Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare

9 | 1991

Shakespeare et le corps à la Renaissance

‘Speak hands for me’: Image and Action in *Julius Caesar*

James R. Mulryne

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/1192>

DOI: 10.4000/shakespeare.1192

ISSN: 2271-6424

Publisher

Société Française Shakespeare

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 November 1991

Number of pages: 101-112

Electronic reference

James R. Mulryne, « ‘Speak hands for me’: Image and Action in *Julius Caesar* », *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* [Online], 9 | 1991, Online since 01 January 2007, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/1192> ; DOI : 10.4000/shakespeare.1192

SHAKESPEARE
ET LE CORPS A LA RENAISSANCE

Société Française Shakespeare

Actes du Congrès 1990

sous la direction

de

M.T. JONES-DAVIES

PARIS
LES BELLES LETTRES
1991

*Tous droits de traduction, de reproduction et d'adaptation réservés
pour tous les pays.*

© 1991 Société d'édition Les Belles Lettres,
95 bd Raspail 75006 Paris

ISBN 2.251 69117-X

Speak hands for me : image and action in *Julius Caesar*

I should begin by explaining and amplifying my title. "Speak hands for me" takes us to the very centre of *Julius Caesar*, the heart of its political action :

CINNA (<i>kneeling</i>)	O Caesar —
CAESAR	Hence! Wilt thou lift up Olympus?
DECIUS (<i>kneeling</i>)	Great Caesar —
CAESAR	Doth not Brutus bootless kneel?
CASCA	Speak, hands, for me!
<i>They stab Caesar, Casca first, Brutus last</i>	
CAESAR	<i>Et tu, Brute?</i> —Then fall, Caesar!
<i>He dies</i>	
CINNA	Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!
	Run hence, proclaim, cry it about the streets!
	(III.i.74-8)

Speak hands for me : the phrase articulates the poignancy, even the pathos, of political action, juxtaposing the eloquence of speech and the effectiveness of action. Or perhaps the ineffectiveness of speech and the unsophistication of action. Either of the contradictory two bestows identity on *me*, for good or ill. The paradox of concept is complemented by the paradox of gesture : are the hands of supplication or the hands that hold the knife?

I shall wish to return more than once to this central moment, but let me draw out now a few of its salient features. There is something very moving about the starkness with which the event is dramatised. One notices the simplicity, even the bareness, of the language, with the only verbal flourish Caesar's characteristically vain and self-deluding reference to Olympus. Shakespeare seems willing to risk clumsiness of expression, even faintly discernible solecism : "Doth not Brutus bootless kneel?" There is, too, the remarkable theatrical self-denial of the death itself :

Then fall, Caesar! *He dies.*

Eloquence of language, and — so far as the script offers us clues — eloquence of gesture, are denied. The moment is always remembered for the pathos of "*Et tu, Brute?*", already perhaps a stage tag in Shakespeare's own day¹. The phrase, like its companions, is notable for its simplicity; but it is notable too for its effect of displacement, of (if you like) *defamiliarisation*. Nowhere else in an utterly serious context does Shakespeare desert the eloquence of English, *his* English, for the strangeness, the oddly un-nuanced starkness of a foreign tongue. *Julius Caesar* is known for alienation effects of telescoping time and distance, through making its action ambiguously remote and present, then and now². The Latin phrase similarly invites and resists empathy. Its Greek forebear, in Suetonius, καὶ σὺ τέκνον (even you, my son) with its allusion to Caesar's rumoured paternity of Brutus, picks up the sense of shock, of contradictory closeness and distance, in Caesar's phrase. It points also towards the persistent tradition, perhaps copied on Shakespeare's stage, that in the bloody flurry that ends Caesar's life, Brutus provides the *coup de grace* by thrusting his dagger into his "father's" genitals. The theatrical guile of the little scene — at the heart of a larger scene, and of the play itself — lies in its opposition of action and inarticulacy: hands, not words, speak.

