



ENGLISH LITERATURE

Bridging Work

Julius Caesar



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Introduction

A Bridge to A Level Literature

You have already studied *Julius Caesar*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. Those skills remain important at A Level, but they are developed in new and more sophisticated ways.

At GCSE, you were often asked to explain what Shakespeare presents and how he presents it. At A Level, the conversation broadens. Ideas become more complex and debatable. Analysis of language, form and structure moves beyond methods you might have explored at GCSE and invites you to explore craftsmanship and constructs. Context is no longer a collection of facts used to support an argument, but a lens through which interpretation can be generated and challenged.

You will also begin to think about texts in relation to one another. Shakespeare's tragedies do not exist in isolation: they belong to wider literary traditions, genres and theatrical practices. Comparing texts allows us to explore how writers revisit similar concerns and produce different effects.

Perhaps the most significant change is that interpretation becomes central. You will encounter the views of critics and scholars, consider how directors and actors make interpretative choices in performance, and explore how audiences have responded to texts and productions across different periods. Rather than searching for a single "correct" reading, you will learn to evaluate multiple perspectives and develop arguments of your own.

This booklet uses *Julius Caesar* as a starting point for that journey. Through contextual reading, critical debate and close textual analysis, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into an A Level one.

How the Booklet Works

You will notice that this booklet does not ask you to write a complete essay immediately. Instead, each chapter focuses on a different aspect of literary study and gradually builds your confidence and understanding.

As you move through the booklet, you will work with the same essay question, the same line of argument and the same analytical paragraph. You will revisit these repeatedly, refining and extending them as each new assessment objective is introduced.

1. **Chapter 1** introduces the shift from GCSE to A Level and explores how literary study becomes increasingly interpretative.
2. **Chapter 2** introduces the assessment objectives and shows how GCSE skills evolve at A Level.
3. **Chapter 3** focuses on AO1 and AO2, helping you construct a line of argument and develop an analytical paragraph through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.
4. **Chapter 4** introduces AO3, showing how contextual reading can deepen interpretation.
5. **Chapter 5** explores AO4 through comparison with *Hamlet*, demonstrating how texts illuminate one another.
6. **Chapter 6** introduces AO5 through literary criticism, revealing that interpretation is an ongoing conversation rather than a search for certainty.

You should complete the booklet in order. Read the extracts carefully, annotate the articles, respond to the reflection questions and write in the spaces provided. Do not worry about producing perfect answers. The purpose of this booklet is to encourage curiosity, exploration and confidence.

You may find that your opinions change as you progress through the chapters. This is not a sign that your earlier ideas were wrong. Instead, it reflects the nature of literary study itself: interpretations develop as we encounter new evidence and new perspectives.

Although much of this booklet focuses on refining a line of argument and developing a single analytical paragraph, this is not the final destination. By the end of the booklet, you should use everything you have learned to produce a complete essay response to the original question.

You may wish to print this booklet out and hand write your work, you may wish to type your work so it is easier to consciously edit and adapt. Whichever you choose, be prepared to submit your essay in September within the first two weeks of you starting.

Your final essay should include:

1. an introduction containing your line of argument;
2. multiple analytical paragraphs;
3. close analysis of Shakespeare's methods;
4. relevant contextual understanding;
5. comparative insight;
6. engagement with critical interpretations;
7. and a conclusion that draws together your argument.

The paragraph you have developed throughout this booklet should become one part of this larger response.

You are not expected to have all the answers before September. Instead, you are invited to approach literature with curiosity, confidence and a willingness to explore.

Welcome to A Level Literature.

Booklet Key

Key Information

Task instruction

Model/exemplar

Chapter 1

The Question

You have already studied *Julius Caesar*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. You have analysed Shakespeare's methods, learnt quotations and developed interpretations supported by evidence from the text.

Those skills do not disappear at A Level.

However, A Level Literature invites you to engage with texts differently. Rather than simply identifying what Shakespeare presents, you begin to explore the ways in which literature generates debate, encourages multiple interpretations and resists straightforward answers.

To experience this shift, begin with two questions.

The GCSE Question

Read the following extract from **Act 4 Scene 3** of *Julius Caesar*.

At this point in the play, Cassius has accused Brutus of condemning one of their men for taking bribes.

BRUTUS

Let me tell you, Cassius, you yourself
Are much condemned to have an itching palm,
To sell and mart your offices for gold
To undeservers.

CASSIUS

I, an itching palm?
You know that you are Brutus that speaks this,
Or, by the gods, this speech were else your last.

BRUTUS

The name of Cassius honours this corruption,
And chastisement doth therefore hide his head.

CASSIUS

Chastisement?

BRUTUS

Remember March, the Ides of March remember:
Did not great Julius bleed for justice' sake?
What villain touched his body, that did stab
And not for justice? What, shall one of us,
That struck the foremost man of all this world,
But for supporting robbers, shall we now
Contaminate our fingers with base bribes
And sell the mighty space of our large honours
For so much trash as may be graspèd thus?
I had rather be a dog and bay the moon
Than such a Roman.

GCSE Task

Starting with this conversation, explore how Shakespeare presents the relationship between Brutus and Cassius in *Julius Caesar*.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents the relationship between Brutus and Cassius in this conversation;
- how Shakespeare presents the relationship between Brutus and Cassius in the play as a whole.

The A Level Question

Consider the A Level standard question below. Read the information that follows and respond to the task.

"Brutus and Cassius are united by political necessity rather than genuine friendship."

In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of the relationship between Brutus and Cassius in *Julius Caesar*.

This question does not simply ask you to identify examples of friendship or conflict in the play.

Instead, it offers an interpretation and invites you to engage with it.

You may agree.

You may disagree.

You may find yourself doing both.

Before deciding what you think, spend some time with the question itself.

Task:

Explore the question.

1. Read the statement several times.
2. Annotate it as you would annotate a passage from the play.
3. Circle, underline or make notes around the statement itself.
4. Use the prompts below to help inform your annotation.

Consider:

- Which words seem most significant?
- Which words are difficult to define?
- Which words seem open to debate?
- What assumptions does the statement make about Brutus and Cassius?
- Which moments from the play immediately come to mind?

Gathering Evidence

Rather than deciding immediately whether you agree or disagree, begin by collecting evidence. Imagine that you are preparing for a debate. Read the information below and complete the table that follows.

1. Evidence that supports the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Brutus and Cassius are political allies rather than genuine friends?

You might consider:

- Cassius persuading Brutus to join the conspiracy;
- the forged letters;
- their disagreement over Antony;
- the quarrel in Act 4;
- their conflicting military decisions;
- Cassius' resentment of Brutus' authority.

Use quotations wherever possible.

2. Evidence that challenges the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Brutus and Cassius share genuine friendship and loyalty?

You might consider:

- Cassius' admiration of Brutus;
- Brutus' trust in Cassius;
- their reconciliation after the quarrel;
- Brutus sharing the news of Portia's death;
- their farewell before Philippi;
- Cassius' emotional response during their argument;

Again, support your ideas with evidence from the text.

3. Looking for Tension

Strong literary arguments rarely emerge from certainty.

As you gather evidence, look for moments that complicate your thinking.

For example:

- Is Cassius manipulating Brutus or genuinely respecting him?
- Does political ambition strengthen or weaken friendship?
- Is Brutus an idealist or an ineffective leader?
- Does Shakespeare admire republican loyalty or expose its weaknesses?
- Can private friendship survive public duty?

Make a note of any moments that resist easy judgement. These moments of tension are often where the most interesting arguments begin.

Task:

Using the prompts and guidance above, complete the evidence table below.

Evidence to support the statement	Evidence to challenge the statement

From Ideas to Argument

You have now gathered evidence, explored different perspectives and identified points of tension.

The next step is not to choose one side and ignore the other.

Instead, begin to shape your own viewpoint.

Read the examples below.

1. A straightforward response:

Brutus and Cassius work together because they share the same political aims.

2. A more developed response:

Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as political allies whose relationship is shaped by differing ideas about honour and leadership.

3. A more nuanced response:

Although Shakespeare presents moments of genuine affection between Brutus and Cassius, their friendship is repeatedly undermined by political ambition, conflicting ideals and the pressures of leadership, suggesting that public duty ultimately proves stronger than personal loyalty.

Notice that the final example acknowledges complexity.

It does not abandon judgement.

Instead, it refines it.

Task:

Drawing on the notes you have made, write a line of argument responding to the question. You do not need to completely agree or disagree.

You might begin with phrases such as:

- Although...
- While...
- To some extent...
- However...
- Ultimately...

Remember:

- Your aim is not to produce the perfect answer.
- Your aim is to begin thinking like a literary critic: gathering evidence, weighing interpretations and arriving at a viewpoint that is thoughtful, tentative and supported by the text.

Your line of argument:

Looking Ahead...

You have just begun doing something that A Level Literature students do every day.

You have moved beyond identifying examples of a theme and started to engage with an interpretation.

You have gathered evidence, recognised complexity and begun constructing an argument of your own.

In the next chapter, you will revisit your thesis and begin to develop it further, exploring how literary arguments become increasingly sophisticated through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.

Chapter 2

The Assessment Objectives

In Chapter 1, you explored an A Level question, gathered evidence from across the play and developed a provisional argument of your own.

Without realising it, you had already begun engaging with some of the skills expected of A Level Literature students.

The Assessment Objectives (AOs) explain how literary thinking develops from GCSE to A Level. They are not simply a checklist for examiners; they describe the different ways in which we engage with texts as readers and critics.

Importantly, A Level does not replace the skills you developed at GCSE. Instead, it elevates them.

GCSE to A Level

GCSE Literature	A Level Literature
AO1: Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response. Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.	AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.
AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.	AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.
AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.	AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.
AO4: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.
—	AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

As you read through the table, what do you notice?

Perhaps the most striking changes are:

- GCSE skills are still present, but they become broader and more conceptual;
- AO4 changes entirely;
- A new AO5 is introduced, recognising that literary interpretation is often contested.

You have already begun engaging with AO1. Now, revisit your argument and consider how each of the AOs can deepen and develop it.

AO1: Argument

At GCSE, you developed a personal response supported by evidence from the text.

At A Level, that response becomes more conceptual and sustained.

Task:

Read the line of argument you wrote at the end of Chapter 1.

Does it:

1. move beyond retelling events?;
2. establish a clear viewpoint?;
3. acknowledge complexity?;
4. suggest that alternative interpretations may exist?

You may wish to revise it.

Revised line of argument:

A02: Writer's Craft

At GCSE, you explored how writers use language, form and structure to create meanings and effects. Strong GCSE responses already move beyond simply identifying techniques; they explain what those methods contribute to the audience's/reader's understanding of the text.

At A Level, that analysis becomes broader and more ambitious.

You begin to consider how the distinctive features of a text's form shape meaning.

For drama, this means thinking not only as a close reader, but also as a theatre critic:

- Why has Shakespeare chosen to place this moment here?
- How would this scene work in performance?
- What do these dramatic choices encourage audiences to think and feel?
- How do the conventions of tragedy shape our interpretation of *Julius Caesar*?
- How do private disagreements become public political drama?

The question shifts from: "What effect does this method have?" towards: "How has Shakespeare constructed meaning through the possibilities of dramatic form?"

Consider the responses below.

GCSE

Brutus' rhetorical questions show that he believes the conspirators killed Caesar for justice.

This is a valid observation. It identifies a method and explores its meaning.

A Level

Shakespeare's repeated rhetorical questions transform a private disagreement into a public defence of the conspiracy's ideals. By recalling "the Ides of March" at the height of Brutus and Cassius' quarrel, Shakespeare dramatises Brutus' inability to separate personal relationships from political principle. The audience witnesses not simply an argument between friends, but the collapse of the republican values that once united them, suggesting that ideology has become both the foundation and the weakness of their alliance.

Both responses explore meaning.

The difference is that the A Level response also considers:

- the dramatic placement of the moment;
- Brutus' speech as part of Shakespeare's construction of political tragedy;
- the relationship between Brutus' private convictions and their effect on an audience;
- how Shakespeare uses the resources of drama to shape interpretation.

Task:

Return to the extract from Act 4 Scene 3.

Choose one or two quotations from the table you devised and write a response exploring how Shakespeare constructs meaning through dramatic form.

You might consider:

- where this moment appears in the play;
- how an audience might respond to it in performance;
- what Shakespeare reveals or withholds;
- how speech, staging or dramatic conventions contribute to meaning;
- how this moment contributes to the development of the tragedy.

Remember: you are not looking for techniques to identify.

You are exploring how Shakespeare, as a dramatist, has crafted this moment and shaped the audience's understanding of friendship, honour and political responsibility.

