

# The Tragedy of Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare

## Prereading Guide

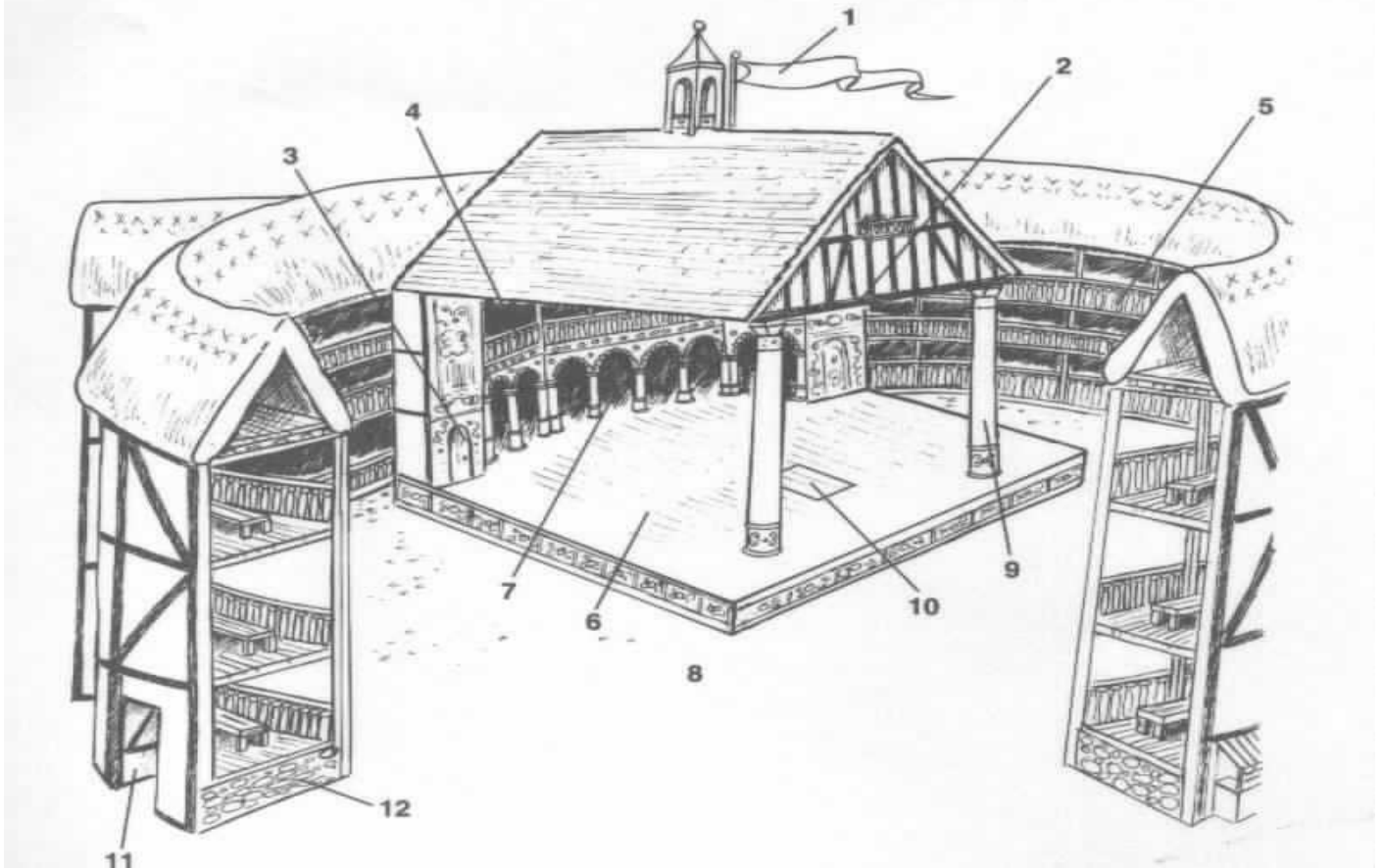
### *Julius Caesar* Prereading Questionnaire

**DIRECTIONS:** For each of the following statements write "agree" or "disagree" in the column at right. Then, explain why.

