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Title: Overview: *Julius Caesar*

Play, c. 1599

English Playwright (1564 - 1616)

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Born in England in 1564, William Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* in 1599. The play follows events that actually took place in ancient Rome in the first century B.C., but also reflects to some degree the realities of English life in the late sixteenth century, during what is known as the Elizabethan era.

Events in History at the Time the Play Takes Place

The Roman Senate

All the central characters of *Julius Caesar*—Caesar, Mark Antony, the conspirators—are members of the senate, Rome's main governing body. The senate controlled both domestic and foreign policy, publishing decrees, arresting and convicting citizens, levying taxes, and convening public assemblies. Senate members generally worked hard; their meetings started very early in the day and often continued until dark. Though its size varied over the years, the Roman Senate had about 600 members during the time covered in *Julius Caesar*. Any adult male citizen automatically became a senator after serving as a junior government official. In practice, the body was dominated by Rome's aristocrats, who were called patricians. This dominance of the senate by rich citizens was due in part to the low salaries pulled in at even high-level government posts: one had to be wealthy to be able to afford to take such a position.

The principal officials of the senate, and of Rome, were two consuls. Selected from among the senators by the general population, they each served during alternate months for about one year. A consulship was the supreme honor available to a Roman citizen. Consuls summoned and presided over the senate, conducted the main elections, and commanded armies during wartime. Though they wielded great influence, their power was checked by the presence of the second consul with whom they served and the short duration of their term in office.

The Rise of Julius Caesar

In 60 B.C., about fifteen years before the events depicted in *Julius Caesar* took place, Caesar, Gneius Pompeius (Pompey), and Marcus Licinius Crassus were three of the most powerful senators in Rome. They decided to form a pact to support each other politically. This pact, which

became known as the first Triumvirate, allowed each to support the others in accomplishing their respective political goals. Armed with such power, the three allied senators were able to get laws passed more easily than they had been able to do individually. The alliance served each of the senators well for a number of years. In 53 B.C., however, Crassus was killed in a war and the alliance between Caesar and Pompey gradually began to disintegrate. Caesar tried to salvage the relationship. He offered to divorce his wife, Calpurnia, and marry Pompey's daughter, Pompeia. At the same time, Pompey would marry Caesar's great-niece Octavia. Such intermarriage between families was a common way of solidifying political bonds. Pompey refused the proposal, however, and married the daughter of one of Caesar's enemies, a certain sign of hostility. Before long, violence and civil war broke out between supporters of Caesar and supporters of Pompey. In 49 B.C., Caesar's army forced Pompey and his followers out of Italy. Battles continued between the two for a number of years in such places as Greece, Egypt, and Africa. Caesar finally emerged victorious in 45 B.C., at the battle of Munda, Spain.

Caesar's popularity grew tremendously during the civil war. In 46 B.C., the senate appointed him to be "dictator" for ten years. This new status as Rome's supreme leader made him much more powerful than a consul. Upon his triumphant return to Rome in 45 B.C., the senate voted him a great number of honors. He was awarded the title *pater patriae* (father of the country). His statue was placed in all the temples of Rome and the towns of Italy. He was also allowed to use several significant emblems of power on all occasions. These symbols included a wardrobe of a purple triumphal toga and a laurel wreath and use of a gilded chair. Other honors followed as well. A religious temple—where festivals in his honor would be celebrated annually—was to be built in memory of the peace Caesar had restored. An ivory statue of his likeness was to be carried with those of the gods in processions. His birthday was made a public holiday and the month Quintilis renamed as July in his honor. On February 15, 44 B.C., he assumed the title *dictator perpetuus*: "dictator for life." Previously, dictators had only been appointed to serve temporarily to deal with state emergencies. As *dictator perpetuus*, however, Julius Caesar was assured that he would be the most powerful man in Rome for the rest of his life.

