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Ideology as delusion:
Bodies and politics in *Coriolanus*
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In all the critical editions of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, the classical sources for the fable of the belly and the members are clearly identified.¹ The transmission of such a tale through Greek, Latin, French and English authors is an established feature of Roman-play scholarship. Another source passes unnoticed by most commentators,² and by all the recent editors of the play: the twelfth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. My contention in this paper is that several passages from that epistle are an obvious source for the controversy between Menenius and the rebel citizens. The Pauline intertext is as important for the political interpretation of the scene, as the classical transmission of the tale. It is worth quoting the relevant verses from this chapter, before studying its relationship to the play.

12 For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many. 15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? 18 But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. 19 And if they were all one member, where were the body? 20 But now are they many

¹ The references to the text of *Coriolanus* are from R. B. Parker's Oxford edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). Philip Brockbank's edition for the Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1976) and Lee Bliss's for the New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: CUP, 2000) were also consulted.

² It is listed by Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (Cranbury (NJ), London, Mississauga (Ont.): Associated University Presses, 1999); the parallel is briefly and inconclusively discussed by Zvi Jagendorf, "Coriolanus: Body Politic and Private Parts," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.4 (Winter 1990) 461.

members, yet but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. 22 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: 23 And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. 24 For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: 25 That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. 26 And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.³

Unity, honour and division in a corporate human group: such are the points at issue between the rebels and the senator. Our New Testament excerpt is the text that Shakespeare's characters are implicitly discussing in the first scene of *Coriolanus*. First, I shall present some aspects of the theory of the body politic, then I shall try to establish the effectiveness of the intertext I have just assumed, and lastly I shall describe how Caius Martius himself shatters that ideology to pieces by his own uses of his body. Far from being a unifying body politic, his staged body appears as a medium of individuation. In this, the play of *Coriolanus* reflects the emerging philosophical debates at the moment of its production, that particular moment in the history of Europe when the individual person began to matter more than the holistic system in which he had been described to be entangled in the previous decades or centuries.

In his first epistle to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul compares the Christian Church with the body of Jesus Christ. It is a body whose head is Christ, and whose members are the baptized. In the body of the Church, each member has a specific gift, virtue, or function, called a charisma (prophesying, speaking in tongues, interpreting signs, healing the sick, etc...), but there is no hierarchy among those charismas. They would not exist without the Holy Spirit, and those who display those gifts only hold them thanks to the free gift of God's grace, not for their own merits. The text I have quoted is an explanation of such notions. There may be a distinction between superior and inferior members, but they are all in need of one another, each and every one. It is also, more classically, illustrated by this other passage from Romans 12:

3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. 4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. 4 Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of operations but it is the same God which worketh all in all. 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. [...] 11 But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.

Those texts are among the most quoted biblical sources of an ideology that prevailed throughout the Middle Ages and most of the Renaissance, an ideology which is classically called "organicism." Based on a certain number of biblical texts, it declares that the social

³ Biblical quotes refer to the Authorised Version (1611).

hierarchy is natural and God-ordained, that political power is ordained of God for the protection of the subjects, and that all men owe obedience to “the powers that be” (Rom. 13:1). In the version developed by the king of Scotland James VI before he became James I of England, but which was inspired to him by previous theologians and lawyers, kings are God’s lieutenants on earth. Their power is similar to God’s own power: right of life and death, right to promote or abase individuals or families as he pleases, to maintain or exclude individuals or groups from his grace. The monarch is the head of the kingdom, and if he thinks that a member or organ must be purged, cut off or bled, he has a right to apply the remedy, no matter how painful that remedy may be.⁴

The English society of the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries relied on deference for its daily intercourse: every member of the commonweal was expected to know his or her standing, to whom they were to curtsy or bow, by whom they could expect to be saluted, in whose house men would have to take their hats off, and conversely, in whose house they could keep their hats on. Homilies, conduct books, even proclamations by the sovereign, or parliamentary legislation reminded them of the quality of clothing they were allowed to wear, depending on their social standing. The doctrine preached and taught to Elizabethans and Jacobeans was obedience and social stability, but the reality that was obvious to all, was social mobility. The ubiquity of organicist language typical of the Jacobean era paradoxically reflects the disruption of the belief in natural hierarchies, in an age when political thought in Europe had begun to drift apart from theology. The practice of James I and his son Charles was to create new Lords and knights by sale of titles, a policy that denied the ideology of social stability that their divines were asked to preach. By contrast to what the ministers were supposed to preach, the Church of England itself was one of the areas in English society, where meritocracy could help promoting sons of farmers to substantial positions, or at least to positions of authority and respectability.

