

Making Shakespeare Important

By Charles L. Powers

Julius Caesar

INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

Overview of Course Structure

“To be or not to be” may be the most quoted line from any play in history. Who was Shakespeare? Why study Shakespeare? Are his works still relevant for today? What do his plays and sonnets mean? My hope is that by the end of the course you will have answered many of those questions for yourself. I have written this course out of a personal interest in Shakespeare and a desire for others to dive deep into his works. Each lesson will be similar in format, with a brief review of what you have already read, an introduction to the act/scene you will be reading, followed by a link to that particular act or scene. There will be a few questions about the day’s reading; for some students, it may be easier to read these questions ahead of time. Finally, some thought-provoking questions will be asked. These will serve to relate what you read to your own life, thus, making Shakespeare relevant for you.

Julius Caesar Resources

The play that we will be studying in this course is *Julius Caesar*, one of Shakespeare’s most well-known plays. For some people, the language of Shakespeare is hard to understand. If this is the case, it may be good to keep a link open on your computer that provides a good translation. I personally recommend No Sweat Shakespeare. On this site you will find a wealth of resources related to Shakespeare. For this particular play, the following link will take you directly to the “modern day” *Julius Caesar* is <https://www.nosweatshakespeare.com/shakespeares-plays/modern-julius-caesar/>. This modern-day translation is very readable. (Parents: Beware, there are *many* advertisements on this website. Remember to NEVER click on an advertisement or popup.)

One can also readily access audio versions of Shakespeare’s works on YouTube, as well as many other sites. Your local library will also have audio resources. If you are like me, I enjoy having a physical copy of what I’m reading in hand. I make most of my book purchases on <https://www.thriftbooks.com/>; here you can purchase books at a very low price and receive free shipping if you spend \$10 or more. My personal preference is *The Complete Works Of William Shakespeare: Comprising His Play and Poems*, published by Fall Rivers Press. It contains all Shakespeare’s plays.

Who Was Shakespeare?

While this course is not a history on Shakespeare, I think it will be good to provide a simple sketch of the man behind the plays. William Shakespeare, sometimes called the Bard of Avon, was born in April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. He was the third of eight children born to John and Mary Shakespeare. Not much is known of Shakespeare's childhood, as like most of his life, he was very mysterious. He married Anne Hathaway when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six; they had three children. He began his career in London as part owner of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which later was called the King's Men. He also partially owned the Globe Theater. It is said that he would write a play every year and a half to two years. While that doesn't sound like much of a feat, consider he was writing with a quill and ink and was also traveling from London to Stratford to perform or direct his plays during this time as well.

There has been some talk over the years that the works that have been attributed to Shakespeare are not really his own and that there may have been others who wrote the great works. Again, this is speculation, and each person can judge for themselves, but as for me, I believe that William Shakespeare is the author of these great works. While Shakespeare formally retired at the age of forty-seven, he continued to help young playwrights and assist with the plays he had already written and were being performed.

It is thought that Shakespeare died on or around April 23, 1616. He died in his home in Stratford called New House. It is said that his son-in-law, Dr. John Hall, was present at his bedside when he passed away. He was buried at Holy Trinity Church on April 25, 1616. Shakespeare is often regarded as the greatest English playwright in history, having written some thirty-nine plays, over 150 sonnets, as well as a handful of other pieces. While one can receive a master's degree in Shakespeare Studies, this provides a general and brief overview of Shakespeare.

Julius Caesar Synopsis

Character List

Julius Caesar - dictator of Rome

Calphurnia - wife to Caesar

Octavius Caesar - one of the three rulers after Caesar dies

Marcus Antonius - one of the three rulers after Caesar dies

Maemilius Lepidus - one of the three rulers after Caesar dies

Cicero - senator

Publius - senator

Populius Lena - senator

Marcus Brutus - conspirator against Julius Caesar

Cassius - conspirator against Julius Caesar

Casca - conspirator against Julius Caesar
Trebonius - conspirator against Julius Caesar
Ligurius - conspirator against Julius Caesar
Decius Brutus - conspirator against Julius Caesar
Metellus Cimber - conspirator against Julius Caesar
Cinna - conspirator against Julius Caesar
Portia - wife to Brutus
Lucius - a servant boy to Brutus
Flavius - tribune
Murellus - tribune
Artemidorus - a sophist of Cidnos
A soothsayer
Cinna - a poet
Another poet
Several friends to Brutus and Cassius
Several servants to Brutus
Pindarus - servant to Cassius
Other lesser senators, citizens, guards, attendants

Plot

Murellus and Flavius break up a gathering of Roman citizens who are trying to celebrate Julius Caesar and his triumphant return from war. The victor is celebrated with public games. On the way to the arena to watch the games, a stranger stops Caesar and warns him that he should beware of the “Ides of March,” or March 15. Fellow senators Cassius and Marcus Brutus are suspicious of Caesar’s reaction to the power he holds over the Republic. They are afraid he will accept offers to become the next emperor. Cassius, who is also a successful general, is jealous. Brutus is more balanced in how he views the political position. Cassius and some of his allies visit Brutus one night and try to persuade him to join with them in their views and then kill Caesar. Brutus is troubled by these plans, but despite his wife, Portia, asking what was wrong, he refuses to share with her.

Finally, on March 15, Caesar is urged not to go to the Senate by his wife who has had a dream that he will be murdered. Nevertheless, he is persuaded to go, and as petitioners surround him, Caesar is stabbed and dies as Brutus gives the final blow. Against Cassius’ advice, Mark Antony is allowed by Brutus to speak at Caesar’s funeral. Brutus had just spoken to the people of Rome, addressing why the conspirators killed Caesar. Brutus calmed the crowd by explaining they were worried he would take ultimate control. However, Antony’s speech stirs them up again, and they begin to riot; the conspirators are forced to flee the city.

Brutus and Cassius gather any army in Northern Greece and prepare their forces to fight a battle against Mark Antony, who has now joined Octavius, Caesar’s great nephew. Brutus and Cassius begin to argue about how they will pay for the soldiers they have hired. They resolve their

differences and prepare to engage Antony's army at Philippi. Brutus receives news of his wife's suicide in Rome. He sees Caesar's ghost and is unable to sleep. The Republicans seem to be winning the battle, but when his messenger's horse seems to be overtaken, he fears the worst and asks his servant to help him die quickly. Brutus finds Cassius's body and commits suicide himself as it is the only honorable action left for him to perform. Antony is now triumphant and praises Brutus as the most noble and honorable Roman of all. He then orders a formal funeral before Octavius returns to Rome.

Link for *Julius Caesar*

The following link will take you to the main page of the *Julius Caesar* play we will be using for this course. However, place the individual links you will need for each day in the assignments. I would encourage you to become familiar with how, not only this page, but all the others are laid out. Again, do not click on any advertisements or links other than those indicated in your daily readings.

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/julius_caesar/index.html

I hope that you enjoy this course as much as I have enjoyed putting it together. If you have questions at any time, please feel free to contact me. I check my email daily and will get back with you as soon as I receive your question. Also, if you have any suggestions or feedback, those would be greatly appreciated as well.