



Introduction to the Play

Historical Background of *Julius Caesar*

Shakespeare adapted *Julius Caesar* from Plutarch's classic *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*, which was translated and published in English in the late 1500s. The time frame within the play is one month, but the historical events portrayed actually happened over three years from 45 B.C.E. to 42 B.C.E. The Feast of Lupercal was on February 15, and Caesar was assassinated one month later on March 15. His death was followed by civil war between the supporters of Brutus and Cassius and the army controlled by the new Triumvirate—Antony, Lepidus, and Octavius. The aftermath of the assassination took three years. In fact, the death by suicide of Brutus and Cassius was two weeks apart.

In 61 B.C.E., Pompey was a strong and successful leader and general in Rome. To solidify his power, he formed an alliance with two other men: Marcus Crassus, the wealthiest Roman of his time, and young Julius Caesar. The three men, elected consuls, ruled as the First Triumvirate because of their combined wealth and leadership skills. However, Crassus took his army to fight a war with the Parthians and was defeated and killed. Caesar was more successful. He was expanding the Roman Empire in North Africa, Spain, France, and Egypt.

This centralization of power in the hands of Pompey and Caesar was a growing concern to the Senate. They feared what might happen to

the liberty and freedom of Roman citizens if Julius Caesar or Pompey were to take total control of Rome. To reduce the influence of these two men, the Senate convinced Pompey to fight Caesar in a civil war, and they demanded that Caesar return from his foreign conquests alone, without any troops. Caesar returned, but he brought his armies with him for protection. This rebellious act resulted in civil war.

Because of Caesar's leadership and charisma, the people of Rome sided with him against Pompey, who had to escape to Greece to preserve his life. Caesar gave chase, and in 48 B.C.E. defeated Pompey's army. Pompey again retreated to Egypt, where he was killed by Ptolemy XII, King of Egypt. Caesar continued his conquests in and near Egypt. He returned to Rome a hero, triumphant over many other nations. In response, the Senate elected Caesar dictator for a ten-year term.

In 45 B.C.E., some of Pompey's sons in Spain threatened Caesar's leadership, so Caesar took his armies to Spain and defeated the Roman armies loyal to Pompey's sons. He returned to Rome the victor. This time, however, his victory was not over foreign countries but over fellow Romans. That is why the tribunes at the opening of the play are so upset with the plebeians on holiday. It is at this point in the history of Julius Caesar that the play begins.

The reader may wonder about the relationship between the Roman tribunes Brutus and Cassius with Julius Caesar, and why they

take the role of conspiracy leaders. Brutus descended from an important old Roman family. One of his ancestors had even assisted in the founding of Rome. During Pompey's rise to power, Brutus and Cassius were Pompey's allies. Then, when Julius Caesar marshaled his armies against Pompey, they turned against Caesar. The seeds of the conspiracy had been sown.

Synopsis of *Julius Caesar*

Act one, Scene 1

In Rome, Julius Caesar arrives after defeating his rival Pompey. The people of Rome are celebrating the victory by taking a holiday from work. Two Roman officials, Flavius and Marullus, are upset with Caesar's popularity.

Act one, Scene 2

Surrounded by his friends, Caesar parades through Rome. He is celebrating his victory over Pompey's sons and the Feast of Lupercal, a fertility rite. From the crowd, a soothsayer tells Caesar to "Beware the ides of March," which is March 15. Caesar does not pay attention to the warning.

Everyone leaves, but Brutus and Cassius stay on the street to talk about Caesar. Cassius tries to convince Brutus to join the conspiracy to kill Caesar. Soon, Caesar returns and notices Cassius and Brutus talking. He says to Mark Antony that he distrusts Cassius. Later, Casca reports to Cassius and Brutus that Caesar was offered a crown three times, but Caesar refused

it reluctantly. They talk about Caesar's ambitions and weaknesses.

Act one, Scene 3

It is a dark and stormy night in Rome. Cicero and Casca comment on the weather as an ill omen. Cassius talks to Casca and Cinna about the conspiracy. They devise a plan to draw Brutus into the assassination plot.

