‘Words before blows’: Civil and military in *Julius Caesar*

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Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* concludes with a sequence of battle scenes that occupy most of Act Five. Before these climactic battles, there occurs a confrontation between the opposing generals: Antony and Octavius on the Caesarian side, Brutus and Cassius on the republican. The exchange of threats between the generals makes a fulcrum between two parts of the play, the first in which the action takes place in the civic realm and the second in which it takes place on the battlefield. That division is not of course absolute. On the one hand, violence has already erupted with the murder of Caesar—which takes place in the Senate, the heart of Rome’s civic polity—and with the riot that Antony provokes afterwards. On the other hand, the battles of Act Five involve surprisingly little staged martial action, and much observation, report, and surmise. This very blurring of the boundaries is characteristic of *Julius Caesar*. The play shows an acute political awareness of the ways in which military violence and civil persuasion are interrelated forces, readily transforming into one another.

> BRUTUS Words before blows—is it so, countrymen?
> OCTAVIUS Not that we love words better, as you do.
> BRUTUS Good words are better than bad strokes, Octavius.
> ANTONY In your bad strokes, Brutus, you give good
> words—
> Witness the hole you made in Caesar’s heart,
> Crying, ‘Long live! Hail, Caesar!’
> CASSIUS Antony,
> The posture of your blows are yet unknown;
> But for your words, they rob the Hybla bees
> And leave them honeyless.
> ANTONY Not stingless too.
> BRUTUS Oh yes—and soundless too,

> For you have stol'n their buzzing, Antony,
> And very wisely threat before you sting.
> ANTONY Villains! You did not so when your vile daggers
> Hacked one another in the sides of Caesar:
> You showed your teeth like apes and fawned like hounds
> And bowed like bondmen, kissing Caesar's feet;
> Whilst damnèd Casca, like a cur, behind,
> Struck Caesar on the neck. Oh you flatterers!
> CASSIUS Flatterers? Now, Brutus, thank yourself:
> This tongue had not offended so today
> If Cassius might have ruled.
> OCTAVIUS Come, come, the cause. If arguing make us sweat,
> The proof of it will turn to redder drops.
> [*Drawing his sword*] 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 avenged, or till another Caesar
> Have added slaughter to the sword of traitors.[1]

This exchange skilfully characterizes the four generals. The noble Brutus opens it politely, acknowledging that his opponents are nevertheless his 'countrymen', and recognizing that to put 'Words before blows', negotiation before battle, is the proper procedure for Romans to follow. (It is possible that the line is a taunt, suggesting that his opponents are taking refuge in words because they are reluctant to fight, but that does not seem right for Brutus.) Antony and Cassius are less restrained. Antony points up the permeability of the boundary between words and blows, political and military: he harshly accuses Brutus of hypocrisy for professing friendship to Caesar with words while planning his death by weapons. Cassius ripostes sharply by accusing Antony of a similar doubleness: Antony too has used honeyed words to stir the Roman people to violence. The youthful Octavius appears impatient with his elders' words: he is keen to come to blows, and by drawing his sword speaks the language of the battlefield rather than the debating chamber.

The disputants make clear a fact that reverberates throughout *Julius Caesar*. Renaissance Europe admired Rome both for its military efficiency and for its civil arts, such as political debate and the rule of law.[2] But in Shakespeare's play those seemingly opposite attributes, words and blows, cannot be separated. To put it simply, the arts of language are also weapons in the battle for power, and military accomplishments can be parlayed into political success, as was done by Caesar himself.

The play opens in the aftermath of a military victory and the ceremony of a triumph that celebrates victory. The reactions both of Caesar's supporters and of his opponents show that the prestige of a military triumph is also a means for winning political power.[3] For the Tribunes, it is the means by which Caesar threatens, like a human embodiment of the Roman eagle, to 'soar above the view of men / And keep us all in servile fearfulness' (1.1.73-4). Caesar confirms this threat when he refuses to attend the Senate, claiming that the honours of military conquest elevate him above the authority of the civil power: 'Have I in conquest stretched mine arm so far / To be afeared to tell greybeards the truth?' (2.2.70-1). The prestige of Caesar's military conquests will also add fuel to Antony's incendiary funeral oration. Caesar first wore the mantle in which he was murdered, Antony tells the Roman people, 'on a summer's evening in his tent, / That day he overcame the Nervii' (3.2.177-8).

The exchange or crossover between military and civil is most sharply enacted at the moment of Caesar's murder, when the legal appeals of the conspirators for the pardon of Metellus Cimber turn abruptly into the language of weapons: 'Speak hands for me!' (3.1.83). The exchange also takes place in another register when Portia reveals to Brutus the 'voluntary wound' she has made in her own thigh (2.1.310-14). In this episode, the Roman woman, whom Shakespeare envisages as normally confined to the civic and indeed the domestic sphere, has made a startling battlefield gesture, proving that she possesses the characteristic Roman virtue of constancy.

The prevalence of weapons as stage properties in *Julius Caesar* is a constant reminder of the military basis of the Roman state. Some of the dramatic uses of these weapons show the same pattern of the military turning into the political. Casca narrates how Caesar wins the applause of the Roman people by 'offer[ing] them his throat to cut' (1.2.268). In the meeting of the conspirators at Brutus's house, Casca himself draws his sword in order to point out the direction of the rising sun (2.1.110-16). This strange moment acts as a reminder that the conspirators hope for the rise of a revived republic, while in fact their action advances the rise of Caesar's fortune in the person of his heirs Antony and Octavius. Immediately after Caesar's murder, Brutus encourages the conspirators to take part in an extraordinary procession, designed by Brutus as a republican answer to Caesar's opening triumph, but in fact most unlikely to win the public support he hopes for:

> 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 Marketplace,
> And waving our red weapons o'er our heads,
> Let's all cry, 'Peace, freedom, and liberty!' (3.1.115-20)

As weapons manifest the military character of Rome, so the use of documents, letters, and books as stage properties, as well as the practice of oratory, manifest Rome's civic character, reminding the audience that the city was a model for Renaissance culture as well as Renaissance warfare and empire. Even on the eve of battle, Brutus recreates himself with the book that he has left in the pocket of his gown (4.2.342-3), as well as with the song of his servant Lucius (4.2.357 s.d.).

But these documents and verbal arts can also act as weapons. The letters fabricated by Cassius appear to Brutus to state the mind of the Roman people, but in fact they witness to nothing more than the bitter and contentious mind of Cassius himself (1.2.316-21, 1.3.146-50, 2.1.36-58). Artemidorus guilelessly attempts to warn Caesar of his danger by the use of a written

message. Most dramatically of all, Antony uses both the art of Roman rhetoric and the document of Caesar's will as weapons against the conspirators. As soon as Antony claims the seemingly harmless right to speak at Caesar's funeral, Cassius recognizes the danger (3.2.242-61). Antony of course exploits the arts of language while claiming that he has no mastery of them, and he displays Caesar's will to win the people's support while later seeking means to circumvent its provisions (3.2.243-57, 4.1.8-10).

The place of the military in *Julius Caesar* is illuminated in a recent book by a leading Australian Shakespearean scholar. Charles Edelman has already established a national reputation for his very original short monograph on *Hamlet* in the Horizon series, and an international reputation as the author of the first comprehensive study of swordplay in Shakespeare.[4] Edelman has recently taken further his work on Shakespeare and the Renaissance arts of war by compiling *Shakespeare's Military Language: A Dictionary*.[5]

One way of assessing the usefulness of a dictionary is to apply it to a particular problem. What light does Edelman's dictionary shed on *Julius Caesar* as a play that patrols the border between civic and military? The relation between militarism and politics at the play's opening is touched on in the entry for 'chariot', which shows that Shakespeare mentions only once the use of a chariot in warfare but mentions several times its use in triumphal processions. This frequency shows that Shakespeare was well aware of both the political uses of the triumph at Rome and the dramatic potency of the triumph on the stage.

After the death of Caesar, Rome divides into two armed parties, making it certain that the state's political future will be settled only by war. Viewing history with an eye to dramatic concentration, Shakespeare has Cassius muse that he is 'compelled to set / Upon one battle all our liberties' (5.1.81-2). Edelman's entry 'battle' points out that there were in fact two separate battles of Philippi, and that the second was in turn separated by four days from Brutus's suicide: Shakespeare runs

together all these events in his fifth-act climax.[6] Antony is the first to foresee that war is inevitable, envisaging it in the terms of a Senecan tragedy:

> And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
> With Ate by his side, come hot from hell,
> Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
> Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war. (3.1.288-91)

Edelman explains that the term 'cry havoc' was 'originally the signal for the seizure of spoil', but that in Shakespeare it becomes metonymic for the general devastation of warfare.

On the details of warfare, the entries on 'rank' and 'squadron' refer to a passage whose specifically military content might otherwise be missed. On the morning of Caesar's murder, Calpurnia describes the warfare in the heavens that makes her fearful for his safety. The supernatural warriors 'fight upon the clouds / In ranks and squadrons and right form of war' (2.2.19-20). Edelman points out the technical meaning of these terms, and in particular the greatly developed use in the Renaissance of the square formation. (Though he does not make it perfectly clear to the reader inexpert in military history whether or not the square formation existed at all in Roman warfare.) Referring to the traditional emphasis given to the basics of marching in regular ranks, he also comments wittily that in Calpurnia's speech 'even a supernatural army is not an army unless it is drawn up, in Henry IV's phrase, "in mutual and well beseeming ranks".'

The battle sequence of *Julius Caesar* introduces further technical terms, some specifically Roman, some based on Renaissance practice. Brutus's 'legions' (4.2.298) points up Shakespeare's awareness of the Roman resonance of this term, but Brutus's 'companies' (4.2.212-13) is a general term, perhaps prompted by the Renaissance development of the 'company' as a 'subdivision of an infantry regiment commanded by a captain'. Just before the generals' exchange of insults in 5.1 (historicised by Edelman as a military 'parle' or

'parley'), a messenger tells Antony and Octavius that the republicans' 'bloody sign of battle is hung out' (5.1.15). Edelman gives several contexts for this sign. The display of 'a flag or other device coloured red goes back to Roman times'; but in general 'Roman standards were sculpted figures, with the exception of the *vexillum*, a square cloth'; while this play's 'bloody sign of battle' was called in North's Plutarch 'an arming scarlet coate'. Edelman claims that the presence of a red flag in Roman plays is a Shakespearean anachronism, but his evidence does not fully support this claim, at least in *Julius Caesar*. Not that anachronism matters very much, if the dramatist can make good use of it. Shakespeare may be remembering Marlowe's spectacular use of 'streaming colours' and standards in *Tamburlaine*—though it is characteristic of the muted treatment of warfare in *Julius Caesar* that this display is described rather than staged.

Edelman's dictionary also helps alert the reader to a number of signs that the republican armies are not well organized, or are not performing well, or both. The celebrated quarrel between Brutus and Cassius arises from a dispute over raising money with which to pay the army (4.2.134-42). Edelman explains that the Roman soldier owed his allegiance primarily to his general, 'who paid him, found opportunities for spoil, and persuaded the Senate to give him land on which to retire. Any general who had difficulty paying his troops could not count on their loyalty; therefore Brutus's twice-spoken complaint to Cassius . . . is extremely serious'. The republican armies also lack discipline. Brutus's men begin seizing spoil while Cassius's men still require support on the battlefield (5.3.7-8). Cassius is forced to kill his own fleeing standard-bearer: 'This ensign here of mine was turning back; / I slew the coward and did take it from him' (5.3.3-4). Edelman's documentation of 'ensign' shows that 'To lose an ensign was to impugn the honour of a legion' and that the importance of the Roman ensign was well known in the Renaissance.

No less striking than Edelman's treatment of the military aspects of *Julius Caesar* is the fact, revealed in his indexes, that

there are fewer entries for this play than one would expect for a text treating Rome's greatest general. In fact, the list of terms for *Julius Caesar* is smaller than for any other play based on history, except *Henry VIII*. The diminution of military interest in *Julius Caesar* is especially noticeable in the battles of Act Five, where an audience might have been waiting for the spectacular action that Shakespeare supplied at the climax of *Henry IV, Part 1*, and through much of *Henry V*.

As has already been noted, there is surprisingly little on-stage fighting in the battle that settles the future of the Roman state. Philippi is marked instead by investigation and observation, reports and guesses. Brutus sends 'bills'—written instructions—to his forces (5.2.1). Observing the action from a hill, Cassius believes that he sees his tents on fire and sends Titinius for further information (5.2.12, 15). Pindarus now takes up the watch and narrates Titinius' supposed capture (5.2.29). This is in fact an error: Titinius reappears and explains that he was met by friends not enemies (5.2.54, 87). On-stage fighting does eventually occur in 5.4, but it soon gives way in 5.5 to Brutus's elegiac contemplations, set against news of off-stage fighting. This is warfare conducted in a surprisingly civilian fashion. Shakespeare's technique may be related to the unavailability of suitable players for a full-scale battle scene. Equally, it may mark a deliberate move from the national epic of *Henry V* toward the decorum of classical tragedy, in which violent action is always narrated rather than acted.

Having sampled Edelman's dictionary for a particular purpose, it is appropriate to sum up the dictionary as a whole. *Shakespeare's Military Language: A Dictionary* is exceedingly thorough, well organized, and accurate. It lacks illustrations or maps, a deficiency for which Edelman justly castigates one of his predecessors in the area of military history (p. 40). Page after page evinces fascinating information: for example, the difference between sentinels (who merely warned of an approaching danger) and the watch (who fought them off), or the reason why Iago should dismiss Cassio as 'a great arithmetician' (because an important English manual of

soldiership was titled *An Arithmeticall Militare Treatise*). A system of cross-referencing directs the reader of any given entry to all related entries. There are indexes to Shakespeare's works, to plays by his contemporaries, and to historical persons.

It is regrettable that these indexes are not complemented by an index of Shakespeare's characters, which would surely have been more useful to most readers than the index of historical persons. Probably the book's most informed, and certainly its most enthusiastic, critic would have been Shakespeare's Fluellen. But the reader encounters Fluellen only tangentially, under 'discipline'—and possibly elsewhere, but one cannot be sure. Falstaff turns up under 'captain', where his several other appearances in the dictionary are cross-referenced. This is very useful—but only to the reader who hits upon this entry. Likewise, the fake soldier Parolles, the conscientious Cassio, the magniloquent Armado, are all interestingly related to Renaissance military practices, but the reader has to be fortunate or persevering to discover this information about them.

The dictionary is thoroughly and resourcefully documented by reference to an impressive range of authorities, both primary and secondary. Longer articles end with a summary of authorities, given in short form, which can be followed up by referring to the sixteen pages of Bibliography. This last procedure is however less convenient than it should be, since the Bibliography is divided into five sections. These sections are not given separate running heads, so that it takes a certain amount of page-turning to determine where one is in the Bibliography, an irritant that increases every time one consults it. Moreover, it is not always apparent in which section a given book will appear. The reader who wishes to follow up the comments on English archery of the Venetian ambassador Sebastian Giustinian might well expect to locate them in 'primary sources', but they appear in a separate section, 'documentary sources'. The division between these two categories seems unnecessary as well as imperfectly logical (what makes the Paston Letters 'primary' rather than

'documentary'?). It must be said, however, that this is an unusual instance of fussiness in a book that generally consults very intelligently the needs and convenience of the reader.

The dictionary does the reader a service, on the whole, in its choice of editions. Shakespeare's source writers, such as Plutarch, Holinshed, and Cinthio, are all cited with reference to Geoffrey Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (when they appear there). This is the most convenient place for a reader to follow up such references. More debatable is the fact that classical and foreign authors are quoted in Renaissance translations. The implication is that this is how Shakespeare and his audience would have read such books. But readers likely to be interested in these authors in translation would in very many cases, perhaps most, be capable of reading them in the original. We know, of course, that Shakespeare read Plutarch's Greek in English translation, but it is quite likely that he would have known Caesar's writings in Latin, not in Arthur Golding's English. Shakespeare may even have read Lucan in Latin, as Edelman shows in his entry 'sling', where he glosses interestingly Hamlet's phrase 'The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. The use of Renaissance rather than modern translations is therefore a little misleading, as well as adding an unnecessary layer of quaintness to the texts.

In covering such an extensive subject, it is inevitable that slight deficiencies will appear. The entry on 'triumph' refers to 'the custom of tying important prisoners to <the> general's chariot'. I do not know of any evidence for this custom at Rome. It is possible that Shakespeare believed there was such a custom, but that is a different matter. Distinguished prisoners did march in a triumph immediately behind the chariot of the triumphator, and they may have been loaded with chains, but I do not believe there is evidence that they were attached to the chariot. Some of the bibliographical references seem a little outdated. It is surprising to see the entry on 'Amazon' refer only to an article of 1940, when recent feminist criticism has produced many studies on this subject. On the Spanish Armada,

the only specialised studies that Edelman mentions are Garrett Mattingley's books of 1959 and 1963. These remain admirable works of historical scholarship, but they have been superseded in various ways. The monograph by Colin Martin and Geoffrey Parker, *The Spanish Armada* (1988), and the collection of essays on *England, Spain and the 'Gran Armada'*, edited by M. J. Rodriguez-Salgado and Simon Adams (1991), both utilize archeological materials that have come to light since Mattingley wrote.

Shakespeare's Military Language is more than a straightforward work of reference; it is also an interesting read. Edelman commands a laconic wit, as when he assesses the military value of cutting down boughs from Birnam Wood in *Macbeth*. Camouflage was valueless in early modern warfare: 'the accuracy of Elizabethan calivers and muskets was so poor at all but the closest range that covering oneself with foliage was more trouble than it could possibly be worth.' The only military purpose of Malcolm's stratagem would be to disguise the number of his soldiers, but in fact Macbeth already knows this number. Therefore, Edelman notes, 'Malcolm's army has done much environmental damage for no good reason.' There are innumerable pieces of information that illuminate Shakespeare's plays in unexpected ways. The seeming oddity of Hamlet's desire to 'take arms against a sea of troubles' is explained by reference to Aristotle and Aelian, who tell how Celtic soldiers wade into the sea with weapons drawn, 'as though they were of force and violence to withstand the rough waves'. The dramatic nature of *Othello* is brilliantly illuminated by Edelman's gathering of materials on the military duties of the 'watch' and on the rank of 'ancient'. Many entries in *Shakespeare's Military Language* amount therefore to notes or short essays on Shakespeare's dramatic use of military materials, a characteristic that rounds out the usefulness and value of this very good book.

Endnotes

[1] *Julius Caesar*, ed. Anthony Miller, The Bell Shakespeare (Marrickville, NSW: Science Press, 1996), 5.1.28-57.

[2] See, e.g., A. T. Grafton, 'The Renaissance', in *The Legacy of Rome: A New Appraisal*, ed. Richard Jenkyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 97-123, esp. pp. 97-8, 122.

[3] Political contestations over the Roman triumph are discussed in Anthony Miller, *Roman Triumphs and Early Modern English Culture* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001). This book also includes a fuller discussion of the triumph in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (pp. 130-3)

[4] *Shakespeare's Hamlet*, Horizon Studies in Literature (Melbourne: Sydney University Press / Oxford University Press Australia, 1995); *Brawl Ridiculous: Swordfighting in Shakespeare's Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

[5] Athlone Shakespeare Dictionary Series (London and New Brunswick, NJ: Athlone Press, 2000).

[6] Shakespeare does divide the battle into two distinct parts (5.3.118), perhaps a vestige of the historical record.

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