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## “The sweet which is their poison”: of venom, envy and vanity in Coriolanus

Yan Brailowsky

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LECTURES D'UNE ŒUVRE  
**THE TRAGEDY OF CORIOLANUS**  
DE WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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EDITIONS  

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DU TEMPS

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# “The sweet which is their poison”: of venom, envy and vanity in *Coriolanus*

Yan Brailowsky

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Menenius’ introductory “belly” speech (I.1) foregrounds the question of food and famine in *Coriolanus*<sup>1</sup>. Critics have taken Menenius’ cue and analyzed the implications of the patrician’s parable throughout the play, but often failed to discuss what I believe are equally significant references to poison.

I would like to argue that references to “poison” or “venom” are not exactly Shakespeare’s proposed antidote, as it were, to the feeding (or lack thereof) that goes on elsewhere. Contrary to other plays in which references to poison clearly refer to mortal potions and assassination plots, *Coriolanus* offers no such thing. Poison is only taken in a figurative sense – and yet, the poison in the play is poisonous, infecting not the body natural, but the body politic, underlining the deep-rooted link between poison and envy, or *Invidia*.

In what follows, as I try to re-interpret Brutus’ remark that “All tongues speak of [Coriolanus]” (II.1.201), I take the question of poison and the way in which poison affects, or infects, the body politic to be a metaphor for what happens when one attempts to weigh one’s merits, or give (away) one’s voice. This will, in turn, allow me to argue that, if *Coriolanus* is often said to lack rhetorical flourishes commonly found elsewhere in Shakespeare, it is perhaps because Coriolanus’ fabled

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1. In what follows, unless noted otherwise, I shall quote from *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, Brian R. Parker (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994. Whenever possible, I will abridge my analysis by referring to useful paragraphs in Brian Parker’s introduction, hereafter referred to as Parker. I shall occasionally refer to the Arden edition, edited by Philip Brockbank, London, Methuen & Co Ltd., 1976, hereafter referred to as Brockbank.

lack of oratorical skills is here set as a model against the “Vanitie of Words”, to counterpoise “the sweet which is [our] poison” (III.1.159).

### **Sweet poison**

The antithetical relationship between nourishment and venom is a commonplace – like the “belly” speech Menenius himself knows the audience has heard before (I.1.87). To illustrate the link between food and poison, a useful reference is the famous twelfth-century treaty by Pietro d’Abano, in a 1593 French translation:

L’Aliment & le Venim sont de contraires effects en nostre corps. L’aliment le nourrit, suiuant mesmes son etymologie : le venim le destruit & consume, l’aliment que nous prenons pour nostre nourriture, est conuertit en sang, au foye, qui le communique par les branches de ses venims, à tous les membres, pour les substanter. Le venim estant meslé avec le sang ou ailleurs, selon la propriété, tout seul, ou meslé avec l’aliment, selon sa qualité & quantité, reduict à sa nature venimeuse, le membre qu’il aura touché, ou tout le corps. Et comme les animaux, & autres choses que la terre produit pour nostre nourriture, estans par nous mangez & digerez, se tournent en nostre substance, & nourrissent nos corps : Aussi les Venims qui ont atteint, ou sont conioincts à nos corps, au lieu de les substanter, les changent, & rendent venimeux. Or d’autant que l’argent est plus puissant que le patient, nostre substance, comme passiuue, se change en venim, qui est comme vne chose actiue : ainsi que la paille, passiuue, est denotee par le feu, son agent. C’est pourquoy plusieurs Médecins ont voulu dire, que le venim est du genre des choses qui corrompent la composition & complexion du corps, & induisent quelquefois solution de continuité<sup>1</sup>.

The narrative woven by the Paduan professor of medicine shows us how food and venom are “converted” and “communicated” in much the same way as Menenius says the belly “digest[s] things rightly” (147) and “send[s] it through the rivers of your blood” (132). The difference being that venom ultimately “corrupts” the body while the belly feeds it: “au lieu de les substanter, les changent [nos corps] & rendent venimeux”. And yet, in *Coriolanus*, the difference between food and poison is not as clear-cut as d’Abano suggests.

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1. Pietro D’Abano (tr. Lazare Boet), *Traicté des venims de Pierre d’Abano dict Conciliateur*, Lyon, Jean Huguetan, 1593, p. 6-7.

Though poison is not directly mentioned in this opening scene, Menenius does call his tale “stale” (89), thereby suggesting that something dubious has affected the body politic. Not only is it no longer in a pristine state, it is potentially unwholesome – Menenius even offering to “stale’t a little more”. His splendid conclusion that the Senate is like a “good belly” (145) is counterbalanced by the plebeian’s description of the belly as “the sink o’th’body” (119), and Menenius’ own admission that the belly retains “but the bran” (143). Finally, the interpretive reversibility<sup>1</sup> of this “pretty tale” compounds Menenius’ failure in restoring the health of the body politic; he merely succeeds in delaying the crowd’s attack.

