



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



Sacred Blood and the Body's Rich Legacy in *Julius Caesar*

Author(s): Louise Geddes

Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (June, 2010), pp. 45-74.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/geddes%20article.html>

“Sacred Blood and the Body’s Rich Legacy in *Julius Caesar*”
by Louise Geddes

Standing across Caesar’s body in the marketplace, Antony follows his famous oration with the claim that his power of speech has not the power to “stir men’s blood” (3.2.224).^[1] As much as listening to his words, Antony wants to encourage the plebeians of Rome to look once more upon the piteous sight of the slain Caesar’s corpse. The assumption that underpins Antony’s observation is that the blood of Caesar can “speak” more to the citizens than any words the orators might use. By presenting the body of Caesar onstage, Shakespeare is capitalizing on the appeal of bloodshed, and Antony’s decision to make a relic of the corpse evokes the resistance to iconography that characterized England’s religious revolution. Shakespeare was keenly aware of the controversy surrounding iconoclasm, as it was also a source of anti-theatrical prejudice. Jonas Barish discusses the way in which Medieval antitheatrical writers viewed with disgust the “feigned recreation” (69) that the plays offered, drawing attention to the clerical resistance to spectacle that threatened to redirect the public gaze from a church that employed many of the same visual tactics, but for different ends, therefore blurring the boundaries between “true” and “false” spectacle.^[2]

Antitheatricalists argued that staged performances reinforced the notion of unthinking belief in what is seen, and mirrored the practice of venerating church idols and material objects. In *Julius Caesar*, this power to dazzle is manipulated and exploited, revealing the extent to which the 'truth' of an image is dependent on its successful manipulation. The image of Caesar's carcass recalls the alarming spectacle of Christ's mutilated body, previously found on crucifixes and rood screens, which although now banished from churches, re-emerged in texts such as *Actes and Monuments*. The bloody body of Caesar that Antony unveils is one of the play's most arresting sights and incites the watching crowd to explode in violent fury. Through Antony's manipulation of powerful images, Shakespeare's play exploits violent spectacle at the same time it critiques the manipulation of images.

Literary critics have long been aware of the ceremonial nature of *Julius Caesar*, explaining Brutus' attempts at creating ritual as an example of a self-delusional attempt to justify the slaughter of his friend.^[3] Over the years, a critical consensus has emerged to suggest that Rome is a place where "words and rituals have dangerously lost their meaning" (Danson 53). However, even though the Roman populace may have lost touch with the "real sacramental import of ritual" (Conn Liebler 98), one cannot assume that ritual has no place in Shakespeare's Rome. Instead, the play shows an awareness of the importance of political violence, both to Caesar's Rome and sixteenth-century England.

The play is located within a world of piety, one that values sacrifice, something that early modern reformers might insultingly characterize as Catholic. The opening act is littered with events and observations that carry religious undertones, and mix ancient Roman rites with allusions that would have been noticeably relevant to a contemporary Elizabethan audience, such as the statues of Caesar that the citizens deck with garlands, and the mocking of the shoemaker as a mender of "bad soles" (1.1.14). Like Puritan preachers, the tribunes propose that instead of participating in a ritual in which meaning buckles under the weight of spectacle, the people "run to your houses, fall upon your knees, / Pray to the gods" (1.1.53-4) for wisdom, privileging introspective prayer over noisy public ceremonies. Brutus takes an extremist stance, viewing all aspects of traditional religion as archaic, superstitious and primitive. However, even as he rejects idolatry in his speeches, his actions validate the impact it holds over the citizens of Rome and mark him as susceptible to the same idolatrous tendencies.

The extreme desire of Brutus to subjugate everything around him to the power of words sets him apart from the ways in which the citizens of Rome communicate, and he is left foolishly surprised when he fails to present a sacrificial image that will be accepted by no other authority than an invocation of his honor. Brutus does indeed sanctify the killing of Caesar but it is because his actions unwittingly acknowledge that the power of spectacle is far greater than his language could ever be. Standing in the marketplace, Brutus mistakenly assumes that his rationality can recontextualize

Caesar's death, and that he can simultaneously ritually kill and deny the ceremony's validity. Because of the space of uncertainty that Brutus creates, Antony is able to usurp and manipulate the impact that the murder has on the Roman masses. In spite of the conspirators' efforts to prevent the worship of living Caesar as a god-on-earth, Caesar's corpse becomes a consecrated object, and the citizens fall into idolatrous worship of Rome's dead monarch. Through a consideration of the analogous contradiction found in Reformation theology and culture, we might read *Julius Caesar* as a play that simultaneously exploits and undermines the theatrical nature of early modern belief.

