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## Challenging authority or the rhetoric of dissent in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*.

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### Introduction

Turning from the History of England to some emblematic moments of Roman history in two of his Roman tragedies, *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare chooses to anatomize the performative power of words in the theatrical representation of national politics under crisis. Relying on Plutarch's vision of Roman history as translated by Sir Thomas North in the *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, published in 1579, Shakespeare draws heavily on the language of North's translation to stage the mechanisms of dissent through the rhetorical strategies that his leading political figures, namely Julius Caesar and Coriolanus, apply in their formal interactions with their people. Both national leaders stand as emblematic figures of legitimate power facing public hostility and contest of their supremacy over the people. Following Ciceronian principles about the art of rhetoric applied to the exercise of political power, Shakespeare provides through the highly rhetorical nature of the staged speeches a literary model of the art of fashioning political power on a subversive mode. Thereby the playwright uses very subtly the specular nature of his antique stage of power to highlight the workings of power and dissent in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. In this paper I will adopt a comparative approach of both plays centered on the notion that the subversive nature of some of the main characters' discourses lies in the performative quality of their speeches and more broadly on the intricate rhetorical strategies they master.

In their edition of the *Complete Works*, Stanley Wells & Gary Taylor underline the particular status of the tragedy of *Julius Caesar* in the Shakespearean canon for, as they say: "*Julius Caesar* shows Shakespeare turning from English to Roman history, which he had last used in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*", (p. 599). We see that, at the turn of the sixteenth-century (1599), Shakespeare shifts from the historical cycles of English history that he had composed in order to illustrate the political, theological and verbal subtleties (or should I say intricacies) of the exercise of power, by the successive English dynasties, to

famous episodes of the Roman history which allow him to deepen his analysis of the linguistic and dramatic fabric of political power, particularly in troubled times.

It is commonly acknowledged among critics that in Shakespeare's so-called Roman tragedies the articulation between language and wounded flesh is a characteristic and recurring feature. This theatrical device strikes out particularly in *Julius Caesar* (c. 1599) and *Coriolanus* (after 1605, before 1610) and calls for close analysis.

### **\**Julius Caesar* and the web of rhetoric**

Relying on North's translation of the Greek historian Plutarch's depiction of ancient Rome, Shakespeare's selects as subject matter the aftermath of the sacrificial murder of a widely admired and respected leader, namely Julius Caesar, by Brutus, whose act was then commonly interpreted as a foul crime, even if Brutus paradoxically retained the admiration of most for his virtues. The bearing of the historical and political context of the transgressive bloody act, in the historical course of action, recedes in Shakespeare's play before the rhetorical and theatrical dimension he gives to the representation of the event, as I will try to show in my forthcoming analysis. One may recall that the dramatic potentialities of Caesar's career had inspired several English writers earlier than Shakespeare (Stephen Gosson's *Playes Confuted in fiue Actions*, 1582 and several anonymous plays recorded in Henslowe's *Diary* in 1594, 1595, the anonymous *Caesar's Revenge*, 1606 and Chapman's *Caesar and Pompey*, 1631). But none gave such precedence to the power of rhetoric, and more of bodily rhetoric used as a theatrical prop intended to challenge authority. Involved in the dramatic economy, and political world of the play, as well as a physical presence on the very stage where the play is being performed, Julius Caesar's body is spectacularly turned into a gigantic Hydra that calls for revenge, thanks to the speeches it prompts in some of the characters of the play. We will see later in this paper that similarly the scarred flesh of the heroic Coriolanus is expected to 'speak' for him before the people, as a fleshly testimony of his war deeds. In the latter case the perspective will prove different because the hero's scarred body will remain obstinately dumb for lack of character, not even the successful warrior himself as expected, willing to

comply with the tradition of paraphrasing the visual evidence<sup>1</sup>. And this failure will lead to the ultimate tragic death of Coriolanus.