Expressions of Rome’s decay are not in Shakespeare’s source text, Plutarch’s *The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus*, nor, for that matter, are references to poison or venom<sup>2</sup>. Outbursts of the plague in London in the months preceding *Coriolanus* certainly account in part for an accumulation of terms denoting decay, pestilence, disease, and so forth<sup>3</sup>, but cannot account for insistent references to poison or venom.

While this, in itself, is remarkable, *Coriolanus* presents other peculiarities: in Shakespearean plays of the same period, notably *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Pericles*, poison or venom are most frequently linked with serpents or assassination attempts. The terms are used literally and affect the body natural: Antiochus proposes to poison Pericles after the latter has deciphered his riddle about a “viper” that is “no viper” (I.1); Cleopatra commits suicide with an asp, while Cæsar initially believes she was killed by poisoned figs (V.2).

In *Coriolanus*, references to poison are only used figuratively. Coriolanus does not refer to a real poison, like Claudio’s “leperous distilment” which did away with his brother in *Hamlet* (I.5.64). When Coriolanus says:

At once pluck out  
The multitudinous tongue; let them not lick  
The sweet which is their poison. (III.1.157-159)

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1. Parker recalls how the fable has been traditionally read in two ways, one stressing “social harmony”, the other striving to uphold the “legitimacy of hierarchy”, p. 19.
  2. Plutarch, (tr. Sir Thomas North), *The lives of the noble Grecians and Romanes*, London, Thomas Vautroullier dwelling in the Blacke Friers by Ludgate, 1579, 1st edition. For convenience’s sake, I will quote Plutarch from a readily available edition, in Geoffrey Bulough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, London, New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul/Columbia UP, 1964-1975, vol. 5.
  3. See Parker, p. 81. For other diseases such as leprosy and gangrene, see III.1.81-82, 297-298, 308-313, for instance.

The poison he refers to is “a dangerous physic” (156), i.e. a medicine gone awry. A few lines below, Brutus will say something quite similar:

Sir, those cold ways  
That seem like prudent helps are very poisons  
Where the disease is violent. (III.1.220-222)

By having two enemies express the same idea, that of a “help” or “physic” which turns poisonous, Shakespeare seems to underline the ambivalent nature of poison. Potion and poison are derived from the same Latin root, *pōtiō*, but they are antithetical terms. By stressing the extreme nature of the potions involved, Shakespeare stresses the fact that the difference between curative *potion* and deadly *poison* is essentially a matter of degree, a conception epitomized by the sixteenth-century Swiss alchemist and physician Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus, in a dictum: “*alle ding sind giftt und nichts ohn giftt. Allein die dosis macht das ein ding kein giftt ist*”<sup>1</sup>.

The inherent ambiguity of the notion of poison is an apt metaphor for what goes on in the play, especially when one takes into account the German term for poison: *Gift*, which takes on amphibolic overtones in English<sup>2</sup>. Like Menenius’ “belly” tale, who or what the *Gift* is can be interpreted either positively or negatively, as either Rome or Coriolanus.

We are told Coriolanus is re-born in Corioles, a “pot” (I.5.20), transforming him into the embodiment of a *pōtiō* both poison and potion. Indeed, Coriolanus is Rome’s gift: he is both its saviour and enemy, as he fights against, or for, the Volsces. In the same way, Rome is a gift to Coriolanus: it is ready either to lend him its voices, giving him a

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1. “All things are poison, and nothing is without poison. The dosage alone determines what is poison”, Paracelsus, *Sieben Defensionen, Verantwortung über etliche Verunglimpfungen seiner Mißgönner*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Karl Sudhoff and Wilhelm Matthieszen (eds.), München, R. Oldenbourg, 1928 (1538), vol. 11, chap. 3, p. 138.
  2. Amphibology is “when we speake or write doubtfully and that the sence may be taken two wayes”, according to George Puttenham in *The arte of English poesie*, John L. Lumley (ed.), New York, AMS Press, 1966 (1589), English reprints, v. 4 [no. 15], p. 267. On amphibology in the Renaissance, see my article “Amphibologie et parole jésuitique à la Renaissance : entre poétique et politique”, *Bulletin de la Société de Stylistique Anglaise*, 27, forthcoming. Freud does not include *Gift* in his analysis on “The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words”. See “Sur le sens opposé des mots originaires”, in Sigmund Freud, tr. Bertrand Féron, *L'inquiétante étrangeté et autres essais*, Paris, Gallimard, Folio Essais, 1985, p. 47-60. But there are other languages in which the relationship between potion and poison are well documented. See “La pharmacie de Platon”, in Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination*, Paris, Seuil, 1972, p. 71-197, on the difference between *pharmakeus* and *pharmakon*.

consulship and a *central* role in the affairs of state, or it is ready to refuse him, casting him *out* of the city, after having unsuccessfully tried to cast him *off* a cliff.

