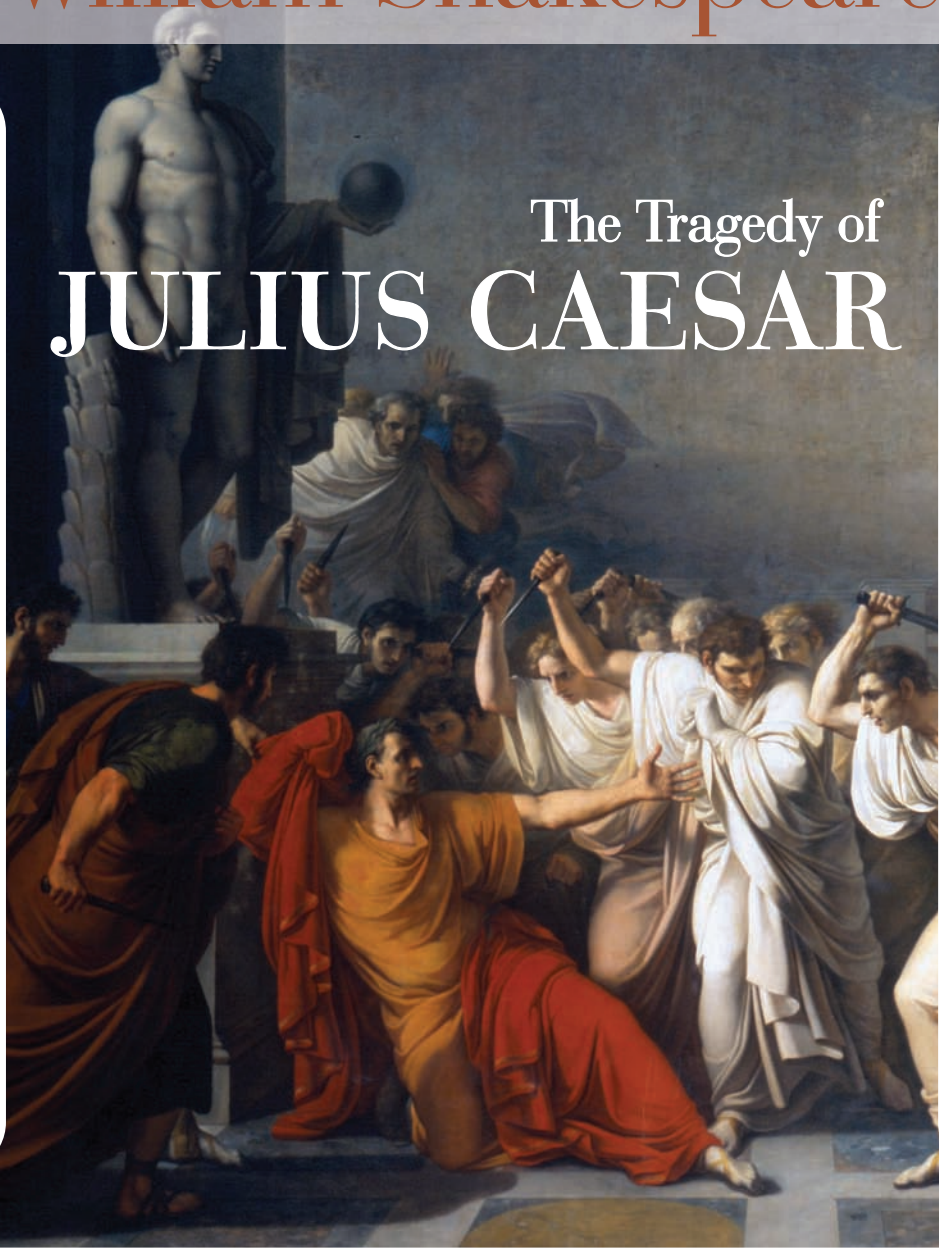


The New Kittredge Shakespeare

William Shakespeare

The Tragedy of

JULIUS CAESAR



Series Editor: James H. Lake

Edited by
Sarah Hatchuel

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THE TRAGEDY OF
JULIUS CAESAR

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FOCUS EDITION

I will divide this introduction into three parts—a study of how the play works in terms of structure, themes and gender; a history of the play in performance; and an analysis of the screen adaptations.

