To Starve with Feeding: The City in Coriolanus

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Coriolanus begins with an angry mob demanding to be fed and ends when another mob in another city brings the hero down in violent fulfillment of its hunger for revenge. The citizens at the beginning are moved to wish for Coriolanus' death, the citizens at the end to enact it—with a little help from Aufidius and his friends. That they do so ritualistically, as John Holloway has pointed out, in that ceremony of disorder, the sparagmos, suggests that Coriolanus' death has been inevitable from the first as a "ritual killing required by society" once it has isolated its victim. In fact, Shakespeare builds this inevitability into the very structure of his play by making the closing scene answer so closely to and fulfill the voiced desires of the crowd at the opening to kill Coriolanus in exchange for a specified social end: "Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price" (I.i.9-10). The play is full of such mirror scenes: In III.iii, the Roman plebians again want Coriolanus to die by having him pitched from the Tarpeian Rock. But these specifically analogous actions at the opening and close give prominence to the actions of the group in a play that otherwise seems almost single-minded in its concentration on the hero. Shakespeare uses the citizens as a framing device because—to borrow Reuben Brower's deft phrase—the central subject of the play is what happens to Achilles in the forum. Like Coriolanus, who is both an historical personage reasonably well known to an educated Elizabethan and the embodiment of a heroic type, the city which casts him out is both the historical Rome of the early Republic and the "City," that symbol of the human community bound together by the same gods, heroes, laws, customs, buildings, and walls. By framing the play with images of the community—first hungry, then sated and spent—Shakespeare suggests that the tragic outcome of what happens to Achilles in the forum has as much to do with the nature of the forum as with the nature of Achilles himself.

The obvious importance of the idea of Rome to the action of the play has not gone unnoticed by its critics, but predictably enough there is less than substantial agreement about what attitude toward Rome the play finally proposes. MacCallum, quoting Heine's description of the Romans as men "great through the idea of their eternal Rome; great, wheresoever they have fought, written or builded in the inspiration of this idea," is powerfully struck by a "feeling of the
majesty and omnipotence of the Eternal City. . . [standing] aloft and apart from its faulty representatives as a kind of mortal deity that overrules their doings to its own ends." Donald Stauffer agrees that the play's real hero is Rome but lays emphasis not on the majesty of the fatherland but on the powerful embrace of the motherland, "the country, our dear nurse." G. Wilson Knight, and after him Traversi, see in the imagery of bricks, walls, metals and stones the less-than-heroic portrait of a provincial town embroiled in intramural warfare. For Eugene Waith, Rome becomes increasingly identified in the course of the play with political corruption, a specious moderation, and the ascendancy of expediency over honor and principle. Two of the play's most recent critics have found in the relations of Coriolanus and Rome a tragic incompatibility. J. L. Simmons sees the play's presentation of Rome in the light of Christian historiography. Without the broad vision of Christian eschatology, the Augustinian vision of two cities, to resolve its inherent divisions, Rome is tragically flawed: rather than change, the rigidly idealistic Coriolanus and the materialistic mob will destroy the city in their insistence on translating their own conflicting visions of the city into reality. Paul A. Cantor sees a similar division in the 'city's constitution between the plebs' appetitiveness and Coriolanus' patrician devotion to public service and argues that Rome finally fails by exacting a narrow standard of loyalty and military excellence that restricts the individual's access to self-knowledge: "that Rome finds it necessary to banish Coriolanus suggests a fundamental incompatibility between political excellence and human excellence." While not wholly incompatible, such differences are of some importance in interpreting the play. The more one emphasizes the impersonal greatness of Rome, and thus the heroic altruism of Coriolanus' death, the further the play moves from tragedy to tragicomedy, from recognition of loss to solemn affirmation of what survives. Such an approach will underscore that, unlike most of his tragic predecessors, Coriolanus is alone in death, having made the right choice and bringing no one else down with him. But if Rome is understood as a city deeply flawed by a chronic aversion to principled conduct of its affairs, then the play becomes a vision of the tragic destruction of a great man by ordinary men and of the loss of the symbol of human possibility. Thus, while it is clearly easy to agree that Coriolanus sacrifices himself for the preservation of Rome, our understanding of his tragedy will depend in large part on how deeply we can value the city that survives him. It seems to me one of the tragic ironies of this paradoxical play that Rome, the symbol of human community, is at once the source of life and the instrument of death, the agent of immortality and the exactor of a sacrifice which diminishes the city's existence in preserving it. Indeed, the city in Coriolanus is an idea compounded of paradox, for it
represents collectively held ideals of individual aspiration and creates the possibilities for achieving them even as it moves with a compulsive, predatory savagery to destroy the heroic man who manifests the very qualities it holds up for emulation.

As with the portrait of the hero himself, then, Shakespeare creates the portrait of his city through contrasts.\(^{12}\) One of the most basic contrasts is between Rome as a concretely realized setting and as a city located in the mind, a symbol of human possibility. This contrast is present from the very beginning of the play in the tumultuous opening dialogue between Menenius and the mutinous citizens which provides a vivid demonstration of the dynamic interplay between the two Romes. The expansive physical presence of the mob filling up the stage with bodies, noise, and movement creates an almost pressing sense of the urban milieu which Shakespeare chooses to emphasize by making this crowd merely representative of a larger crowd whose presence is implied by shouts from backstage: "The other side o'th'city is risen. Why stay we prating here?" (I.i.43-44). The plebeians list their grievances in a catalogue of particular abuses—hoarding, usurious edicts, and repressive legislation—based finally on the undeniable requirements of physical nature. In defending the patricians, Menenius invokes an idea of the Roman state as historical process in language that stations itself firmly in the abstract:

... you may as well
Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them
Against the Roman state, whose course will on
The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs
Of more strong link asunder than can ever
Appear in your impediment.

