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**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32z655v9>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 30(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

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**Publication Date**

1999-10-01

Peer reviewed

**“EVEN TO THE GATES OF ROME”: GROTESQUE BODIES AND  
FRAGMENTED STORIES IN *CORIOLANUS***

by Sean Benson

*Coriolanus* is a rather untidy play, with “fragments” and images of fragmentation scattered throughout; the play is, nonetheless, neatly framed between opening and closing tales the tellers of which attempt to bring closure to the issues they address.<sup>1</sup> Menenius opens the play with his fable of the belly in which he tries to placate the unruly plebeians, and Aufidius ends the play with his promise to confer on the dead Coriolanus a “noble memory,” if his audience will “assist” with the revisionist historiography he intends to present of the play’s eponymous protagonist (5.6.152–153).<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Coriolanus regards his own story—his past—as unchanging, static, and views himself in essentialist terms as the complete, self-sufficient “author of himself” (5.3.36). Pictorially, his person—literally his body—is closed off from and to others as he, for instance, refuses to display his wounds to the plebs (2.3.108–109). Coriolanus, in fact, wishes to view the body, his own as well as the body politic, as finished, complete, with every member having his or her own proper place. His is what Mikhail Bakhtin memorably termed the “classical” view of the human body.<sup>3</sup> The Roman world of the play, however, is not at all closed off, in spite of Menenius, Aufidius, and Coriolanus’s attempts to make it so. Both the members of Coriolanus’s family and the “members” of the body politic as expressed in Menenius’s fable are strikingly unfinished, and constitute the Bakhtinian “grotesque” body of the play.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, grotesque members are what the play relentlessly puts forth with its characteristic open mouths; disembodied “voices”; an open, famished belly; and—most strikingly—the recurrent “gates” that are both a metonym for the

<sup>1</sup>On the issue of fragmentation, see especially Lawrence Danson, *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare’s Drama of Language* (New Haven and London 1974), who argues that synecdoche and metonymy represent the “stylistic peculiarity” of *Coriolanus*, part of what makes the play so rife with images of fragmentation (143). See also Zvi Jagendorf, “*Coriolanus*: Body Politic and Private Parts,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990) 455–469; and Andrew Gurr, “*Coriolanus* and the Body Politic,” *Shakespeare Survey* 28 (1975) 63–69.

<sup>2</sup>All references to Shakespeare’s plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston 1997).

<sup>3</sup>Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1964), trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington 1984) 320.

<sup>4</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317–325.

city and a metaphor of the female genitalia.

In light of Bakhtin's taxonomy of the body, it is my contention that the driving imagery and language of the play concern themselves with fragments, which are often represented as synecdochic parts of some larger whole, even though the connection of part to whole is tenuous and, most often, grotesquely distorted. Fragmentation is present from the outset of the play as Menenius attempts to construct an organic image of a smoothly functioning body politic, but he is unable to control his representation because he locates Roman authority in the grotesque image of a belly. Similarly, Coriolanus's life is fragmented by the many relational roles he must assume, especially in his uneasy relationship to both his civic and maternal mothers—Rome and Volumnia. Coriolanus not only fails to situate himself organically within the maternal "gates" from which he has come as a child, but also within the civic gates to which he keeps returning as an orphan "man-child" of war. Throughout all, Coriolanus resists attempts to tell his story, to weave the fragments of his life into a coherent whole, and in so doing finds himself a grotesque member of his own family as well as of the body politic. In the end, the state allows his limbs literally to be "cut off" (5.6.138); his family, too, no longer recognizes him as a part of its organic structure. He is, as Cominius says, "nothing, titleless" (5.1.13), and in the historiographic vacuum left by Coriolanus's refusal to tell his story, Aufidius, his archenemy, becomes his most unlikely—and, no doubt, unflattering—biographer.

#### *FABULA RASA*: INSCRIBING THE EMPTY BELLY

The fable of the belly was known well enough in antiquity for it to be adapted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11–12, and remained a remarkably perdurable commonplace of conservative political doctrine into the early modern period.<sup>5</sup> Philip Sidney cites it in his *Defence of Poesy* and praises the effect that Menenius's tale has on his audience: having uttered and explained the fable, it "brought forth . . . so sudden and so good an alteration; for upon reasonable conditions a perfect reconciliation ensued."<sup>6</sup> Sidney may be fondly recalling days past, because in seventeenth-century England, with the Midlands revolt as only one small manifestation of an increasingly divisive social body, the analogy of the harmonious body politic was fast becoming, according to one

<sup>5</sup>See David G. Hale, "Intestine Sedition: The Fable of the Belly," *Comparative Literature Studies* 5 (1968) 377–388, esp. 377–379.

<sup>6</sup>Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, 1595, in *Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford 1994) 118.

critic, an “outmoded fiction.”<sup>7</sup> The prominent recuperation of the body politic topos in *Coriolanus*, far from being an unproblematic image of an organic state, serves rather to underscore the difficulty of “applying” the fable to the fractious body politic, whether we situate that body in Rome or—as E. C. Pettet first suggested—in Jacobean England.<sup>8</sup>

Menenius’s fable in *Coriolanus* is, of course, Shakespeare’s representation of the fable he found in Sir Thomas North’s translation of *Plutarch’s Lives*. In Plutarch’s narrative representation of the speech, Menenius finishes the fable uninterrupted,<sup>9</sup> with the implication that his audience accepts his interpretation of the fable as a lesson concerning the organic hierarchy of the body politic. In Shakespeare’s dramatic redaction, we lose an authoritative narrator, gain a less persuasive Menenius, and discover a recalcitrant audience that has suddenly found its voice.

