

## **Moral Economy and the Politics of Food Riots in *Coriolanus*\***

Elyssa Y. Cheng

Department of Western Languages and Literature  
National University of Kaohsiung, Taiwan

### **Abstract**

Food riots in the Elizabethan-Jacobean period were an explosive expression of discontent over the threat of food scarcity and starvation. They were ritualistic acts used by the commoners to compel the authorities to meet the standards of moral economy and to respect the plebeians' legitimate right to eat. In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare highlights contemporary Jacobean food riots by rewriting and transferring the belly fable incident of usury riots into food riots and by repetitively referring to famine, hunger, and food hoarding in the riot scenes. Like Shakespeare's contemporary food rioters, the mobs in *Coriolanus* do not rise up to subvert the established social order; they revolt in order to alert the authorities that their grievances must be heard and respected. By portraying the crowd as exceptionally well-organized, the playwright transforms the play into a social critique to encourage his audience to think about the potential danger of popular disruptions and to urge the authorities to contemplate the consequences of ignoring the popular voice. Through this critique, the dramatist also manages to display how hunger can turn into a formidably collective power that poses a serious threat to the ruling authorities.

### **Keywords**

Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, food riots, moral economy

---

\* I am deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and criticism. I also want to dedicate my greatest thanks to Professor Barbara Bono (Department of English, SUNY at Buffalo) and Professor James Holstun (Department of English, SUNY at Buffalo) for reading and commenting on this essay before it was submitted.

*Coriolanus* was written during a tumultuous period of rising corn prices and the accompanying fear of dearth and famine. Annabel Patterson points out in *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* that there was a sharp rise in wheat prices in 1608, and “in 1609, when wheat prices recovered, a corresponding rise in the price of barley, the poor man’s grain” (137). In addition to the sudden rise in grain prices, this era was also one of the most radical periods of peasant revolt. John Stow’s *Annales* reported that in May 1607, a great number of peasants, up to five thousand, assembled in various Midland counties (including Shakespeare’s home county, Warwickshire) to protest the acceleration of enclosures and the resultant food scarcity and famine.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the riots of the preceding century that had been orchestrated by rebellious aristocrats or religious dissidents, this series of peasant uprisings, historically known as the Midlands Rising of 1607, were England’s first purely popular riots.<sup>2</sup> Although these riots were quickly dispersed, the fears and anxieties they aroused were not. Writing with deep public concern about popular revolt, Shakespeare deliberately altered his sources to reinforce the similarities between the corn riots of the Roman plebeians, the anti-enclosure riots, and the food riots of his contemporary social protestors.<sup>3</sup> Since other critics have already

---

<sup>1</sup> I obtained John Stow’s description of the Midland Revolt of 1607 and the dearth of 1608 in his *The Annales of England* from the fifth volume of George Bullough’s *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), pp. 554-58.

<sup>2</sup> For more discussion of the Midlands Rising of 1607, see Edwin F. Gay, “The Midland Revolt and the Inquisitions of Depopulation of 1607,” *Transactions of Royal Historical Society* New Series 18 (1904): 195-244; Roger B. Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1988), pp. 227-42; John E. Martin, *Feudalism to Capitalism: Peasant and Landlord in English Agrarian Development* (London: Macmillan P, 1983); pp. 172-215; Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 136-38; John Walter and Keith Wrightson, “Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England,” in *Rebellion, Popular Protest and the Social Order in Early Modern England*, ed. Paul Slack (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), pp. 108-28.

