

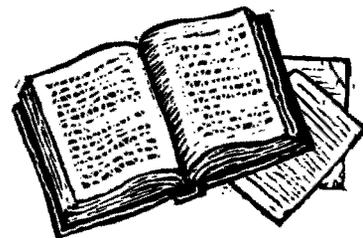
Julius Caesar

Scholars generally agree that *Julius Caesar* was first written and performed in 1599 and may have been the first of Shakespeare's plays to be presented in the newly constructed Globe theater in London. The drama was apparently quite popular among Elizabethan audiences, most of whom were familiar, from numerous other literary sources, with the historical Julius Caesar.

1599

Other aspects of this play that Shakespeare's audiences could relate to included civil wars, which they were forced to endure, and the wide gap between the powerful, wealthy aristocracy and the working class populace. Also, neither political assassinations nor ambitious tyranny, which are topics covered in the play, were novel concepts. In other words, Shakespeare's audiences were well experienced with the material that made up this tragic drama; even the stories of English history that they studied in school were colored by the conquests of the play's title military genius.

In writing *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare chiefly drew on the events in the lives of the historical figures of Brutus, Caesar, and Antony, which he took from biographies written by Plutarch, called *Parallel Lives* (translated by Thomas North as *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* in 1579). Plutarch was a Greek historian and essayist whose work constitutes a record of the historical tradition, the moral views, and the ethical judgments of ancient Greek and Roman cultures. According to some academic studies, Shakespeare was not



especially interested in the details of history addressed by Plutarch; rather, he focused on the underlying character strengths and weaknesses, as well as the motives, that Plutarch noted in many of the great ancient leaders.

While the action of *Julius Caesar* closely follows the events described by Plutarch, Shakespeare greatly modified the significance of those events. By Elizabethan times, two sharply contrasting views of this period in Roman history had emerged. One held that Brutus and the other conspirators were ruthless murderers who unjustly killed their would-be emperor; the other interpreted their actions as the rightful deposing of a tyrant. Shakespeare carefully designed his play in such a way that it seems to support, or at least allows for, both views. As a result, critics have long debated whether Brutus or Caesar is the chief protagonist of *Julius Caesar* and whether either of them qualifies as a tragic hero.

This fundamental ambiguity in the play is further complicated by the different political motivations of the play's main characters. Cassius assassinates Caesar seemingly because he believes Caesar is an alleged tyrant. However, throughout the play are scattered hints that Cassius might have acted out of personal envy. Brutus has nobler ideals; he joins the conspiracy because he wants to preserve the Roman Republic. Mark Antony, on the other hand, rouses the Roman populace against the traitors out of loyalty to Caesar, but he later benefits from the leader's death when he becomes a co-ruler of the Roman Empire.

The circumstances surrounding Caesar's assassination reveal that although the major characters strive to attain different political ends, the means by which they achieve their aims are often quite similar. Furthermore, despite the supposed good intentions of these men, they all become corrupted in some way, and their actions eventually lead to violence and civil strife.

Scholars have increasingly come to regard *Julius Caesar* as a work of rich complexity. Whereas earlier commentators attempted to provide definitive analyses of Brutus and Caesar, more recent scholars have concluded that Shakespeare's portraits are not necessarily explicit; rather, they feature ironic, even confusing elements. Today, critics generally agree that the uncertainties surrounding the protagonists and the political issues raised by the drama are intentional. The ambiguities in *Julius Caesar*,

they maintain, serve to intensify Shakespeare's depiction of the limitations of human understanding and the difficulty of defining absolute truths in regard to individuals and historical events.

PLOT SUMMARY

Act 1, Scene 1

At the beginning of *Julius Caesar*, Flavius and Marullus, two Roman tribunes, appear with a group of various laborers and commoners. They berate the commoners for being in the streets, telling the men that they should be working. When the men reply that they are there to watch the parade honoring Caesar, Flavius and Marullus scorn them. Marullus attempts to belittle Caesar's victories: "Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?" Then Marullus calls the laborers names: "You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!" Marullus points out the laborers' fickleness, recalling how these same men once cheered Pompey, and now they applaud the man who defeated Pompey.

Flavius then tells the crowd, "Disrobe the images / If you do find them decked with ceremonies." In other words, Flavius wants all statues of Caesar to be cleared of any special decorations, a statement, or direction, that will later determine both Flavius's and Marullus's fate. This first scene is a foreshadowing of the attitudes that will be revealed among the conspirators who plot Caesar's assassination, which is about to unfold in the next scene. It also foreshadows the fickleness of the crowd that will occur again after Caesar is murdered.

Act 1, Scene 2

Caesar is marching through the streets with his wife, Calpurnia, with both enemies and supporters of Caesar present. Mark Antony is preparing to take part in a ceremonial run to celebrate the holiday, the feast of Lupercal. During this exercise, runners become symbols of fertility, and Caesar reminds Antony to be sure to touch Calpurnia's hand as he passes by, thus anointing Calpurnia with the power to become pregnant. This signals Caesar's desire to have an heir and heightens suspicions that Caesar is also thinking about becoming king; that is, if Caesar does become king, he will want a son to inherit the

crown. For his part, Antony, demonstrating his loyalty, says, "When Caesar says 'do this,' it is perform'd."

Soon after, the Soothsayer tries to warn Caesar of the conspiracy plot, telling him, "Beware the ides of March." The Soothsayer says this twice, but still Caesar brushes the warning aside, saying, "He is a dreamer." In dismissing the Soothsayer, Caesar demonstrates that he is not superstitious like many of the people around him, as well that he does not wish to show fear.

Everyone leaves the stage except Cassius and Brutus. In the course of their conversation, Cassius discovers that Brutus is upset. Cassius attempts to persuade Brutus to do something about Caesar, telling Brutus that many Romans are not pleased with Caesar but are impressed with "noble Brutus." When horns are heard, Brutus says that he fears the people have asked Caesar to be their king. Cassius jumps on Brutus's statement and says that if Brutus fears this, he should do something about it. Brutus states that he loves Caesar, yet he listens to what Cassius has in mind. Brutus hints that as long as the plot that Cassius is considering is conceived in honor, he could be a part of it.

After relating a story that portrays Caesar as being weak, Cassius observes, "And this man / Is now become a god," insinuating that Caesar is being worshipped but is not strong enough to become king; Caesar is flawed. Brutus listens to Cassius and finally states that he thinks he understands what Cassius is alluding to. Still, he asks Cassius to say no more and to give him time to think.

Caesar and Antony return, and Caesar tells Antony that he does not trust Cassius: "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look; / He thinks too much: such men are dangerous." Antony tells Caesar not to worry, as Cassius is a noble man, but Caesar is not convinced. Caesar states that Cassius "reads much, / He is a great observer, and he looks / Quite through the deeds of men."

Meanwhile, Brutus stops Casca and asks him why the crowds roared. Casca tells him that Antony offered Caesar a crown three times, and Caesar refused it three times. Each time Caesar refused, the crowd roared. Casca says that he thinks Caesar wanted to accept the crown but could not go against the wishes of the crowd. Casca says that when the crowd cheered

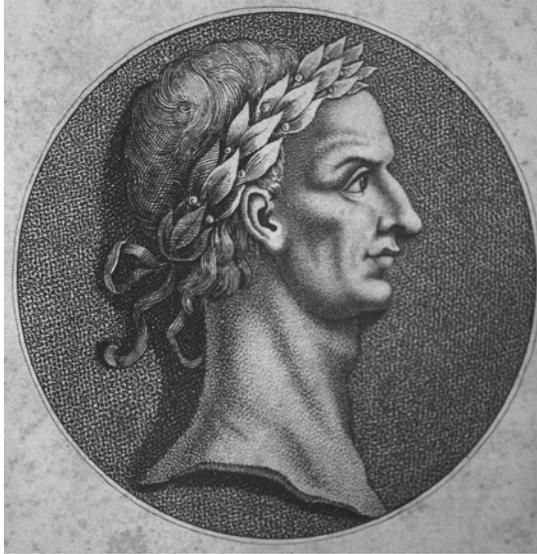
Caesar's refusal, Caesar made a motion indicating that the crowd might as well have slit his throat. Casca also tells Brutus and Cassius that Marullus and Flavius were put to death for pulling the decorations off Caesar's statues; this strengthens Brutus's opinion that Caesar is beginning to act as a tyrant. Before the scene ends, Cassius, alone, plots to send anonymous letters to Brutus to further persuade him to join Cassius's plot.

Act 1, Scene 3

One month later, Casca is out in a terrible thunderstorm, which scares him. Cicero passes by, and Casca tells him of many terrifying sights he has seen: a lion roaming the streets and people burned by the lightning signify the torment that is raging in people's minds, as word has gotten out that some of the Roman senators are planning to offer a crown to Caesar. Cicero, who has vowed to remain politically neutral in regards to Caesar, tells Casca, "Men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves." In other words, omens may be interpreted in many different ways. Then Cicero leaves, and Cassius appears. Cassius is not afraid of the storm and chides Casca for being so timid. Through their talking about the storm, the men understand that beneath their words is a plan to prevent Caesar from becoming king. Casca says that he will join Cassius in whatever he is planning. Cinna next appears, and Cassius gives Cinna the anonymous letters he has written and asks Cinna to deliver them to Brutus. The three men hope that Brutus will join them in their conspiracy, for Brutus is known as a noble and honorable man, and with Brutus among them, the people will respect them no matter what they do.

Act 2, Scene 1

The conspirators, including Cassius, Casca, Decius, Cinna, Metellus Cimber, and Trebonius, meet at Brutus's house. Cassius wants the men to take an oath, but Brutus does not, believing that their cause is powerful enough in and of itself. Then Cassius discusses the possibility of killing not only Caesar but also Antony. Cassius says, "I think it is not meet, / Mark Antony, so well beloved of Caesar, / Should outlive Caesar." However, Brutus says that he thinks the plot would be considered too bloody if they were to kill more than just Caesar: "Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius, / To cut the head off



Engraving of the bust of Julius Caesar

and then hack the limbs.” Also, Brutus tells the men that when they murder Caesar, they should do it properly; Brutus does not want Caesar to be butchered. Brutus says, “Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods,” asserting that this will make them appear more as “purgers, not murderers.” In this way, Brutus attempts to rationalize what he is about to do.

Cassius remains concerned about Antony, because of Antony’s love for Caesar, but Brutus insists that they leave Antony alone and does not believe Cassius should worry about Antony. Brutus suspects that Antony will fall into despair and become harmless. This exchange reveals a weakness of Brutus’s—his inability to properly evaluate other people. At last, the conspirators make their plan concrete, setting the time and place for the assassination. Decius promises to bring Caesar to the Senate at the appropriate time.

After the men leave Brutus’s house, Portia, Brutus’s wife, appears and tells Brutus that she is worried about his not sleeping. She knows that something is bothering him and pleads with him to speak with her. Brutus lies, saying that he is sick, but Portia does not believe him, and she then challenges his definition of their marriage. She wants to know if she is his wife only to eat meals with him and share his bed but not to share in all his intimate thoughts. To prove her trustworthiness, she shows him a self-inflicted

wound on her thigh, asking, “Can I bear that with patience, / And not my husband’s secrets?” But someone knocks on the door, and Brutus tells Portia to leave; he will reveal his secret later. The man at the door is Ligarius, a sick man who wants to join the conspiracy, even though he does not know all the details. He follows Brutus blindly, as he trusts Brutus to be honorable in whatever he does.

Act 2, Scene 2

At Caesar’s house, the thunderstorm continues to thrash the skies. Caesar is awake and mentions that no one in his house has found peace that night. Besides the loud thunder, Calpurnia has cried out three times in her sleep, saying, “Help, ho, they murder Caesar!”

Calpurnia appears, and after telling Caesar of her dreams, she pleads with her husband to stay home and not go to the Senate, as she fears for his life. She tells him of all the bad omens she has either seen or heard about, but Caesar does not want to give in to his wife’s fears. If the gods have ordained his death, Caesar believes, he can do little about it. He remarks, “Cowards die many times before their deaths; / The valiant never taste of death but once.” When a Servant reports that Caesar’s priests also predict that the coming day will not be a good day for Caesar to go out, Caesar finally succumbs to his wife’s wishes. However, Decius then appears and reinterprets Calpurnia’s dream, suggesting that the dream was not a bad omen but rather a sign of greatness to come. Caesar falls for Decius’s trap and leaves with Decius for the Senate.

On the way to the Senate, the conspirators appear. Caesar believes that they have risen so early to greet him and walk with him. When Antony appears, Caesar tells him to go ahead and tell the other senators that he is coming.

Act 2, Scene 3

Artemidorus, on stage alone, reads a paper he is holding. The note tells Caesar to be aware of the conspirators, for they are not to be trusted. Artemidorus announces that he will stand there on the street and hand the note to Caesar as he passes: “If thou read this, O Caesar, though mayest live; / If not, the Fates with traitors do contrive.”

Act 2, Scene 4

At Brutus's house, Portia orders the houseboy, Lucius, to run to the Senate and watch what happens. He is then supposed to report back to Portia. The boy leaves, and the Soothsayer enters. Portia tries to get information from the Soothsayer, who says he will try once again to warn Caesar before he reaches the Senate.

Act 3, Scene 1

The Soothsayer once again warns Caesar, and Artemidorus hands Caesar the warning note, but Caesar heeds neither the men nor their messages. The conspirators then gather around Caesar, pretending to plead with him to pardon the brother of Metellus Cimber; this gives the men a chance to surround Caesar without his becoming suspicious. As planned, Casca pulls out his dagger and inflicts the first wound, as followed by the others, with Brutus stabbing Caesar last. In dying, Caesar cries out, "Et tu, Brute? Then fall Caesar!"

The word of Caesar's death reaches the other senators and the general public, and pandemonium sets in. Under Brutus's guidance, the conspirators wash their hands in Caesar's blood. Brutus tells them that they will walk out, thus bloodied, and will shout, "Peace, freedom, and liberty!" Brutus believes that the people will support the assassination because the tyrant is dead.

One of Antony's servants enters and delivers a short speech, seemingly praising Brutus and surrendering to Brutus's power. Brutus tells the servant to fetch his master, and Antony soon enters. He asks Brutus to allow him to speak to the crowd after Brutus has first made his appeal. Cassius does not trust Antony, but Brutus believes that his own speech will persuade the crowd to support the conspirators and that nothing Antony might say will change that.

