Lecture on Julius Caesar

I. Shakespeare's Roman Plays

a) Titus Andronicus 1593-4  
b) Julius Caesar 1599-1600  
c) Antony & Cleopatra 1606-7  
d) Coriolanus 1607-8

II. Pivotal Points in History

a) From Roman republic to Roman empire

III. Pivotal Points become Parallel Lives: Plutarch

Greek  
Theseus  
Demosthenes  
Dion  
Alexander  
Demetrius

Roman  
Romulus  
Cicero  
Caesar  
Antony

IV. Shakespeare's Plot

1) The Other Ghost: Pompey

2) Caesar's debilities  
a) deaf in one ear; falling sickness = epilepsy;  
b) almost drowns

3) Women, poets and soothsayers
4) The Conspirators
   a) Cassius's "lean and hungry look"
   b) Brutus's nobility
   c) Casca
   d) Decius Brutus

5) The Avengers
   a) Marc Antony
   b) young Octavius

V. Caesar's Triumph vs. the Tragedy of Brutus

Note on Roman History:

Tradition holds that Rome was founded in 753 BC, centuries later than the story Vergil tells about Aeneas, fleeing from Troy with his father Anchises and his son Ascanius, seduced by Dido of Carthage, and finally bid by Jupiter to seek out Italy to become the second Troy. Apparently Ascanius established a kingdom in Alba Longa and years later Amulius, the last of this dynasty, ousted Numitor, the rightful king, and made his daughter Rhea Silvia a Vestal Virgin so that there would be no hope of a succession. Mars took care of this vain boast by impregnating the lady who promptly produced twins, Romulus and Remus, who were promptly thrown into the sea but were rescued by a she-wolf who suckled them (suckling wolf = symbol of Rome). The lads were brought up by a herdsman Faustulus and his wife Acca Larentia and eventually deposed Amulius and placed Numitor back on his throne. They decided to found another city on the shore where they had washed up. An omen of birds decided that Romulus should be king, and he built his walled city on the Palatine hill, but his brother cast scorn on the new city by jumping over the walls, for which he was killed by his brother as some say. Since women were needed to continue the city, the young Romans completed the Rape of the Sabine women, and things went along swimmingly until a later king, Tarquinius Superbus, the last of the mythical Roman kings, raped Lucretia, the wife of his nephew, for which act he was expelled by other patrician families among whom were the ancestors of Brutus, in 510 BC, as the story goes. Hence, Brutus's anxiety about Caesar's becoming king.

After the expulsion of the kings the government became a very limited republic ruled by two consuls chosen from the leading families, who held office for one year. At this point in Roman history the political problem became the battle of the patrician families against the "Plebs," the unprivileged "plebeian" community. Eventually the office of the "tribunes" was established to protect the rights of the Plebs, and their office was inviolable by any other magistrate (see what Caesar does to Flavius and Marullus in our play). The Senate began as an advisory council to the kings but grew by the time of Caesar to be the main administrative body of the republic and numbered some 900 patricians.
The other important background to this play is the opposition of Caesar and Pompey, the two great generals of the time. Pompey was married to Caesar's daughter, Julia, who died in 54 BC.

They became enemies thereafter, and while Caesar was waging his battles in Gaul and extending the Roman empire even to Great Britain, Pompey was waging equal battles in Spain and Africa.

Caesar, seeing that he would now have to defeat Pompey, crossed the Rubicon river and eventually routed Pompey's army and received the head of Pompey while he was having that affair with Cleopatra in Alexandria. This was the Civil War that engulfed Italy for the ten years preceding the death of Caesar in 44 BC.

Two other bits of information that may illuminate action in particular scenes: in I.2 Caesar asks Calpurnia to stand near Anthony as he runs the course of the Lupercalia in order to make her fertile. The Lupercalia, which occurred on the 15th of February, was a celebration of Faunus (the Greek Pan), worshipped under the name of Lupercus. Two patrician youths were chosen to meet at the Lupercus, a cave on the Palatine hill, reputedly the cave where Romulus and Remus were suckled by the wolf (lupus in Latin). They and the other worshippers sacrificed two goats and a dog, and the two youths (Luperci) were smeared with blood and clad in the goat skins ran an expiatory race around the Palatine, carrying in their hands thongs of goat skin, with which they hit women who placed themselves in the way--to produce fertility. The thongs were called februa ("means of purification"), and hence the month in which the festival occurred was called Februarius. Although blood is not mentioned by Caesar, anyone who knew anything about the Lupercalia would be able to connect this festival in which Anthony participated with the bloody dream of Calpurnia, which is reinterpreted by Decius Brutus, and recapitulated in the blood bath of Caesar's murder, and Anthony's reaction to it. Blood-wolves-sacrifice-fertility-ceremony is an important symbol complex in this play.

The second bit of information is about Cicero, the grand old man of Roman politics, a former consul and the supreme orator of Rome. His name means "chick-pea" in Latin, and he came from a humble background, over which he triumphed mightily. During his consulate (64-63 BC) Cicero exposed and put down the conspiracy of Catiline who intended to demolish the Roman republic if her were elected as consul.

Cicero in four magnificent orations against Catiline defeated him and his followers completely. In 59 Caesar became consul Caesar exiled Cicero, who did not support Caesar's unconstitutional attitudes but, wanting to win the old man over, allowed him to return in 57. He is an ominous presence in Shakespeare's play and a power that the conspirators want to have on their side. In the aftermath of the murder of Caesar Cicero delivers a series of fourteen orations, the Philippiics, against Anthony and the triumvirate, for which Anthony had Cicero's head and hands cut off on 7 December, 43 BC.