<sup>3</sup> Critics had noticed and pointed out Shakespeare’s intentional alteration of his Plutarchan sources for his play. In Plutarch, the commoners riot because the Senate refuses to control usury; in Shakespeare, the plebeians revolt because they are starved by famine. The alteration—by changing the nature of the protest from an anti-usury campaign to food riots—becomes a conspicuous pronouncement to show Shakespeare’s as well as his contemporaries’ concerns about popular revolts. For the discussions of Shakespeare’s alteration of his sources, I am indebted to the following: Janet Adelman, “‘Anger’s My Meat’: Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in *Coriolanus*,” in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, eds. Murray F. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1980), p. 129; Andrew Gurr, “*Coriolanus* and the Body Politic,” *Shakespeare Survey* 28 (1975), pp. 66-67; E. C. Pettet, “*Coriolanus* and the Midland Insurrection of 1607,” *Shakespeare Survey* 3 (1950), p. 36; Arthur Riss, “The Belly Politic: *Coriolanus* and the Revolt of Language,” *ELH* 59.1 (1992), p. 55; Richard Wilson,

carefully investigated the relationships between *Coriolanus* and anti-enclosure riots,<sup>4</sup> my endeavor here is to locate the associations between this play and the food riots that occurred in the metropolitan areas and food-exporting towns in England during this period.<sup>5</sup> I focus on food riots because the riot scenes and the language the protestors use in *Coriolanus* bear far greater similarity to the historical scenarios of the London food/apprentices' riots than to the enclosure riots.<sup>6</sup> Although the outbreak of anti-enclosure riots aroused nationwide anxiety over food shortage, what concerned Shakespeare's metropolitan audiences most were the food riots that frequently occurred in their neighborhoods. Through this focus, I will argue that Shakespeare uses this play to criticize the authorities' disregard of popular grievances and to warn them of the possible consequences of neglecting the subsistence needs of the commoners.

E. P. Thompson's essay, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," is one of the most inspiring arguments made to the food rioters in the history of England. In it, Thompson argues that food riots could not be regarded simply as "rebellions of the belly" since they displayed an order and focus that could not be explained by a simple desperation for food (78). Food riots, he maintains, were "a highly complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives;" "in them, the actions of the crowd were informed by the

---

"Against the Grain: Representing the Market in *Coriolanus*," *Seventeenth Century* 6 (1991), p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> For the discussions of the correlation between *Coriolanus* and the Midlands Revolt of 1607, I am deeply indebted to: E. C. Pettett's convincing internal as well as biographical evidence of Shakespeare's concern with his contemporary socio-economic situations. I have also benefited from David George's excellent discussion on Shakespeare's alteration of his Plutarchan sources as well as the play's close association with the Midland Insurrections of 1607 and the condition of dearth and famine in 1607-8. See E. C. Pettett's article and David George's analysis in "Plutarch, Insurrection, and Dearth in *Coriolanus*," *Shakespeare and Politics*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 110-29.

<sup>5</sup> There were two principal categories of popular revolt in Elizabethan-Jacobean England. First, there were anti-enclosure riots, which usually involved vehement protests against the fencing of arable fields and the destruction of hedges and fences erected to restrict access to former common pasture lands, or against dividing former common fields into compact, consolidated farms. Second, there were food riots occurring in metropolitan areas and food-exporting towns where the laboring poor witnessed the transportation of grain out of their home area and would attempt to stop foodstuffs from being shipped. For the definitions of anti-enclosure riots and food riots, and their differences, see Wrightson, in *English Society*, pp. 173-76 and Sharp, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> For the scenarios of London food/apprentices riots, see Ian Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), pp. 154-83; Roger B. Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1988), pp. 187-219.

belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs (78). Thompson thinks that these rights and customs derived from “the moral economy of the poor,” a paternalistic model which demanded that foodstuffs should be marketed at or near their original prices and that the needs of the poor should always take precedence over those of the dealers and middlemen (79).

Though construed specifically for the eighteenth-century English food riots, the model that Thompson sets up can also be applied to the study of Elizabethan-Jacobean food riots since the customs of moral economy originated from the Middle Ages and lasted until the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Thompson’s model first reminds readers that the English food rioters protested out of their belief in moral economy—a community consensus that assumed the authorities’ paternalistic obligations to the needy in times of scarcity. The rioters rebelled in defense of customs, which asserted the paternalistic/moral obligations and traditional practices that the common people expected the ruling class to observe. From this model, we realize that food riots were not simply the result of scarcity or rising prices. Rather, they were the consequences of sudden price inflation caused by the illicit market manipulation of corn merchants and middlemen. The commoners felt compelled to resort to street protests because the authorities failed to ensure reasonable market prices. Thompson holds that the crowd thought their actions were underwritten and legitimized by a moral economy which endorsed the ruling class’ obligation to attend to the commoners in return for their deference. He primarily argues that the food rioters did not merely protest to keep market prices reasonable but also to keep

