


2000

'Rather say I play the man I am': Shakespeare's Coriolanus and Elizabethan Anti-theatricality

Kent Lehnhof

Chapman University, lehnhof@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_books

 Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lehnhof, Kent. "Rather say I play the man I am': Shakespeare's Coriolanus and Elizabethan Anti-theatricality," Shakespeare and Renaissance Association Selected Papers 23, ed. Byron Nelson (2000), 31-41.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Books and Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

Kent R. Lehnhof, “‘Rather say I play the man I am’: Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* and Elizabethan Anti-theatricality,” *Shakespeare and Renaissance Association Selected Papers 23*, ed. Byron Nelson (2000), 31-41.

In the second act of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, the hero is informed that his acceptance as a Roman consul is contingent upon donning “the robe of humility” and petitioning the common people in the market-place for their ratifying vote. Coriolanus recoils from the custom, outraged at the idea of acting a part—complete with costume, dialogue, and stage directions—that does not correspond with his inner truth. At this moment and others, Coriolanus echoes the anti-theatricalist rhetoric of Elizabethan pamphleteers like the popular and prolific Stephen Gosson. In many ways, Coriolanus serves as a stand-in for the anti-theatrical ideology of Gosson and his Elizabethan contemporaries, allowing Shakespeare’s play to explore the arguments of those opposing dramatic representation.

Like any good Elizabethan anti-theatricalist, Coriolanus insists that the social hierarchy of his society is divinely ordained. In *Playes Confuted*, Stephen Gosson exhorts: “We are commaunded by God to abide in the same calling wherein we were called, which is our ordinary vocation in a commonweale” (G6v). Coriolanus makes a similar claim when he tells the plebeians that the patricians govern with divine approval, “under the gods” (1.1.186). According to Gosson, deviation from God’s social hierarchy would result in a national self-destruction. Using the same body-commonwealth metaphor that figures prominently in *Coriolanus*, Gosson exhorts: “If we grudge at the wisdom of our maker, and disdain the callinge he hath placed us in, aspyring somewhat higher then we shoulde . . . the whole body must be dismembred” (G7). Coriolanus’ corresponding claim alleges that social classes keep the country from cannibalizing itself. He tells the plebeians that distinctions of rank and power “keep you in awe, which else / Would feed on one another” (1.1.186-87).

The anti-theatricalists—both Coriolanus and Gosson—maintain that God has ordained a system of signs that manifest the divisions of this divine social hierarchy. Clothing is one **[end page 31]** element of this heavenly semiotics, marking distinctions between aristocrats and commoners, men and women. Gosson asserts that in “the Law of God . . . garments are set downe for signes distinctiue betwene sexe & sexe” (E3v). The “signes distinctiue” also include less material signifiers such as manners of speech, gestures, and intonations. That which marks someone out as a woman, for example, is “not the apparrell onely, but the gate, the gestures, the voyce, the passions of a woman” (E3v).

Coriolanus endorses this anti-theatrical ideology, insisting upon the importance and inviolability of semiotic codes that mark social positions of empowerment. He recognizes the signifying importance of clothing by resisting the “gown of humility,” claiming that it compromises the truth of his social position. The zealotry with which he guards his wounds arises directly out of their ability to semiotically set him apart from the commoners. Similarly,

the pride with which Coriolanus carries his military surname derives from its ability to distinguish him from other Romans. Like the anti-theatricalists, Coriolanus desires to physically ground and tangibly manifest social divisions by using signs that indicate one's position in the cultural hierarchy.

The tenuous relationship between signs and signifiers, however, allows for the misappropriation of signs. Signs represent things; they are not the things themselves. Consequently, the signs meant to manifest an inner social nobility can be divorced from that inner social nobility and can be assumed by those who cannot legitimately lay claim to such distinction. Lower class members of society can display the signs of nobility without possessing the inner nobility those signs are supposed to manifest. These acts of mis-signification potentially result in the mis-allocation of social power, as demonstrated by the two tribunes of *Coriolanus*.

Although they are not noblemen and do not possess the social privilege of noblemen, the tribunes continually display the signs of nobility. Indeed, Coriolanus' hatred of the tribunes derives entirely from their propensity to illegitimately assume the signs of nobility and thereby usurp aristocratic privilege: "I do despise them: / For they do prank them in authority, / Against all noble sufferance" **[end page 32]** (3.1.22-24). Sicinius' use of the "absolute shall" is one such episode of semiotic appropriation. Employing a verbal marker of aristocracy without belonging to the aristocratic class, Sicinius assumes a privilege he does not legitimately possess. In a tirade spanning eleven lines, Coriolanus describes Sicinius' "shall" as an attempt to divert aristocratic power and usurp aristocratic position. He tells the patricians that the tribune's verbal transgression is an effort to "turn your current in a ditch / And make your channel his" (3.1.95-96). Coriolanus warns that the nobility must police the use of aristocratic signs if they wish to preserve aristocratic power. They must insist upon their signifying supremacy in order to convincingly demarcate social supremacy. Failure to maintain a rigid systems of signs delineating social authority results in confusion—and in an environment of confusion lower classes can effect a re-ordering of social authority:

when two authorities are up,
Neither supreme, how soon confusion
May enter 'twixt gap of both, and take
The one by th'other. (3.1.108-11)

