5
Bleeding Martyrs: The Body of the Tyrant/Saint, the Limits of ‘Constancy’, and the Extremity of the Passions in *Julius Caesar*

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare further emphasizes his identity as a rebel poet-playwright by aligning himself with the anti-Augustan Ovid, as he does throughout his Roman poems and plays. Shakespeare here uses the figure of Caesar – with its multifaceted legacy in history, legend, and myth – to explore the complex and ambivalent associations inherited from these past traditions and to expose the direct link between Christianity and its pagan Roman past. In foregrounding Antony’s rhetoric over the bleeding body of Caesar, Shakespeare documents the making of a martyr, showing how the blood and wounds of the body accrue meaning when transposed into a holy icon, simultaneously unveiling that process and reinvesting it with ritual meaning onstage. Shakespeare further extends this ambivalence by opening up larger debates concerning the limits of ‘constancy’ and the turbulence of fiery passion at the micro- and macrocosmic levels, involving pivotal questions that he explores throughout his Roman poems and plays.

Shakespeare stages these conflicts in various ways in *Julius Caesar*, beginning with the appropriation of the figure of Caesar itself. The myths, legends, and debates surrounding the figure of Julius Caesar are contradictory in nature and wide in scope, ranging from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages to the early modern era. Shakespeare draws from these rich, multiple associations in developing his Caesar and in treating the events of the play, highlighting the diverse strands of these traditions in both verbal commentaries and visual depictions of the great Roman general. Although many classical to Renaissance writers praise Caesar for being a brave conqueror and strong leader, others – including the likes of Cicero, Aquinas, and Luther – condemn him as an oppressor. Some commentators, like Petrarch, include both views, criticizing Caesar’s passion and ambition yet elsewhere showing
great admiration of him and little of Brutus. In the sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries, Julius Caesar became one of the many rulers set up as examples for monarchs, as in Erasmus’s comparison of Henry VIII’s ‘strength of will’ to Caesar’s. Sir Thomas Elyot (in The Governour) and William Baldwin (in Preface to Mirroure for Magistrates, 1587 edition) reflect on Caesar as model for ethical study and military strategy, and in his Menerva Britanna (1612), Henry Peacham portrays Caesar as a knight in an emblem signifying the ideal of manly valor and honor. These traditions are followed by commentaries on the actions of Brutus and Cassius, who are described alternatively as bloody murderers and freedom fighters; and Antony, who is sometimes viewed with scorn, other times with sympathy.

Although these debates are well known, they make up only one part of the Caesar myth that Shakespeare inherited. Besides the political and historical commentary, the legend of Julius Caesar is bound up with stories of myth, medieval chivalric romance, the supernatural, the medical history of birthing, and, by association, the medieval cult of blood. Ovid, who challenged Augustus by forsaking the emperor’s sanctioned literary path of Virgil to write lyric and counter-epic poetry, closes out his Metamorphoses with a satirical ‘Apotheosis of Julius Caesar’, in which he sarcastically describes Caesar as a god whose greatness is achieved not through his conquests, governance, or triumph, but through the policies of his successor, his adopted son, Augustus. In later legends, Caesar becomes everything from Oberon’s father, fairy Brünhilde’s son, Judas Maccabaeus’s grandson, one of the Nine Worthies, and chivalric hero, to the architect of the Louvre and the Tower of London. Both Plutarch and Shakespeare align Caesar with the supernatural, but in Plutarch the ghost that haunts Brutus is not referred to as Caesar, but as an ‘evil spirit’; in Shakespeare’s play, it is designated as the Ghost of Caesar who claims to be ‘Thy evil spirit, Brutus’ (4.2.333).

Besides this interest in Caesar, myth, and the occult, legends include a fascination with the Roman conqueror and his Caesarian-section birth. Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, numerous visual portrayals and commentaries depict Caesar as ‘untimely ripped’ from his mother’s womb, a baby propped up on his mother’s lap, similar to a saint or Christ child, looking as if he had miraculously emerged from the woman’s body. In this tradition, Caesar is an important figure in the representational history of maternity, as he is associated with discourses concerning the female body, pregnancy and miraculous births. Although Shakespeare does not directly evoke the image of Julius Caesar’s Caesarian birth in his play, he does foreground this