Lloyd Davis

BODY LANGUAGE IN *JULIUS CAESAR*

> "Let us see him what he is: Is his bodie any thing els, but a lumpe of earth, made together in such forme as we doe see? A fraile vessel, a weake carion subiect to miserie, cast downe with euery light disease, a man to day, to morowe none"
>
> Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1560)

Thomas Wilson's sombre portrayal of man grounds his mortality in the body's basic substance, which recalls its Biblical genesis. This original element seems to grant the male body a primary meaning of materiality and decline. Yet the prospect of annihilation is an ironic corollary to the live body's overweening importance. Earlier in the text, Wilson acknowledges that "Trueth it is, we are more fleshly then spirituall, soner feeling the ache of our body, then the greefe of our soule: more studious with care to be healthfull in carkasse, then seeking with praier, to bee pure in spirite."[1] The body's materiality thus generates constant regard for its existing condition as well as its inevitable dissolution. Moreover, the preoccupation with pain, health and death makes us susceptible to the emotive effects of rhetoric. For in this pre-Cartesian scheme, rhetorical pathos is manifest through "diuers effectes" of the "passions of the minde" on the body: "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" (67). Bodily states are tied to these affective rhetorical swings.

Wilson's description of man's fate suggests another complex link between the body and rhetoric. The body is a visual metaphor for being. To learn what man is we observe his manifest form, an anatomical impulse that recurs through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[2] The form alone, however, reveals nothing; indeed, it cannot be described in itself. Wilson slides from the "bodie" to another metaphor, "a lumpe of earth," which seems to provide the substance of man's bodily form. Yet this apparent solution is part of a question, is the body anything else but ...? A string of responses offers possible referents for the body — frail vessel, weak carrion, subject to disease — until the slippage seems to end with the next response, "a man to day," which produces a kind of circular closure, man = body = man. But again the answer collapses, this time with the last phrase, "to morowe none," which translates fleeting presence into eternal absence. As a trope for man's being, the body triggers a set of images which culminate in nothing. His being and body are conceived in terms that offer no answer other than the figural substitutions of rhetoric itself.

This account suggests that in its material and visible form, the body is entwined with language and death. The body signifies man's origin and end as well as his rhetorical and affective experience. This range of functions establishes the body as a personal and cultural sign par excellence; or, as Mary Douglas writes, "Just as it is true that everything symbolises the body, so it is true ... that the body symbolises everything else."[3] Such elasticity affords the body wide social value and power. Those who can define its meaning, stage its appearance, and interpret its significance may assume critical control over others. If a particular body is universally considered important (at least in one social formation), then wresting symbolic authority or charge over it will realise great power. Tied to this power — as effect and cause, plus the site of its operation — is the material body, its weakness and subjection, as Wilson says, oriented to death.

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* dramatises these issues through a series of visual, physical and verbal confrontations over the body's meaning between the characters. Their contesting depictions of the material body enact ideological and interpersonal rivalries. Through these conflicts the play stages "an unmasking of the politics of representation *per se,*" in a detailed anatomy of the body politic.[4]

The body functions as a flexible social sign in the play. Its connotations range from the Roman republic, to a more specific aristocratic bloc (which divides into pro- and anti-Caesar factions), to ideals of masculininity, to the personalities of key characters. In each case, the body's meaning is disputed by different groups and persons within the groups. Douglas notes that generally "The body ... can stand for any bounded system," such as the national, class, factional, gender and personal figures noted above. But she continues that it is specially suitable to "represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious" (115). In *Julius Caesar*, cultural boundaries of many types are particularly vulnerable, and the intense struggles over them are inscribed in bids for control over the way the body looks and is looked at, the way it acts and is acted upon, and the way it speaks and is spoken about.[5]

The play opens with the tribunes Flavius and Marullus attacking the plebs for celebrating Caesar's recent victory over Roman rivals. They criticise the people for wearing their "best apparel," regarding it as celebrating one who "comes in triumph over Pompey's blood" (I.i.1-51).[6] They command the plebs to return home and "fall upon your knees." The workers "vanish tongue-tied," and the tribunes separate to "Disrobe the images" of Caesar and try to curb his soaring ambition (53-75).