(I.i.63-68)

The suggestions in Menenius’ speech of awesomely disinterested and absolute power and his association of Roman history with the will of the gods make the city heroic. His words would also, I suspect, remind the Elizabethans of the future greatness of Rome in the more familiar imperial period which Shakespeare had already dramatized. Here, republican Rome becomes part of a long, celebrated continuum of men and events which distinguishes the individuals who make up the ranks of a city at any given moment from that idea of the city as res publica which exists apart from the individual life span and is allied with the workings of fate. Furthermore, Menenius’ reminder of the city’s historic future this early in the play makes possible an ironic perspective on the approaching threats to the city’s existence first from the Volsces and later from
Coriolanus himself: whatever else may happen, it is not Rome that will be destroyed.

Menenius goes on to deliver his famous anatomy of the workings of state in the fable of the belly in a dialogue with the citizens which acts out the mutuality he is espousing.\textsuperscript{13} Whether or not we take the fable as an ideal image of civic life, its reiterated rhetorical status as a fable distinctly sets it apart from the dialogue and action that surround it just as Menenius has set the idea of Rome apart from the individuals who live there. The fable is presented as an idea of the city, and it succeeds in calming the angry citizens through its association of the state with the vital natural process of digestion. In its images of the state, the fable of the belly not only makes the city a body, but it also makes the body a city with many essential features of city life—storehouses, workshops, rivers, offices, a central court—and almost suggests intricate topography in the winding distribution of the general food supply. Even in this metaphoric exchange of attributes between body and city, there is some hint of the mutuality which is Menenius’ ostensible message, for the fable brings together an idea of the political process as hierarchical distribution of function with the concrete actuality that idea seeks to regulate. Linked now with the inexorable processes of both nature and history, the idea of Rome would seem to command allegiance. The fable is followed, however, by Coriolanus’ abrupt, bellicose entrance which breaks up the moment of equilibrium and returns the dramatic situation to its discordant beginnings. The scene becomes a brief, introductory enactment of the play’s characteristic rhythms and evidence for the continual forward momentum of civic life.\textsuperscript{14} Coriolanus’ language, a harsh catalogue of plebeian unworthiness which ends, finally, with the telltale epithet, “you fragments” (217), dissolves the metaphoric accord between an idea of the city and its multitudinous inhabitants which Menenius had so patiently evolved. The play never even allows us to find out whether the plebs are right to accuse the patricians of hoarding grain. Thus, the deepest relevance of Menenius’ fable is as a comic possibility of urban stability which the play’s relentless major action leaves behind, isolated and unresolved, as a sign of the division between idea and actuality, between the comedy it is possible to imagine and even at moments achieve and the tragedy it becomes impossible to prevent. Like the city itself, Menenius’ fable cannot finally accommodate the intractable individuality of the hero.

As the give and take of this opening exchange between patricians and plebeians suggests, the play in part can be read as a dialogue of many voices about what the city is or ought to be. “What is the city but the people?” asks the tribune Sicinius later in the play, and the plebs dutifully echo: “True, / The people are the city” (III.i.199-200). In fact, however, definitions of the city split
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sharply along class lines, confirming Plato's view in the Republic that, in a city where there are divisions of wealth, there is more than one city: "For they are each one of them many cities, not a city. . . . There are two at the least at enmity with one another, the city of the rich and the city of the poor, and in each one of these there are many."¹⁵ The patricians tend to identify the idea of Rome exclusively with themselves—"our Rome," as Volumnia says in imagining the honors the city will bestow on her son. Her identification of Rome with her own class is so complete, in fact, that she can ask Coriolanus in Act III to use policy and strategy in his relations with the plebs as he would in a campaign against a warring city. That he feels much the same is obvious from the moment he steps onstage and calls them "scabs" (I.i.171), sores on the body politic that healing, presumably, would take away. Only when the physical survival of the city is at stake does the pronoun shift in favor of the populus: "He'll shake / Your Rome about your ears," shouts Cominius to the frightened tribunes (IV.vi.99-100). Another way of assessing the importance of this class division and of the relative importance of the idea of Rome to the play is to note that Spenck counts eighty-eight uses of the word Rome in Coriolanus, but only thirty-eight in Julius Caesar and thirty in Antony and Cleopatra.¹⁶ Interestingly, the anonymous Roman plebs never use the word, and even the tribunes between them account for only six instances: "Rome" belongs to the patricians.

Such word counts document one's sense of how firmly the play is grounded in the public arena, far more so in fact that the two other Roman plays. The word capitoll, for instance, which occurs only twice in Julius Caesar and once in Antony and Cleopatra, occurs fifteen times in Coriolanus. The Capitol is a frequent destination for players leaving the stage, and Coriolanus' nomination to the consulship in II.i takes place there. Only three scenes (I.iii, III.ii, and IV.v) clearly take place inside a private house, the first two at the home of Coriolanus and the latter at Aufidius' house in Coriolini. More obvious, perhaps, given the notoriously slippery sense of place on an unlocalized stage, is the fact that Coriolanus is the only character to appear by himself onstage. Yet his first words while alone in IV.iv are, significantly, an address to the city of Corioli, so that in a way he is not alone and does not feel himself to be alone at all. Indeed, there is no such thing in this city as a private realm, except (as for Virgilia) in silence. Coriolanus lacks the quiet, melancholy note of the scene in Brutus' orchard in Julius Caesar or the playful domestic scenes between Cleopatra and her attendants that punctuate the swirl of activity in Antony and Cleopatra. Unlike Brutus or Caesar, Coriolanus has no private moments with his wife—or with his mother, either. Their meetings, partings, reunions, and moments of dissension take place in full view of the Roman populace, or at least of the Roman senate; and at the climactic final meeting, Coriolanus makes sure that
Aufidius and the Volsces hear what he says to his family: "Aufidius, and you Volsces, mark; for we'll / Hear naught from Rome in private" (V.iii.92-93).

