



Copyright © 2007 – IRCL. Tous droits réservés. Les utilisateurs peuvent télécharger et imprimer pour un usage strictement privé. Reproduction soumise à autorisation.



Coriolanus and the Hypostatized Body

John JOWETT

(Shakespeare Institute – Birmingham University)

I would like to begin with an image. This image is formative for the way I think of *Coriolanus*, and indeed it comes from my first experience of seeing it on stage. This was in 1978, when Alan Howard took the lead role. The moment I recall is of his re-entry after going to fight alone in the city of Corioles. In theatre style of the period, the stage was swathed in dry ice. The gates were two huge slabs forming a rear stage wall that slid open. They were prised apart from within by the figure of Coriolanus, mounted high above the stage with arms and legs braced against the city gates, melodramatically backlit from below, half naked, drenched in blood. I am not entirely sure that all these details are correct; this is a memory. But this image sums up some of the things I will be talking about today. It uses the figure of the actor to iconise the body, making it a symbol of heroic slaughter. And it overlaps the idea of the superhuman killer with the idea of the sacrificial victim. The image is a modern visual equivalent in theatre terms of ideas in the play's language. It seems to me that, as compared with other Shakespeare plays, the *theatre* is visual and emblematic, and the *language* is strongly mapped onto an *idea* of the body that connects with the physical *presence* of human bodies on stage.

The play's engagement with the idea of the body begins with the fable of the belly, which Menenius uses to calm down the rioters in the opening scene. The citizens are

rioting against food shortages, and single out Caius Martius as their target: 'let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price'. In contrast, when Menenius enters he is hailed as 'Worthy Menenius Agrippa, one that hath always loved the people'. Far from resolving to kill him, they engage in dialogue, giving Menenius opportunity to allegorise the uprising in terms of his 'pretty tale' of the belly:

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
Unto the appetite and affection common
Of the whole body.

The belly responds:

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.

This is a mechanistic view of both body and state. Despite the fable's ancient lineage, it is a myth fit for the age of the new science that was developing in early 17th. c England, an era fascinated equally with the political science of Machiavelli and the anatomy of the body, both key points of reference for the study of this play. Coriolanus may have been written within a year of William Harvey being elected as physician at St Bartholomew's hospital. At some point between 1608 and 1616 he first made his revolutionary discovery that 'a perpetual motion of the blood in a circle is brought about by the beat of the heart'. The idea seems curiously anticipated in Menenius's description of nutrients sent round the body along the 'rivers of the blood', a phrase with no equivalent in the source passage. As Montpellier is famous for its ancient school of medicine, I should mention that there is no coincidence to explain here: the flow of blood was recognised well before Harvey identified the heart as the organ that pumps it. So the point is simply the mechanistic conception of the body, exemplified also in the practice of public demonstrations of anatomy, as newly practiced in Montpellier, London, and elsewhere in the period.

Like anatomy, the fable of the belly reveals the body as an assembly of interdependent organs. Again expanding on the source passage, Menenius describes the citizens as his 'incorporate friends'. The word 'incorporate' is critical to the play. It means literally 'united in one body', and could apply to either a single physical human body or to a collection of people joined in a figurative body. Menenius puns on the two senses,

following good precedent in religious thinking flowing from Christ's 'Take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you'. For instance, Sir Thomas More argued that God 'doth incorporate all christen folke and hys owne bodye together in one corporacyon mystical'. Christ was sacrificed when he lived physically in the world to the end that God could incorporate the faithful into one mystical or spiritual body. I will come back to the idea of sacrifice. But I want to register for now the way Menenius's account correlates the single human body and the collective corporate body, and the convergence of these ideas with Christian theology, in a context where Christian thinking is precisely not the point in any immediate way. We should notice also how this speech, or rather exchange of speeches, plays a keynote role in setting out to the audience the intellectual foundations of the play.

