Exercises

Look at these everyday sentences. Draw circles under them. Decide if each is iambic pentameter or junk. (When it comes to sonnets, a sentence is either one or the other.)

35. I don't think I could eat another bite. iambic pentameter junk
36. Not even my math teacher solved that one. iambic pentameter junk
37. Who orders onion rings on a first date? iambic pentameter junk
38. Is it too late to add a side of fries? iambic pentameter junk
39. You said that we could buy tickets later! iambic pentameter junk
40. Man, some people have no sense of humor! iambic pentameter junk
41. Do I like boardgames? Like Monopoly? iambic pentameter junk
42. Does anybody have some Tylenol? iambic pentameter junk
43. Excuse me? I have some ibuprofen. iambic pentameter junk
44. My goldfish died, but I'm over it now. iambic pentameter junk
Shakespeare's Times: The Question of Succession

Why did William Shakespeare decide to write a tragedy set in ancient Rome? Until he wrote Julius Caesar, Shakespeare specialized in two types of plays: English histories and comedies.

Paradoxically, Shakespeare may have written about the past because of what was happening in the present. Queen Elizabeth I had come to power because the king had no male heir. She was a popular ruler, but she was also old and childless. Her subjects were concerned about who would succeed her. Some were even ready to depose her (as some Romans had been ready to overthrow Julius Caesar).

Plots to overthrow the queen defied the common belief that sovereigns were appointed by God. According to the doctrine of divine right, subjects had no right to make a change in rulers. But certain powerful people in England were ready to overthrow the queen. Among them was the charismatic Earl of Essex, who believed that it was time for a strong, young king (like himself) to take the throne.

No one knows what Shakespeare thought about Essex and his plots. Two fellow playwrights, Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, may have been spies, but Shakespeare seems to have avoided politics. However, he did find himself involved in the conflict between Elizabeth and Essex.

In 1595, Shakespeare wrote Richard II, a play about a weak English king who was replaced by a strong, ambitious subject. Essex loved Richard II and had it privately performed. Perhaps he hoped to start a revolution. After their performance for Essex, Shakespeare's company received a warning from the Court. The earl's interest in Richard II may have convinced Shakespeare that English history was a dangerous subject. Essex was coming close to treason and eventually was executed for this crime. Shakespeare surely didn't want to be beheaded along with him.

Shakespeare's decision to write about Rome also fit the current fashion. During the Renaissance, artists and intellectuals throughout Europe admired ancient Greece and Rome. Young Englishmen studied Latin and Greek and read classical authors such as Cicero and Caesar himself. Painters created works of art about Caesar and Rome. The Elizabethans even considered themselves to be descended from a Roman: the great-grandson of Aeneas, the legendary ancestor of the founders of Rome.

The story of Julius Caesar also had striking parallels to the politics of Shakespeare's time. Like Brutus and Caesar, Essex and Elizabeth had once been close friends. Like Brutus, Essex invoked honor and patriotism to support his arguments. Like Brutus, Essex was willing to shed blood to achieve his goals. Finally, the question of succession was a burning issue in Caesar's Rome and in Elizabeth's England.

Of course, there were also significant differences between England and Rome. For one thing, the Romans had to choose between two forms of government: a republic or an absolute ruler. The English simply had to identify a new monarch. These differences allowed Shakespeare to write about contemporary politics without personal risk.

Julius Caesar was first performed in 1599, almost exactly at the midpoint of Shakespeare's career. The first published collection of the Bard's plays lists it under two different titles: The Tragedie of Julius Caesar and The Life and death of Julius Caesar. In fact, the play can be thought of as either a history or a tragedy. Like most tragedies, it describes the pride and fall of powerful people. Like most histories, it has no clear-cut villain, so it is open to different interpretations. During some periods, the murder of Caesar has been seen as justified; during others, it has been considered treason.

With this history-tragedy, Shakespeare began moving away from historical issues.
into his great tragic themes. In his book Shakespeare, Anthony Burgess says that the playwright became preoccupied with "the puzzle of the good intention that could produce evil... Brutus was a murderer, but still the noblest Roman of them all. The conscience of the killer was to become an obsessive theme in the tragedies Shakespeare was preparing to write."

Why was Shakespeare suddenly fascinated with the problem of evil? Perhaps some personal event struck him to the heart—a betrayal by a friend, for instance. We may never know, for Shakespeare's inner life remains a mystery.

Shakespeare's Rome: The Struggle for Power

Julius Caesar dramatizes the struggle to control Rome after Caesar's assassination. Both Shakespeare and his audience knew who finally won. They also had no trouble understanding references to Roman beliefs and customs. However, most people today need more historical background than Shakespeare provides.

Legend says that Rome was founded in 753 B.C. by the twins Romulus and Remus. The twins were said to be descendants of Aeneas, a Trojan who fled to Italy after the fall of Troy. As babies, Romulus and Remus were thrown into the Tiber River by an uncle who considered them a threat to his power. After floating downstream in a basket, they were found and nursed by a female wolf. The brothers later founded a city on the Tiber and ruled it together. They quarreled, however, and Romulus killed his brother, making himself Rome's first king.

Kings ruled Rome for many years. Rome's last king was the tyrant Tarquin, an evil man who abused his power. In 509 B.C., a patriot named Brutus overthrew Tarquin and helped create the Roman Republic. Junius Brutus became one of Rome's great heroes. He was also the ancestor of the Marcus Brutus who killed Caesar. Marcus Brutus was always aware of his family's obligation to defend the Republic.

The Republic developed a government of many levels, each with its particular duties. Power was kept in the hands of the patricians—those from old noble families—and wealthy middle-class citizens. Working-class citizens—called plebeians—were represented in government but had little actual power. Slaves, foreigners, and women were not allowed to hold office or vote.

