

Julius Caesar and His Times

The short span of Caesar's life, 100-44 B.C., was an important period in the history of Rome. For centuries Romans had debated and even fought civil wars to decide whether a monarchy, a republic, or a dictatorship was the best form of government.

Before 509 B.C. Rome was a monarchy; but in that year, a revolt headed by the Brutus family forced the cruel Tarquinius Superbus from the throne. The Romans established a republic, but the common people, or **plebeians**, soon found that they had merely exchanged the rule of a king for the rule of a group of wealthy, high-born citizens called **patricians**. The two consuls, chief magistrates of the republic, were patricians; the Senate, composed entirely of patricians, made the laws, while the popular assemblies, composed of plebeians, had no real power. Gradually, the plebeians won the right to be elected as consuls or to hold seats in the Senate.

By Julius Caesar's time, Rome was a moderate democracy in form, but in practice was ruled by the Senate. The Senate, however, was disturbed by personal rivalries among its members. For the first time, military leaders entered Rome with their legions to seize control of the government. Since it was possible to appoint a dictator during periods of emergency, an ambitious man could become an absolute ruler. Some Roman dictators championed the people's party; others belonged to the senatorial party.

Julius Caesar, a patrician, cast his lot with the people. Serving in various offices, he won their support by spending money for public entertainment and by establishing laws to free farmers and tradesmen from crushing taxes and debts. In 60 B.C. Caesar formed, with Crassus and Pompey, a **triumvirate** (a three-man rule) to govern Rome and its provinces. Two years later he was made governor of that part of Gaul (now southern France and northern Italy) which Rome then controlled. By brilliant military campaigns he conquered the rest of Gaul, and money from his conquests flowed into Rome. Much of it was used to provide bonuses for his soldiers and to relieve some of the burdens of the common people.

For a short time the triumvirate worked smoothly, but trouble was brewing. While conducting a campaign in Mesopotamia, Crassus was slain. Pompey, jealous of Caesar's popularity, turned more and more toward the senatorial party. The senators, alarmed by Caesar's advance toward unlimited power, issued a decree ordering him to disband his army or be considered an enemy of the state. Caesar accepted the challenge. He led his army across the Rubicon River, which separated his provinces in Gaul from Italy, invaded Rome, and gathered the reins of power into his own hands.

During the next four years Caesar made himself absolute ruler of the Roman world. After securing Spain and the West by overwhelming the troops that Pompey had left there, Caesar followed Pompey to the East, where he had fled. In the decisive battle of Pharsalus, Pompey's forces were routed; Pompey himself fled to Egypt, where he was later killed. Three years after this battle, Caesar made his final campaign against Pompey's faction and defeated Pompey's two sons at Munda, Spain. In the meantime he had been voted extraordinary honors: in 48 B.C. he was named dictator; in 46 B.C. he was made dictator for ten years; and in 45 B.C. the term was extended to life. Thus Caesar was the undisputed master of the Roman world when he returned in triumph from Spain. It is at this point that Shakespeare begins his play.

Name: _____

Julius Caesar: Master of the Roman World—Study Guide

1. When and where was Caesar born?
2. What was Caesar's childhood like?
3. How old was Caesar when he first went to the forum and officially entered the political world?
4. What caused so much political instability during Caesar's childhood?
5. Why did Caesar travel to the Greek island of Rhodes? What happened on the way there?
6. What was the highest office in the Republic?
7. What was Caesar first political appointment? Why is it significant?
8. Who was Caesar's second wife—why was this marriage beneficial to him?
9. What did Caesar do that few other aristocrats would do?
10. How did Caesar gain power despite his unpopularity in the senate? Why were his efforts so risky?
11. What did Caesar gain from becoming the Supreme Priest of Rome?
12. Despite this appointment, what position did Caesar desire? Who did he befriend to achieve it?
13. What happened in 59 B.C.?

14. As Consul, how did Caesar offend the Roman aristocracy?
15. What year did Caesar invade Gaul? What did he hope to gain?
16. What caused the civil war in Rome? What was the result?
17. Describe Caesar's relationship with Cleopatra.
18. What happened in 46 B.C.?
19. How did the civil war affect Rome? What did Caesar do to improve the situation?
20. What was the most dangerous word that could be uttered in Roman politics?
21. What was Caesar elected in 44 B.C.? Why is this significant?
22. Why did the Senators plot to murder Caesar?
23. When was Caesar assassinated?
24. How was Caesar assassinated?
25. What did Caesar's rule and demise show about the Republic?