One is led to understand that the dramatic use of the 'gaping flesh' or the 'scarred body' in both plays highlights the importance of the verbal commentary of action on stage. This definite harping on the notion of words as supreme value is totally in keeping with the Roman context, from an Elizabethan perspective. Rome stands as the emblematic city of professional rhetoricians, where the art of persuasion was cultivated to an extent unparalleled in other societies. The all-mighty figure of Cicero hovering over *Julius Caesar* is a permanent reminder of the overwhelming power of rhetoric in a society fond of public orations, where public justification was a customary practice for important figures of the state, who inevitably had to come to terms with the power of words. Such exercises in rhetorical virtuosity were intimately connected with the handling of power because they ensured the orator's ascendancy on the people: "[T]his oratory of ours must be adapted to the ears of the multitude, for charming or urging their minds to approve of proposals, which are weighed in no goldsmith's balance, but in what I may call common scales" (*De oratore*, 2;159)<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore "the Roman rhetorical tradition also maintains the Attic association of oratory and drama. [...] The art of the greatest orator, an *actor Veritatis*, has in it something tragic and divine, earning him the title *tragicus* (*Brutus*, 203)", as shows Lorraine Helms in her inspiring study entitle *Seneca by Candlelight and Other Stories of Renaissance Drama* (1997, p. 26).

\*One may ask what is a tragedy of words? Even more what is a Roman tragedy of words?

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Brockbank ed., *Coriolanus*, The Arden Shakespeare, Routledge: London, 1988, p. 41: "By making Coriolanus shrink from displaying his wounds to the people (in Plutarch he really goes through with it) Shakespeare focuses further action and spectacle upon the hero's body, and much of the thought and metaphor is attentive to the unity of body and mind. It is 'integrity' in yet another sense: we are under pressure to realize that all qualities of the spirit have a physical manifestation."

<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Helms, *Seneca by Candlelight and Other Stories of Renaissance Drama*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1997, pp. 25-26: "From the early *De invention* to the late *De optimo genere oratorum*, Cicero insists that the nobility of political oratory demands clarity and fullness rather than the *skiagraphia* of the Greek tradition. Nevertheless, he affirms Aristotle's belief that a large audience or ordinary people (*mediocres homines*) is the indispensable precondition for agonistic discourse: "[T]his oratory of ours must be adapted to the ears of the multitude, for charming or urging their minds to approve of proposals, which are weighed in no goldsmith's balance, but in what I may call common scales" (*De oratore*, 2;159). Though Cicero demands expansive lucidity rather than the elliptical majesty of *skiagraphia*, these are still the "common scales" on which Aeschylean grandeur weighs more heavily than Euripidean subtlety. The noblest rhetoric is still political, its venue open-air, its audience popular, and its method agonistic."

Both *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* offer a reflexion on the workings of the art of persuasion in terms of control of a linguistic pattern, and of an audience who is being targeted by the rulers to ensure political supremacy. These plays dramatize the organic links that unite rhetoric and power, encompassing their different aspects in the global image of the wounded flesh endowed with speech. Such an image illustrates the power of speech to achieve a dramatic mystification that will take hold of the audience on stage, and possibly in the theatre-house.

In *Coriolanus* we witness the downfall of a heroic character who refuses to come to terms with the power of words, for he thinks language will mar the integrity of action. As a consequence, Coriolanus's scars remain dumb and his political power is no longer substantiated by the verbal paraphrase of his deeds. The play of *Coriolanus* proves to be the tragedy of a tongue-tied character. As G. R. Hibbard states, in his introduction to the 1967 edition of the plays, (*Coriolanus*, G. R. Hibbard ed., Penguin: London, 1967, p.33): 'The central movement of the play is a terrifying exhibition of the power of words. [the] use [of speech] is fraught with dangers, for words can make things seem other than they are, and alter the significance or the importance of an action entirely, as Aufidius points out at the end of IV.7 when he says (lines 49-50): "So our virtues / Lie in th'interpretation of the time ....". [...] Coriolanus is a victim of words, of what he says and of what is said about him. [...] Coriolanus's vulnerability to words is connected with his failure as a human being.'

*Julius Caesar* on the other hand offers an instance of the very skilful verbal paraphrase of action and shows its effects on the exercise of power. This play can certainly be regarded as exemplary of rhetorical virtuosity in the Shakespearean canon, all the more so as its most consummate rhetorical display in act III, scene two, coincides with the dramatic hinge of the play in terms of structure. The outcome of Brutus's and Antony's oratorical contest is « a chiasmus of fates »<sup>3</sup>, for the victor is found guilty and the potential victim turned into a prosecutor. What could have been a very ordinary instance of political justification turns into a dramatic nucleus: the skilful handling of words in conjunction with visual staging by Antony, or better said the accurate language of Caesar's wounds, ultimately thwarts the course of action.

