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# Must we mean what we say? 'Coriolanus' and ordinary language philosophy

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## Coriolan et la théorie

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## Must we mean what we say? *Coriolanus* and ordinary language philosophy

Article

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### Texte intégral

[Coriolanus] presents us with a famine of words.  
Stanley Cavell<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>In her article on “The Failure of Words” in *Coriolanus*, Carol M. Sicherman argues that, unlike Cordelia who “knows just what she means” when she resorts to “unwilling speech” in *King Lear*, refusing to give way to her father’s desire to be flattered, Coriolanus is “often unsure just what he means” when he refuses flattery.<sup>2</sup> Sicherman goes on to analyse what she calls the “disjunction” between words and their meaning in the play, concluding on Coriolanus’ reluctance to agree on the meaning of words. His speech, she argues, systematically veers towards two extremes: words are either “entirely uncontrolled by any common public agreement, or [they are] rigidly bound to meanings”<sup>3</sup>—either they can mean anything at any moment, or they can only mean one thing at all times. Both extremes are untenable. The former destroys social bonds by making it impossible for people to agree, since no one could be held to one’s word; the latter constricts meaning by refusing to take into account any mitigating circumstance which could help one interpret words according to the context in which they appear.

<sup>2</sup>It is upon these notions of “common agreement” and “meaning” that I would like to talk about, with the help of concepts taken from what is known as “ordinary language philosophy”. After having briefly discussed the problematic links between “intentionality” and meaning, I would like to show how, with the help of Machiavelli, one can try to understand the questions suggested by the title of this paper: must we mean what we say? And must Coriolanus mean what he says?

### [1. Ordinary language philosophy and literary studies](#)

<sup>3</sup>This paper takes up a question posed by Stanley Cavell in his book entitled, precisely, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, the first chapter of which was initially published in 1958.<sup>4</sup> In this opening chapter which lends the book its title, Cavell attempts to show why asking questions on, and in, “ordinary language” is a worthwhile philosophical pursuit. He discusses, among others, the fraught notions of meaning and intention, and of rules and statements, by going over some of the main insights of the Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin,

in order to counter Benson Mates, a professor of philosophy at UC Berkeley who was critical of Austin's work and who, like Cavell, was known for his research on skepticism.

4Approximately two decades later, in 1976, another Stanley chose to talk about speech act theory in another debate. This time, the debate was between literary critics who discussed the uses of speech act theory in literary studies. Fish used Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* as a starting point for his paper on "How to do Things with Austin and Searle" in literary criticism. He argued that a "Speech Act reading" of the play was possible, and even illuminating,

because *Coriolanus* is a Speech Act play. That is to say, it is about what the theory is 'about,' the conditions for the successful performance of certain conventional acts and the commitments one enters into or avoids by performing or refusing to perform those acts.<sup>5</sup>

5Fish shows how the play elaborates on what constitutes a speech act: the performance itself (speech), but also the acknowledgment that one has followed an agreed procedure to effect such an act (such as asking for the people's voices in order to secure the election to the consulship).

6Despite the fact that Fish rephrased the title of Austin's book, *How To Do Things With Words*, for the title of his own article, his analysis is mainly based on the concepts developed by American philosopher John Searle.<sup>6</sup> Searle is known for his work on intentionality which stems from his work on illocutionary acts, one of the concepts developed by Austin in his Oxford and Harvard conferences on performative utterances.

7Contrary to Cavell's article, which criticizes those who claim ordinary language philosophy to be of no use, Fish's paper attacks those who seem to believe Speech Act theory *can* be used—or rather *misused*—in literary studies. Fish takes two notable examples: Wolfgang Iser and Richard Ohmann. Fish claims the former is simply ignorant of the most basic tenets of Speech Act theory; that Iser uses its vocabulary too loosely and metaphorically. According to Fish, Ohmann, however, is more knowledgeable, though he makes serious interpretive blunders, notably when he takes Austin's concept of "felicity" to describe a speech act too literally, endowing it with a moral sense the English philosopher had taken great pains to brush aside. An utterance is said to be "felicitous" when appropriate conditions are met. Whether or not the utterance is good or bad is beside the point.

