Shakespeare's Use of Blood Imagery in the Play

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Even the most casual examination of *Julius Caesar* reveals that the play abounds with verbal references to blood, as well as often vivid visual allusions to blood and blood-letting. In this excerpt from his penetrating study of the play's imagery, noted Shakespearean expert, Maurice Charney, explores many of these allusions. He concludes, for instance, that blood is the chief symbol of the conspiracy. Moreover, says Charney, the conspirators view the blood-letting of the assassination as a kind of ritual purification in which the evils infecting Rome (represented by Caesar's dictatorship) are purged. As the play's later events demonstrate, of course, this view turns out to be mostly self-deceptive. Similarly, images of blood underscore Brutus's tragedy, his sincere belief that his betrayal of Caesar is a noble act, when in reality it is a misguided one. In the end, Charney suggests, the cry of the timeless, primitive blood feud, "blood for blood," echoes once again, as Brutus and the other conspirators pay for spilling Caesar's blood by forfeiting their own.

The central issue about the meaning of *Julius Caesar* is raised most forcefully and vividly by the imagery of blood. If the murder of Caesar is indeed a "savage spectacle" (3.1.223), then the blood with which the conspirators are smeared "Up to the elbows" (3.1.107) is the sign of their guilt. But if the murder of Caesar is a ritual blood-letting of the body politic of Rome, then blood is the sign of purification and new life. The latter point of view marks the tragedy of Brutus, for he cannot foresee that his high-minded but

specious motives will be drowned in the bloodiness of murder and civil strife. He is tragically unable to bridge the gap between reasons and acts.

The Stain of Brutus's Guilt

The blood theme begins in II,i, where it becomes a powerful symbol for the conspiracy. The question of what to do with Antony after the murder of Caesar is a crucial one. The shrewd and practical Cassius wants to kill him, but Brutus objects and makes, according to Plutarch, the first great tactical error of his career. This decision also indicates the rift between the other conspirators and Brutus, who argues his position from the analogy between the bodies human and politic:

> Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,
> To cut the head off and then hack the limbs,
> Like wrath in death and envy afterwards;
> For Antony is but a limb of Caesar.
>
> (2.1.162–65)

He thinks of blood as the symbol of common murder, and he fears the stain of its guilt. The slaying of Caesar is a necessary and beneficial act, but Brutus wishes that there were no blood:

> Let's 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!
>
> (2.1.166–71)

This is one of the most important passages in the play for showing the tragic wrongness of Brutus. The murder of Caesar proves to be not a loving sacrifice, but only a fruitless act of butchery. . . . When all is done, only the body of Caesar has been killed, not the spirit, which stays very much alive in Antony and Octavius and wins vengeance in civil strife. The meaning of the play can almost be formulated by taking the negative of all these statements of Brutus.

The tragedy of Brutus springs from his complete sincerity in preferring duty to Rome to his personal friendship with Caesar. In this sense his tragic course is ironic because his choice is essentially noble but misguided. It is an irony of his situation that things turn out quite differently from what he had anticipated. His inner conflicts are still strong in these

early scenes, and it is from his paradoxically divided loyalties that he speaks of the murder of Caesar as a loving, sacrificial act:

> 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 carcass fit for hounds.
> And let our hearts, as subtle masters do,
> Stir up their servants to an act of rage
> And after seem to chide 'em. This shall make
> Our purpose necessary, and not envious;
> Which so appearing to the common eyes,
> We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers.
>
> (2.1.171–80)

Brutus persists in the analogy of the state as a body, which the conspirators by bleeding will restore to health. In this way the assassination of Caesar will be a purgation, a phlebotomy, and not a murder—it is a necessary though bloody act, and Brutus shrinks from the bloody stain of murder.