---

<sup>7</sup> Though Thompson’s subject of study is the eighteenth-century English food rioters, my application of his moral economic model is by no means anachronistic. In *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500-1660*, Andrew McRae examines “versions of moral economy” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by delineating and expounding the varieties of agrarian discourse in its conservative ecclesiastical forms, urbane forms of satiric drama, and radical forms in the visions of the commonwealth movement in the 1540s and in Winstanley’s communes in the 1650s. He argues that early British agrarian complaint literature tended to represent agrarian society in terms of social interdependence, to condemn individual covetousness as a cause of social decay and to stress the paternalistic/moral obligation of the feudal lords to their tenants (21-132). In *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England*, Andy Wood also uses examples from different versions of *The Book of Orders* (1587, 1594, 1595, 1608, 1622, and 1630) to illustrate food riots as a popular tradition to redress the protestors’ social complaints (95-100). See Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), pp. 21-132; Andy Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 95-100.

the violators of social justice in check because these food rioters manifested moral economy as the core moral value of the entire society.

Using the *Books of Orders*, the Elizabethan-Jacobean emergency measures for poor relief in times of scarcity, as an example, Thompson reminds his readers that the food rioters should not be considered rebels because their actions were remarkably orderly and petitions were always preceded before riots took place (107-15). For the Elizabethans and Jacobean, food riots could be considered a mechanism to express the commoners' political demands.<sup>8</sup> As Keith Wrightson observes in *English Society, 1580-1680*, the food rioters took actions because they had specific grievances to rectify. Yet, despite the nature of the rebellion, their conduct was remarkably restrained, and their punishment was seldom severe. The Tudor-Stuart governing class seemed less interested in punishing the rioting crowd than in taking immediate action to satisfy their legitimate grievances, and the crowd, though acting in defiance of the authorities, "presented no fundamental threat to the existing social order" (175-79). They rioted in order to redress specific grievances, but they didn't possess any vision of an alternative political model to replace the current political institution (175). Based on this mutual consensus, Wrightson concludes that Tudor and Stuart authorities would take swift action to relieve the poor rioters in order to regain their credibility among the commoners and to restore the "tacit understanding of the reciprocal duties" that legitimated their authority (179).

In a proclamation issued on June 2, 1608, James I addressed complaints of soaring grain prices, grain hoarding, and engrossing occurring in various parts of England. He hoped the justices of peace could ensure that the desperate poor could be served corn at convenient and charitable prices and that the wealthier could retain their Christian charities as well as hospitalities, in both the cities and the provincial towns, to relieve the poor (Hughes and Larkin 186-88). This royal proclamation was not merely an official instrument employed to appease the anger of the enclosure rioters. In fact, England's severe weather conditions in 1607-8 and situation of dearth as well as frost in the winter raised corn merchants as well as middlemen's expectations to hoard grain. As a personal letter from William Combe

---

<sup>8</sup> I borrowed this notion of "riots" from E. J. Hobsbawn. In *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Hobsbawn argues that the classical mob rioted in order to alert the authorities of their grievances. Riots, for them, were not rebellious actions to subvert the established social order, but a mechanism for expressing the rioters' political demands. For this notion of riots, see E. J. Hobsbawn, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (New York: Norton, 1959), pp. 109-21.

to the Earl of Salisbury shows: “the dearth of corn, the prices rising to some height, [is] caused by some that as well stored, by refraining to bring the same to the market out of a covetous conceit that corn will be dearer” (qtd. in Bullough 558).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the situation of famine and grain hoarding in 1607-8 was grave. In another proclamation issued on January 4, 1609, the King had to once again emphasize that the situation was serious and that the rich had to offer their hospitality to their poor neighbors in times of scarcity (Hughes and Larkin 202).

