

Synopsis

Ruling an empire, especially one with the size and influence of ancient Rome, isn't easy. With wars and conspiracies, private strategizing mixed with public feuding, and evil omens indicating great doom, a leader must constantly guard against enemies from within and without. When Julius Caesar returns from battle, having defeated his archrival Pompey, the citizens clamor to name him king, but it is an offer fraught with peril. Although Caesar refuses the crown, Roman senators and high public officials fear the worst: Caesar's ambition might lead him to overthrow the Republic in favor of a monarchy. At this moment, plans are set in motion and fates are sealed.

Shakespeare's shortest history, *Julius Caesar*, was first performed in 1599 at the old Globe Theater. It is possible that the playwright was giving some political commentary on the situation in England. Queen Elizabeth I had reigned for many years but was likely to die without an heir, an event that could throw the country into chaos. Shakespeare's retelling of the events surrounding the real Julius Caesar's life and death offered important lessons for his time that we can translate into ours.

When you read *Julius Caesar*, you must familiarize yourself with two worlds: Shakespeare's 16th-century England and Caesar's ancient Rome. The Roman Empire, where some men sought honor and power and others demonstrated betrayal and intrigue, will quickly draw you in and help you think about important issues for today. Shakespeare's language may sound strange initially, but reading slowly and carefully will help you understand the meaning. The blank verse will start to feel familiar as you read the words aloud. Shakespeare's blank verse is an iambic pentameter; pentameter means that each line has five "feet," or accents. Iambic means that each foot has two syllables in a soft-hard (unaccented-accented) combination.