Your Response:

[illegible]

AO3: Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often supports an argument.

At A Level, context can deepen, challenge or reshape interpretation.

Consider the examples below.

GCSE

Roman ideas about honour and public duty would have encouraged audiences to see Brutus as a noble man acting for the good of the Republic. His criticism of Cassius therefore reinforces his commitment to justice and his belief that the conspirators must remain morally superior to Caesar.

A Level

While Roman ideals of honour and republican virtue might encourage audiences to admire Brutus' moral principles, Shakespeare's presentation of his relationship with Cassius also invites a more sceptical reading. Brutus' unwavering commitment to abstract political ideals repeatedly strains his personal loyalties, suggesting that honour may function less as a moral certainty than as an ideology capable of justifying division, conflict and violence.

The difference is subtle but significant.

Context becomes a way of thinking rather than a fact to insert.

Task

Look back at the paragraph you have just written.

How might an understanding of Roman ideas about honour, republicanism and political duty deepen your interpretation of Brutus and Cassius' relationship?

Develop your response below.

AO4: Connections Across Texts

One of the biggest surprises for many students is that AO4 changes completely.

At GCSE, AO4 rewarded accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

At A Level, AO4 asks you to:

- **explore connections across literary texts.**

Literature does not exist in isolation.

Shakespeare's tragedies often confront similar questions:

- What makes a leader legitimate?
- Can political ideals justify violence?
- How do private loyalties conflict with public duty?
- What happens when ambition or ideology overrides personal relationships?

Later in this booklet, you will compare *Julius Caesar* with another tragedy.

For now, simply consider:

- why might reading texts alongside one another deepen our understanding of both?

Task: write down your thoughts

A05: Critical Interpretations

This means recognising that readers do not always agree.

You will encounter:

- academic critics;
- alternative readings;
- directors' interpretations;
- actors' performances;
- audience responses from different periods.

One production might present Brutus as an honourable idealist whose commitment to republican values makes him a tragic hero.

Another might portray him as a naïve politician whose rigid principles contribute directly to Rome's destruction.

Neither interpretation is automatically "correct".

Your role is to evaluate them.

Task:

Read the critical interpretation below.

"Brutus' commitment to honour ultimately destroys both his friendships and the Republic he seeks to protect."

How might someone respond to this interpretation?

Write two or three sentences that either:

- support the statement;
- challenge it;
- or qualify it by recognising both perspectives.

You might begin:

- One interpretation of Brutus' character is that...
- However, another reading might suggest...
- Shakespeare may encourage audiences to see...

Looking Ahead...

You may have noticed that the Assessment Objectives do not operate independently.

As you developed your argument, analysed Shakespeare's methods, considered the influence of context, anticipated wider connections and explored alternative interpretations, you were engaging with all of them.

The rest of this booklet will continue to revisit and refine the same question.

By returning to your original argument again and again, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into something recognisably A Level: more exploratory, more nuanced and more attentive to the many conversations that literature invites.

Chapter 3

Developing Your Argument

By this point, you have already begun answering an A Level question.

In Chapter 1, you encountered an A Level-style task for the first time. You gathered evidence, explored tensions within the statement and developed a provisional line of argument.

In Chapter 2, you considered how the Assessment Objectives evolve from GCSE to A Level, recognising that the skills you have already developed are not replaced, but elevated.

The next step is to begin constructing an essay.

Importantly, A Level essays are not written by addressing one Assessment Objective at a time. Nor are they simply a series of analytical paragraphs linked together.

Instead, they are driven by a line of argument: an overall interpretation that develops, deepens and evolves across the essay. Each paragraph contributes to that wider argument.

In this chapter, you will return to the line of argument you developed earlier and begin transforming it into the foundations of an A Level essay.

Returning to Your Line of Argument

At the end of Chapter 1, you developed a provisional response to the question below.

"Brutus and Cassius are united by political necessity rather than genuine friendship."

In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of the relationship between Brutus and Cassius in *Julius Caesar*.

Task:

Read your original line of argument again.

Having explored the Assessment Objectives in Chapter 2:

- Does it still reflect your thinking?
- Does it establish a clear judgement?
- Does it acknowledge complexity?
- Can you now see more clearly how the essay might develop?

Literary study is often a process of revisiting and refining ideas.

You will have the opportunity to revise your original response later.

A Line of Argument: The Roadmap

A line of argument does more than establish your opinion.

It provides the roadmap for your essay.

A strong line of argument should:

- respond directly to the question;
- establish an overall judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- anticipate the development of the essay by alluding to the ideas explored in later paragraphs.

Think of it as answering two questions at once: What do I think? and: How am I going to prove it?

Less Effective

Brutus and Cassius work together because they are friends who want to save Rome.

This establishes a viewpoint, but gives little indication of how the essay will unfold.

More Effective

Although Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic, their relationship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of honour, leadership and political duty. Through moments of loyalty, manipulation and reconciliation, Shakespeare suggests that genuine friendship exists alongside ideological division, ultimately revealing the fragility of personal relationships in a world dominated by power and public responsibility.

Notice that this line of argument:

- establishes an overall judgement;
- acknowledges complexity;
- hints at the main ideas the essay will explore;
- alludes to wider concerns about honour, leadership and political responsibility without relying on detailed contextual discussion.

A reader can already anticipate the likely direction of the essay.

Planning from the Line of Argument

The line of argument above might develop in the following way:

Line of Argument	Paragraph Focus
Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic.	Paragraph 1: Shared ideals, honour and the foundations of their relationship.
Their friendship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of leadership and political duty.	Paragraph 2: Conflict, manipulation and the tension between personal loyalty and public responsibility.
Shakespeare ultimately presents both friendship and political idealism as fragile and open to tragic failure.	Paragraph 3: Tragic ambiguity and final judgement.

At this stage, you are focusing primarily on AO1 and AO2.

You will return to these ideas later in the booklet:

- contextual insight (AO3) will deepen them;
- critical interpretations and productions (AO5) may challenge them;
- comparison with other texts (AO4) will broaden them.

For now, your task is to establish the foundations of your essay.

Line of Argument to Analytical Paragraph

At GCSE, many students use structures such as PEE, PEA or PEAL. These can provide a useful starting point.

At A Level, essays are often less formulaic. Rather than moving mechanically from point to evidence to explanation, paragraphs sustain an argument whilst moving flexibly between textual detail and interpretation, interleaving the Assessment Objectives along the way.

The structure below is not a formula to memorise.

Instead, it reflects how literary arguments often develop.

1. Establish an aspect of your argument.

How does this paragraph contribute to your wider line of argument?

2. Support it with evidence.

Which moments from the text best illuminate this interpretation?

3. Explore Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

- a. How does Shakespeare shape meaning through:
- b. language;
- c. dramatic form;
- d. structure;
- e. placement within the play;
- f. audience response;
- g. the conventions of tragedy?

4. Return to the wider judgement.

How does this analysis support, refine or complicate your overall argument?

Task:

Before reading, return to the first strand of the line of argument: **Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic.**

Now consider how this idea develops in the model below.

Although Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic, their relationship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of honour, leadership and political duty. Through moments of loyalty, manipulation and reconciliation, Shakespeare suggests that genuine friendship exists alongside ideological division, ultimately revealing the fragility of personal relationships in a world dominated by power and public responsibility.

Brutus and Cassius are initially presented as allies whose shared commitment to the Republic appears to unite them in a common moral purpose. During their quarrel, Brutus reminds Cassius to "Remember March, the Ides of March remember", invoking the assassination of Caesar as a moment of collective

sacrifice undertaken "for justice' sake". Positioned at the height of their disagreement, Brutus' repeated appeal to the conspiracy transforms a personal dispute into a debate about honour and political principle. Rather than focusing on his friendship with Cassius, Brutus returns to the ideals that first brought them together, suggesting that his loyalty lies as much with the Republic as with his fellow conspirator. Shakespeare therefore presents their relationship as one founded upon shared political conviction, encouraging the audience to question whether genuine friendship can survive when abstract ideals take precedence over personal loyalty.

Notice how the paragraph contributes to the wider essay.

1. It develops one strand of the line of argument.

Brutus and Cassius are initially presented as allies whose shared commitment to the Republic appears to unite them...

2. It selects evidence purposefully.

"... 'Remember March, the Ides of March remember'..."

3. It explores Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

"...Positioned at the height of their disagreement, Brutus' repeated appeal to the conspiracy transforms a personal dispute into a debate about honour and political principle..."

Rather than simply identifying repetition, the analysis considers:

- dramatic placement;
- audience experience;
- Shakespeare's construction of political tragedy.

4. It returns to the wider judgement.

"...encouraging the audience to question whether genuine friendship can survive when abstract ideals take precedence over personal loyalty."

The paragraph contributes to the essay's overall argument.

Your Turn: Part A

Task:

Return to the revised line of argument from Chapter 2.

Do you need to make any final changes before beginning your essay?

Remember:

- establish a judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- allude to the ideas your essay will explore.

Revised line of argument:

[illegible]

Your Turn: Part B

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

Task:

Read your line of argument and paragraph together and reflect on what you're written.

Ask yourself:

- Does my paragraph genuinely develop the argument I established?
- Could a reader anticipate the direction of my essay from my line of argument?
- Have I moved beyond identifying methods to exploring Shakespeare's dramatic craft?
- Have I maintained a focus on the question throughout?

Make any revisions you feel are necessary.

Looking Ahead...

You now have the beginnings of an A Level essay:

- a refined line of argument;
- a developed analytical paragraph;
- a clear relationship between the two.

In the next chapter, you will revisit this same paragraph through contextual readings. Rather than adding historical information for its own sake, you will explore how contextual insight can deepen, challenge and reshape the argument you have already begun to construct.

Your essay has started.

Now it is time to elevate it.

Chapter 4

Integrating Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often helps to explain a text.

You may have learned about Ancient Rome, Shakespeare's use of Plutarch's *Lives*, or Elizabethan ideas about leadership, power and political authority. These details can help us understand why writers make particular choices.

At A Level, however, context becomes something more dynamic.

Context is not simply information to be added into an essay. Instead, contextual reading should deepen, challenge and complicate interpretation.

The question is no longer: What do I know about the period? Instead, ask: How does this reading change the way I understand the text?

In this chapter, you will revisit the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3 and explore how literary, historical and theatrical contexts reshape interpretation.

Returning to the Model

Task:

Remind yourself of the model (below) from Chapter 3 which developed the line of argument and first main analytical paragraph.

Although Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic, their relationship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of honour, leadership and political duty. Through moments of loyalty, manipulation and reconciliation, Shakespeare suggests that genuine friendship exists alongside ideological division, ultimately revealing the fragility of personal relationships in a world dominated by power and public responsibility.

Brutus and Cassius are initially presented as allies whose shared commitment to the Republic appears to unite them in a common moral purpose. During their quarrel, Brutus reminds Cassius to "Remember March, the Ides of March remember", invoking the assassination of Caesar as a moment of collective sacrifice undertaken "for justice' sake". Positioned at the height of their disagreement, Brutus' repeated appeal to the conspiracy transforms a personal dispute into a debate about honour and political principle. Rather than focusing on his friendship with Cassius, Brutus returns to the ideals that first brought them together, suggesting that his loyalty lies as much with the Republic as with his fellow conspirator. Shakespeare therefore presents their relationship as one founded upon shared political conviction, encouraging the audience to question whether genuine friendship can survive when abstract ideals take precedence over personal loyalty.

Task:

Now reread the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3.

Before reading any further, ask yourself:

- What assumptions am I making?
- What do I currently believe Shakespeare is doing?
- Which aspects of my interpretation feel secure?
- Which ideas might become more nuanced?

Keep this paragraph in front of you throughout the chapter.

Reading 1: History, Rhetoric, & Tyranny

Historical context enhances interpretation; at A Level, historical knowledge matters because it changes the questions we ask of the text.

Task:

Read and annotate the extract below.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'Historical Background' (see appendices for full article – page 80)

Julius Caesar is one of the plays Shakespeare wrote in an extraordinary burst of creativity in and around 1599. A performance of *Julius Caesar* is described by the Swiss tourist Thomas Platter in September of that year, and it may even have been the play that opened the new Globe Theatre...

...*Julius Caesar* is political, short and action-driven, but although the second half is dominated by war, the play is really about the power of words and rhetoric. Characters are torn down by language, built up by language and manipulated through language. Shakespeare presents voices from every level of Roman society, allowing audiences to hear the fears, ambitions and passions of rulers, senators, soldiers and ordinary citizens...