The manner of one's death mattered in ancient Rome, primarily because of the political currency that a well-executed (pun intended) death could afford. During the Roman Republic, *devotio* became a well-known tradition of embracing death, as a means of honoring the Gods of the underworld, but, under the Empire, it became a symbolic self-slaughter in honor of the Emperor. Occasionally, too, life was offered up as an act of defiance. Cato for example, was so determined to die as a statement against Caesar, that he fell on his sword, and then, while under guard, managed to pull out his stitches and bled to death. Historian Paul Plass suggests that these acts were committed on the premise that "violence was meant to be seen because it was meant to convey a message" (146), rendering life and death as political commodities.

During the English Reformation, martyred bodies become a locus of epistemological, doctrinal and political struggle, as martyrologists attempted to appropriate the testimonies of the dead as a means of propagating a particular agenda. Martyrs were used as figures of inspiration, to galvanize a religious community, or, in this case, a Protestant nation. William Haller explains that “persecution gave its victims the opportunity to dramatize their faith in the Word by embracing martyrdom, and its survivors the opportunity to exploit the testimony of the martyrs by the classic device of a martyrology” (50) – everyone benefits. The spectacles of martyrs going to their deaths were intensely popular, and therefore a terrific medium for political propaganda. In many ways, executions stood as a form of mass entertainment, and thousands of people might turn out to see the death of a high-profile recusant.^[4] Unsurprisingly, there were people willing to exploit this captive audience. Even if Reformers wished to realign the focus of the Eucharist, they could not turn their backs on the powerful image of the sacrifice, and the popularity of martyrdom attests to this. The sight of such suffering had the power to spark interest and even conversion, and this suggests that the Reformation’s drive to strip ritual of its hold over the common people was at most, muted in its success.

John Foxe’s famous book *The Actes and Monuments of Christian Martyrs, or Book of Martyrs* as it is known, is a case in point. In his account of the martyrdom of John Hooper, Bishop of Worcester and Gloucester, we can see the sensationalism implicit in

such narratives. Foxe describes in detail how Hooper burned, which includes him speaking until his lips charred, and beating his breast until one of his arms fell off, while his other hand hung down, dripping gore. Although many critics argue that Foxe deliberately shied away from the Medieval worship of the saints, instead choosing to emphasize the ordinariness of Protestant martyrs (Knott 45), the theatrical nature of some of the martyrdoms he describes complicates such a claim.

Instead of rejecting the theological point of contradiction that martyrdom offers, Shakespeare's play embraces it. As Caesar's shattered body is turned into a sacred relic, a "rich legacy" left to the Roman citizens, it is possible to see that ceremony in Rome is a deeply contested site of meaning in which the popular voice battles against the Senators' re-interpretations of traditional ideas. The elevation of Caesar's bloodied flesh evokes the Catholic iconography so deeply feared by Protestant Reformers, and looks back to a more medieval form of worship, evoking the popular veneration of the saints' bodies and holy relics. Antony is able to exploit this latent power, and his belief that Caesar's wounds "like dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips" (3.1.260) attests to this potency. The reaction of the people, and the raw, violent emotion that Brutus inadvertently unleashes in Rome, serves to validate the presentation of sacrificed flesh – through Antony's superior performance Caesar's body is consecrated in the way Brutus most feared, and this ultimately drives him to suicide.

The response to Caesar's body implies a belief in an intercessionary divine power ascribed to the persecuted body, cementing a Roman sense of the world in which religion is conflated with more scientific and logical phenomena. Casca's discussion of the strange sights he has encountered in the streets, including the slave with the burning hand, the prowling lion and hundred ghastly women, creates an environment in which superstition is justified because the world is a prophetically mysterious place. The discussions of omens, the garlanding of statues and the desire to see Caesar return, all indicate the way in which the visual is privileged over the verbal, and what the conspirators dismiss as the foolish infatuations of the common man is a symbolic power that is integral to Roman belief. In spite of Caesar's protestation, "I am ashamed I did yield" (2.2.106) to the power of Calphurnia's dreams, his first response to his wife's visions was to bid his priests to sacrifice an animal to the gods, in order to create a sense of security.

As opposed to plays such as *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* in which portents and omens are used to explore an individual's psyche, the characters of *Julius Caesar* rarely meditate on the implications of the inexplicable phenomena they face. Aside from the second act musings of Brutus, the characters refrain from revealing their innermost thoughts in private monologues, and instead are restricted to observations that give little more than glimpses into their underlying feelings. This rejection of any real interiority in favor of dramatic spectacle creates an environment that is clouded with symbols ripe for

interpretation, establishes Rome as a “fundamentally mysterious” (Rose 262) place, in which ceremony has an important role. Cinna’s foreshadowing of his own demise,^[5] Ligarius’ assertion that Brutus “like an exorcist, hast conjured up / [His] mortified spirit” (2.1.323-4), and Portia’s assumption that the vision of her on her knees can “charm” her husband into revealing his innermost thoughts, suggests a Rome that blends together a belief in magic and the divine.