8Fish concludes his article with an apophatic definition of speech act theory, saying what it is *not*: "it is not a rhetoric [...] it is not a psychology; it can't serve as the basis of a stylistics; it can't be elaborated into a poetics of narrative; it can't help us to tell the difference between literature and non-literature" etc.<sup>7</sup>

9After having heard these contradictory warnings on the uses and pitfalls

associated with speech act theory, I would like to return to Cavell's topic: ordinary language philosophy. Speech act theory is *derived* from this philosophy, but this philosophy does not end with pragmatics and speech act theory. Rather, Cavell insists on the fact that ordinary language philosophy first aims to question the very tools philosophers use to philosophize. In like manner, and with regards to *Coriolanus*, I wish to take up a few of the questions posed by this school of thought:

1. One is often tempted to distinguish 'ordinary' from 'literary' language. To what extent can we speak of 'ordinary language' when we refer to a work of literature? Is the question more relevant if we are dealing with a *dramatic* work, ie. one in which actors speak and act onstage in front of an audience?

We could argue that theater constitutes a conventional situation combining a number of elements: an audience (i) comes to a playhouse (ii) to listen to a play (iii) acted by players (iv) who produce speech acts (v) recognizable as such by the community (vi) for which they are produced (vi). In the words of Fish, "Speech Act rules are constitutive; they do not regulate behaviour, but enumerate the procedures which define it".<sup>8</sup> In this sense, an audience will more readily recognize statements uttered onstage as having performative force, than they would in 'ordinary' situations.

2. What can be called 'ordinary' about the language of *Coriolanus* (as opposed to other plays, for instance)? Many critics have mentioned the play's comparative rhetorical paucity, especially when set against plays dealing with similar stories blending politics and treason, inspired by Plutarch or English Chroniclers, such as *Richard II* or *Julius Caesar*. If we put aside the fact that we are dealing with a play in (English) blank verse portraying Ancient Rome in Elizabethan London, what, if anything, is 'ordinary' about *Coriolanus*?
3. Lastly, what linguistic precepts obtained in the early modern period are relevant to the study of *Coriolanus*? Plutarch, in his *Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus*, commended the soldier's eloquence, but Shakespeare chose to portray him as officially lacking any oratorical gifts.

This discrepancy between source and text has been variously interpreted. I would like to propose yet another interpretation, based on a reading of Machiavelli's treatise on *The Art of War*, at a moment when Fabrizio, Machiavelli's *alter ego* in the dialogue, speaks of the manner in which a general must speak. As we shall see, a soldier's speech must always be "simple and nete"—ordinary, in short.

## **2. Intention and knowledge (or lack thereof)**

<sup>10</sup>Before turning to Machiavelli, however, I would like to discuss the issue of intentionality. Indeed, the questions above inevitably postulate a certain

degree of intentionality—be it the playwright’s, the characters’ or the audience’s. The question of what this intention means, however, is aporetic: the meaning (or should we say the function?) of the intention lies primarily in its existence. Though we can disagree on what the characters *mean* when they express something, we must at least agree that the characters *do* express something. *Why* certain characters should express anything at all is another matter, and this is a question which comes up at several moments in the play, notably when characters begin to say something, before giving up. That this should happen in a play which was (presumably) *written* before it was *performed*, means that we ought to ask ourselves what it is the characters did not utter, and why. In more “ordinary” circumstances, one can hesitate frequently without really “meaning” anything in particular. Not so with a dramatic work. (Psychoanalysis would disagree with such distinctions.)