...The assassination of Caesar works as an axis for the action. The first half poses the question of whether dissatisfied subjects should overthrow a tyrannical leader, while the second explores the consequences of political violence and the realisation that violent usurpation is not the answer...

...Shakespeare based the play on Plutarch's *Lives*, but he freely reshaped historical events and characters to suit his dramatic purposes. Every question about leadership and tyranny in *Julius Caesar* is therefore also a question directed at Shakespeare's own society, where Queen Elizabeth I was increasingly associated with ideas of divinely sanctioned rule and political stability.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How might an Elizabethan audience have understood Brutus' decision to assassinate Caesar?
- Could the conspiracy represent more than a private act of betrayal?
- How does this context alter your understanding of Brutus and Cassius' relationship?
- Does Shakespeare present political violence as a defence of liberty, a tragic mistake, or both?

Model Revisited

Task:

Read the model.

Notice how it has evolved (see sections in bold) – the contextual insight has been integrated at several points.

Although Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic, their relationship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of honour, leadership and political duty. Through moments of loyalty, manipulation and reconciliation, Shakespeare suggests that genuine friendship exists alongside ideological division, ultimately revealing the fragility of personal relationships in a world dominated by power and public responsibility.

Brutus and Cassius are initially presented as allies whose shared commitment to the Republic appears to unite them in a common moral purpose. During their quarrel, Brutus reminds Cassius to **"Remember March, the Ides of March remember"**, invoking the assassination of Caesar as a moment of collective sacrifice undertaken **"for justice' sake."** **For Elizabethan audiences, however, the conspiracy would have represented more than a private disagreement between political allies. By reshaping Roman history through the lens of contemporary anxieties about leadership and tyranny, Shakespeare invites audiences to question whether violence can ever preserve political order or whether it inevitably creates further instability.** Positioned at the height of their disagreement, Brutus' repeated appeal to the conspiracy transforms a personal dispute into a debate about honour and political principle. **Rather than simply recalling a shared act, his language reinforces the republican ideals that first united the conspirators while exposing the ideological divisions that now threaten to destroy them.** Shakespeare therefore presents their relationship as one founded upon shared political conviction, encouraging the audience to question whether genuine friendship can survive when abstract ideals take precedence over personal loyalty.

Your Turn

Task:

Revisit your own paragraph from Chapter 3.

Integrate some contextual insight informed by this historical lens.

Aim to weave the context into your paragraph, and not simply put it at the end.

Your Response:

Reading 2: Renaissance Theatre

Context also involves understanding how theatre functioned within society and how audiences responded to performance.

Task:

Read the extract below carefully - annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'The Renaissance Theatre' (see appendices for full article – page 82)

Governmental authorities understood the potential disruptions public theatre could cause in a well-ordered cultural hierarchy, so took steps to control the performances of plays from the very beginning. As early as 1574, even before the first theatre was built, the Lord Mayor of London and the Common Council laid heavy restrictions on the times, places, contents and purposes of theatrical entertainments. Although the municipal government was decidedly anti-theatre, its animosity had little effect. Beginning with the construction of the first purpose-built playhouse in 1576 until the closing of the theatres in 1642, theatre's popularity and commercial success steadily increased...

... Many of Shakespeare's plays actually deal with unstable political situations, especially those commonly referred to as the 'great tragedies'. Hamlet's famous indecision originates in the death of Denmark's monarch; Macbeth's plot involves two separate regicides, though both occur offstage. King Lear provides some of Shakespeare's most complex reflections on the nature of kingship. The image of the 'poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old' Lear (3.2.20) wandering mad on the heath may not have unsettled James I, devoted fan of theatre as he was. But it certainly does raise questions about the actual differences between monarch and subject, questions that resonate with performers, critics and students to this day.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How does this change your understanding of Shakespeare's theatre?
- Why might a play about assassination, leadership and political rebellion have been politically sensitive?
- How might audiences have responded differently from modern audiences?
- Does *Julius Caesar* become more than a story about Brutus and Cassius' friendship?

Model Reconsidered

Task:

Read the model again.

Notice how it has evolved (see section in bold) – in this case, it is integrated at the beginning.

Although Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic, their relationship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of honour, leadership and political duty. Through moments of loyalty, manipulation and reconciliation, Shakespeare suggests that genuine friendship exists alongside ideological division, ultimately revealing the fragility of personal relationships in a world dominated by power and public responsibility.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to judge not only the actions of Brutus and Cassius but the persuasive language through which those actions are justified. Brutus and Cassius are initially presented as allies whose shared commitment to the Republic appears to unite them in a common moral purpose. During their quarrel, Brutus reminds Cassius to "Remember March, the Ides of March remember", invoking the assassination of Caesar as a moment of collective sacrifice undertaken "for justice' sake". For Elizabethan audiences, however, the conspiracy would have represented more than a private disagreement between political allies. By reshaping Roman history through the lens of contemporary anxieties about leadership and tyranny, Shakespeare invites audiences to question whether violence can ever preserve political order or whether it inevitably creates further instability. Positioned at the height of their disagreement, Brutus' repeated appeal to the conspiracy transforms a personal dispute into a debate about honour and political principle. Rather than simply recalling a shared act, his language reinforces the republican ideals that first united the conspirators while exposing the ideological divisions that now threaten to destroy them. Shakespeare therefore presents their relationship as one founded upon shared political conviction, encouraging the audience to question whether genuine friendship can survive when abstract ideals take precedence over personal loyalty.

Your Turn

Task:

Reconsider your revised paragraph.

How might theatrical context broaden your interpretation beyond Brutus and Cassius as individual characters?

Aim to deepen your interpretation rather than simply adding information.

Revised paragraph:

Reflection: Watching it Evolve

Task:

Compare the three versions of the model.

Version	Development
Original Model	Line of argument & close analysis which developed an interpretation
Model Revisited	Historical context deepened the interpretation through ideas about republicanism, leadership and political authority.
Model Reconsidered	Theatrical context broadened the discussion to a more political focus which theatregoers engaged with.

What has changed?

At A Level, AO3 is not about accumulating facts. It is about recognising that texts exist within wider historical, literary and theatrical conversations.

The strongest essays do not simply mention context. They allow contextual understanding to reshape interpretation.

Looking Ahead...

You have now revisited and refined your paragraph through contextual reading.

In the next chapter, you will encounter another important aspect of A Level Literature:

What happens when critics, directors and audiences disagree about what a text means?

You will discover that literary interpretation is not fixed.

It is debated.

Chapter 5

Exploring Texts and Traditions

At GCSE, you studied *Julius Caesar* as a text in its own right.

At A Level, you begin to recognise that literary texts do not exist in isolation. Writers revisit similar concerns, ask recurring questions and experiment with familiar forms. Reading texts alongside one another allows us to deepen our understanding of both.

AO4 asks you to:

- **Explore connections across literary texts.**

However, comparison is not simply about identifying similarities and differences.

Instead, comparison allows texts to illuminate one another. It encourages us to ask broader questions:

- What concerns repeatedly interest Shakespeare as a tragic dramatist?
- How do different tragic protagonists invite sympathy and judgement?
- Does tragedy follow a predictable pattern, or does Shakespeare continually reshape it?

In this chapter, you will encounter another of Shakespeare's great tragedies: *Hamlet*.

As you do so, keep the following question in mind:

- **What happens when characters recognise a moral duty but struggle to act upon it?**

Brutus believes that Caesar must die to protect the Republic and acts despite his personal affection for him.

Hamlet believes that he must avenge his father but repeatedly delays the act.

Both are driven by principle.

Both question themselves.

Both force audiences to consider the uneasy relationship between honour, conscience and political responsibility.

Before You Begin

Task:

Based on your study of *Julius Caesar*, what do you think Shakespeare is interested in exploring through tragedy?

You might consider: power; leadership; honour; political responsibility; friendship; loyalty; rhetoric; conscience; justice; self-awareness; humanity; ambition.

Record your ideas:

Introducing *Hamlet*

Written around 1600, *Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare's most celebrated tragedies.

The play follows Prince Hamlet of Denmark after the sudden death of his father. Before Hamlet has had time to grieve, his uncle Claudius has married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, and assumed the Danish throne.

When Hamlet discovers that Claudius murdered his father, he is confronted with a terrible responsibility: Should he take revenge?

Unlike Brutus, whose tragedy unfolds through decisive action taken in the name of honour and political duty, Hamlet's tragedy is characterised by reflection, uncertainty and delay.

Both protagonists believe they are acting in service of a greater good.

Yet they respond to moral responsibility in very different ways.

As you read, ask yourself: Is it better to act despite uncertainty, or to hesitate until certainty arrives?

Shakespeare offers no easy answers.

Act One

Hamlet opens in an atmosphere of uncertainty and unease. On the battlements of Elsinore Castle, guards and Hamlet's friend Horatio encounter the ghost of the recently deceased King Hamlet. Disturbed by its appearance, they resolve to inform Prince Hamlet, believing the spirit may have some message for him.

Meanwhile, the audience is introduced to a Denmark that appears stable on the surface but is already marked by disruption. Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, has assumed the throne and married Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, with remarkable speed following his brother's death. Although Claudius presents himself as a capable and pragmatic ruler, Hamlet is deeply troubled by what he sees as his mother's betrayal and the court's eagerness to move on. Isolated in his grief, he reflects bitterly on the corruption around him, lamenting, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"

When Hamlet finally encounters the Ghost, the tragedy's central conflict is established. The spirit claims to be the ghost of Hamlet's father and reveals that he was not killed by natural causes, but murdered by Claudius, who poured poison into his ear as he slept. The Ghost commands Hamlet to avenge this "foul and most unnatural murder", transforming private grief into a moral obligation. Hamlet vows to remember his father's command and devote himself to revenge.

Yet Shakespeare immediately complicates what might otherwise resemble a straightforward revenge narrative. Rather than embracing his task with certainty, Hamlet seems overwhelmed by it. He recognises the enormity of what has been asked of him, lamenting, "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" From the very beginning of the play, conscience becomes a burden. Hamlet knows what he believes he ought to do; whether he can bring himself to do it remains uncertain.

Act One therefore establishes the central conflict of the tragedy.

Hamlet knows what he believes he ought to do.

The question is whether he can bring himself to do it.

AO4 Reflection

Brutus believes that Caesar must die for the good of Rome.

Hamlet believes that Claudius must die to avenge his father.

Both men recognise a moral duty that conflicts with their personal feelings.

Task

How does Shakespeare establish different relationships between honour, conscience and action from the very beginning of each tragedy?

Record your ideas:

Act Two

Act Two explores Hamlet's increasingly complex response to the burden placed upon him. Although he now believes Claudius murdered his father, he remains uncertain about how to proceed. Rather than acting immediately, Hamlet adopts what he describes as an "antic disposition", behaving in ways that appear irrational and unpredictable. Whether this madness is entirely feigned, partially genuine, or a combination of both remains one of the play's enduring questions.

Those around Hamlet attempt to explain his behaviour in simpler terms. Polonius becomes convinced that the prince's apparent instability is the result of his love for Ophelia, believing that rejection has driven him into emotional distress. Confident in his own interpretation, Polonius reports his conclusions to Claudius and Gertrude. Meanwhile, the King and Queen summon Hamlet's childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, hoping that familiar faces might uncover the cause of his suffering. Hamlet welcomes them warmly at first, but quickly realises they have been sent to observe him. Surrounded by people he can no longer trust, his isolation deepens.

The arrival of a travelling company of actors prompts one of Hamlet's most revealing moments of self-reflection. Watching an actor summon genuine emotion in the service of fiction unsettles him profoundly. The player weeps for Hecuba, a queen he has never known, while Hamlet—whose father has genuinely been murdered—remains incapable of carrying out the revenge he believes duty demands. Disgusted by what he perceives as his own inaction, he condemns himself: "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!"

Yet Hamlet's response to this self-reproach is not decisive action. Instead, he devises another plan. The actors will perform a play that mirrors the circumstances of King Hamlet's murder. By observing Claudius's reaction, Hamlet hopes to determine whether the Ghost has spoken the truth. Only then, he believes, can he act with certainty.

He concludes: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."

Act Two therefore reveals both Hamlet's greatest strength and his greatest weakness. He refuses to act without evidence, questioning appearances and resisting impulsive judgement. At the same time, his relentless need for certainty repeatedly postpones the action he believes is necessary.

Shakespeare begins to ask whether thought leads to wisdom—or whether excessive reflection can become its own form of paralysis.

AO4 Reflection

Brutus acts upon Cassius' persuasion despite his doubts.

Hamlet repeatedly delays action in pursuit of certainty.

Task:

Does thinking deeply lead to wiser choices—or hesitation?