Written at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1608 after the peasants’ vehement protestation and affected by this political atmosphere, *Coriolanus* exhibits the playwright’s concerns about dearth of food, grain hoarding, and food riots occurring in different parts of England. In this play, the dearth of grain, the anger toward grain hoarders, and the commoners’ insistence that their grievances must be heard and respected by the authorities are constant themes. As a dramatist, Shakespeare purposely alters resounding scenarios taken from his sources to reflect and comment upon the famine and grain hoarding protests in contemporary London. In doing so, he encourages his audiences to think about the potential danger of the food riots and forces the authorities to contemplate the consequences of ignoring the popular voice.

As Christopher Hill notes in his essay “The Many-Headed Monster,” many political thinkers before 1640, such as Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Thomas Smith, Henry Stubbe, and Francis Osborn, perceived democracy and popular demonstration as dangerous as well as seditious because the common people were “fickle, unstable, and incapable of rational thought” (181). However, at the beginning of *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare presents an exceptionally well-organized group of food rioters who resort to public demonstration in the streets in the hope that the ruling class will listen to their grievances. Holding pikes, clubs and other weapons in their hands, the rioters protest in the streets of Rome against the Roman senates over soaring corn prices and unreasonable hoarding. Here, Shakespeare deliberately portrays an orderly and exceptionally self-restrained crowd whose aim in their revolt, like that of the English food rioters, is to articulate their grievances and to demand what they regard as social justice. The First Citizen, the supposed leader of the food riot, asks his fellow protestors to first listen and then pour out their grievances. He wants his fellow rebels to hear him “speak,” and his request is followed by the other rioters’

---

<sup>9</sup> I obtained data about both the drought and severe frost conditions in 1607-8 and William Combe’s description of the dearth from the fifth volume of George Bullough’s *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), pp. 558-60.

echoes of “[s]peak, speak” (1.1.1-2).<sup>10</sup> To speak is to redress their grievances. To speak affords them an opportunity to let the authorities know of their deprivation. The rioters expect that the authorities will listen to their complaints and take swift action to remedy their plight.

Sensing that the authorities are not ready to attend to their complaints, the First Citizen then asks his fellow protestors whether they are “all resolved rather to die than to famish” (1.1.3). His fellow rioters answer unanimously that they are all “resolved” to die rather than to starve to death, suggesting that they are closer to dying from hunger than dying by the sword (1.1.4). For the starving Roman citizens, the military hero, Coriolanus, is the focus of their blame. Though not as “covetous” as the grain hoarders, he is deemed as “the enemy of the people” and “the very dog to the commonality” (1.1.5-6; 1.1.35-38). Later in the play, we gradually come to realize why Coriolanus has become the chief target for the citizens’ attack and resentment. The Romans are at war with the Volscies as the play begins, and being the Roman commander-in-chief, Coriolanus hoards the grain in the markets to supply the military, thus inevitably leading to the shortage of corn supplies (1.1.240-1). Unlike their aristocratic counterparts who are more concerned with their military exploits, the Roman citizens only care about their basic right to subsistence; that is, about whether they can have corn at reasonable market prices (1.1.9). Here, Shakespeare shows that the wrath of the poor is focused upon and directed by their need to subsistence. Their deep resentment toward the dominant class is based upon their consensus that the authorities should rank their needs above warfare and foreign expansion.

Thus, when learning that his fellow protestors will support him wholeheartedly, the First Citizen points out that if the patricians do not help the poor in times of scarcity, these minor outbreaks could become threats to the authorities. Namely, if the ruling class fails to attend to the needs of the poor in times of scarcity, food riots will serve to initiate implacable class hatred. There is no doubt that the First Citizen’s inflammatory discourse is carefully packaged to appeal to the commoners’ deep-rooted hatred of exploitation and class oppression. He first tries to sort people into two distinctively antagonistic camps: the rich, well-supplied patricians vs. the poor, deprived plebeians (1.12-13). The terms he employs to describe the upper class’ superfluity—“surfeits,” “wholesome,” “abundance” and “gain” —contrast strongly with those he uses to depict the lower

---

<sup>10</sup> Subsequent quotations from the play are cited from *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Maus (New York: Norton, 1997), pp. 2785-2871.

class' misery—"poor," "leanness," and "sufferance" (1.1 13-18).<sup>11</sup> Here, the First Citizen clearly testifies that the authorities stock food too excessively and that the abundance of their storage houses is the very source of the lower class' grievances and the origin of the food riots (1.1.16-20).

