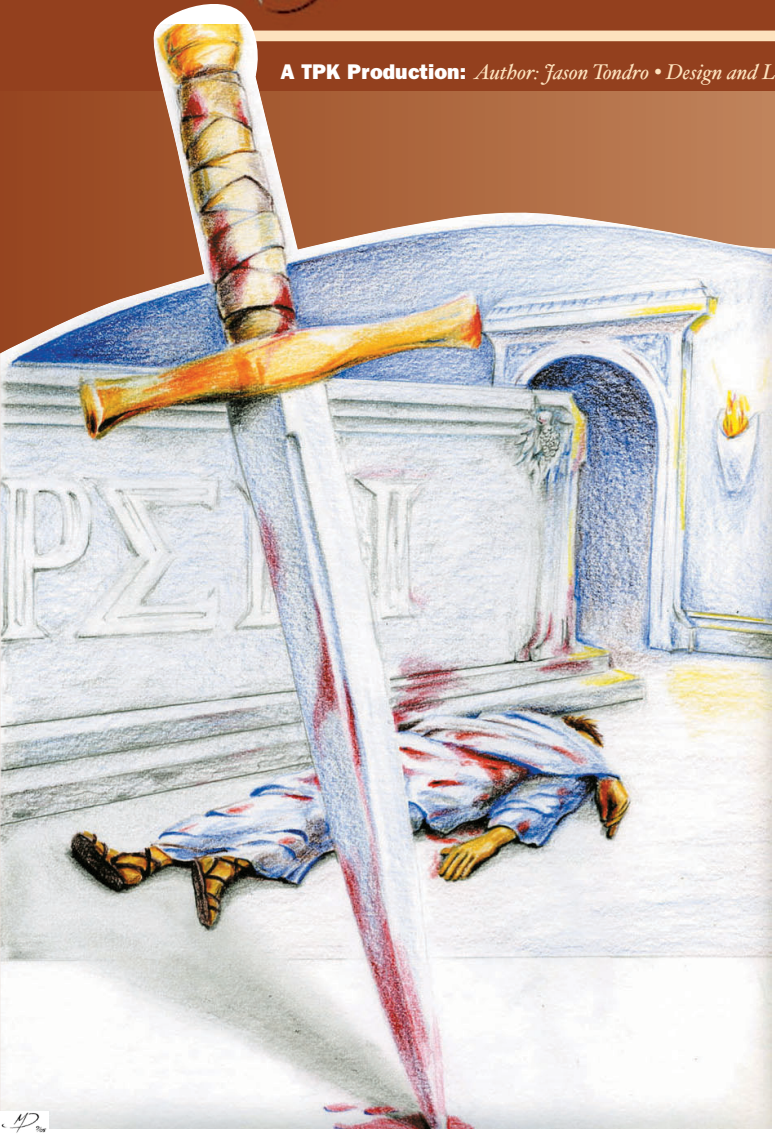


Julius Caesar

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It was the year 1599 and the Queen, who had been on the throne for longer than most Elizabethans had been alive, was old and without an heir. What would happen when she was gone? Would the British Empire disintegrate in civil unrest and revolution? Or would a strong – and hopefully fair – ruler come in and take charge? Would England become like Venice, where there was a Republic but where every cup could be touched with poison and the streets belonged to the mob?

This was the atmosphere in London when William Shakespeare scratched out the lines for *Julius Caesar*. He'd just finished *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, in which he praised the Queen by glorifying her ancestors, but by turning to a Roman subject he was treading on more dangerous ground. Politicians of the day didn't like it when the commoners (or "groundlings") started hearing about the Roman

*"Cowards die many times before their deaths,
The valiant never taste of death but once."*

--Julius Caesar, Act 2, scene 2

Republic, where leaders were elected and "divine right" meant nothing. But Shakespeare wasn't interested in inciting revolution against the throne; he agreed that a strong monarch was the safest form of government.