Act 3, Scene 2

Brutus makes his speech to the crowd, proclaiming his love of Caesar. In defending the assassination, Brutus states, "Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more." Caesar was not good for Rome, Brutus tells them, as he would have eventually enslaved everyone; with Caesar dead, Romans are now free. The crowd supports Brutus.

Antony enters carrying the body of Caesar. Antony's speech proves deceptively clever, as he communicates what he feels without explicitly

vocalizing it. Antony repeats some of Brutus's assertions, such as that Caesar was ambitious; Antony then counters this claim by noting times when Caesar was not ambitious. In order to dispute Brutus's claims about what Caesar has done without appearing to attack Brutus himself, Antony states, "Brutus is an honorable man." Following this pattern throughout his speech, Antony builds doubt in the minds of the people, so that they finally question if Brutus is truly honorable: how could Brutus be honorable if what he has just said is not true? Antony sways the crowd further by showing them the bloody body of Caesar and reading Caesar's will, which Antony says promises much good for the common people.

At length, the crowd is in an uproar. They shout that Brutus and his co-conspirators are villains and murderers, and they want to burn down Brutus's house. As they leave, Antony remarks to himself, "Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot."

Act 3, Scene 3

Cinna the poet is confronted by a group of people. They mistake him for Cinna, one of the conspirators and kill him. This occurrence highlights the unruliness of the crowd and foreshadows the series of deaths that will follow.

Act 4, Scene 1

With Brutus and Cassius having left Rome, Antony forms an alliance with Octavius and Lepidus to prepare for the impending war against the conspirators. The three men meet and discuss which Romans should live and which should die under the new government. Once Lepidus leaves, Antony tells Octavius that he deems Lepidus unfit to help rule the soon-to-be-established empire. Octavius does not understand why Antony led Lepidus to believe he is part of the triumvirate if Antony believes Lepidus is so unworthy. Antony asserts that Lepidus will do the hard work and help ensure their success; Lepidus will bear certain burdens just "as the ass bears gold, / To groan and sweat under the business, / Either led or driven as we point the way." This exchange demonstrates Antony's cunning, as he uses people as he sees fit, then discards them when he has accomplished his goals.

Act 4, Scene 2

Near Sardis, Brutus receives word that Cassius is near. Brutus suspects, however, that something has come between the two men; their friendship has cooled. Cassius appears.

Act 4, Scene 3

Cassius expresses anger over Brutus's decision to condemn one of his men for taking bribes. Brutus and Cassius then have a tremendous argument, during which Brutus accuses Cassius of also taking bribes. The fight continues to escalate until Cassius, deeply offended, bares his breast and offers Brutus his dagger. Brutus overcomes his anger, and the two men are reconciled. Brutus then reveals to Cassius that Portia is dead.

Turning to a discussion of battle plans, Brutus resists Cassius's strategy of making the enemy seek them and decides to engage Octavius and Antony at Philippi. Later, when he is alone, Brutus sees the ghost of Caesar, who tells him that they will meet again at Philippi.

Act 5, Scene 1

Brutus and Cassius meet Antony and Octavius at Philippi to confer; however, after the two sides exchange insults, they agree to face each other on the battlefield. Cassius and Brutus are concerned that they may never meet again, and so they say good-bye to one another.

Act 5, Scene 2

Brutus tells Messala, his servant, to give orders for one of his legions to attack Octavius's group. Brutus thinks he sees a weakness and wants his men to surprise Octavius's army and crush them.

Act 5, Scene 3

Brutus's military decisions prove to be mistakes, with his errors giving rise to a weakness in Cassius's army. Specifically, Brutus ordered his men to move too quickly, and now they are distracted; they begin looting the camp instead of supporting Cassius's men. Cassius's troops, seeing their doomed fate, are running away. Fearing that some approaching soldiers are the enemy, Cassius sends Titinius to find out who they are and orders his servant Pindarus to observe what happens. While the troops are really members of Brutus's army who welcome Titinius into their ranks, Pindarus mistakenly reports that Titinius has been captured. Cassius, in despair, asks Pindarus to help him commit suicide.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- *Julius Caesar* was adapted to film by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1953. This critically acclaimed motion-picture version of the tragedy features Marlon Brando, James Mason, and John Gielgud. The film was directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and produced by John Houseman.
- An educational version of *Julius Caesar* was made into a video by BHE Education, in conjunction with Seaborne Enterprises, in 1969. The video offers performances of key scenes in the play.
- In 1970, another film version of *Julius Caesar* was produced by Peter Snell, through Commonwealth United. This film stars Charlton Heston, John Gielgud, Jason Robards, Richard Chamberlain, Robert Vaughn, and Diana Rigg.
- A televised performance of *Julius Caesar* was presented by the BBC and Time-Life Television in 1979 as part of a series of Shakespeare's plays.

Act 5, Scene 4

In a battle with Antony, Lucilius pretends to be Brutus in order to keep Brutus from being captured. Antony recognizes that Lucilius is not Brutus and orders that Lucilius be kept safe, remarking, "I had rather have / Such men my friends than enemies."

Act 5, Scene 5

After learning of Cassius's death, Brutus prepares to engage the enemy again. Brutus's forces are defeated in this second battle, and Brutus does not want to be taken prisoner, so he commits suicide. Upon finding Brutus's body, Antony delivers a brief oration, proclaiming, "This was the noblest Roman of them all." The other conspirators, Antony says, committed their crimes out of envy; only Brutus believed that what he did was for the common good.

Antony ends his speech by stating, “Nature might stand up / and say to all the world, ‘This was a man!’” In addition, Octavius declares that Brutus will be buried with full honors.

CHARACTERS

Mark Antony

Mark Antony, whose Latin name is Marcus Antonius, is a Roman general and a loyal friend of Julius Caesar’s. He is angered and sad upon learning of Caesar’s death and persuades Brutus to allow him to speak at Caesar’s funeral. Although Brutus demands that Antony support the conspirators, Antony cleverly uses the occasion to rouse the crowd against Brutus and his co-conspirators. Antony displays a high level of cunning in the way he manipulates the crowd’s emotions, such as by making repeated ironic references to the conspirators as “honorable men,” by displaying Caesar’s cloak and corpse, and finally by reading the ruler’s will. An undercurrent of Machiavellian opportunism can also be found in Antony’s character; after he rouses the crowd with his speech, he meets with Octavius to plot how they can take advantage of the turmoil that Caesar’s death and Antony’s speech have caused.

Much like the actions of Cassius and Brutus, Antony’s dealings, while initially appearing admirable, reveal a pragmatic political motivation, which has a significant bearing on the dramatic events of the play. These three characters are ultimately linked by the common bond of ambition, which precipitates, and in some respects is thwarted by, the central crisis of the play—Caesar’s assassination. Antony and Octavius defeat Brutus and Cassius at Philippi and, with Lepidus, form the triumvirate that eventually rules Rome.

Artemidorus

Artemidorus is a teacher of rhetoric. He gives Caesar a letter revealing the plot to assassinate him, but Caesar does not read it.

Decius Brutus

Decius is a Roman general and conspirator of Caesar’s assassination. He persuades Caesar to go to the Senate on the day Caesar is assassinated by interpreting Calpurnia’s prophetic dream as one of honor rather than one that foretells Caesar’s death.

Marcus Brutus

Marcus Brutus is a Roman senator. He joins the conspiracy because he fears that Caesar’s ambition will turn to tyranny, which will eventually destroy the Roman Republic. Brutus is often described as a noble man with high ideals; he is a character of seemingly irreproachable honor and virtue and is often regarded as the tragic hero of the play. But Brutus might also possess the tragic characteristic known as *hubris*—excessive pride that leads to misfortune. Brutus’s *hubris* derives from his arrogance, self-righteousness, and lack of self-knowledge. His involvement in the conspiracy is grounded in his earnest belief that Caesar’s death will benefit Rome, but he is blind to the potential repercussions of the assassination and to his accomplices’ lack of moral principles. He is also so sure of the virtue of Caesar’s assassination that he does not believe anyone can convince the Roman people that Caesar’s death was murder. So unaware is he that he allows Antony to speak to the crowd, convinced that not only Antony but also the people will be loyal to the cause. Brutus’s naïveté, or perhaps more accurately his blindness, catches him off guard as the masses turn against him and the conspirators. Ultimately, Brutus’s tragic flaw is his inability to realize the consequences of his actions, and this lack of self-awareness leads to his downfall at the end of the play.

Julius Caesar

Caesar is a Roman general, a consul, and a would-be emperor. He is assassinated by Brutus, Cassius, and others because they fear his ambition. He appears only briefly in the play. After his assassination, his spirit haunts Brutus at Sardis and Philippi later in the play.

The character of Caesar is perhaps the most difficult to interpret, since reading him one way or another can alter the perspective on the entire play. If Caesar is viewed as an overly ambitious, vain, and pompous tyrant, as Cassius and Brutus see him, then his assassination might be seen as a necessary act to purge Rome of a potentially corrupt dictatorship. On the other hand, if Caesar is regarded as a wise and benevolent leader, as Mark Antony views him, then the conspiracy appears to be an attempt to overthrow the government by a group of envious and power-hungry politicians.

Perhaps the most effective way to resolve the issue of Caesar’s character is to consider that

Shakespeare intentionally presented an enigmatic figure to emphasize the contradictory nature of the assassination and to leave undecided the question of whether the conspirators' actions were justified. Often, critics of the play debate who is the more tragic figure in this play, Caesar or Brutus.

Octavius Caesar

Octavius is Julius Caesar's adopted son and heir. Octavius is not in Rome when Caesar is assassinated. Upon his return, he joins Antony in defeating Brutus and Cassius at Philippi. Then, with Lepidus and Antony, Octavius takes part in the triumvirate that rules Rome.

Calpurnia

Calpurnia is Caesar's wife. After having nightmares about his murder, Calpurnia urges her husband not to go to the Senate on the ides of March, or March 15th, the day he is killed. Calpurnia is invested in omens and dreams, all of which point to Caesar's death. Caesar is almost convinced by Calpurnia's fears and initially stays home, but he is eventually swayed to leave, not wanting to be seen as a fearful leader. Calpurnia is chastised when Caesar ignores his wife's anxieties and departs.

Casca

Casca is a tribune and member of Caesar's entourage. Casca reports to Cassius and Brutus that he saw the way Caesar and Antony responded to the offering of a crown in front of the crowds of people; Casca was not fooled by their public display and believes that Caesar was playing with the crowds in refusing the crown. Casca insinuates that Caesar is merely waiting for the right time to accept the crown and the power that comes with it. Casca joins Cassius's plot and later is the first conspirator to stab Caesar.

Caius Cassius

Cassius is a general and a Roman politician. He organizes the conspiracy against Caesar and recruits Brutus to his cause through flattery and by forging letters that suggest that the Roman people support Caesar's assassination.

Caesar refers to Cassius as being a lean and hungry-looking man, one who should not be trusted. Caesar, of course, turns out to be right, but he dismisses his own thoughts later in the play. Cassius appears to be one of the least trustworthy

men in the play. He has traditionally been described as a villainous, self-seeking politician who helps murder Caesar out of envy and spitefulness. While acknowledging these traits in Cassius's character, some critics have also emphasized his shrewd Machiavellianism. Machiavellianism holds that politics are amoral and that any means, however unscrupulous, are justified in achieving and retaining power. Recently, critics have credited Cassius with having more dimension than the typical Machiavellian villain has. Support for this perspective can be found in Cassius's leadership and keen powers of judgment, his apparent enthusiasm for Brutus's ideal of republicanism, and his great respect for and friendship with his co-conspirator.

Cicero

Cicero is a member of the Roman Senate. He is a renowned orator and is considered a noble man. The conspirators consider asking Cicero to join them, believing that his reputation would help to sway the masses in their favor. Brutus does not agree. Later, Antony and the other members of the triumvirate order Cicero's death.

Cinna

Cinna is a tribune and conspirator. He urges Cassius to recruit Brutus for their cause.

Cinna the poet

Cinna the poet is mistaken for Cinna the conspirator by the mob. He explains the error, but the crowd kills him anyway for his "bad verses."

Flavius

Flavius is a Roman tribune. He wants to protect the commoners from Caesar's tyranny. He condemns a crowd of men for praising Caesar when not too long before that they had praised Pompey, Caesar's enemy. During Caesar's celebratory parade, Flavius removes decorations from Caesar's statues and is later "put to silence." Through Flavius's character, Shakespeare foreshadows the fickleness of the masses as well as the fate of those who go against Caesar, such as Brutus and Cassius.

M. Aemilius Lepidus

Lepidus is a Roman politician. He joins Antony and Octavius to rule the Roman Empire after Caesar's assassination. Antony takes advantage of Lepidus's weak nature, essentially ordering

him to run errands. Octavius, however, thinks more highly of Lepidus.

Marullus

Marullus is a Roman tribune. Like Flavius, Marullus wants to protect the commoners from Caesar's tyranny and points out the crowd's fickle political sentiments. Marullus is later "put to silence" for removing decorations from Caesar's statues.

Pindarus

Pindarus is a servant of Cassius's. He mistakenly informs Cassius that Antony's forces have captured Titinius and are about to overtake the camp, which precipitates Cassius's decision to commit suicide.

Portia

Portia is Brutus's wife. She knows something is bothering her husband and is hurt that Brutus does not open up to her. She does not realize that Caesar's assassination is being planned, but she knows Brutus's distractions are more than the simple illness that he claims to have. Portia attempts to persuade Brutus to confide in her by demonstrating how strong her character is by inflicting a wound on herself. After the assassination has failed to win the support of the masses, Brutus learns that Portia has died; a little later, he learns that Portia's death was a suicide.

Soothsayer

The Soothsayer is a mystic. He unsuccessfully attempts to warn Caesar twice about his impending assassination, telling him to beware the ides of March.

THEMES

Politics

The depiction of Roman politics is central to *Julius Caesar*, especially regarding whether Caesar's assassination should be considered justifiable or not. One critical argument maintains that Shakespeare portrayed Caesar as a contemptible despot with a seemingly limitless appetite for conquest. Brutus joins the conspirators because he fears that the Roman Republic will be destroyed if Caesar is crowned king. From this perspective, *Julius Caesar* can be interpreted as presenting a political conflict between liberty

and tyranny in which the conspirators' assassination of the would-be dictator is noble and just.

A contrary reading holds that Shakespeare created a benevolent, if somewhat vain, leader in Caesar, who is brutally murdered by envious traitors who manipulate Brutus's republican ideals and rely on his political reputation to give their cause credibility. This interpretation is manifested in the character of Antony, who remains loyal to Caesar and supposedly avenges Caesar's murder by rousing the Roman populace against the conspirators. The political implications in this interpretation are that politicians use rhetoric, as opposed to truth or facts, to gain power.