The First Citizen interrupts Menenius seven times, takes over the telling of the story at one point (1.1.114–122), and asks six questions before he will allow Menenius to finish. Moreover, in the midst of the fable, the First Citizen departs from the customary plebeian use of prose and adopts Menenius’s blank verse (1.1.114–124). The contrapuntal harmony one might expect from such poetic convergence belies the fact that at least some of the plebs see through his strategy of satisfying their hunger with mere words.<sup>10</sup> Compared with the narrative speed in Plutarch’s account, Shakespeare’s version is comically digressive, leading poor, frustrated Menenius to resort to invective in order to assail the First Citizen as the “lowest, basest, poorest” “rascal” of the plebeians, the “great toe” (157, 159, 155).

Menenius’s invocation of the fable of the belly invites difficulties on several fronts. Even before he begins, Menenius is oblivious to the plebeians’ starvation, and simply regards their hunger, as Arthur Riss so aptly phrases it, as “a discursive phenomenon to be manipulated, not a literal condition to be acknowledged.”<sup>11</sup> Menenius’s invocation of the body politic topos fails, or does not work as he would like, primarily

<sup>7</sup>Arthur Riss, “The Belly Politic: *Coriolanus* and the Revolt of Language,” *ELH* 59 (1992) 53.

<sup>8</sup>E. C. Pettet, “*Coriolanus* and the Midlands Insurrection of 1607,” *Shakespeare Survey* 3 (1950) 34–41.

<sup>9</sup>See Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 5 (London 1957–1975) 510–511.

<sup>10</sup>On the inability of Menenius to manipulate his plebeian audience, see Anne Barton, “*Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*: Shakespeare’s Roman World of Words,” in *Shakespeare’s Craft: Eight Lectures*, ed. Philip H. Highfill, Jr. (Carbondale and Edwardsville 1982) 29–30.

<sup>11</sup>Riss, “The Belly Politic: *Coriolanus* and the Revolt of Language,” 62.

because of his dual inability to control language and to recognize that his particular interpretation of the body politic cannot subsume all others.<sup>12</sup> Within Menenius's hermeneutic, he stresses the subservience that the other members of the body owe to the belly in order to maintain the organic harmony of the whole:

The senators of Rome are this good belly,  
 And you the mutinous members: for examine  
 Their counsels and their cares; digest things rightly  
 Touching the weal a' th' common, you shall find  
 No public benefit which you receive  
 But it proceeds or comes from them to you. . . . (1.1.148–153)

For all his talk of an organic body knit together, distinctions matter: after all, the senators "are not such as you" (114). The First Citizen, on the other hand, stresses interdependence, the important function each member of the body politic must assume.<sup>13</sup>

The kingly-crowned head, the vigilant eye,  
 The counsellor heart, the arm our soldier,  
 Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter,  
 With other muniments and petty helps  
 In this *our fabric* . . . (1.1.115–119, emphasis mine).

Unlike the uncontested shaping Menenius gives to his account in Plutarch, Shakespeare's version of the fable allows, even invites, competing views.<sup>14</sup>

As Walter Ong has demonstrated, in a primary oral culture—one the plebeians' subculture very likely exemplified<sup>15</sup>—knowledge is personal and experiential, whereas Menenius's fable is an abstraction removed from the real lives and starvation of his listeners. Those in oral cultures relate stories to their own personal, immediate situation,<sup>16</sup> and the First

<sup>12</sup>See Robert Weimann, "Towards a literary theory of ideology: mimesis, representation, authority," in *Shakespeare Reproduced*, ed. Jean E. Howard, Marion F. O'Connor, and Margaret Ferguson (New York and London 1987) 265–272, esp. 268–269.

<sup>13</sup>See Eileen Jorge Allman, *Player-King and Adversary: Two Faces of Play in Shakespeare* (Baton Rouge 1980) 460.

<sup>14</sup>Stanley Cavell, "'Who does the wolf love?': *Coriolanus* and the interpretations of politics," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York and London 1985) 245–272, esp. 260.

<sup>15</sup>The plebeians would have been illiterate, and, thus, their subculture was one of primary orality.

<sup>16</sup>See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York 1982) 42–44 and 52–53.

Citizen’s interpretive comments and questions repeatedly attempt to give Menenius’s abstract metaphor a local habitation in the plebeians’ suffering.

Those in an oral culture are also more comfortable with the formulaic, proverbial maxims that are readily applicable to their lives,<sup>17</sup> and we get a glimpse of this from Coriolanus’s contempt for the plebs as they “sigh’d forth proverbs— / That hunger broke stone walls, that dogs must eat . . .” (1.1.205–206). The problem is not that the plebeians do not understand the fable of the body politic; rather, they do not embrace Menenius’s self-serving, not to mention paternalistic, interpretation. Commoners—whether the plebs of Rome or the villagers of early modern England—are more likely to interpret Menenius’s fable as an example of community, not of hierarchy.<sup>18</sup> Thus, what is presented for us is the plebs’ unwillingness to accept Menenius’s fable on his own stratified terms.