Coriolanus exhorts his colleagues to control social signs by reminding them that any change in the social hierarchy necessarily imperils the ruling class. As members of the highest social class, the direction the patricians can go is down. In Coriolanus' assessment: "You are plebeians / If they be senators" (3.1.100-01).

In order to retain his own aristocratic privilege, Coriolanus is forced to declare that the tokens of aristocracy are meaningful when presented by aristocrats but meaningless when presented by commoners. Accordingly, Coriolanus elaborates a notion of true and false

signification that mandates correspondence between a person's inner social value and the signs of social value that he or she presents. Coriolanus' much-documented fascination with truthfulness, honor, and integrity results from his attempt to restrict signs of power to those who possess power.

Stephen Gosson performs a similar rhetorical maneuver, appealing to Aristotle in an attempt to curb transgressive **[end page 33]** signification. Citing the philosopher's definition of a lie, the Elizabethan author concludes: "Euery man must show him selfe outwardly to be such as in deed he is. Outward signes consist eyther in words or gestures, to declare our selues by words or gestures to be otherwise than we are, is an act executed where it should not, therefore a lye" (E5). Gosson also invokes divine commandment in order to deny the misappropriation of semiotic codes. Re-telling the story of "Sidrach, Misach, & Abednago," Gosson declares that the Hebrew youths' refusal to bow before the idol of the king was a refusal to "make a diuorce betwene the tongue & the heart, honouring the gods of the heathens in lips, & in iesture, not in thought" (D8). Their refusal expresses a divine mandate, binding upon all: "Because the outwarde shew must represent that which is within, they would not seeme to be, that they were not: whose example is set downe as a rule for us to followe" (D8).

Yet the division that Coriolanus and Gosson attempt to instantiate between true and false signification proves unstable. A notion of truthfulness that depends upon the correspondence of outward signs to the inner attributes for which they stand presumes that there is an inner nobility independent of outer signs. Yet Shakespeare's text repeatedly suggests that representation is perhaps all there is. One's identity is nothing more than the way in which one is perceived. This is the thrust of Aufidius' astute observation: "Our virtues / Lie in th'interpretation of the time" (4.7.49-50). There is no difference between true and false representation because aristocratic identity is created by—rather than reflected in—social signs.

Like Aufidius, Volumnia recognizes the constitutive significance of social signs. As a result, she manipulates them in order to construct for her son a role of importance and authority. From start to finish, Volumnia indicates that Coriolanus' aristocratic identity is a social construction, dependent upon public opinion and interpretation. Explaining that Coriolanus was such a comely youth that "for a day of kings' entreaties, a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding," Volumnia reveals that considerations of "honour," "renown," and "fame" nevertheless motivated her to take just such an action. Understanding that nobility is a public relationship (fame, for example, consists of nothing more than being **[end page 34]** the object of public discussion), Volumnia gives up her private relationship with her child, sending him off to "a cruel war" (1.3.8-14). Forcing her child into public life, Volumnia gives him a role to play, and that role results in an aristocratic identity. Janet Adelman points out how the text illustrates this process, noting that in 1.3 Volumnia imagines and describes the

very actions that Coriolanus will perform in 1.4. The temporal priority of Volumnia's description emphasizes that Coriolanus is performing the part that his mother has scripted for him. He fashions himself in accordance with the model in his mother's mind (113). Volumnia confesses her hand in the crafting of her son's identity when she avers that Coriolanus is the product of "my very wishes, / And the building of my fancy" (2.1.197-98). As she tells her son in the confrontation outside of Rome: "Thou art my warrior: / I help to frame thee" (5.3.62-63).

Coriolanus, of course, vehemently attempts to deny that his nobility is created through a practice of public performance. Several scholars have discussed his attempts to deny the role that his community plays in the process of identity formation. James Calderwood, for example, believes that Coriolanus detests praise because the acceptance of praise requires that he "relinquish his right to total self-definition by acknowledging that his nobility is at least partly dependent upon the interpretations of others, even his mother" (218-19). Zvi Jagendorf believes that Coriolanus conceals his war wounds for a similar reason: he refuses to show his scars because such a display constitutes a recognition that the wounds do not stand for themselves as objective signifiers of an inner honor but acquire meaning only when interpreted by the community. The words of a nameless Roman citizen support Jagendorf's assertion. Claiming that it is the role of the people "to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them," the citizen affirms that the wounds acquire meaning only when the community makes them meaningful (2.3.6-8). In order to avoid recognition of this fact, Coriolanus withholds them from the crowds (465).