The politics continue after Caesar's assassination, with the representative factions of the two opposing views—as led by Antony and Brutus—clashing in a civil war. Although Antony presents the image of a devout friend and loyal follower of Caesar to the crowd, his actions in the war are not completely motivated by the need to avenge Caesar's death; that is, Antony seeks political power. As Shakespeare interprets the historical events, only Brutus appears loyal to his reasons for taking part in the assassination and the political events that follow. Brutus's motivations were political from beginning to end; he believed in political ideals that he feared Caesar was not pursuing. Brutus fought in the civil war not for the political power he might gain but for the common good of the Roman people and for the continuation of the Roman Republic.

Power of Persuasion

Persuasion is used in many different ways in *Julius Caesar*. Simple flattery, sly deception, and the art of rhetoric are all used to help sway the minds of the Roman people as well as the minds of otherwise thoughtful and reflective leaders. The power of persuasion is most significantly demonstrated through Antony's and Brutus's speeches at Caesar's funeral in act 3, scene 2. The two men present different verbal strategies, although their goals are in some ways similar.

In Brutus's oration, his principal technique is to imply that the commoners must choose between mutually exclusive alternatives—dying as slaves under Caesar's tyrannical rule or living as free men in the republic—without proving that these are the only alternatives. For instance,



Paul Bentall as the Cobbler, Lionel Guyett as the Soothsayer, and Christopher Benjamin as Caesar in Act I, scene ii, at the Barbican Theatre, London, 1996 (© Donald Cooper/Photostage. Reproduced by permission)

Brutus states, “Had you rather Caesar were living and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?” Of course, Brutus could not prove either of these statements to be representative of reality without living through the continuation of Caesar’s rule or waiting to see what would happen after his death.

Antony’s eulogy, on the other hand, is characterized by the extensive use of irony and repetition, as well as by action words; thus, he excites the commoners’ emotions rather than appealing to their sensibilities. For instance, Antony repeats the phrase “Brutus is an honorable man” several times after insinuating that the evidence of Brutus’s good character is faulty. In order to sway the crowd further, Antony tells the crowd that Brutus’s stabbing of Caesar’s body was “the most unkindest cut of all,” because Caesar loved Brutus. Antony also makes certain claims, such as “When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept,” that the crowd is likely to believe but that cannot necessarily be verified. Overall, neither Brutus nor Antony offer rational proofs of their arguments regarding

Caesar, and consequently the more eloquent rhetorician, not the truth, sways public opinion.

Other uses of persuasion in the play include Cassius’s appeals to Brutus to join the conspiracy in the first and second acts. Cassius relies on flattery, constantly referring to how noble Brutus is. Cassius also persuades Brutus by telling him that Caesar is a weak man, as proven by his poor health and his acts of cowardice. Cassius attempts to cinch Brutus’s involvement through deception, writing letters to Brutus that seem to come from Roman citizens who support the idea of ridding the country of Caesar.

Immediately before Caesar’s assassination in act 2, Decius persuades Caesar to go to the Senate by reinterpreting Calpurnia’s dream so that it reads as a good omen rather than as a foretelling of Caesar’s death. Decius also attempts to persuade Caesar by insinuating that he would be exposing his fears should he allow Calpurnia’s dream to keep him away from the Senate. Caesar does not want to appear a coward, a fact that is not wasted on Decius. Then, as the conspirators gather around Caesar

to walk him to the Senate, their appearance quietly persuades Caesar to believe that they are his allies. Rather than being suspicious of their early rising and accompaniment, Caesar says, “I thank you for your pains and courtesy” and then refers to them as his friends. This feeling of assurance might also have led Caesar to ignore Artemidorus’s note, which warned him of the very men who were accompanying him to the Senate.

Private versus Public Personae

Another theme concerns the private and public personae of Brutus and Caesar and their relationships to human endeavors and history. While the private Brutus is a sensitive man who loves Caesar and abhors violence, the public figure of Brutus is a noble idealist who puts his personal feelings aside to protect the Roman state from Caesar’s perceived ambition. The private Caesar, on the other hand, is a superstitious man plagued by illness, while the public figure of Caesar is a demigod or superman who, in the words of Cassius, “doth bestride the narrow world / Like a Colossus.”

In the private world of the play, characters’ interior motives are revealed, but these motives are not necessarily relevant to their actions in the public world, which, once performed, become independent of them and a part of history. More broadly speaking, then, the play demonstrates humans’ inability to control others’ perceptions of their deeds, as history ultimately neglects a person’s private intentions and records only a person’s public actions.

Ritual

Ritual plays a key role in *Julius Caesar*, as Brutus attempts to exalt Caesar’s assassination to the level of a formal sacrifice. Brutus almost literally states this intent when he declares, “Let’s kill him boldly, but not wrathfully; / Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods, / Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.” Shakespeare provides added theatrical effect to the ritual motif when, after the conspirators stab Caesar to death, Brutus orders them to wash their hands in his blood. This episode emphasizes Brutus’s chief character flaw—self-deception—for he truly believes that he can purify Caesar’s assassination by regarding it as a ceremonial sacrifice.

Fickleness of the Populace

The fickle crowds play an important role in *Julius Caesar*. The common people are easily shamed in the opening scene, when Flavius and Marullus point out how fickle they are—first they honor Pompey, and then they honor Caesar, who defeated Pompey. Later, the masses are easily swayed, first by the arguments of Brutus, then by the rhetoric of Antony, which demonstrates the crowd’s instability and lack of direction. Shakespeare’s depiction of the populace in *Julius Caesar*, in fact, has often been viewed as his condemnation of rule by the people, or democracy, in favor of monarchy. In other words, the populace cannot be trusted to make good decisions.

Leadership Qualities

Shakespeare’s play raises questions regarding what type of person makes a good leader. Caesar himself can be examined as a brave warrior and cunning military strategist or, as Mark Antony views Caesar, as a benevolent man who is a sensitive and protective father figure. Aside from personality, can a leader have physical weaknesses and still rule successfully? Or should a leader be at the pinnacle of his or her health and a professed athlete, such as Antony?

Shakespeare does not answer any of these questions definitively; rather, he merely establishes the personal traits of the various characters in his play. As the play unfolds, the audience watches the characters face different challenges, which eventually expose both their strengths and weaknesses. Thus, the audience is left to evaluate each character’s ability or potential ability to lead. Regarding the character of Brutus, the audience might ask whether his high ideals and noble persuasion make him a good leader. Brutus may represent the most consistent and honest of all the characters in the play, but he proves too trusting—perhaps too naive—which leaves him blind to the consequences of his actions and the actions of others. Cicero, possibly the most thoughtful of all the characters, is relegated to a very minor role in this drama, almost to the point of being totally dismissed. Shakespeare did not give women any more political relevance in the play than they were allowed in actual Roman times, such that attributes ascribed to the feminine mind are rarely relevant in considerations of leadership. Antony comes the closest to rising to a position of leadership in this play. Antony behaves as a loyal friend and

obedient servant to Caesar, but he also proves deceptively cunning, displaying some of the least virtuous characteristics of the politician. He does, however, think for himself, which Cassius, on the other hand, seems unable to do. Cassius needs support and commitment from others in order to follow through with Caesar's murder. In essence, Cassius needs to stand behind Brutus, making Cassius more suited to the role of, say, running mate than to the role of leader.

Ultimately, only the individual audience member or reader can decide whether Shakespeare recommends any of these characters as a model of a good leader. Shakespeare seems to be saying, in fact, that all leaders have their faults, and a good leader simply has fewer of them, such that those faults can be overshadowed by the leader's strengths.

Ambition

Ambition is discussed in this play, primarily with negative connotations. Some of the senators believe that Caesar is an overly ambitious man, making him a candidate for assassination. Even noble Brutus, a friend of Caesar's, rationalizes his murderous behavior based on the understanding that Caesar is overly ambitious. Ambition in this regard is seen as an egocentric drive; Brutus comes to believe that Caesar wants power in and of itself, not for the benefit of the Romans. This concept of ambition is also what Cassius promotes when spurring his coconspirators to attack. However, whereas Brutus is worried about Caesar's ambition because of the detrimental effects it might have on Romans, Cassius simply seems to be jealous of Caesar's ambition. Cassius does not like having to help Caesar when Caesar admits weakness.

Death

Whether occurring on the battlefield or by the individual characters' own swords, a constant stream of deaths weaves through *Julius Caesar*. In the beginning of the play, Flavius and Marullus are put to death for removing ceremonial decorations from statues, thus setting in place a morbid motif that will repeat in every act. Cinna the poet is killed merely for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and having the wrong name. Other people, including Brutus, Cassius, and Portia, take their own lives to save themselves from personal disgrace.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- As a group, set up a court scene in which Brutus is being tried for the assassination of Caesar, assigning a judge, a jury, a prosecutor, and a lawyer for the defense of Brutus. The prosecutor and lawyer should each prepare a ten-minute address to the jury, proclaiming either Brutus's innocence or his guilt. The lawyers can then interrogate Brutus. The jury should be given time to deliberate before voting on Brutus's innocence or guilt based on the lawyers' presentations. If the jury finds Brutus guilty, the judge must decide his punishment.
- In an essay, compare Julius Caesar's assassination to that of President John F. Kennedy, addressing the following questions: How were they similar? How did they differ? What were the political environments like during the lives of each man? How were the assassins treated? Present your essay to your class.
- Adapt the character of Portia to modern times. If she were a woman living in Washington, D.C., in 2006, how would she differ? What would she say to her husband if he were in a position similar to that of Brutus? Rewrite the lines in the play featuring these two characters and recite them with a partner.
- Compare Mark Antony's funeral speech to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. What similarities can be found? How did King try to move his audience? What were some of King's most dramatic phrases? Bring in a taped recording of King's speech and play it for your class. Afterward, guide a discussion, using questions you have prepared. Then ask your classmates to judge both speeches for their ability to rouse the listeners' emotions.

The emphasis on death can be seen to reflect both the period in which Caesar lived and the era during which Shakespeare was writing. Civil

wars and wars with other countries were fairly common in both eras. In addition, in England during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, pestilence, such as the bubonic plague, killed thousands, as did more common communicable diseases. With regard to medical treatment, antiseptics and sterilized equipment were nonexistent in doctors' offices at the time. By some estimates, during the worst of the outbreaks of the plague, as much as one-third of England's population died. Thus, death touched everyone in real life, just as in Shakespeare's play. Although the number of deaths in *Julius Caesar* might appear excessive to the modern reader, for the audience of the sixteenth century—as well as for the people living in the first century B.C.E.—frequent deaths were to be expected.

STYLE

Iambic Pentameter and Blank Verse

Shakespeare wrote much of the text of *Julius Caesar* in iambic pentameter. With verse written in iambic pentameter, each line has ten syllables, with the second syllable in the five pairs (each pair is called a foot) usually accented. For example, take the opening line in Act 1: "Hence! Home, you idle creatures, get you home!" The syllables would be broken up as follows: hence-home/you-id/le-crea/tures-get/you-home. This would be read with the word "Hence!" unaccented; the word "Home" accented; the word "you" unaccented; and the first syllable [id] in the word "idle" accented, and so forth. The unstressed and stressed syllables create a rhythm similar to: ta-DUM/ta-DUM/ta-DUM/ta-DUM/ta-DUM.

Iambic pentameter is said to mimic natural human speech; it is also said to match the beating of the human heart. For this reason, some people claim that the lines in Shakespeare's plays that are written in iambic pentameter are easiest to memorize. In fact, iambic lines are the most commonly found lines in Shakespeare's works, as well as the most predominant in much of English verse.

Although not all of the lines in *Julius Caesar* are in iambic pentameter, the most important passages are, such as Mark Antony's speech at Caesar's funeral. Still, variations in meter can be found within iambic pentameter sections throughout the play. Without such variations, audiences might grow tired of hearing the same

monotonous, singsong rhythm repeated throughout the play. For instance, lines 6 and 9 in act 1, scene 1 are irregular. After Flavius delivers five lines in iambic pentameter, a carpenter says "Why, sir, a carpenter"; then, after speaking two lines in iambic pentameter, Marullus says, "You, sir, what trade are you?" Each of these lines has six syllables, not ten syllables. Also, some lines contain more than ten syllables. Some scholars believe that Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter so as to guide the actors who would dramatize his plays with regard to how to deliver the lines. On the other hand, Shakespeare likely did not mean to create steadfast rules about how to present his material but rather to offer the actors some direction.

A combination of iambic pentameter and unrhymed ends of lines is referred to as blank verse. Blank verse may look like prose, or regular speech, at first, because of the lack of a rhyming pattern. However, blank verse does feature the purposeful arrangement of meter, while prose has no set meter pattern. Two other differences between blank verse and prose are visual distinctions. In the text of *Julius Caesar*, for example, many lines do not proceed all the way to the right margin; instead, they terminate after the appropriate number of syllables. Also, with blank verse, each line begins with a capital letter, unlike with the prose in the pages of novels. This difference can also be noted in the speeches given by Brutus and Antony at Caesar's funeral: Brutus's is written in prose, while Antony's is written in blank verse.

Indeed, Shakespeare uses prose in his plays for specific reasons. For example, Brutus's speech is meant to convey a very rational execution; thus, it is written in prose. Antony's speech, however, is emotional and is one of the most beautiful examples of blank verse in the entire play. Shakespeare also contrasts the dialogue in the beginning of the play between Flavius and Marullus with that of the common workers they come upon in the streets. Most of Flavius's and Marullus's lines are written in blank verse, while the common workers speak in prose. Overall, blank verse may be perceived as Shakespeare's way of elevating conversations, calling attention to important passages, and making utterances sound more poetic without using a rhyming scheme.

Consonance and Alliteration

The sounds of words can be enhanced poetically in many different manners, two of which are consonance and alliteration. When using consonance, an author repeats the same consonant in several closely associated words. Shakespeare used this poetic device throughout *Julius Caesar*, such as in act 1, scene 1 when Marullus addresses the men walking in the streets by exclaiming, “You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!” These lines feature the repetition of the letter *s*, the sound of which carries through the line and connects the words together. Alliteration occurs when consonants are repeated at the beginnings of associated words. One example of alliteration is found in act 3, scene 1 when Antony first sees Caesar’s dead body; he uses the phrase “tide of times,” repeating the consonant *t*. Shakespeare used both consonance and alliteration in line 265, “Domestic fury and fierce civil strife,” in which the letter *f* is repeated. Consonance and alliteration not only sound pleasing to the ear but also sometimes help to emphasize the emotion behind the words’ meaning.