Menenius's fable of the belly, of course, was not devised by Shakespeare. It derives ultimately from the Roman historian Livy's account, in which again it is Menenius Agrippa who delivers the words of wisdom. Shakespeare's account is very close to Livy, as transmitted by William Camden. The passage is especially significant because it is the only place where Shakespeare substantially augments his source in North's translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* by drawing on other source material. The conservatism in adapting the language of the source is unusual in Shakespeare. The passage stands alongside Shakespeare's paraphrase of a passage in Montaigne's essay 'Of the Cannibals' in *The Tempest* as poetic set piece of political philosophy which Shakespeare incorporates with careful respect for the language of the original. But Shakespeare, as always, writes primarily as a dramatist, and only with that qualification as a writer on political ideas. Both speeches are delivered by old men who are humane and wise in their way. They are figures who might be expected to offer sound advice and opinion, and to put forward something that gets to the very heart of the play's ideation. Both speakers are trying to deal with violent disorder and replace it with an image of an ideal and self-regulated commonwealth. But when Shakespeare produces an image of the ideal, it is always challenged by the immediate reality. Neither speaker can present his wisdom without interruption from sceptical or hostile antagonists.

There are other differences between the source passage in Livy and its realisation in the play. First, by noting the context in which Camden introduces the passage from Livy, we can expand our image of the relation between the human body and the socio-political body towards the realm of religion to which I have already referred. It is an anecdote in which Pope Adrian is told that people think that 'The Church of Rome, which should be a mother, is now a stepmother, wherein doth sit both Scribes and Pharises; and, as for yourself, whenas you are a father, why do you expect pensions from your children?'. The assumption is that the Church of Rome accumulates wealth by tithing and taxing the people. It is unnatural, on the analogy of the everyday family, for the Holy Father to exact money from his spiritual children. When this happens, what should be a spiritual corporation is actually a worldly corporation. Of course, Shakespeare's play about ancient Rome finds no space for proto-protestant critiques of the Catholic Church, but the passage as Shakespeare read it offers another clue that the corporate body is not only human and political, but, beyond that, is also mystical in its dimensions.

The second difference from the source is not an omission but a change. In Shakespeare, the belly speaks for itself. In Livy, the dispute between the members of the body leads to them calling 'a common Council' in which they 'desired the advice of the

heart'. The heart is here the spokesperson of Reason, and resolves the conflict: 'So by the persuasion of Reason, the stomach was served, the limbs comforted, and peace re-established'. The stomach has no special privilege in terms of authority. In contrast, Shakespeare makes the stomach equivalent to the ruling elite, and has it adjudicate in its own cause. Moreover, he allows Menenius to ridicule the whole basis of the fable by giving the belly human attributes expressed in other parts of the body: 'With a kind of smile Which ne'er came from the lungs, but even thus—For look you, I may make the belly smile As well as speak'. This heightens the comic grotesque. The patricians, the aristocracy, are figured as nothing more dignified than a smiling belly. This is too close to Falstaff's insistence that his face does not 'have his effect of gravity' but instead 'his effect of gravy, gravy, gravy'. Political seriousness collapses in the face of broad and incongruous humour. Which is exactly what Menenius' strategy is all about. Shakespeare therefore defeats his own proposition. The aristocracy should, in a hierarchy, be represented by the head, or at least, as in Livy, by the heart. The displacement of authority to the belly refutes the image of divinely sanctioned hierarchy. The body is a confederation of parts. The belly prevails because it argues winningly. For the belly to smile, for Menenius to make a joke of his own fable, is to secure advantage, but not to secure a triumph of political reasoning.

Renaissance readers of Livy would have understood that, whether it is located in the heart of the mind, the idea that Reason has ultimate sovereignty over the body offers a political analogy to the sovereign's authority over the state. But if the Christian God has no part in ancient Rome, nor does the Renaissance prince. As in his other Roman plays, and indeed in the Grecian *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare, in creating imaginative and dramatic versions of the classical world, explores what it might mean to take away the basic props that held up the Renaissance view of a hierarchical world.

