

Shakespeare and the Romans

(Note: at the end of this article is a timeline that gives dates for some of the key events explained here and that offers an overview of Roman history up to the present day)

Why was Shakespeare so fascinated with Rome? Why did he write plays about the early Republic (*Coriolanus*), the transition to Empire (*Julius Caesar*), the beginning of the Empire (*Antony and Cleopatra*), and its unhappy, later days (*Titus Andronicus*)? It will serve us well to think on early Roman history, not only so that when you walk about the Roman Forum and see its monuments Rome will seem more familiar to you, and not only because these stories of early Rome are delightful and worth knowing, but so that we may begin to see Rome as Shakespeare imagined it and to understand (and maybe even share) his fascination. And Rome really is fascinating. Look at a map of the Roman Empire and consider its extent: what kind of people could expand from a tiny city, harassed for centuries by other Italian peoples, to within a relatively short period of time an empire that ruled much of three continents? What kind of stuff were these early Romans made of? Maybe Shakespeare had an itch to figure out what kind of people could create such a city. And maybe through our reading of *Julius Caesar* we will begin to understand what happened in Rome two millenia ago. But the story of Rome is not merely the story of that ancient city: Shakespeare's Rome may help us to understand the story of Shakespeare's London; Shakespeare's Rome may help us to understand the story of our America; indeed, Shakespeare's Rome may teach us about any great city or nation—Shakespeare's Rome may teach us about human nature and the nature of politics.

The history Shakespeare read, however, the history that inspired so many of his best plays, is different than the history we have studied in schools. We are usually taught history as social science, as a dry discipline denuded of human interest and drama,

concerned chiefly with facts and statistics. But for Shakespeare history is a branch of literature, and highly philosophical literature at that. Shakespeare knows Rome from fascinating, deeply meaningful *stories*, from writers such as the melancholy epic poet Virgil, the cynical and witty historian Livy, and the comprehensive biographer Plutarch. These stories are not perfectly accurate, objective renderings of past events: some of them are purely legendary. But these stories of Rome that Shakespeare learned—stories that the Romans told themselves, stories rich in character and action and so highly suitable for dramatizing—allow for careful meditation on the central questions about human existence. These are stories to chew on which may satisfy our appetite for wisdom about the human condition.

The story of Rome does not begin in Italy; it begins in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, where the Greeks are besieging the city of Troy, a war some of you may know about from the *Iliad* or other myths or from the recent (and hilariously bad!) movie *Troy*. The gods have decided that the great city of Troy is to be destroyed and almost all the Trojan heroes to be killed. But one hero they decide to save, Aeneas, the son of Anchises and the goddesses Aphrodite (or Venus, as the Romans called her). Why do the gods decide to save this one man? Why not the valiant Hector instead? And why will the Romans claim Aeneas as their ancestor? To answer these questions, one must look to the *Iliad* (book 20, 321-52), in which the god Poseidon, even though he supports the Greeks, saves Aeneas from death at the hands of Achilles because Aeneas is “without guilt” and properly worships the gods. And so the Romans, because of their legendary founder’s reputation for righteousness, idealize themselves as having a special mission, a devotion to *justice*. Indeed, the poet Virgil, whose *Aeneid* tells the story of Aeneas’ journey from

Troy to Italy, and who was writing after Rome has expanded from a little city-state on the Italian peninsula to a great empire spread over three continents, will claim that Rome has a special mission to bring justice to the whole world. When Aeneas descends into the underworld to meet the ghost of his father Anchises and learn his future, his father tells him what the gods have called him and the Roman people to do:

Roman, remember by your strength to rule
Earth's peoples—for your arts are to be these:
To pacify, to impose the rule of law,
To spare the conquered, battle down the proud.

The ideal Rome is to be a city devoted to the rule of law, where power is to join hands with justice. Of course, the historical Rome does not live up to the ideal, and the motive for empire is more frequently greed and a lust for power than a noble desire to share the goods of peace, justice, and the rule of law. Nonetheless, Rome thinks of itself as having a special calling to spread justice, and it is the case that the legal systems of every Western nation ultimately do go back to Roman law.

