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Embodied Masculinity in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

Amid the famous historical figures and events of *Julius Caesar* a complex question about

rank, thinks he might be able to claim it, either for himself or to attribute it to another—the tribunes lionise Pompey, the populace Caesar, Brutus and Cassius try to claim it for themselves. There are many men but one ideal. Whose version of masculinity is the real thing? How is the distinction to be made? Which criterion is right?

Antony claims that nature ultimately states who man is. It is a powerful way to put things, since it appears not only to support what is said (Brutus is a man) and how (Antony quotes nature), but also to guarantee the speech's premise—man is the pre-eminent natural ideal. The proof of man's perfection is the body—"the elements / So mixed in him" (5.5.72-73)—a seemingly unique attribute, given at birth yet also a man's own to mould and use. No matter that, as happens constantly through the play, men's bodies are always being re-formed verb011 Tl2.6(y)99.5(t3inc69()99.8ein)-04 Tc0.0004 Te0.00Tc0.00040.0m02 ph]TJ17.00Tc0.]TJ17'.3(on is

Romans."[4] Rymer specially condemned the depiction of Brutus, picking his speech as entirely inappropriate, "unless from some son of the Shambles, or some natural offspring of the Butchery."[5] He alludes to Shakespeare's connection to the cattle industry through his father's early work as a glover, which John Aubrey embellished as follows: "his father was a butcher, and I have been told heretofore by some of the neighbours, that when he was a boy he exercised his father's trade, but when he kill'd a calf, he would do it in high style, and make a speech."[6] In contrast to the biographical panegyric that is soon to begin with Nicholas Rowe's *Some Account of the Life &c. of Mr. William Shakespear* (1709), and notwithstanding Aubrey's image of the proto-tragedian, Rymer insinuates that Shakespeare's yeoman background prevents him from characterising heroic masculinity. Despite their different tones, from sarcasm to panegyric, the writers readily assume more or less direct connections between Shakespeare as a man, his lineage, and the kind of plays he can write.

For Rymer and Dennis, the gap between history, genre, and Shakespeare's characterisation threatens to expose and undermine if not historical tradition, then certainly traditional masculinity: if the near-legendary Caesar and Brutus come across as ordinary or inferior, where does that leave all other male figures? Some other early commentators did, however, take a different view. It is in his departures from the sources that Margaret Cavendish locates the success of Shakespeare'.9(f)2.(-1.8(cat)-4(es t)pane)oe ah8(l)tes e.8(r)14(sh4(o)-n)pan

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emotions too appear most significant on account of their physical consequence, the "diuers effectes" on the body of the "passions of the minde:" "like as ioye comforteth the heart, nourisheth bloud, and quickeneth the whole bodie: So heauinesse and care hinder digestion, ingender euill humours, waste the principal partes, and with time consume the whole bodie."[12] Wilson's moralising shares the anatomical premise that recurs through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: examining man's body reveals his true nature. Yet it is not only corporeal detail that is uncovered on early modern dissecting tables. Various notions of man's identity are supported through anatomical discourse, be they in terms of the Christian ethic that Wilson offers, or of a solidly individualised and gendered selfhood, or of a more sceptical and equivocal sense of masculine ethos, as has been recently suggested.

England, as Elizabeth I's reign drew to a close.[16] In these terms, the play participates in an "unmasking of the politics of representation per se, in a detailed anatomy of the body politic," by staging critical episodes, past and present.[17] More specific to my concerns, as part of its wide-ranging political interest, the play represents an ideological struggle over the way the male body looks and is looked at, acts and is acted upon, and speaks and is spoken about.

Hence in addition to its relevance to early modern notions of power, representation, and discourse, *Julius Caesar* offers a view of some of the important conceptions of masculinity and male relations in Shakespeare's time and after. The play presents a society publicly dominated by and symbolically fixated on men. Commentators often note that both female characters, Portia and Calpurnia, are confined to a private domain, their concerns brushed aside (as in Calpurnia's case) unless they try to assume a conspicuous masculine persona, as does Portia through repeated self-wounding.[18] Sidelining the female characters to this degree leaves what is basically a one-gender world where homosocial bonds are acted out through fervent comradeship and enmity in politics and war. Even among allies there exists a "routine intensity of competition central to the definition of Romans as men."[19] Shakespeare depicts a somewhat similar world in *Coriolanus*, but both there and to a still greater extent in *Antony and Cleopatra* he develops the psychological, erotic, social, and political impacts that women can have, notwithstanding (perhaps more on account of) the limitations and pressures brought to bear upon them. With an unwavering focus on men, *Julius Caesar* contrasts to both of these plays, and to Shakespeare's other works with classical settings, including *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and *Titus Andronicus*, where female figures are objects of, but also influential, perhaps uncontrolled, factors in relations between men. (Nonetheless, there remains little sense through most of these works that women are able to relate to themselves or each other outside patriarchal codes. Female characters such as