Here, for instance, is an expression of the doctrine of authority as Shakespeare dramatised it in the person of Sir Thomas More:

Let me set up before your thoughts, good friends,
One supposition, which if you will mark
You shall perceive how horrible a shape
Your innovation [insurrection] bears. First, 'tis a sin
Which oft th'apostle did forewarn us of,
Urging obedience to authority;
And 'twere no error if I told you all
You were in arms 'gainst <God>.

The episode is structurally very similar to the opening of *Coriolanus*, in that an authority figure interposes when the citizens are in uproar. In both scenes the citizens are persuaded by the patrician to put up with their grievances and lay down their arms. But whereas More appeals to Christian doctrine, Menenius appeals with no recourse to any idea of absolute authority. He does not preach. He is persuasive because he defuses the situation, lowering the emotional temperature, replacing violent conflict with humorous reproof. His ideology is weak, because it advocates social order without defining a real basis for social order. The topography of the body does not convincingly map onto the social hierarchy. It is the

Citizen who initially acclaims ‘the kingly crowned head’ and ‘The counsellor heart’. Menenius briefly and more vaguely refers to ‘the court, the heart’ and ‘the seat o’th’ brain’; but it is far from clear who these may be if the patricians are the belly. Who else is there? There is no ‘court’ or ‘seat’ (throne) in the play.

Within Menenius’ bodily system, the belly has a clear enough function: to store and to distribute. But the play presents dangerously little evidence that they do so. The citizens are hungry. They say there’s grain enough. They claim in the opening lines of the play that ‘If they [the patricians] would yield us but the superfluity while it were wholesome we might guess they relieved us humanely, but they think we are too dear’. Better let the people starve, and the grain go off, than let the people eat. And there is little evidence to the contrary. Who is giving and who is receiving in this play? The claims are vehement, but the truth is uncertain. To the citizens, the patricians have only to release the stored grain. To Martius the ‘superfluity’ is to be found not in the store-house but in the citizens themselves—as though the question of grain were simply beside the point. For him, the solution, with its vital echo of the Citizen’s earlier word, is that Rome should ‘vent our musty superfluity’: meaning not that there is too much grain going musty in the store-houses, but too many stinking citizens, who need to be got rid of by being killed in war. Martius turns the citizens’ concern on its head by making it a metaphor. The verb he uses, ‘vent’, means literally ‘sell’. Grain, citizens who consume grain and serve as soldiers, and warfare itself are located within the same system, the same figure of speech. Coriolanus’s words are a sadistically brutal version of the economic: what Falstaff in *1 Henry IV* calls ‘food for powder’, or, in the more modern phrase, cannon fodder, here subjected to the further cruelty of economic supply and demand.

Martius’s aggressive subversion of the citizens’ complaint means that they share dangerously in the same mentality, agreeing about the nature of the problem. Each sees Rome as a body politic that would be cured of its ills if ‘vented’—and here we might remember that the word in its sense ‘cast out, discharged’ suggests nothing better than faeces, the epitome of bodily content that needs expelling. The alternative metaphor is that of the diseased limb that must be amputated. As the action builds towards the moment when Coriolanus is forced into exile, the tribune Sicinius calls Coriolanus ‘a limb that must be cut away’. This reworks the obsession with the wounds on Coriolanus’s own body as his marks of honour:

[MENENIUS] Where is he wounded?
 VOLUMNIA I’ th’ shoulder and i’ th’ left arm. There will be
 large cicatrices to show the people when he shall stand
 for his place. He received in the repulse of Tarquin
 seven hurts i’ th’ body.
 MENENIUS One i’ th’ neck and two i’ th’ thigh---there’s nine
 that I know.
 VOLUMNIA He had before this last expedition twenty-five
 wounds upon him.
 MENENIUS Now it’s twenty-seven. Every gash was an
 enemy’s grave.

