Character Explorer:

Brutus from *Julius Caesar*

Who is Brutus?

Marcus Junius Brutus was a historical figure, a Roman politician who lived from 85-42 BCE. He claimed that one of his ancestors was Lucius Junius Brutus, who according to some legends defeated the last Roman king, Tarquin, and founded the Roman Republic. Shakespeare incorporated this idea in creating his character Brutus. At the start of the play, Brutus is one of many Roman senators concerned about Julius Caesar's growing power and the threat it poses to the political system of Rome. Many historians acknowledge that Caesar would probably have been assassinated regardless of Brutus's participation. However, the admiration people had for Brutus as well as his ancestor's legacy gave the conspiracy legitimacy. With Brutus involved, it was easier for people to believe that the assassins acted for the good of Rome, not just for selfish political gain.

What happens with Brutus in *Julius Caesar*

At the beginning of the play, friends and fellow Roman senators Brutus and Cassius discuss their concerns about Julius Caesar's growing power. After defeating Pompey in a civil war, Caesar has been named dictator for life, and many senators fear that the people of Rome will make Caesar a king. Cassius complains about the honours that are heaped on Caesar, believing that Caesar is no better than they are. Brutus expresses concerns about the threat to Rome and its civic principles. Brutus and Cassius agree to talk more later, but only after another senator, Casca, describes how Caesar was offered a crown three times, but refused it each time. According to Casca, this only made the people love Caesar more.

Later that evening, Brutus wrestles with the moral and ethical questions of assassinating Caesar, whom Brutus considers a friend. The only justification Brutus can find is pre-emptive action. In other words, Brutus decides to participate in the assassination to prevent Caesar's inevitable turn towards tyranny. Cassius and the other conspirators arrive at Brutus's house and they finalize their plans.

The following day in the Senate House, the conspirators surround and stab Caesar. Brutus is the last one to act, and Shakespeare gives Caesar famous last words, "*Et tu, Brute?* Then fall Caesar." (The first part is Latin and means 'You too, Brutus?) Brutus and the other conspirators declare that tyranny is dead and celebrate the act that they believe will ensure liberty for their fellow Romans. When Caesar's friend, Marc Antony, asks to speak at Caesar's funeral, Brutus agrees, despite Cassius's misgivings about how Antony might move the people to anger about Caesar's death.

At the funeral, Brutus speaks first, explaining why the conspirators acted for the good of Rome. The people are convinced, and praise Brutus, some even shouting, "Let him be Caesar!" However, Marc Antony's subsequent speech is so moving and persuasive that the people break out in riots, vowing to kill all the conspirators and burn down their houses. Brutus, Cassius, and the other conspirators must flee Rome.

In the civil war that follows, armies led by Brutus and Cassius are defeated by the forces led by Antony and Caesar's nephew and adopted heir, Octavius. In the face of this defeat, both Cassius and Brutus die by suicide. The play ends with Antony honouring Brutus while Octavius plans to divide the spoils of victory.

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Things others say about Brutus

The ways Brutus is talked about can illuminate aspects of the character.

O, he sits high in all the people's hearts, And that which would appear offense in us His countenance, like richest alchemy, Will change to virtue and to worthiness.	Soul of Rome, Brave son derived from honorable loins, Thou like an exorcist hast conjured up My mortified spirit.
Brutus, this sober form of yours hides wrongs.	No, my Brutus, You have some sick offense within your mind.
Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel.	Brutus hath rived my heart.
This was the noblest Roman of them all. All the conspirators save only he Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.	His life was gentle and the elements So mixed in him that nature might stand up And say to all the world "This was a man."

Some things Brutus says throughout the play

Lines that a character speaks can reveal details about their personality and relationships with other characters. The lines below are listed in the order that they appear in the play.