11Let us take but one example. Critics have noted Martius’ uncanny tendency to forget, and Shakespeare to recall, anecdotal information. Thus, when Martius tries to remember the name of his host in Corioles to redeem him from captivity, he exclaims: ‘By Jupiter, forgot!’ (1.10.82–91); likewise, he forgets the names of the other tribunes chosen to represent the people:

Five tribunes to defend their vulgar wisdoms,  
Of their own choice. One’s Junius Brutus,  
Sicinius Velutus, and I know not. ’Sdeath (1.1.212–4)

12These ‘failed’ utterances cannot be solely attributed to Martius’ defective memory, or what one may call his “senior moments”, such as when he claims the battle has left him too tired to recall the name of his host in Corioli. Fish interprets the first example as proof that Coriolanus could not fully “execute a proper request, without in any way qualifying it”.<sup>9</sup> By forgetting the name of his host, Fish claims Martius invalidates his petition to Cominius, thereby finding a way to discharge himself from an obligation which, like all obligations, he bore like a yoke. In response to the line where Menenius says that “What he bids be done is finished with his bidding”, Fish says: “His [Coriolanus’] word is law, and not because he is the spokesman for an institutional authority, but because he is the source of law itself. His is the declarative of divine fiat, the logos, the *all*-creating word.”<sup>10</sup>

13Sicherman interprets the second instance as proof of Coriolanus’ “logorrhea [...] he cannot stop talking, nor can he always shape whole sentences or keep his syntax clear.”<sup>11</sup> Both critics point to Coriolanus’ improper use of language. Despite the repeated references to the fact that he is “ill school’d / In bolted language” (3.1.324–5), and his own assertions that he will speak his mind, come what may, Shakespeare willingly resorts to a type of utterance which somehow exceeds ordinary speech. Martius speaks too much, thus underlining the hermeneutic fallacy of words: when they are uttered by the “many-headed multitude” (2.3.15), words mean everything and nothing. This fallacy is made even more glaring when one compares Martius to the character often referred to as his surrogate father, the volubile Menenius with his pretty tales.

14Tellingly, in an earlier play, Shakespeare had already staged characters discussing speech act theory in terms couched in comedic legalese: I am speaking of the beginning of the grave-diggers' scene in *Hamlet*, when the two characters discuss Ophelia's probable suicide.

*Grave*. Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?

*Other*. I tell thee she is, therefore make her grave straight. The crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial.

*Grave*. How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defence?

*Other*. Why, 'tis found so.

*Grave*. It must be *se offendendo*, it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches—it is to act, to do, to perform; argal, she drowned herself wittingly.

*Other*. Nay, but hear you, Goodman Delver—

*Grave*. Give me leave. Here lies the water—good. Here stands the man—good. If the man go to this water and drown himself, it is, will he nill he, he goes, mark you that. But if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life. (*Hamlet*, 5.1.1–20)

15As Plowden noted, this reasoning was that of the defending counsel in the case of *Hales v. Pettit*. Hales had committed suicide in a fit of madness in 1560, and the ensuing trial was meant to determine whether his suicide entailed the forfeiture of a lease. Stanley Fish must have found this case rather entertaining—one of his areas of research is legal studies.

16As it happens, the grave-digger's reasoning is a barely veiled parody of the judge's ruling in the affair: "Sir James Hales being alive caused Sir James Hales to die; and the act of the living man was the death of the dead man. And then for this offence it is reasonable to punish the living man who committed the offence, and not the dead man".<sup>12</sup> The tripartite act described by the Gravedigger is precisely what Coriolanus can be said to have done to himself: he drowned himself (figuratively, in words or in silence, but also through exile or death) both wittingly and *se defendendo*.

### **3. Civil conversation and military oratory**

17I began my paper by quoting Sicherman, who says Coriolanus is "often unsure just what he means". I would like to return to my initial question—must we mean what we say? To quote Cavell, "I am less interested now in the 'mean' than I am in the 'must'".<sup>13</sup> What is it that Coriolanus *must* mean, if

anything? I wish to argue that whatever it is, it must first relate to his military, as opposed to civil, obligations and career, and, by way of consequence, to his speeches in military contexts.