He literally notches up his victories on his own body. That body seems indestructible. Streaming with blood, he is like a martyr who refuses to die, or a strange version of a martyr whose body is marked with the testimony that others, Rome's enemies, suffered death, 'Every gash was an enemy's grave'. It takes conscious effort on the part of the people to remember what they keep telling themselves, that he is a mere mortal, a member of the body politic, and subject to the city's laws and institutions. To call him 'a limb that must be cut away' is not a simple affirmation of his mortality. It is saturated in ideology, in the sense of a consciously adopted political mentality. There is a deadly contest on how to figure Coriolanus's body: whether by elevating it as a fetishised symbol of inhuman heroism, or, conversely, degrading it as a mere limb of the body politic, subject to amputation if it does not function correspondingly.

Menenius has therefore argued in vain, for the model that prevails is not one in which all the body's members are incorporated, but one in which there is a permanent contest to define the internal enemy as diseased or superfluous and in need of purging. Coriolanus's image of venting the superfluity of the people is eventually answered by the Sicinius' radical question, 'What is the city but the people?'

That is a viable question for as long as the city defines itself as a republic in which the citizens have voice. *Coriolanus* is a radical play precisely in that it describes a polis in which every debate is, in the profoundest sense, constitutional, raising the abstract question 'what is the city?' and answering that question in aggressively contested ways. The elements of a constitutional democracy are raw and vulnerable. Insurrection results in the appointment of new tribunes to represent the people, and indeed to articulate the question 'What is the city but the people?'. But the political ascendancy of Coriolanus threatens an obvious reversal:

SICINIUS On the sudden
I warrant him consul.
BRUTUS Then our office may
During his power go sleep.

From all perspectives the city constantly sees itself as unincorporated, and the ideological and physical struggle is about what is superfluous, where the self-wounding, self-curing knife-cut should fall.

And, the play suggests, this is an inevitable consequence of a state with two conspicuous features: it is militarised, and yet it lacks the kind of central authority that we might call, in Jacobean terms, a monarchy, or, in modern terms, a dictatorship. The state of more or less continuous war is demonstrated in the play to produce an internally divided polis at war with itself, because were it not for the state of war Coriolanus really would be redundant, and his exile really would solve the problem.

War is, then, internalised as the instability within the city itself. Martius is, in the opening lines, 'enemy to the people', and to 'kill him' offers the prospect of 'corn at our own price'. Curiously, the play does not make much of the city's dependence on the surrounding territories for food supply. Food seems to belong to the area of the metaphoric and symbolic. The domesticity of Rome does not involve eating, but sewing, perhaps a

diminutive and feminized equivalent to sword-fighting. Feminine nurture is even more obviously perverted by being reinscribed within male militarism, in Volumnia's startling and famous description of Hector's bleeding forehead:

VIRGILIA His bloody brow? O Jupiter, no blood!
 VOLUMNIA Away, you fool! It more becomes a man
 Than gilt his trophy.

[So the bloody warrior is in his own bodily self his own trophy]

The breasts of Hecuba
 When she did suckle Hector looked not lovelier
 Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood
 At Grecian sword, contemning.

[i.e. showing contempt by spitting blood: the milk that is sucked from the breast becomes the blood that spurts from the wound, which itself is compared with spitting saliva in contempt, thus returning us to the mouth but replacing ingestion with spitting]

