The Caps of the Many-Headed Monster: The Political Significance of Uncovering the Head in *Coriolanus*

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*Il* [i.e. Beethoven] *a raconté lui-même une promenade qu’ils firent ensemble, où l’orgueilleux républicain qu’il était donna une leçon de dignité au conseiller aulique du grand-duc de Weimar, qui ne le lui pardonna point.*

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Hier, nous avons rencontré, sur le chemin, en rentrant, toute la famille impériale. Nous la vimes de loin. Gathe se détacha de mon bras, pour se ranger sur le côté de la route. J’eus beau lui dire tout ce que je voulus, je ne pus lui faire faire un pas de plus. J’enfonçai alors mon chapeau sur ma tête, je boutonnaï ma redingote, et je fonçai, les bras derrière le dos, au milieu des groupes les plus épais. —Princes et courtisans ont fait la haie; le duc Rodolphe m’a ôté son chapeau; madame l’impératrice m’a salué la première. —Les grands me connaissent. —Pour mon divertissement, je vis la procession défiler devant Gathe. Il se tenait sur le bord de la route, profondément courbé, son chapeau à la main. Je lui ai lavé la tête après, je ne lui ai fait grâce de rien. . . .” Gathe n’oublia pas non plus.
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(Romain Rolland, *Vie de Beethoven* 40-41)

*Coriolanus* has been said to be a political play ever since A. C. Bradley claimed that “while political conflict is never the centre of interest in Shakespeare’s play, here is a play in which a prominent element is conflict between democracy and aristocracy” (King 18). A reason for its unpopularity, which many critics have mentioned in their introductions to the play have been ascribed to “the political implications of a certain antipathy” against it (Heuer 50). Why is it political? Perhaps, it is because the play is “about power: about State, or the State; about order in society and the forces of disorder . . . about conflict, not in personal but political life; . . . and . . . about the conflict of classes” (Rossiter 235), or perhaps because it “is a study in the relationships between citizens within a body politic; the relationship of crowds to leaders and leaders to led, of rich to poor” (Kermode 243).

Given these almost unanimous interpretations of the theme, there remains the fact that the performance of the play has been attacked from both right and left. James E. Phillips reports that:

in the 1934 production at the Comédie Française, Paris police were called out to restrain demonstrators protesting against what they regarded as the antidemocratic sentiments of the play; two years later, in Pasadena, California, there were clear, if more restrained, complaints about a production of the play which was regarded locally as communistic because of its sympathetic representation of the rebellious common people of Rome (4).

Which side is right in its interpretation of the play? Disagreements seem to result from the variety of the directors', the critics', and the audiences' own political standpoints set against their specific socio-historical backgrounds. Indeed, Peter J. Smith, citing reviews of the Terry Hands' and John Barton's 1989 RSC version, plainly declares that “*Coriolanus* can be read as an index of the political engagement (or lack of it) of the major English theatre companies” (225).
But, the question is more complicated than it seems. For example, when the anti-social historical, therefore, anti-political studies of literature such as I. A. Richards', René Welleck's, and Russian formalists' in Europe and their American version, the "new criticism," began to flourish, Brents Stirling in his *Populace in Shakespeare*, published in 1949, after spending four pages saying that "individual Marxist interpreters contradict one another . . . is not too important" (80), observed that "the scurrility leveled at the citizens is felt to be coldly cynical" (125). Among his "Marxist interpreters" was A. A. Smirnov, who in his essay translated in 1936 had insisted that "the Roman plebeians are portrayed in the tragedy with rare sympathy" (Phillips 105): a very different interpretation.

Robert S. Miola argues that Shakespeare "seeks in *Coriolanus* to explore the purpose, nature, and problems of political order" (165). Then, he adds a footnote in which he says, "My approach to the politics is similar to that of A. P. Rossiter . . . who argues that the play is not about class war or the Tudor theory of order, but about politics, power, and the state, broadly conceived" (165n). This footnote is unnecessary unless it gives an implicit account of Miola's own political standpoint as well as a subtle evasion of embroilment in any political arguments. This footnote might mislead us into thinking that other approaches different from Miola's and Rossiter's can refute their arguments.

*Coriolanus* has been explored by its critics in the same way that Roman history "was explored as the material of political lessons [by the Elizabethans]" (Spencer 29). Is it possible to read or perform the play without stirring any political sentiments? The answer is probably no. For, even seemingly nonpolitical critics have often fallen into a political discussion of this play. G. Wilson Knight, who "has been called a structuralist ahead of his time," (King 24) discovered a stylistic characteristic of the play: "there is a sprinkling of strange polysyllables outstanding from plainer speech" in prose (Knight 162). Then, he had to relate his discovery to "the main idea of the aristocrat contrasted with commoners" (162).

