

Introduction to William Shakespeare's

Julius Caesar

Notes from *Encounters in Literature* Introductory Material

I. Information and Assumptions Common to Shakespeare's Audience

- A. An audience in Shakespeare's day would be familiar with the words and expressions he used.
- B. The audience believed the monarch (king or queen) was the source of order and stability in the state, just as God is the source of law and order in the universe. To murder a monarch was not just murder, but a great crime against the order of the universe and consequently against the will of God Himself.
(During Shakespeare's lifetime, Queen Elizabeth I, and later King James I, were both absolute monarchs whom the people of England believed had been chosen by God and therefore were superior to ordinary mortals.)
- C. The audience believed in ghosts and took them very seriously.
- D. The audience believed the moods of nature corresponded to human moods.
- E. The audience expected to be completely familiar with the story of the play, so the plot unfolding on the stage held no surprises for them.

II. Caesar and Rome

- A. Rome traces its history back to 753 B.C. when Romulus founded the city and became its first king.
- B. Lucius Junius Brutus expelled the last of the Tarquin kings from ruling Rome in 509 B.C.
- C. The Tarquins made kings so hated that nobles (patricians) and the common people (plebeians) enacted a law that anyone expressing a desire for the return of the monarchy should be put to death. A republic in which both patricians and plebeians shared power was formed to replace the monarchy. This republic lasted for the next 400 years.
- D. By the first century B.C., the republic begins to crumble. Power struggles lead to civil wars which resulted in Rome being ruled sometimes by a monarchy, other times a republic, and even at times a dictatorship.
- E. Caesar was born in approximately 100 B.C. He was a patrician, but early on cast his lot with the common people.
- F. In 60 B.C., Caesar formed a triumvirate with a wealthy patrician, Crassus, and a well-known general, Pompey, to rule Rome.
- G. Caesar was made governor of Gaul (present-day France) two years later. Using his military expertise, Caesar conquered all of Gaul and nearly doubled the size of the Roman Empire. He served in Gaul for almost ten years, growing very popular with his followers there as well as with the common people at home.
- H. Crassus is then killed in battle.
- I. Pompey and the Senate ruling the Empire from Rome are intimidated by Caesar's popularity and power, so they order him to disperse his troops and return to Rome.
- J. Caesar stood up to this challenge to his authority, returned to Rome, and within sixty days took over all of Italy. In fear, Pompey fled to Greece.
- K. Caesar then defeated two of Pompey's officers in Spain.
- L. Upon his return to Rome in 48 B.C., Caesar is elected consul.
- M. Caesar then pursued Pompey to Greece and defeated him.
- N. Finally consolidating his power, Caesar is made dictator for life in 45 B.C.
- O. This is the moment at which the action of Shakespeare's play begins.

Introduction

The dreams you have met so far in this unit, DREAMS, have, for the most part, concentrated on the conflict between the dreams of an individual and the reality of the world. Sometimes, however, when the dreams of individuals come in conflict with those of others, people find themselves locked in a struggle, each trying to impose her or his particular vision of the world upon the others. When such a struggle takes place among powerful people in the state, it affects masses of people and even whole civilizations. William Shakespeare found the rudiments of such a struggle in Plutarch's account of the assassination of Julius Caesar. Using the bare outline of the events as they happened, he fills in the dreams which the participants must have had and recreates the murder and its effects in terms of the conflicts between dreams of power, dreams of freedom, dreams of revenge.

Shakespeare's Audience

To understand fully the background of this grisly murder and its chain of terrible consequences, we need to grasp some of the information and assumptions that were common to Shakespeare's audience. This is not surprising, for during the three and a half centuries that have elapsed since his time, language and customs have changed as radically as clothing and transportation. Shakespeare wrote for his own time and people. He could count on their reactions to certain situations just as today's playwright knows the impact that such references as lynching, teenage gangs, and communism have on the modern audience. Let's consider, then, how an Elizabethan audience would differ from one today.

An audience familiar with the words and expressions he used. Though the basic English sentence patterns are the same, some words have changed in spelling, meaning, or usage. Just as an adult may be confused today by teenage slang, so the reader may be confused by Shakespeare's language. The sound is familiar but the meaning sometimes is lost. Footnotes interpret the strange meaning of familiar words, but they also tend to slow down the impact of the dramatic action. Although you may miss some of the details, your first reading should be for the main story; you can return later for careful study of details.