The highest-ranking officials in the Roman Republic were two consuls, elected for one-year terms. They were elected in pairs, with one senior consul and one junior. The consuls were commanders-in-chief of the army and held all executive power in the city. They also presided over the Senate and all elections. Each consul could veto the actions of the other. Caesar first became a consul in 59 B.C.

The 600 members of the Senate—Rome's main ruling body—were selected by the consuls. A senator was either a patrician or a wealthy citizen. High Roman officials, such as consuls, were also senators. The Senate's decrees became law unless they were vetoed by the tribunes.

The ten tribunes were the only plebeians who were elected officials. In theory, the tribunes could check the power of the senators and protect the rights of ordinary citizens. They had the power to veto any Senate decree and keep it from becoming law. Tribunes were also by law immune from arrest. This prevented the aristocrats from silencing a tribune by throwing him in jail. Consequently, many tribunes were assassinated when they stood in the way of a senator's ambition.

The Republic was certainly not a democracy. It had also had its share of problems. For example, the patricians spent a lot of time fighting among themselves, each trying to get just a little more power. During times of crisis, a powerful man could become dictator. During one crisis, Caesar's uncle Sulla became the absolute ruler of Rome. He killed hundreds of his political opponents.

Despite these problems, more people had a voice in the government than ever before. The Romans were very proud of their Republic. By the time Julius Caesar was born, Rome looked down on any nation that was ruled by a monarch. Most citizens swore that Rome would never have another king. However, by 44 B.C., many Romans were convinced that the ambitions of one man threatened the Republic.
Information about the PLAY

- *Julius Caesar* is a Shakespearean tragedy, written in 5 acts.
- The play was produced in 1599-1600.
- It was first published from a transcript of a promptbook in Shakespeare's First Folio of 1623.
- The First Folio was originally published as *Mr. William Shakespare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*.

*FOLIO*: a book (or manuscript) consisting of large sheets of paper that are folded in the middle to make two leaves or four pages.

Setting

- *Julius Caesar* is set in Rome in 44 BC.
- The action of the play occurs right around March 15, or the "Ides of March." (The Ides of each month of the ancient Roman calendar corresponded to the night of the full moon.)

The REAL Julius Caesar: Interesting Facts

- In the Christian world, Caesar is remembered because he reformed the Roman calendar, and it was then called the Julian calendar.
- Pope Gregory XIII changed the Julian calendar slightly, and many countries use this altered version even today.
- The main differences between the two calendars center around the way they approximate the length of the tropical year and their rules for calculating Easter.

The REAL Julius Caesar: Historical Info

- Julius Caesar was born, supposedly through a C-section, on the 12th or 13th of July, in ~100 BC. His full name was Gaius Julius Caesar.
- Caesar was born into a family of patricians, or members of Rome's original aristocracy. Plebeians were the lower class citizens.
- Caesar's family, the "Julii Caesares," could supposedly trace their lineage back to the goddess Venus.
- Despite the fact that this family was noble, they were not snobbish, rich, or distinguished. Noble blood was not as important as it once had been.
- Caesar began his political career young and proceeded quickly through the ranks. In 60 BC, Caesar made a pact with two other important political figures, Pompey and Crassus, to help him get elected as consul for 59 BC.

*CONSUL*: the highest elected political office of the Roman government (one of two)

The REAL Julius Caesar: Historical Info

- In order to secure this pact with Pompey and Crassus, Caesar had to act as a middle-man between these two men. These men had opposing political views and did not agree on practically anything except Caesar.
- Pompey married Caesar's only child, Julia, to seal his alliance with Caesar. As a side note, Caesar also married for politics. His second wife was named Calpurnia. Julia was from his first marriage.
- This secret pact and partnership between Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar was called the first triumvirate.

*TRIUMVIRATE*: a group of 3 men who "ruled" and were responsible for public administration
The REAL Julius Caesar: Historical Info

- After Caesar was consul, he was appointed governor to Gaul for 8 years. During this time, Crassus had been defeated in battle and Pompey had become jealous of Caesar's success.
- When Caesar returned to Rome, he ignored the Roman senate, defeated the republican forces (who were led by Pompey), and became master and dictator of Rome.
- Caesar pursued the fleeing Pompey to Egypt. Pompey was murdered by an officer of King Ptolemy of Egypt, and Caesar and Cleopatra became good friends.
- Caesar went on other campaigns, where he uttered his famous words, "Veni, vidi, vici," or "I came, I saw, I conquered."
- One of Caesar's major problems was that he offered clemency to too many people who had at one time been his enemies. One of these enemies was Brutus. "Et tu, Brute" was Caesar's famous last phrase as Brutus stabbed him on March 15, 44 BC.

The REAL Julius Caesar: Historical Reputation

- Caesar was not lovable. He was generous to his defeated opponents, hoping that they would end up liking him. However, his clemency ended up hurting him rather than helping him.
- His soldiers liked him because of his many, many military victories. These victories were possible because Caesar was very smart and strategic in the face of warfare.
- Caesar was great and showed much ambition...maybe too much.
- Caesar was also scandalous when it came to his sexual reputation because he did not remain faithful. He had numerous affairs with women, including many married women. One woman he supposedly had an affair with was Cleopatra: this was scandalous not only because she was married to the king of Egypt but also because of the political problems that an affair of this nature could create. Caesar was unfaithful in other ways, too. Supposedly, he dabbled in homosexual relations as well as his heterosexual affairs. This lack of chastity gave him quite a reputation.
- Overall, Caesar was considered almost a genius in his skills in administration, generalship, and propaganda, even though he wasn't necessarily virtuous or morally ethical.