

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

(excerpts)

Act I

Scene I

Julius Caesar has defeated his rival for power, Pompey, after a long civil war. Workers celebrate in the streets of Rome. Two tribunes, Flavius and Marullus, get angry. They liked Pompey. Boo Caesar! They break up the celebrations.

Marullus' speech to the commoners:

Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?
What tributaries follow him to Rome
To grace in captive bonds his chariot wheels?¹
You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!
Oh you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome!
Knew you not Pompey? Many a time and oft
Have you climbed up to walls and battlements,
To tow'rs and windows, yea, to chimney tops,
Your infants in your arms, and there have sat
The livelong day, with patient expectation,
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 Tiber² trembled underneath her banks
To hear the replication³ of your sounds
Made in her concave shores?
And do you now put on your best attire?
And do you now cull out⁴ a holiday?
And do you now strew flowers in his way
That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood?
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.⁵

¹ What captured prisoners march chained to the wheels of his chariot?

² River that runs through Rome

³ Echo

⁴ Select

⁵ Pray the gods hold back the deadly illness you deserve for your behavior

Scene II

Caesar attends a race at the festival of Lupercal. A soothsayer (fortuneteller) tells him to beware the ides of March, or March 15. (The middle day of each month was called the ides.) Caesar leaves. Cassius tries to turn Brutus against Caesar. Caesar's friend, Antony, offers Caesar a crown three times. Three times Caesar rejects it.

Cassius' speech to Brutus:

I cannot tell what you and other men
Think of this life, but for my single self,
I had as life not be as live to be
In awe of such a thing as I myself.⁶
I was born free as Caesar, so were you;
We both have fed as well, and we can both
Endure the winter's cold as well as he.
For once, upon a raw and gusty day,
The troubled Tiber chafing with her shores,⁷
Caesar said to me, "Dar'st thou, Cassius, now
Leap in with me into this angry flood
And swim to yonder point?" Upon the word,
Accoutered⁸ as I was, I plunged in
And bade him follow. So indeed he did.
The torrent roared, and we did buffet it
With lusty sinews, throwing it aside
And stemming it with hearts of controversy.⁹
But ere¹⁰ we could arrive the point proposed,
Caesar cried, "Help me, Cassius, or I sink!"
I, as Aeneas, our great ancestor,
Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder
The old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber
Did I the tired Caesar.¹¹ And this man
Is now become a god, and Cassius is
A wretched creature and must bend his body¹²
If Caesar carelessly but nod on him.

....

Men at some time are masters of their fates.
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.¹³

⁶ I would rather not live than live in awe of someone no better than I am.

⁷ The Tiber River was rising in the middle of a storm

⁸ Dressed

⁹ We fought the raging river with strong muscles, conquering it with our spirit of competition

¹⁰ Before

¹¹ Aeneas, the mythological founder of Rome, carried his father, Anchises, out of the burning city of Troy. Cassius says he did the same for Caesar when he became exhausted.

¹² Bow

¹³ It is not the stars that have determined our fate; we are inferiors through our own fault.

“Brutus,” and “Caesar.” What should be in that “Caesar”?
Why should that name be sounded more than yours?
Write them together: yours is as fair a name.
Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well.
Weigh them, it is as heavy. Conjure¹⁴ with ‘em:
“Brutus” will start a spirit as soon as “Caesar.”
Now in the names of all the gods at once,
Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed
That he is grown so great? Age, thou are shamed!¹⁵
Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods!

Scene III

It is the night of March 14. There is a storm. Casca (a fellow conspirator against Caesar) fears the storm foreshadows bad things to come. Cassius interprets the storm as a sign that Caesar must be overthrown. Cassius and Casca agree that Caesar’s rise to power must be stopped by any means. Cinna, another plotter, enters, and they discuss how to persuade Brutus to follow their plan.

Act II

Scene I

It is a few hours before dawn on March 15—the ides of March. Brutus, unable to sleep, walks in his garden, struggling with a crucial decision: accept Caesar’s growing power or kill Caesar and thus end his rule. He decides to kill Caesar. The other conspirators visit Brutus, and they all agree to assassinate Caesar that day.