By excluding private moments and private settings so completely from the world of this play, Shakespeare embodies dramatically the sacrifice of self which Roman citizenship will increasingly be seen to involve. Throughout the play, the patricians present Rome as a standard for individual conduct, an idea of the possibilities for human greatness, of which Coriolanus becomes a singular example. Cominius rebukes the tribunes for objecting to Coriolanus' claims to the consulship by invoking Roman decorum: "This paltering / Becomes not Rome" (III.i.58-59). Aufidius wishes himself a Roman, because he identifies Rome with a triumphant valor which he, however mistakenly, sees in himself: "I would I were a Roman; for I cannot, / Being a Volsce, be that I am" (I.x.4-5). Coriolanus, for his part, professes himself willing to see the destruction of the actual city for an idea of the proper balance of power in the Roman state: "The rabble should have first unroofed the city / Ere so prevailed with me" (I.i.213-14). He so strongly identifies Rome with a high standard of achievement that he verbally expels the plebeians who care more for grain than glory from the collective ideal of Rome, as they will later expel him physically from the actual city:

I would they were barbarians, as they are,
Though in Rome littered; not Romans, as they are not,
Though calved i'th'porch o'th'Capitol—

(III.i.238-40)

Traditionally, a Roman's commitment to the city was, at least potentially, absolute. Cicero writes in De legibus: "For her it is our duty to die, to her to give ourselves entirely, to place on her altar, and, as it were, to dedicate to her service, all that we possess." Such extreme civic consciousness prevails even in the one ostensibly domestic scene of the play. After two noisily, public opening scenes, both of which involve military conferences, first in Rome and then in Corioli, I.iii seems to introduce a quiet, almost passive mood as Volumnia and Virgilia seat themselves and begin to sew. This mood quickly changes, however, as Volumnia articulates the grim conditions of honorable citizenship for Roman mothers and their sons. The entire scene, composed only of women, is insistently in its emphasis on generations of women giving birth and nurturing children, from Hecuba suckling Hector in the legendary past to Volumnia, Virgilia, and in the dramatic present the lady just now lying-in whom Valeria asks them to visit. Only Valeria stands apart from the prevailing maternal emphasis, though perhaps, as Ribner suggests, the triple alliteration in the
women's names underlines a common ritualistic function.\textsuperscript{18} For Volumnia, motherhood is a civic obligation, a part of the historical process. As she tells a horrified Virgilia, she has at least in imagination already offered up the life of the son she has and the putative lives of the sons she might have had in service to an idea of Rome as the rightful exactor of sacrifice. Her identification of her own life and personal history with that of the state is so absolute that she makes no distinction between biological continuity and the immortality of fame, that life of the name which only the community can bestow. To Virgilia's question, "had he died in the business, madam," the mother replies:

Then his good report should have been my son; I therein would have found issue. Hear me profess sincerely: had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike, and none less dear than thine and my good Marcius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action.

(I.iii.18-23)

Virgilia's quiet articulation of an intensely personal ethos represents the only possible alternative here to the predominant aristocratic code of public commitment, but Virgilia herself retreats to a negative posture of stolid resistance, and her point of view prevails only in the privacy of her silent thoughts. Instead of providing relief from the imminent warfare, then, this scene provides the first taste of it, vicariously, in the verbal violence of Volumnia's bloody images of her son in battle and in the muted violence of Valeria's anecdote about the young Marcius tearing apart the butterfly with his teeth. Even the conflict between Volumnia and Virgilia ends only when Virgilia successfully resists Valeria's entreaties to go visiting.

The absence of private moments in the play takes on greater significance for the idea of Rome through Shakespeare's use of ceremony as a key structural device. John Holloway has spoken of Shakespeare's use of ceremonial actions in \textit{Coriolanus} to plot the hero's movement from being the cynosure in triumph to being an outcast after the ceremonial expulsion from Rome. Ironically, Coriolanus has another triumph in his final return to Corioli just before his ritualized death at the hands of the mob, but even that death has been forecast in the images of ritual sacrifice (III.ii.1, for example) and in the actual threat of ritual sacrifice when the crowd demands that Coriolanus be thrown from the Tarpeian Rock. There are also the important ceremonies attached to the election of consul, though as Holloway points out, these are not triumphal rites but rites of supplication which Coriolanus would prefer to forgo.\textsuperscript{19} There is, finally, one ceremony or ceremony \textit{in potentia} which has received little attention and
which I shall discuss in more detail below. This is the moment of Volumnia’s
triumph as she is hailed as “our patroness, the life of Rome” (V.i.1) and borne
away to a celebration offstage.