Metaphors

A metaphor is a figure of speech used to compare two unrelated things. Authors use metaphors to provide objects with deeper meanings or connotations. For example, Shakespeare uses a metaphor in act 1, scene 2 when Cassius tells Brutus to use him as a mirror: “And since you know you cannot see yourself / So well as by reflection, I, your glass, / Will modestly discover to yourself / That of yourself which you yet know not of.” Thus, “I, your glass” is the metaphor. Cassius is not a mirror, but he wants to offer Brutus a reflection. Interestingly, unlike a real mirror, Cassius does not give an objective reflection, as a mirror might, but rather the interpretation that Cassius wants Brutus to see. Thus, Cassius uses this metaphor to entice Brutus to reveal his inner thoughts; Cassius pretends to see within Brutus what Brutus cannot see for himself.

In act 4, scene 3, Shakespeare uses an extended metaphor that is developed beyond a simple phrase. Brutus compares life—or perhaps fate—to the ocean: “There is a tide in the affairs of men / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; / Omitted, all the voyage of their life / Is bound in shallows and in miseries.” The ebb and flow of the tide is used to explain the actions that Brutus is recommending that his and Cassius’s

armies take. Brutus is saying that timing is essential and that the time to move is now, at high tide. Unfortunately, Brutus misread the tides, so to speak, and soon faces defeat. Regardless, through Shakespeare’s use of this extended metaphor comparing life to the ocean, Cassius and the audience alike better understand the concept that Brutus is presenting. Brutus might have simply said that it was time to move; however, that assertion might not have been convincing enough for Cassius to agree with him. But Cassius understood the concept of the tides—how the ocean ebbs and flows according to its own timetable. When the tide is high, boats sail smoothly from the shore. When the tide is low, boats can become stranded on dry land.

Shakespeare’s Language

Although Shakespeare’s dramas are rich in meaning and feature a deep understanding of human psychology, many people are discouraged by the form of language Shakespeare used. The English language, like all languages in use, is constantly evolving. Just as the language of the twenty-first century will sound strange to English speakers of the twenty-fourth century, so, too, does Shakespeare’s language sound strange to contemporary audiences.

The language that Shakespeare uses can be referred to as early modern English. Some words in Shakespeare’s plays, such as “may’st,” are no longer in use. Also, the order of words in sentences was different in Shakespeare’s time than it is in contemporary times. In the twenty-first century, sentences in English are normally set with the subject first, the verb next, and the object third. An example of this order is the sentence “Shakespeare wrote plays.” The arrangement of many sentences in Shakespeare’s plays, on the other hand, is often different. Examples include “What means this shouting?” and “This by Calpurnia’s dream is signified.” After listening to a scene or two of a Shakespeare play, the language becomes more familiar to many modern audiences, allowing them to be less conscious of the wording and therefore more able to enjoy the play, as they become engrossed in the dramatic action.

Omens

Superstition was still quite prominent in daily life in Elizabethan times. Thus, Shakespeare naturally employed omens in the plots of his plays. In *Julius Caesar*, he primarily uses omens to set a

mood, mostly one of impending disaster. The play's most well-known omen is the Soothsayer's message, warning Caesar to beware of the ides of March. This omen is rather quickly pushed aside by Caesar, who does not want anyone to think of him as being fearful. The omen of the fierce thunderstorm in act 1, scene 3, on the other hand, causes shivers to run down the back of Casca.

Although some people in modern times still look for omens, or signs regarding the future, most no longer fear thunderstorms for their foreboding nature. As with other climatic events, meteorologists on television not only explain how thunderstorms are created but also predict when the storms will appear and how powerful they might become, thus taking much of the mystery out of the weather. Such science, however, was not available in either Roman or Elizabethan times. With his mind filled with the terrible assassination plans, Casca easily becomes affected by the clashing thunder and bolts of lightning, fearing that the gods are warning him about his actions. Also, Shakespeare, through the use of this omen and through Casca's fear, is warning the audience that disaster is indeed on its way. Shakespeare might have intended to use this particular moment both to foreshadow the assassination itself and to set the mood for all the turmoil and death to come after the assassination.

Another use of omens as foreshadowing occurs with Calpurnia's dream. In the dream, Calpurnia sees omens that she interprets as warnings of her husband's death—an interpretation that turns out to be valid. Here, again, Shakespeare seems to have used the omen for multiple reasons. He shows how Caesar could be manipulated, first by Calpurnia's interpretation of the dream and then by Decius's interpretation, which ran counter to Calpurnia's. In the course of the discussion as to whether Caesar should go to the Senate, Decius points out that the members of the Senate will think Caesar is weak if he allows an omen to keep him away from his office. Thus, in this instance, the omen exposes Caesar's inability to make decisions on his own as well as his susceptibility to public opinion.

Another omen is presented toward the end of the play, when Caesar returns as a ghost to haunt Brutus in act 4. Caesar's ghost tells Brutus that he has come "to tell thee thou shalt see me at

Philippi." With this omen, Shakespeare foreshadows the death of Brutus. The audience cannot be certain that this will occur, but the appearance of the ghost of the man that Brutus assassinated—before Brutus goes into battle, no less—is surely not a good sign. In using the ghost, then, Shakespeare intensifies the action by instilling in his audience the fear that Brutus surely would have felt upon encountering the ghost.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Julius Caesar

Gaius Julius Caesar (July 13, 100 B.C.E.—March 15, 44 B.C.E.) is considered one of the most brilliant military minds in history. One of his greatest feats was the conquering of Gaul (modern-day France and Belgium), thus extending the boundaries of the Roman Republic to the Atlantic Ocean. He was also a pivotal influence in transforming the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire, as he was appointed the state's perpetual dictator in the year of his death, 44 B.C.E.

Caesar was raised in a very comfortable setting. His family was not among the wealthiest but did include a long succession of politically influential people. Caesar's father was a military man who died when Caesar was sixteen. Shortly afterward, Caesar became a priest, a position that he did not hold for very long; had he remained a priest, the world would never have learned of his military genius, as a priest was not allowed even to look at a soldier or to touch a horse. In fact, Caesar's military conquests were monumental, as was the death toll that his soldiers inflicted as they conquered lands far removed from the city of Rome. Some historians estimate that in Gaul alone, the casualties numbered in the millions.

By virtue of his military experiences and his family's political influence, Caesar helped to form the first governing triumvirate of the Roman Republic in 60 B.C.E., along with Pompey and Marcus Crassus. In 53 B.C.E., Crassus died in battle, leaving Pompey and Caesar to jointly rule the republic. These two men did not like one another, and with Crassus's death, their differences became more evident. Caesar was not in Rome when Crassus died, and Pompey then ordered Caesar to return. Caesar, suspecting that Pompey planned to have him killed, brought his army with him, a sign to

Pompey that Caesar was prepared to go to war against him. Caesar indeed won the final battle, and this is the point at which Shakespeare's play begins. Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C.E., after he had been awarded the title of dictator for life.

The Roman Republic

In the year 510 B.C.E., the Roman monarchy was overthrown and the Roman Republic was established. At its greatest height, the Roman Republic included lands in present-day Italy, France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and the Balkans and along the coastlines of Asia Minor and Africa.

Social status among full citizens in the early centuries of the Roman Republic was based on birth. The two major social groups were the patricians and the plebeians. The patricians owned most of the wealth and controlled the government. Women were not granted as many rights as men—they were not allowed to vote, for example—but some women did own property. Many Roman citizens owned slaves, who were considered property rather than human beings. A slave owner could do anything to his slaves, including murder them, without having to account for his actions. The social class of the plebeians included everyone who was neither a patrician nor a slave.

The government in the Roman Republic was made up of various groups called assemblies. Each assembly had specific responsibilities. The two most powerful assemblies were the Senate and the Plebeian Assembly. The highest officers, the magistrates, were appointed for a period of one year and shared rule with at least one other person. The one office that would be held by a single male was that of dictator, which was assigned only at certain times, such as in times of war; this assignment would last for only six months at most.

Toward the end of the Roman Republic, discontent began setting in, as the disparities between the very rich and the common citizens were widening. Wars lasted so long that when many soldiers returned home, they found that their farms had been taken away from them owing to lack of payments on loans. Soldiers also had difficulty finding work after they resigned from the armies, as people from conquered lands were brought back to the republic to work for free as slaves. Added land was



Mark Antony with the body of Caesar and Roman citizens, Act III, scene ii (© Shakespeare Collection, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan)

quickly claimed by the wealthiest families, most of whom either were directly involved in the government or bore strong influence on those who were. As such, laws were passed to protect their wealth. In 133 B.C.E., a series of land reforms were proposed by Tiberius Gracchus, a plebeian tribune. These reforms were popular with ordinary citizens, but the more conservative—and more wealthy—politicians were not at all pleased. Thus, they called Gracchus a tyrant and slaughtered him and his followers. When Gracchus's brother attempted to take up the plebeian cause many years later, he, too, was murdered.

A professional Roman army was established for the first time in 107 B.C.E. under the leadership of Gaius Marius. Prior to this, men were called upon to serve in the army only when wars were declared; Marius ensured that his army would consist of trained professionals. Under Marius's newly passed laws, when new lands were conquered, soldiers received plots as part of their pay for twenty years of service. This policy rewarded soldiers for their work and

also helped to spread Roman culture throughout what would eventually become the Roman Empire. Under Marius, land reform issues were somewhat abated because soldiers were able to earn land, thus breaking the aristocracy's hold on land ownership. A second result of Marius's establishment of a professional army was that Marius himself became a victorious hero, as his men often saved the republic from foreign invasions. When Marius retired from public office, however, the Roman Republic was ravaged by other calamities, such as civil wars and slave rebellions.

At the end of the time of the republic, Marcus Crassus, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey), and Julius Caesar ruled as the first triumvirate. Crassus eventually died, and Pompey and Caesar, who disliked one another, clashed in yet another civil war, with Caesar winning the ultimate battle. In 44 B.C.E., Caesar was appointed dictator for life, setting up his death by assassination, as a group of senators determined that the only way of getting rid of him would be to murder him.

The second triumvirate was established after the deaths of Caesar, Brutus, and the other conspirators. Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony), Octavianus (Octavian), and Marcus Aimilius Lepidus took over the rule of the Republic in 42 B.C.E. Lepidus was soon killed in battle. Mark Antony then fell in love with Cleopatra, and Octavian riled the citizens of Rome against Antony, insisting that Antony (who had three children by Cleopatra and gave them one-third of the Roman lands he governed) was not fit to rule. Another civil war then broke out, and Octavian proved the victor. Although Octavian insisted that the republic still existed, the political foundations that had marked the original republic disappeared under Octavian's autocratic rule.

Early Modern England

Shakespeare's England was, in some ways, like Caesar's Roman Empire. Aristocrats controlled the majority of wealth and all the power, but the situation was beginning to change. Shakespeare himself was able to gain wealth through his entrepreneurship, as were many others. Aristocrats feared this social movement, however, and eventually passed laws that made it increasingly difficult for those not born within the aristocracy to make substantial amounts of money; they

even went so far as to decree that certain types and colors of clothes could be worn only among the aristocracy.

Despite the aristocracy's attempts to gain firm control, social change was creeping in, infiltrating almost every aspect of life. From Henry VII to the reign of Bloody Mary and then on to Queen Elizabeth I, the officially condoned religious practices in England were shifted from Catholicism to Protestantism to Catholicism and back again; during one reign, practicing Catholics were put to death, while in another, Protestants were persecuted. While Shakespeare lived and wrote during the relatively stable reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, religion remained a much debated issue. Meanwhile, much confusion was present with respect to scientific matters as well. For ages, standard beliefs about the universe had been based on the ancient Egyptian Ptolemy's assertion that the earth was at the center of the cosmos. The sun, stars, and planets, Ptolemy believed, rotated around the earth. The astronomer Nicolas Copernicus, however, theorized in 1543 that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the solar system, and in 1610, Galileo Galilei proved Copernicus's theory true. Regardless of that proof, many were reluctant to concede old beliefs, such that controversy about the center of the universe continued during Shakespeare's time.

During the sixteenth century, England was becoming an increasingly powerful country, in part owing to its strong naval force. British explorers were circumnavigating the globe, setting up colonies wherever possible. London, at the time, was the largest European city, increasing its population in the sixteenth century by 400 percent, to almost 200,000 people. Thus, England was on its way to becoming an empire, not much unlike that of the empire that Caesar helped to build.

Shakespeare's England was also a place of vast disparities. It has been described as a paranoid police state, with some people enjoying unparalleled wealth while others suffered through unthinkable destitution. It was a place of plagues, wars, and malnutrition. Death was ever present in the minds of its citizens, causing great fear and uncertainty, themes that Shakespeare captured in plays such as *Julius Caesar*.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **First Century B.C.E.:** Julius Caesar, considered by many historians to be one of the greatest military and political leaders who ever lived, is assassinated. As a result, civil war breaks out in the Roman Republic.

Sixteenth Century C.E.: William I of the Netherlands is assassinated after declaring independence from Spain. This event leads to the Eighty Years' War, in which the countries referred to as the Netherlands go to war against Spain. Both countries were once part of the Roman Empire.

Twenty-first Century: Several political assassinations occur all over the world, including those of the Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic, the Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov, and the Baghdad governor Ali al-Haidari. All of these leaders held positions in countries involved in wars related to religious or ethnic strife or to fights for independence.

- **First Century B.C.E.:** Julius Caesar conquers Gaul and extends the Roman Republic to the Atlantic Ocean. He becomes the first Roman leader to order an invasion of Britain. After his assassination, the Roman Senate declares Caesar a god.

Sixteenth Century C.E.: Charles V rules over what is called the Holy Roman Empire,

which includes Spain, parts of France and Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Italy, and Portugal, as well as lands in the New World.

Twenty-first Century: During his political career, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi creates his own political party, becomes the leader of Italy's longest serving government since World War II, and fights off repeated charges of corruption. At the time of his political defeat in 2006, he is the richest man in Italy, owning what is referred to as a business empire.

- **First Century B.C.E.:** Civil war erupts in the Roman Republic as Mark Antony leads a faction against Brutus's army after the assassination of Julius Caesar.

Sixteenth Century C.E.: Peasant rebellions over economic hardships and religious differences erupt in the Holy Roman Empire. Catholics and Huguenots go to war in France.

