‘Musty Superfluity’: *Coriolanus* and the Remains of Excess

Peter Holland
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textes réunis par
Pierre KAPITANIAK

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Jean-Michel Déprats
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Pierre Kapitaniak

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Institut du Monde Anglophone
Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle
5 rue de l’École de Médecine
75006 Paris
www.societefrancaiseshakespeare.org

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‘MUSTY SUPERFLUITY’:
CORIOLANUS AND THE REMAINS OF EXCESS

Peter Holland

A l’acte I scène i, Caius Martius accueille avec joie les nouvelles d’une guerre imminente : “Then we shall ha’ means to vent / Our musty superfluity.” De l’analyse socio-politique des débuts de la période moderne au présent en passant par Marx, la question de l’excès et du gaspillage au sein de l’État a constitué une préoccupation cruciale. Coriolanus représente en partie l’exploration de ce qui constitue la politique de l’excès social et de la façon dont les organismes sociaux négocient le problème de la gestion du gaspillage, qu’il s’agisse de l’économie du marché (un des sens de ‘vent’), du système des égouts (un autre sens de ce mot), ou de personnes. En même temps, la pièce elle-même est constituée formellement par une série de négociations structurelles sur l’excès, la superfluïté, le gaspillage et les implications de traces dans le langage, dans le personnage, dans la taille des rôles et dans la forme scénique (entre autres modes de structuration formelle). Cet article explore les interactions dans la pièce entre le politique et le formel, en tant que représentations de ce qu’il faut faire avec ce qui est en trop, et de la façon de traiter les traces de l’excès.

In i Caius Martius greets the news of imminent war with joy: ‘Then we shall ha’ means to vent / Our musty superfluity.’ From early modern socio-political analysis through Marx to the present, the question of excess and waste within the state has been of crucial concern. Coriolanus is in part Shakespeare’s exploration of what constitute the politics of social excess and how social organisms negotiate with the problem of waste management, be it the economics of the marketplace (one sense of ‘vent’), sewerage (another sense of the word), or people. At the same time, the play is itself formally constituted within a series of structural negotiations with excess, superfluity, waste and the implications of remains within language, character, cast-size and scenic form (among other modes of formal structuring). This paper explores the play’s interactions between the political and the formal as representations of what to do with too much, how to deal with the remains of excess.

By way of preface, I might comment that this essay is less a first attempt to play with ideas for the introduction to the Arden Third Series edition of Coriolanus – though it is also that – than an attempt to relocate excess in performative features well beyond the traditional narrow assumptions that it is a function of rhetoric, psychology and character. So the materials of my argument are intended to be extrapolable beyond Coriolanus, a play which, of course, simply in terms of the number of lines in the Folio text, is excessive, beyond the practicable limits of early modern performance practice.

In the crucial tension at the heart of the concept of excess lies a distinction between, on the one hand, a desirable fullness, that which is more than needed, yet wanted and enjoyed, and, on the other, a wasteful over-plus, the fullness that is not only not necessary but also to be dispelled and reduced back into a form of moderation, a normal, normative, controllable range of values. If the former is continually to be aligned with an early modern valuation of, praise of and desire for copia, that extravagance that denotes fertility, a copiousness, then it is
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found at its fullest, the fullest state of its own fullness, within Shakespeare's language, an expanse of signification that is so often multiple in its valencies and possibilities but whose *copia* is, in the inventiveness of our engagement with it, never a waste, an excess in need of reduction, but instead and always a site of expanding meanings, semantic fields which we analytically reconnect with the texts within which their valencies may speak. We deny, in the self-satisfied way in which we perform the revelation of such excesses and opulencies, the possibility of their wastefulness; they are what we find them to be, that is, as meanings needed by us, for, having identified their excess beyond the required, we work with, not against, the revelations of their multiplicity, revelling proudly precisely in that fullness that is more than these minimally required meanings. Superfluous to the narrow communicative adequacies of the processes of quasi-realist discourse, their excesses are a, perhaps *the*, site of poetic language, an enjoyment of and desire for excess within the local. This is not a superfluity of superabundance of extent, but a pleasurable excess within the tightly defined claustrophobia of language that can often look superficially to be also merely adequate but which we know to be excessively, delightfully more than that.

Excess as a quality of the *unnecessary* within the discourse registers of Shakespearean speech is often located within extent of time, not the crucial poetic delights of compaction. That Italian-German definition which so delighted Ezra Pound, *dichten = condensare*, is in opposition to some kind of temporal dynamic of expansiveness (temporal in performative dramatic language, if spatial in its visible print manifestation). So Caius Martius Coriolanus, a character whose name will come to have an unusual and excessive extent, in its triple formulation a 50% excess beyond the normative Roman forms elsewhere in the play, is someone whom I often hear to be speaking at too great a length, speaking at moments too much, excessive in the extents of his discourse at moments. But he is, in the passage I want to begin with, excessive only in the compacted way in which the meanings are generated that he wishes or which we may posit as within his desires (as opposed to those meanings which in other subtextual spaces we posit as undesired, opposite to desire, an excess that denies, works against the fields of valencies that are wished
for). My initial place of excess is language that is also as clever as the speaker, not only as clever as the playwright.