An even more disturbing problem for Menenius is his decision to place the senators in the belly rather than at the head of the body politic. By locating the belly as the site of authority in the body politic, he is distorting the usual order a Roman audience—and certainly a Jacobean one—would associate with the body politic. The First Citizen tells us as much about English sensibilities as he does Roman ones when he speaks of the “kingly-crowned head” of the state (1.1.115).<sup>19</sup> This touch of anachronism confirms the idea that the usual site of authority in the state resides, metaphorically, in the head. In fact, the First Citizen sounds more like the anonymous writer of *A Supplication of the Poore Commons* (1546) who, while seeking redress for the exploitation of the poor by the rich in the reign of Henry VIII, nonetheless was careful to remember the proper hierarchy: “Let us be unto your Highnes, as the inferiour membres of the body to their head.”<sup>20</sup> James I, too, as is well known, was fond of this association of the king as head of the body politic.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup>See Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 35 and 38.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Sorge, “The Failure of Orthodoxy in *Coriolanus*,” in *Shakespeare Reproduced*, 228–229.

<sup>19</sup>Bullough also reprints Livy’s *Romane Historie*, translated by Philemon Holland (1600). In Livy’s account, Coriolanus reacts against Sicinius because Sicinius, as a mere tribune, acts as if he were king, and, thus, distorts the body politic: “why see I *Sicinius* so mightie? Shall I endure these indignities longer than I needs must? I that could not beare *Tarquinius* to beee King, shall I brooke and suffer *Sicinius*?” (500).

<sup>20</sup>*A Supplication of the Poore Commons* (1546), in *Four Supplications: 1529–1553* (London 1871) 81.

<sup>21</sup>See Jonathan Goldberg, “Fatherly Authority: The Politics of Stuart Family Images,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern*

In distorting the usual arrangement of the body politic, Menenius undermines the very social hierarchy he wishes to affirm.<sup>22</sup> Menenius wants to control the signification of the belly, but the plebeians speak of the kingly “head,” and find the belly “cormorant,” “the sink a’ th’ body” (1.1.121, 122). The plebs contest the image further when Menenius, having finished the fable, asks the First Citizen, “What say you to’t?,” only to receive the curt reply, “It was an answer. How apply you this?” (1.1.146–147). The syntactic arrangement in the second half-line emphasizes “apply,” and one wonders if the First Citizen is simply pointing out the slipperiness in Menenius’s own language and what he presumes to be a foregone conclusion. Menenius wishes to circumscribe the fable’s potential signification, and the plebs, “scabs” that they are, keep reopening the issue.

Thus, act 1, scene 1 underscores the presence of the plebeians as they intrude their voices into a fable the telling of which has traditionally been depicted as a patrician monologue. The plebs’ voice, however, comes at a price: Menenius and Coriolanus both react violently against the plebeians’ recalcitrance, and they treat them, even as they concede their membership in the body politic, as trivial or useless appendages. “Appendages” is right, too, because the plebs constitute the Bakhtinian grotesque: mouths (“the most important of all human features for the grotesque”<sup>23</sup>); tongues; the “voices” Coriolanus repeatedly refuses to metonymize (2.3.125–137); knees; arms; toes; and, of course, empty bellies. Menenius’s invocation of the metaphorical belly, a grotesque member, only underscores their literal hunger, and his failure to invoke the emblem of the classical body, the head, leaves him in their experiential domain where hunger seldom ceases and where the cries of the oppressed are the only recourse left open to the lesser members of the body politic.

In his depiction of the plebeians, Shakespeare could have chosen to allow the plebs no voice, or even to represent their hunger as a pretense

*Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago 1986) 3–32; Leonard Barkan, *Nature’s work of art: the human body as image of the world* (New Haven 1975) 102; and R. B. Parker, “Coriolanus and ‘th’ interpretation of the time” in *Mirror up to Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of G. R. Hibbard*, ed. J. C. Gray (Toronto 1984) 261–276, esp. 268.

<sup>22</sup>See Janet Adelman, “‘Anger’s My Meat’: Feeding Dependency and Aggression in *Coriolanus*,” in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore 1980) 129–149, esp. 129. Norman Rabkin, in *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York 1967) 122, finds the image of the belly repugnant.

<sup>23</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

for—and mere prelude to—their political insurgency.<sup>24</sup> We see a hint of this latter possibility in the play’s opening stage direction: “*Enter a company of mutinous Citizens with staves, clubs, and other weapons.*” If this were the only representation of the plebeians in the play, one might be able to argue that Shakespeare follows Plutarch’s historiographic account unwaveringly. Yet the plebeians have a voice, and that voice—obtuse at times, compelling at others—gives them a fuller representation than “*mutinous Citizens*” can ever hope to. Menenius and Coriolanus want to push them aside, to close off the discourse, but their grotesque appendages keep intruding themselves into the drama.

Coriolanus’s vitriol against the plebeians is particularly ironic because he becomes as much a grotesque appendage, a “limb” to be lopped off (3.1.294), as those he scorns. Not only is he, by play’s end, a grotesque member of the body politic, but also, even more pointedly, a grotesque member of his own family.

