



Armando Durán (Julius Caesar)

JULIUS CAESAR

William Shakespeare

Directed by Shana Cooper

Caius Ligarius, Decius Brutus, Metellus Cimber, Trebonius, Cinna

Fellow conspirators and assassins.

Flavius and Marullus

Tribunes of the people, still loyal to Caesar's vanquished enemy Pompey.

A Soothsayer

Warns Caesar to "beware the Ides of March."

Cinna the Poet

Not to be confused with Cinna the Conspirator—until, tragically, he is.

Commoners and Plebeians of Rome

A mob to be swayed.

Who's Who

Julius Caesar

Roman military conqueror, now Consul of the Roman Republic with unprecedented dictatorial power. In his mid-50s and in failing health.

Marcus Brutus

Senator, respected statesman, friend of Caesar's. Proud descendant of Lucius Junius Brutus, a founding father of the Republic. A stoic, philosophically.

Caius Cassius

Fellow senator, opposed to Caesar's power grab; hatches a plot to assassinate him.

Mark Antony

Caesar's loyal soldier and, ultimately, avenger. A stirring orator.

Octavius

Caesar's adopted son and heir. Now a young man, he will eventually rule as Caesar Augustus.

Portia

Wife of Brutus and daughter of the admired anti-Caesar statesman Cato.

Calpurnia

Wife of Caesar, superstitious and worried for her husband's safety.

Caska

A leading conspirator against Caesar.

The Story

The place is Rome, the year is 44 BC. Julius Caesar, the great general and now Consul of the Roman Republic, has just eliminated his chief rival, Pompey, and now faces an unobstructed path to sole power. But he is aging—weakened by epilepsy and partially deaf—and his wish for greater authority starts to concern even longtime admirers like Marcus Brutus, one of the most respected men in the Senate. This growing faction worries about Caesar's crackdown on civil liberties (eliminating any remaining support for Pompey) and about his monarchical ambitions that are so clearly at odds with the civic virtues of the 500-year-old Republic.

Amid these tensions, Brutus is approached by his colleague Cassius with a proposition: to lead a secret plot to assassinate Caesar and restore Republican rule. Brutus is hesitant at first, but Cassius wears down his resistance with appeals to his patriotism, his devotion to republican ideals and his vanity. Remembering his great ancestor Lucius Junius Brutus—who overthrew the last Roman king and helped found the Republic—Brutus answers the call and ends up leading the conspiracy. While he loves Caesar personally and does not fault his actions so far, he reasons that his friend must die as a preventive measure. "Therefore think him as a serpent's egg," he tells himself, "and kill him in the shell."

JULIUS CAESAR

PARALLEL WRITERS

Julius Caesar is not just based on a true story, but on a very specific historical source: the Greek biographer Plutarch, who chronicled the lives of 50 great statesmen of antiquity in his *Parallel Lives* (circa 100 AD), pairing various ancient Greeks with (then) more recent Roman counterparts. *Henry V*, written in 1599 just before *Julius Caesar*, has many references to Plutarch's subjects. When a 1579 English translation by Thomas North, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, was reissued in London in 1595, Shakespeare clearly read it thoroughly. He obviously kept the book handy, relying on it in later years for *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*.

Parallels between Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Plutarch are unmistakable. The chapters on Caesar, Brutus and Antony in *Lives* supply many of the play's signature events—including Cassius's persuasion of Brutus to lead the conspiracy, Brutus's tortured deliberations over the matter, details of the assassination itself, and even the appearance of a prescient Soothsayer. But just as Plutarch

Despite warnings from a Soothsayer, his wife Calpurnia and other well-wishers (and several ominous supernatural prophecies), Caesar proceeds during the ill-fated "Ides of March" to the capitol, where Brutus and his fellow assassins await with daggers. The deed is done swiftly and messily—the conspirators, covered in his blood, proudly display the evidence, crying "Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!" Confident they will be vindicated in the public eye, Brutus spares the life of Caesar's right-hand man, Mark Antony, whom Cassius counsels killing as well. Antony cunningly feigns cooperation while secretly plotting revenge. At Caesar's funeral, Brutus makes the fatal mistake of letting Antony address the assembled "friends, Romans, countrymen." While at first persuaded by Brutus's cold, logical argument for Caesar's death, the fickle mob just as quickly gives in to Antony's oratorical brilliance and emotional manipulation, appealing to their earlier hero worship of Caesar. With the citizenry riled up into a vengeful passion, Brutus and Cassius take flight, raising an army to hold their tenuous grip on power.