So Aeneas, the model Roman, is favored by the gods because of his justice, but he is as well an image of an ideal Roman because of his piety. Now the Latin word *pietas* is not quite the same as our English word *piety*. Aeneas is pious because of his service to the gods, yes, but that's not the whole of it. His piety encompasses as well his service to his family, his ancestors, and his city. Soon you will see at the Galleria Borghese a statue by the seventeenth century sculptor Bernini that represents the most famous instance of Aeneas' piety. When the Greeks are destroying Troy, raping and looting and killing and burning, Aeneas takes his old father Anchises, who does not have the strength to flee the

marauding Greeks, and lifts him on his back. He then escapes the fiery city carrying the old man, who himself is carrying icons of the household gods, and holding his little son Ascanius by the hand. He saves the past, his father, and the future, his son. He preserves the past—its customs, traditions, religious observances—so as to pass it on to the future. The *ideal* Roman, as Shakespeare would have learned from his reading, possesses such piety, such a devotion to something larger than oneself. An ancient Greek historian, considering the rapid growth in power and wealth of Rome, wrote that “to understand the success of the Romans, you must understand their piety.”

When Aeneas arrives in Italy, he does not actually found the city of Rome, but rather establishes a settlement, Alba Longa, near what will become Rome. The two towns that claim to be built on the site of ancient Alba Longa are the two closest to our campus, Castel Gandolfo and Albano. According to tradition, it is one of Aeneas’ descendents, Romulus, who will found Rome itself, and elements of his story are more disturbing, more sinister; in this story, we have a glimpse of the dark side of Rome. Whereas Aeneas is the son of the goddess of love, Romulus is the son of the god of war, Mars, who raped a virgin princess who then bore twins, Romulus and his brother Remus. She abandoned the babies in a basket, which she left to float in the Tiber River, and in response to the infants’ cries, a wolf came to save them from the floodwaters and suckle them before a herdsman found the babies and raised them as his own. Hence, you will see all over Rome the image of twins suckled by a wolf (“La Lupa”). The very funny and dark historian Livy, by the way, deflates the legend by mentioning that the herdsman’s wife was a prostitute known by her clients as “the Wolf.” But whether Romulus and Remus were nursed by a wolf or a prostitute, either way the boys showed themselves to have a

lupine, a wolfish, ferocity. Since the boys, being the children of the princess, were the true heirs to the throne, they overthrow the tyrannical king who had stolen power.

Romulus and Remus then set out to build themselves a city on the banks of the Tiber, where they had been abandoned as infants. But Remus mocked his brother's half-built walls on the Palatine Hill, jumping over them, and so Romulus killed his brother. The walls are the symbol of the city, and the city will not be mocked. In defense of the city, in defense of its walls, the Romans will brave any danger and make war upon any foe. And so the story of Rome begins with a story of violence, of fratricide.

More examples of ferocity will be provided by the family of the Horatii and by the soldier Scaevola, but these bespeak patriotism and valor. According to Livy, Rome and the original settlement of Alba Long went to war, and the cities decided to settle matters by having two sets of three brothers, the Roman Horatii and an Alban family, fight it out. Two of the Horatii were quickly killed, and so the third ran, knowing that the Albans in chasing after him would be separated. Thus, he could then turn and kill them one at a time, which he did. This surviving Horatius had a sister who was engaged to one of the Alban brothers, and he reentered Rome in triumph wearing the dead Alban's cloak as a trophy. Seeing her brother wearing the cloak, the girl cried out in mourning because her sweetheart was dead. Finding his sister crying for an enemy soldier, Horatius was filled with rage and plunged his sword in his sister's heart: "Take your girl's love and give it to your lover in hell. What is Rome to such as you? So perish all Roman women who mourn for an enemy!" Their father defended his son and the Roman people ruled this justifiable homicide. For pious Romans, nothing is to interfere with one's loyalty to the city. Even pain won't get in the way. Another Roman soldier Mucius, in a latter war

against the Etruscans, plotted to assassinate their king. On being caught, he proudly announced his name and said “I am a Roman come here to kill you.” The furious Etruscan king said that unless Mucius would reveal the details of the plot, he would burn him alive. Mucius then put his right hand into a sacrificial fire burning nearby and left it, until the king, awed by his courage, released him. Thereafter, Mucius was known as Scaevola, “Lefty,” and his act was remembered as typical of that *virtu* (better translated as *manliness* than as the English derivative *virtue*) that led Rome to victory after victory.

