

*The
Connell Guide
to
Shakespeare's*

Julius Caesar

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Introduction

There is a tide in the affairs of men.
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

Julius Caesar stands at the changing of the tide in Shakespeare's career. By 1599, when he wrote the play, he had penned only two experimental tragedies (*Romeo and Juliet* and *Titus Andronicus*), neither of which had the grand scope and profound richness of those he would write next – *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *King Lear*. The rest of his output had been largely romantic comedy and the English history plays. There is a scale to *Caesar* which is unmatched by anything he had written before it and it lays the groundwork for the master works to follow. As such, it stands not just at the turn of the century, but at the point in which its author emerged as the language's foremost writer.

Our sense of the play has evolved over the centuries, and much of what we now consider worthy of scrutiny – the role of women, say – would probably not have occurred to teachers a hundred years ago. We tend to be less overawed by all the characters' claims to personal nobility and quicker to see the

darker side of their political machinations. We are also less likely to see the Roman model of life and virtue as something being offered up for emulation. Indeed it now seems to most critics that Shakespeare was deeply critical of ancient Rome, seeing much of what its characters celebrate as principle as the root cause of all that goes wrong in the play. But that is the nature of scholarship and the theatre – each period finds in the play what interests it most, so that the aging text constantly yields insights and ideas which feel fresh and urgent. *Julius Caesar* remains a powerful study in political gamesmanship, the morality of assassination, and the ways in which people build a sense of who they are.

A summary of the plot

ACT ONE

Scene one: Julius Caesar has returned to Rome in triumph after defeating his former friend and fellow Roman statesman, Pompey. The ordinary people – as represented by the cobbler and carpenter – are in the streets to celebrate, but are scolded for their callousness by the aristocratic tribunes, Flavius and Murellus, who are wary of Caesar and seek to play down his victory by breaking up the crowd and stripping the statues of the garlands the people have hung.

Scene two: Caesar, in public to celebrate the feast

of Lupercal, is warned by a soothsayer to beware the Ides of March, but he dismisses the advice. When he and his entourage go to watch the games, Brutus and Cassius debate his rise to power and what it means for Rome. Cassius, who resents Caesar's swelling authority, prompts Brutus to consider some form of action against him. Caesar's party return, and Caesar reveals his doubts about Cassius's trustworthiness.

Brutus and Cassius talk to Caska about the games, where it transpires that Mark Antony has offered Caesar a crown which he, reluctantly, declined – to the delight of the people. Cassius ends the scene with a soliloquy in which he reflects upon how Brutus might be pressed to join the conspiracy against Caesar.



THE IDES OF MARCH

The Roman calendar did not number days of each month consecutively but counted down toward three points, each of which was tied (at least nominally) to the phases of the moon, the pre-Julian calendar being fundamentally lunar and not driven by the annual movement of the sun.

These three phases were the Nones (corresponding to the 5th or 7th day of the month), the Kalends (the first day of the next month), and the Ides (the 13th or 15th day, marking the middle of the month).

For March, which was technically the first month of the old Roman year, the Ides occurred on the 15th. Being the first full moon of the new year, this was a time of festivity. Shakespeare's condensing of the time line of events effectively combines the

Scene three: Cicero and Caska meet during a storm and discuss a series of strange, apparently supernatural sights. Cicero cautions against trying to decipher what they mean. Cassius arrives, as does Cinna. The conspirators agree that they need Brutus, and Cassius reveals that he has already taken steps to secure him: he has left papers for Brutus to find, papers which appear to come from different people begging Brutus to take action against Caesar.

ACT TWO

Scene one: Brutus, in his orchard, privately resolves that Caesar must be killed. When the conspirators arrive, he takes the lead in determining who else should be involved, resolving to keep Cicero out

fertility celebrations of the Ides of March with the Lupercalia festival which commemorated the founding of Rome. (Lupercalia comes from the Latin meaning 'wolf cave' wherein, according to legend, Romulus and Remus were nursed by a she-wolf.). In fact, this would have actually taken place exactly one month earlier.

The Ides of March included several ritual sacrifices and had ties to ancient scape-goating practices in which an old man was

dressed as an animal, beaten, and thrown out of the city, symbolizing the banishing of the old year and the welcoming of the new, with its attendant associations of harvests and other good things derived from nature. After 44 BC, it became primarily associated with the assassination of Julius Caesar, though Shakespeare seems alert to the date's ritual significance in his depiction of the conspirators wanting to see themselves as priests sacrificing Caesar for the good of Rome. ■

but also to spare Mark Antony, whom Brutus views as essentially harmless. As the conspirators leave, Brutus's wife, Portia, comes to speak to him and eventually persuades him to take her into his confidence.