What really interested Shakespeare was people who did evil things for good reasons, and in *Julius Caesar* the man stuck in that unlucky position is Brutus, "the noblest Roman of them all." Brutus decides that his friend Caesar must die not because Caesar has done anything wrong, but because Brutus thinks that Caesar might do something wrong once he becomes king of Rome. And once Caesar is king, he will be impossible to kill. There's no way to know if Caesar will be a good king or a bad one, but Brutus must act now if he is to act at all. He convinces himself that Caesar must die, and for this Brutus and his fellow assassins pay the ultimate price. Many of these ideas would turn up a year later when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*.

More copies of *Julius Caesar* have been printed off than any other Shakespeare play. Many people read it for the first time in high school, and it includes some of Shakespeare's most repeated lines: "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears", "Et tu, Brute?" and "Let slip the dogs of war!" being the most famous. The language of *Julius Caesar* is relatively straight-forward and easy to read if you just listen. This, along with memorable scenes like the assassination of Caesar and the appearance of the Soothsayer, help to make it one of Shakespeare's most popular works. d20 Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar* uses the play as a resource for adventure in your RPG campaign. It includes character options like Roman paladins and aristocrat rogues, dangers like the dogs of war, restless dead, and rains of fire, new magic items, wolf-priests, and more. To make this easier to use, you will find many different plot seeds and patrons which can be mixed and matched to suit your style of play, including everything from divine ascension to Lovecraftian horror.

If you're already familiar with *Julius Caesar*, you'll see a lot of things here that aren't in the play. But everything here was inspired by the play, usually by Shakespeare's own language, and the extra bits are easy to leave out if you want to run a "historical" version of *Julius Caesar*. In a sense, this article asks the question, "What if Shakespeare were a DM?" If, in addition to reading Plutarch's *Lives* and Appian's *Civil Wars*, Shakespeare had also read the *Player's Handbook*, the *DMG* and the *MM*, he might have come up with something like this.



THE PLAY

Act I

Julius Caesar, who conquered Gaul and invaded Britain, has defeated his last rival Pompey the Great (see sidebar, *Knew You Not Pompey*) to become the most powerful man in Rome. He has not done so without risk, though, bringing his private army across the Rubicon river and into

KNOW YOU NOT POMPEY?

Pompey (Gnaeus Pompeius) was a former ally of Caesar, a successful general and member of the first triumvirate. He even married Caesar's daughter to seal the alliance. But when the third person in their coalition died, the two survivors fell on each other. Pompey had the backing of the Senate and a larger army. He tried to wear Caesar down by attrition but the Senate forced him to attack at Pharsalia in 48 BC. He was outmaneuvered by Caesar and killed. In your game, Pompey may be a sympathetic general whom Caesar betrayed, or just another political schemer with his eye on the throne (in which case his death at Caesar's hand is just business as usual). Pompey had been called "the Great" for 30 years by the time of his death and he should be a fitting rival for Caesar: fighter 8/aristocrat 8 ought to about do it.

THE WOLF-PRIESTS

Remember Rome was founded by two brothers who were raised by a she-wolf. The debt owed to the she-wolf is memorialized by Roman "wolf-priests." In the Festival of Lupercalia, the wolf-priests select individuals to run through the streets of the city bearing leather whips, the touch of which brings fertility and good fortune. (Antony is chosen for this role in the play, and he's supposed to touch Calphurnia, Caesar's wife.) This may be related to belief in the benandanti, good-aligned Italian werewolves who protect the crops and the innocent peasants who farm them by traveling to the spirit world through dream projection and battling evil witches with whips made of grain. (No, really. See Carlo Ginzburg's *The Night Battles* for all the details.) What if the wolf-priests and the benandanti are one and the same?