In his illuminating article “The Belly Politic,” Arthur Riss quotes excerpts from a sermon by Robert Wilkinson to the judges who were to try the Midlands rebels, in the months when Shakespeare is supposed to have written the play. The presence of 1 Cor 12 behind his words is also perfectly clear:

As it is an ill foot that kicketh at the head, and an ill hand that beateth it, so is it an ill head that wisheth the hand cut off, or deviseth a way how to have fewer fingers on the hand; for be there too few, then it is a weak, and a lame hand, like Ehud’s right hand. [...] But to have all parts peopled in due proportion is the glory, beauty and strength of the land. (sig. D^{v-r})⁵

Riss shows how Wilkinson goes on arguing that the rebels ought to have suffered their hunger in silence and submission, as Christ tempted in the wilderness. To Riss, the convinced audience of Wilkinson’s sermon could not react like the audience that Menenius fails to persuade: there can be no saving sacrifice out of the Christian world-view. It was

⁴ *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598), Johann Sommerville (ed.), *Political Writings of James VI and I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 62-84, Speech at Whitehall, 21 March 1610, 182-3.

⁵ Arthur Riss, “The Belly Politic: *Coriolanus* and the Revolt of Language,” *English Literary History* 59.1 (Spring 1992) 59.

shared by the spectators of Shakespeare's play and Wilkinson's listeners, but the on-stage audience of the senator could not be reached by such a spirit of self-sacrifice.⁶

My argument is that the apparent absurdity of the citizens' rhetoric, in answer to Menenius's own perversion of organicism, reflects the impossibility for a growing number of Englishmen of Shakespeare's time to believe and act according to that ideology, and their tendency to subvert it in word as in deed.

Menenius introduces his tale of the belly and the members by the admission that his allegory is threadbare:

I shall tell you
A pretty tale: it may be you have heard it;
But, since it serves my purpose, I will venture
To stale't a little more.⁷

Menenius's fable of the belly is indeed an old tale, a stale tale, since it dates back to Plutarch through North's adaptation of Amyot's French translation of Plutarch (AD 46-120). It is therefore pagan, pre-Christian, and stands on its own in the context of a Roman play. It is a cultural reference for those in the audience who went to grammar school (not a majority by far) and it contains enough echoes of the traditional body-politic metaphor to be reminiscent of its clichés to all the spectators. The stale allegory of the body politic is read through the stale tale of the belly. The terms of the citizen's allegory, on the other hand, is traced back by the editors to John of Salisbury (12th century).

In the most current editions of the play, either Parker's for Oxford, Brockbank's for Arden or Bliss's for Cambridge, ample and reliable information about the classical sources for this fable can be found. My intuition that it has something to do with the passage from 1 Cor. 12 is corroborated by only one reference work that I have been able to consult: Shaheen's *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays*, and by one article which does not make much of the parallel. It is likely to have been commonplace matter to more people than the classical source. Yet, as it is not transparent, one cannot definitely assert that it could be perceived at first hearing. Still, in the author's mind, the Christian source could not but be present alongside the pagan tale.

My contention is that the New Testament intertext provides a key to a likely ideological reading of the speech, and of the play's politics, which goes beyond the mere reminder of 'conservative' commonplaces. The tale is divided between several speeches by Menenius, interrupted by one of the citizens. Here are the two parts of the tale, pasted, as it were, together:

There was a time when all the body's members,
Rebelled against the belly, thus accused it:
That only like a gulf it did remain
I' th' midst o' th' body, idle and unactive,
Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing
Like labour with the rest; where th' other instruments
Did see and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel,
And, mutually participate, did minister

⁶ Riss 60.

⁷ Bliss's text follows the folio reading, and has "scale" instead of "stale" which was Theobald's emendation (Bliss 108, n. for l. 76). An obsolete meaning of "scale" was: removing particles of metal from a coin "for the purpose of fraud". This reading does not alter the interpretation suggested here.

Unto the appetite and affection common
 Of the whole body.
 (1.1.93-102)
 [...]

Your most grave belly was deliberate,
 Not rash like his accusers, and thus answered:
 ‘True is it, my incorporate friends,’ quoth he,
 ‘That I receive the general food at first
 Which you do live upon; and fit it is,
 Because I am the storehouse and the shop
 Of the whole body. But, if you do remember,
 I send it through the rivers of your blood
 Even to the court, the heart,--to th’ seat o’ th’ brain;
 And, through the cranks and offices of man
 The strongest nerves and small inferior veins
 From me receive that natural competency
 Whereby they live.
 (1.1.127-137)
 [...]

‘Though all at once cannot
 See what I do deliver out to each,
 Yet I can make my audit up, that all
 From me do back receive the flour of all
 And leave me but the bran.’
 (1.1.139-143)

The wise belly prides itself in producing visible filth, since it results from the production of a life-giving force for the whole body. It takes the most unpleasant, the filthiest task (from an outsider’s point of view), after producing the most noble matter for the benefit of the whole body, a task which has been invisible to the ungrateful recipients of that quickening energy. This tale clearly points to the wrongs of the rebels, to their misplaced pride of place, and to the modesty of the senators, whose efforts are unseen, but are directed towards the common good.