Let me draw away from *Julius Caesar* just for a moment. In 1598, the year before the probable first performance of the play, James VI of Scotland published *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*. In a passage that rings with conviction, James has this to say³:

... The king towards his people is rightly compared to a father of children, and to a head of a body composed of divers members, for as father the good princes and magistrates of the people of God acknowledged themselves to their subjects. And for all other wellruled commonwealths, the style of *pater patriae* was ever, and is, commonly used to kings. And the proper office of a king towards his subjects agrees very well with the office of the head towards the body and all members thereof, for from the head, being the seat of judgement, proceeds the care and foresight of guiding, and preventing all evil that may come to the body or any part thereof. The head cares for the body: so does the king for his people.

James goes on to develop the venerable commonplace with much (you may think forced) elaboration. As M. Moreau demonstrates elsewhere in this volume, the image is not merely ancient but capable of rich and diverse interpretation. James returned to it often in print and in political speeches. In 1610, for example, when things were already bad with his parliaments, James's political anxiety shows in his readiness to construe the body politic as capable of injury as well as nurture⁴:

As for the head of the natural body, the head has the power of directing all the members of the body to that use which the judgement in the head thinks most convenient. It may apply sharp cures, or cut off corrupt members, let blood in what proportion it thinks fit, and as the body may spare, but yet is all this power ordained by God *ad aedificationem, non ad destructionem* ... it were an idle head that would in place of physic so poison or phlebotomize the body as might breed a dangerous distemper or destruction thereof.

Even in the mind of an arch —, you might say a *desperate*, conservative such as James the well-used image takes its place as a potential icon of tragedy.

Each play of Shakespeare's has its characterising idiom, a theatre language that represents a rich and complex yet ultimately coherent structure of feeling that gives the play its identity. Several papers in this collection demonstrate how the language of body can permeate the script of various plays. Madame di Miceli shows sensitively how the body is evoked in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in *Coriolanus* and in *Othello*. M. Laroque discusses references to the distorted body of carnival and grotesque in *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives*. It needs to be remembered that for Shakespeare body is a theatrical resource as well as a centre of verbal reference. The theatrical language of Antony's death is one that takes in the slack weight of the dying body, as Cleopatra hauls it aloft to her monument, as well as the words that seek to transform it to fire and air. The freedom and inventiveness of Falstaff's language, its fantasy world of impossible possibilities, is braced against his physical bulk that tethers him to the world we know; when his horse is stolen (in *I Henry IV*) his involuntary parody of the Renaissance icon of the hero on horseback owes as much to his corpulent presence on stage as to the humorous allusiveness of language — and one reflects that even when mounted

Falstaff must have presented a ponderable antitype to the aspiring Hotspur or the saddle-vaulting, chivalric Prince of Wales, both lithely present on stage before our eyes. As an Elizabethan playwright, it is natural that Shakespeare should reflect on the associations and the tensions between word and fact. His theatre was a theatre, supremely, of eloquence; it was also a theatre of limited technical resource, almost, in Grotowski's phrase, a *poor* theatre. For an actor, too (and Shakespeare was of course an actor) there is language and there is gesture, word and body. Let me return to *Julius Caesar* to suggest, in a necessarily sketchy way, how the time-honoured image of the political body becomes in that play an influential part of its characterising theatre-language, drawing into itself word and action, giving a tongue and hands to the tragic image of the mutilated state.

It is easy to forget as the assassination scene develops that Caesar's mangled corpse remains on view, mutilated and bloody, for something like four hundred lines. No stage production can be successful unless the action and the presented image constitute a savage spectacle. Violence is inseparable from revolution, save in the most exceptional cases. A very recent study of the French Revolution, Simon Schama's *Citizens*, presents the matter starkly⁵:

From the first year it was apparent that violence was not just an unfortunate side effect from which enlightened Patriots could selectively avert their eyes; it was the Revolution's source of collective energy. It was what made the Revolution revolutionary.

The Revolution seems largely to have bypassed the Luxembourg palace, where our Society chose to hold its conference, but the streets outside were bloody long before the Terror. The placid statues of Caesar that occupy the rooms of your Senate building offer a poignant iconographic comment on the bloodiness of mob and quasi-judicial killing, on which in a historical sense rests the authority of the august body that deliberates within those walls. In the play, Caesar's torn body lies beneath the statue of Pompey — himself defeated and eventually murdered — until Antony, the play's man of eloquence, begins to moralise its wounds. *That* stage-development, from the speech of hands, the language of the knife, to the orator's pulpit and the power of words (both of them memorably present in our play-experience) constitutes one of the play's enrichments of its dialogue of body and word.

