

William Shakespeare

JULIUS CAESAR

Introduction

What do Capitol Hill, high school, and the 400 year-old play *Julius Caesar* have in common? A lot, actually—intrigue, egos, power issues, plots, betrayals, back-stabbing—this stuff has been around a l-o-n-g time; at least since 44 BCE, anyway. Yup, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* is, as they say in the movies, “based on a true story”—the story of an ambitious Roman general, his shooting-star rise to power, and the conspiring dudes who want to take him down.

So why’d our man Will (Shakespeare, that is) want to tackle such ancient history? Well, in 1599, when the play is believed to have first been performed, England had a little “ancient history” of its own: Queen Elizabeth, who ruled England for almost forty years, was 65 years old—TRULY ancient by Renaissance standards, when most people didn’t make it past 55 or 60. So the English were totally spooked about what would happen when she died, especially since she didn’t have any heirs. Coincidence or coincidences, neither did Caesar! So even though the censors of the time wouldn’t allow Shakespeare to come right out and say it, “people in the know” knew what Will was up to. He was using the story of Caesar to imagine what might happen after Elizabeth’s death if England wasn’t careful.

We know that a performance of *Julius Caesar* included realistic sound effects for thunder and battle scenes. The actor playing Caesar probably had a pig’s bladder filled with blood under his costume, and when he was stabbed, he and the conspirators were covered with blood. About 15 men played all the parts in the play, memorizing several parts each. The two female roles were played by boy apprentices. There were no women actors in the theater at this time.

Today critics are divided over *Julius Caesar*. Some consider it flawed because it is the only Shakespearean tragedy where the title character is killed halfway through the play. Also, the focus of the action is never clear. Who is the hero of the play? Is it Caesar or Brutus? What is the message Shakespeare intends?

In reading the play today, we tend to judge it by our modern standards and concepts of democracy and freedom. When you read the play, try to see it through the eyes of one who lived in England at the beginning of the 17th Century. It was a time of change and discovery, yet it was a time of divine right, monarchy, order and obligation. Without these things the world would be in chaos. What destroys the harmony is Caesar’s Rome—Caesar’s ambition for power? Cassius’ jealousy? Brutus’ naïveté? Or the fickleness of its citizens?

Master List of Characters

Julius Caesar	<i>Dictator of Rome</i>
Marcus Antonius	<i>Friend of Caesar and one of the leaders of Rome after Caesar's death</i>
Marcus Brutus	<i>Friend of Caesar who kills him "for the good of Rome"</i>
Cassius	<i>Leader of the conspiracy against Caesar and brother-in-law of Brutus</i>
Casca	<i>The first conspirator to stab Caesar</i>
Trebonius	<i>Member of the conspiracy against Caesar</i>
Caius Ligarius	<i>Final member of the conspiracy, a sick man who joins them when Brutus asks him to help make Rome well.</i>
Decius Brutus	<i>Conspirator who uses flattery to get Caesar to the Senate House</i>
Metellus Cimber	<i>Conspirator and brother of Publius Cimber who was banished from Rome</i>
Cinna	<i>Conspirator who urges Cassius to bring Brutus into the conspiracy to gain favorable public opinion</i>
Flavius and Marullus	<i>Tribunes who guard the rights of Roman citizens</i>
Octavius Caesar	<i>Nephew of Julius Caesar and first Roman Emperor</i>
Lepidus	<i>Ally of Antony and Octavius and one of the three rulers of Rome after Caesar's assassination</i>
Cicero	<i>Roman senator and orator later killed by Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus</i>
Publius	<i>Elderly senator and witness to Caesar's death</i>
Popilius Lena	<i>Senator who was opposed to Caesar</i>
Calphurnia	<i>Wife of Caesar who tried to keep her husband home on the day of his assassination</i>
Portia	<i>Wife of Brutus, daughter of Cato and sister of Young Cato</i>
Lucilius	<i>Officer in Brutus' army who is captured by Antony</i>
Titinius	<i>Officer in Cassius' army who commits suicide after Cassius' death</i>
Messala	<i>Officer in Brutus' army who gives Brutus information from Rome, including news of Portia's suicide</i>
Young Cato	<i>Brother-in-law of Brutus who dies in battle</i>
Varro and Claudius	<i>Soldiers under Brutus' command who wait in his tent in Sardis before the battle of Philippi</i>
Volumnius, Clitus, and Dardanus	<i>Soldiers under Brutus' command who refuse to help him commit suicide after the battle of Philippi</i>
Strato	<i>Loyal friend of Brutus who assist him in his suicide</i>
Lucius	<i>Servant of Brutus</i>
Pindarius	<i>Servant of Cassius who helps his master commit suicide</i>
Artemidorus	<i>Friend of Caesar who writes a letter warning of the plot</i>
Soothsayer	<i>Seer into the future who tries to warn Caesar about the plot to kill him</i>
Cinna the Poet	<i>Poet on his way to Caesar's funeral who is killed by an angry mob out for revenge</i>
Another Poet	<i>Jester who enters Brutus' tent while Brutus and Cassius are arguing</i>
Labeo and Flavius	<i>Soldiers in Brutus' army</i>

