



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival

SHAKESPEARE IN 1599

It is likely that William Shakespeare wrote both *As You Like It* and *Julius Caesar* in 1599. At first glance, these two plays seem quite different from one another—one is a comedy based on a novel published in 1590, while the other is a tragedy set in ancient Rome. However, if we dig into what scholars have discovered about Shakespeare's life during that time, we find some interesting parallels.

By 1599, Shakespeare's career in the theatre was taking off. He had been working consistently as a playwright and actor in the Lord Chamberlain's Men for more than five years. His name began to appear on the cover of quarto editions, suggesting that he was recognized as an author. In 1597, he bought one of the most expensive houses in his hometown of Stratford. We even have letters of people writing to Shakespeare for business loans.

Shakespeare was also a shareholder in the new playhouse constructed south of the Thames river. Ambitiously christened "the Globe," the theatre probably had its grand opening in the summer of 1599. Some scholars believe that *Julius Caesar* was the inaugural performance. Although we have no concrete evidence, it makes sense from a business standpoint. What better way to advertise the opening of your new theatre than a brand-new play by the company's star dramatist about the assassination of Julius Caesar?

Other scholars raise the possibility that *As You Like It* was, in fact, the first new play to be shown at the Globe. In any case, it was

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THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT:

AS YOU LIKE IT
CAESAR

Shakespeare's first comedy to premiere there. A popular legend has it that a banner hung over the entrance to the Globe, bearing a Latin motto that translates into "all the world plays the actor." If so, then the famous monologue in *As You Like It*, which begins with "All the world's a stage," could very well have been a sly plug for the new theatre in addition to a meditation on life and death. The line, "this wooden O," in *Henry V* (also written around this time) also refers to the Globe, which was donut-shaped. Maybe Shakespeare was so excited about his new artistic home in 1599 that he couldn't help himself.

The Lord Chamberlain's Men went through another major change that year. Will Kempe, the talented clown actor and dancer, left the company in 1599. We know for sure that he played Dogberry in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and he probably took on many of Shakespeare's other comic roles up to that time, including Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Lancelot in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Kempe's replacement was Robert Armin, a goldsmith turned actor. Armin had a beautiful singing voice and was known for his verbal dexterity and wit. He set the template for the comic characters that Shakespeare wrote since 1599, including Feste in *Twelfth Night*, the Gravedigger in *Hamlet*, and the Fool in *King Lear*. This "second generation" of fools began with Touchstone in *As You Like It*, whose name may be a reference to Armin's former trade. Some historians conjecture that Armin also played Casca in *Julius Caesar*.

Shakespeare was reaching new heights as the sixteenth century came to a close. He was inspired to attempt new subject matter and techniques in his playwriting, and took on a larger role in the management of the company. Placed side-by-side, *As You Like It* and *Caesar* give us a snapshot of Shakespeare's work at a transitional time in his career.



Woodcut illustration of Robert Armin from 1609. (Wikimedia Commons)