Act two, Scene 1

Brutus cannot sleep. Convinced by Cassius' false letters, Brutus decides that killing Caesar is the only honorable action. The conspirators come to Brutus' home, and he joins their conspiracy to assassinate Caesar in the morning at the Capitol. Now a leader, Brutus convinces the group to let Mark Antony live even though he is a friend of Caesar.

After the nighttime visitors leave, Portia joins Brutus and asks him to let her in on his troubles. To prove she will keep his secrets, she shows him a wound she has given herself in the leg. Brutus promises to tell her what is happening to him.

Act two, Scene 2

Calpurnia, Caesar's wife, has had a disturbing dream and begs Caesar not to leave the house. He listens to her until Decius reinterprets the dream in a positive light. The other conspirators arrive with Mark Antony, and all the men leave for the Capitol.

Act five, Scene 3

Cassius feels that his life is at its end because it is his birthday, so he will begin and end on the same day. Unsure of the state of the battle, he sends Titinius to see if the troops nearby are friend or enemy. Then he asks Pindarus to go up the hill to report how Titinius is doing. Pindarus returns and mistakenly reports that Titinius has been captured by the enemy. Cassius, despairing, commits suicide. Brutus arrives and sees that Cassius' unnecessary death is part of Caesar's revenge.

Act five, Scene 4

Pretending to be Brutus, Lucilius is captured by Antony's army. Antony respects Lucilius' loyalty and bravery.

Act five, Scene 5

Brutus wants to kill himself when he sees the battle is lost. He asks three of his soldiers in turn to hold the sword so he can run on it, but they all refuse. Finally, his servant Strato agrees. Brutus sees his death as Caesar's final revenge.

Antony, Octavius, Messala, and Lucilius arrive after the battle to find Brutus dead. Antony and Octavius promise to honor Brutus with a soldier's burial and to take Brutus' men into their services rather than count them as traitors.

Character List for *Julius Caesar*

Julius Caesar: Powerful leader and general in Rome

Calpurnia: Wife to Caesar

Marcus Brutus: Noble Roman whose forebears were noble Romans

Portia: Wife to Brutus

Caius Cassius: Prominent tribune and major instigator of the conspiracy to assassinate Caesar

Marcus Antonius (Antony): Leader of the Triumvirate and friend to Caesar

Other Conspirators

Casca

Trebonius

Caius Ligarius

Decius Brutus

Metellus Cimber

Cinna

Roman Senators

Cicero

Publius

Popilius Lena

Members of the Triumvirate with Marcus Antonius

Octavius Caesar

M. Aemilius Lepidus

Tribunes, elected officials

Flavius

Marullus

Plebeians, the commoners or working people in Rome

Cobbler

Carpenter

Messenger

Though Shakespeare's stage directions are sparse, definition of a few key terms will be helpful for the reader. The following is a brief glossary of stage directions commonly found in Shakespeare's plays.

Selected Glossary of Stage Directions in Shakespeare's Plays

Above: an indication that the actor speaking from above is on a higher balcony or other scaffold that is higher than the other actors

Alarum: a stage signal, which calls the soldiers to battle; usually trumpets, drums, and shouts

Aside: words spoken by the actor so the audience overhears but the other actors on the stage do not. An aside may also be spoken to one other actor so that the others on stage do not overhear.

Calls within: a voice offstage that calls to a character on the stage

Curtains: Curtains were fabrics draped around a bed that could be opened or closed for privacy.

Draw: Actors pull their swords from their sheathes.

Enter: a direction for a character to enter the stage. This can be from the audience's right (stage right) or the audience's left (stage left).

Enter Chorus: a direction for an actor to come to the center of the stage and offer some introductory comments, usually in blank verse or rhyming couplets. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Chorus delivers a sonnet, a form of poetry associated with love.

Exeunt: All characters leave the stage, or those characters named leave the stage.

Exit: One character leaves the stage.

Flourish: A group of trumpets or other horn instruments play a brief melody.

Have at: Characters begin to fight, usually with swords.