In sixteenth-century England, celestial phenomena, such as the comet spied over Rome in *Julius Caesar*, were frequently exploited for religious and political purposes. Two comets were sighted over England during the late sixteenth century; one in November, 1577 and another that was visible over the course of several weeks during 1582. In the late 1570’s and early 1580’s a flurry of pamphlets circulated in an attempt to address recent celestial happenings. The least overtly political of these documents, written by an author known only as F.K., in 1583, addresses scientific approaches, before he reminds his reader that comets are a reminder from God “to pray that he may turne from us what evyl soever his comettes signifie” (F.K.) continuing the popular path of viewing comets as a celestial omen of doom. Keith Thomas, in his landmark study *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, firmly locates “sciences” such as astrology, prophecy and superstitions in the Catholic domain, suggesting that Protestantism rejected the appeal of popular magic as part of its doctrinal drive against the efficacy of ceremony. Yet, his proposal that “the century after the Reformation thus constituted a transitional

period, during which a variety of magical agencies continued to offer their services to those for whom the Protestant notion of self-help was too arduous" (Thomas 639), implies the similarity in appeal to what he calls the "unsophisticated mind" (638) between the cunning man and religious leader. Thomas' observation that during this time period, "holy relics became wonder-working fetishes" (26), further suggests the difficulty of this transitory moment. In order to reach a culture steeped in these pseudo-scientific ways of reading the world, the reformers had to rely on similar rhetorical techniques and strategies of propaganda. The tension between doctrinal dismissal of magical beliefs, and the need to invest Protestantism's own martyrs and leaders with a sense of the sacred, became a characteristic of the English Reformation.

Shakespeare incorporates this sense of uncertainty into *Rome*, declining to focus on the popular opinion of a comet as an event that foreshadows princely death, and choosing to acknowledge the comet only in act one, scene three, as viewed by the conspirators. Casca, having witnessed the "tempest dropping fire" (1.3.10) attributes it to the more conventional meanings, proposing to Cicero that "either there is civil strife in heaven/ Or else the world, too saucy with the gods, / Incenses them to send destruction" (1.3.11–3). Casca and Cicero's fear echoes the popular early modern interpretation of these occurrences, but Cassius' immediate entrance, unbraced, and his subsequent declaration that he had "bared [his] bosom to the thunderstone" (1.3.49) shows the desire of the conspirators to reinterpret traditional symbols and turn their

back on the fears and superstitions of Rome. Cassius, like Brutus, attempts to reject what he views as a superstitious approach, privileging his own opinion that when interpreting these natural events, the evidence suggests that “heaven hath infused them with these spirits / To make them instruments of fear and warning / Unto some monstrous state” (1.3.69–71). Cassius cannot entirely reject the rhetoric of superstition, but simply demands credit for his ability literally to stand in defiance of the traditional meaning.

In general, the play is littered with Christian iconography, from the three and thirty wounds, to the idolatrous statues of Casear that are “decked with ceremonies” (1.1.65), and trouble the politicians so greatly. The wound display, for example, carries Eucharistic undertones, most notably evoking the most potent symbol of Renaissance Christian thought – the Passion. The play goes to great lengths to reject the notion that Caesar can be seen as quasi-divine by an emphasis on Caesar’s physical flaws. Moreover, the invocation of Christ imagery that arises from such instances as Brutus’s famous demand that the conspirators be “sacrificers and not butchers” (2.1.166) and Cassius’ proposal that his men wash their hands in the slain Caesar’s blood to purify their recent deed, is raised precisely to elicit a comparison that will leave Caesar wanting.

Cassius marks Caesar out as undeserving of becoming a monarch because he is physically weak, having previously been bested by Cassius in a swimming race, but more important is Shakespeare's choice to include scenes that highlight Caesar's physical flaws – his epilepsy, deafness, and inability to father children. Brutus focuses primarily on what "the common eyes" (2.1.179) will see, recognizing that in his Rome, idolatry is not necessarily contingent upon the selection of a worthy object of veneration, but the selection of what appears to be the most obvious choice of veneration placed in front of the people. This awareness creates a problem for the conspirators: how to make the citizens understand a "purpose necessary, and not envious" (2.1.178), and because Shakespeare resists giving us any real insight into Caesar's motivations, the conspirators are left incapable of adequately explaining the burning need to sacrifice Caesar for Rome. The closest Brutus comes to a rationalization is at the beginning of the second act, when he wonders:

Th'abuse of greatness is when it disjoins
Remorse from power; and, to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections swayed
More than his reason. But 'tis a common proof,
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend: so Caesar may; (2.1.18–27)

Even though Brutus' rhetoric evokes the divine, with the image of Caesar climbing into the heavens to sit among the gods, the crucial word here remains "may." Brutus' eloquent theory is based entirely around conjecture of what Caesar may turn into, admitting that he has yet to see such qualities in Caesar when he acknowledges "I have not known when his affections swayed /More than his reason." Cassius exacerbates his sense of inevitable future injustice by indignantly declaiming Caesar's right to even presume greatness, due to his physical limitations, ambiguously asking "should Rome et cetera" (2.1.47, my italics), feeding Brutus' imagination, yet never giving any more reason than the personal rancor and jealousy. It seems that what angers the conspirators most is that Caesar is not divine, that he is one of them, chosen over them by the popular voice for adoration, because of his superior ability to manipulate theatrics, not his god-like characteristics.