#### CORIANUS’S DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY VALUES

For all its political ramifications, the play keeps returning to the domestic household, the *oikos*. In fact, according to one scholar, an intimate connection between the two exists, as *Coriolanus* illustrates an early modern commonplace of political doctrine: “Beneath the politics of the state . . . lie the politics of the family.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, one does not have to do a very close reading of the play in order to get a sense of its familial matrix: the word “son” occurs twenty-eight times, only to be outdone by the thirty-eight occurrences of the word “mother.” Coriolanus and Volumnia usually refer to each other by these respective tags, yet there is no easy organic unity within their family, as signs of dysfunction begin to appear with the repeated collocation—usually Volumnia’s—of “my son.” Used once or twice, the possessive adjective suggests affection; used with repetitive frequency, it bespeaks an intense desire, even, as critics have suggested, the insinuation of a desire for incest. We can, of course, read the adjective less darkly, as simply a sign, for instance, of the pride Volumnia takes in her son’s

<sup>24</sup>See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cory Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago 1988) 271–313, esp. 283–287.

<sup>25</sup>Parker, “*Coriolanus* and ‘th’ interpretation of the time,” 273. The notion that family structures mimic, not to mention undergird, political configurations is a commonplace in the early modern period. John Dod and Robert Cleaver, for instance, begin their *Godly form of Household Government* (1598) with the phrase, “A household is as it were a little commonwealth” (sig. B1). See also Goldberg, “Fatherly Authority: The Politics of Stuart Family Images.”



exploits, but there is still something disturbing about their relationship.

Their relationship begins, of course, well before the drama opens. Lawrence Danson reminds us that “we learn more about the *childhood* of this insistently heroic man than we do about the childhood of any other of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes.”<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare may have responded, in fact, to Plutarch’s decision to play sociologist and probe Coriolanus’s childhood:

Caius Martius, whose life we intend now to write, being left an orphan by his father, was brought up under his mother a widowe, who taught us by experience, that orphanage bringeth many discommodities to a childe, but doth not hinder him to become an honest man, and to excell in vertue above the common sorte: as they are meanelly borne, wrongfully doe complayne, that it is the occasion of their casting awaye, for that no man in their youth taketh any care of them to see them well brought up, and taught that [which] were meete. (505–506)

Plutarch acknowledges that “orphanage” brings its share of problems, but he is unwilling to allow anyone to attribute the blame for misbehavior to a less-than-ideal upbringing. Coriolanus is, indeed, fatherless, and Volumnia, as *mater familias*, exercises an inordinate, and unusual, influence over her son.

Much has been written about breast-feeding, or the lack of it, in *Coriolanus*. Volumnia quickly passes over her own maternal instincts in favor of martial prowess: “The breasts of Hecuba / When she did suckle Hector, look’d not lovelier / Than Hector’s forehead when it spit forth blood / At Grecian sword contemning” (1.3.40–43). In the first half of this century, Melanie Klein argued that, through her breast, a mother “represented the external world for [the infant].”<sup>27</sup> The mother’s breast is a metonym for the mother, and it is from her breast-feeding that the child receives his first gratification in the world.<sup>28</sup> Gratification, that is, or rejection. Breast-feeding her son only the insubstantial “valiantness,” “thou suck’st it from me,” Volumnia wishes to render Coriolanus a hardened warrior (3.2.129).

As far as Volumnia is concerned, breast-feeding manifests the clas-

<sup>26</sup>Danson, *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare’s Drama of Language*, 152, emphasis Danson’s.

<sup>27</sup>Melanie Klein, *The Psycho-Analysis of Children* (1932), trans. Alix Strachey, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London 1949) 208.

<sup>28</sup>Melanie Klein, “Weaning” (1936), in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921–1945* (New York 1975) 290–305, esp. 290–293. See also Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York and London 1992) 148.

sical grotesqueness of the female body: unfinished, open, and—worst of all—leaky. Women menstruate and lactate, both of which emphasize their maternal capacities, their connectedness to others. For men, though, a leaking or bleeding body can signal a “failure of physical self-mastery” and constitutes, according to one critic, “a shameful token of uncontrol.”<sup>29</sup> An open body is exposed and vulnerable, and Volumnia not only detests this in herself, but refuses to allow her son, from a very early age, to become dependent on others, especially herself.<sup>30</sup>

The real problem Coriolanus faces is, as Coppélia Kahn suggests, “re-engulfment” by the female: encapsulated within the vagina for nine months, the child then identifies with his mother’s breast as the source of pleasure that fills him and simultaneously renders him dependent on her. Separation from the mother is an indispensable part of becoming autonomous, and “identifying with [the father] can help the child manage separation [from the mother] more easily.”<sup>31</sup> In the absence of a father with whom he can identify, Coriolanus is, as Plutarch notes, forced back upon his mother: “For he thought nothing made him so happie and honorable, as that his mother might heare every bodie praise and commend him . . . and that she might still embrace him with teares ronning downe her cheekes for joye.”<sup>32</sup> Volumnia will not have a womanly (read dependent) son: she thrusts him into the war where he is forced to become a “man-child” (1.3.16).