Immediately it is apparent that people's bodies are being constantly observed and talked about, visual and rhetorical signs whose meanings are judged and

fought over (the stakes are increased by echoes of disputed Elizabethan sumptuary codes and Puritan attitudes to self-discipline[7]). The dressed body signifies political allegiance and social rank, its postures connote submission or resistance. This legibility locates the body in a "politics of *visibility*"[8]; however, the prevailing codes of body language have become equivocal and denote political instability. The way the body looks and is looked at assumes urgent but often uncertain meaning.

Various forms of this uncertainty start to be portrayed in the following scene. Caesar's retinue enters to participate in the celebration of Lupercalia, through which Calphurnia might "shake off [her] sterile curse" (I.ii.9). The link between Caesar and sterility, despite being ascribed to his wife, disturbs the pomp of the "titular hero's" entrance.[9] It foreshadows other physical and character failings soon to be revealed, while foreboding is reinforced by the soothsayer's warning of the Ides of March. Shakespeare is playing upon the audience's likely knowledge of Caesar's end; it increases rather than reduces suspense, for every gesture or word seems a possible index to when the killing will occur. Like the characters, the audience tries to fasten on any portent.

Cassius's dialogue with Brutus reveals the continually mobile and ambivalent gaze that all the characters practise. He notes that Brutus has been looking at but not seeing him: "Brutus, I do observe you now of late: / I have not from your eyes that gentleness / And show of love as I was wont to have" (I.ii.31-33). In response, Brutus admits that his attention has been turned in rather than out: "if I have veil'd my look, / I turn the trouble of my countenance / Merely upon myself" (36-37). The reflexive effect of the gaze is underlined. Though looking at the other, one regards the self: what I may see in him is already within. This double vision is at work in Caesar's view of Cassius later in the scene. He dislikes the way he looks because he knows what it means: "Yond 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" (191, 205-7).[10] The emulous rivalry and knowledge make the aristocrats versions of one another, all "fashioned through violent competition," seeking the goals of power and identity at the other's expense.[11] Yet if the other is a version of the self, his demise is incipiently one's own. In viewing the other the self foresees its grim prospects.

Hence the reflexivity of the gaze is repressed as it is exercised. The aristocrats deny or foreclose the self-interest and reference of their gaze, presupposing instead its objective truthfulness. In this way, focusing on others works to confirm and insulate the observer's identity. Thus 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"

(I.ii.208-9). Cassius's critical account of Caesar affirms his own probity through his 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" (I.ii.91,118-20). Having had his self-perceptions mirrored and endorsed by Cassius (I.ii.66-69), 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" (II.i.11-12,27-28). Only Cicero admits to the subject's investment in what he perceives: "men may construe things, after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves" (I.iii.34-35). But this observation also presumes that its accuracy exempts his perspective from the general rule it announces.

Through all these looks and counter-looks runs a notion of bodies as texts, to be interpreted and analysed. This idea is exemplified in act II scene ii when various characters try to present and interpret a series of bodily images. Before he ventures to the Senate, Caesar calls for an augury — the reading of sacrificial entrails — to check his course of action (II.ii.37-43). The previous night Calphurnia had dreamt of danger, in Caesar's statue running "pure blood" from a hundred spouts (II.ii.76-79). In the next act, after the stabbing, Brutus insists that the killers "bathe" and "besmear" their hands, arms and knives in their victim's blood physically to proclaim peace, freedom and liberty to all (III.i.106-10).

Yet because it is a text, the body is open to misrepresentation and misinterpretation. These effects may compound because the self-affirmation sought by observers often blinds them to risks of their own misreading and of the motivated readings of others. The body becomes a site of conflicting perceptions. In contrast to Calphurnia, Caesar and the conspirator Decius Brutus interpret her dream in positive terms, as urging him to bravery and patronage, but they do so for entirely different reasons (II.ii.83-89). When Antony grasps the bloody hands of the killers, declaring "Friends, I am with you all, and love you all" (III.i.220), Brutus accepts the gesture at face value, though as Cassius suspects and we soon hear, it is the seal of Antony's antagonism, "Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!" (III.i.258).[12]