Although Caesar may be less than divine, he knows how to entertain a crowd. His rejection of kingship is a political display that centers around the awareness of the power of the people to elevate and lionize whomever they choose. Furthermore, Caesar himself publicly rejects any image of himself as a divine entity, by refusing (for the present time, at any rate) to accept the crown, which would distinguish him as King, and distance him from the people of Rome. Casca explains how Caesar, upon perceiving that "the common herd was glad he refused the crown, he plucked...ope his doublet and offered them his throat to cut" (1.2.262-4). Such stage-managed humility

gives the citizens what they wish to see, leading Cassius to dryly note, "if the tag-rag people did not clap him and hiss him according as he pleased and displeased them, as they use to do the players in the theatre, I am no true man" (1.2.226-8). Caesar understands the way in which his city operates, and gives the citizens not only spectacle, but a sense of control over spectacle, as evidenced by the stage managed offering of the crown. Even Caesar's seizure cannot quell the passion of the crowd. Furthermore, Caesar's concern that Cassius "thinks too much" (1.2.196) illustrates his awareness that spectacle can override rational thought, and control the emotions in such a way as to cloud the judgment.

Considering the skepticism shown towards ceremony in the play, it is no wonder that there is confusion in Brutus' claim that they be "sacrificers and not butchers" (2.1.165). Brutus' actions throughout the play reveal a surprising ambivalence towards the notion of sacrifice, and this uncertainty is the reason he is unable to exploit the body of Caesar in the way that Antony does. Trying to make sense of a political system that is so easily manipulated, Brutus' thoughts are continually at odds with each other, and this conflict becomes manifest both in his actions and speech. His suggestion that the conspirators maintain lofty goals is immediately undercut by his insistence on not making a pledge together. He recoils from the idea that their "performance / Did need an oath" (2.1.135-6), rejecting the idea of consecrating the murder in promises, before immediately attempting to recast the death as a sacrifice, declaring that Caesar will be

carved “as a dish fit for the gods” (2.1.173). He acknowledges Caesar’s symbolic representation of the Roman Empire by breaking up his body into parts, and allocating parts to public figures when he calls Antony “but a limb of Caesar” (2.1.165), strengthening the traditional link between sacrificial victim and social body. His concern for the way Caesar’s death will be constructed, combined with the continual references to hewing and hacking found in Brutus’ speech, contradicts the common assumption that Brutus is a man trying to invest meaning in empty ceremony.

In spite of his words, Brutus is fully aware of the symbolic potential of such gestures, and tries to manipulate this meaning for his own purposes, even as he strives to downplay its potency. His insistence that the conspirators “bathe [their] hands in Caesar’s blood / Up to the elbows, and besmear our swords” (3.1.107-8) is a ceremony in itself, and we must question the extent to which the conspirators are willing to recognize this. Cassius musings suggest his greater political acumen when he wonders, “how many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over, / In states unborn and accents yet unknown (3.2.112-4).

Cassius hopes that in years to come, the murder will be invested with the same symbolic potency as the crown they so fear Caesar wearing. By the physical act of washing his hands in the blood, he simply further sanctifies the spilt blood. His actions are a recognition of the symbolic power that blood holds, but even if he is aware of this,

Brutus attempts to downplay the image he will create by his conviction that eloquent speeches will prevail in the popular mind. Brutus hopes to present Caesar as a sacrifice to Rome, but his dependence on the crowd to validate his ceremony as such, diminishes the power of the spectacle he has created. His glib insistence he alone can employ logic to explain away the murder, is undermined by his decision to present the body to the waiting crowd.

Having experienced the vast popularity of public bloodshed, both secular and religious, in England, Shakespeare understood the significance of elevating the visceral over the verbal, and the shock of Caesar's body is the centerpiece to the scene in the marketplace. If further proof of Shakespeare's investment in the dramatic power of visual imagery is needed, we might only consider act three's revelation of the body.

Shakespeare's citizens respond thus:

O piteous spectacle!
O noble Caesar!
O woeful day!
O traitors! villains!
O most bloody sight! (3.2.199-203)

This list both begins and ends emphasizing the extraordinary shock at what is seen by the common eyes. Brutus' concern has been proven right. Brutus has deeply underestimated the extent to which the citizens of Rome respond to what they can see and touch, but Antony astutely realizes that to show "Caesar's wounds, poor poor

dumb mouths” is to “bid them speak” (3.2.226-7). The spectacle of Caesar’s body is one that will reverberate in the public imagination, and what is at stake during the scene in the marketplace is who can most convincingly appropriate this image.