The Blood Flows Freely

Among the portents in the next scene are two powerful signs of blood. Calphurnia warns Caesar of "Fierce fiery warriors" (2.2.19) who "drizzled blood upon the Capitol" (2.2.21). This blood prepares us for the actual murder of Caesar in the Capitol, and "Fierce fiery warriors" looks ahead to the antagonists in the civil strife. The concern with blood becomes more ominous in Calphurnia's dream, as Caesar relates it to Decius:

> She dreamt to-night she saw my statuë,
> 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.
>
> (2.2.76–79)

This image, too, anticipates the later action in which the conspirators do actually bathe their hands in Caesar's blood after his murder. But Decius turns Calphurnia's dream to seemingly favorable omen:

> Your statue spouting blood in many pipes,
> In which so many smiling Romans bath'd,
> Signifies that from you great Rome shall suck
> Reviving blood, and that great men shall press
> For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance.
>
> (2.2.85–89)

The image continues the analogy between Caesar's body and the body politic of Rome. There is a covert praise of Cae-

sar's assassination here: the body politic of Rome will be revived by the murder of Caesar, although great men will press for memorials of him once he is dead. The last two lines are full of heraldic and religious imagery intended to flatter Caesar.

Blood imagery is of greatest importance in III,i, where it is not only a repeated verbal theme, but also enters into the stage action. Animal blood from concealed bladders or sponges was probably used to represent Caesar's murder on the Elizabethan stage, and, from all indications, there was a frank emphasis on the spectacular effects of murder scenes. . . .

A number of blood images in III,i show Caesar in the height of pride just before his fall. He thrusts aside Metellus Cimber, who "might fire the blood of ordinary men" (3.1.37), but not Caesar's. He does not bear "such rebel blood" (3.1.40) that can be melted by emotional persuasion, and the chief connotation of "blood" is the passion that Caesar forswears. The world is full of men who are "flesh and blood, and apprehensive" (3.1.67), but only Caesar remains in cold, unchanging constancy. Yet ten lines later he is stabbed to death as readily as any mortal, and the blood that would not be fired or thawed now flows freely from the dagger wounds of the conspirators.

A Fearful Blood Ritual

From this point until the end of the play the fact of Caesar's assassination is kept constantly before the audience, and this is done to a large extent by blood imagery. Of course, Caesar's bloody and rent body is on stage through all of this scene, and at a number of important moments (3.1.148–50, 194–210, 254–75) Antony addresses it as if it were a living presence; Octavius' Servant does the same (3.1.281). In the next scene it is absent only for the short time of Brutus' oration. At line 44 Antony and others enter with the body, which remains on stage until removed by the plebeians for the funeral pyre. Thus Caesar's body dominates the scene for almost 450 lines after his death. The body plays a conspicuous role during Antony's funeral oration, but throughout the time it is on stage it serves as a visible indictment of the conspirators. Its commanding presence on stage, possibly on the elevated platform or dais on which the "throne" usually stood, keeps the audience aware of the crime of assassination.

Shortly after the murder, Brutus directs the conspirators in a fearful blood ritual:

> 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!'
>
> (3.1.105–10)

This action fulfills the prophecy of Calphurnia's dream (2.2.76–79), and we may assume that stage blood was liberally used for these effects, since the conspirators' hands and swords need to remain very vividly bloody for about 150 lines (until the exit at 3.1.253). The blood ritual that Brutus began at 2.I.166 seems now a sacrilege rather than a consecration. It is continued as Cassius takes up Brutus' invocation:

> Stoop then and wash. How many ages hence
> Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
> In states unborn and accents yet unknown!
>
> (3.1.111–13)

And Brutus answers . . . in the same spirit of uncontrolled exaltation:

> How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,
> That now on Pompey's basis lies along
> No worthier than the dust!
>
> (3.1.114–16)

The eyes of the conspirators are on posterity, which they are sure will approve their present acts. These speeches represent the highest point in the development of the conspirators; with the entrance of Antony's Servant their downward course begins.