18In his dialogic treatise on *The Art of War*, first published in Italy in 1521 and subsequently translated in English, Machiavelli goes to certain lengths to include oratory among a soldier's required qualities. Speaking to Zanobi and Cosimo Rucellai, in the guise of the character of Fabrizio Colonna, Machiavelli argues that:

To perswad or diswade a thing unto fewe, is very easie, for that if wordes suffice not, you may then use authoritie and force: but the difficultie is, to remooue from a multitude an euill opinion, and that which is contrary either to the common profit, or to thy opinion, where cannot be used but wordes, ye which is meete they bee heard of euerie man, minding to perswade them all. Wherefore, it was requisite that the excellent Captaines were oratours: for that without knowing how to speake to all the army, which difficultie may be wrought any good thing: the which altogether in this our time is layed aside. Reade the life of *Alexander Magnus*, and you shall see how many times it was necessary for him to perswad, and to speak publikely to his armye [...]

19At this point of the dialogue, Machiavelli proposes a series of synonyms describing perlocutionary acts, ie. acts which are meant to affect the hearer, as to convince or inspire them to perform an action:

otherwise he [Alexander the Great] should neuer haue brought them, beeing become ritch, and full of spoile, through the desertes of Arabia, and into India with so much his disease, and trouble: for that infinite times there grow things, whereby an army ruinateth, when the Captayne either knoweth not, or useth not to speake unto the same, for that thus speaking taketh away feare, encourageth the mindes, increaseth the obstinateness to fight, discouereth the deceiptes, promiseth rewardes, sheweth the perills, and the waye to auoide them, reprehendeth, prayeth, threateneth, filleth full of hope, praise, shame, and doth all those thinges, by the which the humane passions are extincte, or kindled, wherefore that Prince, or wommon weale, which should appoint to make a new power, and cause reputation to their armye, ought to accustome the Souldiours thereof, to heare the Captain to speake, and the Captayne to know how to speake unto them.<sup>14</sup>

20Fish, and Austin before him, argued that perlocutionary acts are mostly beyond the remit of speech act theory, since, contrary to illocutionary acts, considered as “conventional”, perlocutionary acts are “contingent; they cannot be predicted because there is no way of knowing what will certainly



bring them off.”<sup>15</sup> Howbeit, Fabrizio’s / Machiavelli’s analysis has a direct bearing on our understanding of what “ordinary language” could mean for Coriolanus. As Margreta de Grazia recalls, in an article on “Shakespeare’s View of Language”, seventeenth-century England began to turn to a mostly pessimistic view of language, heretofore considered to be flawed ever since the destruction of the Tower of Babel, but still capable of effecting positive change upon the world, as if human speech had remnants of the performative power of Adam’s word in the Garden of Eden, or as if it could be endowed with the performative power of God’s Word during Whitsun.<sup>16</sup>

21Machiavelli and Coriolanus, however, retain the more optimistic, positive view of language, though both are keenly conscious of how ‘simple’ words can be misunderstood. Contrary to civil speech, which in the sixteenth century focuses on verbal prowess and the art of amplification, military speech is devised as short, “simple and nete”. Machiavelli insists on the “voice” of the soldier in book 5 of his treatise, with an analysis which contrasts with the “voices” of the citizens in Shakespeare’s play:

Your first question importeth much: for that many times the commaundementes of Captaines, beeing not well understoode, or euill interpreted, haue disordered their armie: therefore the voices with the which they commaund, in perills ought to be cleare and nete. And if thou commaund with the sound, it is conuenient to make that betweene the one way and the other, there be so much difference, that the one cannot bee chaunged for the other: and if thou commaundest with the voice, thou oughtest to take heede that thou use the generall voices, and to use the particulars, and of the particulars, to use those, which may be interpreted sinisterly. Many times the saying backe, backe, hath made to ruinate an armie: Therefore this voice ought not to be used, but in steede thereof to use, retire you. If you wil make them to tourne, for to chaunge the head, either to flanke, or to backe, use neuer to say tourne you, but say to the left, to the right, to the backe, to the front: thus all ye other voices ought to be simple and nete, as thrust on, march, stand strong, forward, retourne you: and all those thinges, which may be done with the voice, they do, the other is done with the sound.<sup>17</sup>

22This “neatness” of voice can account for Coriolanus’ insistence on words which he believes are misused: ‘traitor’, ‘shall’, ‘mildly’, and, of course, ‘voices’. These words, one could argue, are thus singled out because they should belong to one realm only: according to Coriolanus, it is only the soldier who can tell who is a traitor, only he can use the ‘absolute shall’ (3.1.92), or use his voice properly (when Martius appears before Cominius, he recognizes him only by his voice). As ‘civilians’, the tribunes necessarily misuse these words.

