the beginning of the last century of the Republic, a century fittingly introduced by the Graccian struggles. The relatively moderate violence of these brothers in their attempted redress of political ills, prevalent even in their day, marks the initial step in a progression of autocratic acts whose logical result could only be the complete subversion of the republican constitution. The well intentioned, though vicious, device of Gaius Gracchus in making monthly doles of cheap corn to the populace, although following an established senatorial custom of occasional distribution in times of stress (a) set up a dangerous precedent which was followed and abused by ambitious politicians, with consequent weakening of popular moral fibre, until the genius of Caesar opposed a decided, if arbitrary remedy. By this the hordes of Negroes, Phrygians, Iberians, Celts, Slaves, Gladiators and abandoned men of all classes whose thousands thronged the capital, were taught to seek out political favourites rather than honest employment; thus was the populace accustomed to look to the generosity of a privileged class or to the power of an individual rather than to the remedial legislation of an ordered state; in short, this was the first step, in many, by which democracy was nullified and the way made ready for the rule of "one only man".

The whole century is marked by successive internal disorders and commotions culminating in a civil war which was the undoing of the Republic. War had been Rome's way to glory and by the instruments of war, an able general, backed by an army loyal to himself, was Rome undone.

Hitherto the ever open gates of Janus had meant something of benefit to the capital. External wars had served as a means of relief against internal economic and political pressure. By this means economic rottenness had been hidden for generations before either the Gracchi or Caesar. Long and sanguinary struggles against the Italian nations by decimating the population, supplying relief in plunder and new lands for settlement, had alleviated the pressure of poverty. By the time of the Gracchi these wars were practically concluded and the last colonies in Italy had been settled. Rome had begun to share the glories and the perils of Empire. Now war passed, for the most part, to regions outside the Italian possessions and raging in the outposts of the Roman domain among alien peoples; glutted the Roman market with unlimited slave labor, by manipulation of which the capitalist class secured control, first of the public lands, and then of the great food supplies. The poor increased in number but the old families dwindled, in their diminution becoming more exclusive. With true aristocratic disdain of the NOVUS HOMO they strove again to rise to position of new families by excluding them from the three sources of Roman wealth, occupation of the public lands in a large scale, farming of the revenues, and exploitation, from government positions, of the Provinces - "the estates of the Roman people" so called.(b)

Thus by inheritance, intermarriage and monopoly of political control was brought about such a centralisation of wealth

(a) Botsford - History of Rome - 156.

(b) Rawlinson - Ancient History- 353.

as has scarcely been paralleled in the world's history. Thus was the capital of the Roman world filled with throngs of alien, shiftless and landless men. Drawn from Italy, from the Province and from the outposts of the Empire by the inducements of free food and swash-buckling demagogues they added to the problems of an incapable government and to the terrors of a disorganized and starving City. Of the Rome of the later Republican years let Mommsen tell (a). After describing the wretched condition of the inhabitants of the capital "the accumulation of rubbish" in the "narrow and angular, wretchedly kept" streets, the tumbling houses cheaply built by speculators, the splendid palaces of the rich "like isolated islands amidst the sea of wretched buildings", and the utter want of anything like orderly policing, the learned historian writes (in 1857), "If we try to conceive to ourselves a London with the slave population of New Orleans, with the police of Constantinople, with the non-industrial character of the modern Rome, and agitated by politics after the fashion of Paris in 1848, we shall acquire an approximate idea of the republican glory, the departure of which Cicero and his associates in their sulky letters deplore". Such was the capital of the worm out democracy Julius Caesar aspired to govern.

Among the more wise and patriotic of the Romans it had long been seen that this state of things was fraught with peril. Such a complex of unwieldy and poverty stricken proletarians, slaves, aliens and oppressed Provincials on the one hand with a licentious and voracious governing class on the other, boded ill for the peace of Rome, and claimed the serious consideration of all who pretended to the name of statesmen (b). Unhappily statesmen worthy the name were few and far between in the Rome of that period. In their place great individuals, some well meaning, others unscrupulous, came to the head in affairs of State. Tiberius Gracchus had failed in his manifestly remedial plans from use of violence to procure constitutional changes. Gaius avoiding this, failed from tactlessness in his opposition to the Senate, then, as ever, the stronghold of patrician power and privilege. The next who held in his hand the way to regeneration was Marius, conqueror of Jugurtha and of the Cimbri and Teutones.

The career of this great Roman is significant. He was probably the last of the "colossal individualities" who might have redeemed the old Republic. After him it was too late. Consul, in defiance of the institution, six times, he is an illustration of the disintegrated condition to which Roman social and political life had fallen. He further illustrates the means by which it was to be recovered - his reorganisation of the army on democratic lines perfected that instrument by which the Republic was to be supplanted and the Empire established by Caesar. Finally, of plebeian origin, the husband of Julia, a paternal Aunt of Caesar, Marius must have exerted an abiding influence on the boyhood days of Caesar. The boy was in his fifteenth year when Marius was compelled to fly for his life from the hatred of Sulla. When his uncle returned he seems to have recognized the ability of the youth for he made him Flamen Dialis, priest of Jupiter. Caesar was then hardly more than a boy but had already put off his purple bordered toga and donned the white toga of manhood. To the influence of Marius is attributed Caesar's early affiliation with the Popular party.