Together, the sacrifice of private time and space and the prominence of
ceremony, which gives structure, meaning, and historical continuity to the
activities of a group, suggest how thoroughly and intensely civic the life of this
city is and how little room remains for the gigantic and defiantly individual
figure of Coriolanus. The report of Coriolanus’ triumph, for instance, described
first by the tribune Brutus and repeated in less detail fifty lines later by a
messenger, is a description not of the returning hero but of the city pressing its
welcome upon him:

Your Prattling nurse
Into a rapture lets her baby cry,
While she chats him; the kitchen malkin pins
Her richest lockram ’bout her reechy neck,
Clamb’ring the walls to eye him. Stalls, bulks, windows
Are smothered up, leads filled, and ridges horsed
With variable complexions, all agreeing
In earnestness to see him. Seld-shown flamens
Do press among the popular throngs, and puff
To win a vulgar station.

(II.i.195-204)

The audience’s sense of what L. C. Knights has called the city’s “felt solidity” is
confirmed by such expository narrative, which draws on the Elizabethans’
sophisticated awareness, built up by a long tradition of street theaters and civic
pageantry, of the theatrical uses of cities.

But Shakespeare develops the idea of the city in the language of the play
primarily through imagery which establishes a close identification between
character and setting. G. Wilson Knight has noted the imagery of buildings and
building materials and finds it appropriate to the harsh civic setting and the
provinciality of life in a small city. Bradley was perhaps the first to comment
on the play’s avoidance of those natural and supernatural images which
elsewhere convey a sense of mystery and imaginative sweep. Certainly the
play is preoccupied, in part, with all those things of specifically human man-
ufacture and accomplishment, with that for which the earthly city is a tradi-
tional symbol. And it is preoccupied, too, with the genesis of the hero and the
power of his mother. It is important to note, therefore, that the close identifica-
tion of character and setting is one that the characters make themselves. One
sign is the architectural imagery which so many characters use quite casually to express desire or accomplishment. Cominius speaks of the “spire and top of praises vouched” (I.ix.24); Aufidius vows in I.x that neither “fane nor capitol,” those customary restraints, shall prevent his taking revenge on Coriolanus; and Volumnia exults to her son that she has lived “to see inherited my very wishes / And the buildings of my fancy” (II.i.188-89). Throughout the play, the city’s physical features provide images for assessing its spiritual state so that the physical survival of the city becomes equated with the fates of the human agents onstage. Images of the city’s destruction recur: Coriolanus’ image of unroofing which I have already quoted echoes ironically when he is threatening to destroy Rome. Cominius rebukes the people:

You have help to ravish your own daughters and
To melt the city leads upon your pates,
To see your wives dishonored to your noses—

Your temples burnèd in their cement, and
Your franchises, whereon you stood, confined
Into an auger’s bore.

(IV.vi.82-84, 86-88)

The patricians use city imagery rhetorically to symbolize what is at issue in the conflict between Coriolanus and the plebeians, between the one and the many. Cominius images the popular revulsion against Coriolanus as consul in Act III as the physical collapse of the city’s distinctive, hierarchical topography into architectural chaos and formlessness:

That is the way to lay the city flat,
To bring the roof to the foundation,
And bury all, which yet distinctly ranges,
In heaps and piles of ruin.

(III.i.204-07)

Later he compares the idea of resisting the plebeians’ mutiny against the patricians to the foolishness of standing “against a falling fabric” (III.i.247). As Coriolanus stands opposed to the plebeians in the action of the play, so he stands opposed to them in the play’s imagery. While they are identified throughout the play with the city’s architectural collapse, Coriolanus becomes increasingly associated with monumental form. Back from his futile embassy to the vengeful hero, Cominius tells Menenius and the tribunes that “he leads
them like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature, / That shapes man better” (IV.vi.91-93). Just before the news of Coriolanus’ decision to spare Rome, Menenius describes him to the tribunes as the massive creation of the military architect, a walking colossus:

When he walks, he moves like an engine, and the ground shrinks before his treading. He is able to pierce a corslet with his eye; talks like a knell and his hum is a battery. He sits in his state, as a thing made for Alexander. What he bids be done is finished with his bidding. He wants nothing of god but eternity, and a heaven to throne him in.

(V.iv.18-24)

Both Volumnia and Menenius, in fact, even identify Coriolanus with the Capitol itself. After his banishment, she rebukes the tribunes in an architectural equation: “‘As far as doth the Capitol exceed / The meanest house in Rome, so far my son . . . does exceed you all’” (IV.ii.39-42). Later Menenius assesses for the tribunes the chances of Coriolanus sparing Rome by comparing him to the Capitol: “‘If it be possible for you to displace it with your little finger, there is some hope the ladies of Rome, especially his mother, may prevail with him’” (V.iv.4-6). We, of course, know them to have done just that, and Menenius’ speech is laden with dramatic irony. The city, as we know and as Menenius and the tribunes will soon come to know, has been spared but at a cost, which, as Coriolanus tells his mother, will prove most mortal to him. If, as Menenius says, to move Coriolanus is to move the Capitol, then to move the Capitol (which is here a heroic symbol of fixity and permanence) is inevitably to bring it down when Coriolanus himself falls. But a city surviving without a Capitol is a city without a center, with a dead place where once the symbol of extraordinary accomplishment stood.