Let me follow that dialogue briefly into the detail of the play's script. You'll recall Antony's words in the presence of Caesar's corpse :

Over thy wounds now do I prophesy -
Which like dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips
To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue ... (III.i.259-61)

Dumb mouths beg my tongue. It would be difficult to find a more succinct, a starker, expression in theatre for the paradox of the speechless eloquence of body. The figure of the wound as mouth appears to have been something of a commonplace; Shakespeare may have stolen the phrase from *A Warning for Fair Women* (printed 1599)⁶. But magnetised into the habit of feeling of this play, into its theatrical idiom, it becomes expressive indeed. Again some dislocation of response occurs : the phrasing and the evoked image call to mind the baroque sensibility of, say, Crashaw, and are remote from the usual metaphoric language of this play. Antony returns to the same figure a scene later, though now in a plainer style, and in a phrase that parallels, you might almost say *parodies* "speak hands for me" :

I tell you that which you yourselves do know,
Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,
And bid them speak for me. (III.ii.217-19).

So close an echo — bid them speak for me — locating attention between speech and action — can scarcely be accidental. The two instances are links in one sequence of political action, its dumb eloquence.

It would be possible in a longer paper to develop this point. Instead, let me turn again to the theatre moment from which we began. It is only twenty lines or so later that we have the play's most vivid staging of the intensely ironic juxtaposition of hand and word. Brutus — none other than Brutus — exhorts his fellow conspirators :

Stoop, Romans, stoop,
And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood
Up to the elbows, and besmear our swords.
Then walk we forth, even to the market place,
And waving our red weapons o'er our heads,
Let's all cry "Peace, freedom and liberty!"

CASSIUS Stoop, then, and wash. (III.i.105-11)

Brutus attempts to ritualise the deed, to compromise its nature by making it over into ceremony; so the ugly deed may be converted into words — peace, freedom and liberty. But we have to take in the full stage-picture, the theatrical as well as the textual reality. The hands the conspirators raise are thick with blood; their arms run with blood to the elbow; the swords they wave are themselves bloody. And informing and qualifying everything is the emotional excitement, not the deliberative claim, of the players. Their language — their political action — is to be running and crying, not thought or prayer. Their hands are to speak; and the stage picture eloquently renders that speech.

Many critics have called attention to the discrepancy between this stage action and Brutus' preview of it in the orchard scene :

Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius.
We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,
And in the spirit of men there is no blood.
O that we then could come by Caesar's spirit
And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,
Caesar must bleed for it. And, gentle friends,
Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully;
Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,
Not hew him as a carcase fit for hounds. (II.i.167-75)

There are various poignant ironies here. Brutus is too sensible to suppose that Caesar's corpse will not bleed, yet he wishes to alter the imaginative mode, to *sacramentalise butchery*. He wishes to render deliberate ("boldly, but not wrathfully") what becomes in stage terms a few scenes later a savage spectacle. The realities of political action resist the mind's elevation of them — hands, in other words, speak.

It would be possible to follow the division between word and action deeper into Brutus' mind. But his is one case only of the play's separation of language and fact. There is an intense theatrical contradiction between the elevated language and formal, processional, movement of Caesar, and his epileptic body. Few who saw Mark Dignam's Caesar in Trevor Nunn's production at Stratford will forget his rigid bearing that at every moment betrayed the fragility of his hold on himself, his health, his commonwealth — a vivid actor's statement of the thematic contra-

diction between what we conceive and what we are. Shakespeare pays much attention to Caesar's body; his deafness for example serves as a comment on the functioning of the political as well as the personal body. But the literal points that become figurative are most vividly made in one of the play's most memorably-scripted speeches, rich in opportunities (an important matter of theatre language) for a player gifted in mimicry. You will recall Cassius' speech :