Antony is quick to exploit the body of Caesar, in order to sanctify it not an emblem of tyranny, but an icon of the Rome that is under threat by senators who are out of touch with the common people. The most valuable commodity in this war of propaganda is the corpse of Caesar, and Antony understands the need to state-manage this spectacle. In the famous third act, Antony’s superior performative ability is immediately illustrated by the way in which the men address the crowd. Brutus remains in the pulpit, above and away from the common people, offering an eloquent but impersonal oration, symbolic of his separation from the people he is supposed to represent. He challenges the lower class citizens of Rome to step forward and “censure [him] in [their] wisdom” (3.2.16) and stand up to him in public debate. Antony, however, offers a more emotional response, coming down into the marketplace to place Caesar’s body firmly amid the crush of citizens, as one of them. He is even forced to beg the masses of Rome to “stand far off” (3.2.168) in order to maximize the impact caused by the revelation of the body. Antony may lack the lofty aspirations of Brutus (or at least, the claim to lofty aspirations), but he excels in his ability to exploit the spectacle of Caesar’s corpse on a purely visceral level, and to beatify the corpse in a way that Brutus fails to anticipate and most certainly cannot contend with. The failure of Brutus, then, is

not his inability to sanctify a political killing, but his unwillingness to recognize that the death of Caesar turns his body into a static icon left open to multiple interpretations, or that he has created a sacred object for the people of Rome to revere.

In the marketplace, the flesh of Caesar passes from the body of slain tyrant to Roman martyr, and whips the people into a frenzy of violence that cannot be contained. In this moment, Shakespeare offers his most critical dissection of the processes of idolatry and reveals the ruthless personal agendas that underpin each perspective. In Shakespeare's Rome, poised between Republic and Empire, the beliefs of the crowd are used as political tools, and similar to Brutus' earlier scenes of deliberation, we are encouraged to maintain a detached view of Antony's performance, but without ever losing sight that we are watching exactly that – a performance. In spite of his claim, "I am no orator as Brutus is" (3.2.211), Antony succeeds in contextualizing the vision of Caesar's corpse in order to maximize the potency of what the citizens will see, as a means of inciting their passion. For a "plain blunt man" (3.2.212), Antony demonstrates an ability to stage manage a public occasion that could rival Caesar's, and his exploitation of this relic suggests a wariness in the play of trusting too wholeheartedly in iconic visions.

Antony offers three lengthy speeches that anticipate the revelation of the body. In his first speech, he surreptitiously challenges Brutus' reshaping of the murder, calling

attention to the way in which language can be subject to interpretation, presumably, in advance of offering a sight that would appear to need no contextualization. Like Brutus, he appeals to the rationality of the citizens, but unlike Brutus, begs the masses to invoke their own sense of Roman history, and remember what they have themselves witnessed as examples of Caesar's ambition. In his first speech, he destabilizes words, calling attention to Brutus' rhetoric through parody and open critique. He simplifies Brutus' esoteric "friends, Romans and lovers! Hear me for my cause and be silent that you may hear" (3.2.13) into the famous "Friends, Roman countrymen, lend me your ears" (3.2.72) further showing his capacity to appeal to the common man. He goes on to say:

When the poor hath cried, Caesar hath wept.
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious,
And Brutus is an honourable man.
You all did see that on the Lupercal
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse. Was this ambition?
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious,
And sure he is an honourable man. (3.2.91-99)

Antony, like Brutus, invokes this selective memory of Rome, but asks the citizens to privilege what they have seen over what they hear. Underlying his repetition of the phrase that Brutus "is an honourable man" is a direct challenge to Brutus's logocentrism, asking his audience to believe, not the words that they hear, but what they themselves have seen in his behavior. If Brutus calls himself honorable, but looks like a butcher, then it follows that what is termed a sacrifice cannot be more than a

savage murder. In fact, Antony rejects the very idea that honor can be something discursively created. Honor is the “scutcheon” (5.1.137) that Falstaff claims it to be in 1 Henry IV, a shield that advertises the nobility of its bearer,^[6] but to Antony, it is a badge made of wounds, valor embodied in blood and scar tissue, not in serpentine speeches and declarations of honor.

Theatrics, in the shape of spectacle, becomes necessary, because the audience cannot distinguish between the two arguments. The citizens themselves affirm this, by asking each other:

Marked ye his words? He would not take the crown,
Therefore 'tis certain he was not ambitious. (3.2.112-3)

Here, Antony's words become material signs, to be marked or observed. The fifth plebeian's comment does not invoke his own memory of what he saw, but his understanding is dictated by Antony's explained remembrance of what was a highly public spectacle, and translated into a logical equation dictated by visual signs. While the citizens struggle to evaluate what they have heard, Antony stands before them, weeping, as a visual reminder of the love that Caesar inspired. His quiet tableau appears to validate his words, and once the citizens have noticed that “his eyes are red as fire with weeping” (3.2.115), their immediate response is to decide that there is “not a nobler man in Rome than Antony” (3.2.116), showing the extent to which public

perception is inspired by theatrical visions, even if they are as unreliable as the words used to explain them.