Scene two: Caesar prepares to go to the Capital but his wife, Calpurnia, dissuades him: she has had a dream in which she saw his statue bleeding. But when the conspirators arrive to lead him to the Senate, Decius offers an alternative explanation of the dream, saying that it is a sign that Rome will thrive because of Caesar. Decius also says the Senate plan to make Caesar a king. Persuaded, Caesar changes his mind. He is now determined to leave the house.

Scene three: Artemidorus reads a paper which he plans to give Caesar in which he tells him who the conspirators are and what they plan to do.

Scene four: Portia, waiting for news from the Capital, meets the soothsayer who reinforces her anxiety that her husband's intentions have been discovered. She goes home to wait for news.

ACT THREE

Scene one: Caesar declines to read Artemidorus's paper. The conspirators then make their own petitions to Caesar but he spurns these, claiming to

be above lesser men in his constancy, whereupon they attack and kill him. They then cover their hands in his blood before seeking to reassure the crowd that they have acted with honest intent. Mark Antony arrives and negotiates a truce with the conspirators on condition that he be allowed to speak at the funeral. Cassius does not like this, but Brutus agrees anyway. When left alone with the body, Antony reveals the depth of his sadness and anger, prophesying chaos to come.

Scene two: Brutus and Mark Antony both make speeches about what has happened. The crowd, who were supporters of Caesar's, are initially hostile to Brutus but he convinces them of the purity of his motives. He then gives place to Antony who begins cautiously, calling the conspirators honourable, but gradually he raises doubts and questions about what they have done. He shows the crowd Caesar's bloody corpse and reads them the details of his will which makes provision for the common people, and, in the process, he turns them against Brutus and the rest, so that the scene ends with the crowd turning into a riotous mob who want revenge on the conspirators.

Scene three: Cinna the poet, a man we have not seen before, is caught in the street by the crowd. At first they mistake him for Cinna the conspirator, and though he explains who he is, they kill him anyway.

ACT FOUR

Scene one: Antony, Octavius and Lepidus – the triumvirate in charge of Rome now that the conspirators have fled the city – determine who will be killed for association with (or sympathy for) Caesar’s assassins. They also plan their military operations against Brutus and Cassius’s forces, and resolve to limit the legacies in Caesar’s will to save money.

Scene two: Brutus and his military staff discuss their predicament. Cassius arrives, angry. Brutus takes him into his tent so that their argument is not overheard.



CICERO

Although his part in Julius Caesar is comparatively small, Marcus Tullius Cicero, whose life was documented by Plutarch, was one of the Romans best known to the Elizabethans.

Cicero was a philosopher, statesman and orator, and it was for his skills in this last category that he was

particularly famous since they were – like Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* – studied as a model of Latin prose style in schools like the one Shakespeare almost certainly attended in Stratford. The rediscovery and publication of his letters by the Italian poet Petrarch is often cited as one of the formative moments of the Italian Renaissance in that they revived interest in Roman history, civics, and humanism.

Cicero, who had often opposed Caesar’s rise to power, took Pompey’s side in the civil war, but soon lost confidence in the rightness and capabilities of

Scene three: Cassius and Brutus argue over the conduct of the war and Cassius’s failure to send money to Brutus which he needed to pay his legions. In the course of the quarrel Brutus recalls the purity of his motives in killing Caesar and expresses his fury that they should now be forcing the local populace to fund their army. When the argument is resolved, Brutus reveals that his wife, Portia, is dead. Titinius and Messala join them to discuss battle plans. Brutus overrules Cassius’s suggestion that they wait for the enemy to come to them rather than attacking it directly at Philippi. When Brutus is left alone, he is visited by the ghost of Caesar who says he will see him again – in battle.

the Pompeian faction. After Caesar defeated Pompey at the battle of Pharsalus, he pardoned Cicero but remained wary of his political activity. For a time Cicero apparently hoped that Caesar might return Rome to its Republican ideals, but he was never a true ally of Caesar’s. He was apparently caught off guard by the assassination and later wrote that he wished he had been included in the conspiracy.

As civil war overtook Rome once more, Cicero became the most powerful man in the Senate, though he butted heads with Mark Antony whom he

considered to be an opportunist trying (as Shakespeare’s play shows) to rewrite the terms of Caesar’s will. As the conflict with the conspirators escalated, Antony took the opportunity to rid himself of an old enemy. He had Cicero executed and, in final vengeance, his head and hands cut off (symbols of his political speeches and writings) and displayed in the forum as a warning to others. One story alleges that Antony’s wife, Fulvia, still furious over things Cicero had said in life, took his head down and repeatedly stabbed through his tongue with a hairpin. ■

ACT FIVE

Scene one: Octavius and Antony (who are beginning to disagree with each other) meet Brutus and Cassius and exchange insults. Cassius reflects upon the battle to come and says a final farewell to Brutus, aware they may never see each other again.