Yet Rome’s external military triumphs were accompanied by internal conflict. We see that factional and fratricidal strife reemerge time and again. Rome had a monarchy, and many of the senators, the aristocrats, resented the king and the whole institution of monarchy. The senators wanted *liberty*. Matters came to a head when a nasty character named Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin the Proud) seized the throne by killing his predecessor. Tarquin then had the most powerful senators, those who might be a threat to his power, put to death, but there was one particularly astute young man, Junius Brutus, who pretended to be a half-wit and escaped harm. This Brutus, the ancestor of the Marcus Brutus you know from *Julius Caesar*, then will use the crimes of Tarquin’s family to dethrone him. The Romans were involved, once again, in a war against a neighboring Italian tribe. During a lull in the fighting some of the young officers sat around drinking wine, and the young men, in their cups, began extravagantly praising their wives. One, Collatinus, said his wife Lucretia was more virtuous than any of them and proposed that they go spy on their wives to compare how virtuous these women truly were. The officers galloped off to Rome at dusk, and on reaching the city found their wives drinking and carrying on at a party. Except for Collatinus’ wife Lucretia—as he promised, they found

her at home working at the loom by lamplight with her maidservants, attending to the household as a good Roman matron should. She was as virtuous as her husband said she was. Lucretia politely invited the officers in to dine, at which dinner one of them, Sextus Tarquinius, King Tarquin's son, seeing how beautiful and honorable she was, became inflamed with desire for her. Sextus secretly returned to her house a few nights later, and Lucretia was properly hospitable to the king's son, offering him dinner and lodgings in the guestroom. But during the night Sextus snuck into her room, climbed into her bed, and put his left hand on her breast. "Lucretia, not a sound! I am Sextus Tarquinius. I am armed—if you utter a word I will kill you." Lucretia was terrified, but in response to his pleading that she willingly make love with him, she steadfastly refused. "Not even the fear of death could bend her will." So Sextus pulled out his trump card: "If death will not move you, dishonor shall. I will kill you first, then cut the throat of a slave and lay his naked body by your side. Will they not believe that you have been caught in adultery with a servant and paid the price?" Fearing that she would lose her reputation for chastity, Lucretia yielded. Sextus had his way with her and the next day went back to camp, happy with his triumph.

Lucretia was in despair and sent letters to her father and her husband, who brought Brutus with him, to come right away. They found her in tears, and to the question "Is it well with you," cried in response, "No, what can be well with a woman who has lost her honor? In your bed, Collatinus, is the impress of another man. My body only has been violated. My heart is innocent, and death will be my witness. Give me your solemn promise that the adulterer shall be punished—he is Sextus Tarquinius. He it is who last night came as my enemy disguised as my guest, and took his pleasure with me. That

pleasure will be my death—and his too, if you are men.” They tried to comfort her and told her it wasn’t her fault, that Sextus was the only guilty party. She responded, “I am innocent of fault, but I will take my punishment. Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they deserve.” At which point, she pulled a knife from under her robe and drove it into her heart.

Brutus, who had been faking idiocy all these years to escape notice, cast off his disguise, grabbed the bloody knife, and proclaimed, “by this girl’s blood—none more chaste until a tyrant wronged her—and by the gods, I swear that with sword and fire, and whatever else can lend strength to my arm, I will pursue Tarquin the Proud, and his wife, and all his children, and never again will I let them or any other man be King in Rome.” He brought the bloody knife, the dead body, and Lucretia’s weeping family out into a public square. Presiding over this bloody spectacle, he told the crowd the story of her death and reminded them of Tarquin’s tyranny. The mob was outraged and Brutus led them into rebellion. They marched on the royal palace. The king had to flee with his youngest sons, and his oldest son, Sextus, the rapist, was killed. Brutus the Liberator had saved Rome from tyranny, and the city would now be a republic.

Shakespeare’s Brutus, the assassin of Caesar, is ever aware that he is the descendent of the great man. And the Romans as a people will celebrate Brutus’ courage and cunning, and understand themselves as having been ennobled by the republic which he founded. It is quite likely that Rome’s republicanism and the Romans’ sense that they are descendents of individuals such as Brutus and Lucretia, who were so remarkably devoted to liberty and honor, provided the energy and confidence that would lead Rome first to conquer the other cities and tribes of Italy, then defeat the great Carthaginian

empire and annex Sicily, North Africa, and Spain, then triumph over Greece and much of the Middle East, then what is now France, England and Wales, and southern Germany. Still, despite these triumphs, internal strife and factionalism remain. The two sons of Brutus the Liberator conspire with the exiled Tarquin to overthrow the republic, and their father, to save Rome, will have his sons put to death. *Pietas*, the sense of duty, means that one puts the good of the city above one's personal desires and happiness.

The Roman Republic

The historical records for this period are more complete and so this overview will be more that of the “social science” historian, but there are still a number of memorable anecdotes and unlikely tales. When the Gauls, Celtic tribesmen from what is now southern France, sacked much of the city in 390 B.C., most of the populace withdrew to the fortified Capitoline Hill. The Gauls failed to take the fortress when geese, sacred to the goddess Juno, cackled in the middle of the night, alerting the Romans who then fought off the assault. Because the guard dogs that night failed to bark, every August 3rd, the anniversary of the battle, Romans would crucify dogs while honoring geese.