Pageant: a show or spectacle of actors in unusual costumes, usually without words

Prologue: an introduction spoken by the Chorus that gives an overview to the audience and invites them into the play or scene

Retires: A character slips away.

Sennet: a series of notes sounded on brass instruments to announce the approach or departure of a procession

Singing: a signal for the actor to sing the following lines as a tune

Within: voices or sounds occurring off stage but heard by the audience

But Shakespeare still had what is considered his finest writing to do. He began his writing of tragedies beginning with *Hamlet* in 1600. In the following five years, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. Why Shakespeare turned to these darker, more serious themes is widely debated by scholars. But all agree that these plays established Shakespeare's premier place in English literature.

Toward the end of 1609 through 1610, Shakespeare began to write his problem romances. These works, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*, are rich with mature themes of forgiveness, grace, and redemption.

After 1611, at the age of 47, Shakespeare moved back to Stratford exclusively, settling into life at New Place and enjoying a renewed relationship with his daughters, especially Susanna. He prepared a will, which has become famous for the request to leave his wife their "second best bed." Many have debated whether this is a sentimental or cynical bequest. In the same year that his daughter Judith married, 1616, Shakespeare died at the age of 52. However, it was not until 1623 that all his plays were collected into one manuscript, now referred to as the *First Folio*. The fellow King's Men players who compiled the manuscript, Heming and Condell, entitled it *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*.

Shakespeare's England

The age of Shakespeare was a glorious time for England. William Shakespeare's life in England was defined by the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603). During her leadership, England became an important naval and economic force in Europe and beyond.

England's rise to power came when its navy defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, when Shakespeare was about 24 years old. Queen Elizabeth was skillful in navigating through the conflicts of religion. She maintained religious independence from Rome as the Church of England became firmly rooted during her reign. Additionally, she financed the establishment of colonies in America to grow the British Empire and expand its economic opportunities. At the end of her reign, England was the leader in trade, naval power, and culture.

Because of its role as the main economic, political, and cultural center of England, London became the hub of England's prosperity and fame. If anyone wanted to become famous as a poet or dramatic writer during Shakespeare's time, he would need to be in London. In fact, London was full of great writers besides Shakespeare, such as Marlowe, Sidney, and Jonson. Yet, even as London was full of parties, trade, and amusement, it was also full of poverty, crime, and disease. Crime was a large problem, and the main jail in London was called the Clink. Disease and poor sanitation were common. In fact, twice in Shakespeare's lifetime, London endured an outbreak of the

plague, which killed thousands upon thousands of people.

Before Queen Elizabeth took the throne, London was a modestly sized city of about 60,000 people. By the time James I took the throne at her death, more than 200,000 people lived in London and its suburbs. People were attracted to London because it gave many opportunities for work and financial improvement. It was also a vibrant social scene for the upper class. In fact, one honor of being a noble was the opportunity to house Queen Elizabeth and her entire party if she was in your neighborhood. If she was a guest, it was expected that her noble hosts would cover all the expenses of housing her group. She made many “progresses” through England and London, establishing her relationships with the nobility. However, several nobles asked to be released from this honor because the expense of supporting her visit had often caused bankruptcy.

Perhaps it was better to be a flourishing member of the English merchant middle class. Their numbers and influence were rising in England at the time of Shakespeare. This was a new and an exciting development in Western European history. One major factor in the rise of the middle class was the need for wool for clothing. The expansion of the wool trade led to the formation of entire cities throughout England, and sparked progress in many other areas of commerce and trade.

With the rise of the middle class came a concern for more comfortable housing. Rather than serving simply as shelter or defense against

attack, housing developed architecturally and functionally. One major improvement was the use of windows to let in light. Also, houses were built with lofts and special places for eating and sleeping, rather than having one multi-functional room. However, doors between rooms were still very rare, so that privacy in Shakespeare’s time did not really exist.

