

JULIUS CAESAR

by William Shakespeare

If you were in high school sixty or seventy years ago, you could not escape "Julius Caesar" as a classroom assignment. Earlier, it might have been "The Merchant of Venice,"

"Merchant" was valued for Portia's "Quality of Mercy" speech. It took a while for school authorities to admit that Portia was a hypocrite - and that the drama was embarrassingly anti-semitic.

But there was nothing objectionable in "Julius Caesar." The play is sexless, of historic interest, and devoid of ribald humor. It is also easy to read. The play is filled with one syllable words; everyone speaks as clearly and precisely as a Roman senator. And, in those days, Latin was a part of the basic high school curriculum, so the play nicely supplemented the language course.

It is also easy to stage, with four leading roles. It could be performed with a minimum of scenery and props. All you need are wooden daggers, swords and some bed sheets for togas.

The play is always relevant, especially in this country, which draws heavily on Roman precedents. It also carries a cautionary message for democratic societies: an honest, patriotic man is drawn into a violent act - an assassination - in order to save the republic and, in consequence, brings on its finish. After Caesar's murder, the form of the Roman state looked the same - but senators and representatives of the people were no longer in charge. The emperor commanded and they obeyed.

Caesar's downfall was already a popular topic for English theatre when Shakespeare took it up, sweeping away all other versions. The plot is compelling, characters are familiar and strongly drawn, and its stately language, memorable ("Friends, Romans, countrymen" is as familiar as "To be or not to be.").

The action begins with Roman citizens at play, awaiting Caesar's entrance. Two Tribunes of the Republic come onstage to quiet the tumult. They are the first of some dozen people we will meet who are opposed to Rome's current strongman, Julius Caesar. The rabble is celebrating the Lupercal, which features a series of games, but they are also decorating statues honoring Caesar. They are roundly scolded for it by the tribunes and dispersed.

But they come right back on stage to welcome Caesar as he enters, accompanied by Rome's power elite. A soothsayer speaks from the mob, warning Caesar to beware the Ides of March. Caesar dismisses the warning and leaves, followed by everyone but Cassius and Brutus,

Both men come from noble families, but Brutus is the more highly esteemed because everyone acknowledges that he is “an honorable man,” a descendant of patriots. Cassius starts to work on Brutus, trying to recruit him into a plot to overthrow Caesar.

Cassius uses flattery and reason to seduce Brutus and it starts to work. Casca arrives to tell them of the games attended by Caesar and how Antony, one of Caesar’s favorites, offered him a crown, which he refused three times. When asked what Cicero had to say, Casca replies that he spoke in Greek, which he did not understand, saying “It was Greek to me,” giving us another familiar phrase from Shakespeare.

Cassius is left alone, feeling sure that he will be able to win Brutus’ support for Caesar’s assassination.

Attention shifts from Cassius to Brutus in the second act. It is night and Rome experiences not only violent storms, but several bad omens. Brutus reads letters that have been sent to him. They are forgeries by Cassius, who wants to deceive Brutus into thinking that many Romans want him to rise against Caesar.

The conspirators come to Brutus’ home to work out their assassination plot. Cassius wants to kill Mark Antony as well, but Brutus objects that a second murder would spoil the nobility of their action; they should be “sacrificers, not butchers.” This is not the only time that Cassius will be overruled by Brutus and, every time, Brutus is wrong.

After the conspirators leave, Brutus wife, Portia, pleads with him to share with her the secret that so obviously burdens him. Portia is a shrewd observer and she knows that something is wrong, but Brutus rebuffs her.

Attention then shifts to Caesar. He is preparing to visit the senate when his wife, Calpurnia, begs him to stay home. She has had a disturbing nightmare which seems to predict his murder. He reluctantly agrees. But when Decius, one of the conspirators, comes to accompany Caesar to the senate, he interprets Calpurnia’s dream innocently and persuades Caesar to leave.

It is interesting to note here that, if Brutus and Caesar had listened to their wives, the plot would have been undone. The men are victimized by their masculine pride; Portia and Calpurnia are more insightful, but their warnings are dismissed.

Caesar receives two more warnings on his way to the senate, but disregards both. Antony is drawn away from the scene by Decius Brutus and the conspirators cluster about Caesar with a petition, then attack him. The final sword thrust comes from Brutus, which elicits Caesar’s disbelieving cry, “You, too, Brutus? Then fall Caesar.” The line was so familiar in Latin to English schoolchildren of Shakespeare’s time that it is rendered in Latin: “Et tu, Brute.”

The crowd scatters; the conspirators bathe their arms and swords in Caesar's blood in order to parade through the city as liberators. Antony returns and makes a show of friendship to the murderers, taking each one by the hand and calling each by name. He asks why they have killed Caesar. Brutus replies that he will answer that question in a funeral oration. Antony then seeks permission to speak as well. Cassius objects, but is again overruled by Brutus.

