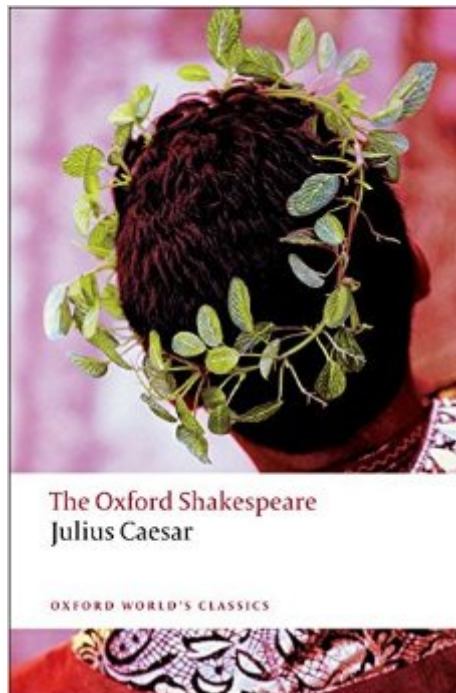


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The Oxford Shakespeare: Julius Caesar (Oxford World's Classics)



Synopsis

The most famous of Shakespeare's Roman tragedies, *Julius Caesar* was written and first performed in 1599, and was apparently one of the plays his contemporaries enjoyed most. Recounting the death of Caesar on the steps of the Senate house, the play offers some of Shakespeare's finest scenes: Antony's skillful speech at Caesar's funeral, and the quarrel and reconciliation between Brutus and Cassius with the news of Portia's death. This edition includes a fresh consideration of the play's date and its place in the Shakespeare canon and examines how Shakespeare reshaped his sources (primarily North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*).
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Customer Reviews

Julius Caesar is one of my favourite Shakespeare plays, combining as it does some wonderful poetry with the drama of a historical tragedy. Shakespeare, characteristically, does not take sides. Are Brutus, Cassius and their co-conspirators striking a blow for freedom, or is their plot an unjustifiable and treacherous murder? Shakespeare does not tell us what to think; he puts the arguments of both sides into the mouths of his characters and leaves us to decide for ourselves. The only problem I have with the play is the way that the Roman masses are portrayed as a fickle mob

who are easily swayed by the speeches of demagogues. Nevertheless, the scene where Mark Antony turns the crowd from supporting the actions of the assassins to wanting to hunt them down and kill them is marvellous drama. Especially clever is Antony's increasingly ironic use of the phrase, "And Brutus is an honourable man." Shakespeare's slightly patronising attitude to the common folk is also the only negative feature of another of my favourites: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here the "mechanicals" are very funny, but unfortunately portrayed in a rather condescending way. As to the real history on which "*Julius Caesar*" is based, the Roman Republic which the historical Brutus supported was not a democracy. It was an oligarchy dominated by a rich senatorial elite who were only concerned with their own freedom, not that of the mass of poor citizens, let alone that of the slaves. The real Julius Caesar did indeed destroy the "freedom" of this rich people's oligarchy. But he gained power not just through military force but also because he won the poorer citizens to his side by adopting populist measures which benefited them.

Unlike many of my age, I was not exposed to JULIUS CAESAR as a youth in school, so this was my first encounter with it. It may not be one of Shakespeare's best plays, but it is well worth reading (or seeing). It is a deep and sophisticated play, though ultimately ambiguous and unsettling. It is rife with famous lines: "The fault * * * is not in our stars, / But in ourselves"; "It was Greek to me"; "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. / I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him."; The "unkindest cut of all"; "Mischief, thou art afoot"; and "There is a tide in the affairs of men." The play revolves around the assassination of Julius Caesar, something that occurs in the play's middle -- Act III, Scene 1, to be precise. Before the deed, the anti-Caesar forces plot and recruit additional conspirators, especially Brutus, who is "honorable", highly regarded by the Romans, a fierce Republican, a close friend of Caesar's, and somewhat of an intellectual. Brutus begins to worry that Caesar, if crowned emperor, MIGHT abuse his authority and become a tyrant; he soon convinces himself that he should join the assassination conspiracy in order to prevent what MIGHT happen. The assassination lets slip "the dogs of war", as the remainder of the play shows. In the end, most of the conspirators are dead and Octavius Caesar has begun his power play that will end with him as Augustus, the tyrant whom Brutus feared Julius Caesar MIGHT become. Foremost, then, JULIUS CAESAR strikes me as an object lesson on the unintended, and uncontrollable, consequences of tyrannicide (or regicide, or the modern toppling of dictators). And, ironically, through his assassination Julius Caesar was immortalized.

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