\*

23 Must Coriolanus mean what he says? If he embodies the perfect soldier depicted by Machiavelli, the question is moot: he *must* mean what he says, or say what he means, if he is to avoid chaos and destruction on the battlefield. A general cannot afford to give the wrong order to his soldiers. His “voice” must be ordinary, that is “simple and nete”, but also based on conventions and proper procedures, to avoid the risk of a fatal misprision.

24 Contrariwise, ordinary citizens (whom we could call “civilians”, in 21st-century parlance) have no reason to follow such rules—their lax observance of the meaning of words is exemplified by the manner in which they quickly give, and take back, their “voices”. Worse still, citizens can misuse words intentionally for political gain, as shown by the tribunes’ crafty manipulation of Coriolanus’ weak points. Against this backdrop of double-dealing citizens, we are repeatedly reminded that Coriolanus is “too absolute” (3.2.41). The term crops up twice in the previous scene, when Coriolanus rejects the tribunes’ attempt at exercising their new powers (3.1.92, 118), and again when Coriolanus seeks refuge among the Volscians (4.5.137). In *Coriolanus*, the term seems double-edged. Etymologically (from the Latin *absolutum*), it means “loosened, free, separate, acquitted, completed”, from the verb to absolve. The word originally implied freedom “from imperfection or qualification; from interference, connexion, relation, comparison, dependence; from condition, conditional forms of knowledge or thought” (*OED*, 1989). And yet, the term also suggests Coriolanus’ “absolute” dependence, as shown by Volumnia’s hold on her son, and as intimated by Cavell, when he says that “We are [...] exactly as responsible for the specific implications of our utterances as we are for their explicit factual claims.”<sup>18</sup> That the other characters should claim *they* are *not* responsible for their utterances, all the while holding Coriolanus responsible for *his* words, may be what constitutes the tragic in the hero’s “absolute” character.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Carol M. Sicheman, “*Coriolanus*: The Failure of Words”, *ELH*, 39 (2), June 1972, pp. 189-207, quote p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, [1969] 1976. On meaning and *Coriolanus*, see also James L. Calderwood, “*Coriolanus*: Wordless Meanings and Meaningless Words”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 6 (2), Spring 1966, pp. 211–224.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Fish, “How to do Things with Austin and Searle: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism”, *MLN*, 91 (5), October 1976, pp. 983–1025, quote p. 1002.

<sup>6</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962; John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essays in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969; idem, *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Fish, *art. cit.*, p. 1023.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1008.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 990.

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[10](#) Ibid., p. 999.

[11](#) Sicherman, art. cit., p. 198.

[12](#) William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Harold Jenkins (ed.), London/New York, Routledge, Arden Second Series, 1982, p. 547.

[13](#) Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, op. cit., p. 9.

[14](#) Niccolò Machiavelli, *The arte of warre, written in Italian by Nicholas Machiavel, and set foorth in English by Peter Withorne, student at Graies Inne: with other like martiall feates and experiments, as in a table in the ende of the booke may appeare*, London, Printed by Thomas East for John Wight, [1521] 1588, book 4, p. 65.

[15](#) Fish, art. cit., p. 1007.

[16](#) Margreta de Grazia, “Shakespeare’s View of Language: An Historical Perspective”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 29 (3), Summer 1978, pp. 374–388.

[17](#) Machiavelli, op. cit., book 5, p. 70v–71r.

[18](#) Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say ?*, op. cit., p. 12.

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