As the play indicates that there are several similar protestations in other corners of the city, the audience can immediately become aware of the potential destruction that food riots can cause. At this moment, Menenius enters to deliver his belly fable to the angry crowd. Shakespeare again frames the scenes of his contemporary food riots within the context of the popular protest of these Roman plebeians. First, we must note that the rioting crowd is armed with "bats and clubs"—the weapons of Shakespeare's contemporary enclosure rioters (1.1.48), and the way in which the First Citizen files his petition to the authorities is also similar to those used by Elizabethan-Jacobean food rioters. Knowing that Menenius comes to talk them out of their anger, the First Citizen indicates that the Roman senators know they are rioting because of the scarcity of corn but choose to ignore their plight. They riot, not only to vent their grievances, but also to demonstrate their collective power.

Facing the immediate threat of the rioting mob, Menenius diplomatically diverts their blame of the patricians to the gods:

For your wants,  
Your suffering in this dearth, you may as well  
Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them  
Against the Roman state, whose thousand curbs  
Of more strong link asunder than can ever  
Appear in your impediment. For the dearth,  
The gods, not the patricians, make it, and  
Your knees to them, not arms, must help. (1.1.57-65)

This diversion reflects the Renaissance Englishmen's belief that drought and bad weather conditions were God's vengeance upon men for their sins.<sup>12</sup> In redirecting

---

<sup>11</sup> The difference between the upper class' abundance and the lower class' scarcity is very similar to the heaven and earth simile that Hamlet uses to contrast the kingly magnificence of his father, Old Hamlet, and the villainy evil of his uncle, Claudius. See *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene iv.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the Renaissance Englishmen's belief that bad weather was a punishment from God, see John Walter and Keith Wrightson, "Dearth and Social Order in Early Modern England," *Rebellion, Popular Protest and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), pp. 114-15.



the blame for the plebeians' suffering onto the gods, Menenius attempts to find legitimate reasons to exempt the authorities from being accused of exploitation. Aside from this whitewashing, he also invokes the notion of moral economy, reinforcing the patricians' paternalistic duties as well as their obligations to the commoners and thus indirectly criticizing the commoners for their failure to appreciate the beneficence of the ruling class (1.1.65-69).

However, when the mob hears Menenius' argument, they are further incensed. The First Citizen repudiates this argument by pointing out that the famine they are suffering is not a result of natural disaster but of class oppression:

Care for us? True, indeed! They ne'er cared for us yet: suffer us to famish, and their store-houses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich; and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love they bear us. (1.1.70-76)

Realizing that the food rioters are not that easily manipulated, Menenius decides to construct his belly fable: an aristocratic political fable which helps legitimize the exploitation of the ruling class.<sup>13</sup> By addressing the rebels as "my good friends" and "honest neighbors," he reveals his awareness of the Renaissance aristocracy's moral obligations to the lower class and his anxiety about the potential repercussions of the food riots (1.1.53). When the First Citizen confronts Menenius by pointing to the fact that famine is "not unknown to the state" and by expressing the rioters' hope for the authorities to listen to their voices, Menenius responds that drought and severe weather conditions are the manifestations of the gods' vengeance for man's sins; therefore, the plebeians should kneel down to plead for the gods' mercy, rather than blame the patricians who take paternalistic care of them (1.1.56-69). Menenius's discourse contains two layers of political hypocrisy. On the one hand, he attempts to divert the commoners' rage from the patricians to the gods; on the other hand, he deliberately ignores the disregard of moral economy as the major grievance of the food rioters; at the same time, he emphasizes the aristocracy's

