A Closer Look at

"Romans, countrymen, and lovers..."

This speech is spoken by Brutus in Act 3, Scene 2 of *Julius Caesar.*

Who's Brutus?

Shakespeare's character is based on a real person. Marcus Junius Brutus was a Roman politician who lived from 85-42 BCE. Brutus had a famous ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, whom many credited with banishing Rome's last tyrant/king and establishing the Roman Republic. Shakespeare has the characters in the play embrace this tradition. This amplifies the impact of Brutus's participation in the assassination plot.

Although Shakespeare's play is called *Julius Caesar,* Brutus is often considered the central character, or protagonist. Brutus faces the main dilemma of the play: whether it is right to kill Caesar to protect Rome. Brutus believes that Caesar could turn the Roman Republic into an autocracy, which means a government ruled by one person with absolute power.

Brutus wrestles with the dilemma through a soliloquy, a speech directly to the audience while the character is alone on stage. Brutus's central importance to the play is also clear in the narrative arc. The title character, Caesar, dies about halfway through the play, while the story isn't resolved until Brutus dies at the end of the play.

What's happening when this speech is spoken?

After struggling with the moral and ethical considerations of assassinating Caesar, Brutus has joined the conspiracy. On the morning of March 15, 44 BCE as many as 60 senators participated in the killing. The assassins, who called themselves 'liberators' believed that the people of Rome would celebrate them for preserving their freedom. However, the assassination was met with fear, confusion, and chaos. The following speech is Brutus's effort to justify the assassination to the people of Rome.

The scene

In some descriptions of this scene from Shakespeare's play, this speech is delivered to the crowd attending Caesar's state funeral. In other descriptions, this speech comes to calm an angry, frightened mob. How do these different ideas affect your understanding of the speech?

The speech

Romans, countrymen, and lovers! hear me for my cause, and be silent, that you may hear: believe me for mine honour, and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe: censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses, that you may the better judge. If there be any in this assembly, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say, that Brutus' love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: --Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him: but, as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love; joy for his fortune; honour for his valour; and death for his ambition. Who is here so base that would be a bondman? If any, speak; for him have I offended.Who is here so rude that would not be a Roman? If any, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so vile that will not love his country? If any, speak; for him have I offended. I pause for a reply.

The people respond with, "None, Brutus! None!"

Then none have I offended. I have done no more to Caesar than you shall do to Brutus. The question of his death is enrolled in the Capitol; his glory not extenuated, wherein he was worthy, nor his offences enforced, for which he suffered death.

Marc Antony now enters with Caesar's body.

Here comes his body, mourned by Mark Antony: who, though he had no hand in his death, shall receive the benefit of his dying, a place in the commonwealth; as which of you shall not? With this I depart, – that, as I slew my best lover for the good of Rome, I have the same dagger for myself, when it shall please my country to need my death.

The speech: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?

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I pause for a reply.

The Crowd responds, "None, Brutus, none!"
And Brutus continues...

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I have done no more to Caesar than you shall do to Brutus.

The question of his death is enrolled in the Capitol;

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Antony enters with Caesar's body

Here comes his body, mourned by Mark Antony: who, though he had no hand in his death, shall receive the benefit of his dying, a place in the commonwealth; as which of you shall not?

With this I depart, – that, as I slew my best lover for the good of Rome, I have the same dagger for myself, when it shall please my country to need my death.

The Crowd responds, "Live, Brutus! Live! Live!" Some even say things like, "Bring him in triumph home unto his house!" and "Give him a statue with his ancestors!" and even "Let him be Caesar!"

Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

lovers – although this now usually concerns romantic love, the earliest meaning was friends
cause – a principle or goal that someone will defend because of a deep commitment
honour – first it's a noun, meaning great respect, esteem, or good reputation
censure – here it simply means judge
assembly – a gathering of people
rejoice – to feel or show great delight
valiant – brave and bold
honour – here it's a verb, meaning demonstrate due respect or reverence
slew – killed; it's the past tense of slay
valour – bravery, especially in the face of danger
base – low in the social scale
bondman – someone who is enslaved or otherwise forced to work without payment
vile – shameful, or worthy of contempt
enrolled – recorded or legally entered
Capitol – the geographical and political centre of ancient Rome; later used for other legislative buildings
glory – high renown or honour won by notable achievements
extenuated – lessened or toned down
wherein – in which
enforced – here it means emphasized, made important
mourned – lamented or grieved over
commonwealth – state, nation, or community
dagger – a short knife with a pointed, edged blade used as a weapon



Explore the language

Unlike a lot of Shakespeare speeches, this one is in prose, not verse. What effect does that have?

Explore the words

Step 1:

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?

Step 2:

- What's the effect of this language?

Explore the thoughts

Step 1:

- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change?

Step 2:

- What might the length of the thoughts tell you about what's happening for this character? Why do you think Brutus makes these choices?

Challenge the words

Theatre artists often make adjustments to the language as they prepare Shakespeare's plays for performance. Sometimes these are minor tweaks, while sometimes they're major adaptations. It all depends on what the artists hope to explore and express through their productions.

Shakespeare wrote his plays and poems more than 400 years ago, and his experience of the world was different from ours today. The meaning of words changes over time, as does their resonance. We encourage you to explore and interpret Shakespeare's language in your own ways, to discover how it resonates for you.

What do you do when specific words or phrases in Shakespeare's text feel hurtful or problematic? What about language that doesn't include you, or everyone you would like to include?

- In the speech above, is there anything you would want to challenge? For example, Brutus refers to the crowd as men, and uses the male pronoun when referring to an imagined individual. Do you think the only people listening to Brutus are men? What if a production of the play is given a different setting in a different era? Does that change anything?
- Is there any language you find discriminatory or problematic? What solutions do you propose?

Explore the ideas

Brutus delivers this speech as justification for the political assassination of Julius Caesar. Look carefully at the details of Brutus's argument, and think about the act of violence.

- What do you think about political violence? Is it ever justified to assassinate a leader?
- What do you think of the reasons Brutus lays out for choosing this course of action?
- Why do you think the crowd is persuaded? What techniques can you spot that Brutus uses to convince them?
- Can you think of a time when someone changed your mind because of the way they spoke? What techniques did they use to persuade you?
- What techniques do you use when trying to change someone's mind?

Explore the character

If time allows, compare this speech with that of Marc Antony (Act 3, Scene 2, lines 82-266. This is the speech that Antony delivers right after Brutus speaks, with many interruptions from the crowd.)

- What do you think about Brutus's strategy when giving this speech? What do you think this reveals about the character?
- What do you think of how people respond?
- What is your opinion of the assassination of Julius Caesar and of Brutus's justification for it?