Not only is the female world contaminated by images of military violence, but Volumnia establishes herself as a very fount for the ideology of violence. Elsewhere in Rome, Menenius is a festive figure, but although he talks about eating and drinking we never see him do so. It is 4.3, the scene where Coriolanus arrives in Corioles and makes himself known to Aufidius, that brings us as close as the play can go to a scene of feasting. Even here, the actual evidence of food is held back from the audience, as though festivity were too much an affront to the world of the play. We are tantalisingly near: music plays within, servingmen come and go, calling for wine, and Coriolanus, no doubt hungry from his travels, notes that 'The feast smells well'. Sometimes, indeed, on stage the scene is managed so that the dialogue between Coriolanus and Aufidius takes place before the nobles of Corioles in the feast itself. But as written it is a threshold scene. Coriolanus will be led in to the feast at the end of the scene, but the audience is kept out of it. The reason is no doubt in part theatrical: a feast takes a lot of setting up, and a table surrounded by bums on seat is not good dramaturgy, unless, as in *Macbeth*, the feast is disrupted by an over-insistent ghost. Nevertheless, it's worth considering, in view of the importance of food and the human body symbolically throughout the play, that its failure to materialise on stage and be eaten says something about the play's world. Ingestion simply does not happen. Nor does the social harmonisation associated with it.

The end of the play is quite simple. It offers the prospect of an apotheosis of Coriolanus as fighting machine as he threatens to burn and destroy Rome itself. It offers the hypothesis that Coriolanus has transcended the human and become a destroying god. A point to which I will return.

But in contrast to the destroying dragon, the Coriolanus that is finally affirmed reveals a more complex humanity than has been seen in him at any previous stage. When

he grants his mother's petition to make peace with Rome, he chooses kinship, humanity, mortality:

But for your son, believe it, O believe it,
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
If not most mortal to him.

Note how the simple repetition acts as guarantor of personal sincerity and vulnerable selfhood. Note also how the unusual word order in 'you have with him' quietly insists on *relationship*, whilst at the same time objectifying the personal pronoun 'me' to third-person 'him'.

Coriolanus is, after all, not simply the heroic person, 'me alone', but the warrior as an effect of the civil and military infrastructure: 'make you a sword of me'. Coriolanus experiences different ways of being alone: in sole opposition to the citizens, as warrior who 'Alone I fought in your Corioles' walls', 'Alone he entered / The mortal gate of th' city', and then to be exiled from Rome, to 'go alone, / Like to a lonely dragon that his fen / Makes feared and talked of more than seen', and 'As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin'.

This last is often cited as evidence of Coriolanus' desire to be a god, an extension of his earlier desire for his victories to be their own reward, in that it separates him yet further from human commerce. But that desire cannot be realised. Coriolanus in fact depends on his social being—his relation with his mother in the first and final instance, but also in his determination to be hostile, which I would see as a kind of neediness or inverted clinginess, certainly a form of dependence. Intellectually, it is true, as Stanley Cavell puts it, that he 'desires to be desireless, he hungers to lack nothing, to be complete'. But he cannot attain that object, because he cannot escape his hunger to hunger.

His need for others is a clue as to why his inferior opponent Auffidius is never killed. To resolve and end hostility in single combat is precisely what Coriolanus does not want. The prospect of total autonomy is actually anathema to him, so when exiled from Rome he goes straight to Auffidius' house. The narrative is one of revenge, but the psychology within the symbolic patterns suggests that revenge is part of a realignment of hostility and need.

But when he belongs neither to Rome nor Corioles, he is a nothing, or at least a mere mortal. The play's last use of the word 'alone' is when he is surrounded by Auffidius and his co-conspirators, now enemies about to kill him:

False hound,
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I
Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles.
Alone I did it.

Note the irregular caesura in 'That...I', the forced line-break between subject 'I' and verb, and the front-stressed 'Fluttered', together creating hiatus or strain between subject and verb, and dramatic emphasis on the unusual verb itself. Alone he did it. Alone he now is not, and yet is. Coriolanus' anti-social earlier doings in Corioles, like the feast in Corioles, were tantalizingly offstage. His killing, the revenge of the social, is brutally onstage. In appearance, at first, it is one of the most companionable moments he experiences. The spectacle of his military entrance to greet the nobility of Corioles, and indeed the careful phrasing of the very stage direction, is deeply ironic: '*Enter Coriolanus marching with drum and colours, the Commoners being with him*'. It is a spectacle of social integration. One would expect the citizens to be waiting for Coriolanus with the nobility, or to be following after him. The latter is certainly possible, but the words '*with him*' give a distinctly different emphasis. The point at which Coriolanus is seen integrated with the citizens is the point at which members of the nobility kill him.