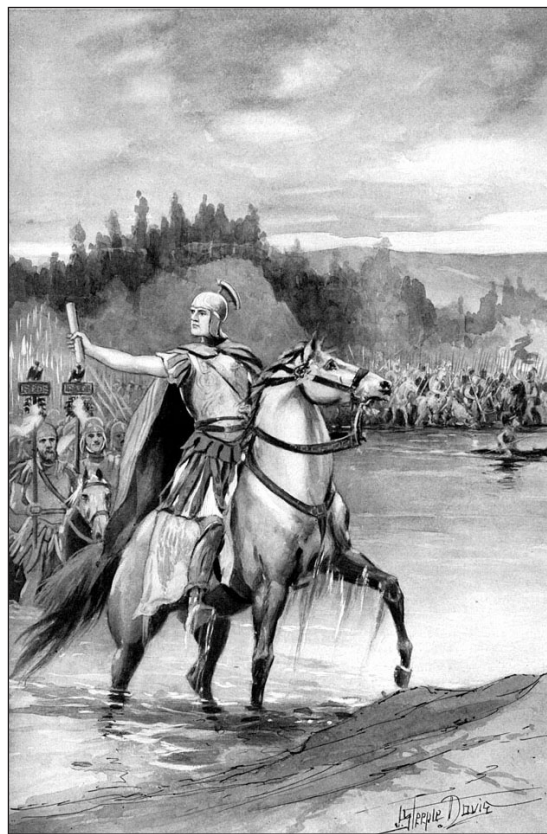
In this version, the wolf-priests use the Festival of Lupercalia to recruit extra help when the odds are against them. The people they pick to run through the streets become werewolves-for-a-day, traveling to the spirit world that night to help the benandanti battle evil witches. Antony gets picked because he's strong and canny, but your players may be chosen also or instead. This would be a useful foreshadowing to the main adventure of *Julius Caesar*, giving the players a chance to meet some key figures in the story (Caesar, Antony, Calphurnia) before the assassination takes place or Brutus is even recruited. The wolf-priests make poor patrons, however. Their numbers are few and they can't afford to get mixed up in Roman politics when they need to harbor their strength for their nightly battles.

Adding the werewolf template will increase the PC's effective level by +3, but no possessions of any kind accompany the players to the dream world. Use night hags as a base creature for the evil witches, adding class levels as necessary to make them competitive with the players. The whips of grain are made of pure dream-stuff and bypass the hag's damage reduction.

the city in defiance of Roman law. The people don't seem to care, however: a carpenter and cobbler are decorating Caesar's statues with crowns when Flavius and Murellus, two conservative tribunes who don't want to see Republic overthrown by a king, appear to put an end to the celebrations. Caesar's return is a cause for fear, not a parade. Didn't the mob cheer for Pompey, who brought treasures and glory to Rome? Will they now root for Caesar, Pompey's killer?

The conquering Caesar has returned on the 15th of February, a celebration called the Lupercalia. (Historically, Caesar returned to Rome in October. Why would Shakespeare change the date? See the *Wolf-Priests* sidebar for one possible answer.) He is in the company of two very important men, who will go to war after his death: Mark Antony is a long-time follower of Caesar with amazing powers of public speaking, Brutus is a wealthy politician who has a reputation as the most honorable man in Rome. After ensuring that his wife Calphurnia, who

has so far been unable to conceive a child, is directly in the path of the Lupercalia fertility rite, Caesar is interrupted by an old Soothsayer who utters the famous prophecy, "Beware the ides of March." This isn't persuasive enough for an overconfident man like Caesar, who doesn't put much stock in creepy prophecies anyway. (The "ides" was a particular day of the month that was determined by a mathematical formula. In March,



the ides falls on the 15th.) While Caesar, Antony, and the rest go off to celebrate Lupercalia, Brutus is pulled aside by his old friend Cassius, who has something on his mind. Why should Caesar be raised up so high in power and popularity? What has Caesar got that, say, Brutus hasn't got? Why, once Caesar and Cassius were swimming across the Tiber river together and Caesar couldn't make it; Cassius had to save him from drowning. Now Caesar is about to be king, and Cassius can't get any respect. Is that fair? Is that just?

At first, Cassius' argument falls on deaf ears: Brutus isn't interested in elevating his own position and he doesn't share Cassius' jealousy. But clearly Brutus is worried about something, and as the two men talk he can hear Mark Antony offering Caesar the crown offstage. Three times Antony makes the gesture and three times Caesar refuses, but each time the crowd cheers louder. Another friend of Cassius appears, Casca, to give a fuller report of the almost-coronation, including the fact that Caesar had an epileptic fit the third time, but it just made the crowd feel more sympathy for him. Indeed, Caesar seems now beyond challenge. "If Caesar had stabb'd their mothers," Casca tells us, "they would do no less."