Shakespeare's audience also held a different body of beliefs from today's audience. During Shakespeare's life, England was ruled by Queen Elizabeth I and later by James I, both absolute monarchs who the people believed had been chosen by God and hence were superior to ordinary mortals. In addition, the monarch was held to be the source of order and stability in the state, just as God is the source of law and order in the universe. Therefore, to murder a ruler was not just murder, but a great crime against the order of the universe and consequently against the will of God Himself. In order to feel the full horror of such an act the reader must accept the Elizabethan viewpoint. The audience also firmly believed in ghosts and took them very seriously. Whether a good or a bad spirit, an apparition was an awesome and terrifying creature. Obviously, the same reaction is not felt by today's audience. The Elizabethans also felt that the moods of nature corresponded to human moods. When horrible acts were put in motion by human agency, then nature responded with darkness, strange sounds, terrible storms, and unnatural events. Although we mentally reject such a theory, we still respond to movies and television shows which heighten a dark, dramatic moment with the eerie sounds of wind and storm.

The Elizabethan audience suffered from today's in their expectations. They expected to be completely familiar with the story of the play, so the plot unfolding on the stage held no surprises for them. What they came to see was the handling of characters and to hear language of great beauty.

Caesar and Rome

Shakespeare expected his audience to know the history of Rome and the story of Caesar's rise and fall. Even when Caesar was born in approximately 100 B.C., Rome was an old city tracing its history back to 753 B.C. when the legendary Romulus supposedly founded the city and became its first king. About two hundred and fifty years later, in 509 B.C., the last of the cruel and unscrupulous kings of the Tarquin family was expelled from Rome under the leadership of a noble man and great patriot, Lucius Junius Brutus, ancestor of the Brutus you are about to meet in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

The Tarquins had made the name of king so hated that the nobles (patricians) and the common people (plebeians) enacted a law that anyone expressing a desire for the return of the monarchy should be put to death. Instead, they formed a republic in which, theoretically at least, both the patricians and the plebeians had a share in the government. Over the next four hundred years or so (double the age of our own republic), both factions worked out a balance of power which helped to form the basis of Rome's strength, a strength which made it the leading nation of the Mediterranean world.

By the first century B.C., however, the republic had begun to crumble. Uneasy balances of power exploded sporadically into civil wars in which Rome vacillated between a monarchy, a republic, and a dictatorship. It was in such a world of great political unrest that Caesar rose to power.

Preparing to Read

Watch carefully from the very beginning for the conflicts that will lead to the climax and its repercussions. Note, too, how they are embodied in specific characters whom Shakespeare masterfully reveals through what they say and do, and what others say about them. Watch carefully, too, for Shakespeare's handling of the necessary background details. For just as there is exposition in a short story, so there must be exposition in a drama. It is difficult to make this necessary material seem a part of the action, but Shakespeare does it very cleverly. Notice in the first scenes how carefully he works together the little bits of information that you need for background.

As nearly as scholars can determine, the Elizabethan plays were originally given in two parts. The action played continuously for an hour or so and was interrupted by an intermission which was followed by another period of action. The division of the play into five acts was made at a later date when the plays were printed. *Julius Caesar* breaks neatly into two parts: the first moves through the death of Caesar; the second deals with the results of the murder. If you can, read steadily until you reach the end of the murder scene before going back for a more detailed study of the play. Then start with the funeral oration and read through to the end.

Note that Shakespeare has written most of the play in blank verse. Blank verse is a line of iambic pentameter verse (see page 256). It has five stresses per line, each usually occurring on the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth syllables of the line. Blank verse has no end rhyme and its rhythm is particularly suited to drama because it so closely resembles the rhythm of normal English speech. In reading

blank verse aloud, as you should to sense its grace and power, read it according to the sense of the passage rather than according to the length of individual lines.



2. Julius Caesar was born of a patrician family but early in his career cast his lot with the common people. As a representative of the popular party he climbed rapidly from one office to another. His eloquence, lavish games, and entertainments for the people, as well as political accomplishments for them, won him a large following in Rome. In 60 B.C., Caesar formed a triumvirate to rule Rome with the wealthy patrician Crassus and a well-known general, Pompey. Two years later Caesar was made governor of Gaul and by brilliant generalship went on to conquer all of Gaul, almost doubling the empire. For almost ten years he served in Gaul, winning the admiration of his legions and the support of the commoners at home. After Crassus was killed in battle, Caesar's growing popularity so frightened the Senators and Pompey that they issued the order for Caesar to disperse his troops and return to Rome.

