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SHAKESPEARE'S VISION OF
BODY POLITIC IN "THE TRAGEDY
OF CORIOLANUS"**

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MUCH ADO ABOUT BODY: SHAKESPEARE’S VISION OF BODY POLITIC IN “THE TRAGEDY OF CORIOLANUS”²

This paper offers a new philosophical interpretation of the first scene of William Shakespeare’s play “The Tragedy of Coriolanus”. It analyzes Shakespeare’s vision of the “body politic” metaphor and the ways in which he used it to reflect on fundamental problems of political philosophy. These findings are backed by the comparison of the play’s storyline to its original source—Plutarch’s “Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans”. The author shows that Shakespeare deliberately changed Plutarch’s narrative in order to explicate the problematic character of organic metaphors as such and the metaphor of body politic in particular.

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Introduction:

William Shakespeare between poetry and philosophy

Great works of philosophy at times can be hidden in the shadows of other, more successful texts that bask under the sun of admiration. These works are not necessarily written in the form of a treatise or a dialogue, as is commonly thought, but rather unexpectedly take the shape of a poem or a dramatic play. Philosophy can get contributions from poets just as well as “professional” philosophers. As Sir Philip Sidney elegantly put it in his *Defense of Poesy*,

...I say the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him; that is to say, he teacheth them that are already taught. But the poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs; the poet is indeed the right popular philosopher (Sidney 92).

A prime example of such poet, it seems, is William Shakespeare, a man, whose prominence exceeds all conceivable limits—but mostly in literature, not at all in philosophy. Indeed, Sidney’s words may appear questionable, especially since he was a poet himself. In order to ascertain if he is right, one can turn to the poets’ arch-antagonists in the sphere of words—that is, to philosophers. And it is difficult to find among them a dearer friend of the poets than Aristotle, who famously wrote in *Poetics* that “...poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, IX, 1451b2-5, trans. Bywater). It is, of course, a compliment made in the context of comparison and thus a faint one; but if we examine this passage thoroughly, we can derive something valuable from it—the thesis that “poetry deals with universals”. This concise yet definite remark brings these two kinds of human thought closely together because “universality” is one of the main characteristics of philosophy in general and political philosophy in particular. “Philosophy <...> is a quest for universal knowledge, for knowledge of the whole”, affirms Leo Strauss, whose view on the subject I uphold (“An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays” 4). Poetry strives for the same universality and therefore shares with philosophy a very similar *telos*. However, it is vitally important to note that, naturally, we cannot consider *all* poets as peers of philosophers when it comes to “universals”—it would have been erroneous in many aspects; yet nonetheless, there are some poets who are worthy of such standing, and William Shakespeare is certainly one of them. Now I shall introduce more explicitly the main purpose of this paper: it is meant to study the political philosophy of Shakespeare’s *The tragedy of Coriolanus*, and, specifically, the vision of the body

politic metaphor displayed in it. For if Shakespeare every so often takes part in contemplation of general philosophical problems, then he must be able to engage with the problems of *political* philosophy. It has been repeatedly noted that the playwright was involved in the everlasting philosophical dialogue on the nature of politics and political men: as A.G. Bloom and H.V. Jaffa point out in their influential book *Shakespeare's Politics*, "Shakespeare devotes great care to establishing the political setting in almost all his plays, and his greatest heroes are rulers who exercise capacities which can only be exercised within civil society." (Bloom and Jaffa 5). This thesis corresponds to *The tragedy of Coriolanus* in the most lucid fashion, even though that play has never been truly popular among political philosophers and thinkers in comparison with other great tragedies of the Shakespearean corpus, at times losing the competition to its fellow Roman plays. Peculiar enough, even the recent book titled "Shakespeare and the Body Politic" has no chapters on *Coriolanus* (Dobski and Gish). Such a decision seems unjust since the play as a whole is incredibly political, providing complex observations and arguments concerning the essence of organic metaphors as well as other political problems eternal by nature (such as the bounds of political subjectivity, the foundations of civic culture, etc.). The level of figurativeness in the play is truly impressive: readers encounter intense stream of tropes, images, and symbols; and while all of them are *literary* devices, their rhetorical power is subjected to philosophical inquiry.

Thus, my paper is purposed to elaborate a philosophical interpretation of the body politic metaphor in *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*. In order to accomplish that aspiration, I will, first, analyze closely the intellectual moves Shakespeare makes to establish his philosophical standpoint regarding organic metaphors. Then this standpoint (and the arguments that back it up) will be elucidated through the comparative examination of two narratives: that of the play and that of its primary historical source—Plutarch's illustrious *Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*. Now, once the basic foundations of the study have been established, a new predicament arises—that of the choice of methodology. As I propose, the methodology that suits both means and ends of my paper belongs to the history of political philosophy. Recent debates around this discipline tend to highlight its complex and confusing nature (e.g. Gunnell; Normore). While the sole object that history of political philosophy is supposed to study is defined clearly (it being the texts of the past), there is no accord when it comes to choosing between different principles of hermeneutical reading of these texts. Some scholars outline the ambivalent nature of philosophical writings and claim that the latter pertain to both *history of philosophy* and *intellectual history*, hence placing it in possession of two quite competitive disciplines with distinct methodological frameworks (cf. Mandelbaum 60-66; Normore 30-35). This inevitably leads to antagonism between the disciplines, which is expressed through vigorous debate around