Twenty-first Century: Religious, tribal, and ethnic wars result in the deaths of hundreds of thousands in Serbia, the Sudan, the Congo, the Ivory Coast, Afghanistan, the United States, Iraq, Israel, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Palestine, and many other countries.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Julius Caesar, most historians agree, was first performed in 1599. The first person to record having seen the play was a Swiss traveler, Thomas Platter, who provided a positive review of a performance given on September 11 of that year. Indeed, most of the original audiences, like Platter, enjoyed the play. In 1637, the play was reportedly staged for royalty, namely, Charles I. As time passed, *Julius Caesar* became one of Shakespeare's more popular plays, drawing

audiences well into the seventeenth century in England. As the eighteenth century approached, changes were sometimes made to the play in performance. For example, Brutus's character was adapted into a more prominent role, as critics and audiences debated the nature of Brutus's involvement in the assassination of Caesar; those who believed the assassination to be politically warranted emphasized the nobility of Brutus, while those who considered the murder to be the work of a misdirected man portrayed Brutus as corrupt. Other changes made Caesar

appear more ruthless and likened Antony to a leader of the common people. Also in the eighteenth century, *Julius Caesar* was first performed in the United States. In 1864, John Wilkes Booth, the man who assassinated President Abraham Lincoln, acted with two of his brothers in a New York production of *Julius Caesar*, with John playing the role of Mark Antony.

The politics of the play are discussed at length by Allan Bloom in an essay in his book *Shakespeare's Politics*. Bloom describes some of the political sentiments at the time of Shakespeare's writing of *Julius Caesar*, stating, "The political life of ancient Rome began to attract interest and admiration." Bloom notes that Shakespeare's "Roman plays present us with the essential Rome, and in them he tried to re-create those elusive qualities that made the Romans what they were." Bloom adds, "In Shakespeare's day, the remnants of the Roman Empire were still alive, and it was still remembered that Britain itself had been a part of it." This situation partly explained the popularity of Shakespeare's play, according to the critic. Toward the end of his essay, Bloom writes, "In these last scenes of the play, what was a rigid opposition between Brutus and Cassius dissolves under the pressure of Caesar's unrelenting spirit." Further, the critic asserts that Shakespeare depicts the two conspirators as "good but erring men. Shakespeare does all of this very delicately so as not to disturb the superficial and roughly true structure of his message," which Bloom says "demonstrates the inadequacies of ordinary men to overcome the force of a man like Caesar."

In the essay "Shakespeare and Political Thought," published in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, Martin Dzelzainis focuses on the funeral speeches of Brutus and Antony, using them to exemplify Shakespeare's great skills in writing, especially his gift of crafting arguments about great issues. Dzelzainis writes of Shakespeare's era that "pupils at grammar schools were expected to acquire proficiency in arguing . . . and routinely honed their dialectical skills by composing orations on controversial themes," such as the assassination of Caesar. Dzelzainis concludes that Shakespeare's "unrivalled ability to stage situations requiring the expression of opposed views is displayed to full effect in the competing funeral oration, in prose and verse, of Brutus and Mark Antony."

G. K. Hunter, in his essay, "Shakespeare and the Traditions of Tragedy," published in *Shakespeare Studies*, focuses on Brutus and Antony, as well. Hunter writes, "In the famous scene of Caesar's funeral Brutus's speech has only *ethos* to recommend it; he more or less tells the assembled populace that, being himself, he cannot make a speech. Antony, however, has no such inhibitions. The *personae* he manipulates—Caesar's friend, your friend, humble suitor, grieving follower, outraged victim, angry vindicator—each of these is calculated to have a precise effect in a calculated sequence of effects. The brilliant political orator and the tongue-tied visionary—such contrasts show the complexity with which Shakespeare has developed his basic contrast." Hunter goes on to discuss the problems that arise when attempting to determine whether Brutus did the right thing for the wrong reasons or the wrong thing for the right reasons. Hunter thus classifies *Julius Caesar* not merely as a tragedy or as a "Roman play" but also as a "problem play."

CRITICISM

M. W. MacCallum

Focusing on Cassius's intellectual preoccupations, self-sufficiency, championship of liberty and equality, and rejection of the supernatural, MacCallum contends that the character's behavior is guided by his belief in the philosophy of Epicureanism. Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who asserted that pleasure was the highest good in life. For Epicurus, the greatest joy derived from emotional calm and serenity; he therefore considered intellectual activities superior to all others. The philosopher also extolled the virtues of freedom and denied that gods had any control over human affairs. MacCallum also discusses Cassius's strengths and weaknesses of character, faulting his spitefulness, jealousy, and lack of fortitude but praising his enthusiasm for the cause of republicanism and his keen powers of judgment.

The main lines of [Cassius's] character are given in Caesar's masterly delineation, which follows Plutarch in regard to his spareness, but in the other particulars freely elaborates the impression that Plutarch's whole narrative produces.

Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look:
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous . . .



THEY BOTH HAVE SCHOOLED THEMSELVES IN
THE DISCIPLINE OF FORTITUDE, BRUTUS IN STOIC
RENUNCIATION, CASSIUS IN EPICUREAN
INDEPENDENCE; BUT IN THE GREAT CRISES WHERE
NATURE ASSERTS HERSELF, BRUTUS IS STRONG AND
CASSIUS IS WEAK.”

He reads much;
He is a great observer, and he looks
Quite through the deeds of men; he loves no
plays,
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music;
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort
As if he mock'd himself and scorn'd his
spirit

That could be moved to smile at anything.
Such men as he be never at heart's ease
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,
And therefore are they very dangerous.
[I. ii. 194–95, 201–10]

Lean, gaunt, hungry, disinclined to sports
and revelry, spending his time in reading, obser-
vation, and reflection—these are the first traits
that we notice in him. He too, like Brutus, has
learned the lessons of philosophy, and he finds in
it the rule of life. He chides his friend for seeming
to fail in the practice of it:

Of your philosophy you make no use,
If you give place to accidental evils.
[IV. iii. 145–46]

And even when he admits and admires
Brutus' self-mastery, he attributes it to nature,
and claims as good a philosophic discipline for
himself. There is, however, a difference between
them even in this point. Brutus is a Platonist with
a Stoic tinge; Cassius is an Epicurean [Platonists
held that the highest reality is intellectual rather
than based on sensory perception. Stoics
believed that wise men should be free from pas-
sion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submissive to
natural law. Epicureans considered emotional
calm the highest good, held intellectual pleasures
superior to others, and advocated the renuncia-
tion of momentary in favor of more permanent
pleasures]. That strikes us at first as strange, that

the theory which identified pleasure with virtue
should be the creed of this splenetic solitary: but
it is quite in character. Epicureanism appealed to
some of the noblest minds of Rome, not as a cult
of enjoyment, but as a doctrine that freed them
from the bonds of superstition and the degrading
fear of death . . . And these are the reasons that
Cassius is an Epicurean. At the end, when his
philosophy breaks down, he says:

You know that I held Epicurus strong
And his opinion: now I change my mind,
And partly credit things that do presage.
[V. i. 76–8]

He has hitherto discredited them . . .

Nor stony tower, nor walls of beaten
brass,
Nor airless dungeon, nor strong links of
iron,
Can be retentive to the strength of spirit:
But life, being weary of these wordly bars,
Never lacks power to dismiss itself.
[I. iii. 93–7]

Free from all superstitious scruples and all
thought of superhuman interference in the affairs
of men, he stands out bold and self-reliant, con-
fiding in his own powers, his own will, his own
management:

Men at some time are masters of their
fates:
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
[I. ii. 139–41]

And the same attitude of mind implies that
he is rid of all illusions. He is not deceived by
shows. He looks quite through the deeds of men.
He is not taken in by Casca's affectation of
rudeness. He is not misled by Antony's apparent
frivolity. He is not even dazzled by the glamour
of Brutus' virtue, but notes its weak side and
does not hesitate to play on it. Still less does
Caesar's prestige subdue his criticism. On the
contrary, with malicious contempt he recalls his
want of endurance in swimming and the com-
plaints of his sick-bed, and he keenly notes his
superstitious lapses. He seldom smiles and when
he does it is in scorn. We only once hear of his
laughing. It is at the interposition of the poet,
which rouses Brutus to indignation; but the pre-
sumptuous absurdity of it tickles Cassius' sar-
donic humour [IV. iii. 124–38].

For there is no doubt that he takes pleasure
in detecting the weaknesses of his fellows. He has

obvious relish in the thought that if he were Brutus he would not be thus cajoled, and he finds food for satisfaction in Caesar's merely physical defects. Yet there is as little of self-complacency as of hero-worship in the man. He turns his remorseless scrutiny on his own nature and his own cause, and neither maintains that the one is noble or the other honourable, nor denies the personal alloy in his motives. This is the purport of that strange soliloquy that at first sight seems to place Cassius in the ranks of Shakespeare's villains along with his Iagos and Richards, rather than of the mixed characters, compact of good and evil, to whom nevertheless we feel that he is akin.

Well, Brutus, thou art noble: yet, I see,
Thy honourable metal may be wrought
From that it is disposed: therefore it is meet
That noble minds keep ever with their likes:
For who so firm that cannot be seduced?
Caesar doth bear me hard: but he loves

Brutus:

If I were Brutus now and he were Cassius,
He should not humour me.

[I. ii. 308–15]

It frequently happens that cynics view themselves as well as others in their meaner aspects. Probably Cassius is making the worst of his own case and is indulging that vein of self-mockery and scorn that Caesar observed in him. But at any rate the lurking sense of unworthiness in himself and his purpose will be apt to increase in such a man his natural impatience of alleged superiority in his fellows. He is jealous of excellence, seeks to minimise it and will not tolerate it. It is on this characteristic that Shakespeare lays stress.

Yet notwithstanding this taint of enviousness and spite, Cassius is far from being a despicable or even an unattractive character. He may play the Devil's Advocate in regard to individuals, but he is capable of a high enthusiasm for his cause, such as it is. We must share his calenture of excitement, as he strides about the streets in the tempest that fills Casca with superstitious dread and Cicero with discomfort at the nasty weather. His republicanism may be a narrow creed, but at least he is willing to be a martyr to it; when he hears that Caesar is to wear the crown, his resolution is prompt and Roman-like:

I know where I will wear this dagger
then:

Cassius from bondage will deliver Cassius.
[I. iii. 89–90]

And surely at the moment of achievement, whatever was mean and sordid in the man is consumed in his prophetic rapture that fires the soul of Brutus and prolongs itself in his response.

Cassius: How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

Brutus: How many times shall Caesar
bleed in sport

That now on Pompey's basis lies along
No worthier than the dust!

[III. i. 111–16]

And even to individuals if they stand the test of his mordant criticism, he can pay homage and admiration. The perception that Brutus may be worked upon is the toll he pays to his self-love, but, that settled, he can feel deep reverence and affection for Brutus' more ideal virtue. Perhaps the best instance of it is the scene of their dispute. Brutus . . . is practically, if not theoretically, in the wrong, and certainly he is much the more violent and bitter; but Cassius submits to receive his forgiveness and to welcome his assurance that he will bear with him in future. This implies no little deference and magnanimity in one who so ill brooks a secondary role. But he does give the lead to Brutus, and in all things, even against his better judgment, yields him the primacy.

And then it is impossible not to respect his thorough efficiency. In whatsoever concerns the management of affairs and of men, he knows the right thing to do, and, when left to himself, he does it. He sees how needful Brutus is to the cause and gains him—gains him, in part by a trickery, which Shakespeare without historical warrant ascribes to him; but the trickery succeeds because he has gauged Brutus' nature aright. He takes the correct measure of the danger from Antony, of his love for Caesar and his talents, which Brutus so contemptuously underrates. So, too, after the assassination, when Brutus says,

I know that we shall have him well to
friend;

[III. i. 143]

he answers,

I wish we may: but yet I have a mind
That fear him much; and my misgiving still



Jonathan Hyde as Brutus with mob in Act III, scene ii, at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1991 (© Donald Cooper/Photostage. Reproduced by permission)

Falls shrewdly to the purpose.
[III. i. 144–46]

Brutus seeks to win Antony with general considerations of right and justice, Cassius employs a more effective argument:

Your voice shall be as strong as any
man's
In the disposing of new dignities.
[III. i. 177–78]

He altogether disapproves of the permission granted to Antony to pronounce the funeral oration. He grasps the situation when the civil war breaks out much better than Brutus:

In such a time as this it is not meet
That every nice offence should bear his
comment.
[IV. iii. 7–8]

His plans of the campaign are better, and he has a much better notion of conducting the battle.

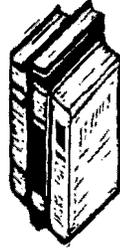
All such shrewd sagacity is entitled to our respect. Yet even in this department Cassius is outdone by the unpractical Brutus, so soon as

higher moral qualities are required, and the wisdom of the fox yields to the wisdom of the man . . . [however] passionate and wrong-headed Brutus may be in their contention, he has too much sense of the becoming to wrangle in public, as Cassius begins to do. Another more conspicuous example is furnished by the way in which they bear anxiety.

[When Popilius Lena speaks with Caesar at the Capitol at the beginning of Act III, scene i,] Cassius believes the worst, loses his head, now hurries on Casca, now prepares for suicide. But Brutus, the disinterested man, is less swayed by personal hopes and fears, keeps his composure, urges his friend to be constant, and can calmly judge of the situation. It is the same defect of endurance that brings about Cassius' death. Really things are shaping well for them, but he misconstrues the signs just as he has misconstrued the words of Lena, and kills himself owing to a mistake; as Messala points out:

Mistrust of good success hath done this
deed.
[V. iii. 65]

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- An account of the historic figure of Julius Caesar can be found in Michael Parenti's *The Assassination of Julius Caesar: A People's History of Ancient Rome* (2003). Parenti has been praised for the storytelling skills he demonstrates in this account of why a group of Roman senators plotted the death of Caesar. Parenti speculates about the motives of the conspirators, particularly regarding what they feared about Caesar that led them to murder him.
- Julius Caesar, besides ruling the Roman Empire, was also a gifted writer. *Caesar's Commentaries: On the Gallic War and on the Civil War* (2005), edited by James H. Ford, provides an insider's view of the intelligence of this leader; Caesar also offers interesting insight into how he wanted to die.
- Another Shakespearean play about a great leader is *Henry V* (c. 1599), which is set in fifteenth-century England. Henry's father, King Henry IV, has just died, and the new king must demonstrate that he has given up his rowdy and irresponsible past and is capable of leading a war-torn England into a fruitful future. Toward this end, Henry V must face his past as he launches a war against France and must count on some of his old friends to support him in battle.
- Among lighter Shakespearean fare, one of the bard's most popular comedies is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596), a tale of love and fantasies with a bit of pixie dust thrown in for added spice. Four lovers' lives become strangely entangled when they find themselves in a forest filled with fairies and a traveling acting troupe.
- Who—or what—might compare to a figure such as Julius Caesar in the contemporary world? And how might Caesar have affected various European and U.S. cultures? These are some of the questions that are covered in the book *Julius Caesar in Western Culture* (2006), a collection of essays by Jane Dunnett, Oliver Hemmerle, and others, as edited by Maria Wyke. The writers in this collection offer their thoughts on Caesar's relevance with respect to religion, art, and political history throughout the ages.
- Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* (1934) provides another view of ancient Roman civilization. Through this fictionalized autobiography, Graves tells the story of a young man who is considered an idiot because he suffers from a speech impediment. Scorned by his culture, Claudius becomes a great observer of the strengths and weaknesses of his contemporaries. Eventually, Claudius rules Rome.