| STATEMENT  | AGREE/<br>DISAGREE | EXPLANATION |
|--|--------------------|-------------|
| No political leader should have absolute power.  |                    |             |
| Money, power and ambition make good people make bad choices.   |                    |             |
| Belief in omens and signs is silly and superstitious. There is a natural explanation for everything. |                    |             |
| It is right to hurt someone you love to serve the greater good.                                      |                    |             |
| There are acceptable reasons to commit murder.   |                    |             |
| It is not how long you live, but how well you live that matters.                                     |                    |             |
| It is better to die in an act of bravery than live by cowardly means.                                |                    |             |
| Suicide is an honorable way to die.  |                    |             |
| Trusting your friends, no matter what, always turns out well.  |                    |             |

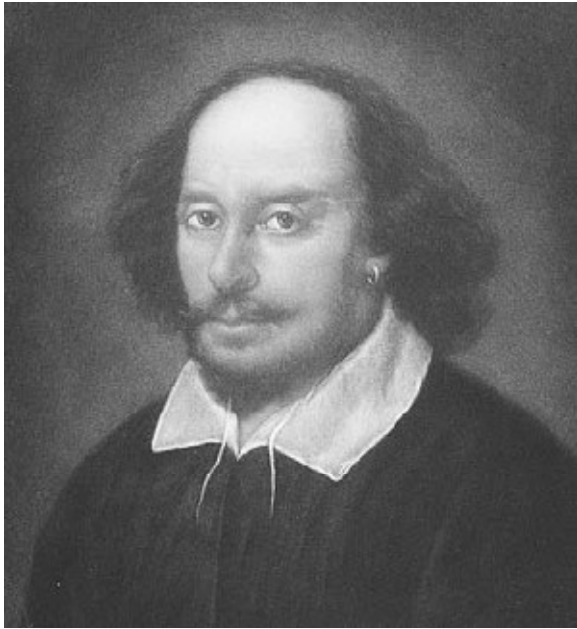
# The Globe Theatre

In 1599, the famous Globe Theatre was built. Referred to by Shakespeare as a "wooden O," the Globe could hold up to 3,000 spectators, and had as many as 20 sides. Using the Glossary of Terms, examine this unique theatre with its tiered stages, hidden doors, and unusual construction. The Globe Theatre burned down during a production of *Henry VIII* in 1613; reconstruction began that same year. In 1664, the Globe was finally torn down.



1. **Flag:** This signaled to people that there was a performance that day.
2. **The Heavens:** The underside of the stage roof, painted sky-blue and decorated with stars, a sun and a moon. Angels and spirits could descend from the hut that had a winch on top of the roof of the main stage. It protected the players from rain and was also used for storage and other sound effects such as thunder, cannons, and bells.
3. **Tiring House:** The players' dressing room
4. **Upper Stage:** "The Chamber" was used for most balcony and bedroom scenes.
5. **Galleries:** Three covered seating sections where rich people paid more to sit on wooden benches. For an additional penny they could use a cushion to sit on.
6. **Main Stage:** Where the majority of the action took place.
7. **Inner Stage:** Used for indoor scenes. It had a curtain that could be closed and opened for scene changes.
8. **Yard:** The open air standing room in front of the stage for the poor people. The floor was covered in the hard-wearing earth, ash and hazelnut shells.
9. **Oak Support Pillars:** These were painted to look like marble. Players used them to hide on stage and observe other actors performing asides to the audience.
10. **Trapdoor:** Leading down into 'Hell,' the space under the stage. Ghosts and witches could rise and descend through this door in the middle of the stage.
11. **Entrance:** Patrons put one penny per performance into a box, hence the term "Box Office"
12. **Foundation:** Made of brick because it was built on wet land near the Thames River.

## William Shakespeare Biography



**W**illiam Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small market town about a hundred miles from London. His father, a glove maker and landowner, rose to the position of bailiff (equivalent to mayor) in 1568. His mother came from a prosperous farming family. Shakespeare probably attended Stratford's grammar school, where he would have received a solid education in classical literature and Latin. At age eighteen, he married Ann Hathaway, who was eight years older than he. She bore a daughter, Susanna, in 1583, and twins, Judith and Hamnet, in 1585. Hamnet, Shakespeare's only son, died in 1596.

**"Upstart Crow"** Sometime after 1585, Shakespeare moved to London and began his career as an actor and playwright. By 1592 he was already successful enough to arouse the jealousy of Robert Greene, a writer who denounced him as an "upstart crow." Greene felt that an actor should not compete with university-trained writers, but others did not share this prejudice. Shakespeare seemed to have found patrons among the nobility, and in 1594 he joined the theater company the Lord Chamberlain's Men. With Shakespeare as their principal dramatist, the company (later renamed the King's Men) became England's leading theater company.

