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Title: Explanation of: "Julius Caesar" by William Shakespeare
Play, c. 1599

English Playwright (1564 - 1616)

Source: *LitFinder Contemporary Collection*. Detroit: Gale, 2009.

Document Type: Work overview

First performed in 1599, *Julius Caesar* is among the best-known Roman plays of William Shakespeare (1564-1616). Generally considered a transitional work, it contains elements of the political concerns found in the playwright's prior English-history plays and also foreshadows elements of the revenge tragedy later explored in *Hamlet*. Critics have been drawn to the play's principal characters, emphasizing their complex motives, relationships, virtues, and failings. In addition, commentators have identified masculinity and its relationship to both violence and constancy as a central theme in the play.

Set in Rome in 44 BCE, *Julius Caesar* depicts the senatorial conspiracy to murder the Roman dictator, Caesar, and the political turmoil that ensues in the aftermath of the assassination. The play concentrates on two central historical personages: the ambitious and headstrong Caesar, slain midway through the drama, and his friend Brutus, who becomes convinced that by eliminating the charismatic dictator he can somehow rescue the faltering Roman Republic.

When the play opens, the Roman citizens have taken to the streets to celebrate Caesar's triumphant return home after defeating the threatening forces of Pompey the Great. Cassius, a prominent nobleman who is both jealous of Caesar and fearful of his ambitious nature, begins to conspire against him. Through various schemes, Cassius wins the support of several other noblemen, including the influential and beloved Brutus. After Caesar is murdered in the capital by the conspirators, Mark Antony, Caesar's loyal general, delivers an emotional funeral oration that foment a violent rebellion.

Civil war erupts between the conspirators and a triumvirate of generals led by Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Lepidus. The two factions clash at the Battle of Philippi. Mistaken battlefield reports and changes in fortune lead to the deaths by suicide of both Brutus and Cassius.

Most of the dramatic tension in *Julius Caesar* results from the political conflict between several strong characters who espouse distinctly different ideological values. As many commentators have pointed out, Caesarism (that is, the advent of an absolute dictatorship) serves as the catalyst for this conflict. If Caesar is the catalyst, however, character-centered studies of the drama have primarily focused on Brutus, who is considered to be the tragic figure of the play. Although conventional twentieth-century consensus on Brutus tended to emphasize his nobility and idealism, some critics have stressed the ambivalent nature of his character. Contemporary scholars continue to analyze the motivations and ambiguities inherent in Shakespeare's dramatization of this character.

Recently scholars have focused on the cultural and political significance of *Julius Caesar*, especially in early modern England. Several critical accounts note the key historical events of the play — conspiracy, assassination, and civil war — and how the theatrical representation of these actions might have affected Elizabethan, Jacobean, and even modern audiences.

Throughout most of its history, *Julius Caesar* has been highly popular on the stage. Directors and audiences alike are attracted to the play's grandiose displays of pageantry, rhetorical eloquence, forceful characterizations, and exciting battle sequences. The sheer number of modern productions attests to the enduring appeal of Shakespeare's absorbing political drama.

Source Citation

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