Pre-reading for *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene 2

In this play, the hero is not Julius Caesar, but Brutus, his best friend. Caesar has won many victories and is a hero in Rome. However, there are those who fear that Caesar has become too ambitious, that he covets kingship for himself and will eventually betray the founding principles of Rome, which was created to be a republic. Honorable men like Brutus are committed to those ideals and would fight against any threat to Rome’s rule by the people.

This creates an opening for Cassius, a senator who envies and resents Caesar and his successes. He begins to conspire with other senators to assassinate Caesar. He knows, however, that if he and his fellow conspirators do this act on their own, their motives will be viewed with suspicion. They need someone on their side who is renowned for his sense of honor and for his commitment to Rome. Who better than Caesar’s best friend to recruit? If even Caesar’s closest friend were to agree that Caesar’s ambition is a threat to Rome, the conspirators would be better able to justify themselves. Cassius approaches Brutus and convinces him that Caesar must die for the good of Rome.

Brutus, who is so honorable himself that he does not always recognize dishonorable motives in others, eventually agrees to join in assassinating Caesar. His sense of honor is such that, when Cassius and the others want to kill Caesar in secret, Brutus insists that it must be done in the open. He reminds them that their intentions are honorable (because Brutus’s intentions *are*) and they should not be ashamed to act publicly. They agree to kill Caesar when he arrives at the Senate on March 15 (the Ides of March).

Despite many warnings against leaving his home on the Ides of March, Caesar goes confidently to the Senate. There, he is repeatedly stabbed by the senators. He turns at last to Brutus, possibly for help, and sees the blade in his friend’s hand. Tragically, he says, “Et tu, Brute? Then fall Caesar!” This is what Mark Antony will call “the unkindest cut of all.”

After the assassination, the conspirators are again guided by Brutus, who plans to speak to the shocked and enraged people and to explain why they have killed Caesar--that it is for their own good. Mark Antony, another of Caesar’s friends, requests to speak as well. Cassius warns Brutus not to allow this. Antony has had no part in the assassination, and he and Cassius do not like each other. Brutus has never particularly admired Antony, whom he considers rather ambitious as well. Cassius fears that Antony will speak against the conspirators and inflame the people. Antony promises Brutus he has no intention of speaking against them, and Brutus, who trusts others to be as honest and honorable as he is, agrees to allow Antony to deliver a eulogy.

Cassius leaves to speak in another part of the city. Brutus delivers his speech, defending his actions and relying on the crowd’s faith in his honor. He then leaves Antony alone with the crowd to deliver his eulogy, trusting Antony’s word.