Body, Blood, and Spirit Inseparable

Antony's speeches in this scene reiterate "blood" both as the symbol of the murdered Caesar and as the sign of the conspirators' guilt. The double emphasis is made almost in his first words:

> I know not, gentlemen, what you intend,
> Who else must be let blood, who else is rank.
> If I myself, there is no hour so fit
> As Caesar's death's hour; nor no instrument
> Of half that worth as those your swords, made rich
> With the most noble blood of all this world.
> I do beseech ye, if you bear me hard,
> Now, whilst your purpled hands do reek and smoke,
> Fulfil your pleasure.
>
> (3.1.151–59)

Antony's thoughts run on blood as he boldly dares the con-

spirators to kill him, too. Their hands and swords have been bathed in Caesar's blood, whose visual signs they now flaunt to all Rome as justification of their deed. Throughout this scene Antony provides a bitter, sarcastic commentary on these "purpled hands" and swords, for they bear the stain of guilt upon them. . . .

Brutus' reply to Antony acknowledges the blood, but attempts to offer reasons:

> O Antony, beg not your death of us!
> Though now we must appear bloody and cruel,
> As by our hands and this our present act
> You see we do, yet see you but our hands
> And this the bleeding business they have done.
> Our hearts you see not. They are pitiful. . . .
>
> (3.1.164–69)

The separation of "hands" from "hearts" echoes Brutus' earlier distinction between the body and the spirit of Caesar (2.1.166ff). In his tragic blindness he cannot see that the one ("hands") is not simply an instrument for the other ("hearts"): in the act of murder the body and its blood are inseparable from the spirit.

But it is the bloody hands of the conspirators that Antony is insisting on as the outward badge of their guilt. In a supremely ironic ceremony Antony shakes each of their hands:

> Let each man render me his bloody hand.
> First, Marcus Brutus, will I shake with you;
> Next, Caius Cassius, do I take your hand;
> Now, Decius Brutus, yours; now yours, Metellus;
> Yours, Cinna; and, my valiant Casca, yours.
> Though last, not least in love, yours, good Trebonius.
>
> (3.1.184–89)

This ceremony parallels the one by which Brutus entered the conspiracy: "Give me your hands all over, one by one" (2.1.112). We need to supply the all-important expression and attitude of Antony here, the mingling of intense loathing and feigned reconciliation. From this handshaking Antony acquires "bloody fingers". . . and he speaks as if to undo the guilty ritual in which he has participated:

> Pardon me, Julius! Here wast thou bay'd, brave hart;
> Here didst thou fall; and here thy hunters stand,
> Sign'd in thy spoil, and crimson'd in thy lethe.
> O world, thou wast the forest to this hart;
> And this indeed, O world, the heart of thee!
> How like a deer, stroken by many princes,
> Dost thou here lie!
>
> (3.1.204–10)

He has almost gone too far . . . but Brutus, who himself loved Caesar, will now shield Antony. The hunting imagery of this speech stresses butchery rather than the sacrifice Brutus hoped for. . . . By sharing in Caesar's blood he [Antony] has seemed to condone the murder, but behind this mask vengeance for Caesar is being prepared.

Antony Promises "Blood and Destruction"

Brutus' unshaken sense of his own rightness allows him to commit his second great tactical error according to Plutarch: he gives Antony permission to speak a funeral oration for Caesar in the market place. We need to understand the tragic character of Brutus here. He has absolute confidence in his own rational power, for the conflict in him does not go beyond the alignment of motives leading to the decision to murder Caesar:

> Between the acting of a dreadful thing
> And the first motion, all the interim is
> Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.
>
> (2.1.63–65)

After the "acting" of the "dreadful thing," however (equivalent to the decision to murder Caesar, rather than the murder itself), the "phantasma" and "hideous dream" become things external rather than aspects of Brutus' mind. . . . The scope of Brutus' tragedy is limited by his own sense of rightness, for his decision to take part in the conspiracy seems to end his process of self-questioning. He is "arm'd so strong in honesty" (4.3.67) that he cannot feel the world aright or admit the possibility of error, although the quarrel scene perhaps contains a subdued sense of guilt and tragic disillusion. He will either give reasons to Antony for Caesar's murder, "Or else were this a savage spectacle" (3.1.223). But Brutus seems too sure of his reasons to allow for alternatives to his own course of action, and this is one of the chief sources of his tragic blindness.