This profound identification of character and setting, which is most significant with respect to Coriolanus himself, is only in part, however, a metaphorical identification of men and the buildings of their city. Other image patterns in the language of the play serve to bring together various kinds of experience and, as part of the intensely civic atmosphere, to demonstrate the insistent interconnectedness of such experience. The characters tend to talk about personal experience and public activities in reciprocal terms and to weigh the one against the other. As Charles Mitchell has suggested, the opening scene questions the wellsprings of patriotic feeling in a variety of ways.23 The plebeians, concerned throughout the play with Coriolanus’ motives, announce that concern at the very beginning by using the question of motive to offset Coriolanus’ accomplishments: “Though soft-consciened men can be content to say it was for his country, he did it to please his mother and to be partly
proud" (I.i.34-36). The way in which personal feeling is set against public actions in this speech occurs elsewhere in the play and introduces an ambiguity fundamental to the heroic conduct of the Achillean hero, whose activities are directed primarily towards winning personal glory and benefit city and countrymen only incidentally.24 But as the expulsion of the hero for not asking the consulship kindly demonstrates, no element of action can be separated from any other in the intimate concentration of life in a city like this, where there seems to be no line dividing public from private. Coriolanus, who sees in battle the opportunity for self-expression, makes use of the thoroughly traditional Renaissance metaphor linking sexual love and warfare when he embraces Cominius on the battlefield:

O, let me clip ye  
In arms as sound as when I wooed, in heart  
As merry as when our nuptial day was done,  
And tapers burned to bedward!

(l.vi.29-32)

Aufidius, in so many ways Coriolanus' lesser and darker self, makes use of the same language in telling Coriolanus he is happier to see him "than when I first my wedded mistress saw / Bestride my threshold" (IV.v.118-19). Volumnia, with her immense appetite for vicarious experience, tends to bring images and emotions of intensely private moments into the larger context of the aristocratic code of ennobling public service. She links images of blood and warfare with those of love, birth, and nurture in her conversation with Virgilia in I.iii, which moves from love to childbirth to motherhood. She sees both sexual and maternal love in an inferior relation to glorious military action. In a speech that begins with the revealing phrase "If my son were my husband," she tells Virgilia to prefer Coriolanus' absence on the battlefield to conjugal embraces as she, his mother, rejoiced more in the news of his first glory in battle than in the news of the birth of a boy. Moving from personal statement to objective assertion, she goes on to insist that

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

(l.iii.38-41)

This tendency to associate personal experience or private emotion with public, usually military, action is given thematic significance through the play's
attention to family relationships as another way of suggesting the constricting intimacy of civic life and as the literal and figurative foundation for all the larger social and political ties that hold a city together. The language of familial relationships pervades the play from Menenius’ assurance to the plebs that the senators “care for you like fathers” (I.i.73) to the play’s horrifying final moments when the hysterical mob in Coriolanus shouts a terrible litany of kinship as they fall on Coriolanus: “He killed my son!—My daughter!—He killed my cousin Marcus! He killed my father!” (V.vi.120-21). Indeed terms of kinship are embedded in the dialogue of the play simply because of the major characters’ habit of talking about each other as son, husband, wife, or mother rather than by name. Menenius is spoken of as Coriolanus’ father; the younger Marcius is dramatically important mostly for being “the father’s son”; and Volumnia, who can imagine her son as her husband and has “a charter to extol her blood” (I.ix.14), exults in the possessiveness of family ties. Coriolanus himself perceives his victory in Corioli in terms of its effects on families. When he sees Virgilia weeping at his triumphal return, he reminds her, “Such eyes the widows of Corioles wear, / And mothers that lack sons” (II.i.168-69). He uses similar language in addressing the city itself:

City,
’Tis I that made thy widows. Many an heir
Of these fair edifices ’fore my wars
Have I heard groan and drop.
(IV.iv.1-4)

His own conflict with Rome is imaged at least once in the play as a marital quarrel, when the Roman spy tells his Volscian acquaintance, “the fittest time to corrupt a man’s wife is when she’s fall’n out with her husband” (IV.iii.29-30).

Unlike the essentially comic vision of interdependence in Menenius’ fable of the belly, there is nothing reassuring about the pervasiveness of family ties and the all-encompassing embrace of civic life in republican Rome. For one thing, this constriction into intimacy seems to work like friction to aggravate differences between the classes, as the sudden, bitter outburst between patricians and plebeians in IV.vi demonstrates. Even more disturbing, Shakespeare relates the play’s several primary image patterns—imagery of animals, eating, and bodily parts—to predatory nature and even to cannibalism in order to reveal the dark and primitive underside of the city as family, the horror and savagery which lies just beneath the dynamic surface of ordinary social life and,
like a cresting wave, breaks finally in a brief, uncontrollable moment of violence at the end of the play.

Like the terms of kinship, an anatomical vocabulary of body parts is firmly enmeshed in the dialogue and underscores the literal significance of the traditional metaphor of the body politic from which it is derived. This anatomical imagery is introduced prominently into the play at the very opening when it is given sustained comic elaboration in Menenius' fable, the ostensible purpose of which is to provide a way of seeing the parts of the social organism in relation to the whole. But, as Leonard Barkan has recently explained, imagery of the body in Coriolanus suggests the fragmentation of society because both Coriolanus and the many-headed multitude manifest a compelling tendency towards division and inner disharmony.\textsuperscript{25} In the first act alone, we hear of Coriolanus' lips and eyes; brows bound with oak and bloody brows; Hecuba's breasts and Hector's forehead; Aufidius' head, knee, and neck; Aufidius washing his hands in Coriolanus' heart; the buttock of the night and the forehead of the morning. In this imagery, body parts are seen not in relation to the whole but in isolation as separable units. While the effect of the pervasive body imagery may be to anthropomorphize and make fully dramatic an abstract conception of the commonwealth, the tendency among the characters to see human beings rather primitively as component parts is a constant reminder of mortality and the physical vulnerability of the human body. Thus it serves to qualify the suggestions of divinity and monumentality with which Coriolanus is increasingly associated after his expulsion from Rome until the final moments when the tropes of fragmentation become literal.