Since he embodies a gift, i.e. someone in whom antithetical meanings coexist, his existence potentially endangers everything that underpins the stability of meaning and, consequently, the social and political order. Because *Coriolanus* can dissolve the barriers between antithetical terms, he *must* be exiled, rather *ejected*, from Rome, instead of being simply executed or imprisoned within the city limits. That “eject” is a *hapax legomenon* in the Shakespearean canon, as the Arden editor notes<sup>1</sup>, stresses *Coriolanus*’ extraordinary and semi-pestilent nature.

For we are peremptory to dispatch  
This viperous traitor. To eject him hence  
Were but our danger, and to keep him here  
Our certain death. (III.1.288-291)

I would also argue that the paronomasia *Volsces/voices* contributes to the unsettling of meaning, all the while sealing *Coriolanus*’ fate: no matter which poison he picks, be it fighting against, or for, the *Volsces*, or fighting for, or against, the people or “voices” of Rome, *Coriolanus* is doomed to die, as if his pride acted like a mortal poison, contaminating good and bad deeds alike.

### “Bevenimde Envy”

The ambivalent nature of the poison that Rome and/or *Coriolanus* represent requires further analysis, one which could invert the causal link suggested above. To claim that Rome or *Coriolanus* are dangerous does not suffice to justify the reference to poison or venom. In *Julius Caesar*, another major Roman tragedy, Mark Antony refers to *Cæsar*’s purported ambition as the prime justification for his murder (III.2). In that central scene, Shakespeare does not refer to poison or venom, whereas in the equally pivotal scene of *Coriolanus*, also in Act III, Shakespeare insistently mentions poison and serpents (III.1.89-90, 159, 221, 265, 289).

One has to turn to well-known representations of Envy in Classical and Renaissance culture to understand why the dramatist thought it useful to mention poison in this play. Let us begin with a particularly eloquent example: Geoffrey Whitney’s “*Invidiæ descriptio*” in *A Choice of Emblemes, and other devises*, first published in 1586:

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1. The term is “not elsewhere used by Shakespeare”, Brockbank, p. 213.



What hideous hagge with visage sterne appeares?  
Whose feeble limmes, can scarce the bodie staie:  
This, Enuie is: leane, pale, and full of yeares,  
Who with the blisse of other pines awaie.  
And what declares, her eating vipers broode?  
That poysoned thoughtes, bee euermore her foode.

What meanes her eies? So bleared, sore, and redd:  
Her mourninge still, to see an others gaine.  
And what is mente by snakes vpon her head?  
The fruite that springes, of such a venomed braine.  
But whie, her harte shee rentes within her brest?  
It shewes her selfe, doth worke her owne vnrest.

Whie lookes shee wronge? Bicause shee woulde not see,  
An happie wight, which is to her a hell:  
What other partes within this furie bee?  
Her harte, with gall: her tonge, with stinges doth swell.  
And laste of all, her staffe with prickes aboundes:  
Which showes her wordes, wherewith the good shee woundes<sup>1</sup>.

The description of Envy with its “poisoned thoughts” had been earlier described by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, here rendered in English by Arthur Golding in 1567:

There saw she Envie sit within fast gnawing on the flesh  
Of Snakes and Todes, the filthie foode that keepes hir vices fresh. [...]  
The working of hir festered gall had made hir stomacke greene.  
And all bevenimde was hir tongue<sup>2</sup>.

In both cases, it is interesting to note, as Brockbank does in the Arden edition, that “vipers were believed to eat their way at birth through the parental bowels<sup>3</sup>”. Like Envy’s self-inflicted wounds, and “eating vipers” which feed (on) it, this partly explains the numerous references to cannibalism and consuming one’s own flesh in the play<sup>4</sup>.

Whitney’s emblem is more outspoken than its illustrious forebear, Andrea Alciati’s *Emblematum liber* (in particular emblem 71), first published in 1531 and widely re-edited thereafter. In addition to being less pithy than the more famous Alciati emblems, Whitney’s book of

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1. Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes, and other devises*, Leiden, In the house of Christopher Plantyn, by Francis Raphelengius, 1586, 1st edition, p. 94.
  2. Ovid, Arthur Golding (tr.), *The .xv. Bookes of P. Ovidius Naso, entytuled Metamorphosis*, London, Willyam Seres, 1567, II. 970.
  3. Brockbank, p. 212.
  4. Parker, p. 78-79.

emblems also offers other intriguing echoes with Shakespeare's text, notably its paradoxical play with "sweet" and "poison" in the poem accompanying the emblem "*Fel in melle*", not unlike Shakespeare's oxymoronic "the sweet which is their poison":

Lo CVPID here, the honie hyes to taste,  
On whome, the bees did straight extende their power:  
For whilst at will he did their labours waste,  
*He founde that sweete, was sauced with the sower:*  
And till that time hee thought no little thinges,  
Weare of suche force: or armed so with stinges.

