



Before the play begins

The origins of the Roman Republic

When the **Roman Senate** granted Julius Caesar the title of dictator of Rome for life, it effectively signalled the end of the **Roman Republic** that had governed the city and its territories for more than four hundred years.

The Republic had been founded when the inhabitants of Rome drove out the tyrannical **Tarquin** kings and set up their own form of government, in which they could elect their own leaders rather than being ruled by hereditary kings.

The Republican government

At first, control of the Republic was entirely in the hands of the **patricians**, Rome's aristocratic class. Only patricians could be elected members of the Senate, or parliament, and only patricians could be chosen as heads of state, or **consuls**. To prevent any one man obtaining too much power, there were always two consuls elected at any one time, who could rule for one year only. Consuls were primarily military commanders who would lead Rome's armies in war. In times of great emergency a dictator (supreme commander) was appointed in place of the consuls, but for a period of no more than six months.

In time the **plebeians**, the ordinary citizens of Rome, campaigned for and achieved the right to have their say in how they were to be ruled. They were allowed to elect two **tribunes** to represent them in government and protect their interests. Eventually the plebeians gained their own assembly, and the right to propose laws and to require one of the two consuls to be chosen from their own class. But despite these concessions, the patricians still retained overall control of government, while the plebeians – who were far greater in number than the patricians – remained poor, discontented and ready to riot.

The size of the Roman world

As the centuries passed, the Roman Republic secured control of the rest of Italy, then Greece, Spain and North Africa, until it had conquered most of the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.

But as Rome's wealth increased, so the quality of its ruling classes declined. The patrician class became more interested in luxurious living than in public service, and power gradually gravitated into the hands of a few men who could use their wealth and private armies to control the power of the Roman Senate and eliminate their political enemies.

Two such great rivals were Caesar and **Pompey**. Although for a while it suited the two men to form an uneasy political alliance, it was inevitable that they would eventually come to blows. In the bitter civil war that followed, Pompey was defeated and fled to Egypt, where he was murdered. In 48 BC, the Senate appointed Caesar as 'dictator' (i.e. made him head of government) and granted him many other powers and honours. There was even a statue of him placed in one of the Roman temples with the inscription 'To the Unconquerable God'. Caesar was now sole ruler of Rome and its territory. He was king in all but name.

Caesar was, however, surprisingly merciful to most of his defeated Roman opponents (including Brutus and Cassius) and gave a number of them responsible positions in his new regime. But the great unanswered question was how he would use his supreme power over the government of the Republic. Would he use it to reform and strengthen the old Republican system, which had so clearly failed to maintain control of Rome's vast territory? Or did he intend to establish a new monarchy with himself as the first king or emperor?

JULIUS CAESAR

Some of the patricians were genuinely fearful that Caesar secretly intended to return Rome to monarchical rule. One such was Marcus Brutus, once a supporter of Pompey but now a close friend of Caesar. Brutus was a committed Republican and boasted a distinguished ancestor who had helped expel the Tarquin kings and establish the original Republic. Some patricians became so desperate that in 44 BC they conspired to assassinate Caesar before he could make himself king. One of the leaders of this conspiracy was Caius Cassius, another former supporter of Pompey in the recent civil war.

This is the point at which Shakespeare begins his story.

- ◆ **Working in a small group, research each of the elements of the above summary that appear in bold font. Prepare a mini-presentation on the context of the play, including additional details and images to accompany the text. Share this with your class.**

Julius Caesar and the Elizabethans

The figure of Julius Caesar held a particular fascination for the Elizabethans. Some admired his military skill, strong leadership and generous treatment of former enemies. Others condemned him for his ruthlessness, for his

weakening of the powers of the Senate and above all for his ambition.

Some Elizabethans may also have felt that the play reflected contemporary anxieties about what England might become following the death of the childless Elizabeth. They were divided in their attitude to the conspirators. If some felt Caesar's murder was justified to help preserve the Republic, others believed it to be a wicked act, or at the very least a major political misjudgement resulting in the very thing the conspirators were trying to prevent: the collapse of Rome's Republican governmental system. Brutus in particular enjoyed a double reputation. He was seen as an honest man of principle and a champion of liberty. Yet by joining the conspiracy he became also the man who treacherously murdered his friend and benefactor.