But the history of Rome now is increasingly a less charming history of factionalism, as the city is convulsed by the struggle between the patricians (aristocrats) and plebians (commoners) for power. The Romans devised a system of government that sought to avoid two great evils: the unrestricted power of any one man, any potential tyrant; and the instability that plagued the democratic city-states of Greece. They did so by providing for strong executive authority. Each year two men, the consuls, were given tremendous authority, including command of the army and interpretation and execution

of the law. There was strong leadership at the top. Yet these men had a number of checks put on them: they must consult with the Senate, they were only elected to one-year terms, and the two were subject to each other—neither consul could do anything without the approval of the other. This was not a bad system, and it lasted, for the most part, for about 400 years. But less than ten percent of the population were patricians and thus eligible to vote for and serve as consuls. The plebians were initially denied any political representation. Their protests grew increasingly angry, and after they threatened to leave Rome en masse and start a new city, the patricians granted them representatives, the two tribunes, whose purpose was to intercede on behalf of the plebians. But the common people still lived difficult lives, still subject to periodical famine, still heavily in debt so that many ended up in a slave-like condition. And they were still ill-treated by patricians, such as the great soldier (and mama's boy) Caius Marcius Coriolanus, who wanted to take away the privileges they had recently been granted, something Shakespeare dramatizes in *Coriolanus*.

Rome's wars continued as the city conquered more enemies and expanded into new territories. Rome itself seemed on the verge of destruction when in 218 the great Carthaginian general Hannibal crossed the Alps into Italy and defeated the Romans in a series of battles, but he was never able to launch an assault on Rome itself. Eventually, Rome would destroy Carthage (near modern-day Tunis in North Africa) in the Punic Wars, and so too would it, under the generalship of Julius Caesar, conquer Gaul in the first century B.C., by which point its empire stretched from Northern Europe to Africa, from Spain to the Middle East.

But these conquests exacerbated Rome's social problems, and the city's new status as a superpower conflicted with an older Roman political order. The republican model of government and the ideals that undergirded it were coming under tremendous strain. The destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C. meant that Rome no longer had a great enemy against whom its various factions needed to be united. Moreover, the war and its aftermath brought about significant social and demographic changes. Farmers serving as soldiers could not keep up their farms, which fell into disrepair and were lost. Hannibal's rampaging army and later civil wars meant that others fled their farms throughout Italy for Rome itself, leading to depopulation of the countryside. The massive importation of slaves and grain from newly conquered territories such as Sicily, and the seizure of lands from disloyal Italian allies because of the Social War (91-88 BC; from *socii*, "allies"), resulted in further destabilizing demographic changes. The countryside was no longer made up of small, independent farms growing wheat but of large estates (an analogy could be made to the end of the family farm and the growth of agribusiness in the United States) employing slaves and growing olives and grapes for wine. There was much land speculation and much corruption, as the possibility of quick wealth because of the large new markets was a temptation. The new reliance on slave labor made free labor less valuable and undermined social coherence, especially as authorities remained wary of slave revolts. Meanwhile, landless men flocked to Rome, to become dependent on bread handouts from the government. The conquests also affected Rome's religious and cultural life. From Asia Minor came new religious cults and from Greece new intellectual and artistic influences. "Captive Greece took captive her rude conqueror," wrote the Roman poet Horace, and the Greek culture influenced Rome's own great artists and writers, such

as Horace, Virgil, and Ovid. But Greek philosophical systems, such as Epicureanism and Cynicism, tended to emphasize individual happiness, rather than the devotion to the city that was an important cause in Rome's astonishing rise to power. The senatorial class which once had a reputation for stern virtue now had a reputation for corruption—supposedly the Romans struggled to defeat the North African king Jugurtha because so many senators were receiving bribes from him—and Rome was called “the city for sale.”

The poor had their defenders, such as Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, charismatic patrician brothers who supported reforms to benefit the lower classes, such as the division of large plantations to provide plots for small farmers. But the Gracchi seemed self-interested, potential despots using the poor to bolster their own power, and they, along with thousands of their supporters, were killed in the last decades of the second century B.C. The existence of a large class of resentful, unemployed men led to the rise of a new kind of army, no longer made up of private citizens fulfilling their civic duty, but, instead, of professional soldiers loyal to their generals, such as Marius, Sulla, Crassus, Pompey, and Caesar, whose ambitions provoked decades of civil war. The latter three, “the First Triumvirate,” briefly united to govern Rome, but, after Crassus’ death, Caesar in 49 B.C. brought his army back from Gaul, crossed the Rubicon, a stream in northern Italy, and marched on Rome. Pompey fled (along with supporters such as Brutus and Cassius), soon to be defeated in battle in Greece and then killed in Egypt, while Caesar had himself declared Dictator in Perpetuity.