The hyues weare plac'd accordinge to his minde,  
The weather warme, the honie did abounde.  
And Cypid iudg'd the bees of harmelesse kinde,  
But whilst he tri'de his naked corpes they wounde:  
And then to late his rashe attempte hee ru'de,  
*When after sweete, so tarte a taste insu'de.*

So ofte it happes, when wee our fancies feede,  
And only ioye in outwarde gallant showes.  
The inwarde man, if that wee doe not heede,  
Wee ofte, doe plucke a nettle for a rose:  
*No baite so sweete as beautie, to the eie,*  
Yet ofte, it hathe worse poyson then the bee<sup>1</sup>.



*Whitney's Choice of Emblemes, 1586*

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1. G. Whitney, *op. cit.*, p. 147 (my italics).

Whatever the actual influence of Whitney's book on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, what remains in every traditional source of imagery of Envy is a clear semantic and symbolic relationship between envy, poison and vipers. The question remains: who is envious in *Coriolanus*?

In his French-English dictionary, first published in 1611, Cotgrave mentions a French proverb to illustrate the word "Venim": "À la queue gist le venim<sup>1</sup>". In Florio's Italian-English dictionary, the Italian word for venom, "*veléno*" (sic), is said to connote "ill will, grudge or bitterness of minde<sup>2</sup>". This would seem to point to the envy of the plebeians and their Tribunes who fear Coriolanus' authoritarian tendencies and hate for the common people. Menenius talks about the parts of the body which "envied [the belly's] receipt" (I.1.109) while Coriolanus complains to Aufidius about "the cruelty and envy of the people" (IV.5.75). To such direct references, one should add indirect references: "malice" and slander are frequently alluded to, and these are commonly associated with envy. Indeed, Brockbank systematically glosses "envy" as "malice" in the Arden edition. Whenever malice is mentioned, poison or venom are not far behind.

All this would seem to agree with Sir Francis Bacon's analysis "Of Envy", first published in the 1625 edition of his *Essays*:

*Publique Enuy* is as an *Ostracisme*, that eclipseth Men, when they grow too great. And therefore it is a Bridle also to Great Ones, to keepe them within Bounds.

This *Enuy*, being in the Latine word *Inuidia*, goeth in the Moderne languages, by the name of *Discontentment*: Of which we shall speake in handling *Sedition*. It is a disease, in a State, like to Infection. For as Infection, spreadeth vpon that, which is sound, and tainteth it; So when *Enuy*, is gotten once into a State, it traduceth euen the best Actions thereof, and turneth them into an ill Odour<sup>3</sup>.

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1. Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*, London, Adam Islip, 1611, 1st edition.
  2. John Florio, *Queen Anna's New World of Words, or Dictionarie of the Italian and English tongues*, London, Printed by Melch. Bradwood, for Edw. Blount and William Barret, 1611.
  3. Francis Bacon, *A Harmony of the Essays, etc., of Francis Bacon*, Edward Arber (ed.), New York, AMS Press, 1966 (1597-1625), English reprints, v. 7 [no. 27], p. 516. Bacon's influential *Essays* often prove an insightful companion to Shakespearean criticism, so much so that some nineteenth century critics even tried to argue that Bacon was, in fact, the *real* author of Shakespeare's works.

Bacon’s analysis suggests that envy leads to sedition, and that it works like a poison, infecting an otherwise healthy body politic. His essay also underlines the positive effect of envy when it is of the “Publicque” kind. But Bacon whole-heartedly disowns the “Priuate” kind of envy, such as that provoked by pride:

Aboue all, those are most subiect to *Enuy*, which carry the Greatnesse of their Fortunes, in an insolent and proud Manner: Being neuer well, but while they are shewing, how great they are, Either by Outward Pompe, or by Triumphant ouer all Opposition, or Competition. (515)

Bacon suggests that those who are guilty of the sin of pride are responsible for provoking envy in others. If “public envy” can possibly be attributed to the Tribunes, the nobles in *Coriolanus* tend to feed on “private envy”. “I sin in envying [Aufidius’] nobility” (I.1.228) says Coriolanus; and Sicinius claims it was Coriolanus who “Envied against the people” (III.3.96), not the other way around. The first time Aufidius is shown onstage fighting against his arch-enemy, he exclaims: “Not Afric owns a serpent I abhor / More than thy fame and envy” (I.9.3-4)<sup>1</sup>. A few moments later, he says his valour is “poisoned” by Coriolanus, adding the last panel, poison, to the symbolic triptych linking serpents, Envy and poison:

My valour, poisoned  
With only suff’ring stain by him, for him  
Shall fly out of itself. (I.11.17-19)

The above quotation comes after a Soldier’s remark that Coriolanus is “the devil”, to which Aufidius replies: “Bolder, though not so subtle” (16-17). Bacon concludes his essay by saying:

It [Envy] is also the vilest Affection, and the most depraued; For which cause, it is the proper Attribute, of the Deuill, who is called; *The Enuious Man, that soweth tares amongst the wheat by night*. As it alwayes commeth to passe, that *Enuy* worketh subtilly, and in the darke; And to the preiudice of good things, such as is the *Wheat*. (517)

If the *Devil* is the “Envious Man”, it follows that if Coriolanus is called “the *devil*”, he needs be an envious man, though not quite *The Envious Man* himself – Coriolanus, we are told, is more bold than subtle.

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1. The wording and absence of punctuation makes this line somewhat problematic.

Envy also provides the motive for Aufidius' plot to assassinate his rival after the latter's triumphant return from Rome. Aufidius resents Coriolanus' success, and regrets his earlier decision to greet the exiled Roman hero, as if he had poisoned himself by having been merciful:

*First Conspirator.* How is it with our general?

*Aufidius.*

Even so

As with a man by his own alms impoisoned,  
And with his charity slain. (V.6.9-11)

Even the most Christian of virtues, Charity, is contaminated by the poison of envy.

### **“Vanitie of Words”**

The man I speak of cannot in the world  
Be singly counterpoised. (II.2.84-85)

If there is undoubtedly an envious subtext in *Coriolanus* which accounts for the otherwise mysteriously metaphorical occurrences of terms denoting poison, venom and serpents, is there also a poisonous subtext? And if so, what does this poisonous subtext say about *Coriolanus* as a play?

In the opening paragraphs of his essay, Bacon suggests that envy provokes an “ejaculation of the eye”:

There seemeth to be acknowledged, in the Act of Enuy, an Eiaculation, or Irradiation of the Eye. Nay some haue beene so curious, as to note, that the Times, when the Stroke, or Percussion of an Enuious Eye doth most hurt, are, when the Party enuied is beheld in Glory, or Triumph; For that sets an Edge vpon Enuy; And besides, at such times, the Spirits of the person Enuied, doe come forth, most into the outward Parts, and so meet the Blow. (511)

As it happens, Aufidius' envy reaches unbearable heights when Coriolanus returns from Rome, the people “splitting the air with noise”, whereas Aufidius “had no welcomes home” (V.6.50-51). This touches the Volscian to the quick, envy affecting him much in the same way as a poison does, and driving him on in his murderous intent. As a result, “the Spirits of the *person Enuied* [here, Coriolanus], doe come forth”, and the Roman general's last speech shows how he does indeed come forth “[...] and so meet the Blow”, as he will “thrust the lie unto him

[Aufidius]” (V.6.111), and call on the Volsces to “cut me to pieces [...] / Stain all your edges on me” (112-113).

Earlier on, Coriolanus had equally been infected by the envious eyes of the plebeians who vowed to “eject”, or “ejaculate”, him from the city (quoted earlier, III.1.289), and here too, Coriolanus rushed to confront his envious accusers with a macabre *gradatio*:

Let them pull all about mine ears, present me  
Death on the wheel or at wild horses’ heels,  
Or pile ten hills on the Tarpeian rock,  
That the precipitation might down stretch  
Below the beam of sight [...] (III.2.1-5)

Envy has a material impact on the person envied. This counterbalances the figurative, non-material use of poison in the play, turning envy, in effect, into deadly poison. In this sense, envy and poison are synonymous in *Coriolanus* – rather, envy can be understood as a sub-type of poison, one in which, as seen in the last quotation, eyesight and hearing play a crucial role. When one neither sees nor hears news from the envied person, envy wanes. “He, that mindeth but his own Businesse, [cannot] finde much matter for *Enuy*<sup>1</sup>”. It is therefore of the essence that something be visible or audible to provide food for envy’s poisoned thoughts, or, conversely, that one disappear from sight, for envy to abate.