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Fuzier, « Rhetoric vs rhetoric: A Study of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Act III, scene 2 » in *Cahiers Elisabethains*, n°5, p. 55.

Antony's striking description of the power of words in Rome in relation to the wounded body, dramatizes very effectively the articulation between rhetoric and action:

And put a tongue  
In every wound of Caesar that should move  
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny.  
*Julius Caesar* III, 2, 231-233

His image articulates language, human body and political violence. We find here a variation on the wound-mouth theme: Caesar's wounds, the visible sign of his service to Rome, open their « ruby lips » to call for revenge. They bear evidence of violence, transgression, and call for the medium of verbal language to incense the mob to action, so that in turn they breed more violence. The blood they shed forth is not a sign of devitalization of the human body. This « pure », « reviving », « sacred » blood which smeared the conspirators' swords is transmuted into an endless flood of words, uttered by so many tongues as there are wounds on Caesar's body now turned into a massive Hydra. Marc Antony appears there as the agent who validates this symbolic transmutation through his « seduction » speech in act III, scene two.

Antony's vision of Caesar's wounds as so many mouths is a perfect illustration of the reflexion on the effective combination of literary and dramatic rhetoric central to this play. The forum scene is very much akin to an actual theatrical situation, for we have orators on stage performing a set-piece, for the benefit of an audience. Facts related through words are dramatized with the use of literary rhetoric, highly codified according to literary rules, and other elements, mostly visual, like Caesar's wounds, his toga, his will, etc... that can be labelled as dramatic rhetoric. The oratorical contest at the core of the play becomes an exercise in staging verbally and visually, in which both modes are conjoined for the sake of maximal efficiency. It happens that Caesar's speaking wounds ensure Antony's superiority for they combine most perfectly these two elements: even though, ironically enough, it is Brutus who is designated by Antony as the most skilful interpreter of Caesar's wounds.

The play's highest dramatic moment calls for a close scrutiny of the interplay between literary and dramatic rhetoric in the speeches of the two orators; on a more general level, it prompts a reflexion on the play as an example of variations on rhetoric, put to political service.

Before focusing on the rhetoric of deception as exemplified in Brutus's and Mark Antony's speeches in act III, scene two, it seems relevant to examine the positioning of the scene itself in the general structure. This scene follows the climax of the play in terms of plot development, for it comes right after Caesar's assassination. Indeed, it stands as a verbal prolongation of the act itself; for Brutus it is a justification of the act and its validation by the people's agreement, while for Mark Antony the contestation of an act understood as a political transgression. Furthermore, the scene is also embedded in an act framed by two murders—Caesar's assassination and Cinna's murder—which convey the idea of the pervasiveness of violence: there is violence in action before the verbal 'interval' which itself fosters further violence. The scene appears as the hinge of a diptych where language is on the one hand born from action and on the other prompts action. From a semantic standpoint we can also notice that the verbal 'interlude' sets into perspective the use of names and as a result exposes their vacuity, for Caesar is killed because of what his name stands for and Cinna is murdered for bearing the wrong name. One may recall Juliet's line: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet.", when she is telling Romeo that a name is nothing but an empty shell, arbitrarily chosen without any reference to an essentialist perspective on language. This line shows how the status of language, lies at the core of the potential tragedy: wrong names can kill. In both *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* names have potential lethal properties. They are emblematic of the versatility of language that Shakespeare stages here from a political perspective.

The issue of names in the play is intimately connected with the rhetoric of power, for names stand as emblems. Caesar's self-naming practice, the use of the third person, his self-mythologizing, all contribute to turn him into an abstract, universal entity that defies action, as the actual development of the plot will show. At the other end of the spectrum we find Cassius who is attempting to overrule the wielder of power by exposing the vacuity of names:

Brutus and Caesar: what should be in that 'Caesar'?  
 Why should that name be sounded more than yours?  
 Write them together, yours is as faire a name;  
 Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well;  
 Weigh them, it is as heavy; conjure with'em,  
 'Brutus' will start a spirit as soon as 'Caesar'.