How might Brutus answer this question? How might Hamlet?

Record your ideas:

Act Three

Act Three contains some of the most famous scenes in Shakespeare.

Act Three marks the dramatic and psychological heart of Hamlet. The questions that have troubled Hamlet since the beginning of the play—whether to act, whether he can trust appearances, and whether certainty is ever possible—become increasingly urgent. It is also the act in which Shakespeare reveals the devastating consequences of both hesitation and impulsiveness.

The act opens with Hamlet's most famous soliloquy: "To be, or not to be: that is the question." Reflecting on suffering, mortality and the burdens of existence, Hamlet wonders whether it is nobler to endure life's hardships or to end them altogether. Yet even the prospect of death offers no escape. The uncertainty of what follows—"the undiscover'd country"—fills him with fear. Hamlet concludes that it is often conscience that prevents decisive action: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all."

For Hamlet, thought and moral awareness are both gifts and burdens. His ability to imagine consequences, to question motives and to consider alternative possibilities repeatedly inhibits action.

Soon afterwards, Claudius and Polonius arrange for Hamlet to encounter Ophelia while they secretly observe. Hamlet's treatment of her is harsh and unsettling. Urging her to "Get thee to a nunnery", he appears disillusioned by love, distrustful of women and increasingly alienated from those around him. Whether this cruelty reflects genuine bitterness, strategic performance or emotional instability remains open to interpretation. Shakespeare offers no easy explanation, forcing audiences to grapple with the complexity of Hamlet's state of mind.

The turning point of the act arrives with the performance of The Mousetrap. The actors stage a scene closely resembling the Ghost's account of King Hamlet's murder. As Hamlet watches Claudius's reaction, the tension becomes almost unbearable. When Claudius abruptly rises and stops the performance, Hamlet interprets this as confirmation of his guilt. At last, the certainty Hamlet has long sought appears to be within his grasp.

Yet certainty does not lead to immediate action. Finding Claudius apparently alone at prayer, Hamlet has the perfect opportunity to avenge his father. However, he hesitates once again. Believing that killing Claudius during prayer might send his soul to heaven, Hamlet postpones revenge: "Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;/And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven."

Ironically, the audience knows that Claudius has been unable to repent sincerely. Hamlet's reasoning, though morally complex, is tragically flawed. The delay that he believes to be principled becomes another missed opportunity.

The act concludes with one of its greatest ironies. Summoned to confront his mother, Hamlet speaks passionately about betrayal, corruption and moral responsibility. Hearing movement behind a curtain, he assumes Claudius is hiding there and, for the first time in the play, acts without hesitation. He thrusts his sword through the arras. Instead of Claudius, he kills Polonius.

The man who has spent three acts struggling to act decisively suddenly abandons caution and acts impulsively—with devastating consequences.

Act Three therefore exposes the central paradox of Hamlet's tragedy. He delays when he believes action is justified, yet acts rashly when certainty is absent.

Shakespeare suggests that neither impulsiveness nor excessive reflection offers protection from tragedy. Conscience may illuminate the moral significance of our choices, but it does not guarantee that we will make the right ones.

AO4 Reflection

Brutus kills Caesar believing violence is necessary for the Republic.

Hamlet spares Claudius despite believing revenge is morally necessary.

Yet Hamlet impulsively kills Polonius.

Task:

Which response do you find more understandable? Why?

Record your ideas:

Act Four

The consequences of Hamlet's actions begin to unfold rapidly in Act Four. Having finally acted, Hamlet discovers that violence has not brought clarity or resolution. Instead, the accidental killing of Polonius sends shockwaves throughout the Danish court, drawing more characters into the tragedy and accelerating its movement towards catastrophe.

Claudius is quick to recognise the threat Hamlet now poses. Publicly, he presents himself as a concerned ruler attempting to manage a dangerous situation. Privately, however, he sees an opportunity to remove Hamlet permanently. Hamlet is sent to England under the supervision of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, carrying sealed letters that secretly instruct the English king to execute him upon arrival. Claudius's willingness to sacrifice Hamlet demonstrates the extent to which corruption has spread through the Danish court. The distinction between justice and self-preservation becomes increasingly blurred.

Hamlet himself appears strangely calm in the aftermath of Polonius's death. At times, he speaks with dark humour and philosophical detachment, refusing to show the remorse audiences might expect. Yet Shakespeare complicates this apparent indifference. During his journey, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras's army marching to fight over a seemingly insignificant piece of land. Fortinbras's decisiveness forces Hamlet to confront his own hesitation once again. Reflecting upon his repeated delays, he condemns himself: "How stand I then,/That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,/Excitements of my reason and my blood,/And let all sleep?" Observing Fortinbras's willingness to act for honour and reputation, Hamlet resolves: "O, from this time forth,/My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"

Elsewhere, the human cost of the tragedy becomes increasingly apparent. Ophelia, devastated by her father's death and Hamlet's rejection, descends into madness. Her fragmented songs and disjointed speech reveal profound grief and vulnerability, transforming her into one of Shakespeare's most poignant victims. Through Ophelia, audiences witness the collateral damage caused by the actions and indecisions of others. Unlike Hamlet, she has little agency within the structures that govern her life, and her suffering exposes the devastating impact of political and familial conflict upon those caught in its path.

At the same time, Laertes returns to Denmark, enraged by the death of his father and the apparent injustice surrounding it. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes responds immediately and passionately. He storms the palace demanding answers and vengeance. Claudius skilfully manipulates Laertes' anger, directing it towards Hamlet and proposing a plan to eliminate him. Together, they devise a duel involving a poisoned sword and a poisoned cup, ensuring Hamlet's death regardless of the outcome.

Act Four therefore broadens Shakespeare's exploration of conscience and action. Fortinbras acts swiftly.

Laertes seeks immediate revenge. Claudius schemes decisively to protect himself. Hamlet, meanwhile, continues to struggle between reflection and action.

The tragedy increasingly asks whether hesitation is a mark of humanity and moral awareness, or whether the refusal to act allows suffering to multiply and injustice to flourish.

AO4 Reflection

Throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents a range of responses to conflict and revenge:

- Claudius acts quickly to preserve his position;
- Laertes pursues immediate vengeance;
- Fortinbras embraces decisive military action;
- Hamlet reflects, hesitates and questions.

In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus, Cassius, Antony and Octavius similarly embody different responses to political conflict and leadership.

Task:

What are the consequences of decisive action?

Does Shakespeare suggest that honour and political principle can become as destructive as revenge?

Record your ideas:

Act Five

By the final act of the play, death has become unavoidable. Yet Shakespeare slows the pace of the tragedy, creating moments of reflection that encourage both Hamlet and the audience to consider mortality, identity and the limits of human control.

The act opens in a graveyard, where two gravediggers discuss death with dark humour and surprising irreverence. Their conversation reminds audiences that death ultimately erases social distinctions. Kings, jesters and ordinary labourers alike share the same fate.

When Hamlet arrives, he encounters the skull of Yorick, the court jester who entertained him as a child. Holding the skull, Hamlet reflects upon the inevitability of death: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio." The prince who once feared uncertainty now confronts mortality with a greater degree of acceptance. Even Alexander the Great, he observes, returns to dust.

This meditation is interrupted by Ophelia's funeral procession. Discovering that Ophelia has died, Hamlet is overwhelmed by grief and guilt. In the raw emotion of the moment, he publicly declares the depth of his love for her, confronting Laertes in the process. Yet Shakespeare leaves audiences to question whether Hamlet's recognition comes too late to offer comfort or redemption.

The final sequence centres upon the duel between Hamlet and Laertes. Claudius and Laertes secretly intend to murder Hamlet using a poisoned sword and a poisoned cup prepared as a backup plan. However, the scheme rapidly descends into chaos. Gertrude unknowingly drinks from the poisoned cup and dies. During the duel, Hamlet and Laertes exchange swords, resulting in both men being wounded by the poisoned blade.

As death approaches, truth finally emerges. Laertes confesses Claudius's treachery and asks Hamlet's forgiveness. At last, Hamlet acts decisively and without hesitation. He stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink from the poisoned cup.

Yet this long-awaited revenge offers little satisfaction. The stage is littered with bodies. Hamlet himself has been mortally wounded. As he dies, he entrusts the future of Denmark to Fortinbras and urges Horatio to tell his story truthfully: "The rest is silence."

Fortinbras arrives to assume control of a kingdom devastated by betrayal, revenge and loss.

Act Five offers no simple resolution. Hamlet finally achieves the revenge demanded at the beginning of the play, but only after countless opportunities have been missed and irreparable damage has been done.

Shakespeare suggests that insight often arrives too late to prevent tragedy. Understanding ourselves and our responsibilities does not necessarily equip us to act wisely. Instead, audiences are left to wrestle with uncomfortable questions about justice, agency and the human capacity for error

AO4 Reflection

Both Brutus and Hamlet gain moments of profound self-understanding.

Brutus recognises the failure of the conspiracy and chooses an honourable death.

Hamlet comes to understand the inevitability of death and the limitations of certainty.

Yet both protagonists die.

Task:

Does self-awareness lessen responsibility?

Does understanding the consequences of our actions excuse them, or does it make us more accountable?

Record your ideas:

Tragic Protagonists Compared

By this point, you have encountered two very different Shakespearean tragedies.

At first glance, Julius Caesar and Hamlet appear to have little in common.

One protagonist acts decisively in the belief that violence is necessary for the good of the state, while the other hesitates and reflects. One is driven by honour and political duty, the other by filial obligation and uncertainty. One commits murder early in the play; the other spends much of the drama wrestling with whether he can bring himself to act at all.

However, comparison allows us to move beyond obvious differences.

AO4 asks us to consider how texts illuminate one another. Rather than asking simply, "What is the same?" or "What is different?" we might instead ask: "What new understanding of Brutus emerges when we place him alongside Hamlet?"

The table below is designed to help you think comparatively. Notice how each comparison returns us to the central concerns of tragedy: conscience, responsibility, suffering and judgement.

Question	<i>Julius Caesar</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>
What initiates tragedy?	Brutus chooses to assassinate Caesar, believing that political duty and honour require him to act for the good of Rome.	Hamlet is burdened with the responsibility of revenge, yet struggles to act upon it.
What role does conscience play?	Conscience shapes Brutus' decisions, but ultimately reinforces his belief that violence can serve justice.	Conscience repeatedly interrupts action, causing Hamlet to question, delay and reflect.
How do the protagonists suffer?	Brutus experiences grief, political conflict, betrayal and the collapse of the ideals he sought to defend.	Hamlet endures grief, uncertainty, distrust and profound emotional conflict.
When does insight occur?	Brutus gradually recognises the consequences of the conspiracy, but continues to pursue the course he believes honour demands.	Hamlet gains moments of clarity throughout the play, though certainty rarely brings peace.
What effect does self-awareness have?	Self-awareness reinforces Brutus' commitment to honour, even as his choices contribute to tragedy.	Self-awareness encourages caution, but often contributes to paralysis and missed opportunities.
How should audiences judge them?	Brutus invites both admiration and criticism, appearing at once principled, honourable and tragically misguided.	Hamlet invites both sympathy and frustration.
What remains unresolved?	Questions of honour, political responsibility and whether violence can ever preserve liberty.	Questions of justice, certainty and the limits of human understanding.

Reflection

Comparison does not require us to decide which character is "better" or "worse".

Instead, it encourages us to think more carefully about the questions Shakespeare repeatedly explores through tragedy.

Task

Having encountered both plays, consider the following:

- Does conscience protect people from wrongdoing?
- Can self-awareness become a burden?
- Is hesitation more admirable than decisive action?
- Are tragic protagonists defined by their choices, their circumstances, or both?
- How should audiences respond to characters who understand the consequences of their actions but fail to avoid them?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Throughout this booklet, you have revisited the same model paragraph, allowing it to evolve as your understanding has deepened.

At the end of Chapter 4, you reconsidered your interpretation through contextual reading (AO3).

Now, comparison invites you to broaden that interpretation once more.

Task:

Read the model below from where it was modified with AO3 insight.