The ambiguous hand-shaking near the end of Act III suggests that characters' (mis)readings of the body regularly focus on its actions and gestures. Through the drama, the body plays a physical part in various political rituals, "the ceremonies by which power is manifested."[13] It is often the object of such ceremonies, but it also acts to score political and social points. The key example of the latter occurs (paradoxically offstage) when Caesar three times rejects a crown publicly presented to him by Antony. The theatricality of the scene is emphasised by Casca, who contemptuously notes the manipulated emotions of

the crowd, which jointly celebrates the offering and refusal of sovereignty (I.ii.231-72). The episode displays the importance of public performance in winning and maintaining political power. It provides "a model of authoritarian populism" that both Brutus and Antony later try to reproduce.[14]

However, Caesar's actions also reveal the risks involved in this kind of display. As Erving Goffman notes, the power of performance is double-edged: "a formal occasion cannot ignore or terminate what it is that is designated the official focus of attention. It follows that every celebration of a person gives power to that person to misbehave unmanageably."[15] In succumbing to "the falling sickness" (I.ii.251), Caesar loses control of his body; it takes over and conveys mixed signals about his fitness to rule. Indeed, throughout the first half of the play, Caesar's body is an equivocal political factor. Its lameness and deafness undercut his imperial claims, while its colossal status riles as much as it overshadows his peers, who conceive it as "monstrously grotesque and structurally disruptive."[16] He is paradoxically trapped by the power his body signifies. Although weaknesses such as the epileptic fit may bolster Caesar's position with some — charismatically revealing the character beneath the role[17] — they also expose him to attack for aspiring both to a power beyond his capacity and to the bodily subjection of others: "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" (I.ii.114-17). Ironically, the conspirators use such bowing and scraping to distract Caesar before the stabbing (III.i.33-75; Antony later charges them with doing so, at V.i.41-44). His fall is thus ironically preceded by physical expressions that seem to verify his dominance, just as his offstage *coup de théâtre* is framed by the beginnings of conspiracy.

The last words of Cassius quoted above angrily exaggerate the process of submission, but the image he uses registers sharp sensitivity to the two bodies' relative status, bearing and control. The absence of intention and minimal movement in Caesar's careless nod magnify the degree of his symbolic mastery, and the slight effort needed to exercise it suggests its exalted quality. Such bodily power is a scarce commodity; not everyone can have it, and it concentrates in one person at the expense of others.

In this society there is, however, a type of bodily agency which cannot be taken away from any individual. It remains a fundamental rite especially for the masculine body, signifying an unalienable quantum of self-power: the potential to wound or kill oneself. In this case the body acts and is acted upon; it is both agent and object. Cassius continually dwells on this trope of identity, which puzzlingly preserves selfhood by destroying or damaging it: "I had as lief not be as live to be / In awe of such a thing as I myself" (I.ii.94-95); "I know where I will wear this dagger then; / Cassius from bondage will deliver

Cassius...That part of tyranny that I do bear / I can shake off at pleasure" (I.iii.89-90,99-100); "Cassius or Caesar never shall turn back, / For I will slay myself" (III.i.21-22). Brutus invokes suicide as the supreme sign of patriotism at the end of his oration to the people (III.ii.46-48). Portia declares that her self-wounding testifies to a "constancy" beyond female measure, and embraces it as her own "honorifically gendered, purgative, *voluntary* wound of the male."[18]

That the links between self-wounding and the construction of masculine identity may be equivocal emerges more fully in the play's closing scenes. The suicides believe the act 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" (V.v.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 or diminishes (note Brutus's remark after Caesar's death, "ambition's debt is paid" [III.i.83]).

Yet the deaths' circumstances in the last scenes challenge this view of quantifiable control and honour. While Titinius actually does kill himself, Cassius and Brutus have to persuade others to assist, and the extra involvement diminishes the gesture of absolute agency: Cassius orders a servant to help and thereby win his freedom; Brutus must ask four soldiers before finding one who will hold the sword. These dubious situations suggest that the idealised view of suicide is not held by everyone; Clitus replies earnestly to Brutus but his words border on grotesque humour, "I'll rather kill myself" (V.v.7). Cassius dies having confused Titinius's reception by friends as capture: "O, coward that I am, to live so long, / To see my best friend ta'en before my face!" (V.iii.34-35). His mistake later moves Titinius to kill himself anyway, with Cassius's own sword. Brutus dies having earlier suggested that he considers suicide as "cowardly and vile, / For fear of what might fall, so to prevent / The time of life" (V.i.104-6). Finally, Cassius and Brutus both expire with Caesar's name on their lips, forced to acknowledge his victory over themselves, as they die by blades used to kill him.