If the political situation of the scene is considered globally, one can but notice that the citizens have material reasons to complain about famine, and to criticize legislation that was being passed. The citizens have something practical to argue against the senators. The members in the fable are not given such practical knowledge by Menenius who clearly confesses that, as narrator, he controls whatever the characters say or do (“I can make the belly smile / As well as speak” 1.1.106-107). Not so with the citizens. As Riss explains, Menenius respects his rhetorical devices as little as he does the citizens: “Menenius simply assumes that the plebs will submit to a patrician as naturally and as axiomatically as a vehicle will submit to its tenor.”⁸ The citizens cannot be made to take their physical bellies for rhetorical devices.

But are the citizens critically and dialectically equipped to object to Menenius’s old wives’ tale? They have the stamina to do so, and they are clearly not submissive, since they cut off the senator’s speech and talk back to him. Yet, the most daring apostrophe, the most successful reply, rhetorically speaking, is just as stale as Menenius’s tale: it

⁸ Riss 63.

recapitulates the most basic components of the body politic allegory, as if the character was quoting a Jacobean preacher struggling against lack of inspiration.

The kingly, crownèd 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...
 (1.1.112-116)

Partly belonging to Shakespeare's lineage of linguistically incompetent popular characters, the citizen reverses the application of the body-politic allegory: instead of describing the counsellor as the heart of the commonweal, he sees the heart as the human body's counsellor, and so on. The allegory's so stale that it can be reversed, with no loss of oratorical assertiveness. Yet, though his spontaneous rhetoric may sound awkward, compared with Menenius's, the conservative rhetorical taste of many of Shakespeare's contemporaries would have regarded his choice of vehicles as more apposite than those of Menenius: the head is a more credible choice to speak of order, than the belly.⁹ The citizen perceives the need to match the vehicle to the reality of the situation which the metaphor or allegory must describe, a point which is clearly eluded by Menenius, who is just as arbitrary and casual in his attitude to rhetoric as to the lower orders of Roman society. As Riss argues, Shakespeare is keen to have language fit the structure of society, but like the citizen, "he works to revise, not reassert, the traditional structure of authority."¹⁰

Not without ideological consistency, the citizen restores to the body its physiological nature. First and foremost, before being a stock of political metaphors, it is a natural system that defines a person as it stands. A person with bodily needs, needs that are not satisfied in a dearth crisis. Fundamentally, from their point of view, the citizens are neither rebel members, nor dissatisfied members of the body politic, but dissatisfied bodies, bodies dissatisfied with the commonwealth, who will not be fed empty tales anymore.¹¹ There is a genuine political crisis in this initial scene of *Coriolanus*.

Now, what does the New Testament intertext tell us that the two versions of the body-politic allegory do not? It can be found in these verses:

22 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: 23 And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. 24 For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: 25 That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.

In the tale of the rebel members, the members do not doubt that they belong to the body, whereas the organs in Paul's simile are anxious to know whether they do belong to the body, wondering whether they do exist though none of them is the body as a whole.

⁹ Riss 65-66. He quotes Forset's *Comparative Discourse of Bodies Natural and Politique* (London: 1606), who prefers Christ's allegory of the head as the noble part (Riss 65 quoting Forset Ar^o).

¹⁰ Riss 67.

¹¹ See Riss 62.

15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?

Paul answers the anxiety of the early Christian believers by a message of collaboration teaching them the spirit of communion, in which none is superior, and all are equal in dignity. In the pagan tale, there is a struggle for supremacy, in which Menenius grants victory to the belly. In Paul's text, there is no hierarchy but for the eyes or opinions of men: the pudenda, the shameful or lower parts of the body are "adorned," *viz.* covered. They are covered, just like sacred objects are covered: they receive "more abundant honour." As the Authorised Version that was being translated at the time of the play's performance puts it, there must be "no schism" in the body, *i.e.* no division.

On the face of it, the ideal of social harmony and collaboration is the same, but the injunction to have care for one another is absent from the Menenius version: he is partisan as he is arguing for the senators against the citizens, thus implicitly confirming the citizens' grievance, that the senators behave as a separate, vested interest in the republic. If we follow Paul's arguments, by choosing as his mouthpiece, so to speak, the belly – which is called by the citizen "the sink of the body" (1.1.119) – Menenius chooses the humble, the shameful part, one of those almost sacred organs that must be covered, but only to give himself precedence over the other members. As such, he fails in the realisation of the ideal of communion that pervades Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. As previously shown, his choice of metaphorical vehicle was debatable on rhetorical grounds, but the interpretation of the scene through the Pauline intertext also reveals his self-interestedness in choosing a humble (*too* humble) vehicle to represent himself and the men of his estate. In Machiavellian terms, the fox is out-foxed, so to speak, by the citizens... and by the New Testament.