What Caesar Was Really Like

Though not described as a particularly likable man, Caesar had such skill in politics, generalship, public speaking, and writing that he has been called a genius. So generous was he to the enemies he had defeated (if they were Roman) that he forgave some without doling out punishment. Sometimes he even gave them posts in his own government. Two such former foes were Cassius and Brutus. Both would later turn against Caesar. Caesar's pained cry, "Et tu, Brute?" (And you, Brutus?) became famous; it is often used today by those who wish to convey feelings of betrayal.

How Well Did Caesar Rule?

As dictator, Julius Caesar proved generous in granting Roman citizenship to foreigners. He also had the cities of Corinth and Carthage rebuilt for his discharged soldiers and for the workers of Rome. He further increased the size of the senate and made it better represent all of Rome. But Caesar also had an air of haughtiness that apparently contributed to his downfall. He, for example, disregarded public opinion when, in 46 B.C., he welcomed the Egyptian ruler

Cleopatra to Rome. Along with other ill-considered acts, such disdain for public sentiment was one factor that prompted old friends to turn against him

While Caesar had the support of the senate, some members were not happy about his rise to dictatorship. They chafed under a political arrangement that greatly diminished their influence. In addition, Rome's republican tradition seemed to be in tremendous jeopardy. Prior to Caesar's ascendancy, even the most influential Romans had checks on their powers in the form of popular elections and term limits for consuls. No single person had ever before wielded so much power. So, as reenacted in Shakespeare's play, a conspiracy that included about sixty senators formed. Led by Gaius Cassius Longinus (Cassius) and Marcus Junius Brutus (Brutus), the conspirators assassinated Caesar on March 15, 44 B.C.

Roman Religious Holidays

The Romans believed in a pantheon of gods, each linked to a particular human activity. For example, there were gods of war (Mars), home life (Vesta), and agriculture (Ceres). Every activity was performed under the authority of a particular god. Before beginning any significant action, people customarily performed a ritual or made a sacrifice in honor of the appropriate god. The Roman calendar also consisted of a large mixture of regular daily, monthly, and yearly religious rituals celebrating the cult of a particular god or gods. Some of these holidays, such as the Ides of March and the Feast of Lupercal, are mentioned in *Julius Caesar*.

The Feast of Lupercal was a major public event that took place yearly on February 15. The Lupercal were a group of priests associated with Mars, the god of war. Every February 15 they met at Lupercal, a sacred cave at the southwest foot of the Palatine hill in Rome. According to legend, this was the place where a wolf had suckled Romulus and Remus, the twin sons of Mars and the mythic founders of Rome. The ritual began with a sacrifice of goats and a dog, and an offering of sacred cakes. The priests smeared blood on the foreheads of two young men from noble families. Afterwards the blood was wiped off with wool dipped in milk and the young men laughed in accordance with the rules of the ritual. A feast followed. Next the priests cut up the sacrificial goat skins into strips. Naked except for the skins, the priests ran from Lupercal, traveling several times around the Palatine hill. Along the way they struck bystanders—especially women who wanted to be cured of barrenness—with thongs. Mark Antony is portrayed in *Julius Caesar* as one of the Lupercal runners. Caesar alludes to this when he tells him:

Forget not in your speed
To touch Calpurnia, for our elders say
The barren, touched in this holy chase.
Shake off their sterile curse.
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1.2.6–8)

Jupiter, the god of the sky, was also the supreme god of the Roman pantheon. In fact, the city of Rome was a domain dedicated to him, and his temple on the capitol was the center of national religious life. The Ides, or midpoint, of every month was devoted to him; honorary rituals called for a number of sheep to be led along a road called the Via Sacra and then sacrificed to Jupiter.

In addition to this ritual of recognition of the Ides of March, another festival dedicated to Anna Perenna was celebrated. In ancient Rome March was the first month of the year, and Anna Perenna was honored as the goddess of the new year. Her festival took place in a grove near Rome's Tiber River. After a formal sacrifice and public prayers to secure a healthy year, people spent the day socializing, drinking, singing popular songs, and dancing. It was in 44 B.C., on the same day these festivities would have been taking place, that Caesar was killed in the senate.

