

Commentary

Julius Caesar was the first of Shakespeare's three plays dealing with the history of Rome, the others being *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. After its foundation Rome was ruled by oppressive kings until the Romans rebelled and a republic was formed made up of the Senate (who dealt with civil justice) and the tribune, who represented the people. Julius Caesar became a consul in 59 BC and distinguished himself with his leadership ability and ambition, extending Rome's power extensively outside Italy. His greatest rival was Pompey whom he defeated along with his sons, thus gaining absolute military power.

It was after this victory that Caesar returned to Rome in triumph and it is here that Shakespeare's story begins.

Many critics feel that the work should actually be entitled *Marcus Brutus* as he is the main character, Caesar being assassinated at the beginning of Act III. The whole play, in fact, revolves around Brutus's internal conflict which stems from his love and devotion to Caesar but his fear that he will become absolute dictator and his love for the Roman Republic. Caesar, however, is the instigator of all the action and remains the underlying force in the hearts and minds of the characters throughout the play, so justifying its title.

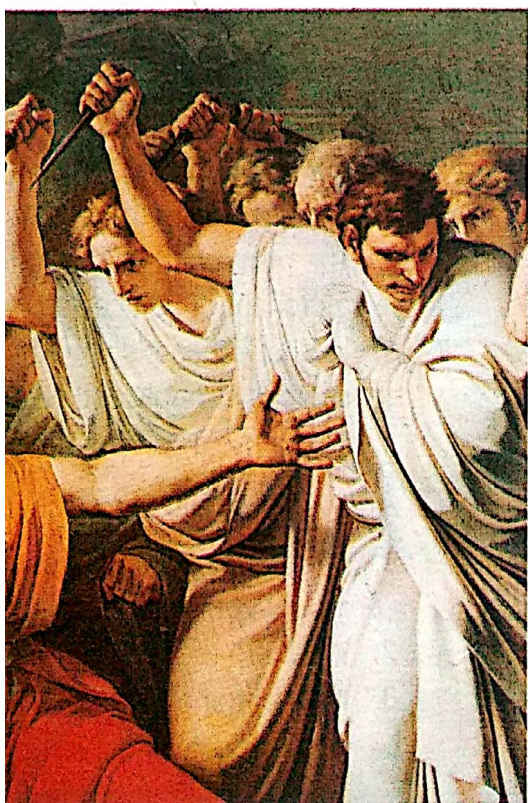
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The plot

Pompey and his family have now been defeated. Caesar now has supreme power and as a result a conflict has emerged in Rome between those who conspire against Caesar and the fear of a growing dictatorship (Brutus, Cassius and others) and those who support him (Antony and Octavius).

While most of the conspirators are motivated by envy and ambition Brutus, Caesar's close friend, has only the interests of Rome at heart and is finally tricked into becoming one of the conspirators by Cassius who led him to believe (through false letters) that the people of Rome no longer supported Caesar.

Caesar is warned of approaching danger, 'Beware the Ides of March', (15th March), yet feels invincible and goes to the Senate that day. It is then that he is assassinated, each conspirator stabbing him with Brutus giving him the final blow.



The conspirators, using the much-loved Brutus as spokesman, then face the crowd, declaring they acted in the interests of Rome and its people. Brutus gives a convincing speech but, in allowing Caesar's supporter, Mark Antony, to speak after him, proves himself to be a naïve politician. Antony, slowly and eloquently swings public opinion in his favour, until finally, after showing them Caesar's dead body, he incites them to drive the conspirators out of Rome. The last to survive battle is Brutus who finally commits suicide. Antony, however, pays him a final tribute by stating that he was: 'the noblest Roman of them all'.

Shakespeare's source

The main source of Shakespeare's play is the work by Plutarch, *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* in its Elizabethan translation by Sir

Thomas North. This was a very popular and much read piece of work in Shakespeare's time and Shakespeare could have depended on the fact that much of his audience would have known the story.

Themes

One of the main themes of the play is the struggle for political power and how it can transform those involved. Through the characters Brutus, Antony, Cassius and Caesar Shakespeare draws four different political profiles. The honest, honourable yet naïve character of Brutus; the cunning, opportunistic yet heroic figure of Antony; the corrupt, cynical and ruthless Cassius – the perfect antagonist for Brutus; and Caesar himself, a complex figure, undoubtedly charismatic and an efficient leader yet physically weak and blind to the dangers stemming from those closest to him, the result of his megalomania and a fixed belief in his own invincibility.

The problem of a successor was something which would have also touched the hearts of Shakespeare's audiences at the time and one which Shakespeare was well aware of. Queen Elizabeth was coming to the end of her reign and still there was no legitimate heir to the throne. The peaceful transition which was to follow under James I was not something the Elizabethan audience could have predicted. Therefore the power struggle and an uncertainty for the future we can find in the play were things Shakespeare's audience could have identified with.

The malleability of the masses is another theme throughout the play as we can see in the two speeches below how quickly they can change their allegiance.

Let's get started

1 We are going to look at two very important speeches in the play. Caesar has just been assassinated. Read and listen to this short speech by Brutus in which he explains to the people of Rome why he took part in Caesar's murder. Then answer the following.

1. What reasons does Brutus give for taking part in Caesar's assassination?
2. What does he appeal to in his listeners to persuade them that his actions were justified? Choose.

<input type="checkbox"/> their fear	<input type="checkbox"/> their morality	<input type="checkbox"/> their patriotism
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3. Does he convince the people of Rome?

BRUTUS. [...]

Romans, countrymen, and lovers! hear me for my cause, and be silent, that you may hear: [...]

If there be any in this assembly, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say, that Brutus' love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living and die all slaves, than that

BRUTO. [...]

Romani, compatrioti, e amici! udite causa; e fate silenzio per poter udire: Se vi è alcuno qui in questa assemblea amico di Cesare, a lui io dico che l'amore per Cesare non era minore al suo. Se poi domandi perché Bruto si sollevò contro questa è la mia risposta: non che io amo meno, ma che amavo Roma di più. E se volessi che Cesare fosse vivo, e morire tutti da schiavi, o che Cesare sia morto per vivere tutti da liberi [...]