How does the play work?

Julius Caesar is one of William Shakespeare's Roman plays. It is a tragedy set in a very specific place and time, that rewrites historical material into an artistic experience, offering a view of Rome from an Elizabethan standpoint. In *Julius Caesar*, time concentration aims at creating dramatic effects—Caesar's ceremonies of triumph (that occurred originally in October, 45 B.C.) take place at the same time as the Lupercal ceremonies (that really happened in April, 44 B.C.); Octavius arrives in Rome on the very day of Caesar's murder instead of six weeks later; the two episodes of the Battle of Philippi happen on the same day instead of being separated by twenty days. But time concentration also creates a sense of doom, precipitating the death of Caesar or the suicides of Brutus and Cassius. In the play, Shakespeare appears to project the Elizabethan fear of chaos onto Roman history. Renaissance England had an organic and harmonious vision of the universe—all creation was ranged in an unalterable order from the angels down to men, and from there to the beasts and plants. In that great chain of being, the ruler held a special place—he represented a crucial link between God and the earth. If the monarch was murdered or if the crown was usurped, chaos and confusion were expected to replace peace and natural order. The character of Julius Caesar seems to stand for the leader preserving the natural order, and his murder leads the Roman Empire into turmoil, in the same way that the civil war of the Two Roses between the adherents of the House of Lancaster and the House of York divided England in the fifteenth century. Caesar's murder conditions the whole structure of the play—all that precedes announces it and all that follows prolongs it in violent aftermaths. If Caesar disappears before half of the play is over, his figure keeps haunting the play like Nemesis, the vengeful figure in mythology. Caesar is almost presented as the equivalent of an anointed English king whose destiny can be read in the sky. With thunder and comets, signs in heaven anticipate Caesar's death and the chaotic future

of Rome: "When beggars die there are no comets seen;/ The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes" (2.2). In the Renaissance, the movements of the stars and the appearance of comets as well as eclipses were believed to be the origin of disaster. The murder of Caesar is thus presented as a fatal mistake which plunges Rome into political turmoil and civil strife. The order imagined by the conspirators only ends in dangerous disorder, in a social unrest that will lead to the murder of innocent men—as Cinna the Poet is killed instead of Cinna the Conspirator. Moreover, instead of destroying tyranny, the assassination of Caesar only creates more absolutism, leading to the reign of Octavius-Augustus.

In fact, what the conspirators seem to deny is precisely Caesar's representation of the natural order. Cassius, the ambitious malcontent, succeeds in convincing Brutus that his name is as worthy as that of Caesar. Brutus is duty-bound to take sides with the conspirators because he embodies the Republic through his ancestor Junius Brutus, who committed the first regicide of the monarchy and set up the Republic in B.C. 509. However, it is not often mentioned that Junius established a new reign, that of the Patricians—a kind of social elite who soon monopolized political power. In overthrowing Caesar, Brutus does not wish for the rule of the people, but for the return to the reign of the Patricians. In this, he wishes for a revolution in the original sense of the word—a return to the starting point. It is therefore very difficult to apply the modern notions of democracy or fascism to *Julius Caesar*. In the play, Caesar's tyranny is rather underplayed. His human weaknesses, such as his epilepsy and deafness, are emphasized, revealing the vulnerable human being behind the mask of power. Critics have regularly noted the grotesque discrepancy between Caesar's political domination and his physical inferiority. This can be linked to England's own political situation at Shakespeare's time, with a woman, Elizabeth I, at the head of the state. But physical limitation is not the only element that lessens Caesar's tyranny. Even Brutus admits that Caesar's actions have always been governed by reason: "And to speak truth of Caesar,/ I have not known when his affections sway'd/ More than his reason." (2.1).