---

<sup>13</sup> For more discussions of Menenius's belly fable, see James Holstun, "Tragic Superfluity in *Coriolanus*," *ELH* 50.3 (1983): 485-507; Andrew Gurr, "*Coriolanus* and the Body Politic," *Shakespeare Survey* 28 (1975): 63-69; Zvi Jagendorf, "Coriolanus: Body Politic and Private Parts," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.4 (1990): 455-69; Arthur Riss, "The Body Politic: *Coriolanus* and the Revolt of Language," *ELH* 59.1 (1992): 53-75. Jagendorf's article offers the most inspiring insight for my analysis of Menenius's belly fable in this essay.

awareness of their paternalistic duties/obligations to the commoners. However, the protestors are not easily convinced. The First Citizen immediately counters this argument by demonstrating that they are not going to be annihilated by the wars, but by the patricians because they are hoarding grain (1.1.71-76).

Sensing a class war approaching, Menenius offers to tell the rebels his belly fable (1.1.85-144). By comparing the grain-hoarding state to a food-cupboarding belly and the food rioters to the mutinous, discontented body parts, he tries to persuade his plebeian audiences that the limbs' rebellion against the belly is absurd because the belly altruistically digests food and sends out nourishment to the limbs, keeping only the bran for itself. This parable, however, fails to convince the hungry crowd to go home. Upon hearing Menenius's grotesquely constructed carnal economy, the First Citizen offers his own politico-corporeal metaphors: ". . . the arm our soldier, / Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter, / With other muniments and petty helps / In this our fabric" (1.1.105-8), intending to lay his claim to a different interpretation of the body, "an interpretation that stresses function rather than subservience, action rather than dependence" (Jagendorf 460). By deconstructing Menenius's horizontal topography of storehouses, rivers and offices centered upon the belly, the rebel reconstructs an alternatively vertical model in which the body parts cooperate in the service of a common enterprise and are merely restrained by the guts at the bottom—"Who is the sink o'th'body" (1.1.111).

Though Menenius puts a lot of energy into appeasing the rioting crowd, the appearance of Martius (later honorably named Coriolanus<sup>14</sup>) immediately enflames the raging fires of this class war. It is evident that his concerns about the food riots occurring in several corners of the city center on the potential threat popular revolts may engender and that he completely disregards the rioters' grievances (1.1.173-78). When learning that the rioters are protesting unfair prices as well as market distribution, he expresses his deepest contempt for the laboring class by focusing on their uselessness in the Volscian wars (1.1.240-41). His disregard of the subsistence needs of the lower class and his reluctance to attend to the popular voices foreshadow his resistance to beg for the commoners' votes in the marketplace, his undeserved banishment, and his final tragic death.

Coriolanus's refusal to beg people's support in the marketplace is a highly politicized moment in the play in which Shakespeare closely connects his theatrical Rome with his contemporary London. Though the initial purpose of the mob is not

---

<sup>14</sup> Caius Martius is given the name "Coriolanus" after he leads the Roman armies to victory against the Volscian city of Corioles.

to obliterate the established social order, the power of their union and the potential threat of their rage are so formidable that the latent horror of the many-headed monster becomes an animated political agenda that Shakespeare vividly pursues in this play.

Coriolanus's reluctance to swallow his aristocratic pride and compromise his dignity in order to court the popular support is thus transformed into a theatrical metaphor through which Shakespeare directs his aristocratic audiences to ponder whether or not they should listen to the grievances of the corn rioters. Returning triumphantly from the Volscian war, Coriolanus has every right to be granted consulship; however, before he can be so titled, he needs to pass the public "shaming custom" of pleading for the approval from the common people. His resistance to donning the humiliating gown and displaying his wounds to the plebeians develops into a sensationally dramatic scenario that underscores the consequences of disregarding lower-class grievances.