Although Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic, their relationship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of honour, leadership and political duty. Through moments of loyalty, manipulation and reconciliation, Shakespeare suggests that genuine friendship exists alongside ideological division, ultimately revealing the fragility of personal relationships in a world dominated by power and public responsibility.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to judge not only the actions of Brutus and Cassius but the persuasive language through which those actions are justified. Brutus and Cassius are initially presented as allies whose shared commitment to the Republic appears to unite them in a common moral purpose. During their quarrel, Brutus reminds Cassius to "Remember March, the Ides of March remember", invoking the assassination of Caesar as a moment of collective sacrifice undertaken "for justice' sake". For Elizabethan audiences, however, the conspiracy would have represented more than a private disagreement between political allies. By reshaping Roman history through the lens of contemporary anxieties about leadership and tyranny, Shakespeare invites audiences to question whether violence can ever preserve political order or whether it inevitably creates further instability. Positioned at the height of their disagreement, Brutus' repeated appeal to the conspiracy transforms a personal dispute into a debate about honour and political principle. Rather than simply recalling a shared act, his language reinforces the republican ideals that first united the conspirators while exposing the ideological divisions that now threaten to destroy them. Shakespeare therefore presents their relationship as one founded upon shared political conviction, encouraging the audience to question whether genuine friendship can survive when abstract ideals take precedence over personal loyalty.

Task:

Now read the reconsidered model, with AO4 insight incorporated.

Although Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic, their relationship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of honour, leadership and political duty. Through moments of loyalty, manipulation and reconciliation, Shakespeare suggests that genuine friendship exists alongside ideological division, ultimately revealing the fragility of personal relationships in a world dominated by power and public responsibility.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to judge not only the actions of Brutus and Cassius but the persuasive language through which those actions are justified. Brutus and Cassius are initially presented as allies whose shared commitment to the Republic appears to unite them in a common moral purpose. During their quarrel, Brutus reminds Cassius to "Remember March, the Ides of March remember", invoking the assassination of Caesar as a moment of collective sacrifice undertaken "for justice' sake". For Elizabethan audiences, however, the conspiracy would have represented more than a private disagreement between political allies. By reshaping Roman history through the lens of contemporary anxieties about leadership and tyranny, Shakespeare invites audiences to question whether violence can ever preserve political order or whether it inevitably creates further instability. Positioned at the height of their disagreement, Brutus' repeated appeal to the conspiracy transforms a personal dispute into a debate about honour and political principle. Rather than simply recalling a shared act, his language reinforces the republican ideals that first united the conspirators while exposing the ideological divisions that now threaten to destroy them. Shakespeare therefore presents their relationship as one founded upon shared political conviction, encouraging the audience to question whether genuine friendship can survive when abstract ideals take precedence over personal loyalty. **By contrast, Hamlet's prolonged hesitation reveals a protagonist paralysed by moral uncertainty, whereas Brutus acts despite his doubts, suggesting that Shakespeare's tragedies explore both the dangers of excessive reflection and the consequences of unwavering commitment to principle. Brutus' honourable intentions may invite admiration, yet his willingness to subordinate personal loyalty to political ideology ultimately contributes to the destruction of both his friendships and the Republic he seeks to defend.**

Notice what has changed.

The comparison has not distracted from your interpretation of *Julius Caesar*.

Instead, it has sharpened it.

AO4 does not ask: What is similar? It asks: How does another text help me understand this one more deeply?

Your Turn

Task:

Return to the paragraph you have been developing throughout this booklet.

Using one carefully integrated comparative sentence, broaden your interpretation through *Hamlet*.

Remember:

- Keep *Julius Caesar* as the focus.
- Use *Hamlet* to illuminate your argument.
- Avoid bolt-on comparison.
- Ask yourself what *Hamlet* reveals about *Julius Caesar*.

Revise your paragraph:

Looking ahead...

Before moving on, take a moment to recognise how your thinking has evolved:

- Chapter 3 helped you construct an argument and analyse Shakespeare's methods;
- Chapter 4 deepened that argument through literary and historical context;
- Chapter 5 broadened that argument through comparison.

You have not replaced earlier interpretations.

You have refined them.

In the final chapter of this booklet, you will discover that interpretation itself is contested. Critics disagree.

Directors make choices. Audiences respond differently across time.

Literary study is not about arriving at a single, definitive answer.

It is an ongoing conversation.

Chapter 6

Joining the Critical Conversation

Throughout this booklet, you have gradually developed your interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of the relationship between Brutus and Cassius in *Julius Caesar*.

1. You began by constructing an argument.
2. You analysed Shakespeare's dramatic methods.
3. You deepened your ideas through context.
4. You broadened them through comparison.
5. At each stage, the same paragraph evolved.

However, A Level English Literature asks something more.

It asks you to recognise that intelligent readers do not always agree.

Two critics may examine the same scene, the same quotation and the same character and arrive at different conclusions.

This is AO5.

AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

Importantly, AO5 is not about finding the "correct" critic.

Nor is it about collecting quotations from critics and attaching them mechanically to the end of an essay.

Instead, criticism should help you:

1. refine your ideas;
2. challenge your assumptions;
3. qualify your interpretations;
4. recognise the complexity of literary debate.

Literature becomes a conversation.

And now, you are invited to join it.

Before You Begin

Task:

Without looking back at your paragraph, complete the statements below.

Brutus and Cassius' relationship is founded on genuine friendship because...

Brutus and Cassius' relationship is shaped more by political necessity than genuine friendship because...

If you found yourself agreeing with both statements, you have already begun thinking critically.

Reading 1: Coppelia Khan

Critical interpretations can encourage us to revisit familiar characters from an entirely new perspective.

Task:

Read the extract carefully and annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that support your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge your interpretation;
- ideas that could deepen your understanding of Brutus and Cassius

Extracts: from 'A Modern Perspective: Julius Caesar' (see appendices for full article – page 84)

Of course, Brutus and Cassius differ in character: Brutus wouldn't stoop to the deception Cassius practices by planting in Brutus's study faked petitions from citizens supposedly clamoring for Brutus to topple Caesar. And it wouldn't occur to Cassius to justify Caesar's murder by calling it "a sacrifice." Yet they are equally blinded to the complex politics of Rome by their shared republican mentality. *Julius Caesar* has often been treated almost as a set of individual character studies. And it is true that Shakespeare's "noble Romans" are vividly differentiated. However, they are all conceived within and motivated by a common sense of class identity as patricians and of national identity as Romans defending the Republic.

While Brutus and Cassius ponder their loss of status as Caesar's "underlings" (1.2.148), within earshot a crowd roars for him. Though in person Caesar may fall short of the mystique he generates, he knows how to inspire massive public approval. In contrast, for Brutus and Cassius the people hardly exist. Casca's account of how Caesar refused the crown drips with aristocratic disdain for the "tag-rag people." Yet why, according to him, did the people cheer for Caesar?

. . . still as he refused [the crown] the rabble-
ment hooted and clapped their chopped hands and
threw up their sweaty nightcaps and uttered such a
deal of stinking breath because Caesar refused the
crown. . . .
(1.2.254–58)

Seemingly, the people too are captive to the republican ideal. Then Brutus's fear that "the people / Choose Caesar for their king" must be mistaken. Or is it? For when Caesar "perceived the common herd was glad he refused the crown, he plucked . . . ope his doublet and offered them his throat to cut" (1.2.274–77). He is obviously playing to the grandstands, in what amounts to a parody of serving "the general good," in order to milk the crowd's adoration. But does it lie within the people's power to confer the crown? Evidently not, for it is Antony who offers it, and in the next scene Casca says "the Senators tomorrow / Mean to establish Caesar as a king" (1.3.88–89). The patricians, then, are divided into factions for and against Caesar. But is any faction strong enough to override the people's will? As Antony's funeral oration demonstrates, the man who can convince the masses that Caesar—in high republican fashion—was devoted to *them* can rule Rome. Thus it would appear that republican ideology

can be successfully co-opted by ambitious men like Caesar and Antony. While grasping power for their own interests, they convince those who give it to them that they use it only for “the general good” — thus establishing a set of imagined social relations that masks the real ones.

Brutus sets out to kill Caesar in the conviction that Caesar “would be crowned.” The glimpses of Caesar that Shakespeare allows us neither confirm nor refute this belief. Grandiose but physically infirm, imperious but easily manipulated by flattery, in his last moments he resembles the Caesar of Casca’s account who loves to delude himself and others into thinking that he embodies the selfless, constant servant of the state. “What touches us ourself shall be last served,” he declares (3.1.8), and, refusing entreaties, continues:

But I am constant as the Northern Star,
Of whose true fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament. . . .
Let me a little show it, even in this:
That I was constant Cimber should be banished
And constant do remain to keep him so.
(3.1.66–68, 77–79)

Disturbingly, it is Brutus who most resembles Caesar in playing the republican role. Both Caesar and Brutus are self-conscious about their particular virtues and concerned to display them publicly, no matter what their actual feelings. Caesar wants to be known for his courage. Warning Antony that Cassius’s envy is dangerous, he says, “I rather tell thee what is to be feared / Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar” (1.2.221–22). Alone with his wife, who urges him to heed the portents of disaster and stay home from the Capitol, he speaks of himself in the same ringing tones that mark his public utterance: “Caesar shall forth. The things that threatened me / Ne’er looked but on my back” (2.2.10–11). Brutus, quite similarly, takes pains to make public the moral principles behind his actions. When he is alone, he calls the prospect of murdering Caesar “a dreadful thing” and refers to the “monstrous visage” of conspiracy (2.1.66, 88). But once the conspiracy gathers, he refers only to the “virtue of our enterprise” (2.1.144).

As if to underline similarities between these two adversaries, Shakespeare parallels them in two successive scenes, 2.1. and 2.2. Both characters are shown as uneasy and unable to sleep; both greet the same group of men, shaking hands and naming them: to Brutus, they are fellow conspirators; to Caesar, “good friends.” Each, making a fatally wrong decision, reveals his vanity. Brutus refuses to allow Mark Antony to be killed as well as Caesar because it would make the deed “too bloody,” then rationalizes the inherent, unavoidable bloodiness of murder into a pious, ceremonial sacrifice, “necessary and not envious [i.e., malicious]” (2.1.175–96). Caesar decides to go to the Capitol despite Calphurnia’s warning and allows Decius to flatter him that her dream of his statue running blood symbolizes his miraculous ability to revive Rome (2.2.88–95).

Finally, as Norman Rabkin has noted, Shakespeare presents each character alone with his wife, responding to her suspicion that he is facing some danger. (See Further Reading.) In his other plays based on Roman history, Shakespeare gives women much more prominence than in *Julius Caesar*, where Portia and Calphurnia each speak in only two scenes. In this play Rome is more intensely a man’s world than in Shakespeare’s main sources, Plutarch’s biographies of Caesar, Brutus, and Mark Antony. While Plutarch notes the intermarriages among patricians that held their political alliances together and recounts with relish anecdotes in which women figure prominently, Shakespeare focuses dramatic interest on relations among men. Indeed, in terms of the Republic, to be a Roman means to be gendered male. Our word “virtue” comes from the Latin word *virtus*, meaning both manliness and valor, which is derived from Latin *vir*, man. The virtues promoted by the social and political life of the Republic are also

gendered masculine and considered proper to men alone, as is made clear in the two scenes in which Portia is onstage.

In the first, when Portia begs Brutus to “tell me your counsels,” she asks not for specific information about the conspiracy so much as for intimacy, a sharing of thoughts and feelings based on mutual trust. What keeps Brutus from trusting her is that she is a woman and, according to gender conventions that survive even today, considered incapable of self-restraint and prone to telling secrets. (Brutus refers to the conspirators as “secret Romans that will not palter”—will not shift position and thus divulge the conspiracy.) But Brutus’s Romanness, which is virtually the same as his masculinity, also inhibits him from revealing inner conflict, self-doubt, or vulnerability to anyone, male or female. Portia is as convinced as Brutus that only those who show masculine valor deserve trust, and so she tries to cross the gender barrier by giving herself “a voluntary wound” in the thigh, a simulation of the battle wounds men customarily incurred in defending the Republic, wounds that earned them honor and political office. Though we can infer from her anxiety in 2.4 that Brutus has told her of the conspiracy, that scene indicates her doubts about sustaining the masculine virtue toward which she has aspired, and it shows her reversion to an image of herself as necessarily fearful and untrustworthy because she is a woman: “How hard it is for women to keep counsel! . . . / Ay me, how weak a thing / The heart of woman is!” (2.4.10, 45–46).