The Play in Focus

The Plot

The play opens on the Roman religious feast of Lupercal. In addition to the feast, Julius Caesar's triumph over Pompey and his followers and his recent return to Rome are also being celebrated. Caesar is cautioned by a soothsayer to beware the Ides of March, but he decides to ignore the warning. A number of senators express concern about Caesar's rapidly increasing power and popularity, especially after he is publicly offered a crown by Mark Antony. Though he refuses it, Rome's long tradition as a republic—and the senators' positions in it—seem to be in great jeopardy. Cassius forms a conspiracy to kill Caesar that includes a large number of senators.

Brutus, a well-respected senator, is approached by Cassius and informed of the plot. He deliberates over whether to become involved in the conspiracy. During a night full of ominous thunder, lightning, storms, and strange happenings, he finally decides that his duty is to help save the Roman republic; Caesar must be killed. The conspirators meet Brutus at his house and they agree to carry out their plan that day.

The foreboding storms of the night, along with her own nightmares, have disturbed Caesar's wife Calpurnia. Interpreting them as warnings that something terrible is about to happen to Caesar, she begs him to stay home that day. The conspirators convince him otherwise however, and escort him to the senate. Soon after his arrival, he is stabbed to death by the conspirators.

Despite Caesar's popularity, the conspirators believe that they will be able to convince the Roman people of the rightness of their action. At Caesar's funeral, Brutus's speech does win them over, but only temporarily. After Brutus leaves, Mark Antony convinces them instead that Caesar's death was unjust, and he manages to work the crowd into a fury against the murderers.

Brutus and Cassius flee Rome and gather an army. At Philippi, in Macedonia, they fight a battle against the armies of Mark Antony and Octavius, who is Caesar's great-nephew. Cassius, believing the war to be lost, commits suicide. Soon after, Brutus decides to run upon his own sword, held by his faithful servant Strato, rather than die at the hands of enemies. Rome is thus left in the control of Mark Antony and Octavius.

The Character of Brutus

Brutus seems to be guided in the play at least partly by the philosophy of stoicism, a school of thought that was popular among the ancient Romans. Stoics believed that there was a rational force pervading reality and guiding all things to their perfection. Every person had a share of this

force. It was one's duty to try to identify oneself with the force while training oneself to feel indifference to everything else. According to the Stoics, the rational soul should dominate one's actions. Personal emotions, which are motivated by service to oneself rather than by rational consideration of what is universally beneficial, are seen as powerful and disabling distractions. The Stoics believed that only by putting aside passion, unjust thoughts, and self-indulgence, and by performing one's duty with the right attitude, could a person live consistently with nature.

Brutus can be seen striving against his emotions throughout the play. In the first act he is at "war with himself" and tells Cassius.

Vexed I am
Of late with passions of some difference
Which give some soil, perhaps, to my
behaviors.
(*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.39–46)

The stoic philosophy strove to be detached and aspired to a feeling of passionless indifference, an approach that appears to be favored by Brutus during his deliberation over what to do about Caesar. He separates his personal feelings for Caesar from his rational assessment of what must be done. For example, in his speech to the Roman people after Caesar's assassination, he states, "I slew my best lover [friend] for the good of Rome" (*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.38). In other words, he killed Caesar because he rationally came to the decision that his existence threatened the general good; therefore it was his duty to do so. "Not that I loved Caesar less," Brutus says, "but that I loved Rome more" (*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.19–20).