Scene two: A short battle scene in which Brutus gives orders to harry the wing of Octavius's army which seems weak.

Scene three: Brutus's haste has left Cassius' army surrounded by Antony's. Cassius's force is driven back and Antony overtakes their camp. Unable to see clearly, Cassius sends Titinius to determine which troops are now so close. He then asks his servant Pindarus to report on Titinius's progress, but the servant mistakenly thinks that Titinius has been taken by Antony, when in fact Brutus's troops have welcomed him into their ranks. In despair for what he assumes to be the loss of the battle, Cassius has Pindarus help him commit suicide. Titinius and Messala arrive and make clear what has really happened. When Messala goes to find Brutus, Titinius kills himself. Brutus finds the bodies, but resolves to fight on.

Scene four: Another battle scene in which Lucilius pretends to be Brutus to distract Antony's troops, allowing the real Brutus to escape. Antony accepts this as an honourable strategy.

Scene five: Realising he is beaten, Brutus seeks out one of his men to help him kill himself but they all refuse. He reveals that he has seen Caesar's ghost again on the battlefield and, as the rest of his army go into a final retreat, finds a man – Strato – who agrees to help kill him. Antony and Octavius, now completely victorious, find the body and say that it should lie in state as befits a man of honour and a soldier.

What is *Julius Caesar* about?

Politicians are like actors. We watch them closely for signs of whether they believe what they are saying, whether they seem “genuine”. This kind of scrutiny is at the heart of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The question which seems to be on the mind of almost every character in every scene is “What does this person – or event – actually *mean*?”

Take the beginning. There are people in the streets of Rome, lots of them – despite the fact that it's a work day – and they don't seem to have the clothes or the tools of their trades. For the tribunes, Flavius and Murellus, this is troubling. Why are a cobbler and a carpenter wandering around Rome without their aprons and tools, the “signs” of their “professions”? The status of these men who are cheering for the returning, triumphant Caesar is

unclear – a sign, to the tribunes, of the way Caesar is threatening the established social order. So the tribunes go about the streets disrobing the statues of Caesar, and try to play down the celebration of his return, asserting their belief in the Rome they are accustomed to – Rome as it used to be – though doing so, in the end, will cost them dearly. We later learn that for this reactionary act they are “put to silence” (1.2).

This is telling, for if the play is deeply concerned with the difficulties of “reading” behaviour in general it is equally concerned with reading the behaviour of a crowd, or of “the people”. Flavius and Murellus can’t read the people at all: they assume they can simply overrule them, bully them with the high-minded ideas of Rome which they, as tribunes, prefer – “you ought not walk / Upon a labouring day without the sign / Of your professions” – but their strategy backfires and they learn to their cost that their belief in their power was in fact an illusion.

In Shakespeare’s Rome, *everything* is a kind of performance, a set of clues to be read and turned into meaning. The storm is a symbol to be deciphered – though Cicero warns Caska about the difficulty of doing so accurately. So is Calpurnia’s dream and the entrails from the sacrificed beast we are told about. Brutus is sent fragmentary, anonymous letters which he must “piece... out”. Cassius worries about the eagles which leave his army before the climactic battle of Philippi, and

cannot make sense of the action in the battle in ways which lead to his own disastrous suicide.

This is a play full of signs and symbols which seem to cry out for interpretation but whose meaning is neither clear nor fixed. As a result, things and events are constantly being read and misread, “construed... clean from the purpose of the things themselves” (1.3). The same is true of people. Caesar distrusts Cassius’s “lean and hungry look”. Cassius, in turn, reads Brutus’s nobility for signs that he might be pushed against his nature. The conspirators similarly scrutinise Cicero and later – disastrously – Antony, for signs of their political use and potential dangerousness. But no one is more “read” than Caesar himself.

It is often observed that there are two Julius Caesars in the play: the man and the myth. The man, it turns out, is frail – weak, elderly, deaf in one ear and prone to seizures – and thus vulnerable to attack. The myth is far harder to kill and looms over the play like a shadow long after the man is left bleeding at the foot of Pompey’s statue. This dual identity makes Caesar doubly hard to read. He himself struggles to keep his private and public selves separate. In public he tries to live up to the myth, to do what he thinks is expected of him, and eventually overrules his own instinctive anxieties about going to the Capital where he will die, for fear of seeming afraid.

Brutus, too, has to live up to his reputation – to his public concept of himself as noble and