*JC*, I, 2, 140-145

Once the name is dissociated from the being it becomes an empty cell, and precipitates the destruction of the person: like a beheaded body, it is then deprived of its substance.

In order to echo distortedly the destruction of the character whose identification with his name was too complete, Shakespeare stages the killing of a character whose name is thrust upon him as a perfect synonym of his being:

Cinna : Truly my name is Cinna

1st Person : Tear him to pieces ! He's a conspirator.

Cinna : I am Cinna the poet, I am Cinna the poet.

4th Person : Tear him for his bad verse.

Cinna : I am not Cinna the conspirator.

1st Person : It is no matter, his name's Cinna ; pluck but his name out of his heart, and turn him going.

*Julius Caesar, III, 3, 26-32*

This example shows that once names have been deprived of their ability to represent, chaos is come again. The tragic conclusion of the paradoxical death of the character blessed with the wrong name encapsulates the absurdity of such a linguistic, be it existential, twist. This final stroke seriously undermines the credibility of words that are no longer related to their content. Finally this seems to be the paramount idea such a highly rhetorical play is determined to convey. The ultimate danger is perhaps absurdity, as shown with Cinna's murder. An absurdity, prompted by the orators' speeches, which reverberates on Caesar's assassination *a posteriori*. The effect achieved is circular: language and preposterous action are ultimately exposed as indissociable.

Such a central scene stages us with the verbal contests of Brutus and Antony, who have devised antithetical 'verbal paraphrases' of the murderous deed. Nevertheless, a common feature to their orations is the initial restrictive frame that either they define or is imposed on them. Brutus's avowed purpose is to justify the murderous act in public to have it ratified by the people:

I will myself to the pulpit first,  
And show the reason of our Caesar's death  
*JC, III, 1, 236-237*



In other words, his speech appears redundant once the act itself is committed: there is no proper motivation at the core of it apart from a rational appraisal of the perpetrated act.

Antony's oration on the contrary is delivered with a revenge purpose in mind, for he himself qualifies his speech as a devised strategy to prompt the people to action:

There shall I try  
In my oration, how the people take  
The cruel issue of these bloody men.  
*JC, III, 1, 292-294*

Yet he is compelled to indirection in his speech for Brutus has set explicit boundaries to it:

You shall not in your funeral speech blame us,  
But speak all good you can devise of Caesar,  
And say you do't by our permission.

*JC, III, 1, 245-247*

These diverging premises will inevitably have a bearing on the verbal strategies of the two orators. If one had to define the basic antithesis between the two speeches in broad terms, one could certainly speak of the use of ready-made rhetoric on the one hand versus the use of made to measure rhetoric on the other hand, or better said a deliberate refusal to compromise, as opposed to a more pragmatic standpoint.

Brutus's oration can be basically defined as a mathematical theorem, « logical but tautological, brief but redundant »<sup>4</sup>, in other words a real paradox that will precipitate his failure, as I will attempt to show now. Regarding speech length, Brutus's style can be termed 'laconic'—referring here to Plutarch's description of Brutus as one who « counterfeited that brief compendious manner of the Lacedaemonians »<sup>5</sup>—for though in prose, it does not extend beyond thirty-five lines. The linguistic medium used is prose because it works as the natural vehicle of logical argumentation, which ties in with Brutus's purpose to offer a logical argument to be judged by the crowd. His speech bears no imagery, for this would appeal to the imagination when he is addressing the mind, but offers variation on rhetorical figures dependent on *logos*. It appears as an intricate structure, an elaborate concatenation of geometrical figures of parallel, symmetry, opposition, which may appeal to the well-exerted

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<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Serpieri, « Reading the Signs : towards a Semiotics of Shakespearean Drama », in *Alternative Shakespeare*, ed. John Drakakis, (London, 1985), p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Brutus*, II, in *Shakespeare's Plutarch*, ed. T.J.B. Spencer, Harmondsworth 64, p. 1041.

mind, but are unlikely to touch simple hearts. This bears evidence of the complete lack of adjustment of the medium used by Brutus to his audience, and appears as a striking weakness in a political speech. Regardless of the nature of his audience, Brutus offers the mob a well-constructed and perfectly balanced piece of eloquence, according to classical rhetorical standards. His speech conforms to the Aristotelian rhetorical pattern, with an introduction or 'exordium', a main development or 'oratio,' that falls into three parts that embody the three modes of persuasion ('*pathos*', '*ethos*' and '*logos*'), and closes with a conclusion or '*peroratio*'.

