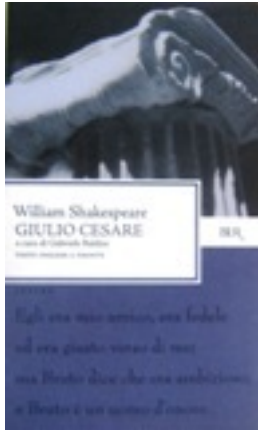

William Shakespeare

Giulio Cesare



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Author: William Shakespeare

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Description

In this striking tragedy of political conflict, Shakespeare turns to the ancient Roman world and to the famous assassination of Julius Caesar by his republican opponents. The play is one of tumultuous rivalry, of prophetic warnings—"Beware the ides of March"—and of moving public oratory—"Friends, Romans, countrymen!" Ironies abound and most of all for Brutus, whose fate it is to learn that his idealistic motives for joining the conspiracy against a would-be dictator are not enough to sustain the movement once Caesar is dead.

Insightful reviews

Ivana: The first thing that comes to my mind when thinking about this play is the beginning of that famous speech "Friends, Romans, Countrymen!" Yes, Mark Anthony really made quite a speech there! You have to love the fact that the play that is in many ways philosophical can also be dramatic.

This is one of my favourite plays by Shakespeare mainly I think that it describes perfectly that burning ice within that we sometimes call ambition and sometimes lust for power. It was this examination of power, conspiracy, duty, patriotism, friendship and politics that captured my attention. In addition, I always liked the historical figures that happen to be the main characters in this play. That may be the reason why I enjoyed Antony and Cleopatra as well.

Despite what its title suggests, this play doesn't focus on Julius Ceaser, but rather on the people surrounding him. However, that is not of much importance as other characters (Mark Anthony, Brutus, Cassius) are so well developed and fascinating.

"??? ?? ??????"

Kalliope: What is this play about? Is it about Julius Caesar, as the title says? Well, he is assassinated half way through the play and disappears (Act 3, scene 2). Granted, his ghost reappears later on, but it is not the ghost of the caliber of Mozart's (and Lorenzo da Ponte's) commanding Commendatore. JC's ghost exists only in Brutus mind as his conscience. For even if Brutus thinks that it is the ghost's revenge to "turn our swords toward our own stomachs", the only time the ghost speaks is to say "I am your evil spirit, Brutus".

JC does not seem to have a huge stature anyway. His triumph celebrated at the beginning is not Rome's but his very own, since his victory consists of having defeated Pompey's sons, i.e. his personal enemies and not the enemies of Rome. We also see that his wife Calpurnia has little trouble in convincing him not to go to the Senate, and only a moment later Decius easily changes his mind again and persuades him to go nonetheless. When he subsequently preaches his own steeliness to the senators ("I could be well moved if I were as you..."), he is not believable. He just seems conceited.

So, no, I do not think it is about JC.

Maybe the play is about Brutus, the most interesting of the characters and the one with the most lines. He is drawn into the plot by Cassius's astuteness and tricks, and throughout the play we are reminded that he is acting with the good of Rome as his main objective. His famous soliloquy in Act II is a defense of the nobility of the act. But both his weakness in falling prey to Cassius conniving and the loss of empathy when he coldly dismisses the memories of his deceased and yet beloved wife ("No more, I pray you...") detract from his being the prime candidate. No, in spite of Antony's words at the end ("This was the noblest Roman of them all..."), he remains elusive.

Cassius's role is that of Best Supporting Actor.

The play ends leaving the future eerily open. From history we know what happened next and the cotemporary public must have also known it, but there is no hint in the play on which way Rome will go not even on what the alternatives are.

Of course there are always the eternity themes that Shakespeare is so extraordinary at developing and with which his plays are always loaded, themes as Ambition, Loyalty, Omens and Destiny, etc... Analyses of these are well trodden.

I will not venture in this fertile direction.

In previous readings I was approaching the plays by William Shakespeare as Classics existing in the historical vacuum of eternity. But in my current protracted reading of these works, it is the parallels of the plots with contemporary events or circumstances that are interesting me greatly.

In 1599 when the play was first performed (possibly the first in the new Globe Theatre) Queen Elizabeth was 66 but looked and acted a lot older. She had lost a lot of her glamour and the icon-making machinery had begun. The boost that the triumph over the Spaniards had brought was eroding, and new problems with Ireland were coming to the limelight. The bitter rivalry between the Earl of Essex and Lord Burghley, and later with the son Robert Cecil, was keeping courtiers at bay. The secret services were increasing their control and pressure which only contributed to a greater feeling of terror. And meanwhile, there was still no clear heir to the throne. People must have felt rather itchy about the political instability and the uncertainty that the immediate future held.

Of course causality between events of the day and a play produced in any given period are hard to detect, let alone to prove. This is not a play-à-clef. But in choosing plots and devising how to develop them, Shakespeare must have known what would ring a bell in the minds of the public. If, when seeking entertainment, the Londoners were to choose a play over bear-biting, the play had to be engaging. The author's ability in verbalizing human passions by reminding everybody of their concerns is what makes these plays so very special.

I see then Julius Caesar as a tragedy without a hero. And the open "what now?" with which it closes, can be better understood if we become aware of the insecurities with which contemporary audience were about to enter into the following century.

PS: Orson Welles put on a production in 1937 in which the setting was the contemporary Fascist and Nazi Europe (Caesar as Mussolini?). This is available as Audio. A GR friend recommended the modern film "Me and Orson Welles" in which it seems some of the OW original footage has been included. I have ordered this DVD but have not seen it yet. I can't wait.

PPS: The film disappointingly does not include any original footage of the 1937 play, and is somewhat silly.

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smiles, and smiles in this kind of sortAs if he mocked himself and scorned his spiritThat can be moved to grin at anything.Such males as he be by no means at heart's easeWhiles they behold a better than themselves,And as a result are they very dangerous. (Act 1, Scene 2, Ins 205-212).

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