

Insight Text Guide

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Julius

Caesar

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William Shakespeare

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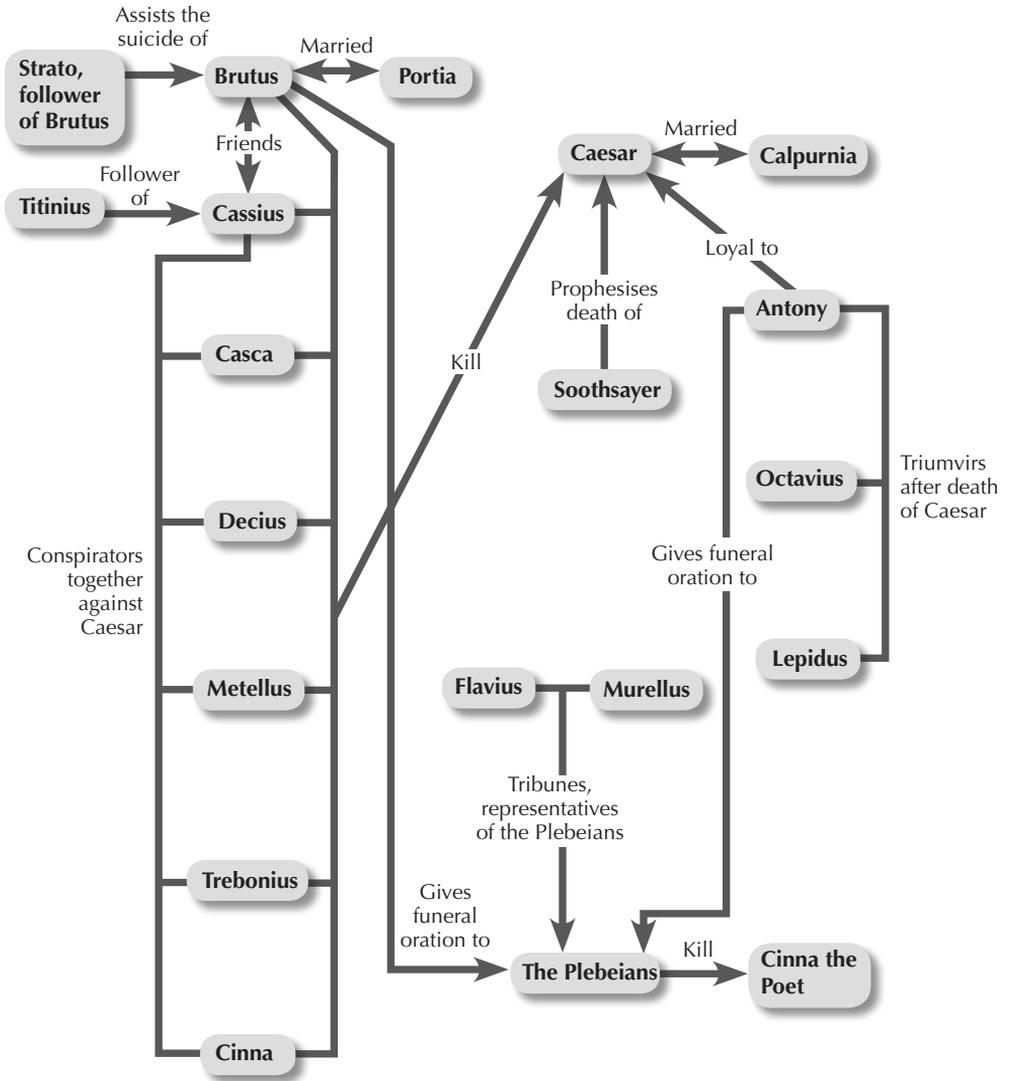
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This book is dedicated to my parents, Dimity and Peter Bladen.

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CHARACTER MAP



OVERVIEW

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is one of the most renowned figures of the English literary Renaissance (also referred to as the ‘early modern period’). His dramatic and poetic work, written during an intensely productive period from the late-sixteenth to the early-seventeenth century, has proved capable of enduring well beyond his own time and place. Translated into many languages and adapted for film, television, ballet, opera and graphic novels, Shakespeare’s work has evolved into a cultural phenomenon, meaningful and compelling to audiences of different periods and cultures.