Whatever the Elizabethans may or may not have thought of Julius Caesar and the rights or wrongs of his assassination, less than fifty years after Shakespeare wrote his play the English people executed their king and set up their own Republican form of government under Oliver Cromwell.

▼ The Roman Republic c. 44 BC





Pompey and the Senate! Caesar and the people!

(in groups A and B of four or five each)

There has been a terrible civil war. Pompey and Caesar – heroes always named in one breath – have fought each other for supreme power in Rome, and Caesar has won.

All of you are Romans after the war. Group A still supports Pompey's views, believing in a more democratic type of government, through the elected assembly of the Senate. Group B supports Caesar, upholding the direct personal rule of a dictator.

- Use the opinions and details on the relevant scroll on the right to make a list of the benefits of senatorial (Group A) or one-person (Group B) rule as you see it. Include the views of both patricians and plebeians.
- After making their lists, Groups A and B should choose one person from their group who will speak at Caesar's celebratory 'triumph'. The other group members should help the nominated speaker to prepare a 60-second speech outlining the group's views to the assembled crowd.
- In your group, find and watch clips of political addresses. Suggest how the speaker might build into their own delivery any effective performance techniques that you identify. As the speaker practises the speech, the rest of the group should offer constructive feedback on what is good and what could be improved!
- Make placards, banners, badges and leaflets to distribute, or create other types of publicity material to be used at the triumph. Show clearly where your loyalties lie and either what you want to celebrate about Caesar's success or what you fear might happen under his rule.
- Then stage the triumph, allowing each group the chance to present their arguments. If you can, film it!
- Play the recording back and judge which group made the stronger case.

A The Pompeyite point of view

Pompey believed in the Senate. He fought for the Senate, he died for the Senate. One-person rule is dangerous – what's to stop Caesar becoming a tyrant now that the Senate has made him permanent head of government and granted him many special powers? Let's face it, he's even being worshipped like a god now that one of his statues has been erected in the temple. One ruler may serve us well, but what will happen when that person dies? Do we want to return to the days of the monarchy when power was handed on unopposed and we had no say in who ruled us? That's one of the reasons we killed the last king we had – four hundred years ago!

B The Caesarite point of view

People in Rome are poor. Only the rich get votes in the Senate. Yes, the rich look after themselves. But with Caesar, you ask and you get. He listens and then he takes action – and he's richer than the Senate, because he's been off on his conquests again. Yes, it's true that he saw off Pompey, but look how decent he's been in forgiving the other rebels like Brutus and Cassius. They've now taken up positions of responsibility in his government, so we can trust him to put the good of the people first. Let him rule! Let him be a dictator! We need a strong man after the wars. But we'll never let him be king, of course.

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Excerpt
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JULIUS CAESAR

Caesar's triumph

Study this photograph from a modern production of *Julius Caesar*.
How effective do you think it is in suggesting the kind of admiration
that Caesar was held in by some of his public? Why?



List of characters

Caesar and his supporters

JULIUS CAESAR
CALPURNIA Caesar’s wife
MARK ANTONY
OCTAVIUS CAESAR } The ruling Triumvirate after Caesar’s death
LEPIDUS

The conspirators against Caesar

Conspirators

BRUTUS CASCA CINNA METELLUS CIMBER
CAIUS CASSIUS DECIUS BRUTUS TREBONIUS CAIUS LIGARIUS

Family and followers

PORTIA Brutus’s wife	VARRUS	
LUCIUS Brutus’s boy servant	PINDARUS Cassius’s slave	
CLAUDIO	LUCILIUS	
LABEO*	TITINIUS	
FLAVIUS*	MESSALA	} Officers of Brutus and Cassius
CLITUS	YOUNG CATO	
STRATO	VOLUMNIUS	
DARDANIUS	STATILIUS*	

Other Romans

CICERO	CINNA THE POET
PUBLIUS CIMBER	A CYNIC POET
POPILLIUS LENA	1ST, 2ND, 3RD, 4TH PLEBEIANS
OTHER SENATORS*	CARPENTER
FLAVIUS	COBBLER
MURELLUS	MESSENGER
SOOTHSAYER	
ARTEMIDORUS	1ST, 2ND, 3RD SOLDIERS
SERVANTS TO CAESAR, ANTONY AND OCTAVIUS	OTHER PLEBEIANS*

*non-speaking parts



Two Tribunes, Flavius and Murellus, ask some tradespeople why they are taking the day off. A Cobbler gives riddling replies.

