



Julius Caesar

William Shakespeare
(1599)

PLOT

First Act. This act is set in a street in Rome in February of the year 44 BC. General Julius Caesar has just returned after defeating his rival, Pompey, and his many military triumphs have made him the most powerful man in Rome. He has also been offered a king's crown, which he refuses three times. Meanwhile the conspirators Cassius, Casca, Cinna, and others are plotting against Caesar and decide to draw Brutus into their conspiracy.

Second Act. Brutus is alone in his orchard and meditates over the state of things. While Caesar's despotism is the main theme of the first act, Brutus's republican ideology emerges in the second. Notwithstanding his many doubts about the 'acting', Brutus decides to kill Caesar.

Third Act. The tragic plot rises to its climax, when Caesar is assassinated. It is an intensely dramatic scene in which Caesar's supposed friends gather around him and stab him. At the funeral Brutus tries to convince the angry mourners (→ *Brutus's speech*) that he has been forced to kill Caesar in order to save Rome from dictatorship. Eventually, Antony gives his funeral oration (→ Text Bank 14) after placing the General's corpse in the market place, and he succeeds in moving the listeners by his words and in stirring them to 'mutiny and rage' against Brutus.

Fourth Act. A military dictatorship succeeds the rule of Caesar and the triumvirs, Antony, Octavius and Lepidus, draw up a list of those who are to be put to death.

Fifth Act. The conspirators gather their forces and meet the army of Octavius and Antony at Philippi, where they are defeated. Brutus and Cassius commit suicide and Antony pronounces noble words of praise over Brutus's corpse.

DATE, SOURCES AND SETTING

Julius Caesar is partly set in **Rome** in February of the year 44 BC and partly around **different Italian battlefields**. The Roman action takes place in the physical landmarks of ancient Rome, such as the Tiber River, the Capitol, and the Senate, in the houses of Brutus and Caesar, in the streets and in the Forum. In later scenes, the action moves to the battlefield at Philippi.

The play was first performed at the newly built theatre, the Globe, in 1599. It opens the period of the 'problem plays' involving a moral, social issue, and it bears witness to the maturity reached by Shakespeare, who wrote it under the influence of the particular political situation in England at that time.

The historical sources are Plutarch's *Lives*, translated into English in 1579.

CHARACTERS

Most critics argue that **Julius Caesar** is the **protagonist** of the play, pointing out that he is the title character and the cause of all the action in the play. Even in scenes in which he is absent, he is the focus of the discussion and

the reason for revenge. He is an aging man who stands for the past, while the conspiracy is the future and the desire of freedom. He embodies a great antithesis: the human, superstitious, loving man and the arrogant, ambitious politician; this causes his downfall.

Other critics believe that the Roman nobleman **Brutus** is the protagonist, claiming he is **the most complex character** of the play, whose psyche is explored in depth. His tragic flaw is his permanent sense of principle and nobility.

In fact, he believes that his role in the assassination is for the good of Rome, as he tells the plebeians in his famous speech: 'If then that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer – not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more' (→ *Brutus's speech*).

He stands for the man of the Renaissance, still attached to a disappearing world, but at the same time attracted by new ideas he does not completely understand. He is torn between past and future and is a preparatory sketch for Shakespeare's Hamlet (→ T13), who has many of the same difficulties to face and the same doubts about his relationship with his own soul and the society around him. Brutus stands for reason, for the political idea of 'republic', but he lacks passion and does not take the crowd's attitudes and emotions into consideration; because of this his words are ineffectual.

Antony is more charming, more practical than Brutus and with a subtler political mentality; he has **the power of words** and he is able to transform the conspiracy from an act committed in the name of freedom into a murderous crime. In fact, after Caesar's assassination, he turns the crowd against the conspirators: his speech begins with the well-known lines, 'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears' (→ Text Bank 14). He continually praises Brutus as 'an honourable man' who has killed Caesar for being ambitious. He then presents all the images of Caesar in which the General has not been ambitious, instigates mob riots and subtly encourages the burning of the conspirators' houses. Along with Octavius and Lepidus, Antony leads an attack against Cassius and Brutus and defeats them at Philippi.

THEMES

The rhetoric of politics. *Julius Caesar* is about the most important Roman tragedy and its main theme is the rhetoric of politics. According to Shakespeare, rhetoric is the maker of history: the people who can make an effective speech are the winners.

Virtue in public men. Other two important themes are the nature of ambition and the problem of goodness and honesty in people with public roles. What is virtue in a private man, may cause ruin in a public man: Brutus is unable to judge people because he is too 'honest' and the clever Antony soon discovers how to defeat him.

The mirror of the Elizabethan order. In 1599, when *Julius Caesar* was first performed, Queen Elizabeth I was old;



she had never married and had no children to succeed her. Shakespeare and his contemporaries must have worried greatly that someone would try to grab power causing another civil war. When the Elizabethans spoke of order, they did not just mean political or social order (→ 2.3). The universe was ruled by a benevolent God and everything had a divine purpose to fulfil. The king's right to rule came from God himself, and opposition to the king

earned the wrath of God and threw the whole system into disorder. Everyone was linked together by a chain of rights and obligations, and when someone broke that chain, the whole system broke down and plunged the world into chaos. What destroys the divine harmony in *Julius Caesar* may have been Cassius's jealousy of the General's power, Caesar's ambition and Brutus's rationality.

Key idea

The power of monarchy

Julius Caesar is a history play about a political assassination. The question it asks is: is it ever right to use force to remove a ruler from power? We, as contemporary readers, can answer that question in terms of our own experience in the 21st century. But if we are going to understand what Shakespeare thought, it is important to know something about the values of the Elizabethan world in which he lived.