Meals in Shakespeare’s England were an important part of the day. Breakfast was served before dawn and was usually bread and a beverage. Therefore, everyone was really hungry for the midday meal, which could last for up to three hours. If meat was available in the home, it was usually served at this time. A smaller supper was eaten at 6:00 or 7:00 P.M., with the more wealthy people able to eat earlier, and the working class eating later. Cooking was dangerous and difficult since all meals were cooked over an open fire. Even bread was not baked in an oven but was cooked in special pans placed over the fire. A pot was almost always cooking on the fire, and the cook would put in whatever was available for supper. This is most likely where the term “potluck” came from.

Furniture was usually made of carved wood, as woodcarving was a developing craft in Shakespeare’s day. One important part of an Elizabethan home was the table, or “board.” One side was finished to a nice sheen, while the other side was rough. Meals were served on the rough side of the board, and then it was flipped for a more elegant look in the room. The table is where we get the terms “room and board” and having “the tables turned.” Another important part of a middle- or an upper-class

home was the bed. Rather than being made of prickly straw, mattresses were now stuffed with softer feathers. Surrounded by artistically carved four posts, these beds were considered so valuable that they were often a specifically named item in a will.

Clothing in Shakespeare's time was very expensive. Of course, servants and other lower-class people wore simple garb, often a basic blue. But if a person wanted to display his wealth, his clothing was elaborate and colorful, sewn with rich velvet, lace, and gold braid. An average worker might earn seven or eight English pounds in a year, and a very nice outfit for a nobleman might cost as much as 50 or 60 pounds. In other words, if seven or eight healthy workers pooled their money for the entire year, spending nothing else, they could buy only one respectable nobleman's outfit.

Entertainment was an important part of life in Shakespeare's England. Popular sports were bear-baiting, cockfighting, and an early form of bowling. Bear-baiting, in which a dog was set loose to fight with up to three chained bears in the center of an amphitheater, and cockfighting, in which roosters pecked each

other to death, were popular then, but would be absolutely unacceptable entertainment today. Bowling, however, has maintained its popularity in our current culture.

In London, a main source of entertainment was the theater. Some theaters were very large and could hold more than two thousand people. Even poor people could attend the theater since entrance cost only one penny (equivalent to 60 cents today), and they could stand around the stage. For a bit more money, a person could sit in an actual seat during the performance. However, some thought that going to the theater could be dangerous to your body or your soul. The theaters were closed twice during the plagues to reduce the spread of the disease. The Puritans disapproved of the theater as an unwholesome leisure-time activity. They also disliked the theater because the theaters were located in an area of London surrounded by brothels and bars. Nevertheless, the theater became respectable enough by 1603 to be supported by James I—and he was the monarch who directed the King James Version of the Bible to be translated.



ACTIVITY 1

*Pleasing the Plebeians*Act one, Scene 1

Background In this scene, the commoners, or plebeians, are celebrating the defeat of Pompey, a ruler who supported the Republic. Caesar, the victor, has little respect for the Republic and favors the more personal rule of a dictator. Shakespeare has one plebeian—a shoemaker, or cobbler—representing the crowd. He is using puns to communicate with a tribune who is angry that he and other plebeians are celebrating Pompey’s overthrow.

Directions Part A

In paragraph form, write a brief character sketch of the cobbler. Include details, such as name, age, physical characteristics, whether he has a family, and so forth. Write your paragraph below.

Part B

Imagine you are the cobbler, and write 1–2 paragraphs explaining to the tribune why you are pleased that Caesar will be the new ruler of Rome. Before you write this explanation, think about why a poor person like this cobbler would have benefited from having a strong central leader like Caesar. Write your paragraph(s) below. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary.



ACTIVITY 2

Cassius, the Conspirator

Act one, Scene 2

Background In this scene, Cassius tries to convince Brutus that Caesar is not fit to be the ruler of Rome, but Brutus is. Cassius is hoping that Brutus will become part of the conspiracy to overthrow Caesar.

Directions Reread Cassius' lines from line 65 to line 175 and then make two lists, one listing why Cassius thinks Brutus should be ruler, and one why Cassius thinks Caesar should not. Write your lists below.

Brutus	Caesar