It is also the point that brings together the two images of the figure in literally violent opposition. The eagle that flutters the dove-cote, 'Alone I did it', on the one hand. On the other, the stinging accusation 'boy': 'At his nurses tears / He whined and roared away your victory', the accusation of maternal dependency that taunts Coriolanus to his self-ruining boast: 'Measureless liar . . . 'Boy'? O slave'... 'Boy'! False hound, / If you have writ your annals true...'.

It goes without saying, almost, that Coriolanus is the least mature of Sh's heroes. From this perspective, the play is a demonstration of the physical indominatability but psychic vulnerability of the military man. The man of steel is an insecure brat tied to his mother's apron strings.

But my main point in this lecture is not to offer a character study. I am interested instead in the ideas of exchange and excess, in the quasi-economic regulation of the play's world. Coming to the play from *Timon*, I note some differences that are also points of similarity. *Timon* does have a feast on stage; in fact two of them. The first feast is a set-piece demonstrating the excess and the folly inherent in Timon's gift-giving. Timon is an idealist who believes in a reciprocal brotherhood of man. Unfortunately, his so-called friends, though happy to receive, see no reciprocal obligation to give, and are prevented if they try to do so. *Coriolanus* is founded on a first premise of hostility, on a figure who hates as surely as Timon loves. Again there is a perverse model of human exchange and obligation, based on that skewed relationship between the one person and the many. Timon and Coriolanus both see themselves as exceptions, and act with according excess. Their behaviour, oblivious of the normal mechanisms of reciprocity that govern society and allow it to function, leads to an inevitable crisis. Timon exiles himself from Athens; Coriolanus is expelled forcibly from Rome. In both plays there is a counter-movement, led by Coriolanus himself and, in *Timon*, by Alcibiades.

One can often compare Shakespeare plays and find parallels between them, but the parallels here are both telling and routed in Shakespeare's initial conception of the plays. This claim may seem contentious: what evidence can there be of the writer's initial conception? The answer lies in the source material, North's translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*. When writing *Timon*, he would have found the 'Life of Alcibiades' paired with the 'Life of Coriolanus'. Shakespeare's main interest was

deflected from Alcibiades to Timon; in other words he found in the 'Life of Alcibiades' the story of the man who turns against his home city, accusing it of ingratitude, but developed it by showing Timon, who is mentioned in Plutarch's 'Life of Alcibiades', largely instead of Alcibiades, and partly in parallel with him. The idea of the parallel life is, then, embodied in *Timon* itself. When Shakespeare later came to write *Coriolanus*, he could fail to have been aware that the military leader Coriolanus was Plutarch's parallel for the military leader Alcibiades. This was the only occasion on which Shakespeare dramatised both Plutarch's paralleled figures. But Timon had substituted for Alcibiades, Timon was not a soldier, and Shakespeare had already established the principle of reciprocal obligation and ingratitude as the theme that linked Timon and Alcibiades.

From this perspective it will be clearer that Coriolanus has the quality that might be called hostile generosity. Verbally, he is generous with abuse, as is manifested immediately when he first appears on stage in his invective against the citizens. But on the battle field he sets himself up as that figure of ironic martyrdom I mentioned before—another connection with Timon, who repeatedly sees himself as a Christ figure, and says, when bills are thrust at him,:

Knock me down with 'em, cleave me to the girdle.
Cut my heart in sums.
Tell out [i.e. count out] my blood.