Points of view keep alternating and changing our vision of the whole play. We, the spectators, are almost in the same position as the crowd that listens to Brutus's speech and then to Antony's oration. After supporting Brutus, the crowd soon allies itself with Antony. The Roman people are thus marked with a tragic flaw—that of fickleness and instability. The crowd, blind and influential, can commit murder without reason—Cinna the Poet is thus lynched through a mere mistake in identity. The tragedy, therefore, does not seem to be that of Brutus or of Caesar, but that of Rome and the Romans. Instead of a domestic, personal tragedy, Shakespeare may have written the political tragedy of a whole empire and its people in a reflection on power and the legitimacy of its conquest. Shakespeare does not make a clear choice between Caesar and the conspirators but revels in ambiguity. He does not present an apology for absolutism or democracy. The freedom that Brutus and his followers pretend to give back to the people is a mere slogan, a word that is simply repeated, empty of concrete meaning and effect: "Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!," "Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement!" (3.1).

ACT I

SCENE I. [*Rome. A street.*]

Enter Flavius, Marullus, and certain Commoners over the stage.

- FLAV. Hence! Home, you idle creatures, get you home![†]
Is this a holiday? What, know you not,
Being mechanical, you ought not walk
Upon a labouring day without the sign
Of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou? 5
- CARPENTER Why, sir, a carpenter.
- MAR. Where is thy leather apron and thy rule?
What dost thou with thy best apparel on?
You, sir, what trade are you?
- COBBLER Truly, sir, in respect of a fine workman I am but, as you would say, a
cobbler. 11
- MAR. But what trade art thou? Answer me directly.
- COB. A trade, sir, that I hope I may use with a safe conscience, which is indeed,
sir, a mender of bad soles.
- MAR. What trade, thou knave? Thou naughty knave, what trade? 15

ACT I. SCENE I.

Flavius and Marullus, as Tribunes of the People, are leaders of the popular or democratic party and therefore opposed to Caesar's ambitious plans. **Over the stage** is a conventional phrase indicating that the actors enter and cross the stage before they come to a halt. 3. **Being mechanical**: belonging to the working class, having a trade. 4. **sign**: for example, work clothes and tools. [S.H.] 5. **profession**: trade, occupation.—**thou**: An old distinction between the pronouns *thou* and *you* was preserved in Elizabethan English. *Thou* was the more familiar form of address. 7. **rule**: tool for measurement, with a pun on controlled behaviour. [S.H.] 10. **in respect of**: in comparison with. 11. **a cobbler**: a botcher, an unskilled or clumsy workman (in antithesis to "fine workman"). The word meant also "a repairer of shoes," and this is in fact the speaker's trade; but he resorts to ambiguity in order to mislead Marullus, who understands him in the general sense (botcher) and therefore repeats his question with emphasis: "But what *trade* art thou? Answer me directly" (straightforwardly, without evasion or quibbling). 14. **soles**: The play on *sole* and *soul* was one of the commonest of puns. 15. **naughty**: rascally.

† In Bradley's 1950 film, the people wishing to attend Caesar's triumph are seen eating and shouting in close-ups. The Tribune's oration against their cheering anticipates Antony's speech in the Forum scene as he is filmed in a low-angle shot up the Senate stairs, highlighting his powerful rhetoric. As the second Tribune destroys bunches of flowers, scattering every petal on the ground, the film creates a metaphor foreshadowing the fall of Caesar. Mankiewicz's 1953 version opens on Caesar's bust decorated with flowers while a busy crowd is cheering in the background. The first Tribune violently removes the flowers from the statue and throws them to the ground, but he is immediately arrested by a soldier. Mankiewicz's opening thus presents a military and dictatorial state, based on the cult of Caesar's personality. [S.H.]

HOW TO READ *JULIUS CAESAR* AS PERFORMANCE

“How many ages hence/ Shall this our lofty scene be acted over/ In states unborn and accents yet unknown!” (3.1). This is how Cassius reacts after having taken part in the murder of Caesar with all the other conspirators. The play makes here a direct reference to the theater, the medium for which it has been written. The characters in the play often reveal that they are actors playing parts. When Brutus advises his fellow conspirators, he urges them to conduct the affair as efficiently as actors would do: “Let not our looks put on our purposes,/ But bear it as our Roman actors do,/ With untir’d spirits and formal constancy” (2.1). When Cassius meditates on his relationship with Brutus, he shifts roles as if he were a director allowed to redistribute the parts in the play: “If I were Brutus now and he were Cassius,/ He should not humor me” (1.2). As you read the play, you will often be reminded by Shakespeare that what you are reading is a play-script meant to be performed.