The politics of gender in *Julius Caesar* is governed by relations among men, however, rather than between men and women. Male friendships are indistinguishable from politics itself, from which women are formally excluded, and such friendships are strongly marked by rivalry. Pompey and Caesar were political allies before they became enemies; Brutus, though favored by Caesar, plots to kill him; Brutus and Cassius, bound by shared ideals, quarrel bitterly. Cassius’s story of his swimming match with Caesar captures the routine intensity of competition that is central to the formation of men as Romans:

For once, upon a raw and gusty day,
The troubled Tiber chafing with her shores,
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,
Accoutered as I was, I plungèd 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.
(1.2.107–16)

At a key moment in the play, when Brutus tries to justify murdering Caesar, he too evokes the rivalrous world of Roman politics:

. . . 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.
(2.1.23–28)

Because Caesar has gained this “upmost round” and towers “like a Colossus” (1.2.143) above his former peers, they feel their manliness diminished. Cassius laments that “we are governed with our mothers’

spirits. / Our yoke and sufferance show us womanish" (1.3.86–87). In raising their daggers against Caesar, then, they assert their manliness as Romans, and by bringing Caesar down and making him bleed, reduce him, as Gail Paster has shown, to the inferior status of a woman. (See Further Reading.) Brutus persuades himself and the other conspirators that they can dissociate Caesar's spirit from his body, and wishes that it were possible to cut off Caesar's ambition without making him bleed for it. From the assassination scene to the end, however, Caesar's blood and corpse become key images in the contest for power between the conspirators and their opponents. Brutus urges his friends to bathe their hands in Caesar's blood as a sign of "Peace, freedom, and liberty" (3.1.118–22)—the death of a tyrant, the restoration of the Republic. But their opponent Mark Antony cleverly turns their gesture to his own advantage when he plucks the bloody mantle from Caesar's corpse to show the crowd his wounds and "let slip the dogs of war" (299)—*Mark Antony's* war against Brutus and Cassius. It is he who defeats them, through superior military tactics, in the final battle of Philippi, at which both conspirators take their own lives.

Earlier, Brutus had confessed to Cassius that he would commit suicide rather than "be led in triumph / Thorough [i.e., through] the streets of Rome" (5.1.119–20). And Cassius considers it dishonorable to live after he thinks he sees Titinius taken captive. Yet both imply in their last words that Caesar's spirit has taken revenge on them, and many critics have adopted this interpretation, which provides a certain kind of moral closure typical of Elizabethan revenge plays. But we need not seek explanations only in the supernatural realm. Brutus and Cassius, in effect, help to bring about their own downfall through their moral blindnesses and tactical errors, and Mark Antony foments civil war to serve his own interests. Curiously, the "monstrous apparition" that appears to Brutus in his tent on the eve of battle calls itself not Caesar but "Thy evil spirit" and says only "thou shalt see me at Philippi" (4.3.320, 325, 327). Perhaps Shakespeare is implying that Brutus's own fatal error of judgment in thinking that republican liberty could be achieved only by killing Caesar has resulted, quite contrary to his intentions, in evil. Brutus himself is not evil, though his uncompromising idealism carries with it a subtle vanity. We might say that he only carries to a misguided extreme the values and expectations implied in the republican ideals he inherited. As Cicero states, ". . . men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves" (1.3.34–35).

Unpacking Coppelias Khan

Kahn argues that Brutus values honour and political principle above his personal relationships. His commitment to what he believes is right helps to explain why he joins the conspiracy against Caesar, even though he loves him as a friend.

From this perspective, Brutus' tragedy lies in the fact that his greatest strength becomes his greatest weakness. His honour makes him admirable, but it also prevents him from recognising the damage his choices cause to those around him.

However, readers might question whether Brutus' actions are driven only by principle. Shakespeare also presents moments of affection, grief and reconciliation that suggest genuine friendship survives even amid political conflict. Rather than presenting Brutus as either hero or villain, the play encourages audiences to debate whether honour justifies betrayal.

Reflection

Task:

Kahn suggests that Brutus values honour and political principle more than friendship.
To what extent do you agree?

You may wish to consider:

- Does Brutus genuinely care for Cassius?
- Does political duty damage personal loyalty?
- Can audiences admire Brutus whilst criticising his choices?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Task:

Read the model paragraph below.

This is the version developed at the end of Chapter 5 having integrated a comparison with *Hamlet*.

Although Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic, their relationship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of honour, leadership and political duty. Through moments of loyalty, manipulation and reconciliation, Shakespeare suggests that genuine friendship exists alongside ideological division, ultimately revealing the fragility of personal relationships in a world dominated by power and public responsibility.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to judge not only the actions of Brutus and Cassius but the persuasive language through which those actions are justified. Brutus and Cassius are initially presented as allies whose shared commitment to the Republic appears to unite them in a common moral purpose. During their quarrel, Brutus reminds Cassius to "Remember March, the Ides of March remember", invoking the assassination of Caesar as a moment of collective sacrifice undertaken "for justice' sake". For Elizabethan audiences, however, the conspiracy would have represented more than a private disagreement between political allies. By reshaping Roman history through the lens of contemporary anxieties about leadership and tyranny, Shakespeare invites audiences to question whether violence can ever preserve political order or whether it inevitably creates further instability. Positioned at the height of their disagreement, Brutus' repeated appeal to the conspiracy transforms a personal dispute into a debate about honour and political principle. Rather than simply recalling a shared act, his language reinforces the republican ideals that first united the conspirators while exposing the ideological divisions that now threaten to destroy them. Shakespeare therefore presents their relationship as one founded upon shared political conviction, encouraging the audience to question whether genuine friendship can survive when abstract ideals take precedence over personal loyalty. By contrast, Hamlet's prolonged hesitation reveals a protagonist paralysed by moral uncertainty, whereas Brutus acts despite his doubts, suggesting that Shakespeare's tragedies explore both the dangers of excessive reflection and the consequences of unwavering commitment to principle. Brutus' honourable intentions may invite admiration, yet his willingness to subordinate personal loyalty to political ideology ultimately contributes to the destruction of both his friendships and the Republic he seeks to defend.

Task:

Now read the model paragraph below which has been adapted.

Notice how criticism can be woven into an argument rather than attached awkwardly to the end. What has been incorporated links to the prior point (about spectators of the play engaging in political ideas) and is linked to the point that follows (about Brutus and Cassius' relationship, which was the original starting point/idea of this paragraph before it developed).

The sentences have been adapted to ensure it is seamlessly integrated.

It becomes part of the wider discussion.

The additions below have been bolded.

Although Shakespeare presents Brutus and Cassius as men united by a shared commitment to the Republic, their relationship is repeatedly tested by conflicting ideas of honour, leadership and political duty. Through moments of loyalty, manipulation and reconciliation, Shakespeare suggests that genuine friendship exists alongside ideological division, ultimately revealing the fragility of personal relationships in a world dominated by power and public responsibility.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to judge not only the actions of Brutus and Cassius but the persuasive language through which those actions are justified. **Kahn suggests that Brutus' commitment to republican ideals ultimately blinds him to political reality, arguing that he is "not evil, though his uncompromising idealism carries with it a subtle vanity." Rather than diminishing Brutus' nobility, this interpretation complicates it, encouraging audiences to recognise that the very qualities which make him honourable also contribute to the destruction of his friendships and the Republic he seeks to preserve.** Brutus and Cassius are initially presented as allies whose shared commitment to the Republic appears to unite them in a common moral purpose. During their quarrel, Brutus reminds Cassius to **"Remember March, the Ides of March remember"**, invoking the assassination of Caesar as a moment of collective sacrifice undertaken **"for justice' sake."** For Elizabethan audiences, however, the conspiracy would have represented more than a private disagreement between political allies. By reshaping Roman history through the lens of contemporary anxieties about leadership and tyranny, Shakespeare invites audiences to question whether violence can ever preserve political order or whether it inevitably creates further instability. Positioned at the height of their disagreement, Brutus' repeated appeal to the conspiracy transforms a personal dispute into a debate about honour and political principle. Rather than simply recalling a shared act, his language reinforces the republican ideals that first united the conspirators while exposing the ideological divisions that now threaten to destroy them. Shakespeare therefore presents their relationship as one founded upon shared political conviction, encouraging the audience to question whether genuine friendship can survive when abstract ideals take precedence over personal loyalty. By contrast, Hamlet's prolonged hesitation reveals a protagonist paralysed by moral uncertainty, whereas Brutus acts despite his doubts, suggesting that Shakespeare's tragedies explore both the dangers of excessive reflection and the consequences of unwavering commitment to principle. Brutus' honourable intentions may invite admiration, yet his willingness to subordinate personal loyalty to political ideology ultimately contributes to the destruction of both his friendships and the Republic he seeks to defend.

Your Turn

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Looking Back

At the beginning of this booklet, you were invited to think differently about literary study.

Since then, you have learned how to:

- construct arguments (AO1);
- analyse Shakespeare's methods (AO2);
- deepen interpretations through context (AO3);
- broaden ideas through comparison (AO4);
- engage with literary criticism (AO5).

You have also discovered something important.

Great literature rarely produces certainty.

Instead, it invites debate.

It encourages disagreement.

It rewards curiosity.

As you move into A Level English Literature, remember:

- You do not need the "right" answer.
- You need an argument that is thoughtful, supported and open to complexity.

That is what literary study demands.

And that is the conversation you are now ready to join.

What's Next?

You are now to complete your essay – as aforementioned in the introduction, you can hand write or type this.

Important: Whilst this booklet required you to integrate contextual insight (AO3), comparative insight (AO4), and critical insight (AO5) in one main paragraph, you are not expected to include these in all your main paragraphs. You have to be selective and purposeful, avoiding repetition and embedding any of the above just for the sake of it.

Your deadline will be given to you in September, however expect it to be within the first two weeks of the term.

This essay will be marked and feedback will be provided.

Your baseline assessment will be linked to this work where you'll be given a similar essay-style question to respond to – the contextual and critical reading from this bridging unit will be directly relevant for this assessment.

Appendices

Historical Background – Bell Shakespeare

Julius Caesar is one of the plays Shakespeare wrote in an extraordinary burst of creativity in and around 1599.

Much Ado About Nothing, *Henry V*, *As You Like It* and an early draft of *Hamlet* are believed to have also been completed around this time. A performance of *Julius Caesar* is described by Swiss tourist Thomas Platter in his diary in September of 1599. It may have been the play that opened the new Globe Theatre, although *Henry V* and *As You Like It* also vie for that title.

The posthumous First Folio (1623) version is considered the original and only official publication of this text. *Julius Caesar* appears towards the end of the Folio, in the 'tragedies' section. On the contents page it is listed as 'The Life and Death of Julius Caesar'. *Julius Caesar* is one of four plays that use ancient Rome as their backdrop. The others are *Titus Andronicus* (written in the early 1590s), *Antony and Cleopatra* (written around 1606) and *Coriolanus* (written around 1607). Together, the four Roman plays cover a swathe of ancient Roman history, from the early republic (*Coriolanus*) to the fall of the republic (*Julius Caesar*) to the rise of the empire (*Antony and Cleopatra*) to the late empire (*Titus Andronicus*). *Titus* is the only one of the four that is entirely fictional and not based on recorded historical events. As always with historically based works Shakespeare melds fact, fiction, and legend in *Julius Caesar* to produce a challenging, ambivalent drama that reflects some of the issues of Shakespeare's own political climate.

Before writing *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare had written almost all of his history plays and at least seven comedies. This was just his third tragedy, after *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*. It should be noted, however, that Shakespeare's plays usually defy classification. Just as the comedies can delve into the darkness of the human experience, *Julius Caesar* explores love and relationships in many forms. In fact, the word 'love' or its derivatives appear 40 times in the play.

Julius Caesar is political, short (almost half the length of *Hamlet*) and action-driven, but although the second half is dominated by war the play is really about the power of words and rhetoric. Characters are torn down for language, built up by language and manipulated through language. Cinna the poet is killed by the mob just after the Forum scene, a symbolic silencing of truth and art, and when Brutus and Octavius face each other in a parley before battle they fight with words and about words:

Brutus: Words before blows: is it so countrymen?
Octavius: Not that we love words better as you do.
Brutus: Good words are better than bad strokes, Octavius.
Act 5, Scene 1

One of the greatest achievements of *Julius Caesar* is its representation of varied voices from varied classes. We don't just see Rome from the Senate chamber; we hear the opinions, discontent, fears and passions of the cobbler, the plebeian, the ruler, the senator, the artist, the revolutionary and the foot soldier.

The assassination of Caesar works as an axis for the action, and the play is thus split into two parts. The first half poses the question whether unsatisfied subjects should subvert a tyrannous leader by any means necessary, and the second half maps the regret and realisation that violent usurpation is not the answer. What Shakespeare points out is that history makes legends of these fallen leaders, and the legend can be as tough an opponent as a living tyrant.