The opening apostrophe of the speech, « Romans, countrymen and lovers », meant to establish a relation between the speaker and his audience, suggests immediately that it is a formalized oratory piece, relying on a symmetrical ternary rhythm that will be kept throughout.

The actual demonstration of Brutus's rights to kill Caesar comes in a syllogism, developed from line 30 to line 35 (« Who is here so base that would be a bondsman... » etc... till « Then none have I offended »); this syllogism is a perfect instance of a logical reasoning (valid but not true), has no sophistry in it and yet does not convince ultimately Brutus's audience of the legitimacy of the murder committed. One could certainly argue that the audience could not grasp the abstract development of the reasoning, which would account for their mitigated response. But it seems that Brutus's mistake in devising such a strategy goes further than that, for it comes from an idealization of the Romans, as citizens embodying a set of old values. Brutus appeals to their pride as Romans, to their civic sense, to their political awareness, without contemplating the possibility of his audience being different from the ideal model he has in mind. Brutus's idealism causes him to see worthiness and nobility where there may be baseness and villainy. What was meant to convince ultimately proves self-deceptive. Another fatal mistake of Brutus's is his hasty disposal of a crucial point for the crowd, in the non-explicit statement « The question of his death is enroll'd in the Capitol ». Instead of providing the mob with a lengthy development about the actual reasons that motivated the act, he only denies their wish to be satisfied and thereby fosters frustration.

In his conclusion Brutus returns to the initial theme of the '*peroratio*', that is to say his allegiance to the '*vox populi*', as well as his concern for public good. By the end of his speech the wheel has come full circle, and so has his argument. Ultimately it gives the impression that

nothing has been effectively proved, that even perhaps there was nothing to prove for the orator knew he was right, though this is not made obvious to the crowd.

This speech is very enlightening in terms of characterization, for it illustrates how the rhetoric of demonstration can turn into the rhetoric of self-deception. Brutus is a self-professed Stoic, averse to rhetorical figures liable to move the passions or the emotions, so that he delivers an honest straight-forward speech, that ultimately misses the point. He is betrayed by the art on which he relies so heavily, for he proves unable to adjust it to the present situation. His failed contribution offers an instance of the failure of empty formality in public orations, from a dramatic standpoint. His speech, like himself, remains all the time above the level of the audience: for instance, he never allows the crowd to interrupt him which shows he is not in the least concerned with 'audience participation'. Finally, the provisional triumph he is granted (« Bring him with triumph home unto his house », l. 50), the symbolic nomination (« Let him be Caesar », l. 52) the iconic celebration (« Give him a statue with his ancestors », l. 51) appear as a mechanical response to his stilted speech, rather than the enthusiastic response of a skilfully mystified audience. Brutus's failure regarding his communicative strategy is made even worse by the choice of prose as a more appropriate linguistic medium: this initial advantage turns into a great handicap when his words seem corseted in ill-fitted rhetoric.

In contrast to the preceding straightforward speech meant to strike people's minds by its logical clarity, Antony's oration is a masterpiece of indirection, in which words are turned « the seamy side without ». It is the work of a pragmatic orator whose rhetoric is methodically fashioned in order to fit perfectly its audience. We may recognize something of the Machiavellian *ethos* at the core of Antony's skill at fashioning his own discourse. Critics have repeatedly underlined the potential influence of Machiavelli's philosophy of power on Shakespeare. We know that Shakespeare had not read the works of the Florentine author in the text, but had vicarious knowledge of it through fellow playwrights such as Christopher Marlowe (*The Jew of Malta*). Undoubtedly the Machiavellian inspiration is very perceptible in many a History play, as well as our Roman tragedies.

