Honor and Virtue

Many of the characters in Julius Caesar are preoccupied – obsessed, even – with ideas of honor and virtue. They want to act in a way that is "right" and just, that will not bring shame upon them, and that will benefit not only themselves, but the nation of Rome. Concepts of honor and virtue, however, are not concrete. They change throughout time and from culture to culture. In Julius Caesar, Shakespeare has to balance the Roman pagan ideals of his historical subject matter with the Christian morals of the world in which he lived (and in which he had to get his play past the government censors). This activity will explore concepts of virtue both in Roman antiquity and in Shakespeare's England, as well as examining ways to relate those ideas to modern frameworks of honor and morality.

This activity will also touch on the issue of suicide as depicted within the play. As this is a sensitive issue and possibly triggering for some teenagers, you may want to use this discussion as an opportunity to bring in a guidance counselor to speak to your students about suicide.

Activity #1: Roman Virtues

Roman virtues tended to spring from how a man related to society, based on qualities that formed a model for excellence in both private and public life. Attainment of these virtues was important because it allowed society to run smoothly. Some of the most important virtues were:

- **Auctoritas**, the totality of one's social standing built up through experience and reputation, a measure of clout and influence
- **Dignitas**, a man's good name and prestige, a sense of self-worth and personal pride
- **Gravitas**, a sense of sobriety, responsibility, and earnestness, a sense of substance and depth rather than frivolity
- **Pietas**, encompassing not just religious devotion, but a respect for the natural order of society and ideals of patriotism, as well as the sense of duty to the state and to one's family
- **Veritas**, “truthfulness,” honesty and respectability in dealing with others

These virtues had near-tangible currency for the Romans. They were not just abstract concepts; the Romans conceptualized them in a way that has no precise analog in modern society. For the Romans, it was almost as if each man had a jar for each virtue, and his actions (or those of his friends and family, reflecting on him by association) could either add beans to his jar or take them out. Though there was no actual record-keeping of a man's virtuous standing, Roman men (particularly those with political ambitions) had a constant awareness not only of their own measures, but of the measures of their allies and opponents within the political system. A man with insufficient auctoritas could not hope to win high political office. A scandal could damage a man's dignitas, making his social life considerably less pleasant.

Many Roman writers, including Cicero and Seneca, refer to these concepts when discussing political failures and successes; as such, they could have been familiar to anyone (like Shakespeare) with a classical education, and therefore could have influenced the composition of Julius Caesar.
• Discuss:
  o Which of the virtues do the major characters display? Ask your students to back up their opinions with examples from the text.
    ▪ Example: Caesar displays great (even excessive) dignitas when walking through Rome for the Lupercalia festival (1.2).
  o When do these characters invoke these ideas of virtue (even if they don't use the actual words for them) to influence or manipulate other characters? Again, have your students find examples in the text.
    ▪ Example: Cassius calls upon Brutus's pietas to get him to join the conspiracy (1.2); Antony rhetorically questions Brutus's veritas to get the plebeians on his side (3.2).
  o What happens in the play to make any characters gain or lose one of these virtues?
    ▪ Example: Cassius's shady financial dealings (4.2) call his veritas and dignitas into question; the idea that Caesar is afflicted with the falling sickness, possibly seen as a curse from the gods, might damage his auctoritas or pietas (1.2).
  o At the end of the play, whose "virtue-jars" are fullest?

• Writing Prompt: In a journal entry or short essay, ask your students to choose which of the Roman virtues they think is most important in Julius Caesar and to defend that choice with quotes from the text.

Activity #2: Elizabethan Virtues
The major difference between the Christian concept of virtue and the Roman ideal is, essentially, one of private life versus public life, or, to put it another way, the idea of internal responsibility versus external. Honor and virtue in sixteenth-century England sprung from a Christian sense of duty to God and were concerned with a man's individual soul, not with his relation to society. Dishonorable or unvirtuous conduct was most threatening to the individual, who would be held accountable for his actions in the afterlife; the only concern for others was that he might inspire similar inappropriate conduct. Christians also had a codified set of rules to obey, passed down in the Bible, the works of notable Christian authors, and the mandates of the Church. Though the universality of this code was less distinct in the decades following the English Reformation and the rise of Protestantism than it had been during the centuries of Catholicism's unbroken dominance of Europe, many ideas of sin and virtue still carried over even with the advent of the Church of England.