SHAKESPEARE'S SOURCE

Shakespeare's main source for the text is Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, as published in translation by Thomas North in 1579. Many character and plot details are lifted directly from the source material, and even some of the phrases are copied word for word. But Shakespeare makes the story his own by adjusting characters and situations to suit his needs. Plutarch describes both Cassius and Brutus as 'leane and whitely faced fellows', yet Shakespeare applies this description only to Cassius and presents Brutus as the epitome of male virtue and constancy. Shakespeare shifts the date of Caesar's triumph to six months earlier and has it occur at the same time as the Lupercal, and he also gives Caesar the famous final words "Et tu Brute?" rather than just having him pull his toga over his head in silence as Plutarch does. Shakespeare also has the conspirators assemble at Brutus' house the night before the assassination rather than Cassius', allowing Portia to appeal to Brutus and play on his conscience while his destiny waits on the other side of the door.

SHAKESPEARE AND HISTORY

Shakespeare's central source for *Julius Caesar* was Plutarch's *Lives*. However, as always, he never let the facts stand in the way of a good story.

As in most of his histories, Shakespeare telescopes time. Historically, Caesar's triumph was in October of 45BCE and the Feast of Lupercal on 15th February the following year, however Shakespeare makes these events simultaneous. The assassination of Caesar was a month later historically, but in this play it seems only days later. The Forum scene (Act 3, Scene 2) includes, in one sequence, action that in fact took place in several different places over a period of six weeks, and historically there were nine months between Brutus and Cassius meeting at Sardis and the battle at Philippi. Shakespeare compresses this time gap. Shakespeare also increases the number of wounds on Caesar from 23 to 33 – perhaps a reference that echoes the death-age of Christ.

The 'pulpit' where both Antony and Brutus go to speak is anachronistic – corresponding to an Elizabethan, not a Roman place of public address. Other anachronisms in the play include a striking clock, a book with 'the leaf turned down', and costuming anomalies such as nightcaps and doublets. Shakespeare's era was a time of fascination with what could be learned from antiquity, rather than how accurately history could be reported.

Every question about leadership and tyranny in *Julius Caesar* is in fact a question directed at Shakespeare's own society. For example, the link between Elizabeth and Julius Caesar is clear – a temporal ruler claiming divine rights. In the latter years of her rule, Elizabeth was known in almost mythological terms such as 'Gloriana' (Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queen), and fastidiously controlled the production and dissemination of her image. Caesar was similarly linked to mythology – called the father of Oberon (King of the Fairies) and linked to legendary exploits such as the building of the Tower of London.

Shakespeare's bending of history was not a new concept. Plutarch, in his introduction to the life of Alexander the Great in *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, reminds the reader: "My intent is not to write histories, but only lives... Oftentimes a light occasion, a word, or some sport makes men's natural

dispositions and manners appear more plain than the famous battles won, wherein are slain ten thousand men, or the great armies or cities won by siege or assault.”

The Renaissance Theatre – Eric Rasmussen

In the late summer of 1597, a monster emerged from the humid stench of London’s Bankside. News of the monster quickly reached Robert Cecil, Secretary of State to Queen Elizabeth. Cecil determined that the monster was a threat to national security and arranged for its swift destruction. The nest where it had bred was raided and neutralised; the people who had nurtured it were called to account and imprisoned. The monster in question was a satirical play called *The Isle of Dogs*. Its co-author, Thomas Nash acknowledged that in writing the play he’d created a monster: ‘it was no sooner borne but I was glad to run from it’. No copy of the play exists today, so we can only guess at its contents. But the Privy Council clearly viewed it as ‘seditious’ and ordered not only that the dramatists and actors be imprisoned but that all theatres in the city be closed for months as a punishment. This governmental response may seem like overkill, but the Queen and her enforcers were keenly aware of the potential danger posed by theatre’s ability to subvert cultural norms. In Renaissance England, the development of theatre paralleled, and may have helped to spark, dramatic, culture-wide shifts in religious, economic, social, sexual and even political perspectives.

Theatre historian Andrew Gurr has estimated that as many as 50 million people paid to see live theatre in London during the golden age of English Renaissance drama. London loved theatre. And with theatre’s popularity came a reorganising of social strata in which class divisions were no longer safe. After all, William Shakespeare, the son of a Stratford glover, earned enough in a decade of playmaking and acting to buy a share in a theatrical company as well as an opulent house in Stratford-upon-Avon. He even applied to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms. When the request was granted, Shakespeare effectively entered the nobility. This social step epitomises the potentially subversive nature of theatre: it allowed the playmaker son of an artisan father to style himself a gentleman.

Restrictions

Governmental authorities understood the potential disruptions public theatre could cause in a well-ordered cultural hierarchy, so took steps to control the performances of plays from the very beginning. As early as 1574, even before the first theatre was built, the Lord Mayor of London and the Common Council laid heavy restrictions on the times, places, contents and purposes of theatrical entertainments. Although the municipal government was decidedly anti-theatre, its animosity had little effect. Beginning with the construction of the first purpose-built playhouse in 1576 until the closing of the theatres in 1642, theatre’s popularity and commercial success steadily increased.

Subversive playwrights

The successful playwrights who emerged during this period were a decidedly subversive group. There was Christopher Marlowe, accused of being an atheist, suspected of homosexual tendencies, an ex-spy who was murdered at age 29 in the suspicious company of other spies. There was Ben Jonson, who had been apprenticed to his bricklayer stepfather as a youth, soldiered in the Low Countries, killed a fellow actor in a duel and became a Catholic while in prison for the killing. And there was George Wilkins, a thug who had a long arrest record for brutal assaults (including kicking a pregnant woman in the belly). Wilkins was Shakespeare’s landlord in London, and collaborated with him on *Pericles*.

When Sir Francis Walsingham formed an acting company under the patronage of Queen Elizabeth, he dictated that plays written for and performed by the Company of Players, the Queen’s Men, should feature

patriotic representations of English history with wholesome Protestant morals, and ought to be written in stately verse. Although some early playwrights adhered to this party line, Marlowe broke frame to take serious risks: writing about a Mongol warlord, Tamburlaine – in blank verse, no less. More seriously, whereas the government had called for morality plays with English heroes, Marlowe's foreign infidel repeatedly commits heinously amoral acts and is never struck down by the hand of divine justice. And Marlowe's Tamburlaine was a runaway success.

Even when Marlowe wrote apparently orthodox plays, he still found ways to push against the government's expectations, as well as societal conventions. Doctor Faustus, his best-known work, presents itself as a familiar moral tale of the perils of pride and excessive learning, and yet somehow manages to question the very legitimacy of that moral dramatic framework. The Massacre at Paris, perhaps Marlowe's most obscure play, disrupts expectations in similar ways. The play promises to be a fairly straightforward, nationalistic condemnation of Frenchness and Catholicism. Unsurprisingly, in the course of the play this expected straightforwardness collapses into recognisably Marlovian political angling and moral shades of grey.

Shakespeare was influenced by Marlowe's subversion of form and subject matter. The two may have collaborated on King Henry VI Parts 1–3, choosing as their subject a weak and ineffectual monarch in a decidedly unpatriotic series of plays. Much like Marlowe's earlier Edward II, Shakespeare's own Richard II deals with the deposition of another inept king. The scene in which Richard is forced to yield his crown was omitted from printed versions of the play throughout Elizabeth's reign, and was perhaps left out in performance as well – no doubt the official government censor, known as the Master of the Revels, did not wish to encourage audiences to contemplate removing a sitting monarch, given the Queen's advanced age and debatable fitness for rule. Indeed, when the Earl of Essex planned a coup to overthrow Elizabeth, his henchmen commissioned Shakespeare's acting company to perform Richard II, presumably to get Londoners in the mood for a forced deposition. Although the rebellion failed, theatre's potential for political subversion was clearly understood.

Many of Shakespeare's plays actually deal with unstable political situations, especially those commonly referred to as the 'great tragedies'. Hamlet's famous indecision originates in the death of Denmark's monarch; Macbeth's plot involves two separate regicides, though both occur offstage. King Lear provides some of Shakespeare's most complex reflections on the nature of kingship. The image of the 'poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old' Lear (3.2.20) wandering mad on the heath may not have unsettled James I, devoted fan of theatre as he was. But it certainly does raise questions about the actual differences between monarch and subject, questions that resonate with performers, critics and students to this day. The extant manuscript of Sir Thomas More – a play to which Shakespeare contributed a few speeches – gives us a peek of insight into the type of subversive material that the censor was on the lookout for. The Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, has written on the first page of the manuscript 'leave out the insurrection wholly'. The government was obviously concerned that a stage representation of a riot by unemployed Londoners against foreign workers who had taken their jobs might breed real riots in the theatres and the streets of the city.

All plays performed in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre had to be approved by the Master of the Revels, with the curious exception of those staged by the Children of the Queen's Revels, a company of boy actors under the patronage of Queen Anne, for whom the poet Samuel Daniel was appointed as the official licenser of plays. Dramatists flocked to this company where they (rightly) assumed that a sympathetic fellow writer would be more likely to allow subversive plays to be staged than a rigorous government censor. In 1605, Ben Jonson, George Chapman and John Marston went so far as to make fun of King James's Scottish accent in Eastward Ho! (Jonson and Chapman were subsequently imprisoned and 'in danger of having their ears and noses slit' as punishment, all the while blaming the offensive passages on

Marston.) In the following year, John Day's *Isles of Gulls*, a thinly veiled attack on the government, occasioned such a scandalous uproar that the playwright and entire cast of boys were imprisoned. Whereas casting conventions called for boys to perform women's roles, the trope of the cross-dressing character called for a female character to don a male disguise. Thus, a boy actor taking the role of Portia in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* would, in the course of the action, cross-dress as a woman for the part of Portia, then cross-dress again (or back?) when Portia adopts the persona of Balthazar. This fluidity leads, in several of Shakespeare's plays, to highly fascinating reflections on the relationship between gender, performance and identity; more importantly to Renaissance London, it would have further ruffled Puritan feathers. But the Puritans would ultimately get their revenge, and certainly the last laugh, when they came to power and succeeded in closing the theatres in 1642.

Religion

Religion was another favoured target of theatrical satire, and one that was seemingly tolerated by the Master of the Revels. Characters such as Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* and Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* exaggerated extremist Puritanism for comedic effect. Roman Catholicism was usually represented with more seriousness, but hardly more concern for psychological realism. In Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, the outwardly Catholic Duke of Guise reveals in his first soliloquy that he is in fact one of Marlowe's trademark atheist villains. In Shakespeare's *King John*, Cardinal Pandolf acts as the Pope's proxy, repeatedly acting against England's interests. Sometimes, of course, Puritans were represented seriously, and Catholics were represented comedically; for instance, one scene in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* has Faustus use his new magical powers to beat and abuse the Pope, a scene clearly written for laughs. The theatre used humour to skewer Puritans and slander to skewer Catholics: the common denominator was irreverence.

Cross-Dressing

The Puritans deeply disapproved of the theatrical practice of cross-dressing female roles. Women were not part of the theatrical guilds, so acting companies cast boys in most women's parts. This practice represented the ultimate in theatrical deception to religious eyes: boys were not women, and presenting boys in the guise of women misled audiences, both about boys' natures and women's natures. When playwrights and companies realised that this casting habit bothered the Puritans, they predictably leaned into it. With increasing frequency from the 1590s onward, English Renaissance plays deployed not only cross-dressing actors but cross-dressing characters as well.

A Modern Perspective: Julius Caesar – Coppelia Khan

When Cassius tries to persuade his friend Brutus that they must halt Julius Caesar's rise to power, Cassius speaks of an idealized "Rome" of the past in which kingship was unthinkable:

Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods! . . .
O, you and I have heard our fathers say
There was a Brutus once that would have brooked
Th' eternal devil to keep his state in Rome
As easily as a king.
(1.2.160, 167–70)

A few scenes later (2.1), Brutus wrestles with the question of whether Caesar intends to become king, and recalls his own namesake:

My ancestors did from the streets of Rome
The Tarquin drive when he was called a king.
(2.1.56–57)

As many in Shakespeare's audience might have known, Rome began as a kingship that lasted some 150 years until Lucius Junius Brutus, ancestor of this play's Brutus, led an uprising in 510 B.C.E. that drove the reigning dynasty from Rome, abolished kingship itself, and established the Roman Republic. Both Cassius and Brutus equate Rome with the Republic and the values it purports to embody. They see themselves as Romans because they believe in the Republic and because they repudiate kingship so that power can be shared among the elected rulers, the aristocratic patricians who make up the Senate, and the people. Then, supposedly, no one man can dominate Rome; all male citizens will be free, and equal. (The government of the United States, in which power is shared among the president, the Congress, and the Supreme Court, is modeled on the Roman Republic, and the pledge of allegiance to the flag mentions "the republic . . . with liberty and justice for all.") Brutus, once he is convinced that Caesar "would be crowned," sees himself as destined to repeat his ancestor's heroic mission: by killing Caesar, he will, he thinks, restore the true "Rome"—the Republic.