"within this wooden O"

Henry V, 1, i

The Londoners who flocked to see *Julius Caesar* in September of 1599 were among the first to attend a performance at the new Globe Playhouse. The Globe was the newest theater in London, but its basic design was as old as England's first permanent playhouse.

James Burbage, who was both a carpenter and an actor, built the first public playhouse in London in 1576. In designing his building, he combined some features of an innyard with the shape of an arena. Like other Elizabethan actors, Burbage had usually performed in the courtyards of various London inns. Most inns were three-storied structures that enclosed a rectangular and unroofed yard. The innyard was converted into a theater by placing a temporary platform at one side of the yard. The spectators stood in the yard or filled the tiers of balconies that overlooked the yard. Like other

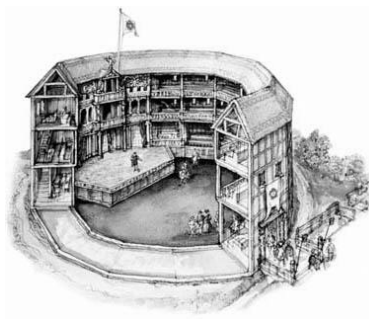
Londoners, burbage was also familiar with the circular

arenas or "gardens" where bullbaiting and bearbaiting contests were held. In these arenas, spectators stood on wooden scaffolds that surrounded the baiting ring. They were protected from the animals by a fence.

Burbage adapted the circular shape of the "gardens" for his playhouse. Then, in the three-storied frame of his building, he constructed spectator galleries similar to inn balconies. Because of his example, Elizabethans came to think of a playhouse as an

arena with galleries surrounding (or almost surrounding) an open yard. It could hardly have been a surprise to Elizabethan playgoers that the new eight-sided Globe was, in effect a "wooden O."

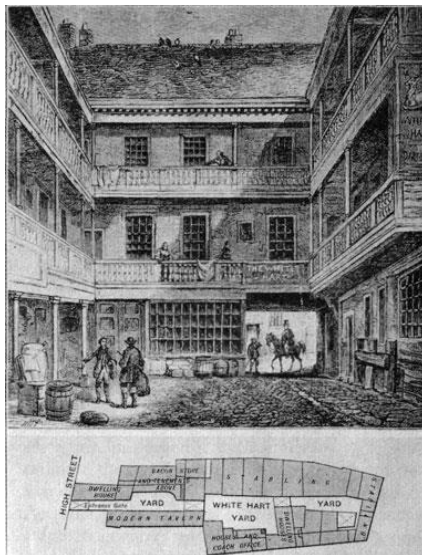
It was the size of the Globe platform, not the shape of the playhouse, that astonished Shakespeare's audience. Measuring about 942 square feet, the Globe platform was the largest of its time. Why did the Elizabethan platform



stage disappear in later theaters?

About the same time that the Globe opened, playwrights began to write more and more scenes for the inner stage. As this stage became more important, it had to be enlarged. In theaters of the late seventeenth century, the inner stage was wider and deeper; all that remained of the Elizabethan platform was the narrow apron in front of the curtains. This is the stage you probably know the best – the picture frame stage.

In a theater with a picture frame stage, the audience sits in front at some distance from the actors. As a result, playgoers tend to be less actively involved in a performance than were the Elizabethans who had the platform thrust into their midst. Many modern theaters have recaptured the close relationship between actor and spectator by reviving the platform stage. In theaters such as these, it is more nearly possible to stage Shakespeare's plays as he intended them to be staged.



Name: _____

Julius Caesar—Act I Study Guide

Act I: Scene 1

1. Why are the tribunes angry at the commoners?
2. Identify two puns used in this scene.
3. Identify the metaphor in Flavius' last speech in Scene One.

Act I: Scene 2

1. What physical weaknesses of Caesar's are revealed in this scene?
2. What is Caesar's opinion of Cassius?
3. What is Cassius trying to do in his long talk with Brutus?
4. Brutus states that he has lately been "with himself at war." What is it that is bothering Brutus? What type of conflict is this?