In the last scene of the play Brutus decides that he himself must die. He appears to come to this decision, and face the act itself, with the passionless indifference of a stoic. He and his army are fighting a losing battle against the enemy forces of Antony and Octavius. He states that it makes the most sense for him to kill himself before his enemies can do it: it is the most honorable course of action to take. Furthermore, he has seen the ghost of Caesar twice since the assassination, and he calmly takes this to mean that his "hour is come" (*Julius Caesar*, 5.5.19). After meditating, he requests that one of his trusted servants hold his sword while he runs upon it. He kills himself, saying "Caesar, now be still:/ I killed not thee with half so good a will" (*Julius Caesar*, 5.5.50–1). His manner of death indicates a mastery over his feelings even in the last moments of his life.

Sources

Julius Caesar is based on characters that actually existed and events that actually took place in ancient Rome. For his interpretation of the facts, Shakespeare seems to have drawn on Sir Thomas North's 1579 *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*. North's book was a translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, a work originally written in Greek toward the end of the first century A.D. In particular, Shakespeare drew on Plutarch's articles about the lives of Caesar and Brutus. In fact, some of the passages in *Julius Caesar* incorporate phrases that are very similar to those employed by Plutarch.

Plutarch

“I dare assure thee, that no enemy hath taken
nor shall take Marcus Brutus alive ... for
wheresoever he be found, alive or dead, he will
be found like himself.”

(Dorsch in Shakespeare, p. xiv)

Shakespeare

“I dare assure thee that no enemy shall ever take
alive the noble Brutus / ... When you do find
him, or alive or dead. / He will be found like
Brutus, like himself.”

(*Julius Caesar*, 5.4.21–5)

Other similar examples can be found throughout the play. Still, while Plutarch evidently provided a basis for some of the elements of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, there were marked differences between the versions. For example, Shakespeare condenses the actions described by Plutarch a great deal. The play moves very quickly from scene to scene. What really took place over the course of two years seems in Shakespeare's play to unfold in less than a month. Moreover, the scene in which Cassius and Brutus first speak about Caesar is presented in much more detail by Shakespeare. Finally, the playwright added the speeches Brutus and Antony give to the Roman people after Caesar's death. Though Plutarch's narrative seems to have been an important influence, the play that Shakespeare wrote is ultimately his own interpretation of the story.

Numerous other plays were written about Julius Caesar in the Elizabethan era. These included *Caesar Interfectus*, presented at Oxford in 1582, the anonymous *Caesar's Revenge*, and Sir William Alexander's *Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Shakespeare's work was first staged in September 1599 and proved immediately popular. The play was later included in the first published collection of Shakespeare's plays, the *First Folio*, in 1623

Events in History at the Time the Play Was Written

Shakespeare and Elizabethan Politics

Although the political events that take place in *Julius Caesar* do not correspond directly to events of the Elizabethan era, there were similarities between the two. Like the rule of Julius Caesar, Queen Elizabeth's monarchy was not immune to plots and conspiracies against it. The career of Robert Devereux, Lord of Essex, which reached its high point around the time Shakespeare wrote this play, illustrates this fact.

In the 1590s the charismatic Essex became a favorite of the queen and one of the most popular men in England. His career began to decline toward the end of the decade, however. He was appointed to crush a rebellion in Ireland and left on March 27, 1599. After six months there, he concluded a truce that was extremely favorable to the Irish and returned to England against orders. Bursting into Queen Elizabeth's chamber early on September 28, 1599, he threw himself on her mercy. The next day he was taken prisoner. He underwent trial and was eventually freed

from custody on June 5, 1600. Disgraced by the experience, Essex was also financially ruined when the queen deprived him of a monopoly on sweet wines from which he drew his income.

Essex's anger against the queen grew; he raved to one colleague about “the old woman, as crooked in her mind as in her carcase” (Essex in Halliday, p. 226). In those times, it was a very serious matter to criticize the monarch in this way. Essex went further, however. He began to form a conspiracy against the government. On February 3, 1601, he and five other conspirators laid plans for seizing the court and gathering the support of the people. The next day some of Essex's followers staged Shakespeare's *Richard II* (a play that chronicles the successful overthrow of a monarch), most likely as a means of gathering support for their cause. On the morning of February 8 about 300 followers met at Essex's house. Essex and his followers marched into London, brandishing swords and appealing to their fellow citizens to rise up and join them. None did. When a royal herald publicly proclaimed Essex to be a traitor, his own followers deserted him. The plot quickly deteriorated. Essex turned back toward home and was soon arrested. Within two weeks he was convicted of treason. He was executed on February 25, 1601.