the notion of contextualism (sometimes called “historicism”);³ that antagonism has been of immense relevance to Shakespeare studies, too⁴. The central point of the debate can be broadly explained as follows: anti-contextualists, also called “anti-historicists”, “Straussians” or “doxologists” seek to analyze a work of political philosophy regardless of historical context in which it was written (for overview see Normore, Zuckert). Their approach stems from the notion that philosophical texts are designed to solve the timeless problems of political order and discover the innate nature of politics (e.g. Strauss, “An Introduction...” 5-6; Tarcov and Pangle 911-913); the corpus of such texts forms a self-referential and autonomous “classical tradition”.⁵ Contextualists (often associated with the Cambridge school), on the other hand, propose the opposite view: a work of political philosophy *must* be analyzed with regard to its intellectual, ideational or linguistic context—the latter being a necessary material for a proper understanding of the former.⁶ They often try to discern either the author’s intentions, formed by linguistic conventions and his intellectual surroundings (Skinner) or the “political language” he spoke, being determined by the discourses of his epoch (Pocock). The described debate resonates in the field of literary studies, where the “new historicists” clash with the “new formalists” based on the same subject, and thus acquires even more significance for my paper since its main object of study is a piece of literature.⁷

In order to perform a fruitful study and to grasp Shakespeare’s thought in all complexity, it is necessary to apply the anti-contextualist approach and turn to the hermeneutical path formed by the history of political philosophy.⁸ When studying the Shakespearean corpus, one ought to remember its underlying aspiration to discover and articulate the universal truths of human existence and should establish one’s inquiry accordingly.⁹ Thus, in this paper, my attention will not be devoted to the historical context of the play (e.g. the domestic policy of James I, to which Shakespeare ostensibly responded) or the causes of its writing, however interesting those might

³ Notable works reviewing the debate: Major; Normore; Tarlton; Ward.

⁴ Review of the reflection of this debate in Shakespeare studies can be found, for instance, in Schulman’s *Rethinking Shakespeare’s Political Philosophy: from Lear to Leviathan* (pp. 4-5, 17-22 specifically, and Introduction in general).

⁵ See Levin 462. The “Straussians” tend to include William Shakespeare in this “classical tradition” among the great figures of political thought (cf.: Schulman 4).

⁶ For brief overview see Bevir, “The Contextual Approach”, “The Role of Contexts in Understanding and Explanation”.

⁷ Literary debates concerning the methodology and theoretical foundations of Shakespeare (and Renaissance) studies are quite exuberant both in scale and intellectual rigour; they generate thousands of papers every decade, influencing the field of history of philosophy. For some guidance in this bottomless pool of literature see Craig (especially Chapter I); Wilson and Dutton (Introduction and Section I); Leggatt (preface); Howard and O’Connor 2-5.

⁸ My approach is strongly influenced by the so-called “Straussian hermeneutics” (for detailed review see Schotte).

⁹ For a more comprehensive argumentation regarding Shakespeare’s philosophical capabilities see Craig (Chapter I); Bloom and Jaffa (Introduction); Moore (Introduction).

be. Instead, I shall analyze *Coriolanus* as a text that is concerned with political philosophy and carries timeless philosophical musings. Even if we omit the deep problems inherent to contextualist methodologies (see Clarke; Green), a different—and more fundamental—problem still haunts that approach: in the end, contextualism deeply relativizes any philosophical inquiry and either denies us the possibility to think of Shakespeare as a political thinker altogether or makes such effort truly meaningless.¹⁰ In my view, Shakespeare certainly requires a more vivacious approach which would enable us to read his texts *sub specie aeternitatis*, so to say, and

...If we expect such 'timeliness' in Shakespeare we will miss the point of his peculiar greatness, and if we never go beyond Elizabethan frames of reference in interpreting him, we shall miss his *universality* (emphasis added; Frye 7).

Now, the next predicament is that *Coriolanus*, being one of the less studied Shakespearean plays, was fully brought to light only half a century ago. Most of the texts devoted to its interpretation were written in the field of literary studies—and this fact partly explains why the play remains *terra incognita* for the history of political philosophy. Scholars who nonetheless recognize it as a work in some way related to political thought tend to consider the character of Coriolanus (sometimes along with his mother, Volumnia, and his arch-rival, Tullus Aufidius) to be the most thrilling and philosophically complex element of the text (Rackin; Holloway). Another viewpoint takes interest in *Coriolanus* as Shakespeare's vision of civic culture and the politics of *urbs*—the city of Republican Rome (Miola, chapter VI; Schulman, chapter II; Shrank). Whilst these two interpretive bases emphasize substantial issues the play bestows, they both habitually overlook the intense flow of thought encircling the body politic metaphor (however, it is mentioned from time to time in a hasty fashion). The same can be said about authors who (re)discover the place of *Coriolanus* in political discourses and traditions of early modernity (Armitage et al., chapter VI; Kaegi; Kuzner; Moore 51-57; Riebling). Of those scholars who focus on the body politic, the majority favours the contextual approach; most of them build their articles on literary grounds, thus touching the issue of history of philosophy merely tangentially (Gurr; Garganico; Hadfield 2004, 2005; Holstun). Lastly, there is only a handful of researchers with non-historicist views who deal primarily with the metaphor of body politic and modifications it underwent in the play (Hale 1971; Jagendorf). In continuation of this minor tradition, we shall remember that Shakespeare “seeks in *Coriolanus* to explore the purpose, nature, and problems of political order” and perceive his writings accordingly (Miola 165).