Act I: Scene 3

1. Describe the natural aspects of this scene. What is their dramatic purpose?
2. Name the "prodigies."

3. Why are Cassius and the conspirators anxious to have Brutus join the conspiracy?
4. Quote a speech from Cassius, Cinna, and Casca which shows his opinion of Brutus.

“Within This Wooden O”

1. Who built the first public playhouse? When? What features did he combine when building it?
2. What was the shape of the Globe Playhouse?
3. What was it about the Globe that astonished Shakespeare’s audience?

"I will draw a bill of properties..."

Midsummer Night's Dream



Shakespeare does such a masterful job of setting his scenes in the dialogue of *Julius*

Caesar that it would be possible to stage the play without special costumes or stage properties.

The stage manager at the Globe, however, did have devices for heightening the illusion of reality. What kinds of stage properties did he have and how might they have been used in *Julius Caesar*?

Most of the properties used on the platform were light enough and small enough for the actors to carry on and off as part of their stage business. Backstage at the Globe could be found a large assortment of portable properties – swords and daggers, shields and scrolls, cushions, lutes, dishes, flacons. You have seen Cicero enter with a lantern and Casca with a sword in Act One, Scene 3.

Both the sword and the lantern are carried off when Casca exits with Cassius.

Larger and heavier properties were stored in "Hell." Like the rock which will be used in Act Five, Scene 4, these properties were raised onto the platform through the large trap

door.

It was possible to create greater scenic effects on the inner stage. Here the walls could be hung with cloth painted to suggest the garden of Act Two or with cloth drab enough to suggest the tent interior of Act Four. Several heavy properties could also be positioned on the inner stage before the curtains were drawn apart. Like the trees and bench of Act Two,



Scene 1, these properties were stored backstage or in "Hell" until needed.

Any discussion of Elizabethan staging must take into consideration that Shakespeare's plays were performed in broad daylight. How, then, did the stage manager help Shakespeare create the illusion of night and darkness in *Julius Caesar*? This was done by indicating the need for light; that is, an actor would carry a torch or lantern, or perhaps light a taper.



Name: _____

Julius Caesar—Act II Study Guide

Act II: Scene 1

1. How sound is Brutus' logic for agreeing to kill Caesar?
2. What three tactical decisions are made by the conspirators?
3. What are Brutus' motives in these decisions?
4. List the names of the eight conspirators.

Act II: Scene 2

1. How does the natural environment parallel the events of the play?
2. What is Caesar's opinion of himself?
3. Why is Decius Brutus able to convince Caesar to go to the Capitol?

Act II: Scene 3

1. How do you think Artemidorus found out about the conspiracy?

Act II: Scene 4

1. Does Portia know of the conspiracy?
2. How does Portia almost give away her secret thoughts to Lucius?

“I Will Draw a Bill of Properties”

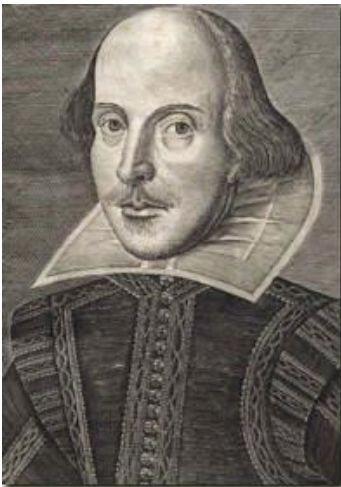
1. Why would it be possible to stage Julius Caesar without costumes or props?
2. Overall what is one characteristic of the Elizabethan theatre's scenery and furniture?

"his hour upon the stage"

Macbeth, V, v

Shakespeare was an actor as well as a playwright. He must have been a competent performer for in 1594 he was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Company – one of the principal acting companies of the time.

The acting companies usually consisted of ten or twelve adult actors and six boy apprentices. All of the women's roles in Elizabethan plays were performed by the



apprentices. The patronage of an important nobleman, like the Lord Chamberlain of England, protected the actors from London authorities who wished to suppress the playhouses. What particular abilities did

an actor possess to qualify for membership in an Elizabethan acting company?