that way: "Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look.... Such men as he be never at heart's ease / Whiles they behold a greater than themselves, / And therefore are they very dangerous" (1.2.195, 209-10).[24] Emulous rivalry and knowledge make the aristocrats' versions of one another, "fashioned through violent competition" and seeking the goals of power and identity through superior insight and at the expense of others.[25] Yet if each man is a version of the self, his demise is incipiently one's own. In viewing the other the self foresees, without necessarily recognizing, its own grim prospects.

Hence the reflexivity of the gaze is repressed as it is exercised. The aristocrats try to deny or foreclose the self-interest and -reference of male vision, and instead presuppose its objective truthfulness. In this way, focusing on others might work to confirm and insulate rather than threaten the observer's identity. After he surveys Cassius, Caesar disavows any personal concern and asserts an eternal presence: "I rather tell thee what is to be fear'd / Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar" (1.2.212-13). Cassius's critical account of Caesar would affirm his own probity through narrative: "honour is the subject of my story.... He had a fever when he was in Spain / ... I did mark / How he did shake. 'Tis true, this god did shake" (1.2.94, 1.2.121-23). Having had his self-perceptions mirrored and endorsed by Cassius (1.2.69-72), Brutus can concede that Caesar's probable ascent justifies his decision to strike for "no personal cause... But for the general... So Caesar may. / Then lest he may, prevent" (2.1.11-12, 27-28). Only Cicero willingly admits to men's personal investment in what they perceive: "men may construe things, after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves" (1.3.34-35). This admission of subjective understanding is later undercut by the blunt literalness with which Cicero's own death is imposed and confirmed: "Ay, Cicero is dead, / And by that order of proscription" (4.2.231-32). The performative violence of the Latinate "proscription" obliterates Cicero's relativism and rhetorical subtlety. The

moment seals Antony's antagonism, "Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!" (3.1.261).[26]

The ambiguous handshaking near the end of Act Three suggests that characters'

attack for aspiring to a power beyond his capacity.[30] Cassius images this power as the imposition of physical submission: "And this man / Is now become a god, and Cassius is / A wretched creature, and must bend his body / If Caesar carelessly but nod on him" (1.2.116-20). Ironically, the conspirators use such bowing and scraping to distract Caesar before the stabbing (3.1.34-76); Antony later charges them with doing just so (5.1.42-45). Caesar's fall is thus ironically preceded by physical expressions that seem to verify his dominance, just as his offstage *coup de théâtre* is simultaneously being framed by the beginnings of conspiracy.

Cassius's words angrily exaggerate the process of submission, but the image he uses registers sharp sensitivity to the two bodies' relative status, bearing, and control. The apparent absence of intention and minimal movement in Caesar's careless nod magnify his mastery. Such bodily power is a scarce commoditytis 07(i)-2..6(s1h bowin)-10rewretcatus, betheo

her rape—"I am the mistress of my fate," she avers[32]—is another mark of the thoroughly masculinised society that is staged in *Julius Caesar*.

The ways in which links between self-wounding and masculine identity can be read as destructive rather than constructive are reinforced in the play's closing scenes. The men want to believe that suicide defines a final control over selfhood, or at least deprives others of the renown of killing them: "For Brutus only overcame himself, / And no man else hath honour by his death" (5.5.56-57). Killing oneself and others earns honour which, like other social values, seems to be conceived quantitatively, or perhaps economically, as something that adds up orn789c" n789bt(isp(a)4.7id,"a)4.7 Bgutusorn789mpasafrn789cat( )]TJT*0.0006 Tc0.0006 Tw[["3

that has Generosity to be moved or is capable of Sorrow and Pity."[34] Lewis Theobald found much "Beauty" in the scene. He contrasts John Fletcher's inability to equal it in the exchanges between Melantius and Amintor in *The Maid's Tragedy*: "Honour and Friendship, the Violation of each and the Desire of recementing them are the Topicks of this Action. The Passions are strong and vehement, but conducted more according to the luxuriant Fancy of the Poet than any Standard in Nature."[35] For these commentators, the scene reflects Shakespeare's insight into brave, passionate manhood and his ability to induce a similar ethos in spectators and readers. It registers an enduring bond between Roman, Shakespearean, and eighteenth-century masculinity. Steele also singled out Act Two, scene one—the meeting in Brutus's orchard—as presenting "that great Soul debating upon the Subject of Life and Death with his intimate Friends."[36] The later scene expands the circle of male intimates to include the audience. Where Fletcher's version is idiosyncratic and excessive, Shakespeare's captures the capacity of manliness to be fortified by a preceding breach.