This anatomical imagery takes on its final terrifying significance for the idea of the city in relation to other image patterns in the play, particularly the recurrent, related emphasis on animals and eating. As G. Wilson Knight was among the first to note, the pervasive animal imagery in Coriolanus dwells on the natural differences between strong and weak animals—lions and hares, foxes and geese, eagles and doves, osprey and fish, cat and mouse—in order to point up the natural inequalities among men which are crucially at issue in the conflict between Coriolanus and the plebeians.\textsuperscript{26} Many of these animal images describe the relationship of predator and prey. At several points in the play, images of animals eating or preying make explicit the brutal necessities of the natural order and equate the predatory relationships of animals with the political relations among men or between heroes and their cities. One indication of the elemental nature of the conflict is that both Coriolanus and the plebeians are imaged as predator and prey, depending on the identity and loyalties of the speaker. Thus, at the beginning of the play, the plebeians...
describe Coriolanus in a clearly pejorative image as "a very dog to the commonalty" (I.i.25-26), but for Aufidius much later Coriolanus is a noble predator who will be to Rome "as is the osprey to the fish, who takes it / By sovereignty of nature" (IV.vii.34-35). Though Coriolanus complains to the plebeians that "he that trusts to you, / Where he should find you lions, finds you hares; / Where foxes, geese" (I.i.165-67), many explicitly predatory images in the play link the plebeians with the predator. Menenius speaks of them as a wolf devouring the lamb Coriolanus (II.i.9-10) and Cominius, another presumably choric character, echoes him later by saying "the people / Deserve such pity of him as the wolf / Does of the shepherds" (IV.vi.110-12). Both Menenius and Coriolanus call the plebeians rats, whom Coriolanus would send to gnaw the Volscians' garners instead of Rome's. When later to the Volscians he speaks of Rome in a riddling Hamlet-like image as the "city of kites and crows" (IV.v.42), he adds to the idea of animals eating and preying the far more unpleasant image of carrion birds who have devoured everything but his name.

These images of predatory nature provide the thematic link between animal imagery and the images of food and eating which recur throughout the play. Maurice Charney suggests that most food imagery in the play associates the plebeians negatively with eating and appetitive urges and the patricians, by contrast, with temperance, asceticism, and, in the case of Coriolanus, an aristocratic disdain for physical requirements. But, while it is true that only the plebeians feel the pains of literal hunger, they are not alone in having appetites. In the opening scene the commoners show themselves capable of seeing appetite in metaphorical as well as literal terms by vowing their mutiny is prompted "in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge" (I.i.22). They see themselves figuratively as food for the patricians, eaten up either by war or repressive statutes, a suggestion which Coriolanus unconsciously confirms by welcoming war as a "means to vent / Our musty superfluity" (I.i.220-21). For his part he accuses the plebeians of preying on one another:

What's the matter,
That in these several places of the city
You cry against the noble Senate, who,
Under the gods, keep you in awe, which else
Would feed on one another?

(I.i.179-83)

The images in these mutual accusations are fundamentally dramatic: they inform us less about the objective truth of the background circumstances than about the attitudes and relationships of the speakers. Common to both accusa-
tions, however, is the association of civic life with predatory animal nature. Thus it is significant that Shakespeare describes almost all the characters in the play in terms of one kind of appetite or another. Menenius, of course, is the play’s gourmand, his hunger distinguishable from the plebeians’ by refinement of taste, for one thing. It is characteristic that he should attribute Coriolanus’ rejection of Cominius’ embassy from Rome to the fact that “he had not dined” (V.i.50). When Coriolanus comes to join forces with Aufidius in Corioli, he takes Aufidius away from a feast which he says “smells well,” though he seems otherwise to have little taste for food, perhaps because, as Menenius says, “meal and bran together / He throws without distinction” (III.i.321-22). Instead, Coriolanus shares with Aufidius, Cominius, and other military figures in the play an appetite for battle. Cominius images battle as a feast, when he praises Coriolanus’ conquest of Aufidius as a morsel after the main course of conquering Corioli: “Yet camest thou to a morsel of this feast, / Having fully dined before” (I.ix.10-11). This image of battle as a feast is given a rather grotesque comic elaboration in the conversation of the Volscian servingmen in Act IV. Responding to the idea that Aufidius was a piece of meat Coriolanus “scotched and notched” for broiling, the Second Servingman adds: “An he had been cannibally given, he might have boiled and eaten him too” (IV.v.191-92). The servingmen imagine the newly reconciled warriors sharing a common table and feasting together at the coming battle, “as it were, a parcel of their feast, and to be executed ere they wipe their lips” (IV.v.219-20). It is possible to see the young Marcius in this context tearing apart the butterfly with his teeth as a training exercise for the heartier fare and bloodier appetite of the grown fighter. These images of feasting in battle do not merely, as Charney suggests, make war a devourer of men. This is a play about the relation of character to action, particularly the problematic relations of heroic character to public action, and it stresses the personal aspect of warfare and citizenship, the decisive actions of a single individual. It is appropriate, then, that warriors become the devourers of other men, with war the social occasion for aristocratic feasting.

The imagery of food and animals, related thematically in images of prey, provides a way of seeing analogy in the otherwise discrete conflicts of city with city, warrior with warrior, hero with city, patrician with plebeian. If Coriolanus devours his opponents on the battlefield, Rome in banishing Coriolanus devours him, or all of him but his name. Similarly, anatomical imagery with its almost inexhaustible complexity organizes the multiplicity of response and action in the central dramatic conflict between Coriolanus and the plebeians. But the relevance of these related images to the idea of Rome becomes apparent, finally, in the rise of Volumnia to triumphal celebration in the penultimate
moments of the play. Through Volumnia, the play’s reiteration of family ties and its primary image patterns come together in a final image of the city which, in turn, shapes our response to the death of Coriolanus.