Such a text that keeps reflecting on the medium of theater was, in fact, written for a very specific system of performance, one that regularly disclosed the illusion of acting. At the end of the sixteenth century and the start of the seventeenth, Elizabethan popular plays were performed on an open-air stage, during the day, in a circular or polygonal construction in which the spectators stood in the stalls or sat in the galleries. All parts were played exclusively by male actors who occupied a bare stage where space and time were suggested only in a verbal way. This absence of a realistic frame avoided the need of changing sets between scenes. In the case of *Julius Caesar*, it was, therefore, very easy to move from Brutus’s house to the Capitol, from the Capitol to the Forum, and finally to the plains of Philippi where the battle takes place. Acting was continuous, and the scenes followed one after the other with fluid rapidity. Visual aids to imagination were minimal and inherent in the architecture of public theaters: a roof painted above the stage represented the sky and the divine; a trap door under the floor could evoke hell. No set designs were created to represent views of Rome or the landscapes at Philippi.

In Shakespeare’s time, the presentation of the plays showed, therefore, a constant distancing between what is seen and what is said, as well as an absence of illusionist intention. The Elizabethan public theater, with its thrust stage, established a privileged relationship with the audience on three sides nearly encircling the

action. Most spectators saw the play being performed in a setting composed of other spectators. The audience attended both the play and the stage activity surrounding and creating the play. The boundary was blurred between art and life, between the actor and the spectator: both were united in the same communion of entertainment and imagination. Elizabethan drama played with the spectators and their permanent awareness of theatrical illusion. The actors' soliloquies and asides, like Brutus's monologue when he ponders Caesar's murder in 2.1 or Antony's prophecy over Caesar's dead body in 3.1, were conventions that established intimacy with the public while signaling the devices of theater (as talking to oneself aloud is more a stage convention than a natural practice). The spectators intervened regularly during the performance, participating in the action with their own reactions. You can imagine easily how a play like *Julius Caesar* benefited from such an environment. During the Forum scene (3.2), spectators could add their own shouts to the Roman people's exclamations. They could support Brutus or Mark Antony with their boing or cheering. The audience at the Globe theater (for which Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* was written in 1599) could become part of the Roman crowd, totally immersed in the dramatic events.

Shakespeare's playtexts regularly refer to the theater, but they do not include many stage directions. They differ greatly from plays written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller or Eugene O'Neill. These plays usually include numerous stage directions that describe precisely the setting as well as the characters' behaviors and emotions. Such dramas are, in a way, accompanied by their own commentary guiding the forthcoming performances. They seem to carry within themselves the very setting in situation of their dialogues. By contrast, if one excludes the few stage directions generally indicating the characters' entrances and exits, Shakespeare's playtexts are mainly composed of dialogues and monologues (even though some Quarto versions are slightly more abundant in terms of stage directions).

When you read a play, you should, therefore, try and play with your imagination to give flesh to the text as if you were seeing everything happening before you. You can choose to read the text immediately or to look for some assistance before starting—you can either read a plot summary to help you grasp the story or see a film production of the play that will provide you with the subjective vision of a director.

Once you start reading, you will have to create an inner show for yourself as if you were a theater or film director. You can decide to view the show as if it was performed on a stage or as a piece of cinema. But in both cases, you will have to imagine the setting, what the actors look like, how they are dressed, how they move and how they speak. The way a line is pronounced can influence the meaning of the text. Let us take the example of a line Antony speaks during his Forum speech as he reveals Caesar's wounds and the holes made by the daggers in his toga: "This was the most unkindest cut of all" (3.2.174). If you imagine that Antony stresses the first word "This," then the line could draw attention to Antony showing a hole with a spectacular gesture, emphasizing the wounded body he displays in front of the crowd.

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~ Laury Magnus

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