The citizen's body-politic allegory turned upside-down equally fails to meet Paul's requirements to reach holiness: each member of the commonwealth stands his ground independently, with the others indeed, but for the sake of his and his family's aching bellies. Yet Paul is not alien to such an assertion of individual dignity: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free" (1 Cor. 12:13). The Christian ethical innovation that so challenged the Roman Empire's symbolism lay in this denial of what we would now call 'communitarianism': all converted believers are equally members of the Church as body of Christ, whether they belonged to the chosen people, to the pagan world, whether slaves or slave owners. Paul often returns to that notion in his writings. The early modern emergence of the individual is deeply rooted in Christian ethics, and the debates of the Reformation and Counter-reformation generated the modern figure of the individual as a subject of personal rights, not as a member of a community of privilege or non-privilege.

What Shakespeare does achieve through this exchange of allegories by rhetorically semi-competent social and political actors, is a manifest subversion of political language that reveals the workings of injustice: the bodies natural of the citizens effectively suffer, whereas rhetoric and semantics are the only victims of Menenius's tale. The body politic of the Roman common weal suffers from the indifference of the senatorial order, and from

Caius Martius's tragic flaw, also expressed by Shakespeare through Martius's language of body and his body language.

In the way he courts votes, by reluctantly displaying his body's wounds, in the way he changes sides to serve Corioles, Coriolanus fails to fulfil several ideals. One is the republican ideal: the consul rules for the citizens, with the institutions, not towards the realisation of private revenge. According to the Roman laws, a general could be granted absolute power with the title of dictator for a given period of time, to wage war, but he was expected to resign his mandate in due time, and return to his original condition in the republic. Here, the general stands alone, fighting his own battle (he got his name from his victory), reacts according to his own private whims, like a tyrant according to the classical writings on the marks of a tyrant.¹² His body constantly speaks (wounds are mouths) of himself, he constantly speaks of his body, and he eventually defects to the enemy side, thus fulfilling his battle name of Coriolanus. One can only agree with David Hale, for whom the fable of the belly cannot apply to Coriolanus, to whom the rest of the Romans are anything but "his 'incorporate friends'."¹³

The etymology of the word 'individual' has to do with 'division.' The individual is what cannot be divided, a self-contained, autonomous unit, so to speak. Organicism is definitely incompatible with that emerging conception. In Greek, *diabolos* means 'divider'. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it is clear that Satan is both divided and divisive: he is divided since he once was an angel, and can only admire the beauties of God's work in his creation, and the beauty of man and woman; yet he can only hate them and wish to alienate them from God. As a divider, he manages to ruin mankind, only by separating Adam and Eve, and tempting Eve apart from Adam. Somehow, Caius Martius could be compared with Milton's Satan: he is Rome and he is Corioles. He dies of the impossibility of being both because of his difficulty at being either.

Caius Martius embodies two figures of modernity: the individual who follows his individual judgment, even in the face of obvious error and failure, on the one hand, and on the other, the illegitimate ruler who, though he rose to power following legitimate rules, becomes a tyrant by the way he rules. Both figures equate Caius Martius with tragical types from classical literature. Both also fail to meet the Pauline requirements that run underneath the body-politic controversy of act I. Coriolanus is a type of emerging modernity, but a failure in the Christian culture of early-modern Europe.

My contention is that, by letting the Pauline epistle surface from time to time from under the tale of the rebellious members, Shakespeare provided a double key to the play: for the spectators with a classical culture, it was a message about the evils of democracy and tyranny that illustrated the founding virtues of their society and applied some principles of classical poetics in the vernacular literature. To all, it was a message against rebellion and against tyranny, as distinct from the kind of legitimate absolute monarchy that James I advocated. To the Christians that perceived that biblical intertext, there was another key to the text. As often with Shakespeare, it may seem equivocal, if not ambiguous: it pleads for a charitable conception of the commonweal, it acknowledges the legitimacy of some individual demands, but it also clearly asserts the dangers of assemblies and the primacy of

¹² Mario Turchetti, *Tyrannie et tyrannicide de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, coll. Fondements de la politique, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001. The marks of tyranny were a common argument against Elizabeth I in recusant writings like those of Cardinal William Allen.

¹³ David G. Hale, "Coriolanus: the Death of a Political Metaphor," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22.3 (Summer 1971) 201.

social harmony. After the Essex rebellion at the end of Elizabeth's reign, after the repression of the Gunpowder plot, Shakespeare seems to have been caught between his recognition of the individual person's dignity, and his anxiety in the face of rebellion and disorder.

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