If Coriolanus does have a father figure in the play, it is the very man he destroys: Tarquin “the proud.”<sup>33</sup> Tarquin had abolished the privileges conferred by his predecessors on the plebs, just as Coriolanus attempts to do, and Tarquin’s earlier attempt to overthrow Rome anticipates Coriolanus’s own assault on the capitol. One could, of course, argue for an enactment of Coriolanus’s own oedipal complex when, in the course of battle, “Tarquin’s self he met, / And struck him on his knee” (2.2.94–95). Coriolanus is, indeed, “Tarquin’s self,” and the ty-

<sup>29</sup>Gail Kern Paster, “‘In the spirit of men there is no blood’: Blood as Trope of Gender in *Julius Caesar*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1993) 284.

<sup>30</sup>It depends, of course, on one’s gender and whether the body is opened voluntarily or not. For women, who have no choice about lactation or menstruation, the involuntary issue of bodily fluids is seen as shameful. As Adelman argues in *Suffocating Mothers*, 149, Hector spits “forth blood” not as a sign of a vulnerable infant spitting forth milk, but as a token of his aggressiveness in battle; the same holds true for Coriolanus.

<sup>31</sup>Kahn, *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*, 8. As William J. Goode says, in his classic study of divorced mothers, *After Divorce* (Glencoe, Ill. 1956), “[A]t every developmental phase of childhood, the child needs the father . . . as an object of love, security or identification” (309).

<sup>32</sup>Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 508.

<sup>33</sup>Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 507.

rant's compelled genuflection before the sixteen-year-old also anticipates Volumnia's later bowing before her astonished son: "What's this? / Your knees to me?" (5.3.56–557). If Tarquin represents a father figure to Coriolanus, this is not the only instance of loose, even figurative, familial configurations in the play. *Coriolanus* is full of images of multiplication,<sup>34</sup> and nowhere is this more evident than in the extended genealogies one finds in the play: Virgilia is Publicola's "noble sister" (5.2.64); the senators are "fathers" of the state (1.1.77); "good news" is a son to Volumnia (1.3.20–21); and she herself becomes "these senators, the nobles" (3.2.65), as well as an emblem of Rome itself (5.5). As numerous as these references are, they pale before the dizzying succession of relational configurations between Coriolanus and others. In fact, Coriolanus has some kind of familial relationship to nearly everyone: husband to Virgilia, Volumnia (3.2.65), Rome, and Menenius (5.1.29); son to Volumnia and Menenius (5.2.63)—not to mention Tarquin again; father to Menenius (5.1.29) and Volumnia (5.2.65); and brother to the people (2.3.96) and Aufidius.<sup>35</sup> Bakhtin, again, describes the grotesque body as one having its orifices open, where the body is unfinished, always becoming. Coriolanus, with his open wounds and his changing status within his family as well as the body politic, is the embodiment of the grotesque body.

#### METONYMIC GATES

Coriolanus's grotesqueness reaches its apex in the image Shakespeare twice uses to depict Coriolanus as a child.<sup>36</sup> His ineffectual "I banish you" (3.3.123) is a compelling picture of an immature, childish man who believes he can change political reality. This is not his only childish moment, however, as he appears in a visual depiction of his own childbirth in act 1, scene 4, in the midst of the battle with the Volscians. In Plutarch's narrative, Coriolanus enters the gates of Corioles with a few of his men<sup>37</sup>; Shakespeare radically alters the scene, with Coriolanus now alone:

*Another alarum. The Volscies fly, and Martius follows them to the gates.*  
*Mar.* So, now the gates are ope; now prove good seconds:

<sup>34</sup>See Leonard Barkan, *Nature's work of art: the human body as image of the world*, 100–109.

<sup>35</sup>See Adelman, 138–139, and Maurice Hunt, "'Violent'st' Complementarity: the Double Warriors of *Coriolanus*," *SEL* 31 (1991) 314–315.

<sup>36</sup>No one wants to be a child in the play. "Boy" is a recurrent term of derision, and Menenius calls the tribunes of the people "infant-like" (2.1.37).

<sup>37</sup>Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 512–513.

’Tis for the followers fortune widens them,  
Not for the fliers. Mark me, and do the like.

*Enter the gates.*

1. *Sold.* Foolhardiness, not I.

2. *Sold.* Nor I. *Martius is shut in.*

1. *Sold.* See, they have shut him in. (1.4.43 SD-47)

The gates function as a complex signifier here. Visually, Coriolanus is swallowed up, invaginated by the gates, which are a metonym for the city and a metaphor of the female body he has just entered. The two images, in fact, coalesce: “The city,” as Coppélia Kahn notes, “is traditionally a feminine enclosure.”<sup>38</sup> Visually, Coriolanus’s rapid emergence from the feminine “gates” represents, in part, a depiction of childbirth—or rebirth, in this case. Coriolanus becomes, in fact, the offspring of war. The stage directions are telling, as Coriolanus emerges victorious: “*Enter Martius bleeding*” (1.4.61 SD).<sup>39</sup> Cominius, too, informs us that, in his earlier battle against Tarquin, Coriolanus “was a thing of blood” (2.2.109).