Brutus’ soliloquy:

It must be by his death; and for my part,
I know no personal cause to spurn at him,
But for the general.¹⁶ He would be crowned.
How that might change his nature, there’s the question.
It is the bright day that brings forth the adder,
And that craves¹⁷ wary walking. Crown him that,
And then I grant we put a sting in him
That at his will he may do danger with.
The abuse of greatness is when it disjoins
Remorse¹⁸ from power. And to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections swayed¹⁹

¹⁴ Call up spirits

¹⁵ It is a shameful time in which to be living

¹⁶ Caesar would need to be killed; and I have no personal reason to attack him, only concern for the general welfare

¹⁷ Demands

¹⁸ Compassion

¹⁹ Passions ruled

More than his reason. But 'tis a common proof
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend.²⁰ So Caesar may.
Then lest he may, prevent. And since the quarrel
Will bear no color for the thing he is,
Fashion it thus: that what he is, augmented,
Would run to these and these extremities;
And therefore think him as a serpent's egg,
Which, hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous,
And kill him in the shell.²¹

Scene II

It is now past dawn on March 15. Caesar and his wife, Calpurnia, have slept badly because of the storm. Caesar prepares to go to the Capital. Calpurnia wants him to stay home because of all the bad omens. Caesar agrees for Calpurnia's sake. He changes his mind when Decius, one of the conspirators, persuades him that he must not seem swayed by his wife's superstitions.

Calpurnia's speech to Caesar:

Caesar, I never stood on ceremonies,
Yet now they fright me. There is one within,
Besides the things that we have heard and seen,
Recounts most horrid sights seen by the watch.
A lioness hath whelped in the streets,
And graves have yawned and yielded up their dead.²²
Fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,
Which drizzled blood upon the Capital.
The noise of battle hurtled in the air,
Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan,
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.
O Caesar, these things are beyond all use,²³
And I do fear them!²⁴

²⁰ Brutus says that for an ambitious person, humility is like a ladder that only remains useful until the climber reaches the top rung.

²¹ Rather than let Caesar do that, I should take steps to prevent it. Since our case against Caesar is weak at present, we must shape our argument against him in the following way: We know what kind of person Caesar is now. If his true nature were allowed to develop, it would reach terrible extremes. So we must treat him as a serpent's egg and kill him before he hatches.

²² Zombies? Cool...

²³ Unlike anything we are accustomed to

²⁴ Calpurnia tells Caesar that she has never before believed in omens, but now she is frightened. She describes the terrible things she has heard of from the men who were on guard during the night.

Caesar's first reply to Calpurnia:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.

.....

Caesar should be a beast without a heart
If he should stay at home today for fear.
No, Caesar shall not. Danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he.
We are two lions littered in one day,²⁵
And I the elder and more terrible,
And Caesar shall go forth.

Calpurnia persists. Caesar changes his mind. Decius says the following to make Caesar repent and decide to go to the Capital after all:

I have, when you have heard what I can say:
And know it now, the Senate have concluded
To give this day a crown to mighty Caesar.
If you shall send them word you will not come,
Their minds may change. Besides, it were a mock
Apt to be rendered²⁶, for some one to say
"Break up the Senate till another time,
When Caesar's wife shall meet with better dreams."
If Caesar hide himself, shall they not whisper
"Lo, Caesar is afraid"?
Pardon me, Caesar, for my dear dear love
To your proceeding bids me tell you this,
And reason to my love is liable.²⁷

Scene III

Artemidorus, a supporter of Caesar, has learned about the plot. He reads a letter he has written to warn Caesar, and then waits in the street for Caesar to pass by on his way to the Capital.

Scene IV

Brutus' wife, Portia, is nervous.

²⁵ Born at the same time

²⁶ It's likely that someone will make a sarcastic comment

²⁷ My sincere interest in your career makes me tell you this. My feeling for you overtakes my intelligence.

Act III

Scene I

Outside the Capital, Caesar refuses to look at Artemidorus' letter of warning. Caesar moves into the Capital. The conspirators surround him, pretending to plead a case. Suddenly, they stab him to death. Mark Antony flees, but Brutus persuades the conspirators to let him live. Brutus promises to explain the killing and its reasons to the Roman people. Antony returns and pretends to be an ally of the conspirators. Secretly, however, he plans to strike back with help from Octavius Caesar, who is now on his way to Rome.