1. Poor Brutus, with himself at war,
   Forgets the shows of love to other men.
2. Let the gods so speed me as I love
   The name of honor more than I fear death.
3. It is the bright day that brings forth the adder,
   And that craves wary walking.
4. Think him as a serpent's egg,
   Which, hatched, would, as his kind, grow mischievous,
   And kill him in the shell.
5. Let us not break with him,
   For he will never follow anything
   That other men begin.
6. Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,
   Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.
7. Ambition's debt is paid
8. As Caesar loved me, I weep for him. As he was fortunate, I rejoice at it. As he was valiant, I honor him. But, as he was ambitious, I slew him.
9. I have the same dagger for myself when it shall please my country to need my death.
10. I had rather be a dog and bay the moon
    Than such a Roman.
11. There is a tide in the affairs of men
    Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
    Omitted, all the voyage of their life
    Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
12. My heart doth joy that yet in all my life
    I found no man but he was true to me.

Challenging assumptions about Brutus

The historical Brutus was famously aligned with the philosophy of Stoicism. While this can illuminate aspects of Brutus's character, it can also be a pitfall. A common misconception suggests that Stoics suppress their emotions. This is not an accurate understanding of the original Stoic philosophers. The goal of Stoicism was to lead a virtuous life in service of the community and of the greater good. Followers of this philosophy regarded reason as the most powerful tool for developing and nurturing these pro-social virtues, regardless of events around them. In other words, Stoicism uses reason to focus attention on what can be changed – including our own attitudes and responses, rather than on forces outside one's control. Rather than suppressing emotions, the goal was to avoid being controlled by them. Stoic philosophy later influenced early cognitive psychotherapies, including approaches that evolved into practices such as cognitive behavioral therapy.

In the theatre, the mistaken assumption that stoicism means emotional restraint can lead to a flat performance. A more compelling approach explores Brutus's efforts to follow this philosophy amid the complex challenges, momentous decisions, and catastrophic losses that fill the play. Watching Brutus struggle to live up to the ideals of Stoicism while experiencing big emotions makes for great theatre.

What do you think?

The assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE was a major turning point in the history of western civilization. While the conspirators may have been motivated by the desire to preserve the Roman Republic, their actions had the opposite effect. The ensuing political instability and civil unrest hastened the fall of the Republic and made it possible for Octavius to become Rome's first emperor, Augustus Caesar. This transformed the constitutional Republic into an autocratic empire. Generations of scholars, philosophers, and school children, including a young William Shakespeare, have debated whether Brutus and the other conspirators were justified in their decision to assassinate Caesar. Shakespeare's play doesn't seem to take a particular position. Instead, it raises questions and leaves room for us to answer them. So what do you think?

- Why do you think it was important to Cassius and the other conspirators that Brutus join their cause?
- What were the pros and cons of taking this bold action? From your perspective, how does Brutus decide what's right?
- Do you think Brutus and the other conspirators made the right decision? Is there ever any justification for political violence?
- Have you ever faced a difficult decision? How do you decide what's right?

Make It Your Own

Now it's your turn! Read through the information about Brutus on the previous pages. Then, using these words, lines, and the story, choose activities from the list below to explore your own interpretations and collaborate with Shakespeare. You can also consult the full play, if you like. You can read it for free online thanks to the Folger Shakespeare Library.

MOVE

How would your Brutus move? How would you express the thoughts with your body? How could you use your voice and/or body to create this character? Based on what you know about Brutus, create your own movement-based interpretation of the text.

Create a sculpture or statue using your body to express what Brutus's lines mean to you. Create a gesture or sculpture for each line. You could also speak the line as you hold each pose. Try it many different ways and notice how each version feels.

WRITE

Create a poem, story, or monologue inspired by the lines that describe Brutus. Then, create another piece using the lines that Brutus speaks. How are the two different? What if you created a piece that was a dialogue between the two perspectives?

LISTEN

What would your Brutus soundtrack be? What types of instruments, ambient sounds, or music would accompany your Brutus? Make a Brutus playlist, or create a soundscape: if you like, you could include recordings of the descriptive words and/or lines spoken by Brutus.

MAKE

Create a costume design. What would your Brutus wear? How does this character spend their time? How do they move? What do they want others to think about them? Where does this character live? What's the climate like? What if the story were moved to a different setting? How does changing the setting to a different time or place change what you imagine?

Create an art project inspired by the words used to describe Brutus and by the lines that Brutus speaks.

Reflect on Your Creations

- What discoveries did you make as you explored the text?
- Why did you make the creative choices that you made?
- What did you learn about Brutus? About the play? About yourself?