Scene 6 further reinforces this birthing iconography: Cominius describes Coriolanus as being “mantled” in either his own or others’ blood (1.6.28–29), and Coriolanus describes himself as “smeared” (69) as if he were still draped in amniotic fluid. With a mother who “thrusts him from dependency,”<sup>40</sup> Coriolanus, in turn—following Thomas North’s suggestive phrasing—“thrusts himself” into the city,<sup>41</sup> the maternal surrogate<sup>42</sup> that engulfs him within its metaphoric gates even as it, too, thrusts him out.

One critic has suggested that Coriolanus’s entrance into Corioles is one of “triumphant rebirth,” but “not,” interestingly enough, “of rape.”<sup>43</sup> If we concede the birthing imagery—and there is ample evidence to support it—why not that of rape as well? The nexus of sex and violence is, after all, extremely close in many of Shakespeare’s plays.<sup>44</sup> The image of Coriolanus entering the gates with sword drawn represents the

<sup>38</sup>Kahn, *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*, 160.

<sup>39</sup>All of the stage directions in scene 4 are from the First Folio, which lends a certain authority to them.

<sup>40</sup>Kahn, *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*, 172.

<sup>41</sup>Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 512.

<sup>42</sup>The Roman state is also a paternal surrogate, as Menenius informs us as he upbraids the citizenry: “you slander / The helms o’ th’ state, who care for you like fathers . . .” (1.1.77).

<sup>43</sup>Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 152.

<sup>44</sup>See Julia Kristeva, “*Romeo and Juliet: Love-hatred in the Couple*,” in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. John Drakakis (London 1992) 296–316, esp. 302.

acting out of phallic aggression. Violent aggression against the city that would engulf him is a natural reaction for Coriolanus. Certainly, homosocial, if not homoerotic, sexual relationships seem to be the norm: Virgilia, his “gracious silence” (2.1.175), seems to have little hold on him, even if she has given him a son. Menenius declares, “The general is my lover” (5.2.14), and, certainly, Coriolanus reserves similar moments of *tendresse* for situations involving men, especially Aufidius.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, as the watch tells us, Rome, Coriolanus’s maternal surrogate, will no longer harbor him: “you have push’d out your gates the very defender of them . . .” (5.2.39–40). Still, Rome sends Menenius to recall her wayward son: “I have been,” he declares to the defiant Coriolanus, “blown out of your gates with sighs” (74–75). The gates are still there waiting to comfort Coriolanus with the longing, and perhaps loving, sighs of the Roman populace.

The metonymic gates, in fact, constitute the central recurring image in the play. When Volumnia succeeds on her mission, and Coriolanus slakes his desire for revenge, she returns “recomforted through th’ gates” (5.4.48). To return to the gates of Rome is, simultaneously, to return, through metaphor, to his mother’s as well as to the state’s protective enclosure. Volumnia’s identification with Rome is made explicit in scene 5, as we are offered a simulacrum of a royal progression with Volumnia at its head: the senators declare, “Behold our patroness, the life of Rome!” (5.5.1). Earlier, too, Volumnia had told him that to invade the gates of Rome is tantamount “to tread[ing] . . . on thy mother’s womb” (5.3.123–125).

Indeed, his penetration of Roman territory almost comes to that pass. Surveying his accomplishments, Coriolanus affirms, “I have attempted, and / With bloody passage led your wars even to / The gates of Rome” (5.6.74–76). One can argue, then, that his capture of Corioles is depicted, with equal ingenuity, as both a birth—coming out of the gates—and a rape—entering into them uninvited. After Coriolanus’s triumphant subjugation of Corioles, the city is most certainly raped: his men enter the very next scene replete “*with spoils*” (1.5.1 SD).

If Coriolanus, like the plebs, emerges as a grotesque figure, it is clear that Rome and Volumnia—his civic and biological mothers, respectively—have constructed him to believe otherwise. Coriolanus would like to believe that he is the self-created “author of himself”

<sup>45</sup>See Madelon Sprengnether, “Annihilating Intimacy in *Coriolanus*,” in *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse 1986) 100–101.

(5.2.36), with the god-like ability to create himself *ex nihilo*. But the play relentlessly affirms that his identity is formed by his mother, whose “praises made thee first a soldier” (3.2.108), and who suckled him, as Hecuba did Hector, to “spit forth blood” (1.3.40–42). The state, too, trains him so that he becomes a warrior, the “epitome of Roman cultivation.”<sup>46</sup> Coriolanus does not regard his identity as a construction, a byproduct of his culture, and yet we are left to wonder if his obstinacy in the face of pleas for him to relent in his fury against Rome is not, after all, the result of his training as a Roman soldier. The state has conferred on Coriolanus an image of himself as unrelenting warrior, an identity he is unwilling—and untrained—to cast off.

In declaring, “I am constant” (1.1.239), Coriolanus considers himself a whole to which nothing complementary can be added, even refusing the spoils and honor intimately linked to victory (1.9). But having honor in the Roman world of the play “depends,” as one scholar suggests, “on its conferral by others,”<sup>47</sup> and Coriolanus’s refusal to accept honor from the plebeians begins to fragment his political and personal stature, “Like one that means his proper harm . . .” (1.9.58). The best indication of this lies in his loss of name, and, hence, identity.