Before he reenters the stage to perform the customarily requested "shaming ritual," we can know from the conversation between the two conspiring tribunes that despite his war exploits Coriolanus' unwillingness to display his wounds to the crowd and court the populace will provide the excuse to exclude him from consulship. His dialogue with Menenius shows that though Menenius shares his aristocratic pride, Menenius is more amenable to this public ritual, whereas we can sense Coriolanus's strong resistance. Before he is forced to engage in the humiliating ritual, he admits to Menenius that he wants to "overleap that custom" (2.2.133). When Menenius persuades him that traditional customs should be respected and encourages him to perform according to custom in the marketplace, he reiterates his reluctance (2.3.105-7).

On the other hand, Shakespeare also depicts the collective power of the crowd and the consequences of popular rage. The Third Citizen clearly emphasizes the monstrosity of the multitude by saying: "Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ingrateful were to make a monster of the multitude, of the which we, being members, should bring ourselves to be monstrous members" (2.3.9-12). Although this passage can be interpreted as Shakespeare's description of the fickle, destructive, and unruly nature of the crowd from the perspective of the ruling class, it can also be read as the crowd's insistence that the authorities pay attention to their voices. It is worth noticing that Shakespeare's crowd is politically sensitive and highly critical in this scene, as we can see in the Fourth Citizen's enigmatic answer to Coriolanus: "You have been a scourge to her enemies, you have been a rod to her friends. You have not, indeed, loved the common people" (2.3.83-85). For us,

Shakespeare's crowd views the aristocracy's ignorance of the grievances of the lower class in terms of "not loving the common people"—a representation of their negligence of their moral/paternalistic duties toward the lower class. The issue of fair corn prices and distribution becomes the centerpiece of this debate as well as the excuse for the tribunes' betrayal of Coriolanus.

There is no doubt that both tribunes, Brutus and Sicinus, understand how to manipulate the genuine suffering of the food rioters in order to stir up uncontrollable mob rage. Here, Shakespeare explicitly indicates that though food riots can be viewed as minor disturbances to the authorities, if the commoner's subsistence needs are not paid their due attention, the crowd's hunger will develop into irrepressible wrath and the mob will relentlessly attack any authorities out of unquenchable fury. Thus, when Coriolanus argues with the tribunes about whether or not the starving poor deserve access to the corn hoarded in the storehouses, the anger of the commoners is immediately kindled, and he is soon transformed from a war hero into an enemy of the people. He is banished and has to turn to Aufidius's camp for support.

Inevitably, Coriolanus's aristocratic pride as well as his sense of his own social rank will dominate his fate and interfere with his ability to function effectively outside the battlefield. He himself certainly understands this tragic flaw. Persuaded by Volumnia to be a peacemaker, rather than the enemy of Rome, Coriolanus realizes that in doing so, he makes himself an easy prey for Aufidius, leading to his own destruction. His last hope, that his son should be a soldier rather than a politician, does not only acknowledge his failure to play the role of a politician but also demonstrates Shakespeare's suggestion that politicians should renounce their aristocratic pride in favor of listening to the commoners' grievances and acknowledging their subsistence needs (5.3.70-75). Shakespeare warns that failure to do so will surely incur uncontrollable mass rage, and the destructive power of collective wrath will be devastating enough to subvert any established social order.

In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx argues:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of

society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (qtd. in Tucker 4)

In this argument, Marx contends that the economic relations of production within a society determine the forms of the state and social consciousness, or more broadly, all social and ideological structures, such as law, politics, religion, education, art, etc. Here, I am not citing this passage to demonstrate Shakespeare as a Marxist political radical because his political conservatism or radicalism is not the major concern of this essay. Yet, by referring to this argument of Marx, I want to stress that even unaware of Marx's theories of political economy, Shakespeare presents a remarkably sophisticated awareness toward the mutualities and interrelationships between the economic base and political superstructure in this play. Though both the plebeians and the patricians understand that the belly fable is a politically deceptive myth, neither Menenius's horizontal topography of the belly as storehouse nor the rebels' alternative vertical cooperative model can discount the plebeians' contribution of labor toward the economic production of their society. Both parties acknowledge that moral economy respects the plebeians' rights to subsistence and understand that food riots—the rebellions of the belly—are direct expressions of the commoners' wrath regarding the dissolution of this economic model.