Like a confident showman, Antony drives his audience to beg – first for the will, then for the body of Caesar. The will, Antony implies, is the marker that shall turn Caesar's body into a sacred relic, and turn his death into a sacrifice that will strengthen the social body of Rome. He says:

'Tis his will.
Let but the commons hear this testament –
Which, pardon me, I do not mean to read –
And they would go and kiss dead Caesar's wounds,
And dip their napkins in his sacred blood,
Yea, beg a hair of him for memory,
And, dying, mention it within their will,
Bequeathing it as a rich legacy
Unto their issue. (3.2.129-137)

The use of a will neatly encapsulates the idea of intention buried in corporeal forms, operating as both a desire and a material object that can symbolize intent. In this moment, Antony drives home the consecration that Brutus began when he smeared his arms in Caesar's blood, and he takes control of an image that Brutus never fully understood and frames it in a manner suitable for his purposes.

It is Antony who takes the image of blood that is already smeared across the stage, covering the bodies of the conspirators, and directly suggests that this vision is seen as a holy one, piquing the curiosity of the citizens of Rome. Through the

consecration that Brutus began, Antony shapes the citizen's response to the body.

Furthermore, he pretends to resist their curiosity, by proposing:

It is not meet you know how Caesar loved you.
You are not wood, you are not stones, but men;
And, being men, hearing the will of Caesar,
It will inflame you, it will make you mad. (3.2.141-4)

As if the sight of Caesar's body were not arresting enough, he turns the body into a coveted holy relic, evoking the Catholic veneration of such objects. Antony's skillful rhetoric anticipates what his audience will see and infuses it with the appropriate Eucharistic undertones. He reveals the body only after he has whipped the crowd into a frenzy, to ensure that the sight will incense them even more. In fact, the will becomes forgotten in the outcry that Caesar's body inspires, and Antony must restrain the angry citizens, reminding them "You have forgot the will I told you of" (3.2.232).

Antony's final speech is framed even further by an appropriation of Brutus's vision of the murder as a sacrifice for the benefit of the social body, by placing the myth of the man as part of a collective Roman history. Standing over the body, he draws attention to its covering, and uses the props to anticipate the spectacle and to create a history fresh in the minds of the citizens. He declares, "if you have tears, prepare to shed them now. /You all do know this mantle. I remember /The first time ever Caesar put it on" (3.2.166-169), forcing attention onto the covered body allowing the audience to imagine what lies beneath. His speech offers a clear illustration of the way in which

Antony frames the spectacle, by forcing his audience to imagine the death of Caesar before the body is revealed. He says:

Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through.
See what a rent the envious Casca made.
Through this the well-belovéd Brutus stabbed,
And, as he plucked the curséd steel away,
Mark how the blood of Caesar followed it,
As rushing out of doors to be resolved
If Brutus so unkindly knocked or no.
For Brutus as you know, was Caesar's angel.
Judge O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him!
This was the most unkindest cut of all,
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquished him. Then burst his mighty heart,
And in his mantle muffling up his face,
Even at the base of Pompey's statue,
Which all the while ran blood, great Caesar fell. (3.2.172-87)

This speech is worth quoting at length, as it offers a clear illustration of the way in which Antony forces his audience to imagine the death of Caesar and to therefore incorporate his version of the death (which he was not present to witness), into the myth of Cesar as holy martyr. This revisionist history, combined with the wound display, will elevate Caesar to glory. The blood that the audience sees on the cloak marks a transitional point between history and ritual, and Antony uses it to mythologize his version of events, conflating it with the blood of Pompey that, stigmata-like, ran from his statue at the fall of Caesar. Antony promotes his imagery even further, lamenting, "I, and you, and all of us fell down" (3.2.188) with Caesar,

denying Brutus his intended meaning of the sacrifice and challenging the citizens to right this wrong by using Caesar's death to strengthen the social body of Rome. Only, at the end of his oration, when he asks that his audience, the "kind souls" merely weep when they "but behold / [Their] Caesar's vesture wounded?" (3.2.192-3), does he remind us that the Roman citizens have yet to see the actual body of slain Caesar. His observation further clarifies the power of theatricality on the people. It is at this point, once Antony feels sure that it would be impossible to misread the sight in favor of the conspirators, that he uncovers the corpse and the consecration is complete. Instead of mollifying the need for a scapegoat, Brutus' misunderstood act of violence has simply inflamed the crowd, and Antony, by exalting Caesar, has turned the 'good' violence that would purge the city of a tyrant into 'bad' violence, which merely leads to more brutality. The conspirators hoped to control the Roman mob by using their bloodstained arms as a statement of democratic oblation, but by failing to satisfactorily validate their claim to sacrifice, simply created an anger that Antony deftly channels in their direction.