Nevertheless, even the plebeians seem to recognize that what Coriolanus perceives to be his true nature is in fact a self-fashioned persona. According to one citizen, Coriolanus has purposefully performed the social part of a soldier in order to obtain the social **[end page 35]** fame of a soldier. The citizen assures a companion: "I say unto you, what he hath done famously, he did it to that end" (1.1.35-36). Coriolanus' self-fashioning is perhaps most strikingly manifest in the episode of his re-naming, wherein he alters his status by adopting a public name/stage name. Just as an actor does, Coriolanus changes his identity by changing the name he calls himself. In both the case of Coriolanus and the case of the actor, identity is constructed by manipulating social signs. Coriolanus' change in status is both created and signified by an artificial marker, that which Cominius calls "th'addition" (1.9.65).

Coriolanus unwittingly acknowledges that his identity is a socially constructed and publicly performed role when he resists what he construes to be an act of false representation. When he demands of his mother: "Would you have me / False to my nature? Rather say I play / The man I am" Coriolanus claims an inner nature to which he must be true (3.2.14-16). As Janet Adelman explains, however, Coriolanus' plea "cuts both ways": "Coriolanus would like to suggest that there is no distance between role and self, but in fact suggests that he plays at being himself" (113). In his very attempt to deny theatricality, Coriolanus shows himself to be embroiled in its practice.

Jean Howard points out that Elizabethan anti-theatricalism is caught up in the same type of self-contradiction. In order to condemn theatricality, anti-theatrical pamphleteers engaged in theatricality: “To become a man of print, to create distinct writing personae, to enter the marketplace with one’s writings were practices of self-transformation and self-fashioning which enhanced, rather than retarded, the commercialization of culture to which [anti-theatricalists were] overtly opposed” (35). Stephen Gosson’s career demonstrates the way in which theatricality imbrues Elizabethan anti-theatricalism. A short time before writing his pamphlets condemning plays, Gosson himself authored several plays for the Renaissance stage. In fact, Gosson’s anti-theatrical pamphlets circulated at the same time that his plays were being performed in London theaters. Gosson’s 1582 tract, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*, textually testifies to the theatricality of his anti-theatrical polemic. Divided **[end page 36]** into five discrete acts, the pamphlet follows the very form of the plays that it tries to suppress.

Howard also emphasizes that anti-theatricalism does not consistently and absolutely oppose all practices of social representation. Anti-theatricalists such as Gosson whole-heartedly endorse sumptuary laws, which Howard describes as legally enforced guidelines for self-performance. Howard writes that this particular form of self-contradiction reveals the way in which anti-theatricalists (and the social order they support) depend upon theatricality: “By insisting that particular subjects express their real social identities by outward signs, the antitheatricalists . . . threatened to lay bare or make explicit the theatricality at the very heart of the traditional social order” (33). In Howard’s view, Elizabethan society is structured around artificial performances, and anti-theatricalists uphold this structure, vilifying—not all acts of representation—but only those unauthorized acts of representation that endanger the status quo. Declaring that “antitheatrical polemic is one apparatus for policing transformations of social identity by specific groups of Elizabethan social subjects,” Howard argues that anti-theatricalism does not condemn the practice of theatricality but rather theatricality as practiced by a particular group of people (27). In short, anti-theatricality is a strategy to preserve power.

This is the lesson Volumnia attempts to teach her son when he refuses to stand for the consulship. Explaining that society is a veritable war for power between the patricians and the plebeians, Volumnia argues that in order to maintain their advantage, the patricians must employ all of the tactics that Coriolanus uses on the field of battle, including “policy,” or the tactic of “seem[ing] / The same you are not” (3.2.46-48). According to Volumnia, Coriolanus’ rejection of theatricality is admirable but utterly untenable in a situation of class conflict wherein two groups struggle for supremacy: “You are too absolute. / Though therein you can never be too noble, / But when extremities speak” (3.2.39-41). Coriolanus, she instructs, should feign humility until his power is consolidated and his position impervious. She counsels:

Speak **[end page 37]**

To th’people; not by your own instruction,
Nor by th’matter which your heart prompts you,

But with such words that are but roted in
Your tongue, though but bastards and syllables
Of no allowance to your bosom's truth. (3.2.52-57)

In the service of the aristocracy, deceit is not dishonorable:

Now, this no more dishonours you at all,
Than to take in a town with gentle words
Which else would put you to your fortune and
The hazard of much blood. (3.2.58-61)

In fact, patrician role-playing is practiced by and benefits all members of the ruling class.