As we can tell from King James's 1608 and 1609 royal proclamations, the King did take prompt action—the reinforcement of moral economy—to remedy the gradual shattering of this moral economic model; and yet, the play reveals Shakespeare's (as well as his contemporaries') dismay at the government's inadequacy in regulating food prices and relieving the commoners' subsistence needs. Construed within the Roman context, *Coriolanus* presents the Jacobean's disappointment at their government's refusal to recognize the commoners' desperate need for food in a time of great scarcity and famine. The crowd's wrath, the patricians' fear of impending riots, and the plebeians' ferocious class hatred all illustrate the panic and shock that people experienced in that period; and the play, inevitably, shows its audiences how hunger can turn into a formidably collective power that poses a serious threat to the ruling authorities.

### Works Cited

- Adelman, Janet. "'Anger's My Meat': Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in *Coriolanus*." *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*. Ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. 129-49.
- Archer, Ian. *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Bullough, Geoffrey, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Vol. V. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.
- Gay, Edwin F. "The Midland Revolt and the Inquisitions of Depopulation of 1607." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society New Series* 18 (1904): 195-244.
- George, David. "Plutarch, Insurrection, and Dearth in *Coriolanus*." *Shakespeare and Politics*. Ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 110-29.
- Gurr, Andrew. "Coriolanus and the Body Politic." *Shakespeare Survey* 28 (1975): 63-69.
- Hill, Christopher. "The Many-Headed Monster." *Change and Continuity*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975. 181-204.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: Norton, 1959.
- Holstun, James. "Tragic Superfluity in *Coriolanus*." *English Literary History* 50 (1983): 485-507.
- Hughes, Paul L., and James F. Larkin, eds. *Stuart Royal Proclamations*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1973.
- Jagendorf, Zvi. "Coriolanus: Body Politic and Private Parts." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.4 (1990): 455-69.
- Manning, Roger B. *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509-1640*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1988.
- Martin, John E. *Feudalism to Capitalism: Peasant and Landlord in English Agrarian Development*. London: Macmillan P, 1983.
- Marx, Karl. "Preface to *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*." *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Norton, 1978. 3-6.
- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *The German Ideology, Part I*. New York: International Publishers, 2001.
- McRae, Andrew. *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500-1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

- Patterson, Annabel. *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- Pettet, E. C. "Coriolanus and the Midland Insurrection of 1607." *Shakespeare Survey* 3 (1950): 34-42.
- Riss, Arthur. "The Belly Politic: *Coriolanus* and the Revolt of Language." *English Literary History* 59.1 (1992): 53-75.
- Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus. New York: Norton, 1997. 2785-2872.
- Sharp, Buchanan. *In Contempt of All Authority: Rural Artisans and Riot in the West of England, 1586-1660*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1980.
- Thompson, E. P. "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76-136.
- Tucker, Robert C., ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Norton, 1978.
- Walter, John and Keith Wrightson. "Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England." *Rebellion, Popular Protest and the Social Order in Early Modern England*. Ed. Paul Slack. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. 108-28.
- Wilson, Richard. "Against the Grain: Representing the Market in *Coriolanus*." *Seventeenth Century* 6 (1991): 111-48.
- Wood, Andy. *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Wrightson, Keith. *English Society, 1580-1680*. New Brunswick: Associated UP, 1982.

### About the Author

Elyssa Y. Cheng received her Ph.D. in English from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 2003. She is currently affiliated with the Department of Western Languages and Literature, National University of Kaohsiung, where she teaches Shakespeare and early British literature. She has published articles (in Chinese and English) on the politics and poetics of labor in Renaissance English drama. Her current research interest focuses upon the culture of commerce in early modern city comedy.  
Email: elyssacheng@yahoo.com.tw

[Received 6 Jan. 2010; accepted 8 June 2010; revised 30 July 2010]