Dramatis Personae *(Friends, Romans, and Countrymen)*

JULIUS CAESAR - a.k.a. Mr. Ego, a war hero with huge ambitions and more than a few enemies
CAESAR PLEASERS:

MARC ANTONY — a major pleaser and Roman player, a partier who knows when to get serious
OCTAVIUS CAESAR — Caesar's adopted son and a Mr. Ego-in-the-making
LEPIDUS — Caesar's old friend, not up on what's hot
ARTEMIDORUS (ARTY) — a small-time Caesar-Pleaser who knows how to get the dirt
CALPURNIA — Caesar's wife and armchair psychic

NON-STABBING SENATORS:

CICERO — an old dude with wise opinions
PUBLIUS — a glad-hander who can keep a secret
POPILIUS LENA — another older senator with deer-in-the-headlights tendencies

SENATOR CONSPIRATORS:

MARCUS BRUTUS — a fervent public servant and upright guy (his judgment needs a little work)
CASSIUS — a lean envious machine and hot-headed persuader
CASCA — a snobby senator with an ax to grind (not to mention a knife)
TREBONIUS — the decoy boy for the conspiracy
LIGARIUS — a Caesar-hater who calls in sick on stabbing day
DECIUS BRUTUS — a two-faced flatterer and dream interpreter
METELLUS CIMBER — a plotter with a beef (Mr. Ego kicked his brother out of Rome)
CINNA — a fierce senator who shares a name with a poet

OTHER POLITICIANS:

FLAVIUS — a.k.a. Flavor-ice, a patrician with a mission: to keep commoners from celebrating Caesar
MARULLUS — another patrician who rains on the commoners' parade

OTHER PEOPLE OF ROME:

A SOOTHSAYER — a creepy psychic whose predictions are dead-on (no pun intended)
CINNA — a peaceful poet with the same name as a conspirator
PORTIA — Brutus' loyal and slightly neurotic wife

BRUTUS and CASSIUS' FRIENDS

LUCILIUS — an officer in Brutus' army and a Brutus wannabe
TITINIUS — officer to Cassius
MESSALA — officer to Brutus
CATO — Portia's brother, son of Cato Sr.

VOLUMNIUS — soldier and Brutus' boyhood friend

BRUTUS and CASSIUS' SOLDIERS and SERVANTS

LUCIUS — Brutus' ever-snoozing slave
PINDARUS — slave to Cassius who takes loyalty to the extreme
VARRUS and CLAUDIUS — guards at Brutus' tent
CLITUS and DARDANIUS — Brutus' loyal soldiers who stop short at outrageous requests
STRATO — Brutus' exceedingly loyal soldier with an anything-for-the-general mentality
CAESAR'S GHOST — the ghostest with the mostest (ego, that is!)

Senators, Citizens, Soldiers, Commoners, Messengers, and Servants

Summary of the Play

The play begins in Rome in 44 BCE on the Feast of Lupercal, in honor of the god Pan. Caesar has become the most powerful man in the Roman Republic and is eager to become king. Caesar, however, has many enemies who are planning his assassination. When Caesar and his entourage appear, a soothsayer warns him to “Beware the ides of March,” (March 15), but Caesar is unconcerned.

Cassius tries to convince Brutus that Caesar is too ambitious and must be assassinated for the welfare of Rome. Cassius is determined to win Brutus to his cause by forging letters from citizens and leaving them where Brutus will find them. The letters attack Caesar’s ambition and convince Brutus that killing Caesar is for the good of Rome.

For a month, Brutus struggles with the problem and on the morning of the ides of March, he agrees to join the others. The conspirators escort Caesar to the Senate and stab him to death.

Brutus addresses the agitated crowd and tells them why Caesar had to be killed. Then Mark Antony delivers his funeral oration and stirs the crowd to mutiny against Brutus, Cassius, and the others. The mob runs through the streets looking to avenge Caesar’s death. A civil war breaks out.

Brutus and Cassius escape to Greece where they raise an army and prepare to fight Octavius and Antony in a decisive battle.

When Cassius believes he has lost the war, he convinces his servant, Pindarus, to stab him. After Brutus is defeated in a second battle, he commits suicide by running on his own sword rather than being taken prisoner back to Rome.

The play ends with the restoration of order, as Octavius and Antony become the two most powerful men in Rome.