3. Caesar took up this challenge to his authority, and in full battle splendor, leading his legions, he crossed the Rubicon, the river separating Gaul from Italy. Pompey fled in fear to Greece. Before pursuing him, Caesar subdued Italy within sixty days . . . then defeated two of Pompey's officers in Spain . . . and then on returning to Rome was elected consul in 48 B.C. Finally turning to Greece, Caesar swiftly crushed Pompey. Three years later he defeated the remnants of Pompey's faction in Spain. During this period of wars, Caesar had been delegated tremendous powers, first being made dictator (customarily a one-year appointment or for the duration of a crisis) in 48 B.C., then dictator for ten years in 46 B.C., and finally dictator for life in 45 B.C. In the full glory of his honors at home and his successes in Spain, Caesar returned to Rome. This is the moment at which Shakespeare begins his drama, *Julius Caesar*.

Reading Shakespearean Drama

Literature and Composition 2

A lot has happened to language since the days of Shakespeare! The ways that we read, write and speak have dramatically changed. By becoming aware of the writing techniques and expressions used by Shakespeare, you will develop strategies to read the play Julius Caesar. Listed below you will find some of these "attack techniques".

Read Holistically

To treat something holistically means to treat all of it instead of its isolated parts. When you read Julius Caesar, rather than struggling with a difficult passage word for word, read all of it straight through to the end punctuation mark. Try to get a sense of the whole passage before you try to break it down into pieces. Sometimes the speeches are long with many interruptions and make their point only in the last two or three lines. Once you understand the basic idea, you can go over the details.

Use the Notes

Your text has footnotes that will help you define unfamiliar words as well as allusions, themes and particularly difficult lines. Be especially aware of words we use today that had a different meaning in Shakespeare's time such as marry, replication, spare, and conceit.

Complete Contractions

Because Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter, he often used contractions to achieve a regular rhythm in his lines. When you come across such words, simply complete them; for example:

o' = on	e'en = even	wi' = with
't = it	e'er = ever	ta'en = taken

Find the Simple Sentence

Some of Shakespeare's sentences are so full of describing words (modifiers) that it is difficult to analyze the thought. When you come across such sentences, locate the subject and verb, then analyze the rest of the sentence.

Rearrange Inverted Sentences

Today we usually put the subject before the verb, but Shakespeare's sentences are often inverted; for example, Portia says to Brutus "Dwell I but in the suburbs of your good pleasure?" When you encounter sentences such as this, simply rearrange them in your mind. Rearranged this passage would read: "I dwell but in the suburbs of your good pleasure?"

Interpret Metaphors

Some of important ideas in Julius Caesar are expressed metaphorically. Ask yourself what comparison is implied and how it affects the overall meaning of the passage. For example, when Brutus says of Caesar "...think him as a serpent's egg which hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous..." he is metaphorically saying that although Caesar hasn't done any real harm yet, like a snake's egg he has the potential to become dangerous.

Understand Omen and Portends

Omens and portends play a large role in setting the atmosphere of Julius Caesar. Fierce weather, astronomical phenomena, unusual events, and fearsome dreams all suggest to the characters that strange times are upon them. An omen or portent is anything that foretells or suggests what may happen in the future.