Just as man's individual integrity is ambivalently symbolised by threats and acts of bodily violence, so is the broader system of aristocratic unity and equality. In this code, physical violence works to destroy the bonds it celebrates; yet as in the individual case, destruction is central to the ultimate celebration. Emulous rivalry "makes for class disintegration as well as class cohesion."[37] The dead body is a synecdochic ideal, the central trope in a rhetoric of masculinity envoiced solemnly by all characters (there is no Thersites as in *Troilus and Cressida* to parody the trope). The sequence of eulogies through the play most clearly reveals the way this rhetoric works. While the appearance and actions of the body are significant, the manner in which corpses are spoken about, and in a sense speak, most vividly depicts the body's social value and function. The play is structured around a series of eulogies, beginning with Murellus's words on Pompey and ending with Antony and

Octavius's comments on Brutus. In between come the well-known orations on Caesar by Brutus and Antony, as well as Brutus's and Cassius's remarks on Portia, and Brutus's on Cassius and Titinius. Each of these speeches not only commemorates the dead but also strives to establish the body's "true" meaning in order to shore up and control the intertwined system of violence and honour. The eulogists do not disagree on the worth of the system but on which faction has the right to speak for it and claim it as their own.

The key motif in Murellus's speech is Pompey's decline from the star of triumphal processions to mere matter over which a new victor rides: "do you now strew flowers in his way, / That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood" (1.1.49-50). The refusal to name Caesar, along with using the depersonalised pronoun "That," attempts to deny his position and restore Pompey's. But where bodily integrity, "the intact ideal maleness of the classical body,"[38] is considered all-important, the loss of bodily control, in battle or as a victim, reduces men's social stature in life and death; Pompey's status cannot be retrieved. The people do, however, comply with the tribune's words which, for the time being, grant him considerable power. This effect recurs through the play. A charismatic quality adheres to the eulogist, as if he alone were able to control the equivocal meanings connoted by the corpse. A similar kind of aura radiates from Brutus in his responses to news of Portia's death, strengthening his leadership over Cassius, Titinius, and Messala, "Even so great men great losses should endure," they concur (4.2.245). Unlike the unsettling reflexivity that can arise from looking at the deceased or weakened other, and which might disturb one's self-image or presage one's demise, speaking of the dead can reinforce one's status and authority.

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of death. His speech uses logical analogies, Socratic-like questioning, and flattering appeals to the hearers' wisdom and speaker's honour to position the audience to agree. In contrast, Antony speaks through Caesar's body. An impression of physical and verbal fusion with the corpse charges his words and overpowers the audience. His mouth and the stab wounds supplement each other to speak: "thy wounds ... like dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips, / To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue" (3.1.262-64); "I... / Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths, / And bid them speak for me" (3.2.215-17). At the same time, Antony manoeuvres the corpse like a stage prop, carrying it out but then withholding it from the crowd, gradually moving it closer to them, finally revealing it beneath the torn and stained mantle. As his own emotions fluctuate, Antony professes union with the dead body, "Bear with me. / My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar" (3.2.102-3). He adapts the orthodox rhetoric of blood and body, by overturning its emphasis on integrity and control. Through playing upon the corpse's visceral presence, he induces the people to stage a carnivalesque uprising. For a liminal period, social hierarchy is undone. The people seize Caesar's body, drive the aristocrats from the city, and subvert linguistic order. The rhetoric of the body politic is fragmented.

The end of the play sees the restoration of social and political order, with a newly dominant faction under Octavius's leadership. The final eulogies reinstate an orthodox rhetoric of the male body, suppressing its materiality to reassert the body politic's symbolic integrity. Before his death, Brutus sets the recuperative process in train with his words on Cassius and Titinius: "Are yet two Romans living such as these? / The last of all the Romans, fare thee well!" (5.3.97-98). The ethos of "Romanness" is salvaged even though he mourns its loss. The victors then celebrate that ethos and imply its persistence. Antony commemorates the fallen Brutus as proof of Roman masculinity. Octavius reinstitutes a

controlled decorum around the body, removing Brutus's corpse from sight. In contrast to the highly public function of Caesar's body—"Produce[d]...to the market place" (3.1.230), as a kind of rhetorical and political prop that continues Caesar's own politically expedient theatricality—Brutus's body is used to uphold a restricted code of aristocratic masculinity, an icon around which those values are solemnly consolidated: "According to his virtue let us use him, / With all respect and rites of burial. / Within my tent his bones tonight shall lie, / Most like a soldier, ordered honourably" (5.5.75-78). By stressing its symbolic value, the new leader erases the masculine body's physical limits. The decline that Thomas Wilson saw as intrinsic to that physical materiality is for the moment also suspended, and a future for the masculine body politic is invoked. It is at most an equivocal future, as the fate of Lepidus and Antony will show.