Jonathan Bate gives us five Western classical criteria of aesthetic excellence. The third one is that a "great work of art is wise; it makes us think" (158). When he tentatively applies this criterion to Shakespeare, before claiming that Shakespeare was not a moral philosopher or a deliverer of homilies but a dramatist, Bate has to concede: if "wisdom is a matter of moral and political precepts, we can certainly find plenty of it in the plays" (159). His first instance is, of course, *Coriolanus*.

Even if we transfer the play into a completely different cultural setting, the answer is the same. The program of the 2002 RSC production of the play, which was professedly influenced by the Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa, cites a passage from Livy:

> I invite the reader's attention to the much more serious consideration of the kind of lives our ancestors lived, of who were the men and what the means, both in politics and war, by which Rome's power was first acquired and subsequently expanded; I would then have him trace the process of our moral decline. . . . (N. pag.)

Actually, this is Aubrey de Sélincourt's translation of Livy's preface to the *Early History of Rome*. De Sélincourt translated the original phrase "artibus domi" into "politics."

Whether or not the editor of the program knew this, the quotation obviously tries, in advance of the performance, to assert the political structure underlying any culture.

Irving Ribner claims that, in both *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, "the essential questions involve not political forces, but the forces of good and evil within the soul of man." However, he concludes the paragraph by telling us that "Coriolanus' "political act must lead inevitably to tragedy"
(192). This nonpolitical critic then goes on to analyze Menenius' parable of the body politic, comparing it with Tudor and Stuart political theory (192-193).

Even the linguistic approach of Juhani Rudanko's, who tries to analyze the play by "the methodology of speech act theory" (117), cannot but argue that "civilian and political structures of rank are very much under challenge and at issue in the play" (147).

Why is everyone concerned about politics in arguing about this particular play, and not in other Shakespearean tragedies? A possible answer is this: the text itself invites our political interpretation. The text perhaps contains some underlying elements which stir our political consciousness, regardless of our own political standpoints.

1

After saying "Hang'em!" (1.1.203), Coriolanus contemptuously reports that when the citizens heard their petition had been granted, "they threw their caps / As they would hang them on the horns o'th'moon" (1.1.211-12). This phrasing, Lee Bliss suggests, "seems echoed in Robêt Armin's preface to his verse translation of an Italian novella, The Italian Tailor and his Boy (1609); A strange time of taxation, wherein every Pen & inck-horne Boy, will throw up his Cap at the horns of the Moone in censure" (Bliss 1). If so, Shakespeare might have changed the complicated phrasing of the comic actor-writer into a simple expression of the citizens' joy. The hyperbolic use of the "horns of the moon" to suggest extreme height can also be found in Antony and Cleopatra (4.7.45) and in Fletcher (cf. Ridley 169-70n). Moreover, compared with Shakespeare's mere hyperbolic expression of the citizens' action, Armin's phrases arouse a much more literary interpretation. In order to prove this, a fuller context for Armin's words is necessary. He addresses his "invisible reader" about the publication of the Italian poem in a rather provocative manner:

I wander with it now in a strange time of taxation, wherein every Pen & inck-horne Boy, will throw up his Cap at the horns of the Moone in censure, although his wit hang there, not returning unlesse monthly in the wane: such is our ticklish age, & the itching braine of abundance. But I speake to thee more mildly: (N. pag.)

These sentences consist of dually associative words: there are "pen," "ink-horn," and "horns of the moon" on the one hand, and "cap," "hang," and "moon" on the other; thus, the dually associated images converge into the image of the moon. Then, the waning of the moon alludes to the waning of his rival writers' wit with the conceit that every writer's wit flies to the moon with his cap. So, Armin, playing the game of associations, connected the activity of throwing up a cap with that of absurd accusation ("taxation" and "censure"). As a result, the supposed atmosphere of joy pertaining to the activity is impaired or almost lost. Furthermore, the use of the singular form "cap" in Armin makes a more vivid image than that of the plural form in Shakespeare. For, it would be hard to imagine that many citizens' caps are hanging upon both tips of the crescent moon. Thus, Armin's expression is much more literary or, I should say, much more Shakespearean here.