Antony is able to succeed where Brutus fails, because the tribunes repeatedly underestimate the appeal that spectacle holds for the people of Rome, and misunderstand the way in which their city operates. In the first scene, despite their indignant stance, the politicians are reduced to angry chaperones, scurrying in the wake of the citizens of Rome, stripping the idolatrous statues, and driving away the vulgar

from the streets, where Caesar's triumph is eagerly awaited. In Shakespeare's Rome, neither the Senators nor Caesar represent the needs of the people, who insist on their right to ceremony. Brutus' decision to deny the crowd of citizens their opportunity to participate in the veneration of Caesar's flesh destabilizes the ritual he has unwittingly created, which results in chaos.

The brutal death of Cinna, which immediately follows the revelation of the body, serves to reinforce Shakespeare's cynical view of the crowd as an easily swayed mob. Led by their frenzied emotions, the crowd is unable to distinguish between the right and wrong labels – or even more chillingly, they do not care. They accost Cinna, demanding to know whether he is friend or foe of the late Caesar. Already, we can see that the nuanced projection by Brutus of himself as a friend forced to turn to violence has been eradicated. At this point, the issue of sacrifice has become so clouded that the mob's act of butchery is offered in the intent of salvaging the social body. When Cinna announces his name, civility vanishes, and the plebeians call for the mob to “tear him to pieces” (3.3.27). Even though their mistaken assumption that he is a conspirator is corrected, and accepted as truth, they continue to demand blood, crying en masse, “Tear him for his bad verses! Tear him for his bad verses! (3.3.29). Hysteria that has taken over the crowd, and the idea of purging the city through the blood of the conspirators, has taken an ugly turn.

Through this indiscriminate violence, we see how Brutus's attempt to validate the murder of Caesar has obliterated all binaries of "good" and "bad" violence, leaving simply violence, which Antony has redirected towards the conspirators. Cinna's attempt to distinguish himself from the politicians falls flat when the mob jeers, "It is no matter. His name's Cinna. Pluck but his name out of his heart and turn him going" (3.3.31-2). The plebeian's directive to "pluck but his name out of his heart" illustrates the ugly response to such manipulation and the belief that violence can obliterate manipulative and untrustworthy words. This latest murder by the mob is a cruel parody of sacrifice, tearing the poet apart in a futile attempt to undo the damage caused by the conspirator and appease a collective bloodlust.

For all of Brutus' and Cassius' rhetorical maneuvering, their deaths ultimately reaffirm the Roman values that are so frighteningly reinforced by the public response to Caesar's death. During the quarrel between the two men, Cassius offers Brutus the opportunity to "revenge [himself] alone on Cassius" (4.3.93) through murder. Although Brutus rejects Cassius melodramatic offer of his heart "that denied [him] gold" (4.3.105), the gesture is enough to reinforce their broken bond of friendship, showing their continued belief in the purging power of sacrifice. Brutus, in true Roman fashion, firmly believes, "It is more worthy to leap in ourselves / Than tarry till they push us" (5.5.23-4). He predicts that his own death will "have glory by this losing day / More than Octavius and Mark Antony / By this vile conquest shall attain unto" (5.5.36-8). Brutus, in a tacit

acknowledgement of his earlier error in judgment, makes a ritual out of his own death, embracing the Roman way of thinking that he had previously rejected. When begging Strato for assistance, he calls upon him as someone whose “life hath had some smatch of honour in it” (5.5.46), to hold a sword for him. Such action is immediately rewarded, by Antony, who offers Brutus an effusive eulogy:

The noblest Roman of them all.
All the conspirators save only he
Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.
He only, in a general honest thought
And common good to all, made one of them.
His life was gentle and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, “This was a man.” (5.5.67-74)

Interestingly, neither Antony nor Octavius acknowledge Brutus’ act as honorable, but Antony does offer a conciliatory description of the nobility of Brutus’ gesture. These descriptions of “noble” and “gentle” allude just as much to Brutus’ social status as his nature, and hint at a more muted celebration of this gesture.

Succumbing to the influence of otherworldly phenomena, Brutus declares that because of the presence of the ghost, “[he] know[s] [his] hour is come” (5.5.18).

Throughout his career, Shakespeare demonstrates an ongoing mistrust in the reliability of ghosts, either as genuine spirits or dependable theatrical devices. The unclear purpose of Caesar’s ghost merely confirms the ambivalence that has dominated his play. Shakespeare cannot offer his audience any certainty that the ghost is real, which

would validate the world of mystery he has created in Rome. The ghost represents a tradition; it is an embodiment of a belief that Brutus could never overcome – in his own mind, much less in the minds of others. Brutus dies in an attempt to reclaim his Roman honor – a conceit that Shakespeare ultimately renders suspect by the theatricality that is necessary to maintain it. In the same way that the crowd is diverted by the presence of Caesar's bloodstained body, the audience is distracted by Brutus' act of falling upon his sword. Brutus' death offers something of a conventional finale to this intriguing play – it is tragic, yet edifying. The play presents Brutus's suicide as a sacrifice that confirms his nobility of purpose and ends the civil strife in Rome.