Medieval tradition recognized Seven Heavenly Virtues with corresponding Seven Deadly Sins:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deadly Sins</th>
<th>Heavenly Virtues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lust</td>
<td>Chastity</td>
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<td>Gluttony</td>
<td>Temperance</td>
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<td>Greed</td>
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<td>Pride</td>
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For Romans, an individual's responsibility was more to the state. Dishonorable conduct was a disruption of order that did not just threaten the individual, but the fabric of society. The afterlife was far less of a concern, because in Roman conception, nearly everyone ended up in the same underworld. Roman gods did not play by one codified set of rules, but were as fickle and contrary creatures as any human, subject to whim, persuasion, and bribery. Ideals of moral behavior came, instead, from philosophers, focusing more on ethics and being good for virtue's own sake, rather than having anything to do with religion.

The point where Elizabethan virtues and Roman virtues come into greatest contention in *Julius Caesar* is probably in the suicides of Portia, Cassius, Titinius, and Brutus. For Christians of the sixteenth-century (and still for many sects today), suicide was a mortal sin, the rejection of the gift of life, as well as an act that indicated a lack of faith in the divine plan for one's life. As a mortal sin could only be forgiven through confession, absolution, and penance, and as suicide (if successful) prevents a person from confessing or paying penance, death by suicide automatically condemned a soul to Hell, eternally. A suicide could not even be buried in consecrated ground (a concept which Shakespeare explores in *Hamlet*, 5.1.1-27, 5.1.205-225).

For the Romans, however, suicide was a viable option for an honorable man, preferable to imprisonment and the shame and mockery which attended failure. Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, authors whose works were available in early modern England, all wrote about suicide as a reasonable and honorable choice. It had no effect on an individual’s fate after death (though, if committed for reasons of cowardice or out of hysteria, it could damage the *dignitas* of surviving family members), as all souls except the very greatest heroes or very worst villains ended up in the same part of the Underworld, regardless of worth.

- **Examine** (or, if your students are comfortable enough with it, act out) the scenes on Handout #7A-D.
- **Discuss:**
  - What are the reasons given in the text for each suicide?
  - How do other characters react to hearing news of suicide?
  - Are the Roman or Christian ideas of suicide more fully represented?
  - How does the idea of honor relate to the idea of a noble death?
  - Is there a way to play these moments humorously? Can Cassius’s or Brutus’s death come off as ludicrous, absurd, or melodramatic?

  **Advanced Studies: Further Exploration:** Compare the suicides of the title characters in *Antony and Cleopatra* to those in *Julius Caesar*. Antony botches his impulsive suicide completely, to the extent that it takes more than one scene for him to die (4.15.55-138 and 4.16.9-70). By contrast, Cleopatra carefully plans her death, arrays herself like a goddess, and dies with utmost dignity – but following a comic scene with a clown bringing her the instrument of her death (5.2.238-304).

**Activity #3: Modern Virtues**

In a pluralistic society like ours, ideas of honor and virtue are no longer as concrete or well-defined as they were for either the Romans or the Elizabethans. We don’t have one overarching system demanding our compliance; instead, our society is a mixture of different influences and modes of thinking.

- **Discuss:**
What are our modern virtues? What makes a person today honorable?
- Make a list on your blackboard, whiteboard, or smartboard.

Where do these ideas of virtue come from? Religion? Social rules and etiquette? Books and movies?
- List as many origins for concepts of honor and virtue as possible.
- How many of these institutions may come into conflict with each other?

What (or who) enforces these virtues? Peer pressure? Laws? Parents and teachers?
- Again, list as many as possible and see where they may contradict or come into conflict with each other.
- Discuss the idea of enforcing morality. How effectively is this done in the United States? What about in other countries?