Yet, we have to note that the hyperbolic use of the above phrases by Coriolanus perfectly fits his swollen-headed character. Shakespeare the dramatist might have used Armin's phrases to create his hero's individual character by reducing their original literariness. What is interesting here is the fact that the same human activity of throwing up a cap, put in a different context, can have a different meaning.
even against the same historical and cultural background.

In writing *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare focused on one particular piece of human behavior: that is, uncovering the head. For instance, an officer insists before the election of consul that Coriolanus hath deserved worthily of his country;
and his ascent is not by such easy degrees as those
who, having been supple and courteous to the
people, bonneted, without any further deed to have
them at all into their estimation and report. (2.2.24-28).

The conspicuously inserted word "bonneted," although this is the *OED’s* only instance of its intransitive use, is generally interpreted as taking off the bonnet in token of respect, while Othello’s use of “unbonneted” (1.2.23) apparently means “with bonnets on” (cf. Brockbank 170n). Indeed, the verb "cap" began to have the same meaning from the mid-fifteenth century (s. v. *OED* “cap” v1, 8a). The strangely reversed meaning of these verbs strongly suggests that showing respect to others by taking off head-gear had become a culturally acknowledged activity in England by Shakespeare’s time; familiar enough for these head-coverings to be used, together with bowing, to represent a ceremonial manner.

Yet, using this activity in his Roman play seems to be Shakespeare’s intentional anachronism. In fact, he described not only caps but also hats and bonnets many times in *Coriolanus* regardless of the fact that the ancient Romans did not wear hats and bonnets. Philip Brockbank, the editor of the play in the second Arden Shakespeare series, points out in his introduction that:

Dover Wilson concluded that the plebeians wore the equivalent of modern dress while the patricians were renaissance Romans; . . . Shakespeare’s Martius is, however, given a hat to wave in II. iii. (l.98, 165), and it is hard to resist the impression that Shakespeare had in mind the bonnet that Bolingbroke is said to have doffed to the oyster-wench. Pope emended to ‘cap’, but ‘stinking, greasy caps’ are very plebeian properties elsewhere in the play (74).

Very few critics have noticed the significance of this anachronism. T. J. B. Spencer, in his essay on vindicating Shakespeare’s learning in writing the Roman plays, had to admit that the “very idea of a Roman candidate for the consulship standing waving his hat was enough to make a whole form of schoolboys break into irrepressible mirth” (28). This peculiarity can only be explained by admitting Shakespeare’s intentional design in composing the whole play.

In their notes, modern editors of *Coriolanus*, including Bliss, skip Coriolanus’ phrases discussed above, probably because the citizens’ action is an obvious token of joy in our age too. Brockbank, almost the only exception to the best of my knowledge, notes that this specific activity is depicted “often in this play” and points out four other scenes in the play (110n); actually, more than a dozen other scenes make reference to head gear.

This essay will examine various interpretations of this particular activity, especially its political ones, and try to point out some absurd consequences of a human activity when it is overcharged with political meaning.

The throwing up of their caps is reported again by a messenger when the people hail Coriolanus, the triumphant general:
Matrons flung gloves,
Ladies and maids their scarfs and handkerchers,
Upon him as he pass'd; the nobles bended
As to Jove's statue, and the commons made
A shower and thunder with their caps and shouts:
I never saw the like. (2.1.261-66)

What differentiates this report from Coriolanus' own is that the former completely lacks the contemptuous tone of the latter. Although filled with hyperbolic expressions just as in Coriolanus' earlier report which has already been discussed, the messenger's report sounds fair. This is not only because it is uttered without any derogatory phrases, but also because the common people are placed in a grammatically equal position with matrons, ladies, and nobles, thus suggesting their social equality. This equating of social ranks enables the people's caps to retain their proper intimacy along with "gloves," "scarfs," and "handkerchers," while these three are, or were, supposed to have their own respective cultural meanings in different contexts. For example, a glove is for Bolingbroke a "gage" to challenge his opponent (cf. Richard II, 1.1.69), for Lafew a scarf is a military mark (cf. All's Well That Ends Well, 2.3.202), and for Othello a handkerchief is a mark of "favor" given to a lover. These meanings are all lost in the reporter's description. Accordingly, the caps of the commoners do not have particular significance here compared with other small articles. In other words, the supposedly symbolic meaning of the people's activity related to their caps is of very little political significance.