From her first appearance onstage in I.iii., Volumnia has been associated both with birth and death, with the continuation of life through issue and the sacrificial death of that issue. If, as Leonard Barkan suggests, Coriolanus sees his body as an extension of the state,28 Volumnia sees Coriolanus as an extension of her body, which she thinks of as reproductive organs—breast and womb. From her flow those qualities of Coriolanus of which she approves: “Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck’st it from me! But owe thy pride thyself” (III.ii.129-30). It is Volumnia’s characteristic way of talking about Coriolanus to recreate him visually, sometimes in mythic terms as when she says, “Death, that dark spirit, in’s nervous arm doth lie” (II.i.150), but typically with an emphasis on his powerful physique and monumentality of form. She horrifies Virgilia by imagining him in battle, first as a bear from whom children flee and then as a mower. In lines I have quoted, she tells the tribunes he is the Capitol. Having created her son, she continues to claim possession of him: “Thou art my warrior; / I holp to frame thee” (V.iii.62-63). Leading the young Marcus in by the hand in Act V, she presents him to his father as the future confronting the present:

This is a poor epitome of yours,
Which by th’interpretation of full time
May show like all yourself.

(V.iii.68-70)

In doing so, she not only emphasizes the continuity of the generations but gives heredity a heroic, hence historical, dimension, as Coriolanus’ prayerful response suggests:

The god of soldiers,
With the consent of supreme Jove, inform
Thy thoughts with nobleness, that thou mayst prove
To shame invulnerable, and stick i’th’wars
Like a great sea-mark, standing every flaw
And saving those that eye thee!

(V.iii.70-75)

Throughout the play, it is Volumnia’s dramatic and symbolic function to
stand like a signpost pointing Coriolanus' and the city's tragic way forward. She is the first to mention him as a candidate, and she congratulates him for his victory at Corioli by telling him what he can do next to please her:

I have lived
To see inherited my very wishes
And the buildings of my fancy. Only
There's one thing wanting, which I doubt not but
Our Rome will cast upon thee.

(II.i.187-91)

His response—"I had rather be their servant in my way, / Than sway with them in theirs"—signals the opening of a division between them which will culminate in Act III in the beginnings of a civil war which is prevented only by Coriolanus' banishment. In that division, Volumnia becomes the Senate's unofficial spokesman for Rome's sacrificial code. As she had first sent him off to war to sacrifice his youth and at least potentially his person for Rome, so she would send him off to the marketplace to beg for office. But this time—such is the inevitable progression of sacrifice—she asks him to offer up his integrity, that absoluteness which is the core of his greatness and which had made his accomplishments possible in the first place. She confesses that her own heart and mind are divided on the question, but instead of seeing this division, as Coriolanus does, as detrimental to individual wholeness, she insists all the more on what is required by the community for whom she speaks: "I am in this/ Your wife, your son, these senators, the nobles" (III.ii.64-65). Thus Volumnia subsumes the fundamental contradiction in her demand—to give up the source of greatness, ostensibly, for the sake of greatness—to the absolute demand for further sacrifice:

I prithee now, sweet son, as thou hast said
My praises made thee first a soldier, so,
To have my praise for this, perform a part
Thou hast not done before.

(III.ii.107-10)

"Come all to ruin," she exclaims before he relents, and she invokes the city's destruction again when he is expelled from it: "Now the red pestilence strike all trades in Rome / And occupations perish" (IV.i.13-14). But her final speech to the tribunes underscores even more pointedly the dramatic effect of
her presence. Sweeping offstage with Virgilia and Menenius, she invests herself with mythic significance in words that pick up images of feeding and preying and adumbrate the crisis to come:

    Anger's my meat. I sup upon myself,
    And so shall starve with feeding. Come, let's go.
    Leave this faint puling, and lament as I do,
    In anger, Juno-like.

    (IV.ii.50-53)

This image of paradoxical appetite recalls Menenius' image of "renowned Rome" as an "unnatural dam" eating up her own children (III.i.289-93) and looks forward to the moment when Volumnia, pleading for "the country, our dear nurse" (V.iii.120), prevails most mortally with her son. Now, cut off from the son whom she regards as both the biological and historical extension of her own life, Volumnia can only feed upon herself and die. But it is an image that applies in an important way to the city, too. Having cast out Coriolanus in order not to "cleft in the midst, and perish," the city finds that, without him, it also is faced with destruction. Thus, always the dramatic embodiment of motherhood, Volumnia becomes increasingly the dramatic embodiment of the city as well, which is traditionally imaged as a mother. When she returns to the stage in Act V to confront this extension of herself who has said, "Wife, mother, child I know not" (V.ii.78), she makes Coriolanus see her as the city by insisting that to march on Rome would be to tread "on thy mother's womb" (V.iii.124). She can make no choice between the ties to country and the ties to family, for they are the same. The claims of both city and family on the individual are absolute and only annihilating paradox can result when the two come unnaturally into conflict:

    And to poor we
    Thine enmity's most capital. Thou barr'st us
    Our prayers to the gods, which is a comfort
    That all but we enjoy. For how can we,
    Alas, how can we for our country pray,
    Where to we are bound, together with thy victory,
    Where to we are bound?