We now, out of convenience, refer to Coriolanus by the play’s title, but that is only a surname he acquires from the state in recognition of his exploits: initially he is identified in the stage directions and by his family and friends as “Martius” or “Caius.” In Roman society, one’s patronymic is an important signifier of one’s identity, and it is significant that, by the end of the play, Aufidius refers to “thy stol’n name / Coriolanus” (5.6.88-9). Coriolanus, too, seems confused as to his real name—consider, for instance, his exchange with Aufidius:

*Auf.* Read it not, noble lords,  
 But tell the traitor, in the highest degree  
 He hath abus’d your powers.  
*Cor.* “Traitor”? How now?  
*Auf.* Ay, traitor, Martius!  
*Cor.* “Martius”?  
*Auf.* Ay, Martius, Caius Martius! (5.6.83–87)

When Cominius returns from his failed mission to reconcile Coriolanus and Rome, he informs his audience, “Coriolanus / He would not answer to; forbade all names; / He was a kind of nothing, titleless” (5.1.11–13). The disconnect between his name and identity further underscores his

<sup>46</sup>Geoffrey Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (Oxford 1996) 156.

<sup>47</sup>Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans*, 155.

fragmented sense of place, be it in Rome or Corioles.

Coriolanus is not only identified with difficulty by name, but he is also unidentifiable by sight. As we have seen, in war he becomes a mass of open wounds, and takes on the appearance of a newborn infant. Coriolanus also disguises himself and goes to join forces with Aufidius in act 4, scene 5. Even after Coriolanus has “unmuffled” himself, Aufidius cannot recognize him, in spite of the fact that they have grappled together hand-to-hand on five previous occasions, and Aufidius keeps repeating to his unrecognized guest, “What is thy name?” (54, 57, 59, 62, 64).<sup>48</sup> The implication, of course, is that Coriolanus’s identity is constructed, not essential: he is known only in context, and removed from battle, Aufidius cannot recognize him. His identity becomes a cipher; as such, his story is written by others.

#### HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE FINAL REDACTION OF CORIOLANUS’S LIFE

Critics have commented on Coriolanus’s “antitheatrical prejudice”—he will only consent to “play / The man I am” (3.2.15–16).<sup>49</sup> In reality, though, his aversion to playing a part reflects a deeper malaise with representations of any kind, and specifically with stories concerning his life and exploits. These stories cast him in continually changing roles as father, son, brother, and so on, and force him to acknowledge that he is not an essentially unchanging man, but, rather, one who has had various “parts,” and cannot play them all well. As we have seen, Coriolanus denied the synechdochic organicism of Menenius’s fable of the belly: the plebs, in his view, were simply vestigial appendages of a political body that was better off without them. And just as he refuses to acknowledge that the political body has more than one essential part, so too he denies his own fragmentation into various roles.

Coriolanus eventually denies all connections to other people, and specifically to his family, as he declares, in Christ-like fashion, “Wife, mother, child I know not” (5.2.82). His banishment by Rome is the reason for this repudiation, but it is a renunciation he makes quite easily as someone who eschews his past and all it entails. Thus, a figure we know only through representations of his past exploits becomes, for Shakespeare, a man who cuts himself off from that past and attempts, as heroes do, to “live in a single transcendent moment.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup>I owe this insight to Thomas Moisan, out of whose seminar on Shakespearean tragedy at Saint Louis University in the spring of 1997 this paper originated.

<sup>49</sup>See Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley 1981).

<sup>50</sup>Jarrett Walker, “Voiceless Bodies and Bodiless Voices: The Drama of Human Perception in *Coriolanus*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43 (1992) 171.

As mentioned at the outset of this essay, Menenius’s and Aufidius’s stories frame the play, but *Coriolanus* is rife with stories. In the first line of the play, the First Citizen, like any good storyteller, asks his audience to “hear me speak,” and then begins to tell a reductive tale in which the plebeians “are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good” (1.1.15–16). Similarly, characters are always relating, in story form, what they have heard, such as the ominous tales of the Volscian advance (1.3.95–101), or what they know of their own or another’s past.<sup>51</sup> Not surprisingly, such representations usually focus on Coriolanus. When no news of the battle is available, Volumnia imagines the story of her son’s exploits:

Methinks I hear hither your husband’s drum;  
See him pluck Aufidius down by th’ hair;  
As children from a bear, the Volscies shunning him.  
Methinks I see him stamp thus, and call thus . . . (1.3.29–32).

After the battle in scene 9, Cominius promises to “report” the story in such a way that the senators will cry, the patricians “attend and shrug,” and the ladies “quake,” but all “Shall say against their hearts, “We thank the gods / Our Rome hath such a soldier” (1.9.2–9). All of these stories indicate the political and familial ties between the characters and connect, as stories and historiographies do, the present to the past.