Yet, for Coriolanus, uncovering the head means servility. He defines common people as things created "to show bare heads / In congregations" (3.2.10-11). It is a degrading activity for him. This is the main reason his report of people's throwing their caps is contemptuous. Once it has been interpreted thus, the meaning of uncovering the head becomes related to social rank and the power-relationship: it becomes political. He is unable to shake off the political significance of the activity. So, once Coriolanus puts on his hat, the head-covering becomes a synecdoche for him rather than a metonymy, a part of his body, his raison d'être. His hat is inseparably linked with his person. And his persistence in this political symbolism leads to his tragedy as we shall see later.

Indeed, uncovering the head can be an effective means of representing the power-relationship between the two parties concerned, especially when their relationship is unstable, changing, and recognized by others as antagonistic. Shakespeare seems to have made full use of this effect. After Coriolanus surrendered himself to his enemy, a "servingman" reports to his colleagues the immediate change in the power-relationship between yesterday's adversaries:

Why, he is so made on here within as if he
were son and heir to Mars; set at upper end o'th'
table; no question asked him by any of the senators
but they stand bald before him. (4.5.196-199)

Here, two activities represent vividly the change: first, Coriolanus took the seat of honor, and second, the Volscian senators stood with their hats off in front of him. It would be dangerous for a common man like this reporter to talk about the power-relationship directly. So, he avoids using the proper name of Coriolanus. But, his report clearly shows that the surrendering general immediately gained superiority. Note the use of the graphical present tense of the verbal phrase "stand bald," which enables people living in a hierarchical society to immediately understand the new master-servant relationship.
Earlier in the play when his mother, Volumnia, and his political supporters persuade Coriolanus to apologize for his past behavior toward the Roman people, the moment his political crisis is at its worst, the mother who "conceives of [the Roman virtue of] *virtus* not as essence [as his son does] but as political strategy" (Dollimore 218) advises him first to:

Go to them, with this bonnet in thy hand,
And thus far having stretch'd it—here be with them—
Thy knee bussing the stones—for in such business
Action is eloquence. (3.2.73-76)

This mother's advice, which sounds like a stage direction, gives the activities relating to her son's head-covering a strongly theatrical impact. For, she abruptly produces a bonnet as if it were a piece of stage property. Bliss suggests that "Volumnia presumably takes her son's hat from him to demonstrate the elaborate stage business she goes on to describe" and further conjectures that "there may be a theatrical pun in 'business'" (202n).

Just before her attempts to persuade began, Coriolanus said to his mother, "Would you have me / False to my nature" (3.2.14-15). Volumnia used a bold image in reply:

I would have had you put your power well on
Before you had worn it out. (3.2.17-18)

Jonathan Dollimore explains that what "Coriolanus understands as his 'nature' Volumnia understands as 'power', something to be appropriated, 'put . . . well on'" (219). What Dollimore misses is the ludicrous fact that this "something" now turns out to be a hat. The political power Volumnia wants her son to achieve is symbolized by a hat. For her son, the hat is symbolic of his very essence, the symbol of the *virtus* he already has. It is a synecdoche of his virtue as well as his wounds from which he cannot be separated. In this sense, his hat is like Richard II's crown. Lois Potter points out that Richard resigns his crown, "transforming a sacramental object into a piece of metal, a 'heavy weight from off my head'" (Richard II, 4.1.204), for "by losing the crown he loses his life since the one is so completely identified with the other" (Potter 38). So, Volumnia, while persuading, must transform her son's hat to something to be "stretched."

Commentators agree that Volumnia is asking her son to show obeisance. This is certainly true. Yet, despite the mother's intention, the shades of meaning conveyed by the verb "stretch" suggest that the significance of the compulsory uncovering of the head is emphasized. It is the equivalent of kneeling. In other words, the bonnet she produced acquires an unnaturally weighty meaning. It is too heavy for a political apprentice such as Coriolanus to handle lightly.

On Volumnia's assertion that action is eloquence, commentators since R. H. Case have cited Francis Bacon's "Of Boldness" in which the essayist introduces the following episode from "a trivialis Grammar schoole Text."

Question was asked of Demosthenes; *What was the Chiefe Part of an Oratour?* He answered, *Action*; what next? *Action*; what next again? *Action*. He said it, that knew it best; . . . A strange thing, . . . . But the Reason is plaine. There is in Humane Nature, generally, more of the Foole then of the Wise (44).

What commentators have omitted is the part where Bacon asks himself why the action of an orator "which is but superficiall, and rather the vertue of a Player; should be placed so high." The answer is not a matter of intelligence as Bacon thought, but the effectiveness of using theatrical actions in
delivering orations. Michael Neill in his essay shows us the frontispiece of John Bulwer's *Chironomia* (1644), in which:

the stage-players Andronicus and Roscius are shown tutoring the orators Demosthenes and Cicero; Andronicus holds up a mirror to his pupil, inscribed with the word *actio*; and Bulwer explains that his task was to reform 'the defect that was before in [Demosthenes'] Orations for want of Action.' It is *actio*, more than anything, that endows rhetoric with the active power of eloquence (Neill 33).