Caesar's famous last words:

*Et tu, Brute?*²⁸—Then fall Caesar!

Antony's soliloquy over the body of Caesar:

Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times.²⁹
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!
Over thy wounds now do I prophesy
(Which, like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips
To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue),
A curse shall light upon the limbs of men;
Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
Shall cumber all the parts of Italy;
Blood and destruction shall be so in use
And dreadful objects so familiar
That mothers shall but smile when they behold
Their infants quartered with the hands of war,
All pity choked with custom of fell deeds;³⁰
And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Ate³¹ by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry "Havoc!"³² and let slip the dogs of war,
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial.³³

²⁸ Latin: Even you, Brutus?

²⁹ In all of history

³⁰ Rome will be torn by civil war. People will become so accustomed to horrible sights that mothers will simply smile when they see their children cut into pieces. Pity will disappear among so much cruelty.

³¹ Greek goddess of revenge

³² "Kill without mercy!"

³³ Like rotting corpses begging to be buried

Scene II

Brutus explains to the “citizens” (or common people) of Rome why Caesar had to be slain for the good of Rome. Then Brutus leaves and Antony speaks to the citizens. Antony manages to turn the crowd against the conspirators by telling them of Caesar’s good works and his concern for the people, as proven by the slain ruler’s will. Caesar has left all his wealth to the people. As Antony stirs the citizens to pursue the assassins and kill them, he learns that Octavius has arrived in Rome and that Brutus and Cassius have fled.

Brutus’ speech to the people:

Romans, countrymen, and lovers³⁴, hear me for my cause, and be silent, that you may hear. Believe me for mine honor, and have respect to mine honor, that you may believe. Censure me³⁵ in your wisdom, and awake your senses³⁶, 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 freemen? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honor him; but—as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love; joy for his fortune; honor for his valor; and death for his ambition. Who is here so base that would be a bondman?³⁷ If any, speak, for him have I offended. Who is here so rude³⁸ 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.

Antony’s speech to the people:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones.
So let it be with Caesar.³⁹ The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious.
If it were so, it was a grievous⁴⁰ fault,
And grievously hath Caesar answered it.
Here, under leave of⁴¹ Brutus and the rest

³⁴ Friends

³⁵ Judge me

³⁶ Reason

³⁷ Which of you is so low that you would prefer to be a slave?

³⁸ Uncivilized

³⁹ Antony says that Caesar’s good deeds should be buried with him; let him be remembered by his faults

⁴⁰ Serious

⁴¹ With the permission of

(For Brutus is an honorable man;
 So are they all, all honorable men),
 Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.
 He was my friend, faithful and just to me;
 But Brutus says he was ambitious,
 And Brutus is an honorable man.
 He hath brought many captives home to Rome,
 Whose ransoms did the general coffers⁴² fill.
 Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?
 When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept;
 Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.
 Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
 And Brutus is an honorable man.
 You all did see that on the Lupercal
 I thrice⁴³ presented him a kingly crown,
 Which he did thrice refuse. Was this ambition?
 Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
 And sure he is an honorable man.
 I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
 But here I am to speak what I do know.
 You all did love him once, not without cause.
 What cause withholds you then to mourn for him?
 O judgment, thou art fled to brutish beasts,
 And men have lost their reason! Bear with me,
 My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
 And I must pause till it come back to me.

Antony tempts the people with Caesar's will. He pretends to be reluctant to read it. The people demand that he read it. He complies, standing around Caesar's body with the people and saying:

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.
 You all do know this mantle⁴⁴. I remember
 The first time ever Caesar put it on.
 'Twas on a summer's evening in his tent,
 That day he overcame the Nervii⁴⁵.
 Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through.
 See what a rent⁴⁶ the envious Casca made.
 Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabbed;
 And as he plucked his cursed steel away,
 Mark⁴⁷ how the blood of Caesar followed it,
 As rushing out of doors to be resolved

⁴² The Roman government's treasury

⁴³ Three times

⁴⁴ Caesar's toga

⁴⁵ A Belgian tribe that Caesar defeated 13 years earlier.