This want of inward strength explains the ascendancy which Brutus with his more dutiful and therefore more steadfast nature exercises over him, though Cassius is in many ways the more capable man of the two. They both have schooled themselves in the discipline of fortitude, Brutus in Stoic renunciation, Cassius in Epicurean independence; but in the great crises where nature asserts herself, Brutus is strong and Cassius is weak. And as often happens with men, in the supreme trial their professed creeds no longer satisfy them, and they consciously

abandon them. But while Cassius in his evil fortune falls back on the superstitions which he had ridiculed Caesar for adopting on his good fortune, Brutus falls back on his feeling of moral dignity, and gives himself the death which theoretically he disapproves.

Yet, when all is said and done, what a fine figure Cassius is, and how much both of love and respect he can inspire.

Source: M. W. MacCallum, "Julius Caesar: The Remaining Characters," in *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Background*, Russell & Russell, 1967, pp. 275–99.

Maynard Mack

Mack discusses the public and private values of Brutus and Caesar in terms of what he views as the primary theme of the play: "The always ambiguous impact between man and history." The private Brutus, the critic asserts, is a gentle, sensitive, and studious man who loves Caesar and deplors violence, while the public figure is a noble idealist who participates in the conspiracy because he believes he must act on behalf of the state. Mack contends that in the first half of the drama Shakespeare focuses on "human will as a force in history" by portraying individuals, such as Brutus, choosing courses of action and controlling events; in contrast, the second half of Julius Caesar demonstrates the inadequacies of noble intentions, rationalism, and human will, once they are displayed in action, in influencing history. Caesar's dual nature, the critic continues, similarly dramatizes Shakespeare's thesis that history is only partially responsive to human will.

I think the place we may want to begin is with I. ii; for here, as in the first witch scene in *Macbeth*, most of the play to come is already implicit. We have just learned from scene i of Caesar's return in triumph from warring on Pompey's sons, we have seen the warm though fickle adulation of the crowd and the apprehension of the tribunes; now we are to see the great man himself. The procession enters to triumphal music; with hubbub of a great press of people; with young men stripped for the ceremonial races, among them Antony; with statesmen in their togas: Decius, Cicero, Brutus, Cassius, Casca; with the two wives Calpurnia and Portia; and, in the lead, for not even Calpurnia is permitted at his side, the great man. As he starts to speak, an expectant hush settles over the gathering: what does the great man have on his mind?

CAES. Calpurnia.

CASCA Peace, ho! Caesar speaks.

CAES. Calpurnia.

CAL. Here, my lord.

CAES. Stand you directly in Antonius' way

When he does run his course. Antonius.

ANT. Caesar, my lord?

CAES. Forget not, in your speed, Antonius.

To touch Calpurnia; for our elders say,
The barren, touched in this holy chase,

Shake off their sterile curse.

ANT. I shall remember:

When Caesar says, "Do this," it is perform'd.

[I. ii. 1–10]

What the great man had on his mind, it appears, was to remind his wife, in this public place, that she is sterile; that there is an old tradition about how sterility can be removed; and that while of course he is much too sophisticated to accept such a superstition himself—it is "our elders" who say it—still, Calpurnia had jolly well better get out there and get tagged, or else!

Then the procession takes up again. The hubbub is resumed, but once more the expectant silence settles as a voice is heard.

SOOTH. Caesar!

CAES. Ha! Who calls?

CASCA Bid every noise be still; peace yet again!

CAES. Who is it in the press that calls on me?

I hear a tongue shriller than all the music
Cry "Caesar!" Speak. Caesar is turn'd to hear.

SOOTH. Beware the ides of March.

CAES. What man is that?

BRU. A soothsayer bids you beware the ides of March.

CAES. Set him before me; let me see his face.

CAS. Fellow, come from the throng;
look upon Caesar.

CAES. What say'st thou to me now?
Speak once again.

SOOTH. Beware the ides of March.

CAES. He is a dreamer. Let us leave him.
Pass.

[I. ii. 11–24]

It is easy to see from even these small instances, I think, how a first-rate dramatic imagination works. There is no hint of any procession in Plutarch, Shakespeare's source. "Caesar," says Plutarch, "*sat* to behold." There is no mention of Calpurnia in Plutarch's account of the Lupercalian race, and there is no mention anywhere of her sterility. Shakespeare, in nine lines, has given us an unforgettable picture of a man who would like to be emperor pathetically concerned that he



AND NOW THIS LITTLE GROUP OF MEN HAS ALTERED HISTORY. THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE EVIL DIRECTION IT WAS TAKING TOWARD AUTOCRATIC POWER LIES DEAD BEFORE THEM. THE DIRECTION TO WHICH IT MUST BE RESTORED BECOMES EMPHATIC IN CASSIUS' CRY OF "LIBERTY, FREEDOM, AND ENFRANCHISEMENT"

lacks an heir, and determined, even at the cost of making his wife a public spectacle, to establish that this is owing to no lack of virility in him. The first episode thus dramatizes instantaneously the oncoming theme of the play: that a man's will is not enough; that there are other matters to be reckoned with, like the infertility of one's wife, or one's own affliction of the falling sickness which spoils everything one hoped for just at the instant when one had it almost in one's hand. Brutus will be obliged to learn this lesson too.

In the second episode the theme develops. We see again the uneasy rationalism that everybody in this play affects; we hear it reverberate in the faint contempt—almost a challenge—of Brutus' words as he turns to Caesar: "A soothsayer bids you beware the ides of March." Yet underneath, in the soothsayer's presence and his sober warning, Shakespeare allows us to catch a hint of something else, something far more primitive and mysterious, from which rationalism in this play keeps trying vainly to cut itself away: "He is a dreamer. Let us leave him. Pass." Only we in the audience are in a position to see that the dreamer has foretold the path down which all these reasoners will go to that fatal encounter at the Capitol.

Meantime, in these same two episodes, we have learned something about the character of Caesar. In the first, it was the Caesar of human frailties who spoke to us, the husband with his hopeful superstition. In the second, it was the marble superman of state, impassive, impervious, speaking of himself in the third person: "Speak! Caesar is turn'd to hear." He even has the soothsayer brought before his face to repeat the message, as if he thought that somehow, in

awe of the marble presence, the message would falter and dissolve: how can a superman need to beware the ides of March?

We hardly have time to do more than glimpse here a man of divided selves, when he is gone. But in his absence, the words of Cassius confirm our glimpse. Cassius' description of him exhibits the same duality that we had noticed earlier. On the one hand, an extremely ordinary man whose stamina in the swimming match was soon exhausted, who, when he had a fever once in Spain, shook and groaned like a sick girl, who even now, as we soon learn, is falling down with epilepsy in the market place. On the other hand, a being who has somehow become a god, who "bears the palm alone," who "bestrides the narrow world like a colossus" [I. ii. 131, 135–36]. When the procession returns, no longer festive now, but angry, tense, there is the same effect once more. Our one Caesar shows a normal man's suspicion of his enemies, voices some shrewd human observations about Cassius, says to Antony, "Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf" [I. ii. 213]. Our other Caesar says, as if he were suddenly reminded of something he had forgotten, "I rather tell thee what is to be fear'd / Than what I fear, for always I am Caesar" [I. ii. 211–12].

Whenever Caesar appears hereafter, we shall find this singular division in him, and nowhere more so than in the scene in which he receives the conspirators at his house. Some aspects of this scene seem calculated for nothing else than to fix upon our minds the superman conception, the Big Brother of Orwell's *1984*, the great resonant name echoing down the halls of time. Thus at the beginning of the scene:

the things that threatened me
Ne'er look'd but on my back; when they
shall see
The face of Caesar, they are vanished.
[II. ii. 10–12]

And again later:

danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he:
We are two lions litter'd in one day,
And I the elder and more terrible.
[II. ii. 44–7]

And again still later: "Shall Caesar send a lie?" [II. ii. 65]. And again: "The cause is in my will: I will not come" [II. ii. 71]. Other aspects, including his concern about Calpurnia's dream,

his vacillation about going to the senate house, his anxiety about the portents of the night, plainly mark out his human weaknesses. Finally, as is the habit in this Rome, he puts the irrational from him that his wife's intuitions and her dream embody; he accepts the rationalization of the irrational that Decius skillfully manufactures, and, as earlier at the Lupercalia, hides from himself his own vivid sense of forces that lie beyond the will's control by attributing it to her:

How foolish do your fears seem now,
Calpurnia!
I am ashamed I did yield to them.
Give me my robe, for I will go.
[II. ii. 105–07]

So far in our consideration of the implications of I. ii. we have been looking only at Caesar, the title personage of the play, and its historical center. It is time now to turn to Brutus, the play's tragic center, whom we also find to be a divided man—"poor Brutus," to use his own phrase, "with himself at war" [I. ii. 46]. The war, we realize as the scene progresses, is a conflict between a quiet essentially domestic and loving nature, and a powerful integrity expressing itself in a sense of honorable duty to the commonweal. This duality in Brutus seems to be what Cassius is probing at in his long disquisition about the mirror. The Brutus looking into the glass that Cassius figuratively holds up to him, the Brutus of this moment, now, in Rome, is a grave studious private man, of a wonderfully gentle temper, as we shall see again and again later on, very slow to passion, as Cassius' ill-concealed disappointment in having failed to kindle him to immediate response reveals, a man whose sensitive nature recoils at the hint of violence lurking in some of Cassius' speeches, just as he has already recoiled at going on with Caesar to the market place, to witness the mass hysteria of clapping hands, sweaty nightcaps, and stinking breath. This is the present self that looks into Cassius' mirror.

The image that looks back out, that Cassius wants him to see, the potential Brutus, is the man of public spirit, worried already by the question of Caesar's intentions, the lineal descendant of an earlier Brutus who drove a would-be monarch from the city, a man whose body is visibly stiffening in our sight at each huzza from the Forum, and whose anxiety, though he makes no reply to Cassius' inflammatory language, keeps bursting to the surface: "What means this

shouting? I do fear the people / Choose Caesar for their king" [I. ii. 79–80]. The problem at the tragic center of the play, we begin to sense, is to be the tug of private versus public, the individual versus a world he never made, any citizen anywhere versus the selective service greetings that history is always mailing out to each of us. And this problem is to be traversed by that other tug this scene presents, of the irrational versus the rational, the destiny we think we can control versus the destiny that sweeps all before it.

Through I. ii, Brutus' public self, the self that responds to these selective service greetings, is no more than a reflection in a mirror, a mere anxiety in his own brain, about which he refuses to confide, even to Cassius. In II. i, we see the public self making further headway. First, there is Brutus' argument with himself about the threat of Caesar, and in his conclusion that Caesar must be killed we note how far his private self—he is, after all, one of Caesar's closest friends—has been invaded by the self of public spirit. From here on, the course of the invasion accelerates. The letter comes, tossed from the public world into the private world, into Brutus' garden, and addressing, as Cassius had, that public image reflected in the mirror: "Brutus, thou sleep'st: awake and see thyself" [II. i. 46]. Then follows the well-known brief soliloquy . . . , showing us that Brutus' mind has moved on now from the phase of decision to the inquietudes that follow decision:

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream.
[II. i. 63–5]

What is important to observe is that these lines stress once again the gulf that separates motive from action, that which is interior in man and controllable by his will from that which, once acted, becomes independent of him and moves with a life of its own. This gulf is a no man's land, a phantasma, a hideous dream.

Finally, there arrives in such a form that no audience can miss it the actual visible invasion itself, as this peaceful garden quiet is broken in on by knocking, like the knocking of fate in Beethoven's fifth symphony, and by men with faces hidden in their cloaks. Following this, a lovely interlude with Portia serves to emphasize how much the private self, the private world has been shattered. We have something close to discord here—as much of a discord as these very

gentle people are capable of—and though there is a reconciliation at the end and Brutus’ promise to confide in her soon, this division in the family is an omen. So is that knock of the latecomer, Caius Ligarius, which reminds us once again of the intrusions of the public life. And when Ligarius throws off his sick man’s kerchief on learning that there is an honorable exploit afoot, we may see in it an epitome of the whole scene, a graphic visual renunciation, like Brutus’, of the private good to the public; and we may see this also in Brutus’ own exit a few lines later, not into the inner house where Portia waits for him, but out into the thunder and lightning of the public life of Rome. It is perhaps significant that at our final view of Portia, two scenes later, she too stands outside the privacy of the house, her mind wholly occupied with thoughts of what is happening at the Capitol, and trying to put on a public self for Brutus’ sake: “Run, Lucius, and commend me to my Lord / Say I am merry . . .” [II. iv. 44–5].

Meantime, up there by the Capitol, the tragic center and the historical center meet. The suspense is very great as Caesar, seeing the Soothsayer in the throng, reminds him that the ides of March are come, and receives in answer, “Ay, Caesar, but not gone” [III. i. 2]. Caesar is to bleed, but, as Brutus has said, they will sublimate the act into a sacrifice:

Let’s kill him boldly but not wrathfully;
Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods,
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.
[II. i. 172–74]

Everything in the scene must underscore this ceremonial attitude, in order to bring out the almost fatuous cleavage between the spirit of this enterprise and its bloody purpose.