Indeed, David Bevington used Volumnia's phrase for the title of his book on Shakespeare's language of gesture. Theatricality is necessary in political oration too. What Coriolanus, a self-confessed man of action, misses is this sense of theatricality in behaving like a politician. "Must I go show them my unbarb'd sconce?" (3.2.99) says Coriolanus to himself even when he is half-persuaded. The political significance of the simple action of uncovering his head is imbedded in the mind of this naive politician.

The persuaders continue their effort using theatrical metaphors: they say "we'll prompt you" (3.2.106) and "perform a part / Thou hast not done before" (109-10). Coriolanus is finally persuaded, saying "Well, I must do't" (110). What must he do? After his self-questioning about his uncovered head, the pronoun "it" seems, strangely, to indicate not the political action his persuaders want him to perform but the unwilling taking off of his hat, an activity he has persistently refused. For this "essentialist" (Dollimore 218) or "bourgeois individualist," (Eagleton 73) ahead of his time, who lives "As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin" (5.3.36-37), to act like humble candidate is to be someone else and, consequently, to deny himself. A man who performs even the simple action of uncovering the head in this awkward way can never be a good actor.

Ann Righter finds in "Coriolanus, as in Antony and Cleopatra," the platonic idea that "the actor and the play suggest futility or shame" (189). And Bruce King suggests that the "concern in the play [i.e. in Coriolanus] with acting, role-playing, persuasion, directing scenes, rhetoric and trials, seems to call attention to the falsity of theatre, and questions the premeditated use of language" (10). There is one place where the combination of theatricality and the falsehood of language are conspicuously observed: that is, in politics. In order to be consul, Coriolanus must learn how to combine the two political techniques.

Menenius, having been informed of Coriolanus' safe return from the war with the Volscians, says:

Take my cap, Jupiter, and I thank thee. Hoo! (2.1.104)

Here, for this patrician, the activity of taking off a cap is showing respect to his god. It is also an emotional activity. The interjection "hoo," which is supposed to be "a natural exclamation" "used to express various feelings" (s.v. *OED*), emphasizes this emotional aspect.

Yet, Menenius' gesture smacks of theatricality. Shakespeare connects the gesture with the same interjection in Antony and Cleopatra. After the feast of truce in Pompey's galley is over, Enobarbus removes his cap as a sign of asking agreement to be free not to accompany "great fellows" like Antony and Pompey:

Hoo! says 'a. There's my cap. (2.7.132.)

Menas, a Machiavellian character in the play, answers his request:

Hoo! Noble captain, come. (2.7.133.)

Theatricality is much more obvious in this case. Enobarbus' holding out of a cap is unnaturally dramatic because he uses the interjection "hoo" as if it were somebody else's line, with his use of the third
person pronoun “a.” This gesture allows Enobarbus and Menas to pretend to be drunk. Menas’ droll repetition of the interjection shows he agrees to participate in this sport. Their brief exchange subtly drops an advance hint of Enobarbus’s later betrayal of Antony.

Menenius’ removing his cap in “Shakespeare’s only great political play” (Rossiter 251) or “Shakespeare’s most detailed analysis of politics” (Vickers, Returning 135) may be a political attitude. If he were really in an emotional state of mind, he would not put his gesture into words. He might have added the interjection to excuse his theatricality. If so, “hoo” is not a natural but a political interjection. It is even possible that Menenius, repeating a favorite expression of the day, holds out an imaginary cap. For, elsewhere in Coriolanus, caps are obviously plebeian belongings, sometimes with pejorative epithets such as “poor knaves” (2.1.68) and “stinking greasy” (4.6.132) as Brockbank points out. The tribunes, his political opponents, being beside him, and in front of the mother and the wife of the future consul, Menenius is expressing both in gesture and voice that he will take the side of Coriolanus who is now to assume the strongest power.