**Literary Achievements** Shakespeare excelled in all forms of drama. At first, he mainly wrote comedies and English history plays. His early triumphs include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Henry IV*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, a romantic tragedy that has remained especially popular with young people. Most critics agree that Shakespeare's creative powers peaked between 1600 and 1607, when he wrote *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and other tragic masterpieces. During this period, his comedies grew darker and more complex. From 1608 to 1611, Shakespeare concentrated on "romances" such as *A Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. These plays, with their fanciful plots, portray human suffering that leads to forgiveness and renewal. Shakespeare wrote two narrative poems and a book of sonnets in addition to his thirty-seven plays.

**Later Life and Reputation** Shakespeare's share in his theater company and part-ownership of its theaters brought him wealth. He bought a large house for his family in Stratford, although he still lived in London for much of the year. Around 1610, he began spending more time in Stratford, where he eventually retired. Shakespeare died in 1616. In 1623, two theater colleagues published a collection of his plays. Known as the First Folio, this edition played an important role in preserving his work. The volume includes a commemorative poem by Ben Jonson, who declares that Shakespeare was "not of an age, but for all time." His plays are performed throughout the world, and they continue to inspire writers, filmmakers, and other artists.

*"Thou art a monument without a tomb,  
And art alive still while thy book doth live,  
And we have wits to read and praise to give"*

—Ben Jonson, "To the Memory of My Beloved Master William Shakespeare"

# Introduction to Drama

*“Perhaps more powerfully than in any of his previous plays, Shakespeare creates an intense sense of a social universe: we feel and smell this Rome; we understand its values and the power exerted by its social ethos on the main protagonists.”*

—Vivian Thomas, *Julius Caesar*

## BACKGROUND

In 1599 the Lord Chamberlain’s Men built a new open-air playhouse called the Globe. *Julius Caesar* was one of the first plays performed there. Located south of London, the Globe was a circular building that held about three thousand people. Its large stage jutted out into an open yard, where “groundlings” could stand and watch for only a penny. Better-off theatergoers paid extra to sit in one of the covered galleries that extended around the theater. The Globe had no lighting, so all performances took place in the afternoon. Shakespeare relied on language to establish the setting of his plays. For example, a character’s description of the moon told audiences that a scene was set at night. The only scenery consisted of props such as tables and chairs. Instead of being a handicap, the bare stage gave playwrights greater flexibility.

*Julius Caesar*, like many of Shakespeare’s plays, shifts rapidly among a variety of locations. Although theatergoers were willing to imagine the setting, they expected costumes to look realistic. Because women were banned from the public stages, boy actors played the female roles. Their high voices, along with wigs and gowns, helped create the illusion. Actors had to be prepared for many distractions. People commonly ate, drank, and talked during performances. The stage was surrounded by rowdy groundlings, and fights sometimes broke out. Yet audiences at the Globe had to have been fairly

sophisticated to appreciate Shakespeare’s plays.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

*Julius Caesar* depicts Rome’s transition from a republic to an empire. According to ancient historians, the republic dates back to 509 B.C., when the last Roman king was expelled and two consuls shared control of Rome’s military. Each year a new pair of consuls had to be elected. The Senate was the republic’s most important political institution. It was composed of several hundred members of Rome’s leading families, who could serve for life. Two citizen assemblies made laws and elected Rome’s magistrates, including consuls. Although the Senate was supposed only to advise the magistrates and the assemblies, it actually held most of the power. Over several centuries, Rome greatly expanded its territories in a series of foreign wars, but these conquests created internal tensions. Some politicians began to challenge the Senate’s authority. Often they gained support from disgruntled veterans and other neglected members of society.

Beginning in 133 B.C., Rome was plagued by widespread corruption and civil warfare. In 60 B.C., Rome came under the control of the wealthy politician Crassus and two military leaders, Julius Caesar and Pompey. This coalition was known as the First Triumvirate. Crassus died in 53, and soon Pompey and Caesar were at odds with each other. After Pompey tried to strip Caesar of his powers in 49, Caesar crossed into Italy, forcing Pompey to flee. Pompey was killed the next year in Egypt. Caesar continued to meet resistance from Pompey’s sons. He finally defeated them in 45 and returned to Rome, where he had himself appointed dictator for life. Shakespeare’s play opens in 44 B.C., when it appeared that Caesar might topple the republic and reestablish a monarchy.