Contrary to Brutus, Antony does not confine himself to the restrictive frame of literary rhetoric but combines it with dramatic rhetoric: his speech invites audience participation and gives the illusion of the creation of a discussion on the issues raised conjointly by the orator

and the plebeians. It allows an interplay between the 'stage' and the 'audience,' substantiated with the use of 'props' such as Caesar's body or his will, so that the impact of words is increased tenfold. Antony's speech also falls into three parts but offers a more devious and less systematic use of rhetoric than Brutus's. It has a much looser appearance but its rhetorical backbone is certainly as strong as his rival's speech. Antony, who is constantly referred to throughout the play as a sensualist, uses a variety of figures whose purpose is to speak to the senses and the heart. As a passionate realist and born demagogue, he calls for emotional reactions, all the more so as he himself is genuinely moved and grieved by Caesar's death. Comparing the different stages of this speech to the ones already singled out in Brutus's, is extremely revealing. His initial apostrophe, « Friends, Romans, countrymen », strictly reverses the order chosen by Brutus and immediately sets the tone of the speech with its appeal to the sentimental before the national feeling. The most characteristic trait of the main bulk of his oration is the use of irony, as a device meant to question the content of words. An instance of this can be found in the following quote:

I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,  
But, here I am to speak what I do know.  
*JC, III, 2, 102-103*

Here the discrepancy between Brutus's words and his knowledge is indirectly exposed. The effect is reinforced by the use of dramatic pauses, as on line 109, that allow the plebeians to awaken to the innuendos of the speech. Antony also makes use of a syllogism to win the approval of his audience from line 124 to line 129 (« Your hearts and minds to mutiny and rage... etc... till « Than I will wrong such honourable men »), but his appears as a real piece of sophistry, with a completely illogical conclusion. The appeal to the heart and mind is supplemented by a very accurate use of stage devices. Antony descends half-way through his speech, in order to have a greater impact on his audience; he uses Caesar's will as a trump card; he attracts the plebeians' attention on the bloody toga as a double emblem of rank and suffering, and then exposes the wounded body itself in a striking 'coup de theatre'. At that point the perfect superimposition of verbal and dramatic rhetoric incenses the people to kill more surely than any logical reasoning. Antony also appears highly skilled in self-dramatization, as is shown in his fake exchange of identity with Brutus at line 228; this belittling device works as a lure, for while disclaiming his oratorical powers Antony is giving a brilliant demonstration of his rhetorical talents, that will spur the people to mutiny. The

tongues in Caesar's wounds are undoubtedly Antony's. Antony's oration is remarkable for its use of repetition as a pedagogic device, but mostly for its constant resort to litotes; his speech is a continuous game of assertion-negation: he affirms through irony and emphasis in order to negate, while he negates through litotes in order to affirm. Simulation and dissimulation are crucial words in Antony's linguistic frame. Ultimately Antony's specious and devious speech, in spite of its initial verse handicap, proves successful for it is the more flexible: it is certainly motivated and offers a perfect coincidence of literary and dramatic rhetoric.

The rhetoric of power used by Antony with a manipulative purpose in mind—« Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot, /Take thou what course thou wilt! » —sends echoes through the play. The opening scene of the play for instance is a very striking example of professional 'rabble-rousing' that enmeshes the plebeians with its « carefully spaced rhetorical questions, deceptive logic, emotive vocabulary, hypnotic repetitions »<sup>6</sup>, according to Anne Barton's analysis. As a result, the Roman citizens are reduced to silence—« They vanish tongue-tied in their guiltiness », I, 2, 62—and compelled to action. The ultimate power of the word is also embodied by Caesar himself, who equates the word with the performance of the action (performative power of language), as Antony expresses it: « When Caesar says, 'Do this', it is perform'd » (I, 2, 10). One may think this to be the outward sign of tyranny, or at least the spectator in the main audience is allowed to interpret it as such.

The art of rhetoric has come to permeate life so completely in Rome that people use it to deceive themselves: Brutus proves one of the victims of the lure of the rhetoric of power, when trying to blur the distinction between speech and action, as Caesar does. In the orchard soliloquy of act II, he « extracts purpose and resolves not from the facts of the situation but from a collection of verbal nothings: from words like « may » and « would »<sup>7</sup>, as Anne Barton puts it. In other words, he is trying to stretch the power of words to the actual completion of the act:

We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,  
And in the spirit of men there is no blood.  
O, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Barton, « *Julius Caesar and Coriolanus* : Shakespeare's Roman World of Words », in *Shakespeare's Craft*, ed. P.H. Highfill Jr. (Illinois, 1982), p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.