1 Tribunes versus common people (in fours)

The opening of the play immediately establishes a sense of conflict. The Tribunes Flavius and Murellus (officials of the Roman government) are loyal to the defeated Pompey. They are angry that the common people celebrate Caesar's triumph in carnival mood. The Cobbler (which can also mean a person who plays with words) responds to the Tribunes' wrath with witty wordplay at their expense.

- Take the parts of Flavius, Murellus, the Cobbler and the Carpenter, and read lines 1–30 together. Experiment with different ways of bringing out the Tribunes' disapproval and the common people's celebration.

▼ Which line do you think is being spoken in the photograph below?



Stagecraft

Setting the scene

Shakespeare does not give any overt stage directions. The script has to be searched for references to the time of day, the location and the weather; for example, and then the director has to decide how to stage the play. They could choose to highlight in the staging a particular idea that runs throughout the play; to make the location specific, even familiar to their audience; or to go for a more neutral setting. Some directors choose to open this play with a powerful statement about the triumph of Caesar over Pompey.

- In groups, discuss your reactions to the staging shown in the picture above.
- Begin a Director's Journal to record your ideas about the staging of *Julius Caesar*, as if you were a director. Make a note in the journal outlining your discussion. Add any of your own ideas for staging afterwards.

mechanical
manual workers, craftsmen

rule measuring ruler
apparel clothes

in respect of compared to
cobble mender of shoes or one who mends clumsily
directly clearly, plainly

soles (a pun on 'souls')
naughty worthless
be not out don't be angry
if you be out if you (your shoes) are worn out
mend repair (shoes) or reform (souls)

Julius Caesar

Act 1 Scene 1

Rome A street

Enter FLAVIUS, MURELLUS, and certain COMMONERS over the stage

- | | | |
|-----------|--|----|
| FLAVIUS | 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. | |
| MURELLUS | 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. | 10 |
| MURELLUS | But what trade art thou? Answer me directly. | |
| COBBLER | A trade, sir, that I hope I may use with a safe conscience, which
is indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles. | |
| FLAVIUS | What trade, thou knave? Thou naughty knave, what trade? | 15 |
| COBBLER | Nay, I beseech you, sir, be not out with me; yet if you be out, sir,
I can mend you. | |
| MURELLUS | What mean'st thou by that? Mend me, thou saucy fellow? | |
| COBBLER | Why, sir, cobble you. | |
| FLAVIUS | Thou art a cobbler, art thou? | 20 |



The tradespeople celebrate Caesar's triumph over Pompey. The Tribunes accuse them of ingratitude to Pompey, who was once the people's favourite.

Language in the play

Rhetorical questions (in groups of four or five)

Murellus's lines 31–50 make much use of **rhetorical questions** (questions that do not need an answer). The questions are intended to influence the thoughts of the listeners and make them reflect on their actions.

- a** Share out the lines, making sure everyone has at least one rhetorical question. Practise speaking the lines, deciding where to speak harshly and where to speak softly. Surround another group and deliver the lines. Then they do the same to your group. Afterwards, talk together about the effect the lines have on the listeners.
- b** As you read on, keep a note of how many times rhetorical questions are used as a device to persuade a listening audience and what the effect of these questions might be.

awl tool for piercing leather

recover resole and cure

neat's leather cattle hide

gone walked

triumph procession celebrating Caesar's victory over Pompey's sons in Spain in March 45 BC

tributaries conquered peoples forced to pay tax

Pompey a great Roman general (see p. 173)

Tiber river, sacred to Romans, that flows through Rome

replication echo

attire clothes

cull out pick, choose

blood blood relatives (Pompey's sons whom Caesar had defeated)

intermit prevent

light on fall upon

Do kiss ... of all rises to the top of its banks

1 Stop the party! (in large groups)

- a** Murellus and Flavius want to manipulate the common people and one way in which they do this is by using vivid language. They paint pictures with their words. In your group, read through Murellus's description of the crowd's reaction to Pompey (lines 36–46). Create a tableau (frozen picture) of this moment. Then discuss why Murellus chose to remind them of these previous celebrations.
- b** Ordinary Romans were deeply superstitious. Every action or decision was taken after consultation with the augurers, who performed rites and sacrifices to find out the will of the gods (see p. 171). Read the Tribunes' differing accounts of what the crowd should do next in lines 52–4 and 56–9. Decide how the Tribunes are playing on the crowd's superstition in these lines and swap your ideas with another group.