A civil war breaks out between the pro- and anti-Caesar forces. Antony is joined by the young Octavius, Caesar's adopted son and heir (and the future emperor Caesar Augustus). Despite some testiness between these two potential rivals (they turn against each other in a later play, *Antony and Cleopatra*), their united forces prove too strong for the conspirators. On top of everything, Brutus learns that Portia, his wife and confidante, has committed suicide rather than face the news of his defeat. Both Brutus and Cassius then take their own lives as well, rather than be led as captives through Rome. Order is restored by Antony and Octavius's victory, but the audience knows that the Roman Republic is already effectively dead and the Empire of Caesar Augustus is soon to begin.

Shakespeare and Democracy

Shakespeare's lasting popularity in the United States may appear to suggest his plays appeal to a democratic sensibility. But would the playwright—a loyal servant of two very powerful monarchs—have been surprised by that kind of reception?

In the case of *Julius Caesar*, American audiences have historically been inclined to see the conspirators as freedom fighters out to vanquish a tyrant, the man who "crossed the Rubicon," marched his armies on his native country and began the transformation of Rome from a republic into an empire. Caesar's very name has long been synonymous with power-hungry dictatorships, and the idea of tyrannicide has always been a popular American rallying cry. Many of the Founding Fathers were known fans of the play, including Thomas Jefferson, who could have been channeling it when he wrote, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."

Americans' take on the play

The play has a long legacy in the U.S. as a rousing pro-democracy pageant. Published scripts and performances proliferated widely during the American Revolution. In the Civil War, the Confederacy co-opted Shakespeare for their own cause; John Wilkes Booth, hailing from a family of famous Shakespearean actors, was so obsessed with the role of Brutus that he acted out his own assassination, in a theatre no less, shouting a line of Latin—"sic semper tyrannis" ("thus always to tyrants")—clearly evoking the world of the play, if not quoting exactly. In the 20th century, actor-director Orson Welles updated the freedom-fighter interpretation with his 1937 stage production set in the Rome of Mussolini, replete with jackboots, armbands and Nuremberg-rally imagery for Antony's funeral oration. He even retitled the play *Caesar: Death of a Dictator*.

But was Shakespeare really approaching Roman history as a small-r republican or a small-d democrat? It surely would have been risky to fully advocate the violent overthrow of a beloved ruler in 1599, a time of much anxiety over England's "homeland security," including several revealed plots against Queen Elizabeth herself. With the nation threatened by Catholic-Protestant religious turmoil within and foreign



Julius Caesar (2011): Mark Antony (Danforth Comins) weeps after the murder of Caesar (Wilma Silva), as Brutus (Jonathan Haugen) ponders the momentous deed.

powers abroad, the ever-present monitoring of London's public theatres loomed especially large over Shakespeare's company. Caesar was also more revered than reviled during the Renaissance. Elizabeth even had a bust of him installed at her Greenwich palace, and Dante condemned Brutus and Cassius to the final circle of hell alongside Judas Iscariot.

That fickle mob

Censorship or self-censorship aside, though, "power to the people" was probably not the message Shakespeare ever intended to convey. In this and his other Roman plays (especially *Coriolanus*), he expresses plenty of skepticism about democracy. Nowhere is this clearer than in his depiction of the Roman electorate as a fickle and malleable mob. When Brutus defends his actions before them, they, at first, effusively agree that "This Caesar was a tyrant" and "We are blessed that Rome is rid of him." (Ironically, one plebeian, overlooking Brutus's whole argument, cries, "Let him be Caesar!") But when Antony takes the stage, he has no trouble reversing their sympathies, stirring them up against the man they just praised: "We'll burn the house of Brutus," they say now. "Most noble Caesar! We'll revenge his death!"