⁴⁶ Tear, hole

⁴⁷ Notice

If Brutus so unkindly knocked or no;⁴⁸
For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel.
Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him!
This was the most unkindest cut of all;
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquished⁴⁹ him. Then burst his mighty heart;
And in his mantle muffling up his face,
Even at the base of Pompey's statue
(Which all the while ran blood) great Caesar fell.
O, what a fall was there, my countrymen!
Then I, and you, and all of us fell down,
Whilst bloody treason flourished over us.
O, now you weep, and I perceive you feel
The dint⁵⁰ of pity. These are gracious drops.
Kind souls, what, weep you when you but behold
Our Caesar's vesture wounded? Look you here!
Here is himself, marred, as you see, with traitors.⁵¹

.....

Good friends, sweet friends, let me not stir you up
To such a sudden flood of mutiny.
They that have done this deed are honorable.
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.

⁴⁸ As if it rushed out of that opening to find out if it really was Brutus who had made the wound.

⁴⁹ Defeated

⁵⁰ Force

⁵¹ Do you cry when you look only at his wounded clothing? Here, look at his body!

Scene III

There's a Roman poet named Cinna (not the same Cinna who took part in the assassination). The angry Roman citizens come upon him and believe he is Cinna the conspirator. Oops. Even after they realize that he is the wrong man, they kill him anyway. Yikes. Then they rush through the city after the true killers of Caesar.

Act IV

Scene I

Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus now rule Rome as a triumvirate—a committee of three. They make a list of their enemies who must be killed. They also discuss changing Caesar's will. Lepidus goes to fetch the will; Antony expresses his low opinion of Lepidus as a leader. Then, Antony and Octavius begin to discuss how to defeat the armies of Brutus and Cassius.

Scene II

Brutus and Cassius have a disagreement.

Scene III

Brutus and Cassius have another argument. Brutus accuses Cassius of corruption and greed. They make up. Brutus' wife dies (she worries about her husband's absence, goes crazy, and swallows burning coals). There are killings in Rome. Antony and Octavius are coming with their armies. Brutus persuades Cassius that their forces must meet the enemy at Philippi, in Greece. Later, the ghost of Caesar appears and promises to see Brutus at Philippi.

Brutus to Ghost:

How ill this taper burns! Ha! Who comes here?⁵²
I think it is the weakness of mine eyes
That shapes this monstrous apparition.
It comes upon me. Art thou anything?
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That mak'st my blood cold and my hair to stare⁵³?
Speak to me what thou art?

Ghost to Brutus:

Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

⁵² How poorly this candle burns. Everyone in the tent is asleep except Brutus. At first he thinks the thing he sees is only the result of poor eyesight. Then he realizes that something is really there.

⁵³ Stand on end

Act V

Scene I

Antony and Octavius enter the battlefield with their army. Brutus and Cassius enter with their forces. The four leaders exchange insults and taunts. Antony and Octavius leave to prepare for battle. Brutus and Cassius say farewell in case they should die in battle.

Scene II

Brutus sends a friend with orders for the forces across the field.

Scene III

Cassius retreats, losing the battle to Antony's forces. He sends Titinius to see if nearby forces are friend or enemy. From a hill, Pindarus believes he sees Titinius killed. Discouraged, Cassius asks Pindarus to kill him. Titinius returns to find Cassius' body and kills himself. Brutus and others arrive, having defeated Octavius' army. They see the bodies of Cassius and Titinius. Brutus mourns, but also looks to a second battle with his enemy.

Scene IV

A captured friend of Brutus tells Antony that Brutus will never be taken alive.

Scene V

Facing defeat, Brutus' forces rest. Brutus feels that all is lost. He asks three men to kill him, but each refuses. Finally, one agrees to hold the sword as Brutus kills himself on it. Antony, Octavius, and others arrive. Antony mourns Brutus. Octavius promises him a noble funeral as the play ends.

Brutus' dying words:

Caesar now be still.
I killed not thee with half so good a will.⁵⁴

Antony's words over Brutus' body:

This was the noblest Roman of them all.
All the conspirators save⁵⁵ 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 them⁵⁶.
His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, "This was a man!"

⁵⁴ I didn't kill you (Caesar) half as willingly as I kill myself

⁵⁵ Except

⁵⁶ Joined the conspirators