Julius Caesar is one of Shakespeare’s most well-known plays. This guide is designed to help you navigate your way through the play, organise your thinking and help you to write intelligently and competently about the play in your essays and exams. Remember that *Julius Caesar* is a *play*, created to be experienced as a performance on stage, even though it is often first experienced as a written text or as a film. If you are able to see it performed you will gain a deeper understanding of its shape, the characters, how the dramatic action unfolds and the effect of Shakespeare’s language. Film adaptations will also help you to understand the play, particularly if you are able to view different versions. However, remember that watching a film shouldn’t be a substitute for a close reading of the text itself.

About the author

So who was Shakespeare? He was born in 1564, when Elizabeth I was on the throne, and died in 1616 when James I was king. Born into a middle-class family in Stratford-upon-Avon (in Warwickshire), William was the son of John Shakespeare, a glove-maker and landowner, and his wife Mary, a gentleman’s daughter. He received an education from the King’s New School in Stratford, but never attended university. As a young man he fell in love with Anne Hathaway, and they were married in 1582 after Anne became pregnant; the child, Susanna, was born six months after the wedding. Twins, Hamnet and Judith, were born in 1585; Hamnet died when he was a child. Subsequently, the marriage seems

to have broken down and when Shakespeare died he left Anne only his 'second-best bed'.

In the late 1580s, Shakespeare moved to London and began his career as a playwright. He joined a theatre company called The Lord Chamberlain's Men (also briefly known as Lord Hunsdon's Men), under the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain. The ensemble produced plays that were performed at a venue called the Theatre. He acted in, wrote plays for and shared in the profits of the theatre company. When the lease over the land on which the Theatre was built expired in 1597, and a dispute with the landlord arose, Shakespeare and his colleagues dismantled the wooden building, took it across the river and reassembled it at Bankside, south of the Thames. The theatre, renamed the Globe, opened in 1599. In London today, a close replica of the Globe stands near the original site, a venue in which Shakespeare's plays are performed all year round.

When James I came to the throne in 1603, he became the patron of the theatre company of which Shakespeare was part owner; the company was therefore renamed the King's Men. The king recognised the huge potential of the theatre to reach many people; in this regard, the theatre can perhaps be thought of as the early seventeenth-century equivalent of television. James wanted his reign to be associated with that 'media' power, despite the fact that in many of Shakespeare's works there is strong criticism of authority figures.

Synopsis

Julius Caesar is a play about political power and how it should be exercised. It raises fundamental questions about the way in which a society should be governed and whether power should be concentrated in one individual or shared between many. The play depicts the final stages of the Roman Republic (a form of government in which the people hold power through their elected representatives and the head of state is appointed or elected). The growing power of Julius Caesar threatens to turn the Republic into a monarchy, wherein supreme authority would be concentrated in one individual, the monarch. Following the death of the monarch, this power and authority would pass to his successor by lineage of blood, not by election or appointment. The play explores the complex question of how the people who are governed should *respond* to the misuse of power.

When power is abused, or when subjects disagree with how power is being exercised, what is the right way to act? How should subjects respond to and oppose what they perceive as tyranny? Can an assassination be a just act or is it simply murder? Shakespeare explores the consequences of violence used as a vehicle for political change and the problems that arise from this. As you read *Julius Caesar*, consider what the play suggests about using violence to attempt to achieve a just political state.

The play also explores other significant issues, such as loyalty and friendship. What happens where the duty to act honourably conflicts with loyalties owed to friends or leaders? *Julius Caesar* is also concerned with the power of rhetoric (persuasive speech) and how language can move us to act in certain ways. As a dramatist, Shakespeare was intensely interested in the power of words.