The heart, metonymic for the body, and his blood are divided between all Timon's creditors. This vision of passive martyrdom is similar to Coriolanus, up to a point. Coriolanus gives of himself totally, and is a figure of inexhaustible outflow. He offers his body for repeated laceration on the battlefield, and is recipient of endless gashes. His body is repeatedly hacked at, opened, penetrated. The everyday phenomenon of the wound that heals, common to us all, is in him something remarkable, almost a miracle. His body retains only the marks of his former wounds, what Coriolanus calls his 'unaching scars', which are no longer active injuries, but marks, signifiers, inscribed on his body. But of course, what they signify is not simply his suffering, as with a martyr, as with Timon's outburst, but his effectiveness as a killer on the battle-field. When he enters the gates of Corioles single-handed, he is assumed to be dead: 'See, see, they have shut him in./ To th'pot, I warrant him'. This is transformed to 'Who's yonder, / That does appear as he were flayed?'—the figure supposedly killed and 'cooked' in the pot is transformed into a living piece of raw flesh. In Cominius' account:

His sword, death's stamp,
Where it did mark, it took. From face to foot
He was a thing of blood, whose every motion
Was timed with dying cries.

The last lines here offer an image suggestive of birth conflated with death: the bloody figure who emerges through the gates to the sound of 'cries'. But Coriolanus is the man, the soldier, and the cries are the dying cries of his victims. Indeed the blood is his own (the SD reads '*Enter Martius, bleeding*') but also, surely, indistinguishably, the blood of his victims. The figure of martyr and the figure of the new-born babe stand for 'death's stamp' that Coriolanus inflicts on others. Christ's body and blood are infinitely divisible; they can

be shared amongst all communicants past, present and future. But Coriolanus' body, healing itself as Christ's does not, is stubbornly singular and fixed.

Clearly, we need to read the play's insistent and grotesque imagery of the body against what we see on stage. Like the grain, like the feast, Coriolanus' moments of most heroic action and most bloody slaughter are withheld from the view of the audience. The gates of Corioles are the threshold of what we are allowed to experience. Beyond that, we rely on evidence: the evidence of Coriolanus' bodily survival, the evidence of blood and wounds—like the evidence of the servingmen going to and from the feast. There are again practical reasons for this: the Jacobean theatre company did not have enough actors to stage a massacre. But again there is purpose to the stagecraft. The gates of Corioles are the threshold between drama as enactment and poetic language. They represent the limit of what can be physically represented. Coriolanus' body is a *token* of terrible but unseen deeds. What cannot be seen will be represented verbally in Cominius' eulogy, which begins by acknowledging that language cannot capture the amazing deeds of Coriolanus—'I shall lack voice'.

But that body is there also in the metaphors of the body that surface everywhere. It is there particularly in the talk about Coriolanus's wounds. I am thinking here not of the bleeding body on the battle-field, but the clothed body of Coriolanus once he returns to Rome. When the citizens insist on seeing these wounds on the warrior's body, they are, of course, insisting on their collective rights within the body politic, rights that are founded on a politics of bodily spectacle and voyeurism, or, as we might say, theatre. But within that system the display of wounds is crucial. They are testimony of the unseen deeds; hence when Coriolanus refuses to display the wounds those deeds are doubly occluded. They also testify that the deeds are dedicated to the state. The crisis in Act 3 is therefore about ownership of Coriolanus's body: whether it belongs to his private, egotistical self, or to the body politic. Consulship demands the latter. English banknotes bear the words 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of [five pounds]'. Coriolanus's scarred body is similarly the symbolically marked object that allows exchange: the hidden wounds are a promise to pay the bearer on *humble* demand the sum of a Consulship. No display, and the citizens will, like Cominius, 'lack voice': that is to say, withhold their votes.