The Caesar that we are permitted to see while all this ceremony is preparing is almost entirely the superman, for obvious reasons. To give a color of justice to Brutus’ act and so to preserve our sense of his nobility even if we happen to think the assassination a mistake, as an Elizabethan audience emphatically would, Caesar has to appear in a mood of superhumanity at least as fatuous as the conspirators’ mood of sacrifice. Hence Shakespeare makes him first of all insult Metellus Cimber: “If thou dost bend and pray and fawn for him, / I spurn thee like a cur” [III. i. 45–6]; then comment with intolerable pomposity, and, in fact, blasphemy, on his own iron resolution, for he affects to be immovable

even by prayer and hence superior to the very gods. Finally, Shakespeare puts into his mouth one of those supreme arrogances that will remind us of the destroying *hubris* which makes men mad in order to ruin them. “Hence!” Caesar cries, “Wilt thou lift up Olympus?” [III. i. 74]. It is at just this point, when the colossus Caesar drunk with self-love is before us, that Casca strikes. Then they all strike, with a last blow that brings out for the final time the other, human side of this double Caesar: “Et tu, Brute?” [III. i. 77].

And now this little group of men has altered history. The representative of the evil direction it was taking toward autocratic power lies dead before them. The direction to which it must be restored becomes emphatic in Cassius’ cry of “Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement” [III. i. 81]. Solemnly, and again like priests who have just sacrificed a victim, they kneel together and bathe their hands and swords in Caesar’s blood. Brutus exclaims:

Then walk we forth, even to the market
place;
And waving our red weapons o’er our
heads,
Let’s all cry, “Peace, freedom, and liberty!”
[III. i. 108–10]

The leader of this assault on history is, like many another reformer, a man of high idealism, who devoutly believes that the rest of the world is like himself. It was just to kill Caesar—so he persuades himself—because he was a great threat to freedom. It would not have been just to kill Antony, and he vetoed the idea. Even now, when the consequence of that decision has come back to face him in the shape of Antony’s servant, kneeling before him, he sees no reason to reconsider it. There are good grounds for what they have done, he says; Antony will hear them, and be satisfied. With Antony, who shortly arrives in person, he takes this line again:

Our reasons are so full of good regard
That were you, Antony, the son of Caesar
You should be satisfied.
[III. i. 224–26]

With equal confidence in the rationality of man, he puts by Cassius’ fears of what Antony will do if allowed to address the people: “By your pardon; I will myself into the pulpit first / And show the reason of our Caesar’s death” [III. i. 235–37]. Here is a man so much a friend of Caesar’s that he is still speaking of him as “our

Caesar,” so capable of rising to what he takes to be his duty that he has taken on the leadership of those who intend to kill him, so trusting of common decency that he expects the populace will respond to reason, and Antony to the obligation laid on him by their permitting him to speak. At such a man, one hardly knows whether to laugh or cry.

The same mixture of feelings is likely to be stirring in us as Brutus speaks to the people in III. ii. As everybody knows, this is a speech in what used to be called the great liberal tradition, the tradition that assumed, as our American founding fathers did, that men in the mass are reasonable. It has therefore been made a prose oration, spare and terse in diction, tightly patterned in syntax so that it requires close attention, and founded, with respect to its argument, on three elements: the abstract sentiment of duty to the state (because he endangered Rome, Caesar had to be slain); the abstract sentiment of political justice (because he was ambitious, Caesar deserved his fall); and the moral authority of the man Brutus. As long as that moral authority is concretely before them in Brutus’ presence, the populace is impressed. But since they are not trained minds, and only trained minds respond accurately to abstractions, they do not understand the content of his argument at all, as one of them indicates by shouting, “Let him be Caesar!” [III. ii. 51]. What moves them is the obvious sincerity and the known integrity of the speaker; and when he finishes, they are ready to carry him off on their shoulders on that account alone, leaving Antony a vacant Forum. The fair-mindedness of Brutus is thrilling but painful to behold as he calms this triumphal surge in his favor, urges them to stay and hear Antony, and then, in a moment very impressive dramatically as well as symbolically, walks off the stage, alone. We see then, if we have not seen before, the first answer to the question why the attack on history failed. It was blinded, as it so often has been, by the very idealism that impelled it.

When Antony takes the rostrum, we begin to get a second answer. It has been said by somebody that in a school for demagogues this speech should be the whole curriculum. Antony himself describes its method when he observes in the preceding scene, apropos of the effect of Caesar’s dead body on the messenger from Octavius, “Passion, I see, is catching” [III. i. 283].

Antony rests his case, not, like Brutus, on abstractions centering in the state and political justice, but on emotions centering in the individual listener. The first great crescendo of the speech, which culminates in the passage on Caesar’s wounds, appeals first to pity and then to indignation. The second one, culminating in the reading of Caesar’s will, appeals first to curiosity and greed and then to gratitude. The management of the will is particularly cunning: it is an item more concrete than any words could be, an actual tantalizing document that can be flashed before the eye . . . It is described, at first vaguely, as being of such a sort that they would honor Caesar for it. Then, closer home, as something which would show “how Caesar lov’d you” [III. ii. 141]. Then, with an undisguised appeal to self-interest, as a testament that will make them his “heirs.” The emotions aroused by this news enable Antony to make a final test of his ironical refrain about the “honorable men,” and finding the results all that he had hoped, he can come down now among the crowd as one of them, and appeal directly to their feelings by appealing to his own: “If you have tears to shed, prepare to shed them now” [III. ii. 169].

The success of this direct appeal to passion can be seen at its close. Where formerly we had a populace, now we have a mob. Since it is a mob, its mind can be sealed against any later seepage of rationality back into it by the insinuation that reasoning is always false anyway—simply a surface covering up private grudges, like the “reason” they have heard from Brutus; whereas from Antony himself, the plain blunt friend of Caesar, they are getting the plain blunt truth and (a favorite trick of politicians) only what they already know to be the truth.

At about this point, it becomes impossible not to see that a second reason for the failure of the attack on history is what it left out of account—what all these Romans from the beginning, except Antony, have been trying to leave out of account: the phenomenon of feeling, the nonrational factor in men, in the world, in history itself—of which this blind infuriated mob is one kind of exemplification. Too secure in his own fancied suppression of the subrational, Brutus has failed altogether to reckon with its power. Thus he could seriously say to Antony in the passage I quoted earlier: Antony, even if you were “the son of Caesar / You should be satisfied,” as if the feeling of a son for a murdered



Jonh Nettles as Marcus Brutus with Christopher Benjamin as the ghost of Caesar, in Act IV, scene iii, at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 1995

(© Donald Cooper/Photostage. Reproduced by permission)

father could ever be “satisfied” by reasons. And thus, too, he could walk off the stage alone, urging the crowd to hear Antony, the very figure of embodied “reason,” unaware that only the irrational is catching.

Meantime, the scene of the mob tearing Cinna the Poet to pieces simply for having the same name as one of the conspirators (III. iii) gives us our first taste of the chaos invoked by Antony when he stood alone over Caesar’s corpse. And as we consider that prediction and this mob, we are bound to realize that there is a third reason why the attack on history failed. As we have seen already, history is only partly responsive to noble motives, only partly responsive to rationality. Now we see—what Shakespeare hinted in the beginning with those two episodes of Calpurnia and the soothsayer—that it is only partly responsive to human influence of

any sort. With all their reasons, the conspirators and Caesar only carried out what the soothsayer foreknew. There is, in short, a determination in history, whether we call it natural or providential, which at least, *helps* to shape our ends, “rough new them how we will” [*Hamlet*, V. ii. 11]. One of the names of that factor in this play is Caesarism. Brutus put the point, all unconsciously, in that scene when the conspirators were gathered at his house. He said:

We all stand up against the spirit of
Caesar:
And in the spirit of men there is no blood:
O that we then could come by Caesar’s
spirit.
And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,
Caesar must bleed for it.
[III. i. 167–71]

Then Caesar did bleed for it; but his spirit, as Brutus’ own remark should have told him, proved to be invulnerable. It was only set free by his assassination, and now, as Antony says, “ranging for revenge . . . Shall in these confines with a monarch’s voice / Cry ‘Havoc’ and let slip the dogs of war” [III. i. 272–73].

The rest of the play, I think, is self-explanatory. It is clear all through Acts IV and V that Brutus and Cassius are defeated before they begin to fight. Antony knows it and says so at V. i. Cassius knows it too. Cassius, an Epicurean in philosophy, and therefore one who has never heretofore believed in omens, now mistrusts his former rationalism: he suspects there may be something after all in those ravens, crows, and kites that wheel overhead. Brutus too mistrusts *his* rationalism. As a Stoic, his philosophy requires him to repudiate suicide, but he admits to Cassius that if the need comes he will repudiate philosophy instead. This, like Cassius’ statement, is an unconscious admission of the force of unreason in human affairs, an unreason that makes its presence felt again and again during the great battle. Cassius, for instance, fails to realize that Octavius “Is overthrown by noble Brutus’ power” [V. iii. 52], becomes the victim of a mistaken report of Titinius’ death, runs on his sword crying, “Caesar, thou are reveng’d” [V. iii. 45], and is greeted, dead, by Brutus, in words that make still clearer their defeat by history: “O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet! / Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords / In our own proper entrails” [V. iii. 94–6]. In the same vein, when it is Brutus’ turn to die, we learn that the ghost of Caesar has

reappeared, and he thrusts the sword home, saying, "Caesar, now be still" [V. v. 50].

To come then to a brief summary. Though I shouldn't care to be dogmatic about it, it seems clear to me that Shakespeare's primary theme in *Julius Caesar* has to do with the always ambiguous impact between man and history. During the first half of the play, what we are chiefly conscious of is the human will as a force in history—men making choices, controlling events. Our typical scenes are I. ii, where a man is trying to make up his mind; or II. i, where a man first reaches a decision and then, with his fellows, lays plans to implement it; or II. ii, where we have Decius Brutus persuading Caesar to decide to go to the senate house; or III. i and ii, where up through the assassination, and even up through Antony's speech, men are still, so to speak, impringing on history, moulding it to their conscious will.

But then comes a change. Though we still have men in action trying to mould their world (or else we would have no play at all), one senses a real shift in the direction of the impact. We begin to feel the insufficiency of noble aims, for history is also consequences; the insufficiency of reason and rational expectation, for the ultimate consequences of an act in history are unpredictable, and usually, by all human standards, illogical as well; and finally, the insufficiency of the human will itself, for there is always something to be reckoned with that is non-human and inscrutable. . . . Accordingly, in the second half of the play, our typical scenes are those like III. iii, when Antony has raised something that is no longer under his control; or like IV. i, where we see men acting as if, under the control of expediency or necessity or call it what you will, they no longer had wills of their own but prick down the names of nephews and brothers indiscriminately for slaughter; or like IV. iii and all the scenes thereafter, where we are constantly made to feel that Cassius and Brutus are in the hands of something bigger than they know.

In this light, we can see readily enough why it is that Shakespeare gave Julius Caesar that double character. The human Caesar who has human ailments and is a human friend is the Caesar that can be killed. The marmoreal Caesar, the everlasting Big Brother—the Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, Franco, Peron, Stalin, Krushev, to mention only a handful of his more recent incarnations—that Caesar is the



ANTONY'S FAMOUS REJOINER IS A *TOUR DE FORCE* WHICH COMPLETES SHAKESPEARE'S PICTURE OF THE KIND OF PERSUASION MOST EFFECTIVE WITH THE CITIZENRY."

one who must repeatedly be killed but never dies, because he is in you, and you, and you, and me. Every classroom is a Rome, and there is no reason for any pupil, when he studies *Julius Caesar*, to imagine that this is ancient history.

Source: Maynard Mack, "Teaching Drama: *Julius Caesar*," in *Essays on the Teaching of English: Reports of the Yale Conferences on the Teachings of English*, edited by Edward J. Gordon and Edward S. Noyes, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960, pp. 320–36.

Brents Stirling

Stirling examines the extent to which Shakespeare relied upon his source material in his presentation of the Roman populace in Julius Caesar. The critic notes that although Shakespeare's portrait of the commoners as fickle, unreasonable, and opportunistic generally echoes Plutarch's lives of Caesar and Brutus, the dramatist also elaborated upon Plutarch's account, notably in Act III, scene II, when Brutus and Antony deliver their funeral orations for Caesar, and in Act III, scene III, when the citizens interrogate the poet Cinna. While the effect of the changes in the first of these scenes is to accentuate the instability of the mob, Stirling maintains, Shakespeare did not deliberately alter his source to further denigrate the populace; rather, the changes were made for dramatic effect and, moreover, were warranted by Plutarch's descriptions of the mob in other episodes of his narratives. The critic states that the second of these scenes, not recorded by Plutarch, reveals an Elizabethan understanding of mob behavior in its emphasis on the hostility and irrationality of class conflict; similarly, Brutus and Antony's funeral orations, only briefly outlined by Plutarch, lend political realism to the tragedy.

In *Julius Caesar* the self-interest and sorry instability of the Roman populace turn the tide against Brutus and the other conspirators. Although their ill fortune materializes at

Philippi, the climactic change from good to ill for the conspirators occurs in Act III with the shift against them of mob sentiment. Accordingly, it will not surprise those familiar with Shakespeare's methods of exposition that the note of plebeian stupidity and mutability is struck powerfully in the opening scene of the play. There the disorderly citizens, who have decked themselves in their best "to make holiday, to see Caesar and to rejoice in his triumph" [I. i. 30–1], are denounced by their own tribunes for ingratitude and change of heart. After the cynical speech by Marullus on the crowd's erstwhile devotion to Caesar's adversary, Flavius pronounces chorally upon its exit:

See, whether their basest metal be not
moved;
They vanish tongue-tied in their guiltiness.
[I. i. 61–2]

The next we hear of the Roman mob is from Casca who, in the well-known lines of Scene 2, reports its reception of Caesar's refusal of the crown:

... and still as he refus'd it, the rabblement hooted
and clapp'd their chapp'd hands and threw up
their sweaty nightcaps and uttered such a deal of
stinking breath because Caesar refus'd the crown,
that it had almost choked Caesar, for he
swooned and fell down at it; and for mine own
part, I durst not laugh, for fear of opening my lips
and receiving the bad air.
[I. ii. 243–50]

The next appearance of the citizenry is in the second scene of Act III. After the killing of Caesar in the previous scene, Brutus and Cassius enter with a throng of citizens who are given the first line, "We will be satisfied; let us be satisfied" [III. ii. 1]. The citizens divide, some to hear Cassius, others to hear Brutus. The honest and highly epigrammatic speech of Brutus quickly converts the suspicious crowd, and they clamor, "Let him be Caesar"; "Caesar's better parts shall be crown'd in Brutus" [III. ii. 51–2]. The uproar of impulsive approval is so loud that Brutus must implore silence so that Antony may speak, and as Antony goes into the pulpit there are cries, "'Twere best he speak no harm of Brutus here" and "This Caesar was a tyrant" [III. ii. 68–9].