Follow Cause and Effect

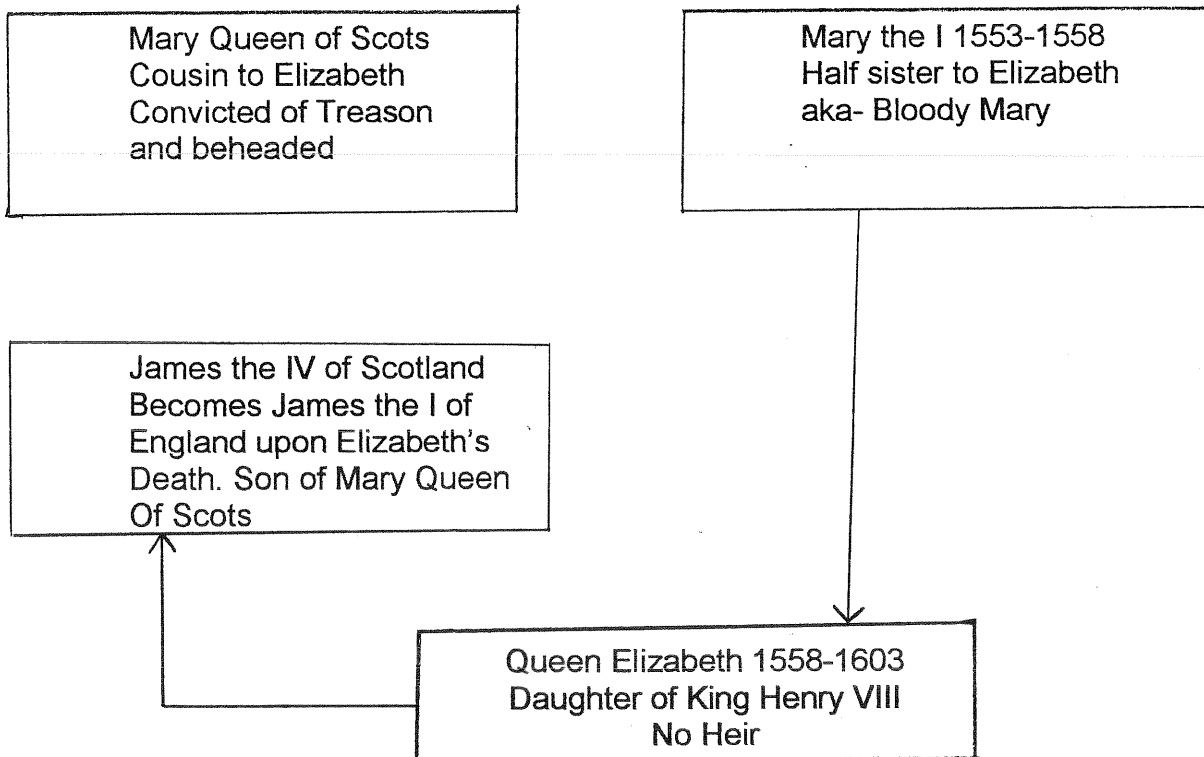
Part of the beauty of Julius Caesar is its tightly woven plot: events do not happen in isolation, but feed one into the another. The first event (the cause) leads to the second event (the effect), which in turn becomes the cause of the third event, and so on. For example, Cassius wins Brutus to the side of the conspirators, which causes them to be bold and assassinate Caesar, which causes Marcus Antonius to inflame the masses with a passionate eulogy. Watch closely for such chains of cause and effect to help you understand what happens as well as why.

Read Passages Aloud

The Tragedy of Julius Caesar is a play, and plays are meant to be performed. When you are reading at home, try reading aloud and visualizing the action as it unfolds.

