

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

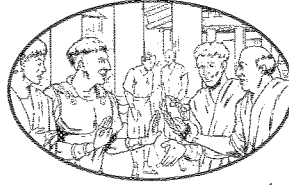
Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar, probably written around 1599, was the first of Shakespeare's Roman plays, and his earliest tragedy.

The play explores the conflict between principle and pragmatism. Shakespeare shows that brutal pragmatism may sometimes serve society better than noble idealism. Despite Brutus's best intentions, Rome was a more stable, just, and free place when Caesar was alive.

Shakespeare strongly believed in the divine quality of kingship and the stability it provided. Around the time *Julius Caesar* was written, Queen Elizabeth I was nearing the end of her rule and had yet to name an heir. Shakespeare was anticipating the chaos that could follow if sovereign power was not transferred in traditional, accepted ways.

Shakespeare based this play on Thomas



North's 1579 English translation of *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. In his play, Shakespeare condensed into three days events that in actuality took place over a period of three years.

Activity: Divide the class into pairs. Assign each pair a controversial topic (e.g., year-round school, school uniforms), and have each student in the pair choose a side, pro or con. Have students write and present short speeches, in pairs, to the class. Discuss with the class how each speech swayed their thinking, and which parts of each speech moved them. Ask how this compares to what happened at Caesar's funeral after Brutus and Antony each spoke.

BARD CARD

Julius Caesar

Plot Summary: This tragedy is Shakespeare's version of the murder of the ancient Roman ruler Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.) and the eventual defeat of the conspirators who killed him.

Main Characters

Julius Caesar: dictator of Rome
Mark Antony: Caesar's friend
Marcus Brutus: a conspirator against Caesar
Caius Cassius: a conspirator against Caesar
Octavius Caesar: Caesar's grandnephew
Calpurnia: Caesar's wife

Glossary

Et tu, Brute: You too, Brutus
Forum: the center and public meeting place of the city
ides of March: March 15th
ingrafted: deep
issue: deed
legions: large military forces
oration: a formal speech
redress: correct
soothsayer: prophet
Tarquin: an earlier Roman ruler who was overthrown
whelped: gave birth