In complete contrast with Brutus, Antony is no expounder but rather an evoker who pulls, one by one and each at the strategic moment, all the stops of the organ. Some forty lines following a self-effacing start, his nostalgic reminiscences

of Caesar and his apparent emotional breakdown have the citizens murmuring in his favor. His mention of Caesar's will and quick disavowal of intent to read it increase the murmur to a clamor, in the midst of which he produces Caesar's bloody mantle; the clamor then becomes a frenzy as the citizenry cry, "About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay!" [III. ii. 205]. Caesar's wounds, "poor dumb mouths" [III. ii. 225] are given tongues as the mob is tensed to the critical pitch. In their upheaval the commoners forget the will, and Antony, with what seems cold-blooded cynicism, calls them back to hear Caesar's bequests in their favor. After that there is no check which can be put on them as they rush through the city with firebrands; significantly enough, they accomplish only irrelevant violence in killing Cinna the poet who, for want of a better reason, is torn for his bad verses.

In his chapter on the source of *Julius Caesar*, [in *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Background*], M. W. MacCallum is not specifically concerned with Shakespeare's presentation of Rome's unreasonable populace. At the outset, however, he does discuss the peculiar shiftiness of the mob's bullying questions addressed to the poet Cinna. MacCallum observes that none of this is in Plutarch and that it is Shakespeare's realistic contribution based upon intuitive understanding of the behavior of braves who have run down a victim. This is valuable. As a short scene in which the bland sadistic stare and the irrelevant retort are thrust upon an innocent who tries to explain himself, the episode deserves more space than MacCallum devotes to it. In its forty lines are packed such an awareness of the hostility and cogent unreason found in class conflict that the scene could be called modern in all senses, sober and ironical, of the term. For in Shakespeare's conception there is surely none of the wistful expectation that aroused masses will act objectively; the scene rests upon a knowledge of such behavior in crisis which is hard to explain other than by the dramatist's intuitive observation.

While he comments briefly upon this bit of realism as a factor not found in Shakespeare's source, MacCallum is silent upon a similar and far more elaborate transmutation of source material. It is well known that the speeches of Brutus and Antony in the funeral scene are Shakespeare's own, but no discussion of altered sources would be adequate which failed to note the political realism which underlies these

additions. From Plutarch Shakespeare certainly derived Brutus's high-mindedness and his tactical error in allowing Antony to speak, but there is no implication, in the source, of the kind of speech Brutus made. It has the laconic and functional sparseness of the Gettysburg Address. Tragically, however, it is not delivered as a tribute to men who died in battle, but as justification of a political *coup* and as an appeal for mass support. Shakespeare conceives of Brutus as an idealist who believes that facts honestly and simply explained are politically adequate. Because of his concern not to sully himself and his pains to represent his opposition fairly, Brutus wins support only until Antony begins to explore crowd responses. And although Shakespeare may not have intended it, Brutus's speech exhibits perfectly the egocentrism of those who make a religion of objectivity. The scorn of emotionality suggested by it, the conviction implied in it that orderly analysis is pre-eminent, and the perfectionistic compactness of it as a composition, all suggest a self-regard by the inward eye which may be the bliss of solitude, but which is fatal in an emergency requiring audience response.

Antony's famous rejoinder is a *tour de force* which completes Shakespeare's picture of the kind of persuasion most effective with the citizenry. Plutarch does give the prescription for this speech, but only in formula. "When [Antony] saw that the people were very glad and desirous also to hear Caesar spoken of, and his praises uttered, he mingled his oration with lamentable words, and by amplifying of matters did greatly move their hearts and affections."

The gist of this is the essence of Antony's oration. Antony, above all, is an analyst of audience temper; he first finds what his listeners want to hear and then wanders among the bypaths of their "hearts and affections."

Next comes the apparent admission against interest: "If it [Caesar's ambition] were so, it was a grievous fault" [III. ii. 79]. Now occurs a hint of the common touch, "When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept" [III. ii. 91]. Then, just as Antony is beginning to warm to his subject, comes his first exploratory halt; apparently inarticulate with emotion, he must pause till his heart, "in the coffin there with Caesar," [III. ii. 106], comes back to him. The commoners begin to mutter and Antony, sensing it, advances to the

next strategic point: he mentions Caesar's will but disclaims all intention of capitalizing upon material interest. Another exploratory pause, and as the citizens clamor for the will Antony knows that he can throw caution away. His subsequent move is to produce the concrete object, the evocative thing which men can touch and see, Caesar's gown with the bloody rents in it. But first he recalls old times and old campaigns:

I remember
The first time ever Caesar put it on;
'Twas on a summer's evening, in his tent
That day he overcame the Nervii.
[III. ii. 170–73]

And now, in a climax of mingled sentiment and abuse, he holds the grisly thing up for the crowd to see. Next, and in clinching employment of the concrete objective device, he drives the crowd's attention directly to the hacked body of Caesar, and there is no holding them. They even forget the will which Antony, who has saved material interest as the most telling and final point, must call them back to hear.

This is not a pretty example of how to manipulate the electorate, and it is even less so when we perceive two ingredients which do not occur at any one point, but are pervasive. In contrast with the understatement of Brutus, who tells the crowd briefly why he killed his best friend, Antony's irony, with its six-fold repetition of the "honorable men" phrase, evolves steadily into the most blatant kind of sarcasm. He knows the inadequacy of quiet irony; he also knows the value of repetition and how to use it climactically.

In evaluating Shakespeare's use of Plutarch in this episode, we have not only the demagoguery of Antony's speech to consider but also a portrait of the populace itself. Concerning the latter, the evidence is conflicting. As the account in Plutarch is followed, it would seem at first that Shakespeare had made a gratuitous and major change in order to emphasize the instability of crowd responses. All readers of Shakespeare know that in his play the citizenry plumps solidly for Brutus, only to change over suddenly at Antony's provocation. Plutarch's account of Marcus Brutus, however, runs entirely counter to this:

When the people saw him [Brutus] in the pulpit, although they were a multitude of rakehells of all sorts, and had a good will to make some stir:

yet being ashamed to do it for the reverence they bare unto Brutus, they kept silence to hear what he would say. When Brutus began to speak, they gave him quiet audience: *howbeit immediately after, they showed that they were not at all contented with the murder.* For when another called Cinna [the conspirator] would have spoken, and began to accuse Caesar, they fell into a great uproar among them and marvelously reviled him.

The account of the same event in Plutarch's life of Caesar depicts the citizenry as being moved by Brutus neither one way nor the other.

There are two reasons, however, why this change taken by itself cannot be relied upon to show a transmutation by Shakespeare with intention of casting discredit upon the populace. The first of these is that there is dramatic reason for the change: it is simply more effective to show a populace swayed first one way and then the other, and the story would be flat without it. Perhaps this principle, if extended, would also account, upon a purely dramatic basis, for the cynical virtuosity exhibited in Antony's speech . . . A second reason why little can be made of Shakespeare's change in this episode is that although Plutarch does not exhibit a fickle citizenry first in agreement with Brutus and immediately afterward with Antony, he does elsewhere and generally give clear hints of its instability. In the life of Marcus Brutus, and but a few pages beyond the excerpt just quoted, occurs this description of the populace just after Antony's winning of their favor: "The people growing weary now of Antonius' pride and insolency, who ruled all things in manner with absolute power: they desired that Brutus might return again."

Beyond the specific data described in the last few pages, there are some general notions in Plutarch which bear upon the problem and find their way into Shakespeare's adaptation of the episode. There is material throughout which establishes the opportunistic allegiance of the populace to Caesar. Cato, for example, feared "insurrection of the poor needy persons, which were they that put all their hope in Caesar." Caesar, moreover, "began to put forth laws meeter for a seditious Tribune than for a Consul: because by them he preferred the division of lands, and the distributing of corn to every citizen, *gratis*, to please them withal." The people are described, however, as antagonistic to the idea of Caesar as emperor, and as

making outcries of joy when he refused the crown. And in direct line with Shakespeare's conception of a Rome plagued with popular insurrection, we learn from Plutarch that

Rome itself also was immediately filled with the flowing repair of all the people their neighbors thereabouts, which came hither from all parties like droves of cattle, that there was neither officer nor magistrate that could any more command them by authority, neither by any persuasion of reason bridle such a confused and disorderly multitude: so that Rome had in manner destroyed itself for lack of rule and order.

Plutarch, in fact, declares that "men of deep judgment and learning" were so concerned with the "fury and madness" of the people that they "thought themselves happy if the commonwealth were no worse troubled than with the absolute state of a monarchy and sovereign lord to govern them." Unlike his story of Coriolanus, Plutarch's account of Caesar, and to some extent his story of Brutus, provided Shakespeare with a ready-made aversion to the populace which amounts to contempt. Apparently unnoticed by source studies, which have been more concerned with story and characterization than with social bias, is a brief passage in the life of Marcus Brutus which probably furnished the cue for Shakespeare's opening scene. This scene is begun by Flavius with a denunciation of the commoners, containing the line, "What! know you not, being mechanical . . ." [I. i. 2-3]. In the scene, moreover, six of the seven responses from the citizenry are made by a cobbler. The suggestion for this may well have been words in Plutarch addressed by Cassius to Brutus: "*What! knowest thou not that thou art Brutus? Thinkest thou that they be cobblers, tapsters, or suchlike base mechanical people, that write these bills and scrolls . . .?*" Whether the passage suggested part of Shakespeare's opening scene or not, it is typical of the social point of view toward commoners which was available to Shakespeare in his source data.

Finally, in a source-play comparison involving *Julius Caesar* it should be made plain that Plutarch supplied Shakespeare with the flagrant and literally inflammatory action of the mob which follows Antony's oration.

But when they had opened Caesar's testament and found a liberal legacy of money bequeathed unto every citizen of Rome, and that they saw his body (which was brought into the market place) all bemangled with gashes of swords: then

there was no order to keep the multitude and common people quiet. . . . Then . . . they took the firebrands, and went unto their houses that had slain Caesar, to set them afire. Others also ran up and down the city to see if they could meet with any of them, to cut them in pieces.

Directly after this comes Plutarch's description of the mobbing of Cinna the poet. (pp. 27–35)

Source: Brents Stirling, "The Plays: *Julius Caesar*," in *The Populace in Shakespeare*, Columbia University Press, 1949, pp. 25–35.

SOURCES

Bloom, Allan, "The Morality of the Pagan Hero: *Julius Caesar*," in *Shakespeare's Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp. 75–112.

Dean, Leonard F., ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Julius Caesar: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1968, p. 120.

Dzelzainis, Martin, "Shakespeare and Political Thought," in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, edited by David Scott Kastan, Blackwell Publishers, 1999, pp. 100–16.

Hunter, G. K., "Shakespeare and the Traditions of Tragedy," in *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol. 25, 1997, pp. 123–41.

"Julius Caesar," in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., edited by Michael Dobson and Stanley Wells, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 229–32.

Knights, L. C., "Shakespeare and Political Wisdom: A Note on the Personalism of Julius Caesar and Coriolanus," in *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 61, No. 1, Winter 1953, pp. 43–55.

Shakespeare, William, *Julius Caesar*, edited by David Bevington, Bantam Books, 1988.

FURTHER READING

Ackroyd, Peter, *Shakespeare: The Biography*, Nan A. Talese, 2005.

Ackroyd recounts the life of Shakespeare while weaving in details about life in the Elizabethan era and the effect of live theater on the populace. Using old information in new ways, Ackroyd brings to this telling of the bard's life a refreshing point of view—that of an enthusiast rather than that of a scholar.

Bonjour, Adrien, *The Structure of "Julius Caesar"*, Liverpool University Press, 1958.

Bonjour analyzes the structure, themes, and imagery of *Julius Caesar*, identifying the

play's central issue as the "twofold theme" of political and personal crisis. He maintains that the drama has two heroes, Caesar and Brutus, who alternately evoke praise and blame until, at the end, the audience's sympathies are divided.

Frye, Roland Mushat, "Rhetoric and Poetry in *Julius Caesar*," in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 37, No. 1, February 1951, pp. 41–8.

Frye examines Antony's funeral oration, outlining why it is effective both as poetry and as rhetoric. Frye also explores the continuing appeal of the speech.

Goddard, Harold C., "Julius Caesar," in *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, University of Chicago Press, 1951, pp. 307–30.

Goddard asserts that the central political theme of *Julius Caesar*, that violent opposition to imperialism only breeds further tyranny, is dramatized through the character of Brutus. Goddard distinguishes between the "true" Brutus, whose innocence and wisdom are symbolized by his relationships with Lucius and Portia, and the "false" Brutus, who, in convincing himself of his own moral infallibility, demonstrates his kinship with the imperious Caesar.

Humphreys, Arthur, ed., *Introduction to Julius Caesar*, Clarendon Press, 1984.

This volume offers a broad overview of several issues associated with *Julius Caesar*. Humphreys provides sections on the play's composition date, stage history, language, and imagery, as well as on Shakespeare's sources, his political attitudes, and his treatment of Rome and its values.

Levin, Richard A., "Brutus: 'Noblest Roman of Them All,'" in *Ball State University Forum*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Spring 1982, pp. 15–25.

Levin maintains that the audience's judgment of Brutus must be based on the notions of friendship and loyalty. Levin questions whether Brutus is capable of true friendship, distinguishing him from the other conspirators through his willingness to betray a man for whom he has expressed deep affection. Brutus's lack of knowledge about friendship is his undoing, Levin concludes, for he underestimates the depth of Antony's loyalty to Caesar.

Platt, Michael, "Rome, Empire and Aftermath: *Julius Caesar*," in *Rome and Romans According to Shakespeare*, rev. ed., University Press of America, 1983, pp. 185–257.

Platt focuses on a wide range of political issues associated with *Julius Caesar*, including the influence of Caesar's rise to power on his Roman friends and followers, the justifiability

of Caesar's assassination, and Brutus's motivation for leading the conspiracy against Caesar.

Taylor, Myron, "Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and the Irony of History," in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3, Summer 1973, pp. 301–308.

Taylor contrasts Cassius's and Caesar's philosophical points of view and argues that Shakespeare's purpose in the play was to show

that humankind is incapable of controlling its own destiny.

Velz, John W., "Cassius as a 'Great Observer,'" in *Modern Language Review*, Vol. 68, No. 2, April 1973, pp. 256–59.

Velz discusses Cassius's shrewd powers of observation in relation to his pessimism and his ability to distinguish appearance from reality.