Antony's soliloquy after the conspirators leave says directly and forcefully what has already been said ironically. The stage situation for this soliloquy is particularly impressive. Beginning with the meeting of the Senate and continuing with the murder of Caesar and its aftermath, the stage has always been crowded, especially with conspirators. Antony's aloneness, then, comes as a sudden contrast. It is a moment of unexpected quiet which indicates that the counteraction is already underway. Antony apologizes to the dead Caesar for his conciliatory role with "the-

butchers" (3.1.255), and he prophesies the vengeance of blood for blood that must follow:

> Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!
> 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),
> A curse shall light upon the limbs of men;
> Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
> Shall cumber all the parts of Italy;
> Blood and destruction shall be so in use
> And dreadful objects so familiar
> That mothers shall but smile when they behold
> Their infants quartered with the hands of war,
> All pity chok'd with custom of fell deeds. . . .
>
> (3.1.258–69)

In III,i we learn that Antony will use his funeral oration to see "how the people take / The cruel issue of these bloody men. . . " (3.1.293–94), and the oration never allows us to forget the blood of Caesar. If Antony read Caesar's will, the commons would "go and kiss dead Caesar's wounds / And dip their napkins in his sacred blood. . ." (3.2.138–39). This blood has now become that of a martyr or a saint. Brutus' "most unkindest cut of all" (3.2.188) burst Caesar's heart, and

> Even at the base of Pompey's statue
> (Which all the while ran blood) great Caesar fell.
>
> (3.2.193–94)

We recall Caesar's triumphing "over Pompey's blood" (1.1.56) at the beginning of the play; now Pompey triumphs over Caesar's blood. Antony very artfully disclaims any power as an orator "To stir men's blood" (3.2.228). The "most bloody sight" (3.2.207) of Caesar's body and "sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths" (3.2.230) speak for themselves and act as a powerful persuasion to vengeance.

"Blood for Blood" in the Finale

There is a general slackening of the blood imagery in Acts IV and V. After Brutus' "bloody spur" (4.2.25) image for the civil war, the next significant use of "blood" is in the quarrel scene. Brutus counters Cassius' waspish indignation with the fact of Caesar's murder:

> Remember March; the ides of March remember.
> Did not great Julius bleed for justice sake?
> What villain touch'd his body that did stab
> And not for justice?
>
> (4.3.18–21)

If the purpose of the assassination were not justice, then Caesar's blood is the mark of butchery and murder. By the time of this scene the first flush of idealism has gone out of the conspiracy. It is seen here on the defensive, and Cassius' venality is a sign of disillusion. Only Brutus persists in his original uprightness, which is repeatedly expressed with all the insolent frankness of the morally sure. There is also a suggestion here that Brutus is beginning to be aware of the tragic betrayal of the original ideals of the conspiracy. This awareness creates a sense of doom and fatality in the scene, which is climaxed by the appearance of Caesar's Ghost.

The blood imagery of V,i sets the tone for the battle of Philippi in V,ii. A Messenger reports the enemy's "bloody sign of battle" (5.1.14) to Antony and Octavius. Further on, Octavius cuts off the ingenious conceits of the battle parley with the words of a practical man:

> Come, come, the cause! If arguing make us sweat,
> The proof of it will turn to redder drops.
> Look,
> I draw a sword against conspirators.
> When think you that the sword goes up again?
> Never, till Caesar's three-and-thirty wounds
> Be well aveng'd, or till another Caesar
> Have added slaughter to the sword of traitors. (5.1.48–55)

This is the case against Brutus, Cassius, and their party: they are "conspirators" and "traitors" who must answer for it in battle; the arbitration of the issue will be in blood, not words. The final blood image is used by Titinius for the dead Cassius:

> O setting sun,
> As in thy red rays thou dost sink to night,
> So in his red blood Cassius' day is set!
> The sun of Rome is set. (5.3.60–63)

So Cassius ends in his own "red blood," slain by the same hand and with the same sword that stabbed Caesar. This is the reciprocity of blood for blood.