How can you mate these concepts of modern virtue to the ideas of virtue portrayed in *Julius Caesar*?
- Are any of the Roman or early modern ideals of honor and virtue still relevant today? Do we think of the same or similar concepts by different names or within different parameters?
- Consider how a production of *Julius Caesar* might draw on these ideas for costuming, makeup, or props.

**FURTHER EXPLORATION**

*Julius Caesar* is, in many ways, a “boys’ club” of a play. Both Caesar and Brutus neglect their marriages in favor of their political ambitions and machinations. It is also among the plays with the fewest lines for female characters. Consider the place of women in each of the three systems of honor and virtue (Roman, early modern Christian, and modern) that you have discussed. Do women have the same ideas of honor and virtue as men? How are they similar or different? What language do Calphurnia and Portia use when discussing these concepts? Do either of them attempt to adopt the men’s system?

See the ShakesFear Classroom Ploy (page 197) for more on how the relative absence of women affects the dynamics of the play.

**EVALUATION**

- Ask your students to respond, in a short essay or a journal entry, to the idea of honor and virtue as presented in *Julius Caesar*. Have them consider and address the following:
  - Which character is most virtuous or honorable by Roman standards?
    - Refer specifically to the concepts of *auctoritas, dignitas, pietas, gravitas*, and *veritas*.
  - Which character is most virtuous or honorable by early modern Christian standards?
    - Refer specifically to the Seven Heavenly Virtues.
  - Which character do they think is most virtuous or honorable overall?
    - Explain using their own standards of morality, with reference to the class discussion.
4.2

BRUTUS
Lucius, a bowl of wine.

CASSIUS
I did not think you could have been so angry.

BRUTUS
O Cassius, I am sick of many griefs.

CASSIUS
Of your philosophy you make no use,
If you give place to accidental evils.

BRUTUS
No man bears sorrow better. Portia is dead.

CASSIUS
Ha? Portia?

BRUTUS
She is dead.

CASSIUS
How 'scaped I killing when I cross'd you so?
O insupportable and touching loss!
Upon what sickness?

BRUTUS
Impatient of my absence,
And grief that young Octavius with Mark Antony
Have made themselves so strong: for with her
death
That tidings came. With this she fell distract,
And, her attendants absent, swallow'd fire.

CASSIUS
And died so?

BRUTUS
Even so.

Enter Boy with wine and tapers.

BRUTUS
Speak no more of her. Give me a bowl of wine.
In this I bury all unkindness, Cassius. Drinks.

CASSIUS
My heart is thirsty for that noble pledge.
Fill, Lucius, till the wine o'erswell the cup;
I cannot drink too much of Brutus' love.

Enter TITINIUS and MESSALA.

BRUTUS
Come in, Titinius;
Welcome, good Messala.
Now sit we close about this taper here,
And call in question our necessities.

CASSIUS
Portia, art thou gone?

BRUTUS
No more, I pray you.
Messala, I have here received letters,
That young Octavius and Mark Antony
Come down upon us with a mighty power,
Bending their expedition toward Philippi.

MESSALA
Myself have letters of the selfsame tenor. [...]
Had you your letters from your wife, my lord?

BRUTUS
No, Messala.

MESSALA
Nor nothing in your letters writ of her?

BRUTUS
Nothing, Messala.
MESSALA
That, methinks, is strange.

BRUTUS
Why ask you? hear you aught of her in yours?

MESSALA
No, my lord. 35

BRUTUS
Now, as you are a Roman, tell me true.

MESSALA
Then like a Roman bear the truth I tell:
For certain she is dead, and by strange manner.

BRUTUS
Why, farewell, Portia. We must die, Messala:
With meditating that she must die once,
I have the patience to endure it now.

MESSALA
Even so great men great losses should endure.

CASSIUS
I have as much of this in art as you,
But yet my nature could not bear it so.