Though Cotgrave says venom is “anything that impoisoneth, or infecteth outwardly by touching”, d’Abano, in the treaty mentioned earlier, says venom or poison can act also by sight or hearing:

Le venim se peut diuiser en venim prins au dedans, & en venim prins par dehors ou exterieurement : le venim prins interieurement, est du genre des potions pernicieuses, lequel se donne sous l’espece du boire du manger ou de medecine & est celuy duquel communement on vse pour surprendre les Roys, Princes, Prelats, & autres grands personnages. Le venim prins exterieurement, se prent ou par la veüe, l’ouye, le goust, l’attouchement ou par l’odeur : par la veuë, comme le basilisq : par l’ouye comme vne sorte de serpents, qui naist en Nubie, de la corpulence de deux paulmes, ayant le chef agu, de couleur verte, appellé regulus, lequel en sifflant tue tous les oïseaux, & autres animaux qui l’entendent<sup>2</sup>...

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1. F. Bacon, *op. cit.*, p. 512.

2. D’Abano, *op. cit.*, p. 10-11.

If we were to follow this taxonomic division, envy is a type of poison “prins par dehors ou exterieurement [...] par la veüe, l’ouye [...]”. This description corresponds to the show of strength by Coriolanus in the battle scenes, when we see, or hear about, his military feats which exacerbate his enemies’ envy. It also corresponds to the show offered by *Coriolanus* as a play – a spectacle that is potentially poisonous for the audience, poisoned as it is through the eye and/or the ear<sup>1</sup>.

The historical context (famine, troubled relationships between rulers and their subjects, and so on) might have prodded an Elizabethan audience into sedition, just as it might inspire modern-day audiences to criticize either their haughty rulers or the rabble, depending on how the play is being staged<sup>2</sup>. Thus, one could emphasize the visual character of the tragic hero’s singular pride (“Alone I did it, boy!” [V.6.117]), as when Parker recalls how “Peter Hall preserved the pronunciation ‘Cor-eye-olanus’ throughout his 1984 NT production” (p. 354). This contrived pronunciation succeeds in linking Coriolanus’ body (“Cor”), his display of what it has done (“eye”), and his fate (“olanus” or “alone”, as he stands alone against Rome and the Volscians alike), all in one name, not unlike Sophocles’ *Œdipus Rex*, whose name literally embodies the character’s tragic fate<sup>3</sup>.

In any case, showing a poisoned body natural onstage affects the body politic offstage, throwing into sharp relief contemporary evils and fears of treachery<sup>4</sup>. According to Tanya Pollard, the Elizabethans’ obsession with poison, in particular when poison is used as a dramatic artifice, points to the dangerous nature of theater itself<sup>5</sup>. I wish to argue that the way in which poison affects the body politic is a metaphor for what happens when one attempts to weigh one’s merits, or give (away) one’s voice.

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1. If the audience were moved to tears, for instance, they would be poisoned just like Menenius, as Coriolanus says that tears are “venomous to [his] eyes” (IV.1.24).
  2. R.B. Parker, p. 33-70, 115-136.
  3. « (Œdipe, c’est l’homme au pied [*poús*] enflé (*oidos*), infirmité qui rappelle l’enfant maudit, rejeté par ses parents, exposé pour y périr dans la nature sauvage. Mais (Œdipe, c’est aussi l’homme qui sait (*oída*) l’énigme du pied, qui réussit à déchiffrer, sans le prendre à rebours, “l’oracle” de la sinistre prophétesse, de la Sphinx au chant obscur [...] » Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce Ancienne*, vol. 1, Paris, La Découverte, 1972, chap. 5, p. 113. The authors also mention the ritual of expulsion from the city of the *pharmakós*.
  4. For more on the difference between body politic and body natural, see the classic study by Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Ideology*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, in particular chap. 2.
  5. Tanya Louise Pollard, *Dangerous Remedies: Poison and Theater in the English Renaissance*, Ph. D thesis, Yale University, 1999.

Giving one’s voice is potentially disastrous, if what you *give* is then *taken away*, as when the plebeians fear Coriolanus should turn into a tyrant. The play is as much about Coriolanus’ rise and fall as it is about the difficulty in coming to terms with his rise or fall<sup>1</sup>. Neither he nor his fellow Romans succeed in acknowledging each other’s existence, needs or deeds. As a result, both parties, the individual and the collective, seem to negate each other’s right to exist or, at least, to contradict each other. When Cominius says of Coriolanus: “The man I speak of cannot in the world / Be singly counterpoised” (II.2.84-85), Cominius acknowledges the absurdity in having Coriolanus canvassing the people, as there is no way to weigh (*to poise*) the soldier’s merit, to which the people reply:

For if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them; so if he tell us his noble deeds we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them. Ingratitude is monstrous [...] (II.3.5-9)

The people seem to suggest that to weigh Coriolanus’ merits, he must *show* and *tell*, for the people to *see* and *hear*, before they *touch* him [...] with their tongues. The “monstrous ingratitude” the Third Citizen speaks of will be echoed much later by Coriolanus when he replies to Menenius:

That we have been familiar,  
Ingrate forgetfulness shall poison rather  
Than pity note how much<sup>2</sup>. (V.2.83-85)

That Coriolanus transforms the “ingrate” tongues of the people which come to poise him into the *poisoned* tongues of the multitude<sup>3</sup> denotes his refusal to stand by the subjective (and subjecting) opinion of the crowd, as he too recognizes the potentially destructive force of submission. He had refused to speak to the people, and denied them the right to see and touch his wounds, as if to testify to his desire to avoid being contaminated by their envious or venomous tongues. But by finally submitting to the “ceremony”, standing in the marketplace in the habiliments of the supplicant, he was, in effect, subject to a process of poisoning by the crowd of doubting Thomases.

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1. I am here thinking of Cavell’s analysis of the question of acknowledgement, though his article on *Coriolanus* does not dwell on this issue. See Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.
  2. Volumnia seems to echo this when she agrees with her son that the Romans have become “poisonous of [his] honour” (V.3.136).
  3. To the best of my knowledge, the link between poise and poison has not been noticed hitherto.



In Act V, as the poison has spread and contaminated Coriolanus entirely, he is now both poisoned and poisonous. His own tongue is now poisonous. In the process of refusing the people's voices in the first half of the play, and refusing the patrician's pleas in the second half, Coriolanus becomes, in the words of Terry Eagleton, "a kind of nothing [...] because he is exactly what he is, and so a sort of blank tautology"<sup>1</sup>. It might be more accurate to speak of a living amphibole, as Coriolanus embodies the oxymoronic *Gift*.

Eagleton goes on to quote Cominius:

'Coriolanus'  
He would not answer to, forbade all names;  
He was a kind of nothing, titleless [...] (V.1.11-13)

Cominius, the only Roman Consul we are actually shown onstage, in other words, the only legally legitimate figure of Roman authority, calls Coriolanus "a kind of nothing" in this scene after having said, in an equally hyperbolic statement that is like an inverted mirror image, that Coriolanus "cannot in the world / Be singly counterpoised". I will not reflect on what this says about Cominius; rather, if Coriolanus has become a "blank tautology", what does this say about *Coriolanus*?

I would like to argue that the praise and counter-praise offered by the Roman Commander-in-Chief function like a poison, and point to the essential vacuity of words. If *Coriolanus* is known for lacking the same high-flown metaphors found in other plays, I believe it is because Shakespeare here wishes to exemplify a certain ill-will towards bombastic discourse. Coriolanus' feats are such that the deed outdoes the word.

Shakespeare's stance here is akin to that of Montaigne, as expressed in his chapter on the "Vanitie of Words" (chapter 51, book I, of his *Essays*). But if one compares what Montaigne actually has to say about this, there is much more than a simple agreement between the French essayist and the English dramatist on the whimsical nature of man's word(s). The wording of Montaigne's essay, in John Florio's 1603 translation, is strikingly similar to that of *Coriolanus*.

Montaigne says of oratory, which Shakespeare says Coriolanus does not master:

It is an instrument devised to busie, to manage, and to agitate a vulgar and disordered multitude; and is an implement to be em-

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1. Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986, p. 73.

ployed but about distempered and *sicke mindes, as Physicke about crazed bodies*. [...] Eloquence hath chiefly flourished in Rome when the common-wealths affaires have beene in worst estate and that the devouring Tempest of civill broyles, and intestine warres did most agitate and turmoil them. [...] For that foolishnesse and facilitie which is found in the common multitude, and which doth subject the same to be managed, perswaded, and *led by the eares by the sweet, alluring and sense-entrancing sound of this harmonie, without duly weighing, knowing, or considering the trueth of things* by force of reason: This facilitie and easie yeelding, I say, is not so easily found in one only ruler, and it is more easy to warrant him from *the impression of this poyson*, by good institution and sound counsell<sup>1</sup>.

The above quotation eerily links many of the notions analyzed earlier: it speaks of a kind of “physic” that affects a “sick mind”, of civil war and the “sweet” sound of oratory, a “poison” that does not “weigh” things properly and leads people “by the ears” to sedition. The French echoes the reference to poison with the French *poiser* translated by Florio as “weighing”<sup>2</sup>. Oratory, then, is like a poison.

The rest of Montaigne’s essay offers equally interesting insights into Coriolanus, with its references to food and words:

*An Italian* [...] told me a long, *formall and eloquent discourse of the science or skill of epicurisme and gluttonie*, with such an Oratorie-gravitie and Magistrale countenance as if he had discoursed of some high mysterious point of divinitie, wherein he hath very methodically-decifred and distinguished sundrie differences of appetites [...] And *all that filled up and stuffed with rich magnificent words, well couched phrases, oratorie figures, and patheticall metaphors*; yea such as learned men use and *imploy in speaking of the government of an empire*, which made me remember my man<sup>3</sup>.