¹⁰ See Strauss, “An introduction...”, “Political Philosophy and History”; Tarlton.

The starving body politic: political metaphor in rhetorical dispute

To begin, we need to answer the question: what exactly is the “body politic”? In short, it is a metaphor that likens political community to a human body. It is quite ancient, dating back to the Indian *Upanishads* and *Rig-Vedas*, the *Old Testament*, Plato’s *Republic*, Paul’s *Epistles*, Cicero’s treatises, and, more importantly for our goal, to Aesop’s fables (Dobski and Gish 6-10; Harvey 1-10). As a long-standing trope, it has several key variations: the body can be used to depict either the community as a whole, or the juridico-political position of its sovereign. The latter variation of the metaphor was prominent in medieval and early modern England, where it was used to describe the peculiar legal status of the institution of kingship (Kantorowicz). This phenomenon was re-discovered and extensively studied by Ernst Kantorowicz in his renowned book *The King’s Two Bodies*, which bears significant importance for my paper because in its second chapter the author famously turned to Shakespeare’s historical tragedy, *Richard II*. Kantorowicz was one of the first to show how attentive Shakespeare actually was to organic metaphors and their political implications: as he argued, in *Richard II* the playwright envisioned and, in fact, *restated* the metaphor of the king’s two bodies (24-42). Later researchers enriched the spectrum of studied plays, shedding light on Shakespeare’s usage of organic metaphors in *Henry V* (McEachern), *Cymbeline* (Haunt) and *Macbeth* (Spicci).

In this light *Coriolanus* can be seen as but one of many Shakespearean plays which deal with the body politic. It takes the “communal” variation of that metaphor and builds upon it an intricate observation of the functioning, significance and applicability of the body *qua* political metaphor. The unusual concern with bodies and bodily matters in the play was best described by Zvi Jagendorf in his thorough article on the subject:

The physical is inescapable in this most unerotic of plays; everywhere we encounter legs, arms, tongues, scabs, scratches, wounds, mouths, teeth, voices, bellies, and toes together with such actions as eating, vomiting, starving, beating, scratching, wrestling, piercing, and undressing (Jagendorf 457-458).

In the first chapter I shall thoroughly explore the first scene of the play, where the well-known fable of the belly appears—and this appearance, I propose, is one of the key points of the whole narrative. The scene starts, quite abruptly, with the tempestuous revolt of the Roman plebeians, who have been severely suffering from famine and now claim that patricians are the ones who

knowingly caused it by hoarding the grain:

SECOND CITIZEN. One word, good citizens.

FIRST CITIZEN. We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good. What authority surfeits on would relieve us. If they would yield us but the superfluity while it were wholesome, we might guess they relieved us humanely. But they think we are too dear. The leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory to particularize their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them. Let us revenge this with our pikes ere we become rakes; for the gods know I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge. (I.i.13-24).¹¹

This passionate speech shows very vividly the deep dissension that splits Rome in half: political community is no longer stable because the *superfluity* of food is not redistributed. Critical imbalance of food supply exposes the hidden imbalance of moral positioning of the Roman citizens, revealing that different spheres of communal life are deeply intertwined, affecting one another as if they are parts of one body. Here we encounter the first underlying trope of the play—the distinction between *equipoise* and *superfluity* in the political community, which later will show to be of great importance.

After a short following conversation, plebeians, armed and angered, rush to the Capitol Hill. Along the way, they unexpectedly encounter Menenius Agrippa—a patrician and senator, “one that hath always loved the people” (I.i.51-52). His reputation allows him to speak to the mob, asking for the explanation of people’s discontent. After hearing out the arguments, Menenius seeks to defend the patricians, at first ascribing the “dearth” to the will of the gods:

MENENIUS. For the dearth, / The gods, not the patricians, make it, and / Your knees to them, not arms, must help... (I.i.74-76).

This reference to religious piety, however, completely fails to convince plebeians of anything. It evokes the answer of the Second Citizen, who says that patricians “ne’er cared for us yet / Suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain...” (I.i.82-83). Now Menenius is almost out of rhetorical options, so he decides to change the line of defense, turning to a somewhat

¹¹ All references to *Coriolanus* are to the Folger Digital Edition (Mowat et al., eds., *The tragedy of Coriolanus* (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed January 31, 2019. www.folgerdigitaltexts.org). The standard format of citations is: (I.i.1), where the first number is the number of the act, the second—the number of the scene; the third—the number(s) of the line(s).

peculiar and even clumsy argument, “a pretty tale” (I.1.92), i.e.—to the renowned fable of the belly (originally found in Aesop):

MENENIUS. There was a time when all the body's members / Rebelled against the belly,
thus accused it: / That only like a gulf it did remain / I' th' midst o' th' body, idle and
unactive, / Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing / Like labor with the rest, where th'
other instruments / Did see and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel, / And, mutually
participate, did minister / Unto the appetite and affection common / Of the whole body.
(I.i.98-107).