The play begins by presenting a triumphant Caesar in a public space, being lauded by a crowd of ordinary Roman workers. Caesar is warned by a soothsayer to be wary of the Ides of March, but he dismisses the man as a dreamer. Brutus and Cassius discuss the growing power of Caesar, and Casca relates to them how Mark Antony publicly offered the crown to Caesar three times. Although Caesar refused the crown, Casca's view is that he did so reluctantly. There are concerns that Caesar is a threat to the Republican government of Rome. Cassius flatters Brutus in order to motivate him to act against Caesar. A strange storm arises and various supernatural events are reported.

In the second act, the night before the Ides of March, Cassius orchestrates notes, purportedly from the plebeians urging Brutus to act against Caesar, to be left at Brutus's window. Brutus decides that the death of Caesar is the only way to protect Rome and he, Cassius and others resolve to assassinate Caesar. Portia, Brutus' wife, tries to persuade him to share his heavy secret, but to no avail. Caesar's wife, Calpurnia, holds grave fears for her husband, arising from dreams and strange events; she tries to persuade her husband not to go to the Capitol. Caesar is at first persuaded, however Decius arrives and suggests that Caesar will be seen as a coward if he stays at home. Caesar then resolves to go. Meanwhile Portia is fearful of what is afoot and sends a messenger after Brutus, but after speaking with the Soothsayer, who goes again to warn Caesar, she becomes aware of the assassination plan and appears to support her husband's part in its enactment.

The third act, upon the Ides of March, is the dramatic climax of the play. At the Capitol, Metellus brings a suit to Caesar, which is declined, and at that point the conspirators stab Caesar to death. The conspirators attempt to control public opinion after the deed – Brutus addresses the crowd, arguing that the assassination was necessary, but he then makes the mistake of allowing Mark Antony to speak after him. Antony gives a powerful funeral oration over the body of Caesar with its multiple stab wounds and the crowd is whipped up to a vengeful fury; in their rage, they kill Cinna the Poet.

In the fourth act, Antony, Octavius and Lepidus, as triumvirs, now hold power jointly and resolve to move against Brutus, Cassius and the other conspirators. Civil war has broken out in the aftermath of the assassination. However, there is tension within the new alliances; the triumvirs squabble over power-sharing, and Brutus and Cassius have a heated argument when Brutus accuses Cassius of taking bribes. They appear to resolve their differences when Brutus reveals the suicide of Portia, yet subsequently they disagree on battle tactics. That night the ghost of Caesar appears to Brutus and foretells his death at Philippi. Brutus realises, to his dismay, that although they killed the man, Caesar's spirit remains untouched and, if anything, has grown stronger.

In the final act there is tension between Antony and Octavius on the battlefield. The opposing sides of the war trade insults before separating to prepare for battle. Brutus and Cassius say farewell, not knowing whether they will meet again. Cassius commits suicide after misconstruing events on the battlefield, and his follower Titinius does likewise. Brutus, finding Cassius dead, reflects on the continuing power of Caesar. Caesar again appears to him in dreams and Brutus, seeing the end is near, commits suicide by running against the sword he has asked his follower Strato to hold up. In the last scene, Antony and Octavius, finding Brutus dead, reflect on his nobility and resolve to bury him with full honours.

Character summaries

Brutus

The central character of the play, despite the play's title; intelligent and philosophical, yet naive; close friends with Cassius; Brutus is strongly

loyal to Rome and, paradoxically, to Caesar, despite taking the lead role in the assassination conspiracy.

Cassius

Close friend of Brutus; pragmatic and sly; envious of Caesar; the chief instigator of the conspiracy.

Julius Caesar

Holds the greatest power in Rome; arrogant, egotistical, perceptive of Cassius' envy; sceptical of superstitions and omens; highly conscious of his public persona. The conspirators assassinate Caesar at the Capitol, on the Ides of March.

Mark Antony

Deeply loyal to Caesar; wily, intelligent and powerful as a persuasive public speaker; one of the triumvirs after Caesar's death; although hostile to the conspirators, Antony respects and honours Brutus in death.

Portia

Wife of Brutus; strong-willed, well-spoken and courageous; tragically willing to harm herself; ultimately commits suicide.

Calpurnia

Wife of Caesar; a strong speaker; influenced by dreams and omens.