I was born free as Caesar, so were you;
We both have fed as well, and we can both
Endure the winter's cold as well as he.
For once, upon a raw and gusty day,
The troubled Tiber chafing with her shores,
Caesar said to me "Dar'st thou, Cassius, now
Leap in with me into this angry flood
And swim to yonder point?" Upon the word,
Accoutred as I was, I plunged in
And bade him follow; so indeed he did.
The torrent roared, and we did buffet it
With lusty sinews, throwing it aside,
And stemming it with hearts of controversy.
But ere we could arrive the point proposed,
Caesar cried "Help me, Cassius, or I sink!"
I, as Aeneas, our great ancestor,
Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder
The old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber
Did I the tired Caesar. 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.
He had a fever when he was in Spain,
And when the fit was on him I did mark
How he did shake. 'Tis true, this god did shake!
His coward lips did from their colour fly,
And that same eye whose bend doth awe the world
Did lose his lustre. I did hear him groan —
Ay, and that tongue of his, that bade the Romans
Mark him, and write his speeches in their books, Alas, it cried
"Give me some drink, Titinius,"
As a sick girl. Ye gods, it doth amaze me
A man of such a feeble temper should
So get the start of the majestic world
And bear the palm alone.
Flourish. Shout.

(I.ii.97-131)

There is a logical contradiction in Cassius' words, as though good health and physical prowess certified (or failed to certify) the right to godlike authority.

It is a contradiction however that exactly complements the play's language of body.

One further feature of the assassination scene deserves comment. As Caesar lies murdered, the script reminds us, he lies at the foot of a statue of Pompey :

How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport
That now on Pompey's basis lies along,
No worthier than the dust. (III.i.114-16)

Plutarch takes the moral of this to be as if "the image took just revenge of Pompey's enemy"⁷. Shakespeare will have appreciated the implication of history's causal sequences — his own play makes much of this theme. But he intuited also I think a keener moral-theatrical significance. The play turns more than once to the idiom of bodies and statues. Cassius, for instance, develops his account of the overvalued Caesar by protesting that «he doth bestride the narrow world / Like a Colossus, and we petty men / Walk under his huge legs ...» (I.ii.135-7). In the opening scene, we hear of Caesar's "images" (I.i.64) which Flavius urges Marcellus to "disrobe", and which in modern production may be present on stage. There is, too, Calpurnia's grotesquely prescient dream which fantasises Caesar's statue running with blood. As Caesar relates the dream to Decius :

She dreamt tonight she saw my statue,
Which, like a fountain with an hundred spouts,
Did run pure blood; and many lusty Romans
Came smiling, and did bathe their hands in it. (II;ii.76-9)

Shakespeare's art is rarely more wonderful than in this apt *and* inappropriate phantasmagoric conflation of statue and body. The statue *is* a statue, with all that signifies, yet it runs with blood. The assassination scene holds before our eyes and minds for several hundred lines the ironic correlation of murdered corpse and sculpted body. The statue figures as the perfection in art, the out-of-time arrest, of political action. One does not need to be a reader of Yeats to reflect on the signification of those juxtaposed images,

or to see their relation to this play's idiom of body and word (or as Yeats would have it "soul").

Shakespeare composes each of his plays not only verbally, but also in visual impressions. One characterising example of these, for this play, comes at an early moment when the robed dignity of Caesar and his entourage, clothes in their Festival garments, is set against the figure of Antony made ready "for the course" — that is, stripped for running. His instruction from Caesar is :

Forget not in your speed, Antonius,
To touch Calpurnia; for our elders say,
The barren, touched in this holy chase,
Shake off their sterile curse.

ANTONY I shall remember. (I.ii.6-9)

Antony's naked or near-naked body, associated poetically with the fragility of Calpurnia's womanhood, makes an emotionally strong, and theatrically vivid, correlation and contrast with the grand array of Caesar in procession. This unusual moment, capable of strong realisation in production, casts the language of body and statue into another, yet a compatible, idiom.

There is in *Julius Caesar* a series of what I shall call stage strategies that amplifies the idiom of body we are exploring, and carries further the relation of body to attribute significance. A series of references in Act I scene ii (and the associated actions) emphasises seeing and knowing. The series includes Caesar's summons to the hidden soothsayer :

Set him before me, let me see his face.