It seems like anyone would think thrice before telling this fable to the *starving* mob, whose rage is caused solely by hunger. In any other circumstances, this metaphor would have worked unspeakably better but Menenius uses it specifically in a situation like that, making it incredibly grotesque. Surprisingly, plebeians listen in patience and at some moment the Second Citizen, as if accepting Menenius' metaphorical language, interrupts his speech only to extend the fable in a different way:

SECOND CITIZEN. Your belly's answer—what? / The kingly crownèd head, the
vigilant eye, / The counselor heart, the arm our soldier, / Our steed the leg, the tongue
our trumpeter, / With other muniments and petty helps / In this our fabric, [asked] if that
they... Should by the cormorant belly be restrained, / Who is the sink o' th' body...
(I.i.117-126).

As it turns out, plebeians themselves are aware of the metaphor Menenius describes—and even more: they have their own (and quite detailed) understanding of it, proving to be competent enough to accentuate and secure their roles in this body politic. Menenius, hovering on the heights of his patrician “goodness”, fails to recognize his fellow citizens as *good* enough to participate in his word games. The plebeians, however, do not forget about their civic dignity and are able to behave dispassionately in this inappropriate discussion, causing us to question whether the patricians judge them fairly.

After delivering his counterargument, the Second Citizen continues the dispute, asking Menenius: “The former agents, if they did complain, / What could the belly answer?” (I.i.128-129). The answer follows quickly:

MENENIUS. Your most grave belly <...> answered: / “True is it, my incorporate

friends,” / “That I receive the general food at first / Which you do live upon; and fit it is, / Because I am the storehouse and the shop / Of the whole body. But, if you do remember, / I send it through the rivers of your blood / Even to the court, the heart, to th’ seat o’ th’ brain; / And, through the cranks and offices of man, / The strongest nerves and small inferior veins / From me receive that natural competency / Whereby they live.” What say you to’t? (I.i.135-147).

To the concluding question of Menenius, “What say you to’t?”, the Second Citizen responds, puzzled: “It was an answer. How apply you this?” (I.i.145-46). As David G. Hale suggests, “the Second Citizen’s sullen “It was an answer” shows that the fable has not convinced him that the Senate is in fact performing its nutritional function.” (1968, 382). I have to disagree with this interpretation, for the problem here is more complicated than it seems to be. The confusion occurs because the Second Citizen and Menenius are using two distinct political metaphors and simply cannot understand each other properly. For the Citizen certainly imagines traditional *medieval* body politic, a body that has the “kingly-crowned head” (monarch) and “the counselor heart” (monarch’s council/senate), etc. (see Kantorowicz). That analogy has nothing to do with Republican Rome—strangely enough, it is a close copy of the metaphor originally found in *Policraticus*, the *opus magnum* of John of Salisbury, medieval scholastic and political philosopher. John is known as a founder of the first medieval organic theory of the state (Gierke 25), and the striking consilience is: he based this theory on the alleged work of Plutarch, which, as had been proven (Liebeschütz), was made up by him. John’s *Policraticus* asserts the following in regard to the body politic:

The position of the head in the republic is occupied, however, by a prince subject only to God... <...> The place of the heart is occupied by the senate, from which proceeds the beginning of good and bad works. The duties of the ears, eyes and mouth are claimed by the judges and governors of provinces. The hands coincide with officials and soldiers. <...> Treasurers and record keepers (I speak not of those who supervise prisoners, but of the counts of the Exchequer) resemble the shape of the stomach and intestines; these, if they accumulate with great avidity and tenaciously preserve their accumulation, engender innumerable and incurable diseases so that their infection threatens to ruin the whole body (John of Salisbury 67).

Notice the last part concerning the stomach and intestines: it clearly talks about superfluity that we already encountered. Then change the treasurers to patrician senators—although no change

may be actually needed—and the whole picture will perfectly match that of the Second Citizen. He seems to understand very well, just like John of Salisbury, the double-sworded nature of the belly—the organ that can be profitable (when healthy) and deadly (when infected). Menenius contests this view, explaining to the Second Citizen the meaning of his “pretty tale”:

MENENIUS. The senators of Rome are this good belly, / And you the mutinous members. For examine / Their counsels and their cares, digest things rightly / Touching the weal o’ th’ common, you shall find / No public benefit which you receive / But it proceeds or comes from them to you / And no way from yourselves. (I.i.157-163).

This is clearly a legitimation of the mentioned inequality of moral positioning of Roman citizens: in Menenius’ interpretation the effects of the patrician belly are strictly favorable and one-sided—it is not vulnerable to infectious diseases. Instead of trying to paint a picture of a unified community, all members of which equally contribute to the “weal”, Menenius glaringly attributes moral (as well as social) superiority to patricians, a superiority that always bears benefits for the whole “body”. For him the moral and socio-economic dimensions of civic “superfluity” are deeply intertwined, with the moral side being a more significant one (while the socio-economic one is related to food and other “petty” things). That is exactly why Menenius encourages plebeians to “digest [i.e. rethink] things rightly”, while they have literally *nothing* to digest. His request may seem monstrously ironic or even appear as evidence of the downfall of rhetoric as such (Riss 53; Gurr 67) but, in truth, it is quite logical and plain because he does not care about plebeians’ struggles inasmuch as they blame the Senate for it. The famine for him is not an issue itself—but its disruptive effect on balance and hierarchy of the body politic definitely is. Menenius’ understanding of political hierarchy manifestly derives from the Classical Antiquity and particularly from the general Greco-Roman notion of the good political community which included *political exclusion* as a natural feature of political community (e.g. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Barker; Cicero). Moreover, his image of patricians is equivalent to the Greek notion of *ἄριστοι*, the nobility that is both socially *and* morally superior to the multitude. The semantics of that word implies that when used to describe a person *ἄριστος* (adjective in singular form) means both “noblest” as well as “morally best”.¹² Patricians, just like *ἄριστοι*, are perceived as the main producers of the public good and therefore superior to plebeians both morally and economically (remember the First Citizen’s remarks: “We [plebeians] are accounted *poor* citizens, the patricians *good*”).