History plays were popular during Shakespeare's lifetime because it was an age of discovery, and English men and women were eager to learn about worlds different from theirs. But the Elizabethans also saw history as a mirror where they could find answers to the problems of their lives.

Nowadays, we believe in democracy and are suspicious of anyone who seeks unlimited power; but Shakespeare and his contemporaries had no such prejudice against strong rulers. Their queen, Elizabeth I, ruled with an iron hand for forty-five years, yet her subjects had great affection for her. Under her rule the arts flourished and the economy prospered. While the rest of Europe was involved in war, mostly between Catholics and Protestants, England enjoyed a period relatively free from civil strife. Therefore, to Shakespeare and his contemporaries the message of this play was clear: only a strong, benevolent ruler could protect the peace and save the country from falling into chaos again.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 ANSWER the following questions.

- 1 Where is the story set?
- 2 Who are the most important characters?
- 3 What does Julius Caesar embody?
- 4 What does Brutus stand for?
- 5 What is Antony's real power?
- 6 What are the main themes of the play?
- 7 What did *Julius Caesar* teach the Elizabethans?



Brutus's speech

This extract presents Brutus's famous speech. Caesar has been killed and the large, angry crowd wants an explanation. It is decided that Brutus will speak first; he succeeds in quietening the Romans making a noble speech and declaring his great love both for Caesar and for Rome.

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Act III, Scene 2

1

BRUTUS Be patient till the last.

Romans, countrymen, and lovers, **hear me for my cause**,
and **be silent, that you may hear**¹. **Believe me** for mine
honour, and have respect to mine **honour**, that you may
believe. **Censure me** in your wisdom, and **awake your**
senses², that you may be the better **judge**.

2

If there be any in
this assembly, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say
that Brutus' love to Caesar was no less than his³. If then
that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, **this**
is my answer – not that I loved Caesar less, but that I
loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were **living**⁴,
and **die all slaves**, than that Caesar were dead, to live all
free men?

3

As Caesar loved me, I weep⁵ for him; as he was
fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him;
but **as he was ambitious**, I slew him. There is tears for his
love; joy for his fortune; **honour** for his **valour**; and **death**
for his **ambition**. **Who is here so base that would be a**
bondman⁶? If any, speak, for him have I offended. **Who**
is here so rude that would not be a Roman? If any,
speak, for him have I offended. **Who is here so vile that**
will not love his country? If any, speak, for him have I
offended. I pause for a reply.

ALL **None, Brutus, none.**

BRUTUS Then none have I offended. I have done no more
to Caesar than you shall do to Brutus. The question of
his death is enrolled⁷ in the Capitol; his glory not extenuated⁸,
wherein he was worthy⁹; nor his offences enforced¹⁰,
for which he suffered death.

[Enter MARK ANTONY and others, with Caesar's body.]

Here comes his body, mourned by **Mark Antony, who**,
though he had no hand in his death, shall receive the
benefit of his dying, a place in the commonwealth¹¹, as
which of you shall not? With this I depart, that as I slew
my best lover¹² for the good of Rome, I have the same
dagger for myself¹³, when it shall please my country to
need my death¹⁴.











ALL **Live, Brutus! Live! Live!**

- 1 that ... hear. Affinché voi possiate ascoltare.
- 2 awake your senses. Risvegliate il vostro senno.
- 3 Brutus' love ... his. L'amore di Bruto per Cesare non era inferiore al suo.
- 4 Had ... living. Preferireste che Cesare fosse vivo.
- 5 weep. Piango.
- 6 Who ... bondman. Chi c'è qui così vile da voler essere uno schiavo.
- 7 The question ... enrolled. La ragione della sua morte è registrata.
- 8 extenuated. Diminuita.
- 9 wherein ... worthy. Laddove egli fu degno.
- 10 enforced. Rafforzate, accentuate.
- 11 commonwealth. Stato.
- 12 lover. Amante; *qui*: la persona che ho amato di più.
- 13 I have ... myself. Io conservo lo stesso pugnale per me stesso.
- 14 when ... death. Quando sembrerà alla mia patria che sia necessaria la mia morte.

**VISUAL ANALYSIS**

1 READ the text and write a heading to each section.

2 LOOK at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each mark represents in the spaces provided.

Be	
	
	Mark
	
	
As	
	living
Who	

3 DISCUSS the following questions in pairs.

- 1 Are you for or against the assassination of Julius Caesar?
- 2 Why do you think Brutus delivers his oration as prose?
- 3 In your opinion, what is Shakespeare's view of the crowd?

4 COMPLETE the text about the features and meaning of Brutus's speech with the words from the box.

common sense

honour

rhetorical questions

forgive

was forced

conspiracy

eloquence

dictatorship

suspicious

crowd



Brutus asks the **(1)** to listen to him, to believe him for his **(2)** and consider him an honourable man. Despite his love for Caesar, Brutus frankly and honestly feels that he **(3)** to kill him in order to save Rome from **(4)** Brutus uses several linguistic devices: *if*-clauses (lines 7-10), parallelisms (lines 13-15), **(5)** (lines 17-21) and antitheses ('living'/'die' → lines 11-12; 'slaves'/'free men' → lines 12-13; 'valour'/'death' → line 16); their aim is to provide reasons for the **(6)** 'As Caesar loved me, I weep for him': Brutus's **(7)** appealing to the crowd's **(8)** wins the mind of every Roman. While at the beginning of the speech the crowd is **(9)** and wants to know the reason why Brutus killed Caesar, they **(10)** Brutus at the end and cry 'Live, Brutus!' Then Brutus invites Mark Antony, Caesar's right-hand man, to address the crowd.