



**Understanding Shakespeare:
Julius Caesar**

Robert A. Albano

UNDERSTANDING

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MERCURYE PRESS

Los Angeles

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	11
Act I	17
Act II	49
Act III	73
Act IV	89
Act V	101
Final Remarks	115

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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

INTRODUCTION

The Tragedy of Julius Caesar is not a play about Julius Caesar. If that may seem strange to the audience of today, it was equally strange to the audience of Shakespeare's own time. William Shakespeare was a writer of imagination and invention. Moreover, he was a playwright who appeared to enjoy breaking the **conventions** and traditions of drama to create new and brilliant plays that were unlike any tragedy or comedy that had been produced before. Certainly, the people going to see a play entitled *Julius Caesar* in the Elizabethan era would have expected the play to be about Julius Caesar. But what they instead witnessed for the first time back in 1599 was indeed far more surprising and entertaining and delightful than what they had hoped for. Shakespeare time and again surpassed the expectations of his audience, and he certainly did so in this particular tragedy.

In the first half of *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare presents his audience with two central figures: Julius **Caesar** and Marcus **Brutus**. A reader would be correct in viewing the play as essentially two tragedies fused into one play: the tragedy of Caesar and the tragedy of Brutus. Indeed, in the play Shakespeare even sets up comparisons and contrasts between the two characters and, in essence, reveals

Understanding Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*

how the **fate** of one character is intertwined by the fate of the other. Yet, surprising and, perhaps, a bit shocking to the Elizabethan audience is that Shakespeare presents the scene where Caesar is assassinated at the beginning of the third act. Traditionally, the assassination of Caesar would be the climax, the highest point of tension in the drama; and such a scene should naturally come toward the end of the play. And, indeed, the Renaissance audience would consider a play to be most strange in which the playwright killed off his protagonist before the play is even halfway over.

But Caesar is not the **protagonist** of Shakespeare's play. **Brutus** is. Shakespeare was not concerned with following dramatic conventions, nor was he particular worried about presenting accurate historical facts in his play. Shakespeare was concerned about drama. He was concerned with creating intriguing and vivid characters that appealed to his intellect and imagination and that would appeal equally to the intellect and imagination of his audience. In Marcus Brutus, Shakespeare found a fascinating individual who was thrust into one of the most intriguing and difficult conflicts in all the records of history. Shakespeare recognized that the personal conflict, the psychological conflict which afflicted Brutus, provided the kind of subject matter that great tragedy is made from. Shakespeare thus took a person who historically appeared of secondary

importance and placed him at the center of his great tragic work.

At the core of this play, then, is the **internal conflict** or inner turmoil that rages within Brutus. Essentially, this is what is frequently referred to as a **man vs. himself** conflict. Brutus has to make a choice. He has two options, but neither option is pleasant or desirable to him because, whichever option he chooses, the results or consequences will be dark and deadly. Brutus must choose between two evils. This type of situation is often referred to as a **moral dilemma**. Brutus must make a painful choice; but he knows that whichever choice he makes, he cannot win. He will lose something of himself either way. And either way, others will also suffer as a result. The fate of the Roman Empire rests in the palm of Brutus' hand. And his decision changed the path of history.

Although people going to see Shakespeare's play, back in 1599 and even today, do not have the fate of an entire empire depending upon the decisions they make, most people can relate to the figure of Brutus. There comes a time in everyone's life when he or she must make an uncomfortable decision, a decision that will have negative results regardless of which choice is made. Thus, the audience can sympathize with the true protagonist of this play because they realize that Brutus is in a situation where he cannot possibly win. Brutus must choose the path that he feels will be the best for others

around him. Brutus must choose what is frequently referred to as **the lesser of two evils**. But in choosing evil, even the lesser evil, Brutus is bringing doom and destruction upon himself.

According to diaries and notes from the time of the Elizabethan era, there were several other plays that focused on the figure of Julius Caesar for their subject matter. One diary notes the existence of a lost English play about Julius Caesar performed in **1562**. But since Shakespeare was born in 1564, he may have never seen that one. Another lost English play on Caesar appeared in **1594**. Shakespeare was already well known in London at that time and would most definitely have been aware of this play's existence. According to the diary entry on this 1594 production, the story was in two parts, in two separate plays; but that does not necessarily indicate that any special attention was given to Brutus. In any event, the 1594 play was not performed for very long. It did not have a long successful run. But there might have been in it something which inspired Shakespeare to write his own version. Shakespeare may have taken a minor idea from this play and transformed it into a central conflict in his own.

Shakespeare may have also been aware of and influenced by two **French versions** of the play that appeared during the sixteenth century. In these plays the character of Caesar is depicted as proud, arrogant, and boastful. Shakespeare's Caesar certainly has some of those qualities as well. But Shakespeare was

Understanding Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*

not one to allow his major characters, even if they are not protagonists, to be depicted as simple stock characters or two-dimensional stereotypes. Shakespeare presents a more complicated Caesar who is driven by his ambition (not unlike **Macbeth**), by his desire for acceptance and flattery, and by his own personal vision of how the political state of the Roman Empire should be maintained.

The story of Julius Caesar has long intrigued readers and theater audiences. The assassination of Caesar is one of those momentous occasions in history that cause many people to look back in wonder and amazement. And today, when most people think about Julius Caesar, they think about him the way Shakespeare portrayed him. Shakespeare's thoughtful and psychologically fascinating portrait keeps the character of Julius Caesar and his fate vivid and alive in the imaginations of people today. But, more importantly, Shakespeare additionally brings to the play an even more intriguing story: the story of Marcus Brutus. The story of Caesar involves a unique and awful moment in time, but the story of Brutus presents a conflict of depth and emotion. And Shakespeare certainly knew that a truly great tragedy must certainly have just such a powerfully emotional conflict to make the play touch his audience at a deeply intellectual and emotional level. And, in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare has both the

Understanding Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*

horror of a stunning historical event and the misfortune of a man's moral struggle.

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