Menenius’ view also correlates with the split in the classification of organic metaphors: in

¹² According to Liddel and Scott 241.

fact, throughout human history, the body politic has been described in two ways—the anatomic and the physiological ones. The anatomic version is “the one which concentrates on ‘an architecture’ of parts” (Nederman 214). It underlines the importance of hierarchy, consistency and stability, arranging bodily organs according to their functions; some of these organs (e.g. the “belly”) are seen as the constitutive for the body and its survival. The physiological version, in turn, depicts bodily organs as parts of a dynamic system, aimed at some common purpose, e.g. life sustainability: “Where the anatomic approach emphasizes the diversity and uniqueness of the parts, the physiological approach actually <...> focuses on the body as a coherent unit all of whose members perform according to a shared principle.” (Ibid. 214-215).¹³ As C. J. Nederman convincingly showed, John of Salisbury’s organic theory is fundamentally physiological despite some innate intricacies. We can use his findings and ascribe the physiological vision to the Second Citizen, who shares ideas similar to John’s. The anatomic vision is very close to the views of Menenius, whose interpretation of the belly fable, as we remember, attributes the role of producer of a public good exclusively to patricians, thus adhering to the anatomic model (and openly contradicting the physiological one).

Signs of this glaring confrontation were noticed by Zvi Jagendorf, who observed that plebeians “lay claim to a different interpretation of the body, an interpretation that stresses function rather than subservience, action rather than dependence, and, instead of Menenius’ horizontal topography of storehouses, rivers, and offices centered on the belly, it posits a model in which head, eye, heart, tongue, and leg cooperate in a common enterprise, restrained only by the guts at the bottom...” (Jagendorf 460). Only, it is not a different interpretation plebeians offer but rather a different tradition of political thought. Several authors render this clash of visions as Shakespeare’s endeavor to demonstrate the inapplicability of organic metaphor *per se*. Advancing that notion, D. G. Hale registered the “death” of the body politic metaphor (Hale 1971). He also proposed that “...asserting the nobility of the other parts of the body, the Second Citizen insists upon the contradiction latent in the tradition of the analogy of the body politic and implicitly denies the applicability of organic analogies to political situation.” (Hale 1968, 393). Although this interpretation is not completely false, it is clear from the previous paragraph that Shakespeare did not simply prove the metaphor to be inept; his position is more complex and nuanced.

When it comes to the formulation of Shakespeare’s philosophical stance on some political problem, one is faced with a hermeneutical predicament: amongst all plays of the Shakespearean corpus there is no character like Plato’s Socrates, whose words and beliefs could be (to some extent) identified with those of the author. One might even say in regard to

¹³ Nederman specifies that this distinction is based on the article by Robert Jung (see “Works cited”).

Shakespeare's oeuvre that its author is, in fact, dead. Faced with that problem, I offer the possible solution: because of the confusing polylogue intrinsic to dramatic plays, when elucidating Shakespeare's philosophy one ought to dive not into the deep toils of his characters but rather into various *situations* the plot outlines. Psychological motives of heroes and heroines (as vibrant as those are) should be left to literary critics; the situations these characters live in are of greater meaning, their outcomes and properties being parts of a narrative that is guided by philosophical principles of the playwright.¹⁴ If we accept this principle, Hale's observation can finally be corrected. We are bound to say that Shakespeare deliberately clashes together two kinds of organic metaphors: anatomic and physiological, the first represented by Menenius' fable of the belly, the second—by the Second Citizen and his counter-metaphor.

Now we can proceed with our inquiry, keeping in mind the interim conclusions. It should not come as an amazement that Menenius' attempt to pacify the revolt was doomed to fail—and that is why after the dispute with the Second Citizen he hopelessly exclaims:

MENENIUS. But make you ready your stiff bats and clubs; / Rome and her *rats* are at
the point of battle, / The one side must have bale. (I.i.165-167; emphasis added).

Plebeians, he suggests, are merely *vermin* who demand food due to their wicked nature, not famine. The consequences of this analogy would have been ruinous if Caius Martius, the protagonist of the play, had not entered the scene, coming to Menenius' aid and distracting plebeians from the fable and the whole rhetorical confrontation. However, the arrival of Martius does not signify the fading of bodily imagery, which is obvious due to his very first lines:

MARTIUS. What's the matter, you dissentious rogues, / That rubbing the poor itch of
your opinion, / Make yourselves scabs? (I.i.168-170).