TUDOR ROYAL FAMILY

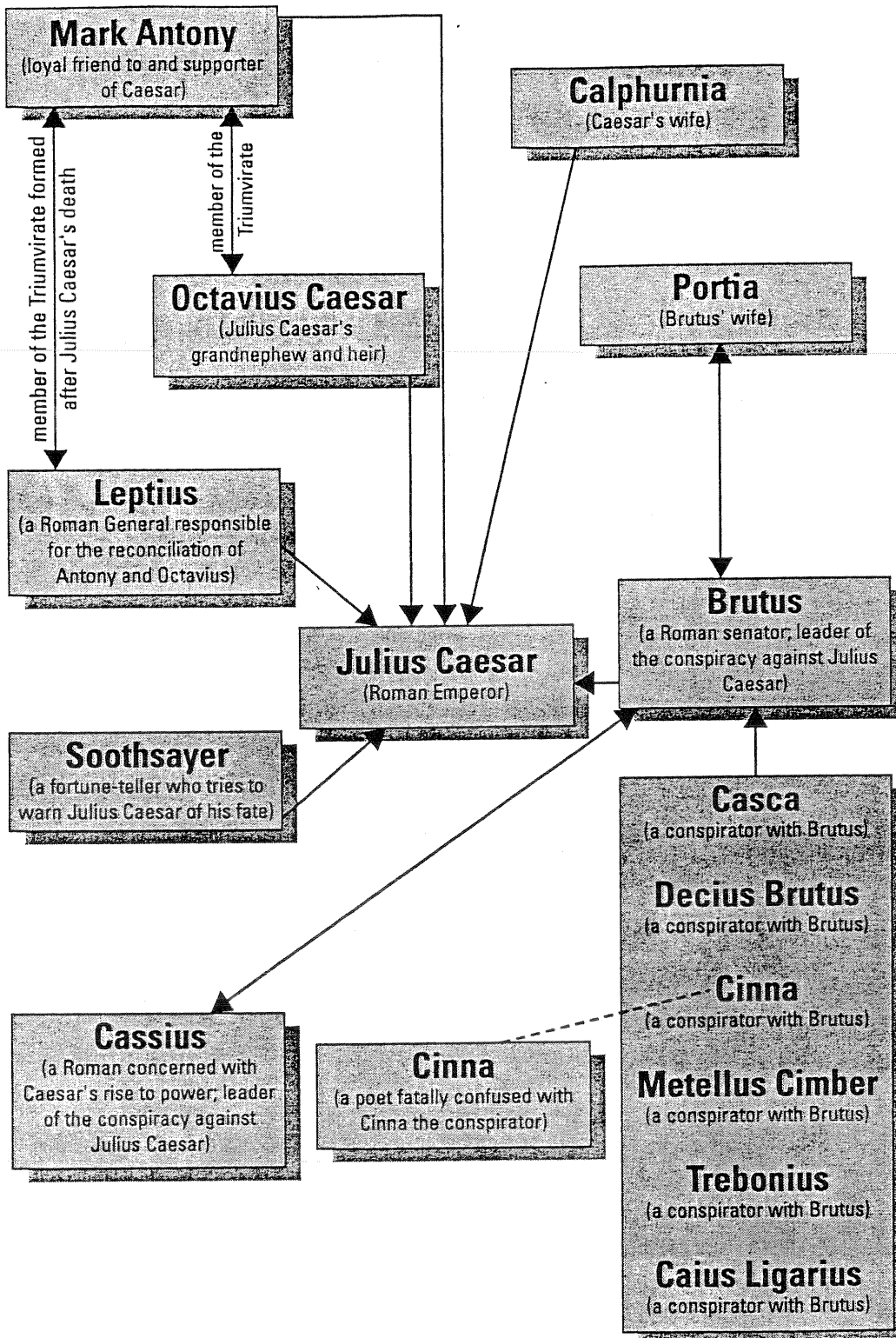
Chart of succession



Things to keep in mind:

- *Shakespeare was a patron of Elizabeth
- *With no heir named to succession the throne was up for grabs
- *Power struggle between Protestants and Catholics
- *James was a Protestant and his accession to the throne would unite England and Scotland.
- *England was on the verge of civil war and this inspired Shakespeare to write **Julius Caesar**
- *Shakespeare would manipulate time and space but much of his play would remain historically based
- *The people from his time would have been aware of the significance of his choice in topic with **J.C.**

Character Map



Who's Who in *Julius Caesar*

The First Triumvirate

(before play begins)

Julius Caesar

Crassus

Pompey

Julius Caesar (dictator of Rome)—Calpurnia (his wife)

Marcus Brutus (Roman Praetor)—Portia (his wife)

The Second Triumvirate

(after Caesar dies)

Octavius Caesar

Mark Antony

M. Lepidus

Servants to Brutus

Claudius

Clitus

Dardanius

Lucius

Strato

Varro

Comrades in Arms with Brutus

Young Cato

Messala

Titinius

Volumnius

Lucilius

Conspirators against Caesar

Marcus Brutus

Decius Brutus

Casca

Cassius

Metellus Cimber

Cinna

Ligarius

Trebonius

Pindarus

(servant of Cassius)