Cynthia Marshall has suggested that in the move from Plutarch's tales to Shakespeare's plays, "relationships to the past are theorized on textual and characterological levels."[40] In many respects, *Julius Caesar* exemplifies this sort of complex response to classical narrative. It dramatizes the problematic effects of a world controlled by aristocratic men. They experience the failures and triumphs of their own dominance, both subject to and the subjects of the power they embody. Their submission to the system they command is the paradox that allows a culture of male authority to continue even though powerful individuals fall. Shakespeare's drama unravels the costs of the system for masculine selfhood but stops short of staging in much detail its consequences for those outside the focal group, including women and men from different classes. Critical perspective is circumscribed by theatrical, historical, and contemporary attraction to the powerful, aristocratic male. Though questioning

masculinity whose universal acceptance is assumed. That assumption is complicated and tested by Shakespeare in other plays; yet its early modern cultural and theatrical pre-eminence provides a major pretext for critical responses to Shakespeare through the seventeenth century and beyond.

Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare's work are to the *Norton Shakespeare*, eds., Stephen Greenblatt, Jean E. Howard, Walter Cohen, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: Norton, 1997). References are included in the text.

2. Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare on Masculinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2; cf. Coppélia Kahn's discussion of *virtus* in *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women* (London: Routledge, 1997), 11-15.

3. John Dennis, *On the Genius and Writings of Shakespear* (1712), in D. Nichol Smith, ed., *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare* (2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 32.

4. Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693), in Brian Vickers, ed., *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, 6 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974-81), 2.55.

5. Ibid., 2.56.

6. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Richard Barber (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1982), 286. Katherine Duncan-Jones' explanation of the technical differences between glovers and butchers confirms Rymer's rancorous tone; see *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from His Life* (London: Arden, 2001), 15.

7. Letter CXXII, in *CCXI Sociable Letters* (1664), in Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts, eds., *Women Reading Shakespeare 1660-1900: An Anthology of Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 13.

8. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 188.

9. Elizabeth Montagu, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear* (1769), in *Women Reading Shakespeare*, 26.

10. Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1560), ed. G. H. Mair (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 83.

influential gloss of the term as "a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them:" from *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 28.

18. In her introduction to the play in the *Norton Shakespeare*, Katharine Eisaman Maus helpfully sums up this position (1529-30). Portia's actions might also be related to a more critical perspective on male conduct that is considered below.

19. Kahn, 85.

20. Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12.

21. On these contextual Elizabethan issues, cf. Richard Wilson, " 'Is this a holiday?' Shakespeare's Roman Carnival," *English Literature History* 54 (1987), 31-44, and Rose, "Conjuring Caesar," *passim*.

22. Peter Stallybrass, "Reading the Body: *The Revenger's Tragedy* and the Jacobean Theater of Consumption," *Renaissance Drama* n.s. 18 (1987), 122.

23. T. S. Dorsch, Introduction, *Julius Caesar*, Arden edition (London: Methuen, 1979), xxvii.

24. Cf. Antony's later comment on the military tactics of Brutus and Cassius: "I am in their bosoms, and I know / Wherefore they do it" (5.1.7-8). Being able to see other men in terms of one's own knowledge and emotion is conceived as crucial to dominance.

25. Rebhorn, 85; cf. Girard: "Caesar is a threat ... but whoever eliminates him, *ipso facto*, becomes another Caesar" (400).

30. Note Goffman's remark that "a sense of the humanity of a performer is somehow generated by a discrepancy between role and character" (294); cf. the impact on the crowd of Antony's tears, which interrupt his oration over Caesar's corpse (3.2.102-14).

31. Paster, 294; cf. Kahn, 101.

32. *Rape of Lucrece*, line 1069.

33. Richard Steele, *The Tatler* 68 (14 September 1709), in *Critical Heritage*, 2.206-7.

34. William Smith, "On Shakespeare and the Sublime," in *Critical Heritage*, 3.96.

35. Lewis Theobald, *Censor* 70 (2 April 1717), in *Critical Heritage*, 2.310.

36. Steele, *The Tatler* 53 (10 August 1709), in *Critical Heritage*, 2.205.

37. Rebhorn, 95.

38. Paster, 298.

39. Girard, 413; cf. Paster, 286, 298.

40. Cynthia Marshall, "Shakespeare, Crossing the Rubicon," *Shakespeare Survey* 53 (2000), 74.