And not dismember Caesar!  
*JC, II, 1, 166-169*

For Brutus the unnatural act needs a verbal paraphrase that will translate it into a symbol, thereby spiritualizing it:

We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers.  
*JC, II, 1, 180*

Words alter the nature of the act, so that in killing Caesar, Brutus stands against his spirit, against the man turned into a mythical creature, against Olympus himself. It seems ironical that the verbal lure made up by Brutus will be actualized in the last moments of the play with the visual presence of Caesar's spirit on stage: the verbal translation of the being, his name cannot be disposed of so easily.

The comparison with the tragedy of *Coriolanus* highlights, in a somehow symmetrical way, the subversive power of silence in the political arena, in connection with a reflexion on the hero's identity and his refusal to comply with the customary political rules that ensure power over the people.

### ***Coriolanus* as a political mirror to Shakespeare's Jacobean England**

Annabel Patterson's illuminating study of Shakespeare's vision of power relations in her *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, Blackwell: Oxford, 1989, p. 121, will serve as starting point of our reflexion on the topical nature of the playwright's depiction of the workings of power in *Coriolanus*: "But this list of appropriations, precisely by being such, raises an important question, the question of Shakespeare's intentions: what does the text of *Coriolanus* itself have to say about power relations, in ancient Rome and elsewhere, subsequently?" (p. 123); "Only if one perceives how this crucial moment in the development of Rome as a republic marked the convergence of class interests and constitutional theory does the choice of the Coriolanus story seem inevitable for Shakespeare, at this stage of his own development and that of the Jacobean state."

### ***Coriolanus*, Harping on bodily integrity vs verbal transaction**

At the heart of the tragic fate of Coriolanus lies the dialectics of silence that ensure bodily integrity (and unicity of the hero) vs linguistic exchange with the plebeians that may favour the possibility of exchange, circulation, adaptation and political flexibility. What may at

first pass for a plea to have his valiant deeds at war and the suffering he endured acknowledged, by the contemplation of the wounds he suffered [Mar. « I have some wounds upon me, and they smart / To hear themselves remember'd.” (I,9,28-29)] results into a refusal to allow any commentary and narration on these scars: Cor. « I had rather have my wounds to heal again / Than hear say how I got them.” (II,2,69-70).

We may need to understand this to refer to Machiavelli's interest for the figure of Coriolanus in his *Discourses* on Livy.

“For Anne Barton, who reads the play in the context of Machiavelli's *Discourse* on Livy's history of early Rome, Coriolanus dramatizes the futile persistence of obsolescent virtues (the valorisation of battlefield heroics) in an environment of subtler needs and growing political sophistication.” [Anne Barton, 'Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's Coriolanus', 1985, repr. in *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's 'Coriolanus'*, ed. By Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), p. 123-47]<sup>8</sup>. Ashby himself in his analysis of the Plutarchan inspiration of the play, coupled with the Machiavellian vision of the art of fashioning, underscores the obsolescence of Shakespeare's character in the light of what he calls “pragmatism in the implementation of policy”: “[...] Shakespeare's interest in 'Machiavellian' ideas prompted him to misrepresent his Plutarchan source in order to examine the paradoxical effects of idealistic inflexibility, and to indicate the moral challenges posed by conceptual indeterminacy.”, p.2. “Shakespeare's departures from his Plutarchan sources [...] were made in order to construct a play that dramatizes a confrontation between determined, 'obstinate' idealism, on the one hand, and the kind of pragmatic flexibility of values associated with Machiavellian doctrine on the other.”, p.3. “Machiavelli's writings uniformly endorse pragmatism in the implementation of policy. They reject the idea that political decisions should be made in deference to presumed moral absolutes, arguing instead for tactical manoeuvrability dependent on circumstance.”, p.5.