Volumnia declares that her advocacy of theatricality is endorsed by all of the nobility: "I am in this / Your wife, your son, these senators, the nobles" (3.2.64-65). She teaches that the object of anti-theatrical ideology is not the elimination of all acts of dissimulation—just those acts of dissimulation that endanger the existing balance of power.

When his mother exposes the interested nature of anti-theatrical ideology, Coriolanus expresses bewilderment:

Must I
With my base tongue give to my noble heart
A lie that it must bear? (3.2.99-101)

His confusion eventually gives way to resolve, and he affirms: "Well, I will do't" (3.2.101). Even as he prepares to follow Cominius' "prompt" and "perform a part," though, Coriolanus reverts to an inflexible anti-theatricality (3.2.106, 109). He claims that he cannot enact the role, for it would abase him, turning him into a "harlot," a "schoolboy," and a "eunuch" (3.2.111-17).

Invoking the Elizabethan anti-theatrical commonplace of the emasculated/effeminated man, Coriolanus alleges that inauthentic signification would result in a political re-ordering. He would lose his social privilege and become a socially powerless woman/boy/eunuch. **[end page 38]**

Having reverted to his "too absolute" ideology of anti-theatricality, Coriolanus proves unable and unwilling to misrepresent himself before the plebeians. The resultant banishment, however, alters Coriolanus' relationship to power and, consequently, his relationship to theatricalism. When he no longer occupies a position of privilege, Coriolanus no longer experiences the political exigency of maintaining the status quo. Once he becomes disempowered, Coriolanus finds change to be in his best interest and openly participates in "slippery turns," embracing his sworn enemy and opposing in bitterest enmity the place and people of his birth (4.4.12). He changes his stance on self-representation, adopting in his disenfranchised condition the theatricality that he had feared as a patrician: the first time we see the banished Coriolanus he enters "in mean apparel, disguised and muffled" (4.4 s.d.). Before Aufidius' servants in Antium, Coriolanus plays the part of a mendicant in order to obtain social power—the exact role that he had earlier refused in Rome! In fact, Coriolanus' refusal to name himself before Aufidius suggests a reluctance to step out of his beggarly role. In order to

delay just a little longer the delight he derives from his successful dissimulation, Coriolanus declines to reveal his identity until Aufidius has asked him his name four separate times (4.5.54-65).

Through his acts of misrepresentation, Coriolanus is able to regain in Antium the privileged social status he lost in Rome. This time around, however, he does not resist theatricalism as a means of preserving position. When Cominius sues for mercy, for example, Coriolanus feigns coldness: "He would not seem to know me" (5.1.8). A few scenes later, Coriolanus confesses that he "show'd sourly" in spite of the great love he holds for his surrogate father (5.3.13). The hero's performance of impassability is so convincing that a Volscian soldier asserts: "The worthy fellow is our general: he's the / rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken" (5.2.108-09). Constancy for Coriolanus once entailed expressing whatever his heart contained. As Menenius explains: "His heart's his mouth: / What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent" (3.1.255-56). Now, however, constancy consists of denying the emotions of his "crack'd heart" (5.3.9). Dissimulation displaces directness as Coriolanus' supreme virtue.

[end page 39]

The hero, however, cannot maintain his impassive part in the face of Volumnia's perfectly executed dramatic appeal. His theatrical performance is upstaged by his mother's and his new-found theatrical ability falters: "Like a dull actor now / I have forgot my part and I am out, / Even to a full disgrace" (5.3.40-42). Almost as soon as Coriolanus learns the power of theatricality, he becomes its victim.

Standing in for Elizabethan anti-theatricalism, Coriolanus is an ideological whipping boy, and the play that bears his name is a vehicle for arraignment that ideology. Throughout the drama, anti-theatricality is revealed to be an impossibly inconsistent ideology that seeks not to eliminate theatricality but rather to restrict theatricality to certain modes among certain classes of society. Anti-theatricality aims to preserve an inequitable distribution of power by policing acts of representation. At the play's conclusion the anti-theatrical spokesperson is repeatedly stabbed, visually representing the ideological anatomization that has taken place. In the end, anti-theatricality—like Coriolanus himself—is shown to be full of holes.

Kent Lehnhof

Duke University **[end page 40]**

Works Cited

Adelman, Janet. "'Anger's My Meat': Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in *Coriolanus*." *Shakespeare: Pattern of Excelling Nature*. Proc. of the International Shakespeare Association Congress. April 19-25, 1976. Eds. David Bevington and Jay L. Halio. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1978. 108-24.

Calderwood, James L. "Coriolanus: Wordless Meanings and Meaningless Words." *Studies in English Literature* 6 (1966): 211-24.

Gosson, Stephen. *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*. 1582. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1972.

Howard, Jean E. *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Jagendorf, Zvi. "Coriolanus: Body Politic and Private Parts." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 455-69.

Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*. Ed. Philip Brockbank. Arden edition. New York: Routledge, 1994. **[end page 41]**