Antony quite deliberately and skillfully unleashes mob violence in his manipulation of the plebeians. "Now let it work," he prays privately, "Mischief, thou art afoot." Shakespeare shows us the chilling effects of such mass hysteria in the very next scene, when citizens corner a man named Cinna, which also happens to be the name of one of the conspirators. He pleads with them that he is just an innocent poet, not the man they seek, but the mob attacks him anyway. "Tear him for his bad verses," they say. So much for vox populi.

The funeral oration and the murder of Cinna mark a key tonal shift midway through the play from the lofty justifications of the assassination to the act's bloody repercussions and the conspiracy's ultimate failure. This tragic reversal gives the text a balance and juxtaposition that is essential to considering Shakespeare's true political mindset while writing. Rather than simply a blanket anti-democracy or pro-tyrannicide statement, *Julius Caesar* more objectively appears to be a continuous debate between the two extremes. As scholar James Shapiro notes, "Even as Shakespeare offers compelling arguments for tyrannicide in the opening acts of the play, he shows in the closing ones the savage bloodletting and political breakdown that . . . were soon to follow."

Julius Caesar has often been promoted as a kind of civic text in America. (Theatre producer Joe Papp often recalled how his first exposure to Shakespeare was reciting from the play in public school in the 1930s.) But recurring skepticism about democracy throughout Shakespeare's work indicates he may have considered its greatest flaw a capacity for self-destruction at the hands of a gullible electorate. "When he tried to imagine electioneering, voting and representation," Stephen Greenblatt observes in his book *Shakespeare's Freedom*, "he conjured up situations in which people, manipulated by wealthy and fathomlessly cynical politicians, were repeatedly induced to act against their own interests." Perhaps in the wake of our own tumultuous election season, we can ponder the play's cautionary history lesson in a more critical and questioning frame of mind.

is suspected of taking liberties with history, Shakespeare allows himself necessary dramatic license with Plutarch, especially with the historical timeline of events. In real life, Brutus and Cassius did not meet their demise until two years after the assassination. Shakespeare, more excitingly, charts their swift downfall in the immediate wake of their crime, giving the final scenes a swift and tragic inevitability.

Elsewhere, Shakespeare seizes on brief descriptions in Plutarch and expands them into epic scenes. Of Antony's eulogy of Caesar, the historian reports that it "did greatly move [the people's] hearts and affections," but only the playwright can compose a 130-line oration that will move us directly. Even when closely paraphrasing his source, Shakespeare transforms expository prose into pithy verse. Plutarch's claim that Caesar thought it "was better to die once than always to be afraid of death" thus becomes the more quotable "Cowards die many times before their deaths. / The valiant never taste of death but once."

JULIUS CAESAR

“HORRID SIGHTS”

For a play often considered stoic and rational, a lot of weird things happen in *Julius Caesar*. Shakespeare never forgets the wild pagan spirituality lurking behind the staid façade of the Roman Republic.

The night before the assassination, a storm brings forth men on fire and wild beasts—enough to give the conspirator Caska second thoughts. “The world, too saucy with the gods,” he fears, “incenses them to send destruction.” Even valiant Caesar, when warned of threats to his life, consults animal-sacrificing priests who report they “could not find a heart within the beast.”

No one is more shaken by such omens than Caesar’s wife, Calpurnia, whose famous line “I never stood on ceremonies,” only gives more force to her nightmare visions—such as a lioness who “whelped in the streets.”

Then there is the vengeful ghost of the slain Caesar, haunting the conspirators to their deaths. As Brutus bemoans when all is lost: “O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet! / Thy spirit walks abroad and turns our swords / In our own proper entrails.”