This is the Rome that Shakespeare knew and which is the background to his *Julius Caesar*.

Quick Timeline and Overview

Don't worry, you don't need to know every date on this timeline, just the ones in bold. But it is valuable to know key dates so that different events can be seen in relation to each other. Further, Rome's history is simply fascinating and knowledge of it is the grounding for an understanding of the history of Western Civilization. And Rome's history continues: note the remarkable developments of the last century.

Legendary	Destruction of Troy (in modern day Turkey); Aeneas, son of Anchises and the goddess Venus, leads Trojan survivors to Italy, founds Alba Longa (near site of UD Rome campus).
April 21,753 B.C. (legendary)	Romulus kills Remus, founds Rome. The city is centered on the Palatine Hill, near where the Tiber River is fordable.
7th-3rd C. B.C.	Wars with other Italian tribes (Etruscans, Volscians Sabines, etc.) The Horatii Brothers Mucius Scaevola ("Lefty")
510 B.C. (semi-legendary)	The Rape of Lucretia. Junius Brutus the Liberator Expulsion of kings, founding of Republic
5th -- 1st c. B.C.	Civil unrest between patricians (aristocracy, senatorial class) and plebians (commoners). Plebians leave, threaten to found rival city on Aventine Hill. Are allowed Tribunes to represent them, but most power remains in the hands of the Senate and the Consuls.
261-41, 218-201	Punic Wars (against Carthage)
146	Destruction of Carthage
3rd-1st c. B.C.	Rest of Italy, North Africa, Spain, Greece, and Gaul (France) added to empire.
133, 121	Deaths of Gracchus Brothers
157-86 B.C.	Life of Marius, general who constructs army loyal to him, not to Rome.

88	Civil war between supporters of Marius and Sulla
73-71	Spartacus leads a slave rebellion.
60 – 46	First Triumvirate (Caesar, Pompey, Crassus) rule Rome. Growing rivalry between Caesar and Pompey.
49	Caesar crosses the Rubicon, marches on Rome.
48	Pompey is assassinated in Egypt, after his defeat by Caesar at the Battle of Pharsalus.
46	Caesar appointed dictator for 10 years.
44	Assassination of Caesar leads to civil war.
43	Second Triumvirate (Augustus, Marc Antony, Lepidus) formed.
42	Defeat of the Conspirators (Marcus Brutus, Cassius) at Philippi.
31 B.C.	Augustus defeats Marc Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium. The Roman Republic is dead in all but name, Rome is now an empire.
64 A.D.	Probable date of St. Peter’s crucifixion in Rome
96-180	The rule of the “Five Good Emperors” (Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius)
320s	The Emperor Constantine converts to Christianity, moves capital of empire to Constantinople (modern Istanbul).
410	Sack of Rome by the Visigoths, a German tribe
452	Pope Leo the Great convinces Attila the Hun not to sack Rome.
476	Traditional date for the fall of Rome (or the Western Roman Empire; the Eastern Roman Empire does not fall until the Turks take Constantinople in 1453).
595	Pope Gregory the Great sends mission to evangelize the English.

8th-10th C	The population of Rome, which had likely been over one million people at the height of the empire, drops to around 25,000 people.
1309-78	The popes leave Rome, reside in Avignon, France.
1511	Martin Luther visits Rome and is dismayed by the corruption of Renaissance Rome; time of Julius II, “Warrior Pope”
1527	Rome is sacked by troops of the Holy Roman Emperor
Mid-16th C.	Beginning of Catholic Reformation (or Counter-Reformation) after the Council of Trent aims to clarify Catholic doctrine and reform abuses in the Church. St. Ignatius Loyola (founder of the Jesuits) and St. Philip Neri are key figures in revitalization of Rome.
17th C.	The Baroque Age (Caravaggio in painting, Bernini in sculpture and architecture, Borromini in architecture)
1870	Rome is made the capital of a newly united Italy.
1922-43	Benito Mussolini’s Fascist party rules Italy and becomes allied with Nazi Germany
1943-44	Mussolini ousted but Nazi Germany then invades Italy; Nazi occupation; thousands of Italian Jews are sent to concentration camps.
June 5, 1944	Rome liberated by British and American troops.
1960s	<i>La Dolce Vita</i> (“the sweet life”); economy booms and Italy becomes one of world’s wealthiest nations
2000s	Adoption of a common European currency; immigration from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa.