"BARE LIFE"

Political Order and the Specter of Antisocial Being
in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar

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Many early modern writers, including Shakespeare, celebrated the state’s growing penetration of daily life.¹ On the other hand, because the social imaginary founded on the nation-state was still emergent in the period, early modern writers, again including Shakespeare, could also conceive of alternatives. In that sense, the surviving literary culture of the period is a resource for rethinking some of our most basic modern assumptions about social and political life. My aim in these pages is to disclose an oppositional discourse that declines to assume the nation-state as a basic framework for society. Exploiting the turmoil generated by the state’s effort to penetrate and organize social life, this oppositional discourse reimagined the most basic, body-mediated interactions through which people connect to other people outside of political or even social structures. Crucial to this project, however, is to distinguish this early modern approach from our present notions of civil society. In the sense in which the term has become influential in communitarian and antipolitical discourse, “civil society” is imagined

¹. New Historicist critics have made this case well; notably, Jonathan Goldberg in James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and their Contemporaries (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).
to rely on connections between people that operate outside the sphere of state power. Contemporary accounts often draw on Jürgen Habermas’s now classic study The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Focusing on eighteenth-century England, Habermas describes a public sphere founded on an extra-state society that nurtures a “purely human” use of communicative rationality. So conceived, civil society is potentially universal and, transcending the framework of the nation-state, can subject it to reasoned critique from outside.

Several theorists of state power, notably Giorgio Agamben, have offered a structural critique of these conclusions. In Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, Agamben argues that all political power is “biopolitical” in that it seeks to organize the most basic, biological infrastructure of human life. Thus, Agamben suggests, civil society is not an autonomous social development but a product of state power:

It is almost as if, starting from a certain point, every decisive political event were double-sided: the spaces, the liberties, and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals’ lives within the state order, thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves. . . . The fact is that one and the same affirmation of bare life leads, in bourgeois democracy, to a primacy of the private over the public and of individual liberties over collective obligations and yet


3. Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger (1962; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). This revolutionary formation of the eighteenth century, Habermas says, rapidly decayed into a relatively inert “public opinion” that is molded and managed through techniques of advertising and state propaganda.

4. It is worth pointing out that Habermas himself, schooled as he is in Hegelian dialectic, consistently foregrounds the ways in which civil society and the state are mutually constitutive, though this important nuance is often lost in applications of his basic model.

5. Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (1995; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Agamben’s critique of the notion of an extrapolitical civil society is part of a broader effort to revise and expand Michel Foucault’s account of the emergence of “biopolitics” (for example, in the introductory volume of Foucault’s History of Sexuality). Agamben argues that the Western tradition of political theory has been marked by the failure to understand that political power always asserts a claim over an ambiguous and unshaped realm of “bare life” that seems to be independent of or excluded from public concerns. Agamben argues that the unacknowledged grasp of political power upon “bare life” runs through seemingly very different political forms, and indeed one of his goals is to demonstrate continuity between the classical, liberal nation-state and apparently antithetical totalitarian regimes. Agamben regards them as equally biopolitical, a claim that he uses to explain the quick transformation of the Weimar republic into the Nazi state. Nevertheless, he does suggest that the classical era of the nation-state is marked by a structurally specific veiling of the state’s grip on “bare life.” The end of the classical era of the nation-state is marked, he argues, not by the invention of biopolitics (as Foucault argues) but by the relative unveiling—in the death camps and in the politicization of biology by debates over issues like euthanasia—of the state’s biopolitical orientation. Veiling biopower, Agamben concludes, had the effect of creating “the spaces, the liberties, and the rights” that inscribe individuals in the political order at the most intimate level of their bare existence.
becomes, in totalitarian states, the decisive political criterion and the exemplary realm of sovereign decisions.\(^6\)

The paradox that Agamben points to is that the private realm liberates itself from the state only by demanding from the state a charter of rights and privileges that involves private life ever more fully in the political order. In effect, Agamben is opposed to any liberal theory that posits a social life that preexists state power and that offers a standpoint from which state power can be criticized from outside. Civil society tacitly affirms state power, he argues, even if it also allows for critical detachment from particular state policies.

The early modern state’s effort to organize the details of social life is a central concern of early modern culture. Writers of the period would, typically, have agreed that what we now call “private life” and “civil society” were recent products of the state and its penetration of social life. But Agamben’s account of state power as essentially biopolitical, as always seeking to rationalize and structure the amorphous realm of “bare life,” is especially instructive to the student of antipolitics. Bypassing the dyad of nation-state and state-mediated civil society, the early modern discourse of antipolitics seeks to make “bare life” visible as such. To imagine a form of life not mediated by political structures, early modern writers in this line turned their attention to emotions, which they interpreted neither as privileged signs of an inner self nor as merely bodily, humoral imbalances. As distinguished, then, from the ways in which modern psychology and Galenic medical theory regard the emotions, early modern writers tended to deal with emotions as defining bodily states that, in recurring patterns, open and close the body to other, emotionally inflamed bodies. Emotions were treated as a grammar of pre- or nonsocial connections between bodies—connections that become evident only when politically ordered social webs go wrong or collapse.\(^7\) Some early modern thinkers thus opened the door to a phenomenology of “bare life” itself.

Shakespeare is among those thinkers, as evidenced by *Julius Caesar*, one of his most self-consciously political, or rather antipolitical, works.\(^8\) The play registers and theorizes the efforts of the state to reorganize social life, but the


\(^8\) My argument that *Julius Caesar* is interesting because it is misaligned with the modern political imaginary is indebted to Richard Halpern’s discussion of the play in *Shakespeare Among the Moderns* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
play also reveals a deep-seated impulse to break with this emerging political framework. While the conspirators in the play are often interpreted as defining a public sphere that resists Caesar's expansion of state power, the play rather points to a deep complicity between Caesar and the conspirators against him. By forcing social questions into a nationalized political frame of reference, their conflict consolidates and strengthens the national political field, which comes to attain almost a monopoly on the ways in which social life can be conceptualized. Marc Antony’s rebellion must be understood against this backdrop. His is a rebellion not for Caesar or against Brutus (conceived as rival political positions) but against politics—against the acquiescence in a politics that orders social life into rival factions demanding personal sacrifice in the name of public goods. Antony teaches Rome a grammar of interpersonal bonding that defines connections between bodies (via emotions conceived as fluids), and these connections are meant to replace any politically mediated public life. Antony’s oppositional discourse sounds irrational, unfeasible, or antisocial. But from a standpoint outside the political field (and that standpoint is what I am trying to locate), radical opposition is not antisocial so much as it is antisystemic—a clear break from the emerging, modern assumption of the nation-state as a fundamental condition of social life.  

The political field that Shakespeare sketches in *Julius Caesar* is organized around the competing discursive poles of absolutism and elite civic republicanism. Caesar is accused of incipient tyranny, but within the terms of early modern political discourse his reliance on a blend of charismatic popularity and manipulation of aristocratic elites would make him look to Shakespeare’s audience very much like an absolute monarch. To secure his grip on the political order, Caesar brings into being an abstract public of more or less formally interchangeable individuals who encounter the state as a spectacle that they either applaud or hoot. Caesar’s absolutist program is counterbalanced by the civic republicanism of Brutus and the conspirators, for whom the state exists to offer an aristocratic elite opportunities for the exercise of virtue and thus the pursuit of ethical perfection. From the perspective of the conspirators, the state is constituted by patriots seeking to maximize their honor. Brutus and the conspirators deploy this conception of the state to delegitimize the popular public that Caesar has forced

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9. I draw the term “antisystemic” from the title of the important study by Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, which argues that, when anticapitalist movements have sought to ameliorate the local effects of international capitalism by aiming to gain a measure of state power (through trade union movements, for example), their success paradoxically strengthens the nation-state, which is the key mechanism by which the capitalist world-system operates. Arrighi and company term “antisystemic” those modes of resistance and social organization that do not strengthen the nation-state while challenging the power of international capital. My effort here is to observe an antisystemic moment just when the nation-state arrived on the scene. See Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Antisystemic Movements* (London: Verso, 1989).
onto the political field. But more crucial than their differences is the similarity of these opponents: each party takes the rival version of political publicity into account, which attests to their differences being essentially local variations within a single political field. Caesar and the conspirators against him share a presupposition that political forms can create publics and structure a nationalized social life. It is this presumption that Antony will transcend.

A familiar interpretation of *Julius Caesar* is that the conspirators represent a nascent public sphere that checks the dictatorial state power that Caesar represents. But the conspirators do not see themselves as operating outside the state or as speaking up for the presumed rights of some extra-state public; their main difficulty is that they cannot envision themselves and their exercise of virtue outside the framework of the state. Cassius experiences loss of political power as a diminution of self because for him the state is a vehicle to exercise and develop his own virtue. In his initial temptation speech, Cassius reminds Brutus that “I was born free as Caesar, so were you” (1.2.97) and complains that they have both become Caesar’s “underlings”:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonorable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates.
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

(1.2.134–140)

The fundamental problem is not that Caesar wants too much power but that he organizes state power on a footing that deprives aristocrats like Cassius and Brutus of their opportunity to use the state in service of their own honor. When Brutus invokes the discourse of the “general good” (as in 1.2.85), he refers only to the elite public of patricians that is constituted by, and constitutive of, the state.

The constitutive role that the conspirators imagine playing in the operations of the state, and their desire to use the state to maximize their own virtue, are hallmarks of the civic republicanism that J. G. A. Pocock has recovered at the heart of early modern political theory and that he has offered as an alternative to liberal theories of the state. In the civic republican tradition, individual rights

10. All references to *Julius Caesar* are taken from the Arden 3 edition of David Daniell (New York: Thompson, 1998). Citations are given parenthetically in the text.

11. In the scene cited, Brutus tells Cassius that, if what he has to say deals with “the general good, / [then] Set honour in one eye, and death i’th’ other, / And I will look on both indifferently” (1.2.85–6).

are not an issue, though a small public of individual subjects is thought to underpin a state that enables them to pursue individual perfection. Thus, the conspirators in *Julius Caesar* regard plebeians as living an institutionalized, state-regulated life that, as a fundamentally economic formation, is the opposite of their own and improperly involved in public affairs. The play begins with Murellus and Flavius, the tribunes of the people and ideological soulmates of the conspirators, complaining that the workers are swarming into the streets to celebrate Caesar. Part of Murellus and Flavius’s complaint is that the political allegiance of the people is fickle since they once loved Pompey as now they love Caesar:

> Many a time and oft
> Have you climbed up to walls and battlements,
> To towers and windows, yea, to chimney tops,
> Your infants in your arms, and there have sat
> The livelong day with patient expectation
> To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome.
> (1.1.38–43)

But what Murellus and Flavius most object to is the workers’ leaving behind their defined roles in the economic realm and asserting for themselves a role in the public life of politics:

> Hence! home, you idle creatures, get you home!
> Is this a holiday? What, know you not,
> (Being mechanical) you ought not to walk
> Upon a labouring day without the sign
> Of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou?
> (1.1.1–5)

The plebeians have left the nonpolitical but state-regulated domain of the economy, where they wore the “sign / Of [their] profession.” Now unmarked, they appear to Murellus and Flavius as a shapeless mass that swarms over the architecture of Rome carrying, as an index of vulgarity, their “infants in [their] arms.” Flavius promises to “drive away the vulgar from the streets” and advises Murellus, “So do you too, where you perceive them thick” (1.1.69–71).

From Caesar’s perspective, of course, the massed people that Murellus and Flavius view as “worse than senseless things” (1.1.36) and try to drive from the streets of Rome, are anything but shapeless: they are a politically effective public that he himself has conjured up to check the power of the aristocrats. The plebeians constitute a rival form of public life whose structural relation to the state is fundamentally different from that of the tribunes and conspirators. Caesar may be a tyrant but he strives to level all other markers of social difference between persons in the population of Rome. One of his methods is to turn holidays (in
the case of the play, the festival of the Lupercal) into state pageants. (This was a strategy of Queen Elizabeth’s as well.) Festivity converts the finely graded social and economic order on which Flavius and Murellus comment—“Roman civil society,” to risk an anachronism—into a disarray of people who, by assembling, can form a public. More or less interchangeable individuals endowed, collectively, with a public life might be termed “citizens,” except that they have no recognized political status apart from formal equality; it might be better to call them “protocitizens.”

In Caesar’s political imaginary, the smallest unit of political discourse is not the face-to-face conversation between aristocrats, nor even a senate-sized debate governed by rules of procedure, but the mass rally, in which anonymous protocitizens gain power by adding themselves, one by one, to the crowd. Caesar is an expert manipulator of crowds, but these assemblies amass a force that can check even Caesar’s will—as when a cheering mass appears to compel him to decline the crown that Antony offers. Casca recounts this rally in a highly tendentious form, but it is easy to extract from his words the real political logic of the event. Casca reports that Antony raised the crown to Julius Caesar three times and that Caesar refused it three times:

And still as he refused it the rabblement hooted, and clapped their chopped hands, and threw up their sweaty nightcaps, and uttered such a deal of stinking breath because Caesar refused the crown that it had almost choked Caesar; for he swooned and fell down at it. And for mine own part, I durst not laugh, for fear of opening my lips and receiving the bad air. (1.2.242–49)

Casca’s contempt for the “stinking breath” this “rabblement” emits is directly proportional to the crowd’s political weight, for he believes that Caesar “would fain have had” the crown (1.2.239–40). Caesar was thwarted only by the opposition of the populace. Casca despises the notion of Caesar as king, but he seems provoked even more that Caesar has endowed the people—stripped of their economic markers and converted en masse into protocitizens—with political force. Casca recognizes their power, even as he tries to devalue it by comparing it to the power of approval and disapproval exercised by an audience being entertained: “If the tagrag people did not clap him and hiss him according as he pleased and displeased them, as they use to do the players in the theatre, I am no true man” (1.2.258–61). Casca may mean to say that Caesar’s humility was only for show, but his analogy of the new politics to theater nevertheless acknowledges a political mechanism for determining the popular will. Political scenarios are proposed to an assembly of protocitizens and their applause or hoots are measured. Casca’s attack on the validity of the crown-offering play is, therefore, somewhat paradoxically, a register of its political force and of Caesar’s success in transforming
“the rabblement” into a protocitzenry with some effective political power. What makes the analogy to the theater possible for Casca is the presumed vulgarity and rowdiness of the “tagrag” crowd. Where Caesar envisions a large public with a structurally different relationship to the state than the elite public of the conspirators, Casca insists he can see only a swarming, formless “bare life” reducible to its grossest physical manifestation, its “stinking breath.”

It is the clash between these opposing, but equally political, imaginaries that causes “bare life” itself to precipitate, as it were, and begin to accumulate on the streets of Rome where it acquires a potentially transformative power. The amorphous crowd that appears in Rome at the margins of competing political visions exceeds all available political forms and yet it finds ways to assert itself more and more radically after Caesar is killed. Immediately following the assassination, Trebonius reports that “Men, wives, and children stare, cry out, and run, / As it were doomsday” (3.1.98–99), and Brutus recognizes the danger: he asks Antony to “be patient till we have appeased / The multitude, beside themselves with fear” (3.1.180–81). Brutus tells Cassius, “go you into the other street, / And part the numbers,” while proposing to the plebeians that “Those that will hear me speak, let ’em stay here. / Those that will follow Cassius, go with him / And public reasons shall be rendered / Of Caesar’s death” (3.2.3–8). This image of an orderly exercise of public reasoning must warm the heart of Habermasians committed to a universally human exercise of communicative rationality. But while one plebeian does suggest to the others that they listen to both speeches and then “compare their reasons / When severally we hear them rendered” (3.2.9–10), Brutus’s clumsy effort to address the mass as though it were a debating club only highlights his inability to come to terms with what the massed populace represents. A clash of rival versions of politically mediated social life has resulted in the displacement of society itself by a feral but now constitutive “bare life.”

The brilliance of Marc Antony’s funeral oration, in contrast to that of Brutus, derives largely from Antony’s exploiting the experience of “bare life” as a source of antipolitical rage. But Antony’s oration draws on his own experience of “bare life,” undergone on the death of his friend: immediately after the assassination, Brutus tells Antony that he too loved Caesar but that this personal tie was necessarily secondary to public considerations. Antony, on the other hand, is...
drawn beyond political logic into rebellion against any notion of state-mediated social life. He refuses to regard the assassination as a political act or a political problem, and his irrational commitment to loving Caesar produces a crisis (or perhaps it is a breakthrough) in his experience of himself and others. Addressing Caesar’s corpse, Antony promises that “a curse shall light upon the limbs of men,” and he calls forth anarchic violence:

O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,  
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers.  
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man  
That ever lived in the tide of times.  
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood.  
Over thy wounds now I do 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 choked with custom of fell deeds,  
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 . . .

(3.1.254–73)

Antony could have used the opportunity to define a political program or to demand violence against evildoers—against all who had opposed Caesar. Instead, his prophecy of violence seems designed only to validate his own love for Caesar. It is as if Antony feels that politics has split a nuclear bond between Caesar and himself, a bond whose violation must now release an enormous burst of energy that will negate traditional social ties. Antony’s cruel soliloquy has the merit of not concealing beneath patriotic rhetoric the naked reality of fratricide and war. But in precisely its cruelest aspects, his speech also expresses a wish for transformation of the most basic patterns of society, including the structure of family allegiances. When Antony looks forward to a time in which mothers are so hardened to violence that they will “but smile when they behold / Their infants quartered,” he is imagining a radical (if radically dystopian) change in social life that flows from his own disorienting experience of the body of Caesar. Antony seems drawn and captured by the unsettling gravity of a corpse whose “dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips / To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue.” Here the
opened body of Caesar summons Antony to enter and occupy it, to speak for it, to mingle with its fluids and especially its blood—a fantasy that had earlier led Antony to wish that he had “as many eyes as thou hast wounds, / Weeping as fast as they stream forth thy blood” (3.1.200–1).

In this fantasy, bodies communicate by means of humoral fluids that produce pre- or extra-social links. Almost the first wish that Antony expresses after seeing the body of Caesar is a desire to be stabbed with the swords still covered in Caesar’s blood:

If I myself [am going to be killed], 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.

(3.1.153–56)

Brutus thinks that Antony is asking for death and tries to dissuade him—“O Antony, beg not your death of us” (3.1.164)—but what Antony is asking for is nothing so simple as death. His phantasmic experience of Caesar’s corpse, of bodily fluids that provoke answering fluids from his own body, reshapes a social connection (his friendship with Caesar) into an unsociable intersubjectivity. By means of the funeral oration, Antony’s transformative experience of Caesar’s body transforms the social world of the play. Antony displays the alluring corpse and calls for fluid to answer fluid, tears to answer blood. The masses are thus infected by whatever has infected Antony and are brought to the same uncanny psychic terrain.

The funeral oration triggers rioting, and Antony celebrates the “it” he has unleashed: “Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot: / Take thou what course thou wilt” (3.2.251–2). But however irrational, the rioting has a logic that picks up and extends the body-centered bonding that Antony experiences in relation to Caesar. Here is the beginning of the riot:

First Plebeian: Never, never. Come, away, away.
We’ll burn his body in the holy place,
And with the brands fire the traitors’ houses.
Take up the body.
Second Plebeian: Go fetch fire.
Third Plebeian: Pluck down benches.
Fourth Plebeian: Pluck down forms, windows, anything.

(3.2.244–50)

What begins as a recognizably political impulse—to cremate Caesar’s body in the “holy place” and then set fire to the conspirators’ houses—turns quickly into an eschatological desire to transcend politics as such. In attacking the benches
and the windows (the benches on which they sat listening to competing accounts of the assassination; the windows through which people, not least Portia, glimpse public doings), these plebeians pull down the material infrastructure of the public life into which Caesar and the conspirators have equally drawn them. So seen, the masses’ rage is an antipublic rage, a rage against publicity and politics.

Once liberated from any political framework, the riot, it is commonly argued, demonstrates to Shakespeare’s audience the dangers of a people unconstrained by law and social order. But even the crudest and most irrational elements of the rebellion—even the attack on Cinna the poet, mistaken initially for Cinna the conspirator—can be interpreted differently:

\begin{align*}
\text{Cinna:} & \quad \text{I am Cinna the poet, I am Cinna the poet.} \\
\text{Fourth Plebeian:} & \quad \text{Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses.} \\
\text{Cinna:} & \quad \text{I am not Cinna the conspirator.} \\
\text{Fourth Plebeian:} & \quad \text{It is no matter, his name’s Cinna. Pluck but his name out of his heart, and turn him going.} \\
\text{Third Plebeian:} & \quad \text{Tear him, tear him!}
\end{align*}

(3.3.29–36)

Though here, once again, the plebeians begin with a nominally political aim—to kill conspirators—by the time they have established that the Cinna at their mercy is not Cinna the conspirator, an undifferentiated frenzy for blood has taken over. On the one hand, there is a social logic to the frenzy, for in rebelling against Cinna’s very name the plebeians are expressing resentment against those who have names as opposed to those who have none—the plebeians, after all, are assigned only numbers. On the other hand, the plebeians are not engaged in an act of compensatory status-building: they reduce themselves to the status of bodies (as agents of physical violence) while reducing Cinna to the same level (as an object of physical violence). “Pluck but his name out of his heart” is not an exclamation from a scene of ordinary mob violence. Names represent a basic principle of social differentiation, and this mob wants to reduce names to bodies. It is unclear whether Cinna survives this assault (the stage directions give us only “Exeunt all the Plebeians”). But if he survives and walks (or is even dragged) off stage, it could look, from the vantage point of the theater audience, as though Cinna has been absorbed into the mob.

It is of course only as theater—the theater Antony loves—that violence

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15. Obviously, gender complicates Portia’s relationship to the conspirators’ ideology of public life in important ways. Being inducted into the conspiracy seems to be a form of liberation from her gendered role in the home, a liberation that she paradoxically completes with her spectacular suicide. In this context, see Cynthia Marshall’s discussion of Portia’s self-mutilating turn against her gender identity in “Portia’s Wound, Calphurnia’s Dream: Reading Character in Julius Caesar,” English Literary Renaissance 24.2 (Spring 1994): 471–88. It is worth noting that Shakespeare consistently calls attention to the important role that women play in the life of the massed crowd.
can stand for a mode of sociability that operates at the level of bodies. When approached as a theatrical spectacle, the civil war that occupies the last two acts of the play seems an irrational outbreak of resistance to the politics of the nation-state—a political order to which Caesar and his assassins, as well as Queen Elizabeth and her antagonists, appear fully committed. Among the disturbing features of Shakespeare’s civil war is the way that commonsensical, self-preserving forms of relationship are infected by the marginal experiences of self and other that Antony injects into Rome. The turn away from self-preservation is clear in the rash of suicides that overtakes the play, beginning with Portia’s death after she has “swallowed fire” (4.2.208)—said to be burning coals, in Plutarch—and continuing with the suicides of Cassius, Titinius, and finally Brutus. Given the Roman cult of suicide, these deaths could be read as triumphs of personal autonomy over fate. In Shakespeare’s telling, however, the suicides are more problematic, for the public prestige of the Roman aristocrats who die is supplanted by perverse forms of bonding. When Cassius cannot find the courage to kill himself, he must beg his slave Pindarus for death:

Come hither, sirrah.
In Parthia did I take thee prisoner,
And then I swore thee, saving of thy life,
That whatsoever I did bid thee do,
Thou shouldst attempt it. Come now, keep thine oath.
Now be a freeman, and with this good sword
That ran through Caesar’s bowels, search this bosom.
(5.3.36–42)

Cassius consciously frames the circumstances of his own death as poetic justice: his dying words are, “Caesar, thou art revenged, / Even with the sword that killed thee” (5.3.45–46). But the fantasy of being penetrated by the sword that “ran through Caesar’s bowels”—the same fantasy that possessed Antony after the assassination—is a way of reestablishing a relationship with Caesar at a level well below that of political allegiance and class solidarity (or even homosociality: the object of the fantasy is a corpse that Cassius helped to mutilate).

This perverse form of bonding, moreover, depends on the inversion of a functionally hierarchical tie between master and slave. “Go show your slaves how choleric you are,” Brutus taunts Cassius for losing his temper, “And make your bondmen tremble” (4.3.43–4). It is to his bondman that Cassius, a Roman lord begging ardently for death, finally turns himself over—and the spectacle is repeated with Brutus begging for death at the hands of his servant Strato (5.5). In both instances, the relationship between master and slave turns out to be the only reliable one. But Shakespeare takes this bond out of its social context, where it has large consequences for both master and slave, and relocates it in a purely
emotional space. The mediated aggression of massive class disparity then fuels a lurid exchange between men that combines aggressive passion with passionate aggression. For Cassius, this suicidal inversion is triggered by what turns out to be an incorrect report of the death of Cassius’s “best friend” Titinius: “O, coward that I am, to live so long, / To see my best friend ta’en before my face” (5.3.34–35). Having failed to defend his friend in the moment when he is “ta’en,” Cassius apparently regards suicide as a way of restoring their friendship. That renewal takes the form of a connection in which the fate of Titinius is registered in Cassius’s own body. When Titinius, alive, returns to find that Cassius has “misconstrued everything” (5.3.84), he promptly stabs himself with the sword that killed Cassius: “By your leave, gods. This is a Roman’s part: / Come, Cassius’ sword, and find Titinius’ heart” (5.3.89–90). While Titinius comes closest in this string of suicides to the aristocratic ideal of dying with honor (“this is a Roman’s part”), he nevertheless joins Cassius and Antony in affirming a corporeal solidarity that transcends social status: he uses the sword still gory with Cassius’s blood (and Caesar’s).

The male-male friendship of aristocrats and the asymmetrical bond between master and slave—but also the stoical mastery over self that Cassius and Brutus so spectacularly lack—are social ties and functions upon which real-world status depends. Shakespeare has character after character in *Julius Caesar* reject social expectations and open an alternative way of being, in which bleeding bodies are penetrated by already bloody swords. It is important to read such moments, and indeed the civil war as a whole, for what they open the door to philosophically; or rather, theatrically. Ignited and then pervaded by antisocial and fundamentally perverse desires, the play’s civil war is not a continuation of politics by other means but a frantic escape from and replacement for politics. Bringing this war to the early modern stage, Shakespeare offered an alternative to the iron clasp of the state and of state-mediated social order. The seeming inhumanity of the alternative is a measure of how deeply felt the revulsion from that social order could be. Read against the grain of the modern political imaginary, which assumes the nation-state as the basic framework for social life, and social life as a necessity of human beings, this play discloses a passionate dissent of bodies from the political and social penetration of “bare life.”