Octavius

One of the triumvirs holding power after the death of Caesar; fights against Brutus and Cassius; argues with Antony over power sharing. The historical figure of Octavius (subsequently renamed Augustus, meaning 'reverend') became the first Roman emperor (from the word 'imperator' meaning 'general'), following the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire. Shakespeare's play does not cover this subsequent event.

Lepidus

One of the triumvirs holding power after the death of Caesar.

Casca, Trebonius, Decius, Metellus, Ligarius and Cinna

Conspirators who, along with Brutus and Cassius, assassinate Caesar.

Flavius and Murellus

Tribunes, representatives of the plebeians (the ordinary Roman citizens).

The Plebeians

The ordinary Roman citizens; not distinguished by separate names in 3.2 and only distinguished by occupation in 1.1. The crowd of common people is an important force in the play.

Soothsayer

Prophesies Caesar's death; warns him to beware the Ides of March; tries again to warn him on the day of the assassination.

Cicero

A senator, representative of the patrician class (upper class) and famous Roman orator and statesman; not involved in the conspiracy.

Cinna the Poet

Killed by the plebeians after Antony's powerful funeral oration, when he is mistaken for Cinna the conspirator.

Titinius, Messala and Strato

Followers loyal to Brutus and Cassius.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The play's setting – Ancient Rome

According to legend, Ancient Rome was founded in the eighth century BCE by the two brothers Romulus and Remus, sons of Mars, the god of war, and descendants of Aeneas. Their mother Rhea Silvia was imprisoned by Amulius and the children thrown into the Tiber river; they were washed ashore and suckled by a she-wolf before being found by a herdsman. After killing Remus, Romulus became the first king. Rome developed from a settlement on the Palatine hill, one of seven hills surrounding the Tiber; the Capitol was the summit of another of the hills and, as the site of a temple dedicated to the god Jupiter, was considered the most sacred part of Rome. Rome was then ruled by a succession of kings, the last of whom was Tarquinius Superbus ('Tarquin the Proud'). The king's son, Sextus, raped Lucretia, the daughter of a celebrated Roman family (Shakespeare's poem *The Rape of Lucrece* [1594] was based on this event). This offence led to the expulsion of the Tarquins from Rome, and the establishment of the Roman Republic, in 509 BCE. Brutus refers to this event in the play: 'Shall Rome stand under one man's awe? What, Rome? / My ancestors

did from the streets of Rome / The Tarquin drive when he was called a king' (2.1.52–54).

This system of government, an aristocratic republic, gave political rights to at least a certain proportion of the populace, albeit excluding women and non-citizens (slaves and former slaves). Two magistrates (consuls), elected annually from the patrician class (the upper class) replaced the king. At times of national crisis, their powers could be temporarily superseded by the appointment of a dictator. The patricians also elected senators and political decisions were made by the Senate. The plebeians (lower class) were represented by appointed tribunes and formed their own assembly. After the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, Octavius (later renamed Augustus) became the first Roman Emperor, thus ending the Republic. From that point, the senators appointed the emperor and thus the political system was no longer a form of democracy. *Julius Caesar* is set at the very end of the Republican period, and shortly prior to the establishment of the Empire. Thus Shakespeare chose a story situated at a turning point in Rome's history, one with strong dramatic impact.

Shakespeare's historical context

Elizabethan government

In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus and Cassius object to Caesar abusing his position by acting as, and potentially becoming, a monarch. They perceive monarchy as a serious threat to the Roman state. The conspirators assume that absolute power is offensive and dangerous. England's government, at the time Shakespeare was writing the play, was a monarchy, based on the assumption of absolute and divinely ordained power vested in the monarch. Thus we can imagine the fascination that the play, and the political issues it raises, held for Shakespeare's audience at the time. Although the play is about Rome, it was relevant to Shakespeare's England, and remains relevant to contemporary societies in many ways. The stage history of the play includes many interpretations that have transferred the setting to contemporary contexts such as twentieth-century fascism or Latin American dictatorships.

The ideal of Rome

Julius Caesar, like other Shakespeare plays such as *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Coriolanus*, explores ideas about Rome. As a city