From an early modern point of view the humility demanded of Coriolanus is exactly what one would expect of an exchange based on credit. As Craig Muldrew has shown, in the era before banks and bank-notes most transactions did not involve immediate payment of money, and depended on credit. The very word 'credit' originally referred to a person's having sound reputation; it was a moral judgement. But in Shakespeare's time it was rapidly acquiring the sense that describes financial obligation. Coriolanus reflects both senses, and indeed the cross-over between them. His body is a kind of IOU or precursor of the banknote. But in the social world of exchange the language of courtesy and obligation is quite simply essential to establish the social bond necessary for the exchange to take place. Coriolanus refuses both the courtesy and the physical evidence of his credit. Coriolanus reinscribes *value* into *valour*—not simply that his value *is* his valour, but that the social concept of value, the very currency of social and political exchange, is negated. His military actions give him social and political currency. They make him a source of benefit to Rome. He is a cornucopia flowing with enemy blood, and his own. But his

social actions remove him from the value system. His valour then stands in relation to itself alone. He says:

As for my country I have shed my blood
Not fearing outward force, so shall my lungs
Coin words ...

But this coining of words is not aimed at establishing his political currency. True to form, he is coining words expressing hostility to the citizens, words whose only exchange value from their point of view is wholly negative. So Coriolanus hoards his wounds to himself, as much as Barabas in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* hoards his gold. But Barabas' gold is displayed to the audience, as the wounds of Coriolanus were at Corioles. Now his body is hidden, in that inappropriate garment, the gown of humility. 'We are to put our tongues into his wounds', declares a citizen. But, in contrast with the resurrected Christ allowing doubting Thomas to put his fingers into his wounds, Coriolanus will not actually allow the citizens to put tongues into his wounds, even in the metaphorical sense; The grotesquely sexualised image, by a process of synaesthesia, translates what is seen into what is spoken and heard. It metaphorically reopens the wounds to produce a repulsively intimate image of the symbiosis between bodily *spectacle* (sight) and political *acclamation* or 'voice' (words); For Shakespeare, the Roman forum is the 'marketplace', here specifically the marketplace of authority, in which leaders are chosen as though they were beasts, valued not for their weight or perfection, but for their worth measured in wounds. 'As if I received them [his wounds] for the hire / Of their breath only': wounds as currency for breath, breath as currency for power.

The play's strategic use of, and meditation on, the human body as epitomised in Coriolanus himself suggests that the body of Coriolanus on stage might be described using the theological term 'hypostasis'. Hypostasis refers to the single person of Christ as distinct from his two 'natures', the human and the divine. This applies to Coriolanus as a figure of bodily sacrifice and god-like menace, and so accounts for the way Coriolanus is at the same time both an arrogant, absolute, and ultimately immature person and a fearful superhuman symbol. It applies to his body, as simultaneously the blood and flesh of a human being and a physical signifier of his deeds within the signifying systems of warfare and social obligation. Coriolanus has been described as the simplest of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, which is true in purely psychological terms, but herein lies a different kind of complexity and fascination. The hypostasized singleness is always unstable and insecure, because it defies cold logic. There will always be the urge to reduce Coriolanus to the merely human, subject of law and punishment, childish and proud mother's son, on the one hand, or on the other hand to figure him as a monstrous, superhuman, 'this Martius is grown from man to dragon', 'the hoarded plague o' th' gods', 'He was a kind of nothing, titleless, / Till he had forged himself a name o' th' fire / Of burning Rome'.

I hope that it is clear, then, how Coriolanus is a variant of the figure of Christ: not loving but hateful. By an inexorable logic, either he will burn Rome or he will relinquish his divinity and be himself destroyed as a mere mortal. He does sacrifice himself for the sake of others. But he saves them only from the fate that he himself would have inflicted. He offers no redemption in the theological sense.

Coriolanus is a bold, experimental, and mannerist application of Shakespeare's recurrent ideas about acting itself: in this case, the actor's body as the vehicle for representing not only events, but the very ideas that form the basis of the play. Through its focus on the hypostatized human body, the play develops not only a political-economic awareness unmatched in any other Shakespeare play, but also what we might call a religious-economic awareness. This is perfectly in keeping with the position of Shakespeare as an early modern writer contemplating Rome as a society as urban as his own London yet lacking the ideological infrastructure of monarchy and Christian God—an epistemological gap that *Coriolanus* threatens to fill in frightening ways.

John JOWETT

Shakespeare Institute – Birmingham University