The Roman Republic, however, never existed in the pure form in which the conspirators imagine it, and the reign of terror unleashed by their assassination of Caesar gave rise precisely to the rule of "one man" that they hoped to prevent. Octavius Caesar became sole emperor of Rome by defeating the conspirators in the final battle at Philippi in 42 B.C.E. and then by conquering his former ally Antony at Actium in 31 B.C.E. This is the play's tragic irony, and some knowledge of Roman history can help us to appreciate it.

In the century or so preceding the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.E., the Roman Republic endured almost constant upheavals. The reforms in land ownership introduced between 134 and 122 B.C.E. provoked fierce resistance from the patrician class, and those who introduced the reforms were killed after armed battles between their followers and those defending the Senate. The senators regained power for a time, but then two rival generals, Marius, in 107 B.C.E., and Sulla, in 88 B.C.E., took control. Each with his massive armies occupied Rome; each carried out a reign of terror—largely under republican law—in which his political opponents were openly slaughtered.

Next came Pompey, who acquired the surname *Magnus*, meaning "the great," by helping Sulla destroy Marius. (In the play's first scene, the tribunes recall Pompey as Julius Caesar's predecessor.) Granted extraordinary powers by the Senate, Pompey swept the Mediterranean clean of pirates and defeated Mithradates VI, king of Pontus, making himself in effect the uncrowned emperor of Rome's eastern provinces. Locked in rivalry with Julius Caesar, who defeated him at Pharsalus in 48 B.C.E., Pompey held more power and authority than any one man in Rome had ever had. The Republic never, for more than brief periods, functioned as it was supposed to—as a combination of monarchy (in the consuls), oligarchy (in the Senate), and democracy that, by keeping all three forms of power in balance, would prevent the worst tendencies of each. Instead, the Republic fostered the division of the aristocracy into factions and the rise of military superheroes whose armies were loyal to them rather than to the Republic.

The republican ideal that Cassius evokes to seduce Brutus into opposing Caesar, and that Brutus uses to justify murder, is closer to myth than to history (though it was also dearly cherished as an ideal even during the worst conflicts of the republican era). Or we might call it an ideology, which, according to Louis Althusser, is a set of imagined relations as opposed to the actual political conditions of Rome. Cassius correctly assumes that Brutus shares this ideology. As "noble bloods" of the ruling elite, both Cassius and Brutus believe themselves to have earned their reputations as "honorable men" by serving the state. That

Caesar, one of their own class, has outstripped them in the ordinary course of advancement through state offices (the *cursus honorum*, or “racetrack” of honors) is an affront to their honor as Romans. Of course, Brutus and Cassius differ in character: Brutus wouldn’t stoop to the deception Cassius practices by planting in Brutus’s study faked petitions from citizens supposedly clamoring for Brutus to topple Caesar. And it wouldn’t occur to Cassius to justify Caesar’s murder by calling it “a sacrifice.” Yet they are equally blinded to the complex politics of Rome by their shared republican mentality. *Julius Caesar* has often been treated almost as a set of individual character studies. And it is true that Shakespeare’s “noble Romans” are vividly differentiated. However, they are all conceived within and motivated by a common sense of class identity as patricians and of national identity as Romans defending the Republic.

While Brutus and Cassius ponder their loss of status as Caesar’s “underlings” (1.2.148), within earshot a crowd roars for him. Though in person Caesar may fall short of the mystique he generates, he knows how to inspire massive public approval. In contrast, for Brutus and Cassius the people hardly exist. Casca’s account of how Caesar refused the crown drips with aristocratic disdain for the “tag-rag people.” Yet why, according to him, did the people cheer for Caesar?

. . . still as he refused [the crown] the rabble-
ment hooted and clapped their chopped hands and
threw up their sweaty nightcaps and uttered such a
deal of stinking breath because Caesar refused the
crown. . . .
(1.2.254–58)

Seemingly, the people too are captive to the republican ideal. Then Brutus’s fear that “the people / Choose Caesar for their king” must be mistaken. Or is it? For when Caesar “perceived the common herd was glad he refused the crown, he plucked . . . ope his doublet and offered them his throat to cut” (1.2.274–77). He is obviously playing to the grandstands, in what amounts to a parody of serving “the general good,” in order to milk the crowd’s adoration. But does it lie within the people’s power to confer the crown? Evidently not, for it is Antony who offers it, and in the next scene Casca says “the Senators tomorrow / Mean to establish Caesar as a king” (1.3.88–89). The patricians, then, are divided into factions for and against Caesar. But is any faction strong enough to override the people’s will? As Antony’s funeral oration demonstrates, the man who can convince the masses that Caesar—in high republican fashion—was devoted to *them* can rule Rome. Thus it would appear that republican ideology can be successfully co-opted by ambitious men like Caesar and Antony. While grasping power for their own interests, they convince those who give it to them that they use it only for “the general good”—thus establishing a set of imagined social relations that masks the real ones.

Brutus sets out to kill Caesar in the conviction that Caesar “would be crowned.” The glimpses of Caesar that Shakespeare allows us neither confirm nor refute this belief. Grandiose but physically infirm, imperious but easily manipulated by flattery, in his last moments he resembles the Caesar of Casca’s account who loves to delude himself and others into thinking that he embodies the selfless, constant servant of the state. “What touches us ourself shall be last served,” he declares (3.1.8), and, refusing entreaties, continues:

But I am constant as the Northern Star,
Of whose true fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament. . . .
Let me a little show it, even in this:
That I was constant Cimber should be banished
And constant do remain to keep him so.
(3.1.66–68, 77–79)

Disturbingly, it is Brutus who most resembles Caesar in playing the republican role. Both Caesar and Brutus are self-conscious about their particular virtues and concerned to display them publicly, no matter what their actual feelings. Caesar wants to be known for his courage. Warning Antony that Cassius's envy is dangerous, he says, "I rather tell thee what is to be feared / Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar" (1.2.221–22). Alone with his wife, who urges him to heed the portents of disaster and stay home from the Capitol, he speaks of himself in the same ringing tones that mark his public utterance: "Caesar shall forth. The things that threatened me / Ne'er looked but on my back" (2.2.10–11). Brutus, quite similarly, takes pains to make public the moral principles behind his actions. When he is alone, he calls the prospect of murdering Caesar "a dreadful thing" and refers to the "monstrous visage" of conspiracy (2.1.66, 88). But once the conspiracy gathers, he refers only to the "virtue of our enterprise" (2.1.144).

As if to underline similarities between these two adversaries, Shakespeare parallels them in two successive scenes, 2.1. and 2.2. Both characters are shown as uneasy and unable to sleep; both greet the same group of men, shaking hands and naming them: to Brutus, they are fellow conspirators; to Caesar, "good friends." Each, making a fatally wrong decision, reveals his vanity. Brutus refuses to allow Mark Antony to be killed as well as Caesar because it would make the deed "too bloody," then rationalizes the inherent, unavoidable bloodiness of murder into a pious, ceremonial sacrifice, "necessary and not envious [i.e., malicious]" (2.1.175–96). Caesar decides to go to the Capitol despite Calphurnia's warning and allows Decius to flatter him that her dream of his statue running blood symbolizes his miraculous ability to revive Rome (2.2.88–95).

Finally, as Norman Rabkin has noted, Shakespeare presents each character alone with his wife, responding to her suspicion that he is facing some danger. (See Further Reading.) In his other plays based on Roman history, Shakespeare gives women much more prominence than in *Julius Caesar*, where Portia and Calphurnia each speak in only two scenes. In this play Rome is more intensely a man's world than in Shakespeare's main sources, Plutarch's biographies of Caesar, Brutus, and Mark Antony. While Plutarch notes the intermarriages among patricians that held their political alliances together and recounts with relish anecdotes in which women figure prominently, Shakespeare focuses dramatic interest on relations among men. Indeed, in terms of the Republic, to be a Roman means to be gendered male. Our word "virtue" comes from the Latin word *virtus*, meaning both manliness and valor, which is derived from Latin *vir*, man. The virtues promoted by the social and political life of the Republic are also gendered masculine and considered proper to men alone, as is made clear in the two scenes in which Portia is onstage.

In the first, when Portia begs Brutus to "tell me your counsels," she asks not for specific information about the conspiracy so much as for intimacy, a sharing of thoughts and feelings based on mutual trust. What keeps Brutus from trusting her is that she is a woman and, according to gender conventions that survive even today, considered incapable of self-restraint and prone to telling secrets. (Brutus refers to the conspirators as "secret Romans that will not palter"—will not shift position and thus divulge the conspiracy.) But Brutus's Romanness, which is virtually the same as his masculinity, also inhibits him from revealing inner conflict, self-doubt, or vulnerability to anyone, male or female. Portia is as convinced as Brutus that only those who show masculine valor deserve trust, and so she tries to cross the gender barrier by giving herself "a voluntary wound" in the thigh, a simulation of the battle wounds men customarily incurred in defending the Republic, wounds that earned them honor and political office. Though we can infer from her anxiety in 2.4 that Brutus has told her of the conspiracy, that scene indicates her doubts about sustaining the masculine virtue toward which she has aspired, and it shows her reversion to an image of herself as necessarily fearful and untrustworthy because she is a woman: "How hard it is for women to keep counsel! . . . / Ay me, how weak a thing / The heart of woman is!" (2.4.10, 45–46).

The politics of gender in *Julius Caesar* is governed by relations among men, however, rather than between men and women. Male friendships are indistinguishable from politics itself, from which women are

formally excluded, and such friendships are strongly marked by rivalry. Pompey and Caesar were political allies before they became enemies; Brutus, though favored by Caesar, plots to kill him; Brutus and Cassius, bound by shared ideals, quarrel bitterly. Cassius's story of his swimming match with Caesar captures the routine intensity of competition that is central to the formation of men as Romans:

For once, upon a raw and gusty day,
The troubled Tiber chafing with her shores,
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,
Accoutered 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.
(1.2.107–16)

At a key moment in the play, when Brutus tries to justify murdering Caesar, he too evokes the rivalrous world of Roman politics:

. . . 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.
(2.1.23–28)

Because Caesar has gained this "upmost round" and towers "like a Colossus" (1.2.143) above his former peers, they feel their manliness diminished. Cassius laments that "we are governed with our mothers' spirits. / Our yoke and sufferance show us womanish" (1.3.86–87). In raising their daggers against Caesar, then, they assert their manliness as Romans, and by bringing Caesar down and making him bleed, reduce him, as Gail Paster has shown, to the inferior status of a woman. (See Further Reading.)

Brutus persuades himself and the other conspirators that they can dissociate Caesar's spirit from his body, and wishes that it were possible to cut off Caesar's ambition without making him bleed for it. From the assassination scene to the end, however, Caesar's blood and corpse become key images in the contest for power between the conspirators and their opponents. Brutus urges his friends to bathe their hands in Caesar's blood as a sign of "Peace, freedom, and liberty" (3.1.118–22)—the death of a tyrant, the restoration of the Republic. But their opponent Mark Antony cleverly turns their gesture to his own advantage when he plucks the bloody mantle from Caesar's corpse to show the crowd his wounds and "let slip the dogs of war" (299)—*Mark Antony's* war against Brutus and Cassius. It is he who defeats them, through superior military tactics, in the final battle of Philippi, at which both conspirators take their own lives.

Earlier, Brutus had confessed to Cassius that he would commit suicide rather than "be led in triumph / Thorough [i.e., through] the streets of Rome" (5.1.119–20). And Cassius considers it dishonorable to live after he thinks he sees Titinius taken captive. Yet both imply in their last words that Caesar's spirit has taken revenge on them, and many critics have adopted this interpretation, which provides a certain kind of moral closure typical of Elizabethan revenge plays. But we need not seek explanations only in the supernatural realm. Brutus and Cassius, in effect, help to bring about their own downfall through their

moral blindnesses and tactical errors, and Mark Antony foments civil war to serve his own interests. Curiously, the “monstrous apparition” that appears to Brutus in his tent on the eve of battle calls itself not Caesar but “Thy evil spirit” and says only “thou shalt see me at Philippi” (4.3.320, 325, 327). Perhaps Shakespeare is implying that Brutus’s own fatal error of judgment in thinking that republican liberty could be achieved only by killing Caesar has resulted, quite contrary to his intentions, in evil. Brutus himself is not evil, though his uncompromising idealism carries with it a subtle vanity. We might say that he only carries to a misguided extreme the values and expectations implied in the republican ideals he inherited. As Cicero states, “. . . men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves” (1.3.34–35).