When Coriolanus himself has to take off his hat, the gesture is already highly charged with political meaning. He who lacks “the proper mixture of gravity and affability, the requisites of ‘political virtue’ ” (Heuer 58) has unusual difficulty in performing this simple action. In the election scene, this unwilling actor has to play a political role and take the position which “his friends would force him to adopt before the multitude as a part, a thing beneath his manhood and his dignity” (Righter 190). His unwillingness is clearly shown when he first appears to meet citizens in the “gown of humility.” Every aspiring politician has to hide his desire to be a man of power by pretending humbleness. It is a basic political trick by which he persuades people to acknowledge his suitability. What is unique in this candidate is that he himself develops this implicit premise:

Third Citizen: . . . tell us what hath brought you to’t.

Martius Coriolanus: Mine own desert.

Second Citizen: Your own desert?

Martius Coriolanus: Ay, but not mine own desire.

Third Citizen: How, not your own desire?

Martius Coriolanus: No, sir, ’twas never my desire yet to trouble the poor with begging.

(2.3.65-71)

He speaks in prose, the common people’s language. But, he spoils the “effect of this significant attempt at compromise by letting his own spirit break through” (Vickers, Artistry 398). His contempt towards people can be seen in his curtness. The denial of his desire seems to be a sign of humility. Yet, a psychoanalyst might find his desire to be elected in the very denial with his use of the word “desire” which makes a clumsy wordplay with “desert”: it is a Freudian Verneinung. The third citizen reacts: “this is something odd” (2.3.82). This reaction simply reveals the fact that Coriolanus is a ham actor playing the role of a political candidate.

He is not ready to play the part yet. He has first to persuade himself, mixing monologue and dialogue:

. . . since the wisdom of their choice is rather
to have my hat than my heart, I will practise the
insinuating nod, and be off to them most counterfeithly;
that is, sir, I will counterfeit the bewitchment
of some popular man, and give it bountiful to the
desirers. Therefore, beseech you, I may be consul. (2.3.97-102)
In order to take off his hat, he has to build up words like "practice," "insinuating," "counterfeit," and "bewitchment," which all suggest political trickery. With these words, this "ugly political innocent" (Kermode 243) is trying to be a "good" politician. Then, come the words "popular" and "bountiful" which suggest desirable political characteristics.

Ironically enough, his desire to be consul is to be realized by calling people "desirers." As is a politician's wont, he persuades both himself and the citizens that his activity measures up to their desires. The desire must be shifted from Coriolanus to the citizens. The suffix "er" in that word "desirers," which is "not elsewhere used by Shakespeare" (Brockbank 185n), has a strongly exclusive power here. The suffix removes the object of the verb and it eliminates other potential actions. They do nothing but desire. Only by such an over-simplified characterization of the common people, can the shift of desire easily take place. This is what the would-be politician is trying to achieve. He completely forgets the fact that the only political activity required here is simply taking off his hat, which a natural politician would instantly do.

Coriolanus' dilemma, like most politicians' dilemmas, is that he cannot be a man of power without revealing his desire, yet at the same time he denies it. "Indeed I would be consul" (2.3.130) says he, at the end of his hesitant, circuitous opening, and then, desperately delivered campaign speech. The political dilemma could be solved, at least for Coriolanus, only by unhesitatingly taking off his hat.

Coriolanus' effort to act the role of a candidate is later reported by a citizen as follows:

He said he had wounds which he could show in private;

And with his hat, thus waving it in scorn,

'I would be consul,' says he; 'aged custom,

But by your voices, will not so permit me:

Your voices therefore.' (2.3.164-168)

Coriolanus' hat, the only political weapon left for him owing to his lack of eloquence in "a predatory, dangerous world in which language is used as a weapon for persuasion and for disguise" ((King 60), is turned by the reporter into a symbol of scorn. If the report is correct, Coriolanus must have added the superfluous activity of waving his hat. It may have satisfied his pride, but it surely weakens the political meaning of taking off his hat. Over-charging his hat with significance must have deprived Coriolanus of the commonsense recognition that a hat is only a hat.

From an objective point of view, the absurdity of his hesitation would be obvious. For instance, Menenius, who can use his cap theatrically, criticizes Brutus by saying "You are ambitious for poor knaves' caps and legs" (2.1.68). This criticism of Coriolanus' political advisor is based on the assumption that any political gestures, such as uncovering the head or bowing, can be stripped of their symbolical meanings. You can have caps and legs any time if they remain simply caps and legs.