These words are followed by a lengthy speech aimed against the plebeians. Martius' outburst lacks any discretion and is so forceful that it magically captivates the plebeians' attention. Another thing his arrival sheds light on is that, as it turns out, the revolt for the most part (i.e. on "the other side of the city" which had risen earlier (I.i.47.)) had been over by the time Menenius and the Second Citizen started their dispute (I.i.218-221). To stop the unrest, patricians had granted plebeians the right to elect representatives—namely, five tribunes. Dumbfounded by this unprecedented "generosity", Martius tells all this to Menenius and then shouts to plebeians: "Go get you home, you fragments" (I.i.245). "*Fragments*"—as if they are no longer the mighty organs

¹⁴ This argument is based on Craig, chapter I; Dobski and Gish 21-22; Bloom and Jaffa 8.

of the harmonic body but rather scattered, pitiful parts of the multitudinous body that fell apart the same minute the revolt ended. Initially united by the common aim, the “body” of the plebeians dissolves itself as soon as that aim is accomplished. When Menenius and Caius Martius finish exchanging the news, a messenger arrives, warning about the Volscians, who have gathered an army and invaded Roman lands. Martius meets this news with open rejoice, making the superfluity trope more grim. The plebeians must be “vented” like a poisonous mould:

MARTIUS. I am glad on't. Then we shall ha' [have] means to vent / Our musty
superfluity. (I.i.249-250).

When contemplating the overall image of the first scene, one is unlikely to overlook Menenius' obstinate attempts of avoiding the actual cause of the revolt at any cost—firstly, by shifting the conversation to the functions of political community, and secondly, by hiding it under a layer of metaphorical language. Carried away by the hasty stream of thought and action, he clings to the straw of rhetoric—but this straw is too weak, and his efforts to put the riot to end using sheer words ultimately fail. Political action, undertaken by the Senate, is what really entails (and signifies) the cessation of the revolt, whereas Menenius' fable is just a “pretty tale”, or, to be more precise, is nothing *but* a pretty tale.

Non-parallel lives: imagining *Coriolanus*

Scholars had long ago figured that the storyline of *Coriolanus* mainly relies on a certain historical source. In this case, the source was Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* (shortly, *Lives*), translated by Sir Thomas North in the year 1579.¹⁵ The interpretation I presented in the previous chapter is based solely on the text of *The tragedy of Coriolanus*; to make these findings more compelling, I am to examine Plutarch's *Lives* and compare the context of application of the body politic metaphor in these two texts.

Plutarch's story shows Rome as a space of never-ending conflict between patricians and plebeians, as a succession of innumerable little strives. During the life of Caius Martius plenty of those strives occurred; here we shall focus on two of them that are of paramount importance due to their role in the storyline of *Coriolanus*. The first conflict takes place in a time of harsh war with the Sabines and revolves around the problem of money lenders, who, supposedly, impoverish the plebeians by means of high interest rates:

¹⁵ That hypothesis is now a “common place” one (cf. Honigmann; Dobson et al. 241).

The reputation and influence procured by his [Caius Martius'] valour were already great in the city, when the senate, taking the part of the wealthy citizens, began to be at variance with the common people, who thought they suffered many grievous ills at the hands of the money-lenders (Plutarch 127).

Reaction of patricians was rather ambivalent; some of them offered to make concessions to plebeians. But Caius Martius, on the other hand,

...did not regard the financial difficulties as the main point at issue and exhorted the magistrates to be wise enough to check and quell this incipient attempt at bold outrage on the part of a populace in revolt against the laws (Ibid. 129).

Feeling resentment, most of the plebeians left the city in secession and camped at the Sacred Mountain by the Anio river (Ibid.). The Senate, shocked by these actions, chose to back down and sent an embassy to the plebeians, tasked with returning them to the city. The head of the embassy was an elderly senator Menenius Agrippa, who, upon arrival, told plebeians the same fable of the belly that we encountered earlier (Ibid. 131). Using the metaphor presented in it, Menenius implicitly accused plebeians of *intestina corporis seditio* ("sedition of bodily organs"), deadly for the life of the community. Such rhetoric led to success and plebeians came back to the city, convinced by Agrippa. Time passed, and after a short successful war with Volscians Rome was once again divided by an internal conflict (the second of the two we are interested in): this time the tribunes "revived the internal dissensions, without any new cause of complaint" (Ibid. 145). The reason for this was that the war had caused a great famine by complicating the food supply and leaving the fields unsown; Plutarch underlines the objective character of the famine, explaining that nobility had nothing to do with it—and accuses "popular leaders" of utter selfishness and political blindness since the Volscian war was far from over (Ibid.).

We can clearly distinguish the original story told by Plutarch from Shakespeare's version of it. Unlike *Coriolanus*, *Lives* presents the circumstances evoking the use of the body metaphor in a different light: the dissent is not caused by famine—the plebeians are malcontent with the money lenders. But it is not the deciding point of discrepancy. The crucial difference between the two stories lies in the way in which plebeians react to the arisen problem. In Plutarch's account they are not so much angered by patricians' reaction as disappointed by it; their following decision—to move out of Rome—seems to be desperate and inevitable at the same time: their own city had failed them, and the former unity is gone. By leaving Rome, Plutarchian plebeians

physically recreate the disruption of the body politic that had already happened on the intangible level. For this reason, the tactic that Menenius Agrippa used to change their minds is immensely suitable; his metaphorical language corresponded with the plebeians' one in a perfect manner, so that during the negotiations on the Sacred Mountain both parties were talking about the same subject and were using the same rhetoric. That is why Menenius succeeded in persuading the plebeians to return: being a skilled rhetor, he used the metaphor very appropriately.¹⁶