Shakespeare finished *Julius Caesar* during 1599, the same year of Essex's disgraced return from Ireland. By the time of the failed conspiracy of 1601, the play was widely known. The English people took note of the similarities between the play and the actual events that unfolded and marveled anew at Shakespeare's work.

The Elizabethan Conception of the World

Though *Julius Caesar* takes place in ancient Rome, Shakespeare's Elizabethan conception of the world influenced the content of the play. One element reflected in his work is the common belief in a direct connection between the phenomena of the natural world and the course of human events. A belief in the influence of the stars upon weather, plant and animal life, people, and events was probably held by a majority of Shakespeare's audience. While many were skeptical of claims of specific knowledge about individuals based on astrological information, general predictions about future events were quite respected. A number of distinguished astronomers, including Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) and Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), were also practicing astrologers. Furthermore, it was common for people of the Elizabethan period to interpret comets, eclipses of the sun or moon, earthquakes, and unusual sights as portents or warnings. When something of major importance was about to happen, or people were in any particular danger of suffering from divine anger for misdeeds, they believed that God provided warning in the form of portents.

Such ominous signs are plentiful in *Julius Caesar*—thunder, lightning, storms, and many strange happenings occur the night before Caesar's murder. The characters experiencing these phenomena interpret them as omens for the future. As Casca says.

...never till tonight, never till now,
Did I go through a tempest dropping fire.
Either there is a civil strife in heaven,
Or else the world, too saucy with the gods,

Incenses them to send destruction.
(*Julius Caesar*, 1.3.9–13)

He goes on to describe other strange images he has seen that night—a man's hand on fire yet not burned, a lion near the capitol, and a hundred ghastly women who swore they saw men on fire walking the streets. Caesar's wife Calpurnia is concerned as well, disturbed by accounts of strange sights seen by the night watchmen—graves opening up, blood drizzling upon the capitol, and ghosts. She also has nightmares of Caesar being murdered. She takes these portents very seriously and begs her husband not to leave the house the next day. He does so anyway and is subsequently killed.

Another Elizabethan belief reflected in *Julius Caesar* is that human beings were composed of four elements, or humours: cholera, phlegm, sanguine (blood), and melancholy. These humours were constantly flowing and never completely stable. When these elements were in balance, a person was at the height of mental and physical health. Any humour could become dominant for a period of time, however, thus affecting personalities in particular ways.

Humour Associated Personality Traits
Cholera Impetuous, cunning, quick to anger, lean, greedy
Phlegm Sluggish, forgetful, dull, slow
Sanguine Cheerful, talkative (Blood)
Melancholy Stable, grave, deliberate

Cassius is characterized in *Julius Caesar* as choleric. While arguing with him, Brutus says, “Must I give way and room to your rash cholera?... Go show your slaves how choleric you are, / And make your bondmen tremble” (*Julius Caesar*, 4.3.39–44). In accordance with Elizabethan belief, Cassius's cholera made him quick to anger but also quick to calm down. Though extremely angry at the beginning of the discussion, Cassius becomes immediately apologetic when he learns that Brutus's wife, Portia, is dead. Other characteristics associated with cholera were leanness and greediness, two qualities linked to Cassius during the play. Caesar notes at one point that he distrusts such a lean, cunning-looking man, while Brutus later accuses him of accepting bribes and having “an itchy palm” (*Julius Caesar*, 4.3.10).

On the other hand, Brutus is remembered as a man whose humours were well-balanced. Antony says of Brutus,

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to the world. This was a man!
(*Julius Caesar*, 5.5.73–5)

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