The nominalization of a verb with the over-simplifying suffix "er" can also be observed in an earlier part of the play. When he sees Roman people fighting each other over spoils, Coriolanus uses a similar word-formation:
See here these movers, that do prize their hours
   At a crack'd drachma! Cushions, leaden spoons,
Iron of a doit, doublets that hangmen would
Bury with those that wore them, these base slaves,
   Ere yet the fight be done, pack up. Down with them! (1.5.4-8)

Annotators of the play have suggested many possible meanings of “movers.” Among them are “creatures,” “active stirring fellows,” “scavengers,” “feilers,” “disturbers of the state,” and “agitators” (cf. Brockbank 132n). Geoffrey Miles, who claims that the play is “Shakespeare's most searching treatment of the ideal of constancy,” (149) says in his footnote that “movers” may “imply ‘removers’ (of loot), but I think the idea of lack of steadfastness is dominant” (150n). So, Coriolanus himself has to explain the meaning of his own definition. Yet, his explanation is not logical. For, his list of examples of trife spoils does not prove that people move. If such trifes are the objects of people's activity, what is wrong with moving them? People should have been called, say, “prizers” of trifes according to his logic. The comma between the word “movers” and the subsequent clause, which has been added since the First Folio, indicates not only taking a breath but also this logical leap. His list of objects after the oversimplified representation of people's activity merely shows that the “Shakespeare's least self-reflective tragic hero” (Bliss 40) is unable to comprehend people. He constantly tries to understand them, but he always fails to do so. So, this time, he has to characterize people as “base slaves.”

Yet, the use of the same suffix could be a political device if it were used by a better politician. In recommending the war-hero as consul in the Capitol, the patrician Cominius uses it effectively:
   I shall lack voice: the deeds of Coriolanus
   Should not be utter'd feebly. It is held
      That valour is the chiefest virtue and
   Most dignifies the haver: if it be,
         The man I speak of cannot in the world
   Be singly counter-pois'd. (2.2.82-87)

This campaign speech does not “lack voice.” The politician has seen that the tribune Brutus argued with another patrician in a manner full of insinuation about Coriolanus' qualification for the role of consul and that the candidate walked off sulkily. Coriolanus' supporter is in a precarious situation. After expressing feigned modesty, Cominius begins a forty-one-line-long speech in which he tries to mitigate antagonism against Coriolanus and have the “deeds of Coriolanus” acknowledged. Note that he refers to the name of Coriolanus by saying “the man I speak of.” And he never uses the proper name in the following encomiastic lines. The use of passive impersonal constructions in his sentences masks the identity of who holds the same opinion as he does. Thus, the politician makes his argument seem a generally accepted statement. In this speech, Coriolanus is identified with “the haver.” Unlike Coriolanus' similar use of the suffix, the word here has an inclusive power. For, the use of “have” chosen here is the most common one, meaning possessing. This absolute use of the verb, together with the definite article, suggests that the person in question has not only valor but also the absolute power to have anything including the right to be consul. Coriolanus lacks this kind of political adroitness, even if he is able to use the same phrasing as his promoter.

The example of another politician brings this linguistic aspect of political adroitness into relief. After the election of the consul, a tribune, Sicinius, persuades the citizens to repeal their votes:
Have you,
Ere now, denied the asker, and now again,
Of him that did not ask but mock, bestow
Your sued-for tongues? (2.3.203-206)

This time, Coriolanus' name is insinuatingly restated as "the asker." Note that the sudden use of the definite article is intended to make his audience realize to whom he refers. The tribune probably hopes to avoid the political danger which specific mentioning of the name of the newly elected consul might cause. In mentioning the name he is obliged not only to express his political position, but also to remind the people of Coriolanus' recent prowess in Corioles. As the war-hero's' name has not been clearly stated, the cunning politician can immediately retract his own words—the asker is really a mocker. The absolute use of the verbs "ask" and "mock" functions as a generalizing device. Furthermore, the series of negators such as "denied," "not," "but" are to promote his audience's negative feelings. Their immediate reaction that "He's not confirm'd: we may deny him yet. / And will deny him!" (207-208) is obviously influenced by the negative effect of the politician's crafty persuasion. What is even more cunning is that the citizens are unknowingly made "askers" by calling them "sued-for tongues." This confusing reversal of logic would ease the citizens' psychological burden when they have to rescind their own votes. The conclusion of this crooked logic is plain: Coriolanus mockingly refused what people asked. So, why should citizens hesitate to deny him again? Thus, they are easily persuaded.

Cominius and Sicinius, who are political opponents, likewise use the generalization-effect of the suffix "er" in blurring a problem which the specific mention of an object might cause. At the same time, they artfully suggest that their object is a specific person—Coriolanus. They teach us that even a simple suffix can have its political uses.