The pattern of suicides thus verges on the mock heroic, suggesting implicit contradictions in the aristocratic code of valour and honour. Total physical control over the body seems to be the same as loss of control. The paradox of the suicides is that they render the body at once agent and object, its own self-subverting site. The attempt to reify the self thus seems to undermine the ethical system that fashions identity in these terms. For bodily integrity is of the highest value for the males, as is exemplified in the dispute between Brutus and Cassius over money and morals. Each is willing to sacrifice his heart to verify his character — Brutus would "rather coin my heart, / And drop my blood for drachmas" than "wring" money from peasants (IV.iii.72-73); Cassius offers Brutus his dagger, "I, that denied thee gold, will give my heart"

(IV.iii.103). Ironically, the acts they would undertake to prove their integrity would rupture masculine wholeness, reproducing the wounds fatal to Caesar's majesty on themselves.

Just as individual integrity is ambivalently epitomised by bodily destruction, so is the homosocial system of aristocratic unity and equality. Here, physical violence works to destroy the bonds it celebrates; but like the individual case, destruction is central to the celebration. As Rebhorn notes, the emulous rivalry "makes for class disintegration as well as class cohesion."[19] The dead body is a synecdochic ideal, the central trope in the rhetoric of masculinity envoiced by all characters (there is no Thersites as in *Troilus and Cressida* to parody the trope, and unlike *Coriolanus,* the critical tribunes are silenced after the first scene). The sequence of eulogies through the play fully reveals this rhetoric. For while the appearance and actions of the body are significant, the ways in which it speaks and is spoken about depict the its social value and function most vividly.

The play is structured around a series of eulogies, beginning with Marullus'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 and Cassius's remarks on Portia, and Brutus's on Cassius and Titinius. These speeches are ideological efforts to establish the body's "true" meaning in order to shore up and control the system of homosocial violence and honour. The eulogists do not disagree on the worth of the system but on which faction has the right to claim it as their own.

The key motif in Marullus's speech is Pompey's decline from the star of triumphal processions to matter over which the new victor rides: "do you now strew flowers in his way, / That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood" (I.i.50-51). The refusal to name Caesar and the depersonalised pronoun "That" attempt to deny him and by implication restore Pompey. Power and agency are conceived in terms of degree of bodily integrity, "the intact ideal maleness of the classical body."[20] The loss of this integrity and control, in battle or as a victim, reduces the male's social stature in life and death.

The people immediately comply with the tribune's eulogy; it grants him power. This reflexive 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. This kind of aura radiates from Brutus in his responses to news of Portia's death, strengthening his leadership over Cassius, Titinius, and Messala, who avers, "Even so great men great losses should endure" (IV.iii.192). Unlike the unsettling reflexivity that accompanies looking at the other and may disturb the self-image, speaking of the dead seems to reinforce one's status, if only momentarily.

Such is the case with Brutus's speech to the people after Caesar's death. It is the first move in "a battle for the interpretation of Caesar's murder," waged between the two factions.[21] Despite being daubed with Caesar's blood, Brutus suppresses the materiality of his death. His speech uses logical analogies and Socratic-like questioning, appeals to the hearers' wisdom and speaker's honour, to position the audience to agree. In contrast, Antony speaks through Caesar's body. A physical and verbal fusion with the corpse charges his words and overpowers the audience. His mouth and the stab wounds supplement each other in order to speak: "thy wounds ... like dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips, / To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue" (III.i.259-61); "I ... / Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths, / And bid them speak for me" (III.ii.226-27). At the same time, Antony physically manages the corpse, carrying it out but 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" (III.ii.107-8). He usurps the orthodox rhetoric of body and blood 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, as they lynch the poet Cinna because his name happens to be the same as one of the conspirators, "pluck but his name out of his heart, and turn him going" (III.iii.33-34). The rhetoric of the body politic is fragmented.