CASSIUS Fellow, come from the throng. Look upon Caesar
(I.ii.20-1)

It includes also Cassius' riddling discussion with Brutus that begins :

Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face? (I.ii.51)

It comprises too a span of stage-action so unusual that I think it without parallel in Shakespeare's work. For more than 150 lines, Caesar is off stage, but engaged in action that has enormous significance for the moral and political balance of the play. Only shouts and flourishes inform us (when we finally get to hear their mean-

ing) that Caesar has three times refused the crown. When he returns to the stage, his facial expression is searched for clues to his inner feelings and intent. Speculation at first and second hand is rife. What we have, I suggest, is a theatrical treatment cunningly crafted to throw into relief the political force of *speculation*: the attribution of significance to appearances, the unstable version of the statue's artifice. (The lynching of Cinna the poet represents the violent acting-out of this attribution — or mis-attribution). Nor does Shakespeare abandon the idiom of searching faces at this point. The orchard scene that follows draws attention in its script not only to the darkness, but to the muffled faces of the conspirators. The stage-picture will complement this and draw it out; so that the surprising set of introductions (among a group of people who must surely know each other) serves to underline the part speculation plays in effecting political action. Brutus insists (one line in the script, but implying a relatively extended stage ritual):

Give me your hands all over, one by one.

(II.i.112).

We return to the idiom of speak hands for me, appreciating once more the wise and ironic light this play casts on the interplay between gesture and meaning in political action.

It would be possible to develop further the attention paid to body in creating verbal and visual impressions — from the tiredness of Lucius through the self-wounding of Portia and Caesar's sickness to the extraordinary suicide of Portia which, suppressed in Brutus' recollection, acts as so potent a political fact in the quarrel with Cassius. Shakespeare's whole play, one might almost assert, proffers his intricate meditation on the meanings of the old phrase, the body politic. But instead of pursuing these matters, I want to conclude, in this place and with the bicentenary of 1789 just past, by remarking the strange presence-in-absence of the play *Julius Caesar*. It is too easy (though the play warns against this) to divorce the play-world from the real world. I find very moving an account of the Romanian revolution of the last few weeks that shadows in an extraordinary way the contours of revolutionary understanding in *Julius Caesar*. The article is by Mariana Celac, a member of the National Salvation Front, now in Government in Bucharest. Published in the (London) *Sunday Times* on 21 January 1990, it appeared under the headline "Don't

let blood be shed". Celac first evokes the revolutionary atmosphere :

The crowd was generating its own field of force. It was unnecessary for anyone to give instructions. The crowd was vast, and there were no microphones, no loudspeakers. If anyone spoke, the most they could do was to stand on a table and address the people closest to them ... As I reached home, I passed a group of about 200 young people heading towards the outskirts of the city and the industrial areas. They were shouting "Come with us! Don't be afraid! Come with us!"

She notes the interplay between individual energy and eloquence :

It was also about mid-morning that I began to notice in the crowd certain very excited individuals. They looked as if a wave of energy was overwhelming their wills. They were people, I felt, that had probably spent the whole of the previous day talking to the soldiers. Among them, I believe it was the best, the most eloquent, the most convincing, who now appeared as the leaders of the crowd.

And she traces the precarious edge of mob violence :

It was then that an agent of the Securitate was seized by the crowd in front of the central committee building. He would have been lynched had students on top of a bus not seen it, and begun shouting : "No violence! No violence!"

As one reads, it becomes almost uncanny to think how Shakespeare prophesies, through Cassius, the playing out over the centuries of Caesar's story, in reality as in sport, on the stages of the world :

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown! (III.i.111-13)

When Celac told her story, Ceaucescu had not yet been subjected to his quasi-judicial execution. But the parallels with, as well as the differences from, the assassination of Caesar, invite our pondering.

J. R. MULRYNE
University of Warwick

NOTES

1. See Arthur Humphreys, ed., *Julius Caesar*, The Oxford Shakespeare, (Oxford and New York, 1984) pp. 24-25.
2. For example, and most notably, in Cassius' 'How many ages hence.' See the last paragraph of this essay.
3. David Wooton, ed., *Divine Right and Democracy*, (Harmondsworth, 1986) p. 99.
4. Wooton, p. 108.
5. Simon Schama, *Citizens : A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (London, 1989), p. 447.
6. Humphreys, p. 1.
7. Humphreys, p. 165 fn.