The hero's scars, inscribed on his body, work as hieroglyphs that require verbal paraphrase in order to gain the people's votes. Zvi Jagendorf analyses the workings of this political, economic and linguistic deal at the root of the public practice, in the young Roman

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Patrick Ashby's "The Changing Faces of Virtue: Plutarch, Machiavelli and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*", *Early Modern Literary Studies*; Sheffield Vol. 19, N°1, (2016): 1-21

Republic: <sup>9</sup> « Above all wounds are numbered counters of exchange in the political market. Wounds are signs not of what he is but of what he has done. They tell stories and are interpretable. They are currency in a political/economic exchange that breeds votes in return for a certain amount of nakedness and verbal display in the market-place.”

But the tragic core of this impossible deal lies in Coriolanus’s refusal to expose himself to the required verbal transaction. He envisages his own body as a sacred entity that should not be violated by any linguistic commentary. Thereby he imagines that he can preserve his bodily integrity and remain one above the mob. To quote again Anne Barton in her « *Julius Caesar and Coriolanus: Shakespeare’s Roman World of Words*”<sup>10</sup> : “He resists the idea that words should be able to violate the integrity of events. Language contaminates the purity of action.” Unfortunately, the consequence of this refusal to comply with tradition is that Coriolanus’s body turns into fossilised material, emblematic of his rigidity that turn him into some form of monstrous being. As Anne Barton notes, Coriolanus is repeatedly compared to a dragon, whose terrifying nature matches its obsolescence. Shakespeare very subtly shows his spectators that such an essentialist vision of the hero’s body belongs to an outdate *episteme* resisting modernity and a revised vision of politics, based on Machiavellian principles. The political flexibility required from the war hero by the people casts a new perspective on an absolutist vision of leadership (monarchy?), that may be discarded. The new model proposed here requires adaptability from the future consul, or to use an early modern phrasing some ‘fashioning’.

On a more linguistic level, the name ‘Caius Martius Coriolanus’ that the protagonist is endowed with at the beginning of the play, by his mother Volumnia (« My gentle Martius, worthy Caius, and / By deed-achieving honour newly nam’d / What is it? – Coriolanus, must I call thee? » (II,1,171-173) works for him as a *cognomen* which encompasses his whole being in a self-contained unit. It seems that it encapsulates his whole essence (the private history of the hero’s lineage, as well as his public identity of heroic warrior) and keeps him at a distance from the rest of society. A kind off semi-god, whose body is offered to worship but which refuses itself to interpretation. For him his name is the end all and the be all, a sacred

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<sup>9</sup> Zvi Jagendorf, « *Coriolanus: Body Politic and Private Parts* », *Shakespeare Quaterly*, vol.41, N°4, 1990, p. 464-465

<sup>10</sup> *Shakespeare’s Craft*, Philip H. Highfill Jr ed., George Washington University, Southern Illinois University Press: Southern Illinois, 1982, p. 34



*cognomen* that prevents any further commentary. But what Coriolanus takes for a form of sanctification in an absolute essence turns into a deadly ritual that leads to his destruction.

The last stroke of the tragic dialectics that Shakespeare explores in this play comes with the implicit reference to the flaying of the satyr Marsyas, when Coriolanus appears at the doors of Corioles: Cominius : « Who's yonder / That does appear as he were flay'd ? O Gods / He has he stamp of Martius, and I have / Beforetime seen him thus." (I,7,21-24). The seemingly flayed creature is momentarily victorious at the opening of the play; but this portentous moment finds its completion in act V, scene 6, when Coriolanus falls under the strokes of the conspirators answering the cry of "Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him!" (I.131). The ultimate *diasparagmos* of the hero (Coriolanus himself asked for it with his words to the conspirators "Call me to pieces, Volsces." V,6,113) punishes his linguistic hubris. The character's faith in linguistic absolutism, manifested in his *cognomen*, is met with the violent dismemberment Aufidius inflicts upon him in act V, scene 6: Auf.: 'Ay, traitor, Martius!' / Cor.: 'Martius.' / Auf.: 'Ay, Martius, Caius Martius!' (I.7-8). Thereby, the monstrous integrity of the war hero is shattered to pieces, as his linguistic denomination crumbles down. The existential mistake of the character is exposed on stage, as his failure to relate to his fellow citizens is punished with dismemberment.