Linguistically speaking, an obvious difference between Coriolanus' and these two politicians' rhetoric is that the former uses the suffix with plural forms such as "desirers" and "movers." This indicates that his use of the generalizing suffix is not in order to allude to a specific person but to cover a number of things which he cannot deal with separately, i.e., people. People, however, are not specific enough to be generalized. The variety of their names in the play clearly shows their indefinability. In fact, critics have used many common cognomens in their essays such as citizens, commoners, mob, plebeians, populace, etc. according to their views of the people in the play.

Coriolanus himself calls them by many different names, most of which are derogatory terms used plurally such as rats, rogues, fragments, curs, slaves, beggars, measles, minnows, fools, crows, etc. The notion of people contains many signifiers. No wonder he mentions the citizens' caps in the plural form unlike Armin. How can he express in general terms these various definitions of people?

When he refers to them in the singular, it must be of significance. His answer, and probably the only possible answer is, "Hydra" or "monster" (3.1.92-94). Coriolanus speaks of this monster as a "beast / With many heads" (4.1.1-2). Ironically, this view of Coriolanus' is identical with the first citizen's definition of people as are "many-headed multitude" (2.3.16-17). The monster has caps on its heads. And, when the caps are off its heads, the plurality of the monster shows its colors. The third citizen expounds the first citizen's definition:

We have been called so of many; not that
our heads are some brown, some black, some
abram, some bald, but that our wits are so diversely
coloured. (2.3.18-21)
Although the citizen seems to sneer at people's inconstancy, his vivid description reveals the simple fact that every citizen is an individual. It would be impossible to lump together into a single concept people who vary so much (how can we express a color brown, black, blonde, and transparent at the same time?) The many-headed monster, because it is a monster, might be strong enough to throw up its caps and hang them on the horns of the moon. However strong he is, Coriolanus could never beat such a monster.

Confronted in the first half of the twentieth century with new literary theories which were preoccupied with the growth of literary forms rather than the social and political contexts of a work, Brents Stirling quoted Louis Wright's remark that "it would resemble a history of hat design which stresses the evolution of hat geometry from Euclid onward, and pays no attention to people who wore the hats" (Stirling 4). Such topsy-turvy argument must surely be absurd. Yet, we can observe the same kind of absurdity in any culturally developed society, especially, in the political world. Sometimes, a hat has enough political significance to destroy a war hero's career. When Menenius, having heard of Coriolanus' counterattack against Rome, reprehends people, it is as if the banished general sought revenge against their caps.

Here come the clusters.
And is Aufidius with him? You are they
That made the air unwholesome when you cast
Your stinking greasy caps in hooting at
Coriolanus' exile. Now he's coming,
And not a hair upon a soldier's head
Which will not prove a whip. As many coxcombs
As you threw caps up will he tumble down,
And pay you for your voices. (4.6.129-137)
Menenius indicates that any single meaning of a cultural activity can be changed to another, as he changed people's caps to jesters' hoods; a token of joy to one of foolishness. Perhaps, Coriolanus could have escaped his tragic end if he had had a mind as flexible as that of his friend. And Beethoven and Goethe could have built up a more friendly relationship if they had been able to remove the political meaning from their hats.

Notes

1 T. J. Luce's more literal translation is "measures at home" (4).
2 The references to Shakespeare in this paper are all taken from the second series of the Arden Shakespeare, as the third series is not yet completed.
3 Brockbank further notes, however, that A. H. Gomme "explains Othello's unbonneted as 'unadorned, fully revealed', and therefore takes bonneted here to be intended in its obvious sense; the Second Officer then means, 'after a show of humility, put their bonnets on again and did nothing more'" (Brockbank 170n). In any case, it is obvious that by the time of Shakespeare the bonnet had become a cultural item used to show the owner's ostensible humility.
The scenes are 2.1.104, 265, 4.6.131-2, 136. Brockbank also points out 4.8.14 in the Second Part of Henry IV.

5 According to Heuer, Coriolanus' "lack of well-tempered political virtue" was already stressed in Plutarch's Greek original (Heuer 51).

6 Instead, Cominius uses "Corioles" twice in his speech. This word is, of course, used to remind his audience of the man who has been named after his exploits there.

7 A. P. Rossiter claims that the "terms in which the mob is described need not worry you," because "those are Elizabethan commonplaces." On the other hand, he goes on to say that the "many-headedness of those expressions is, surely, a measure of Shakespeare's fear: his fear of disorder, civil commotion, the disintegrated State" (241). The boundless variety of people's characteristics is surely any politician's fear, if not Shakespeare's.

Works Cited


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