

## PLUTARCH On Julius Caesar - A Man of Unlimited Ambition ca. 44 C.E.

*Plutarch's Parallel Lives served as the greatest source of knowledge about the ancient world for people of the Renaissance and for Shakespeare, even though its original intent was not to preserve history but rather to examine moral virtues and vices. Plutarch was committed to supporting the Roman Empire and later became a priest at the Greek oracle shrine at Delphi. The following document, written about 150 years after Julius Caesar's death, describes Roman attitudes toward the power that Julius Caesar gained following a Civil War victory against General Pompey.*

But that which brought upon him the most apparent and mortal hatred was his desire of being king,<sup>6</sup> which gave the common people the first occasion to quarrel with him and proved the most specious pretense to those who had been his secret enemies all along. Those who would have procured him that title gave it out that it was foretold in the Sibyls' books<sup>7</sup> that the Romans should conquer the Parthians<sup>8</sup> when they fought against them under the conduct of a king, but not before. And one day, as Caesar was coming down from Alba to Rome, some were so bold as to salute him by the name of king, but he, finding the people disrelish it, seemed to resent it himself and said his name was Caesar not king.

Upon this, there was a general silence, and he passed on looking not very well pleased or contented. Another time, when the senate had conferred on him some extravagant honors, he chanced to receive the message as he was sitting on the rostra [podium], where, though the consuls [highest elected officials] and praetors [elected ministers of justice] themselves waited on him, attended by the whole body of the senate, he did not rise, but behaved himself to them as if they had been private men, and told them his honors wanted rather to be retrenched than increased. This treatment offended not only the senate but the commonalty too, as if they thought the affront upon the senate equally reflected upon the whole republic so that all who could decently leave him went off, looking much discomposed. Caesar, perceiving the false step he had made, immediately retired home and, laying his throat bare, told his friends that he was ready to offer this to anyone who would give the stroke.

But afterward, he made the malady from which he suffered [epilepsy] the excuse for his sitting, saying that those who are attacked by it lose their presence of mind if they talk much standing; that they presently grow giddy, fall into convulsions, and quite lose their reason. But this was not the reality, for he would willingly have stood up to the senate had not Cornelius Balbus, one of his friends, or rather flatterers, hindered him. "Will you not remember," said he, "you are Caesar and claim the honor which is due to your merit?" He gave a fresh occasion of resentment by his affront to the tribunes.<sup>9</sup> The Lupercalia were then celebrated, a feast at the first institution belonging, as some writers say, to the shepherds, and having some connection with the Arcadian Lycae [a mountain in Greece]. Many young noble-men and magistrates run up and down the city with their upper garments off, striking all they meet with thongs of hide, by way of sport; and many women, even of the

highest rank, place themselves in the way and hold out their hands to the lash, as boys in a school do to the master, out of a belief that it procures easy labor to those who are with child, and makes those conceive who are barren. Caesar, dressed in a triumphal robe, seated himself in a golden chair at the rostra to view this ceremony.

Antony [i.e., Mark Antony, Caesar's closest ally], as consul, was one of those who ran this course, and when he came into the forum, and the people made way for him, he went up and reached to Caesar a diadem wreathed with laurel [like a king's crown]. Upon this, there was a shout, but only a slight one, made by the few who were planted there for that purpose, but when Caesar refused it, there was universal applause. Upon the second offer, very few, and upon the second refusal, all again applauded. Caesar, finding it would not take, rose up and ordered the crown to be carried into the capitol. Caesar's statues were afterward found with royal diadems on their heads. Flavius and Marullus, two tribunes of the people, went presently and pulled them off and, having apprehended those who first saluted Caesar as king, committed them to prison.

The people followed them with acclamations and called them by the name of Brutus because Brutus was the first who ended the succession of kings, and transferred the power which before was lodged in one man into the hands of the senate and people. Caesar so far resented this that he displaced Marullus and Flavius and, in urging his charges against them, at the same time ridiculed the people by himself, giving the men more than once the names of Brutus and Cumaei. This made the multitude turn their thoughts to Marcus Brutus, who, by his father's side, was thought to be descended from that first Brutus, and by his mother's side from the Servilii, another noble family, being besides nephew and son-in-law to Cato. But the honors and favors he had received from Caesar took off the edge from the desires he might himself have felt for overthrowing the new monarchy. For he had not only been pardoned himself after Pompey's defeat at Pharsalia and had procured the same grace for many of his friends but was one in whom Caesar had particular confidence.

At that time, he had the most honorable praetorship for the year and was named for the consulship four years after, being preferred before Cassius, his competitor. Upon the question as to the choice, Caesar is related, said that Cassius had the fairer pretensions but that he could not pass by Brutus. Nor would he afterward listen to some who spoke against Brutus, when the conspiracy against him was already afoot, but laying his hand on his body, said to the informers, "Brutus will wait for this skin of mine," intimating that he was worthy to bear rule on account of his virtue, but would not be base and ungrateful to gain it. Those who desired a change and looked on him as the only, or at least the most proper, person to effect it did not venture to speak with him, but in the night-time laid papers about his chair of state, where he used to sit and determine causes, with such sentences in them as, "You are asleep, Brutus," "You are no longer Brutus." Cassius, when he perceived his ambition a little raised upon this, was more insistent than before to work him yet further, having himself a private grudge against Caesar for some reasons that we have mentioned in the Life of Brutus. Nor was Caesar without suspicions of him, and said once to his friends, "What do you think Cassius is aiming at? I don't like him; he looks so pale." When it was told to him that Antony

and Dolabella <sup>14</sup> were in a plot against him, he said he did not fear such fat, luxurious men, but rather the pale, lean fellows, meaning Cassius and Brutus.

## READING QUESTIONS

1. What was the Roman attitude toward Caesar becoming king? What was the difference between the views of the senators and those of the common people?
2. How did the plot against Caesar develop? What justification did Brutus and Cassius use to support their assassination of Caesar?

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**6 his desire of being king:** *The Romans feared the tyranny of kings.*

**7 Sybils' books:** *Books of prophecy that were consulted in Rome during times of crisis.*

**8 Parthians:** *The only civilized power on Rome's frontiers, the Parthians controlled Mesopotamia and Persia. They were famous horsemen and developed the "Parthian shot," which allowed them to shoot arrows while riding away from attackers.*

**9 tribunes:** *Tribunes of the Plebs, which were originally created to defend the plebian class of citizens against the patricians who dominated the early Roman government and which could veto actions and laws they thought would harm the plebians. By the time of Caesar, the Tribunes of the Plebs were often working for their own benefit.*

**10 was the first ... kings:** *In 509 B.C.E., Lucius Brutus removed the last king from Rome.*

**11 Bruti and Cumaei:** *Both names suggest that Caesar was calling the people stupid. The name Brutus means "stupid," and people from Cumae were thought to lack intelligence.*

**12 a private grudge against Caesar:** *Cassius was angry that Caesar had promoted Brutus over him.*

**13 Life of Brutus:** *Another one of Plutarch's Parallel Lives.*

**14 Dolabella:** *A general who originally sided with Pompey but later joined with Caesar, who rewarded him with the consulship.*