

More Evidence That *Julius Caesar* dates to 1583

by Robert Prechter

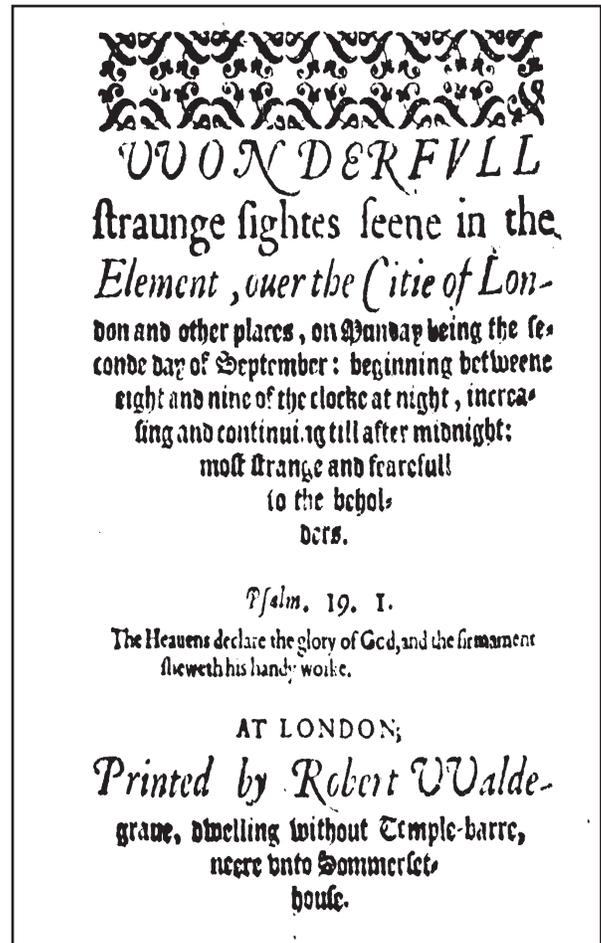
Eva Turner Clark proposed that the first version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* dates to no later than January 1583. She wrote:

On January 6th, 1582-3, "A historie of fferrar shewed before her majestie at Wyndesor on Twelf daie at night Enacted by the Lord Chamberleynes servauntes furnished in this office with diverse new things as one Citty, one Battlement of canvas.... [Feuille-rat: "Documents," p. 350] ...My belief is that "fferrar" should read "Caesar." Phonetic spelling by the recorder would make "Caesar" begin with s, or ss for a capital letter, and Henslowe's "Diary" ...shows "Caesar" spelled "Seser," "Sesar," "Sesear," and "Sesor" (p. 529, 529fn).

Thomas Day, father of author Angell Day, was a parish clerk in London. His only publication is *Wonderfull Strange Sightes seene in the Element, over the Citie of London and other Places*, which describes dramatic atmospheric events occurring on September 2, 1583, between 8 p.m. and midnight. Following his account, Day issues a strident call for people to repent before God's wrath consumes them.

As it happens, an obscure source that Shakespeare mined for his play dates from that same year.

Thomas Day, father of author Angell Day, was a parish clerk in London. His only publication is *Wonderfull Strange Sightes seene in the Element, over the Citie of London and other Places*, which describes dramatic atmospheric events occurring on September 2, 1583, between 8 p.m. and midnight. Following his account, Day issues a strident call for people to repent before God's wrath consumes them. The first pages are in prose and ensuing ones are in verse (fourteeners). Here is Day's description of the event:



...marvailous strange, rare, miraculous, & wonderful permove-
 ments, and regrediacions, with constellations of the ayre, and
 watery elements, which were sometime fiery, and bloody col-
 loured, with streames like sharpe speares, shooting straight
 upward, and meeting together, (as it were) in round point, with
 flashes, much brightnesse, many streames, and straunge and
 unwonted collours of the rainebow. As also with the collour
 of the fire of Brimstone, and seeming as it were burning with
 fierye flashes and smoake. Straunge, and fearefull no doubt to
 the beholders, as though the gallant frame, of all the radiant
 skie and elements, had beene even then about to be set on fire.

Shakespeare must have been quite taken with this powerful
 vision, as he incorporated Day's title and terms into Act 1 scene 3,

of *Julius Caesar*, in which these exchanges occur while thunder booms and lightning flashes:

Cicero. Why, saw you any thing more *wonderful*?

Cassius....And the complexion of *the element* ...

Cinna....There's two or three of us have *seen strange sights*.

Combined, the emphasized words produce "*wonderful strange sights seen of the element*," a precise rendition, save for the preposition, of the opening portion of Day's title. Typing Day's title into Google search confirms that this conflation of words is unique to these two sources, as the two first texts displayed in the search results are Day's and Shakespeare's, and they are the only ones containing all the same words.

There's more. In his description of the event, which covers only a single page of text, Day speaks of "*wonderful* permovements," and Shakespeare's Cicero asks, "saw you anything more *wonderful*?" Day writes of the "*elements*, which were...sometime *fiery*, and *bloody* coloured," and Cassius speaks of "*the element*... Most *bloody*, *fiery* and most terrible." Day writes of "*flashes*," and Cassius remarks on "the very *flash* of it." Day says the events are "*Straunge*, and *fearefull*," and Cassius calls Caesar "*fearful*," as these *strange* eruptions are." Day speaks of "the radiant *skie*... about to be set on *fire*," and Cicero and Casca of "this disturbed *sky*...a tempest dropping *fire*."

It would be nearly impossible to describe a scenario in which Day adopted the language of Shakespeare; after all, he was describing an actual event. And there is no basis on which to attribute Day's description to Shakespeare, who would not be at home with the dense religious language that precedes and follows it. So Shakespeare must have mined Day's dramatic exposition for his play. The coincidence of verbiage supports Clark's case that the earliest version of *Julius Caesar* dates to 1583.

But Feuillerat's records indicate that *A historie of sserrar* was acted a few months before the atmospheric event described by Day occurred. If that play is in fact the first version of *Julius Caesar*, perhaps Shakespeare read Day's book shortly thereafter and revised his play to incorporate its images in helping to set the foreboding tone of Act I. If his play was still popular a few months after its first known showing—as seems probable—it would be reasonable for him still to have been improving the language of the play. Alternatively, perhaps Feuillerat's information refers to someone else's production, which along with Day's inspiring description gave Shakespeare the idea to write his own version of Caesar's fall later that year. (Or perhaps there is an error in Feuillerat's *Documents*, and *A historie of sserrar*, later titled *Julius Caesar*, was actually performed on January 6, 1583-4.)

Sometime after 1575, Oxford had employed Day's son Angell, formerly a printer's apprentice, as his secretary. In 1586, Angell published *The English Secretorie* and dedicated it to the Earl of Oxford. Many sources erroneously attribute Thomas' publication to Angell. But the opening prose passage is signed "Thomas Day," and the thickly religious language of the tract reflects Day's occupation, fitting father far better than son. Taken together, our information establishes relationships between Angell Day and Oxford, and Thomas Day and Shakespeare, thereby

linking them all together.

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Sources

- Clark, Eva Turner. *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare's Plays*. Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1974.
- Day, Thomas. *Wonderfull Strange Sightes seene in the Element, over the Citie of London and other Places...* London: Robert Waldegrave, [1583].
- Shakespeare, William. "Julius Caesar," *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*. London: Jaggard and Blount, 1623.