Shakespeare’s Rome: The Struggle for Power: a History of Rome and its government

Julius Caesar dramatizes the struggle to control Rome after Caesar defeated Pompey. Kings ruled Rome for many years. Rome’s last king was the tyrant Tarquin, an evil man who abused his power.

The Republic (Rome’s government) developed a government on 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 **plebians**-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**, who presided over the Senate and all elections. Caesar first became a consul in 59 BC.

The consuls selected members of the **Senate** -Rome’s ruling body. The Senate’s decrees became law unless 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 the ordinary citizens. They had the power to veto Senate decrees. Tribunes were also by law immune from arrest. This prevented the aristocrats (wealthy and the nobles) 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 and was not without its problems. The patricians spent a great deal of time fighting amongst themselves, each trying to get just a little more power. During times of crisis, a powerful man could become dictator.

Despite these problems, more people had a voice in the government than ever before. By the time Julius Caesar, Rome looked down on any nation ruled by a monarch. By 44 BC many Romans were convinced that the ambitions of one man threatened their Republic.