The end of the play sees the restoration of social and political order, in the emergence of a new dominant faction under Octavius's leadership. The final eulogies reinstate the orthodox rhetoric of the body, suppressing its materiality to reassert the body politic's symbolic integrity. Brutus sets the tone with his words on Cassius and Titinius: "Are yet two Romans living such as these? / The last of all the Romans, fare thee well!" (V.iii.98-99). The ethos of "Romanness" is recuperated 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, "Nature might stand up / And say to all the world, 'This was a man!'" (V.v.74-75). Octavius re-institutes a controlled decorum around the body, removing Brutus's corpse from sight. In extreme contrast to the public function of Caesar's body — "Produce[d] ...to the market place" (III.i.228) as a kind of rhetorical and political commodity[22] — Brutus's body is used to uphold the code of aristocratic masculinity, an icon around which those values are 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, order'd honourably" (V.v.76-79). By stressing its symbolic value, the new leader erases the body's material limits. The decline that

Thomas Wilson saw as intrinsic to that materiality is for the moment also effaced, and a future for the body politic is invoked.

Notes

1. Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1560), ed. G.H. Mair (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 71. The first quotation is from page 83.

2. Exemplified by Hamlet's musings on Yorick's skull; see Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays in Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984).

3. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 122.

4. John Drakakis, "'Fashion it thus': *Julius Caesar* and the Politics of Theatrical Representation," *Shakespeare Survey* 44 (1991): 72. The notion of a material and rhetorical "body politic" in this paper is adapted from Foucault's 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": *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 28.

5. For various "boundary" threats in the play, see René Girard, "Collective Violence and Sacrifice in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar,*" *Salmagundi* 88–89 (1990–91): 399–419, on the body politic; Wayne A. Rebhorn, "The Crisis of the Aristocracy in *Julius Caesar,*" *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990): 75–111, on the aristocracy; Gail Kern Paster, "'In the spirit of men there is no blood': Blood as Trope of Gender in *Julius Caesar,*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989): 284–98, on gender and masculinity; Sharon O'Dair, "Social Role and the Making of Identity in *Julius Caesar,*" *SEL* 1500–1900 33 (1993): 289–307, and Gary B. Miles, "How Roman Are Shakespeare's Romans?" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989): 257–83, on personality and character. In "Conjuring Caesar: Ceremony, History, and Authority in 1599," *English Literary Renaissance* 19 (1989): 291–304, Mark Rose sums up the historical and cultural relevance of such issues at the end of Elizabeth I's reign.

6. All reference is to the Arden edition, *Julius Caesar,* ed. T.S. Dorsch (London: Methuen, 1979).

7. On these contextual Elizabethan echoes, cf. Richard Wilson, "'Is this a holiday?': Shakespeare's Roman Carnival," *ELH* 54 (1987): 31–44, and Rose, "Conjuring Caesar."

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

9. Dorsch, Introduction xxvii.

10. 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" (V.i.7–8).

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

12. Brutus is far more attuned to deceptive signs when he has something to hide, as his aside before the murder suggests, "every like is not the same, O Caesar!" (II.ii.128).

13. Foucault, *Discipline* 47.

14. Wilson, "Is this a holiday?" 36.

15. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 431.

16. Paster, "In the spirit of men" 291.

17. Note Goffman, *Frame Analysis:* "a sense of the humanity of a performer is somehow generated by a discrepancy between role and character" (294). Cf. the effect of Antony's tears in his funeral speech (III.ii.107–19).

18. Paster, "In the spirit of men" 294; see II.i.292–302.

19. "Crisis" 95.

20. Paster, "In the spirit of men" 298.

21. Girard, "Collective Violence" 413; cf. Paster, "In the spirit of men" 286, 298.

22. Cf. Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought,* 1550–1770 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): "As a locus of representation and misrepresentation, the body had become, in effect, a commodity" (85). I am grateful to David Storor for pointing out to me the contrast between the treatment of Caesar's and Brutus's bodies.