When Antony is left alone with Caesar's body, he reveals his true feelings and vows revenge.

Brutus and Cassius go to the Forum to address the citizens. They split up, with Cassius leaving to talk to another part of the crowd (off stage) and Brutus begins his exhortation:

Romans, countrymen, and lovers! hear me for my cause, and be silent, that you may hear: believe me for mine honour, and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe: censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses, that you may the better judge. 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 Caesar were dead, to live all free men? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him: but, as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love; joy for his fortune; honour for his valour; and death for his ambition. Who is here so base that would be a bondman? If any, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so rude that would not be a Roman? If any, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so vile that will not love his country? If any, speak; for him have I offended. I pause for a reply.

(The crowd responds): None, Brutus, none.

Then none have I offended. I have done no more to Caesar than you shall do to Brutus.

After that unconsciously prophetic line, Brutus welcomes Mark Antony into the pulpit and leaves. What follows is a brilliant bit of political oratory, beginning with the familiar, "Friends, Romans, Countrymen." Antony uses every trick of the orator's

trade, none more effectively than the repeated, ironic phrase, "Brutus is an honorable man." By the third time it occurs, the crowd is hooting.

Antony is, by turns, sarcastic and sentimental, manipulating the crowd's emotions to his purpose. He produces Caesar's will and says he will not read it. This, of course, makes the people clamor for it. He then shows them Caesar's body, ragged with wounds, arousing grief and pity in his hearers. He then speaks with self-deprecation and feeling.

Good friends, sweet friends, let me not stir you up
To such a sudden flood of mutiny.
They that have done this deed are honourable:
What private griefs they have, alas, I know not,
That made them do it: they are wise and honorable,
And will, no doubt, with reasons answer you.
I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts:
I am no orator, as Brutus is;
But, as you know me all, a plain blunt man,
That love my friend; and that they know full well
That gave me public leave to speak of him:
For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,
To stir men's blood: I only speak right on;
I tell you that which you yourselves do know;
Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,
And bid them speak for me: but were I Brutus,
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
Would ruffle up your spirits and put a tongue
In every wound of Caesar that should move
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny.

At this, the crowd shouts "Mutiny" and starts to leave, eager to exact revenge. But, Antony has one master stroke left: he brings them back to hear the will which he had said previously he wouldn't read. This is the final spark needed to inflame the people to mob violence and they race away to find and punish the conspirators.

Antony knew just what he was doing and how to get it done. Brutus' oration offered reason and logic. Antony's awoke passion. He has set the city in turmoil and hopes to make something of it. His final line concedes that things are not entirely under his control:

Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot,
Take thou what course thou wilt!

Many in public life find this scene disturbing, for Shakespeare demonstrates how easily public opinion can be manipulated, even reversed by someone who knows

exactly how to appeal, not to reason, but to feeling of fear and anger. It's still a problem in a modern democracy.

Antony is now the center of attention, but he summons to Rome Caesar's adopted son, Octavius, who will be a quiet but dominant presence in the final scenes. Antony and Octavius form a triumvirate with the wealthy Lepidus, who will soon be cast aside. Octavius will ultimately defeat Antony and assume sole command of the Roman Empire as Caesar Augustus.

But, for now, the conspirators have been driven into exile and are assembling an army to oppose Antony and Octavius. Cassius and Brutus meet and quarrel about money and bribes. Brutus scolds Cassius for the manner in which he is raising funds, but clearly expects Cassius to provide money for him. Cassius wants to retreat until they have assembled a larger force, but Brutus wants to do battle at once. This is the last time Brutus will refuse Cassius' counsel and, once again, it is fatally wrong to do so. The two resolve their differences and retire.

But Brutus cannot sleep and, as he sits awake, reading, the ghost of Caesar appears to tell him they will meet at Philippi.

Before the battle, the leaders of the two armies meet and trade insults. During the fight, Cassius mistakenly thinks his best friend, Titinius, has been captured and commits suicide. When Titinius arrives and finds Cassius dead, he, too, takes his own life.

Hearing of Cassius' and Titinius' deaths and his army's defeat, Brutus takes his own life, running on a sword held by Strato, one of his followers. When Antony and Octavius come upon the scene, Antony speaks a valedictory over Brutus:

This was the noblest Roman of them all:
All the conspirators save only he
Did that they did in envy of great Caesar;
He only, in a general honest thought
And common good to all, made one of them.
His life was gentle, and the elements
So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world 'This was a man!'

But it is Octavius who has the final lines, Shakespeare's clear indication that he, not Antony, is now master, and the struggle between the two men will be settled at last in "Antony and Cleopatra."