Shakespeare, for his part, deliberately paints another picture—the one where plebeians are starving *because* of the patricians;¹⁷ the famine now leads not to their relocation from the city but to the violent revolt inside its borders. In *Coriolanus* two distinct incidents from *Lives* get purposely mixed together, ultimately changing the whole narrative. Shakespeare's Menenius is portrayed as an arrogant patrician, not a proficient orator; his use of the body politic metaphor is inappropriate and therefore doomed to fail. This conclusion remains even if we accept the possibility of Shakespeare's reliance on other sources—like Titus Livy's famous *Ab urbe condita*, which, supposedly, could have been another foundation for *Coriolanus* (Barton; Norbrook). As it happens, Livy tells the same story as Plutarch: in his version, Menenius' fable has nothing to do with the revolt caused by mass famine (Livy 323). All in all, Shakespeare's Caius Martius and Menenius see the plebeians as the inferior "multitude", comprised of scattered "fragments", while Plutarch's Menenius sees them as an important (and yet inferior) part of the community, one that has to be reckoned with.

Before proceeding to conclusion, let us once again return to *Lives*. The actual physical secession from Rome, undertaken by the plebeians, opens another path of reflection. It explicates the fact that the elitism of "good" patricians is partly based on the horizontal hierarchy of topography: indeed, Plutarch's account describes a community, one part of which thinks that it invariably acts *rightly* both in political and moral sense; this part also has its own special place in the space of the city (the Capitol Hill), and, accordingly, in the space of the metaphorical body politic (the belly). At the same time, the other part of the community is basically excluded from the pursuit of common good. It resides inside the city and yet lacks its own designated place in it. In this light the plebeian secession appears as an attempt to acquire such a place—or at least to reveal their desire to have it. Topographic (and metaphorical) equality is what plebeians ultimately try to achieve: only those who have a *place* in the city are included in it as rightful members of the community.

That is how Plutarch's Rome oscillates. However, what Shakespeare does in his narrative

¹⁶ Indeed, as Philip Sidney notes, the rhetorical strategy of Plutarch's Menenius ensured the "perfect reconciliation" and can be considered as a perfect use of rhetoric (Sidney 96).

¹⁷ It is confirmed by Martius in the end of the first act.

is more subtle: his plebeians do not seek to *reveal* their desires to patricians by leaving the city. On the contrary, they revolt *inside* its borders, bringing their problems to the Capitol Hill, which represents the political superiority of patricians. By doing so, they subvert the inequality *from the inside*. Zvi Jagendorf observed that Menenius' image of patrician virtue is constituted by the "horizontal topography of storehouses, rivers and offices centered on the belly" (Jagendorf 460). In the first scene that topography crumbles: the superfluity that afflicts Rome is not splashing out of the city, as Martius desires; rather, it floods Rome, removing metaphorical barriers and real political divisions of the past.

Conclusion: organic metaphors and political change

After the intense outburst of the first scene organic metaphors do not disappear from the play at all. Rather, they accompany the storyline and evoke even more complex tropes. Although the following acts predictably turn to the main character—Caius Martius—the imagery of bodily metaphors does not get abandoned, emerging here and there, often meddling with Martius and his fate. In these acts the Roman body politic undergoes a subtle modification: it transforms from the functional into an *ill* one.¹⁸ This change means that the "body" of Rome is now seen primarily in figurative medical terms of health and illness (and hence—in terms of health and illness of its organs). As the conflict between Martius and the plebeians unfolds, various characters turn to medical metaphors more and more often: Coriolanus himself introduces one of them in the determinant speech which he delivers after being denied the consulate. He calls upon senators to "apply a dangerous physic" [i.e. the cure] to the body politic by "plucking out the multitudinous tongue" [the tribunes] (III.i.196-8). Clearly, Martius is afraid of the tribunes solely because they are able to consolidate (or, in his view, manipulate) the plebeians and make them a solid part of the body politic, united by a common political goal. And this is what actually happens later: the tribunes turn the medical metaphor against Coriolanus by declaring him a "disease that must be cut away" (III.i.378). To this Menenius hastily replies: "Oh he's a Limbe, that ha's but a Disease: / Mortall, to cut it off: to cure it, easie." (III.i.379-80). Once again, he resorts to rhetoric to avoid political change and, once again, fails. Unfazed, Tribune Sicinius announces a verdict: "The service of the foote / Being once gangren'd is not then respected / For what before it was." (III.i.391-3). He is declaring the obvious: that part of the body politic

¹⁸ For the detailed study on medical metaphors see Takashi Shogimen's "Treating the Body Politic: The Medical Metaphor of Political Rule in Late Medieval Europe and Tokugawa Japan".

(Martius) which endangers other parts (plebeians) ought to be removed from it completely so as to avoid its vile effects on the stability and security of the city. It should not surprise us, then, that this impetuous figurativeness comes to a close with the metaphorical “amputation” of a “gangrened” Coriolanus from the body politic—his being banished from Rome in perpetuity.