Is Montaigne’s “Italian” Shakespeare’s Menenius? Of all the characters in *Coriolanus*, he is no doubt the one who most resorts to overwrought similes and metaphors (see III.1.258-260, and V.4.11-28 for instance). And the fact that passages in which Menenius speaks of the

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1. Michel de Montaigne, tr. John Florio, *The Essayes of Michael lord of Montaigne*, Henry Morley (ed.), London, New York, Routledge, 1886 (1603), chapter LI (my italics).  
2. Michel de Montaigne, *Œuvres complètes*, Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat (éds.), Paris, Gallimard, Pléiade, 1962 (1580–1595), p. 293.  
3. My italics.

body and food are so numerous would seem to illustrate what Montaigne calls a “skill of epicurisme and gluttonie”.

Set against this verbal gluttony stands Coriolanus’ obdurate silence. To complement the hapax which ejected Coriolanus from Rome, comes another *hapax*, one which ejects words themselves in a stage direction, the only of its kind to be found in Shakespeare: “*He holds her by the hand, silent*” (V.3.183).

This silence, and Coriolanus’ uncouth oratory – a feature that is not found in Plutarch, where he is praised for his eloquence<sup>1</sup> –, seem to condemn Menenius’ flowery rhetoric. In the end, Montaigne’s mocking tone resembles Coriolanus’:

I know not whether they worke that in others which they doe in mee. But when I heare our Architects mouth-out those big and ratling words of *Pilasters, Architraves, Cornixes, Frontispices, Corinthian* and *Dorike works*, and such like fustian-termes of theirs, I cannot let my wandering imagination from a sodaine apprehension of *Apollidonius* his pallace, and I find by, effect that they are the seely and decayed peeces of my Kitchen-doore. Doe but heare one pronounce *Metonymia, Metaphore, Allegory, Etimologie* and other such trash-names of grammar, would you not thinke they meant some forme of a rare and strange language: They are titles and words that concerne your chamber-maids tittle-tattle.

Menenius’ architectural similes, notably in his belly speech, are set against Coriolanus’ coarse declarations, as if he were offering an antidote, or antidictum, as it were, to the poisonous rhetoric of the voluble patrician<sup>2</sup>.

### “Venomous to thine eyes”

Despite Montaigne’s dismissal of the vanity of words, it would not be difficult to apply the same skeptic reading to (military) deeds, as Coriolanus painfully discovers as he is ejected from Rome by its monstrously ungrateful people. In the end, what remains of, and for, Coriolanus, is nothing: he is empty, *vānus*, even stripped of his noble addition “Coriolanus”. And with his death dies that which caused envy:

1. “Whereupon Tullus [Aufidius] fearing that if he dyd let him speake, he would prove his innocencie to the people, bicause emongest other things he had an eloquent tongue”, In Bullough, *op. cit.*, p. 543.
2. The Volscian watchmen quickly discern the danger in Menenius’ sweet words (V.2.15 sq.)

“My rage is gone”, says Aufidius (V.6.147). But does the onstage murder of the tragic hero really serve its cathartic purpose? One could easily argue that the audience remains infected, or affected, by what has just occurred.

We know from Plutarch that Coriolanus will be revenged, *post-mortem*:

Now Martius being dead, the whole state of the Volsces hartely wished him alive againe. [...] After that, the Romaines overcame them in battell, in which Tullus [Aufidius] was slaine in the field, and the flower of all their force was put to the sworde<sup>1</sup>...

This seems to illustrate the motif of just revenge<sup>2</sup>. But this is not in Shakespeare’s tragedy, as the fall of the Volscians happens *offstage*, if it happens at all (we cannot expect the audience to know what Plutarch says actually happened to the Volscians after Coriolanus’ death).

By cutting the story short, Shakespeare suggests that revenge is the silent role the audience must now act out, or “assist” (V.6.154), poisoned as it was by listening to, and looking at, the play. The manner in which the audience “assists” is, of course, wholly dependent on the way in which it has weighed Coriolanus’ and *Coriolanus*’ merits. It may, or may not, lend the play its voices.

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1. Plutarch, in Bullough, *op. cit.*, p. 544.

2. See, for instance, Alciati’s emblem “*Iusta ultio*”, in which both raven and scorpion die: the raven had seized the scorpion, in retaliation, the latter envenoms the former. Both insect and bird perish as they crash into the sea. Andrea Alciati, *Emblemata cum commentariis*, Joannes Thulius (ed.), Padua, P. P. Tozzium, 1621, 152th edition, Emblema CLXXIII.

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