Brutus as Tragic Hero

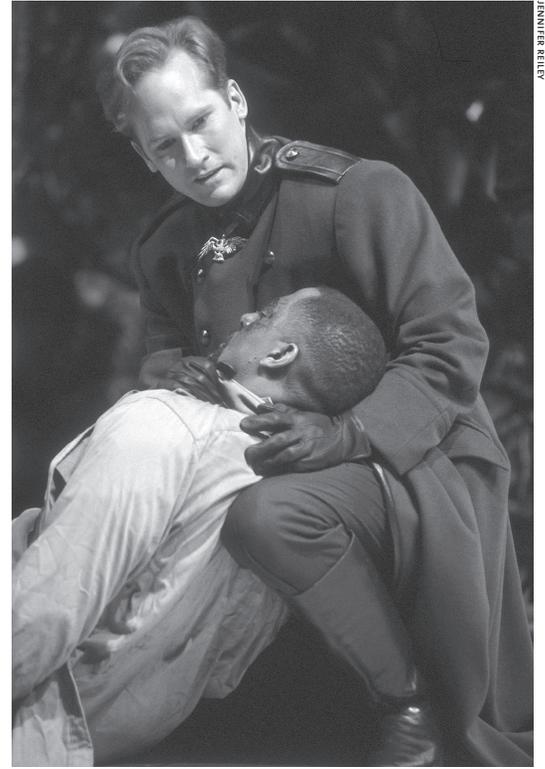
Critics have long carped over *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* as a choice of title for a play in which the eponymous character dies midway through, after appearing in only three scenes. Brutus is by far the largest role on paper, and even Cassius and Antony have more lines than Caesar. Restoration-era playwright John Dennis lamented that Shakespeare had demoted this “first and greatest of men” to “a fourth-rate actor in his own tragedy.”

But dramatically speaking, the actual tragedy in the play is Brutus’s. The death of Caesar may be shocking, but not the kind of ill-fated yet avoidable fall from grace that has distinguished the greatest stage tragedies since the ancient Greeks. Brutus’s fall is far more dramatically compelling than Caesar’s because it shows not just the physical demise of a powerful man but the failure of a noble idea.

The classical tragic protagonist is typically someone of high standing who is brought low, and Shakespeare spends the early scenes building up Brutus’s reputation. First, he is of noble blood by Roman standards, descended from one of the founding families of the republic. He is also celebrated as exceptionally wise, fair and ethical. “O he sits high in all the people’s hearts,” says the conspirator Caska, “And that which would appear offense in us / His countenance, like richest alchemy / Will change to virtue and to worthiness.” As the assassins begin to assemble their risky enterprise, they rely on Brutus’s renown to legitimize it in the eyes of the people.

Tragic flaws

Tragedy is not about the ruin of a perfect, unblemished individual, however, because that would cause only outrage in the audience, not the “pity and fear” that gives the genre its unique power. The truly tragic protagonist is one who has some hand in his own undoing, usually due to an inherent character trait. Brutus’s flaw may be his vanity. His esteemed reputation makes him susceptible to praise, something Cassius seizes upon in overcoming Brutus’s initial ambivalence in joining the conspiracy. As he soliloquizes behind his friend’s back: “Well, Brutus, thou art noble; yet, I see, / Thy honorable mettle may be wrought / From that it is disposed . . . / For who so firm that cannot be seduced.”



Julius Caesar (2002): Marc Antony (Dan Donohue) eulogizes Brutus (Derrick Lee Weeden) as “the noblest Roman of them all.”

Though Cassius’s motives are not as overtly malicious as Shakespeare’s more villainous seducers, the scene is reminiscent of other great Machiavellian manipulators like Richard III or Iago (who exploits the otherwise noble Othello’s penchant for jealousy). Cassius dares Brutus to live up to his ancestral heroes and even suggests he should be king, implying Brutus himself harbors some ambition for absolute power. (“Brutus and Caesar: what should be in that ‘Caesar’? / Why should that name be sounded more than yours?”) To fully reel Brutus in, Cassius even resorts to outright deception—writing fake fan letters appealing to Brutus’s pride, “Writings all tending to the great opinion / That Rome holds of his name.” The appeal to Brutus’s self-regard works so well that he steps forward to lead the conspiracy himself.