(a) Mommsen - Everyman Series, Vol. IV. - 473.

(b) Rawlinson - Ancient History - 354.

Marius lost his opportunity and his great rival abused his Dictator for life, in three years. Sulla "reformed" the constitution to deprive it of all elements of a popular character, with concentration of power in the hands of the aristocratic senate, (a) Here was no Caesar. He merely served to throw the oligarchic and the popular parties into open and bitter rivalry in which "everything ultimately depended on the personal character of the leading men on both sides" (b).

The number of "leading men" was finally (B.C. 69-67) reduced to three, Pompeius, Crassus and Caesar. Of these Caesar was openly in sympathy with the popular cause and by that party was "extolled as the only man worthy to be a kinsman of Marius" (c) Pompey and Crassus dangling between popular favor and senatorial bounty first conciliated one another and then allied themselves with Caesar in the Triumvirate. From this Coalition Caesar emerged master of the Roman world.

Of his Gallie campaigns, and the last months of rivalry with Pompeius nothing need be said here. This civil war must be traced to the completeness of Rome's disorganisation. The Republic existed in nothing but name; the rottenness of the national fabric was the basic cause both of the rivalry of Pompeius and Caesar, and of the rise to power, first of the predecessors and rivals of Caesar and finally of the great Julius himself. "In this way the world wide sovereignty of Rome became the property of a single possessor. This important change must not be regarded as a string of chance, it was NECESSARY - postulated by circumstances----- It was not the mere accident of Caesar's existence that destroyed the Republic - it was Necessity" (d).

- (a) Merivale - History of Rome Everyman Series - 258.
- (b) Mommsen - " " " " " IV. 6.
- (c) Plutarch's Lives Trans. Long & Stewart C. Caesar- VI.
- (d) Hegel, Philosophy of History, 311.

(2). Achievement and Character of Caesar.

The first problem attacked by Caesar was that of reconciling the parties whose antagonisms had induced the civil war and his own elevation to supreme authority. This he went at with characteristic vigor, perspicuity and statesmanship. As a party the Democratic faction was left to the process of decomposition. Rather than allow its leaders to sink into a passive opposition he urged them to accept positions of trust in the new administration. Cassius and Brutus were given positions, Cicero was welcomed as a friend and the followers of Pompeius found the name of their leader "mentioned often and always with respect". The constitutional party was handled with equal justice and wisdom. Caesar's policy did not arise "from the Chivalrous magnanimity of a proud, nor from the sentimental elemency of an effeminate nature, but from the correct

statesmenly consideration that vanquished parties are disposed of more rapidly and with less public injury by their absorption within the state than by any attempt to extirpate them by proscription or to eject them from the commonwealth by banishment "(a). For all this, however, Caesar knew that any reconciliation he could bring about must be for a time external, that there was more unanimity in hatred of himself than in adherence to the state, but did not inquire who hated him or meditated his assassination. He went about the streets unarmed and unguarded and in his later years frequently expressed his opinion that it was better to die at once than to live trembling for his safety. On the fateful Ides of March he went to the Senate house more probably urged by some such philosophy than by the suggestion of Decimus Brutus "that he should be proclaimed King"(b).

His solution of other problems was marked by expedition and permanency. In the short time he was in Rome, some twelve months in all, he, by dint of unsparing thought and toil left his mark on everything he considered in need of readjustment, from the tumbling dwellings, the pools and congestion of traffic in the City itself, to the extortion of governors in Syria, Spain and Sicily (c).

He exercised the whole power of King and Emperor. The Senate, now forgetting its opposition in obsequiousness showered offices and dignities upon him. He had acted as Dictator when he passed from Rome to Spain in 49 B.C. On his return he was made dictator, but temporarily; after Pharsalus he was made dictator with no date of expiry stated. After Thapsus it was given him as an annual office and in the month previous to his assassination he had become dictator for life. Such powers gave him the first position in the state - in itself a recognition by the Senate of an abnormal condition, because the office was, above all, one of temporary expediency. Besides this he received the consulship annually and was granted powers distinctly new, as tribune for life, with the first place in the Senate, the right to declare war or conclude peace, the disposal of the armies and treasuries, nomination of provincial governors, the right of conducting elections, of nominating patrician families and of declaring half the recruits of the Senate. Above all in 46 B.C. he became imperator for life and from the year 44 the coins of the realm bore his head. He had the powers of monarchy and did not despise its symbolism. He wore the purple robe, had his statue set up beside those of the seven Kings on the capital and ordered that oaths be sworn in the name of the Gods and the Emperor! But his desire for the Crown is open to question. His rejection when Antony offered it to him is more reasonably interpreted as an utterly sincere rejection of a title which was ill-sounding to all the Romans (d).

The obsequiousness of the Senate was answered by a complete reform of that ancient body. It was reduced to its original advisory function and its numbers raised to 900 by the admission not only of Knights but of bourgeois citizens and chiefs of the lately conquered Gallic tribes. That Caesar dreamed of a United Empire and a Senate representative of the whole there is little doubt.

(a) Mommsen - Everyman - IV. 437.

(b) Plutarch - C Caesar LXIV.

(c) Hardinge - The Peoples Books - "Julius Caesar" - 80.

(d) Hardinge - "Julius Caesar" - 80.