Artemidorus

(teacher of rhetoric)
a *soothsayer*

Senators

Cicero

Popilius Lena

Publius

Tribunes

Flavius

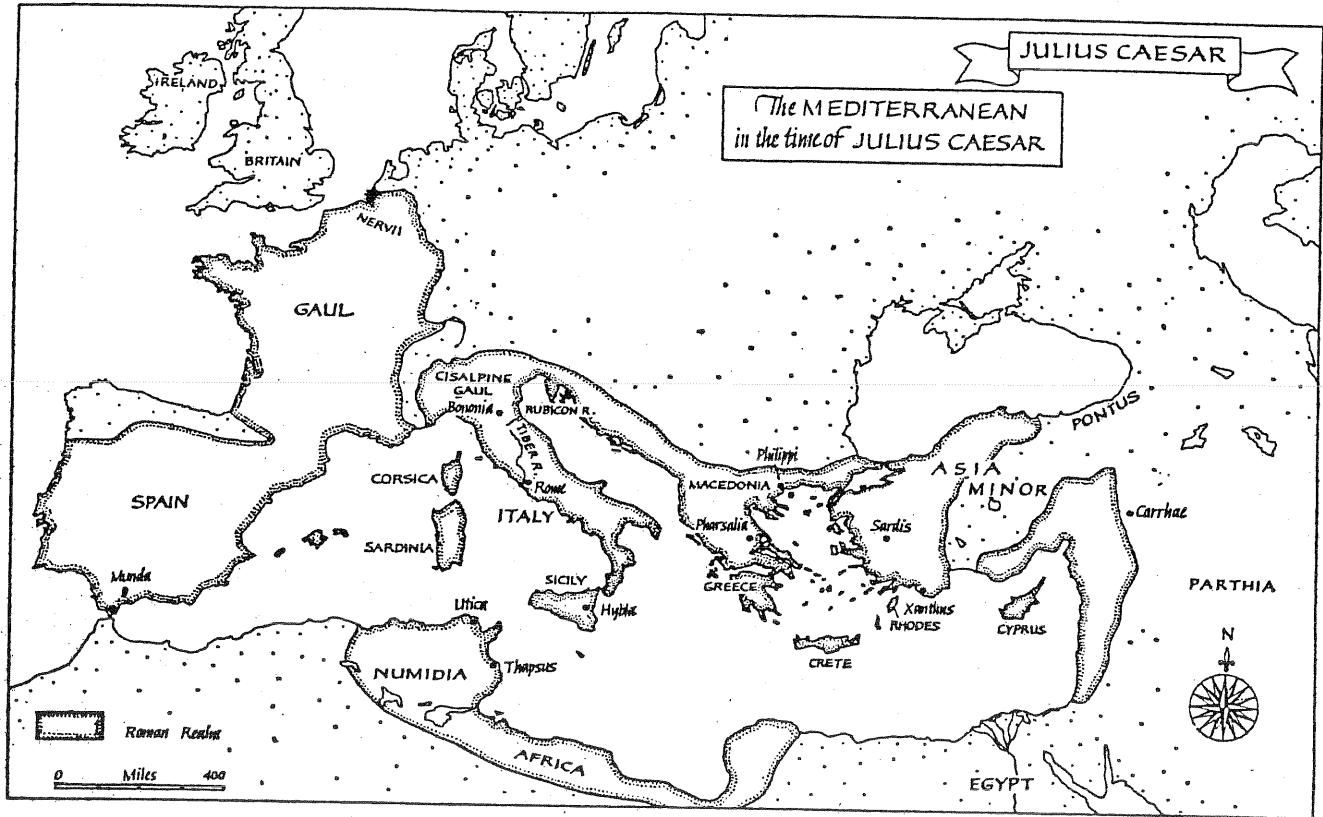
Marullus

Also

Other senators, citizens, guards, attendants, and another poet

Where's Where in *Julius Caesar*

This map lists the Roman kingdom during Caesar's time as ruler. Refer to it as necessary, especially during your reading of Acts IV and V.

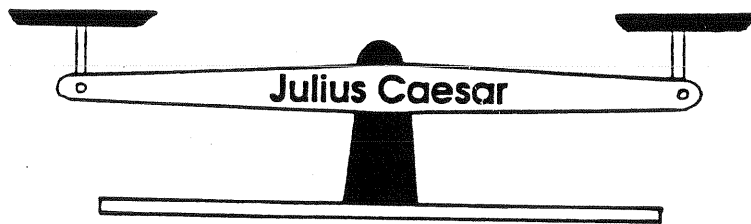


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Weighing Character Traits

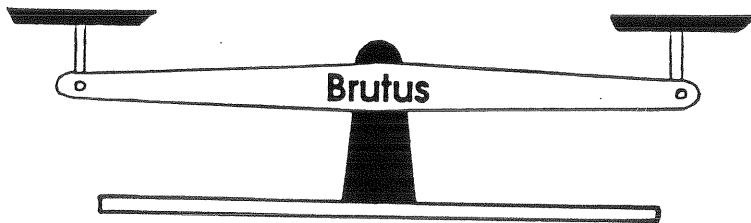
In Act I of *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare introduces three of the play's main characters. He portrays Julius Caesar, Brutus, and Cassius as having both good and bad character traits. On the scales below, write specific traits revealed in Act I that help show both sides of each man's character.

GOOD



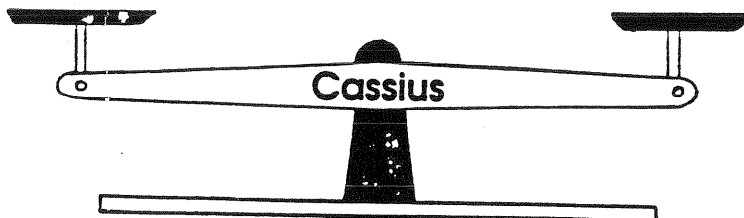
BAD

GOOD



BAD

GOOD



BAD