As the plan moves forward, we already see the seeds of its own destruction in Brutus’s unrelenting idealizing of the bloody act of assassination. “We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,” he tells his compatriots, “And in the spirit of men there is no blood. / O, that we then could come by Caesar’s spirit / And not dismember Caesar!” But Brutus’s dream of a bloodless coup remains just

a fantasy. Once the deed is done, we see Brutus fall victim to another weakness, a vain overconfidence in his own reasoning powers. While choosing not to dispose of Antony along with Caesar may show ethical restraint, Brutus's misreading of Antony's capacity for vengeance turns out to be a fatal mistake—especially when he agrees to let Antony speak at Caesar's funeral unmonitored and without an approved text.

Brutus again shows classic tragic hubris as a military commander in the ensuing civil war. When he and Cassius debate strategy, he advocates a quick surprise attack on Antony and Octavius rather than waiting for them to advance. He argues his reasons impeccably in one of the play's most famous speeches:

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.

The speech is typical Brutus—rhetorically powerful and soundly logical, and it thoroughly persuades the others in the room. But only later do we realize he was totally wrong. He and Cassius are crushed by the pro-Caesarites' better-prepared forces. Cassius's advice to let the enemy tire themselves out by marching to meet them might have changed the outcome. But such is the play's sense of tragic inevitability that Brutus's overconfidence leads to his doom. That tide he speaks of so eloquently is now turning against him.

All is lost

By play's end, Brutus has lost everything: his republic, his friend Cassius, even his wife Portia, whose suicide he learns of at the front. When he faces the prospect of being captured and “led in triumph thorough the streets of Rome,” he shudders: “Think not . . . that ever Brutus will go bound to Rome; He bears too great a mind.” And so before he can be taken alive, he sacrifices himself to retain his honor and nobility.

Brutus's tragedy addresses the eternal struggle between idealism and reality in politics. Must morality always come first or, as the more Machiavellian Cassius would argue, do the ends justify the means? “Cassius was better cut out for a conspirator,” wrote William Hazlitt, the great 19th-century critic. Brutus, he says, in trying “to reconcile the public good with the least possible hurt to its enemies,” suffers from an irony of well-intentioned politics: “The humanity and honesty which dispose men to resist injustice and tyranny render them unfit to cope with the cunning and power of those who are opposed to them.”

The degree of Shakespeare's debt to Aristotle is much debated. Many aspects of the ancient philosopher's foundational *Poetics* he seems to ignore entirely. But in reaching back to antiquity for the story of Brutus and Caesar, he seems to have crafted a play at least in the spirit of the classical tragedy of Greece and Rome.

For Aristotle, tragedy's effect relied on the audience's feelings of pity and fear toward the protagonist. “Pity,” he explains, “is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.” Few may identify with Julius Caesar, who, according to Cassius, “doth bstride the narrow world like a Colossus.” But who among us has not felt our idealism powerless in the face of a “tide in the affairs of men”?

Further Reading

- Plutarch. *Fall of the Roman Republic and Rome in Crisis* (Penguin Classics editions). These volumes, collecting just the Roman chapters of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, feature modern translations of the biographies Shakespeare drew on for *Julius Caesar*: those of Caesar, Antony and Brutus.
- James Shapiro. *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. In his immersive look at one of the playwright's most prolific years, Shapiro reads *Julius Caesar* for its immediate relevance to contemporary Elizabethan politics.
- Barry Strauss. *The Death of Caesar*. Separating fact from legend (including Shakespeare's), a modern historian reconstructs the actual events, motivations and ramifications of “history's most famous assassination.”

CAESAR ON SCREEN

Compared to other Shakespeare favorites, *Julius Caesar* has not been one of his most filmed plays. Here are three attempts—one a straightforward adaptation, the others more modernized riffs.

Julius Caesar (1953)

A surprisingly faithful approach by Hollywood standards. Most notable for the competing performances of classicist John Gielgud as Cassius and Method actor Marlon Brando as Antony.

Me and Orson Welles (2008)

A backstage drama about Orson Welles's famous 1930s anti-fascist update of *Julius Caesar*. The film's detailed reconstruction of Welles's visually stunning stage adaptation allows us to see what all the fuss was about.

Caesar Must Die (2012)

A documentary about a performance by inmates at a maximum security prison in today's Rome. These violent criminals turned amateur actors find surprising meaning and catharsis in Shakespeare's tragedy, revealing new resonances in the classic text.