The prime requisite must have been a resonant speaking voice. From his personal experience, Shakespeare undoubtedly learned to value dialogue that could be spoken rapidly, yet clearly. In addition, an actor had to be a singer and a musician. Since most Elizabethan plays featured songs, an actor was frequently assigned a role, like the role of Lucius in *Julius Caesar*, which required him to sing and play a musical instrument.

Plays of the period also featured numerous duels and mock battles. The daggers, swords, and rapiers used in these scenes were sharp, not blunted weapons. To avoid injury, an actor had to be a competent swordsman. Some plays demanded that he be an acrobat as well!

An Elizabethan actor also possessed an astonishing memory. As many as forty plays were given during a single season, but an

actor might memorize eighty roles. The practice of **doubling**, that is, of performing two or more



roles in a single play, was typical of the Elizabethan stage. Most acting companies had only eighteen people to enact, for example, the thirty or more speaking parts in *Julius Caesar*. Extra actors could be hired, but the problem was largely solved through doubling. Flavius in Act One of *Julius Caesar* might also have portrayed Artemidorus in Acts Two and Three and Octavius in Acts Four and Five.

If an actor performed well, the audience applauded; if not, they pelted him with apple cores. An actor who strutted "his hour upon the stage" was paid out of the penny admissions which were charged to enter the playhouse. If he was a part-owner of the playhouse, as Shakespeare was, he also shared in the gallery admissions.

Name: _____

Julius Caesar—Act III Study Guide

Act III: Scene 1

1. What two incidents occur after Caesar appears at the Capitol that causes the conspirators to think their plans may go wrong?
2. Why are Caesar's dying words especially dramatic?
3. What is the urgent problem facing the assassins immediately after stabbing Caesar?
4. Contrast Antony's private or true motives with those he allows the conspirators to see.
5. Why is Brutus so willing to let Mark Antony speak at Caesar's funeral?
6. What is foreshadowed in the final speeches of this scene?

Act III: Scene 2

1. In his speech, does Brutus appeal to the people's intellect or emotions?
2. In his speech, does Antony appeal to the crowd's intellect or emotions?
3. What are the citizen's feelings toward Brutus as Mark Antony ascends the pulpit?

“His Hour upon the Stage”

1. In addition to being a playwright, Shakespeare was also an actor. Of what acting company was he a member?
2. Who played the women’s roles in the Elizabethan theatre?

"this dreadful night that thunders"

Julius Caesar, I, iii

During a performance of *Julius Caesar*, the stagehands and musicians at the Globe were busy creating a variety of special effects.

Act One, Scene 3, for example, calls for a "dreadful night that thunders, lightens, opens graves, and roars." To simulate thunder, stagehands in the huts rolled a cannonball back and forth or down a few stairs. Elizabethan stagehands could create lightning with a squib (a ball of shiny cloth filled with sulfur powder), which they had attached to the top of a long wire. They lowered the wire through the opening in the canopy and then ignited the squib. This small firework rolled down the wire with a fine hissing sound and exploded with a resounding "crack."

Since Elizabethan audiences delighted in the sight of blood and gore, the assassination scene in Act Three must have pleased them mightily. The actor portraying Caesar probably wore (beneath his costume) a bladder filled with sheep's blood. When the moment for stabbing Caesar arrived, Casca punctured the bladder with his

dagger. Later the conspirators "washed" their hands in this blood. It is likely that Antony delivered his funeral oration over a dummy corpse of Caesar. When Antony flung Caesar's cloak aside, the dummy's many gaping wounds undoubtedly horrified the Globe audience.

Stagehands operating the trap doors from "Hell" were responsible for the ghostly appearances. A ghost ascended through the floor traps in the platform or, like the Ghost of Caesar in Act Four, ascended through the floor trap in the inner stage.

If *Julius Caesar* had called for angels and spirits, the actors portraying these beings would have been lowered and raised (by means of a pulley) through the trap door in the canopy.