    (V.iii.103-09)

For Coriolanus to march against Rome is to turn, almost literally, against the sources of his own life. He cannot renounce his city because he cannot change
who his mother is, cannot alter the fact of his parentage. Thus Volumnia argues 
that to destroy Rome is to destroy his beginning and his end, to replace fame 
with "a name / Whose repetition will be dogged with curses" (V.iii.43-44). It is 
fitting, then, that Coriolanus relents finally at the reminder of the future that is 
his son, and it is fitting that the action which has begun by Volumnia leading 
the young Marcius by the hand should end by Coriolanus taking the hand of 
his mother. But when he does so, the irony of Volumnia’s appeal becomes 
evident. The promise of life for Rome means death for Coriolanus; the sacrifice 
of her issue for the city which she has already imagined and accepted in I.iii is, 
through her own efforts, close to fulfillment:

O mother, mother!
What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene 
They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But for your son—believe it, O believe it!—
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
If not most mortal to him. But let it come.
(V.iii.182-89)

That the source of life—now both mother and city, nature and history—should 
be the instrument of death makes the scene unnatural. The claims of love 
become the claims of death. And Volumnia, as Rome, has become the unnatu-
ral dam eating up her own children as the price of survival, starving with 
feeding. To Coriolanus’ prediction and acceptance of his death, she makes no 
reply.

The two final episodes of the play create a last, ironic perspective on the 
meaning of Rome by juxtaposing the rise of Volumnia with the fall of her son. 
Coriolanus predicts that rise, as he predicts his own death: "Ladies, you 
deserve / To have a temple built you" (V.iii.206-07). Our last view of Volumnia 
is in one of the play’s several mirror scenes, here a deeply ironic verbal and 
visual echo of Rome’s earlier welcome of Coriolanus when Rome was first 
saved from the Volscians. This time the mother has replaced the son as 
cynosure, become the almost deified patroness of a joyful city that lights fires 
and strews flowers in her path. The scene is resonant with classical associa-
tions, looking back to a long and (for the Renaissance) familiar tradition of 
deified women representing the Tycbe, or fortune, of ancient cities in statues, as 
well as on medals and cameos.29 Volumnia, "the life of Rome," becomes 
hedged about with this traditional significance but with the addition of an
untraditional irony. It is the city's desire to "unshout the noise that banished
Marcius; / Repeal him with the welcome of his mother" (V.v.4-5). And, in a
sense, the welcome of his mother is his repeal, because in exacting sacrifice, she
has become the instrument of his immortality, as she had wanted to be, and
that is the only future life he will have. Volumnia has moved Coriolanus to
make a choice we cannot wish otherwise, and this in itself is a key to under-
standing the meaning of the city. Shakespeare does not deprive Rome of all
value. It is worth saving because, whatever its faults and no matter how limited
its virtues, the city as mother is the source of nurture, training, and ideals, the
achievement of common humanity, and the seat of the heart's affections which
it is impious, unnatural, and perhaps impossible to deny. For all its ties to the
higher order of ideals and aspirations, though, the city is also tied to the natural
world represented in this play by animals, eating and parts of the human body.
Like other aspects of nature, the city's need to maintain its own physical
integrity as a vital organism seems to demand the sacrifice of its best and most
characteristic product—the hero. Coriolanus' decision to spare Rome and
die—in a way, to starve with feeding—reveals the community to be in truth the
mother who eats her own children.

Thus for Volumnia and Rome the end of this play is comic, a dramatic fact
which Shakespeare chooses to highlight by presenting them finally moving
joyfully to an offstage celebration in conventional comic fashion. The com-

dunity will survive, as it always does in comedies and as it must always. The young
Marcius (for anyone who cares to think of it) is there to carry on in his father's
image. But for Coriolanus and the audience the play is not over, and the
audience's recognition that tragedy will follow comedy gives to this scene a
heavily ironic cast. Because of the evident fragility of community harmony in
Rome, its unresolved class differences, and the inevitable fickleness of the
crowd, this penultimate allusion to comic form suggests the endless regenera-
tion of a political process whose violent workings we have already seen and are
reminded of once again at the end.

Like the Romans, the Volscians in this last scene begin by welcoming
Coriolanus and end by turning against him. Like the Romans, too, the Vol-
scians have cause to celebrate Coriolanus and, as Aufidius reminds them, cause
to kill him as well. Here the crowd swings violently from celebration to revu-
sion in a concentrated repetition of the play's dynamic. The pendulum swings
back again after Coriolanus' death, and the play ends in a mood of remorse, in
the sorrowful awareness of what cannot now be altered: "My rage is gone,"
says Aufidius, "And I am struck with sorrow" (V.vi.145-46). Fittingly, then,
Coriolanus is celebrated once again, this time in a nascent ceremonial of
mourning: "Beat thou the drum, that it speak mournfully, / Trail your steel
pikes” (V. vi. 148-49). Only Coriolanus is dead; the community will go on, in the endless tragicomic cycle of regeneration, devouring the heroes it nurtures and immortalizes because it is in its nature to do so. If he cannot help being greater than they are—and in his greatness alone—they cannot help being less. Thus, though we would not have the community die for Coriolanus, it survives diminished, starved by such feeding.

Notes:

8 _The Herculean Hero_, pp. 134-41.
11 For this view of an "almost comic conclusion," see Jay D. Halio, "Coriolanus: Shakespeare's 'Drama of Reconciliation,' " _Shakespeare Studies_, 6 (1970), 297.
12 For a discussion of the contrasts in Shakespeare's portrait of Coriolanus, see Waith, pp. 122ff.
13 Brower, p. xxxv.
19 Holloway, pp. 129-30.
21 Knight, pp. 155-56.
24 On this subject, see Waith, p. 17.
26 Knight, p. 163.
28 Barkan, p. 106.