BRUTUS
Well, to our work alive.
5.1

CASSIUS
Now, most noble Brutus,
The gods today stand friendly, that we may,
Lovers in peace, lead on our days to age.
But since the affairs of men rest still incertain,
Let's reason with the worst that may befall.
If we do lose this battle, then is this
The very last time we shall speak together:
What are you then determined to do?

BRUTUS
Even by the rule of that philosophy
By which I did blame Cato for the death
Which he did give himself, I know not how:
But I do find it cowardly and vile,
For fear of what might fall, so to prevent
The time of life: arming myself with patience
To stay the providence of some high powers
That govern us below.

CASSIUS
Then, if we lose this battle,
You are contented to be led in triumph
Thorough the streets of Rome?

BRUTUS
No, Cassius, no:
Think not, thou noble Roman,
That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome;
He bears too great a mind. But this same day
Must end that work the ides of March begun;
And whether we shall meet again I know not.
Therefore our everlasting farewell take:
For ever, and for ever, farewell, Cassius;
If we do meet again, why, we shall smile;
If not, why then, this parting was well made.

CASSIUS
For ever, and for ever, farewell, Brutus;
If we do meet again, we'll smile indeed;
If not, 'tis true this parting was well made.
CASSIUS
O, coward that I am, to live so long,
To see my best friend ta'en before my face.

Enter PINDARUS.

Come hither, sirrah:
In Parthia did I take thee prisoner;
And then I swore thee, saving of thy life,
That whatsoever I did bid thee do,
Thou shouldst attempt it. Come now, keep thine oath;
Now be a free man: and with this good sword,
That ran through Caesar's bowels, search this bosom.
Stand not to answer: Here, take thou the hilts; 10
And, when my face is cover'd, as 'tis now,
Guide thou the sword. ---- Caesar, thou art revenged,
Even with the sword that kill'd thee.

PINDARUS
So, I am free; yet would not so have been,
Durst I have done my will. O Cassius, 15
Far from this country Pindarus shall run,
Where never Roman shall take note of him.

[Exit PINDARUS]

Enter TITINIUS and MESSALA

MESSALA
Where did you leave him?

TITINIUS
All disconsolate,
With Pindarus his bondman, on this hill.

MESSALA
Is not that he that lies upon the ground?

TITINIUS
He lies not like the living. O my heart! 25

MESSALA
Is not that he?

TITINIUS
No, this was he, Messala,
But Cassius is no more. O setting sun,
As in thy red rays thou dost sink to-night,
So in his red blood Cassius's day is set;
The sun of Rome is set. Our day is gone; 30
Clouds, dews, and dangers come; our deeds are done.
Mistrust of my success hath done this deed.

MESSALA
Mistrust of good success hath done this deed.
O hateful error, melancholy's child,
Why dost thou show to the apt thoughts of men 35
The things that are not?
Handout #7D
Perspectives: Honor and Virtue

5.5

BRUTUS
Farewell to you; and you; and you, Volumnius.
Strato, thou hast been all this while asleep;
Farewell to thee too, Strato. Countrymen,
My heart doth joy that yet in all my life
I found no man but he was true to me.
I shall have glory by this losing day
More than Octavius and Mark Antony
By this vile conquest shall attain unto.
So fare you well at once; for Brutus' tongue
Hath almost ended his life’s history:
Night hangs upon mine eyes; my bones would rest,
That have but labour'd to attain this hour.

Alarum. Cry within, 'Fly, fly, fly!'

CLITUS
Fly, my lord, fly.

BRUTUS
Hence: I will follow.

[Exeunt CLITUS, DARDANIUS, and VOLUMNIUS]

I prithee, Strato, stay thou by thy lord:
Thou art a fellow of a good respect;
Thy life hath had some smatch of honour in it:
Hold then my sword, and turn away thy face,
While I do run upon it. Wilt thou, Strato?

STRATO
Give me your hand first. Fare you well, my lord.

BRUTUS
Farewell, good Strato. ---- Caesar, now be still:
I kill’d not thee with half so good a will. Dies

Alarum. Retreat. Enter ANTONY, OCTAVIUS, MESSALA, LUCILLIUS, and the Army.