Coriolanus, however, avoids narrative representations of all kinds. As Coriolanus emerge from the gates of Corioles, Cominius is eager to hear the story of how he managed it:

*Com.* But how prevail’d you?  
*Cor.* Will the time serve to tell? I do not think.  
Where is the enemy? (1.6.45–47)

And it is not just during the exigencies of battle that Coriolanus refuses to tell his story. His past is literally displayed in the scars on his body, but he will not show them to the plebs (2.3); neither does he desire to hear Cominius, or anyone else, talk about his past: “I had rather have one scratch my head i’ the sun / When the alarum were struck than idly sit / To hear my nothings monster’d” (2.2.75–77). “I would they would forget me” is his only request of the plebeians (2.3.57), the fruition of which he effects by isolating himself from his past and the community

<sup>51</sup>Valeria, for instance, recounts the Wednesday Coriolanus’s son ran “after a gilded butterfly” and tore it to fragments with the mercilessness for which his father is known (1.3.57–65).



to which he belongs. Coriolanus's attempt to stake out what one critic calls an "absolute unsocial identity, undetermined by social relations" fails when he is overcome emotionally, not intellectually, by the pathos of his mother's pleading and kneeling before him.<sup>52</sup> From the beginning, whatever he has done, "he did it to please his mother" (1.1.38–39), and his mother, as Lucius Florus so aptly phrases it in his account of Coriolanus's life, "disweapond him with weeping."<sup>53</sup> His sword is useless, and he is, thus, figuratively emasculated by his refusal to sever all emotional ties to his mother. His public failure to destroy Rome is, thus, counterpoised by the reestablishment of his familial tie to his mother; the demands of public and private life are severely at odds in the play.

Recent psychoanalytic approaches locate his downfall in his early childhood and his failure to "separate" from his mother. Plutarch, on the other hand, declares, in North's translation, that Coriolanus is "overcomen in the ende with naturall affection."<sup>54</sup> In other words, we cannot blame his downfall on his childhood, but on the normal, "naturall" affective ties he feels for his mother. Perhaps both approaches are partially correct: clearly, his childhood relationship with his mother is what we would now anachronistically call "dysfunctional," but his final affection for his mother seems altogether understandable, even as it destroys his political future.

The reestablishment of the familial bond comes too late, though, as Volumnia hardly recognizes the man he has become, and suggests that he is a member of some other family:

Come, let us go.  
This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;  
His wife is in Corioles, and his child  
Like him by chance. (5.3.177–180)

Just as his mother disowns him, so too do all the Volscians, his newly adopted political family:

*All people.* Tear him to pieces! Do it presently!—  
He kill'd my son.—My daughter!—He kill'd my  
cousin Marcus!—he kill'd my father! (5.6.120–122)

<sup>52</sup>Lisa Lowe, "'Say I Play the Man I Am': Gender and Politics in *Coriolanus*," *Kenyon Review* 8 (1986) 94.

<sup>53</sup>Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 550.

<sup>54</sup>Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 538.

Visually, this is a striking passage because of the ecstatic glossolalia of voices—“*All people*”—declaring Coriolanus a destroyer of family and civic life. The defender of Rome is finally left with no defenders and his mother, who had been his staunchest defender, is absent from Corioles. Her absence underscores Coriolanus’s inability to reconcile himself either to his family or to the state.

In the end, Coriolanus’s desire to have his story forgotten is frustrated, as Aufidius will certainly tell it. Aufidius, though, realizes the potential incongruity between the doing of deeds and their subsequent representation in stories. He understands that whatever is written down and transmitted is what, ultimately, matters. The storyteller, the biographer in this case, is the person whose version counts in historical consciousness.<sup>55</sup>

So our virtues  
Lie in th’ interpretation of the time,  
And power, unto itself most commendable,  
Hath not a tomb so evident as a chair  
T’ extol what it hath done. (4.7.49–53)

Aufidius’s coconspirators advise him not to let Coriolanus speak, but, rather, to kill him immediately, and, afterwards, “When he lies along, / After your way his tale pronounc’d shall bury / His reasons with his body” (5.6.56–58). The only naïve student of historiography is Coriolanus himself, who insists that there is only one true version of history. Exasperated by Aufidius’s calling him a “boy,” Coriolanus remonstrates that his nemesis’s representation constitutes a historical red herring:

“Boy,” false hound!  
If you have writ your annals true, ’tis there  
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I  
Flutter’d your Volscians in Corioles.  
Alone I did it. “Boy”! (5.6.112–116)

<sup>55</sup>Earlier, Volumnia is also well aware of the importance of appearance—it is not enough simply to be valiant in deed:

Thou know’st, great son,  
The end of war’s uncertain; but this certain,  
That, if thou conquer Rome, the benefit  
Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name  
Whose repetition will be dogg’d with curses;  
Whose chronicle thus writ: “The man was noble,  
But with his last attempt he wip’d it out,  
Destroyed his country, and his name remains  
To th’ ensuing age abhorr’d.” (5.3.140–148)

It is the image he wants to impress indelibly on his listeners, but it is already under erasure, as Aufidius soon offers his own, more ambiguous, and certainly more malleable, version:

                  Though in this city he  
Hath widowed and unchilded many a one,  
Which to this hour bewail the injury,  
Yet he shall have a noble memory.  
Assist. (5.6.149–153)

Perhaps our own complicity in the promulgation of historical fictions is called into question by the simple “Assist.” Aufidius’s would be a touching eulogy if it were not for the chilling fact that he has just murdered the man he now extols. Aufidius promises that the fragments of Coriolanus’s life will be made into a coherent whole, just as Menenius had promised the starving plebeians that their grotesque bodies were important, if subservient, to the state. With Aufidius’s parting story, or promise of one, we are left to wonder if there is not something deeply

disturbing about his assumption and combination of the roles of executioner and literary executor.

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