The battle scenes in Act Five call for sound effects, such as the clash of arms offstage. The musicians created the alarms with their trumpets, drums, and cymbals. Sometimes real cannons were discharged to increase the realism of a battle scene. However, the use of explosives in a building made



of wood and thatch was ill-advised, for it was the discharge of a backstage cannon that destroyed the Globe Playhouse in June of 1613. An eyewitness account describes the fire this way: "...and certain chambers being shot off some of the paper or other stuff wherewith one of them was stopped, did light on the thatch, where being thought at first but an idle smoke...it kindled inwardly and ran around like a train, consuming within less than an hour the whole house to the very ground....Nothing did perish buy wood and straw, and a few forsaken cloaks. Only one man had his breeches set on fire, that would perhaps have broiled him, if he had not by the benefit of a provident wit put it out with a bottle of ale."



Name: _____

Julius Caesar—Act IV Study Guide

Act IV: Scene 1

1. How much time has elapsed since Caesar's death?
2. Why are Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus marking the names of the Romans?

Act IV: Scene 2

1. Where does the action now take place?
2. What does this scene reveal about the relations between Brutus and Cassius?
3. Explain what Brutus means by his words, "...worthy cause to wish things done, undone."

Act IV: Scene 3

1. Why is Cassius angry with Brutus?
2. What does Brutus reveal has happened to Portia?
3. Upon what plan do they agree?

“This Dreadful Night that Thunders”

1. How were thunder and lightning simulated?
2. What was probably used for the blood in the assassination scene?
3. How and when was the Globe Playhouse destroyed?

“...with silken coats and caps...”

The Taming of the Shrew, IV, iii

Costuming on the Elizabethan stage was both lavish and colorful. Shakespeare’s fellow actors—“with silken coats and caps and golden rings, with ruffs and cuffs and farthingales and things” — were a brilliant sight to behold.

The costumes worn by Elizabethan actors usually were so costly that it was necessary to protect them from soil or other damage during the course of a performance. For this reason, rushes were strewn on the inner stage, the rear platform, and the outer edges of the platform. When the moment came for an actor to fall down, for example, he would be careful to fall on one of these rush-strew areas. If you will re-examine the assassination scene in Act Three of *Julius Caesar*, you will see that Caesar’s costume is protected in this way.

Costuming has always been an important visual device to help playgoers distinguish one character from another. Appropriate costuming may also reinforce characterization. In staging their plays, Elizabethan acting companies usually did not attempt to duplicate historical dress. Some of the characters in *Julius Caesar* may have worn Roman robes and cloaks as they do in the illustrations in your textbook. It is more likely, however,

that Roman characters wore sixteenth-century dress. The Globe audience did not think it strange to see Brutus and Antony in Elizabethan doublet and hose! When Shakespeare’s plays are staged today, some productions will adopt historical dress, while other will adopt modern dress.

Although Elizabethans probably did not duplicate Roman dress in *Julius Caesar*, the chances are that their costumes combined the fabric and color in a symbolic way. Englishmen of Shakespeare’s time were extremely class-conscious. One indication of a person’s “high” or “low” estate was the fabric of his clothing. This was true of stage costumes as well. On the Globe platform, aristocratic Romans would be distinguished by their costumes of satin or taffeta, damask or velvet. The commoners would be identified by their coarse

linsey-woolsey; workingmen by their canvas aprons. If the Ghost of Caesar did not wear the same costume as the living Caesar, he would be clad in leather.

Color also symbolized social status to Elizabethans. It was customary in those days to see apprentices, for example, in their liveries of dark blue and to see Queen Elizabeth I in her state robes of scarlet. On the stage, dark blue was also reserved for one who served, just as scarlet was reserved for one who ruled. In addition to symbolizing social status, color symbolized such abstract qualities as love or courage. A costume with many touches of yellow would indicate that the character was jealous. Similarly, orange would represent pride; azure blue would convey honor; and rose would symbolize gallantry.



Name: _____

Julius Caesar—Act V Study Guide

Act V: Scene 1

1. What is the attitude of Brutus and Cassius toward each other as they part before the battle?

Act V: Scene 2

1. What is the plan of attack that Brutus wished to put into effect?

Act V: Scene 3

1. What is the mistake Cassius and Pindarus make concerning Titinius? Give the details which make them think this.
2. Recount the manner of Cassius' death.
3. What was the chief tragedy of Brutus' life?

“...With Silken Coats and Caps”

1. Was costuming given much priority in the Elizabethan theatre?
2. Did Elizabethan acting companies duplicate historical dress? Explain.
3. In what ways did costumes combine fabric and color in a symbolic way?