In the final lines of the play, both Antony and Octavius posthumously recognize Brutus as "the noblest Roman of them all." Yet, his death is the final in a long line of obfuscating theatrics, offered to avoid the stigma of defeat and an attempt to preserve the dignity of his family name. Brutus's dying declaration, "Caesar, now be still. / I killed not thee with half so good a will" (5.5.49-50) links his death to Caesar, revealing Brutus's awareness of the veneration that martyrdom can create. His enthusiasm for death ultimately privileges preservation of his public legacy over the desire to stay and fight for what he had previously viewed as the corrupt social body. For the people of Rome, Brutus' posthumous nobility is not found through his pious life, but through his violent death. He tells Volumnius "It is more worthy to leap in ourselves / Than tarry till they push us" (5.5.22-3), revealing the extent to which he continues to be invested in

a system of honor that has proven to be little more than a political tool for the pursuit of personal glory. Brutus' sense of nobility ultimately means nothing to him without a crowd to concur, and he would rather kill himself to maintain this meaningless badge for his family name. His willingness to create himself as a martyr is the height of his ambivalence towards spectacles of death. His suicide pays homage to the Roman view of honor, yet his enthusiastic welcoming of death suggests a weariness that questions whether Rome is worth such a sacrifice.

It would be presumptuous to presume that *Julius Caesar* promotes a specifically Catholic agenda – certainly, the violence evoked in response to Caesar's sacrifice quashes any idea that this play could be a nostalgic look back at Catholic times – but the play indisputably establishes Caesar's Rome as steeped in more traditional ways of reading the world, ways that are shared by everyone but the politicians. In *Julius Caesar*, there remains a potent emphasis on the popular interpretation of what is seen. This dependence on visual spectacle that Shakespeare is exploring within the play could be read to suggest that there exists an unresolved Protestant frustration with Catholic idolatry within the play, before going further to imply the futility of attempting to stand up against the roar of tradition. Certainly, the conspirators suffer greatly for failing to take into account the reaction of the citizens, and the appeal that public spectacle holds over the citizens of Rome is not to be underestimated.

Endnotes

[1] All quotations are from *The Arden Shakespeare, Complete Works*. Third edition.

[2] Furthermore, Barish proposes in his discussion of sixteenth century anti-theatricalism, that there is an element of collusion between spectator and performer, which effectively renders an audience member complicit in the creation of false spectacle. His reading of Renaissance resistance to theatrical spectacle builds on the principles outlined in his discussion of Medieval theatre, and applies the popular label of "idolatry" onto theatrical spectacle, but focuses his analysis primarily on attacks of the mimesis enacted by players, and assuming the response from the audience that is outlined in the earlier chapter. See Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*.

[3] The discussion of ceremony is one of the more popular approaches to the play, matched only by discussions of the politics that underpin the text and Shakespeare's representations of Rome. For examples of the political approach, see Paul Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome, Republic and Empire* and Wayne A. Rebhorn. "The Crisis of the Aristocracy in Julius Caesar."

[4] Even criminal executions were modeled on religious persecutions, affording the condemned an opportunity to restore his reputation through public penitence, and nobility in the face of death.

[5] As he flees the Plebeians who will ultimately kill him, Cinna exclaims, "I dreamt to-night that I did feast with Caesar / And things unluckily charge my fantasy. / I have no will to wander forth of doors, / Yet something leads me forth" (3.3.1 - 4).

[6] Falstaff asks "Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery then. No. What is honor? A word. What is in that word "honor"? What is that "honor"? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o'Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism" (*Henry IV, Part One*, 5.1.130-7).

Works Cited

Barish, Jonas. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

Cantor, Paul. *Shakespeare's Rome, Republic and Empire*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976.

Conn Liebler, Naomi. *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995.

Danson, Lawrence. *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare's Drama of Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.

F.K. *Of the Critical Starre, Which Appeareth, This October and November, 1580*. London, 1583.

Haller, William. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation*. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

Knott, John. *Discourses of Martyrdom in Early English Literature, 1563 - 1694*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Plass, Paul. *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

Rebhorn, Wayne A. "The Crisis of the Aristocracy in Julius Casear." *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No.1 (Spring, 1990): 75-111.

Rose, Mark. "Conjuring Caesar: Ceremony, History and Authority in 1599." *English Literary Renaissance* 19.3 (Autumn 1989): 291-304.

Shakespeare, William. *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works, third series*. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan, eds. London: Arden, 2001.

Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971.