As we have already established, by using the fable of the belly in his rhetoric Menenius, as well as Caius Martius, speaks against the possibility of (or the need for) *political change*. His understanding of the body politic metaphor is purely anatomic and requires unchangeable stability and stringent hierarchy, which is challenged by the plebeians both rhetorically (through the Second Citizen’s physiological version of the metaphor) and physically (through the revolt that was partly caused by political failure of the Roman body politic and had led to actual political changes). So, when Menenius opposes the “amputation” of Martius, he, once again, reveals his fear of political change, especially the one initiated by the plebeians, who are perceived as a “many-headed beast”, a malevolent multitude (IV.i.1-2).¹⁹

Now that the last theme has been pointed out, it is possible to reflect on the questions posed in the introduction. Before we do that, we need to acknowledge that to side Shakespeare with one affirmative philosophical position often means to confine him and his prolific thought in a too narrow space; one, indeed, should be cautious when doing so. As I stated before, in order to grasp philosophical implications of the play, one should focus on the events of the plot as well as their outcomes. It is time to apply that principle. What, then, characterizes Shakespeare’s *vision* of the body politic? The answer is complex: it lies in the outcome (and circumstances) of the dispute between Menenius and the Second Citizen, analyzed through the lens of Plutarch’s *Lives*. To this we must add the tragic fate of Coriolanus, the play’s main character. These three elements make up an equation that sheds light on our subject.

As we know, Menenius’ effort to stop the plebeian revolt failed; moreover, it *never could have had* any real influence on the political struggle (because “the other side of the city” had already secured the right to elect tribunes by the time Menenius and the Second Citizen clashed their metaphors). And that particular circumstance is meant to show that the latter dispute is, in fact, an *abstract* one. It could never have influenced the “real” political life of Shakespeare’s Rome—but it nevertheless served a crucial role: one of a pure thought experiment, implemented by Shakespeare in order to immerse the reader into the philosophical matters he envisioned (cf. famous thought experiments of 17th century philosophers regarding the “state of nature”). And, like any good thought experiment, that dispute provided both us (readers) and the author himself

¹⁹ The analogy Shakespeare puts in Martius’ mouth becomes even more grim if we read it as a reference to the many-headed beast from the *Apocalypse of John*, the beast which comes from the sea and replaces Christianity with a blasphemous cult (see Revelation 11:7; 13:1-10).

with a definite philosophical conclusion. Indeed, as we have figured, political success of the plebeians shows that their physiological vision of the organic metaphor is, after all, more correct and realistic than the anatomic vision of the patricians. The latter perceived their actions and their position in the community as both superior and unalterable, while the former performed certain political acts destined to change the status quo. Ultimate political goal of the plebeians—to be accepted as an equal part of the community and to be able to produce the common good along with the patricians—was thoroughly described by the Second Citizen and to a great extent achieved by the actions “on the other side of the city”.

That overall view is supported by the analysis of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*. This analysis explicates that Shakespeare deliberately changed the storyline he found in Plutarch’s book, so that the belly fable used by Menenius would appear as inapt and truly inappropriate; thus, the playwright underlined the political and topographic *inequality* present in his imaginary Rome. The same can be said about the superfluity trope which stressed the notion of unjust positioning of Roman political subjects in the eyes of the patricians. What Shakespeare also emphasized when he changed the Plutarch’s narrative was that political rhetoric must be used pertinently and has to be grounded in political reality—otherwise its power will be spent in vain.

Through the play’s development we see Shakespeare as a thinker who firmly supports the possibility and inevitability of political change as such. Although we often tend to understand political change as a category tied to morally good actions, it is not always the case—and the author of *Coriolanus* knows this all too well: after all, the plebeians themselves are not the perfect citizens of a heavenly city. The fate of Caius Martius (who was once hated by the plebeians, then glorified, then once again hated and once again glorified—all in the span of several weeks) and the political machinations of the tribunes prove very convincingly that the plebeians’ judgments can be as false as those of the patricians. They, too, may pursue aims and policies harmful for the political community as a whole. And, naturally, they may lack virtues needed for the wellbeing of the city. In the lessons *Coriolanus* teaches us this one is among the most valuable: good actions do not always have everlastingly good consequences. Shakespeare reminds us that any kind of political change is, in fact, justified only when it is undertaken in the name of a just cause. Such a cause must be supported by political community as a whole—and, in other words, must be “healthy” for the body politic. To conclude, we can say without hesitation: like a true political philosopher, “Shakespeare created images of political men in order to train men whose nature is political.” (Bloom 464).

The philosophical stance of the playwright described above opens up a number of ways to continue the research started in this rather small paper. It enables us to pose questions of a broader character, e.g.: can William Shakespeare be called a republicanist? What views on the

sovereign monarchies did he uphold? Was he *linear* in his philosophical musings, or is his literary heritage just a corpus of chaotic texts, full of controversial views and opinions? Of course, the scope of future research is truly impressive and is worth looking into.

However, there are some things that we can be certain of. In the introduction to *Shakespeare's Politics* Allan Bloom and Harry Jaffa, as if reaffirming Philip Sidney's apologetic stance, assert that

...the philosopher cannot move nations; he speaks only to a few. The poet can take the philosopher's understanding and translate it into images that touch the deepest passions and cause men to know without knowing that they know (Bloom and Jaffa 6-7).

And that is exactly what Shakespeare does in his outstanding manner: in *The tragedy of Coriolanus* poetic and philosophical capabilities of the playwright complement each other, enveloping his profound contemplations of the body politic metaphor and elevating them to intellectual heights reachable to only a handful of thinkers.

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