2 How do the common people react? (in pairs)

The common people exit at line 59 – but Shakespeare gives no clue as to their mood. Are they subdued, resentful, angry or something else?

- Improvise a conversation or write an exchange of text messages between two of the crowd after this brush with the furious Tribunes.



- COBBLER Truly, sir, all that I live by is with the awl. I meddle with no tradesman's matters, nor women's matters; but withal I am indeed, sir, a surgeon to old shoes: when they are in great danger I recover them. As proper men as ever trod upon neat's leather have gone upon my handiwork. 25
- FLAVIUS But wherefore art not in thy shop today?
 Why dost thou lead these men about the streets?
- COBBLER Truly, sir, to wear out their shoes, to get myself into more work. But indeed, sir, we make holiday to see Caesar and to rejoice in his triumph. 30
- MURELLUS Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?
 What tributaries follow him to Rome
 To grace in captive bonds his chariot wheels?
 You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!
 O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome, 35
 Knew you not Pompey? Many a time and oft
 Have you climbed up to walls and battlements,
 To towers and windows, yea, to chimney tops,
 Your infants in your arms, and there have sat
 The livelong day, with patient expectation, 40
 To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome.
 And when you saw his chariot but appear
 Have you not made an universal shout,
 That Tiber trembled underneath her banks
 To hear the replication of your sounds 45
 Made in her concave shores?
 And do you now put on your best attire?
 And do you now cull out a holiday?
 And do you now strew flowers in his way,
 That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood? 50
 Be gone!
 Run to your houses, fall upon your knees,
 Pray to the gods to intermit the plague
 That needs must light on this ingratitude.
- FLAVIUS Go, go, good countrymen, and for this fault 55
 Assemble all the poor men of your sort,
 Draw them to Tiber banks, and weep your tears
 Into the channel till the lowest stream
 Do kiss the most exalted shores of all.

Exeunt all the Commoners



The Tribunes leave, intending to stop further celebration. Caesar comes to the Lupercal races, in which Antony is to run. He orders Antony to touch Calpurnia in the race to cure her infertility.

1 Caesar and the crowd – high and low (in threes)

Caesar does not appear in Scene 1. But the loyal Pompeyite Flavius makes clear in lines 67–8 that he plans to take all the decorations off Caesar's statues. He is also anxious that Caesar should not be allowed to 'soar above the view of men / And keep us all in servile fearfulness'. This bird image emphasises the sense of superiority that Flavius fears in Caesar:

- In your groups, make a list of all the words used by the Tribunes in this first scene to describe the 'lowness' of the common people.
- Then decide whether the Cobbler seems aptly described by these terms. In your view, is he likely to feel 'servile fearfulness'?

Stagecraft

Caesar's triumphal progress (in groups of six to eight)

Plan how Caesar's entrance and exit (lines 1–24) can be staged.

- How will you manage the Tribunes' exit at the end of the previous scene (to follow Caesar back on stage shortly afterwards)?
- How will you enact the stage direction at the start of this scene?
- What is the behaviour of the 'great crowd'?
- How do the different characters speak to, and about, Caesar?
- How does Caesar address his wife and how sensitive is he about her childlessness?
- What sort of person is the Soothsayer?
- How will you use music in the scene? (Consider Caesar's remark at line 16 and the 'Sennet' stage direction at line 24.)

Make your choices, and then present your version of lines 1–24.

basest metal inferior natures (with wordplay on metal/mettle; lead, the basest metal, is inert but malleable)

Capitol Senate house or government building (see p. 172)

Disrobe the images pull decorations off the statues

ceremonies garlands, decorations

feast of Lupercal festival held on 15 February (see p. 172)

trophies arms or other spoils of war taken from the enemy

vulgar common people

Stand you ... sterile curse

a runner's touch was said to cure infertile women

▼ Comment on the atmosphere created by the entrance of Caesar in this production.