I begin then with language at its cleverest, with the small passage from *Coriolanus*, Caius Martius’ reaction in the first scene to the news that the Volscians are in arms, which offered me a title: ’then we shall ha’ means to vent / Our musty superfluity’ (I.i.224-5).¹ In the middle of a scene of social unrest, of riot and insurrection, of citizens ’mutinous’ (that magnificently inappropriate word in the opening stage-direction) for corn, overturning order (that is, patrician order) in search not of the abundance of excess but of a fundamental human adequacy, the right of having sufficient, enough to eat, Shakespeare has chosen so potently to transform what he found in North’s Plutarch, where war was a patrician device to solve a genuine food crisis as well as an equally genuine political threat:

So the wise men of Rome beganne to thincke... howe by this occasion it was very mete in so great a scarsitie of vittailes, to disburden Rome of a great number of cittizens: and by this meanes as well to take awaye this newe sedition, and utterly to ryd it out of the cittie, as also to cleare the same of many mutinous and seditious persones, being the superfluous ill humours that grevously fedde this disease.²

But while Shakespeare’s citizens, unlike Plutarch’s, are sure that there is grain-hoarding, not a grain shortage, Caius Martius on the one hand denies them knowledge of whether there is indeed enough and on the other the right of speaking of it at all:

They say!
They’ll sit by th’fire, and presume to know
What’s done i’th’Capitol
[...] They say there’s grain enough? (189-95)

With the news of the war, comes the possibility of getting rid of people now redefined as precisely the mouldy corn, the ‘musty chaff’ which, at the other end of the play, Cominius will report Coriolanus describing the population of Rome as being (V.i.26), as if the equivalence of people and corn were a recurrent motif in his discourse. We can hear a tension in Caius Martius’ phrase between ‘means’ and ‘superfluity’, the former

¹ All quotations from *Coriolanus* are taken from Philip Brockbank’s edition for the Arden 2nd series (1976).
not only a sign of resource and possibility but also of ‘the mean’, the
desired parameters of adequacies against which the superfluity
functions: eliminate the superfluous (people, corn) and what remains
is within the mean, defines itself as mean, not now mean as meagre but
as appropriately sufficient, the size of population that, on the one hand,
Rome can profitably feed and that on the other it can control. If ‘mysty’
is the sign of the uselessness of the corn/people, for mouldy corn is
precisely the substandard produce that one would rather eliminate,
dispose of, waste for its excess to use, its wasteful uselessness, ideally
by selling (venting in that sense current for Shakespeare) and leave to
others to decide how or whether to consume, then ‘mysty’ is also a
space of the citizen desire that Caius Martius rejects: these people are
the ones who voice what they must have, they are must-y in that sense,
not a sense the OED identifies as current in early modern speech but
which we can reasonably choose to find hovering behind the word. The
superfluous to the organization of the state are those who voice a will,
speak what they must have (here, food) and who refuse their silence (in
a play whose action will depend on a silent act, Shakespeare’s only
stage-direction for silence, ‘He holds her by the hand silent’).

As such, the space of voiced will is a part of the play’s
exploration of what it means to ‘vent’. The sound has already been
heard twice in the scene: Menenius has prefaced the tale of the belly
with the comment ‘it may be you have heard it, / But since it serves my
purpose, I will vent / To stale’t a little more’ (i.i.89–91) – I’ll come
back to the complex force of ‘stale’ in a moment – and Martius has,
just a few lines before, described how ‘With these shreds / They
vented / Their complainings’ (207–8). Menenius dares to make his tale yet more
stale (a sense which, like ‘mysty’, suggests goods become waste,
needing to be disposed of, that second sense of excess) and the people
release the air of their voices from their bodies, expelling the sound,
giving the pent-up pressure within the closed container of the body
corporal and politic a venting, an outlet that is good for it, getting rid of
the body’s gases. Elsewhere what comes out, forced out of the body
through the desire to vent, is something more highly valued in its
formulation than complainings. One vents or gives vent to one’s
emotions, as Menenius will later describe as a kind of compulsion
within Caius Martius, ‘His heart’s his mouth: / What his breast forges,
that his tongue must vent’ (iii.i.255–6). If to vent here is to sell, to
speak, to utter forth, it is also something whose choice of bodily aperture can be contrary. ‘Vent’ can mean to fart, to shit or to piss (and the last will then link back to Menenius’s use of ‘stale’ which is also urine, as if he is urinating in telling the story again, and the first link to Menenius’ “kind of smile, / Which ne’er came from the lungs, but even thus – / For look you, I may make the belly smile, / As well as speak’, a smile that can be a fart as easily as a belch, 106-9). So Stephano will wonder whether Trinculo has been shat out of Caliban: ‘How cam’st thou to be the siege [i.e. turd] of this moon-calf? can he vent Trinculos?’ (*The Tempest*, II.i.106-8).3

I am, of course, at this point in a familiar area of thinking about the play that seems to begin with Kenneth Burke’s anxiety in 1966 about the end of the name Caius Martius acquires:

> in the light of Freudian theories concerning the fecal nature of invective, the last two syllables of the hero’s name are so “right,” people now often seek to dodge the issue by altering the traditional pronunciation (making the a broad instead of long).4

The investigation continued in Stanley Cavell’s added postscript to his essay on the play when including it in *Disowning Knowledge* in 1987 and then was part of Jonathan Goldberg’s fundamental exploration in his essay ‘The Anus in *Coriolanus*’ in 2000. 5 In all three cases it is the excess of language, often viewed within a psychoanalytic drive, that constitutes the site of investigation and I shall want by contrast to see different fields of excess, the performatively visual and the political. But I also want to note another oddity in the framing of the name, for if Burke, Cavell and Goldberg are right to be fascinated by the anality of Coriolanus’s ending, I am surprised that they never explore the heart of his name in the ‘Cor’ that opens it, a name framed by heart and sphincter, a name which, in its opening at its core, astonishingly appears to share this foregrounding of its heart in Shakespeare’s works

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3 All quotations from other Shakespeare plays come from the Arden 2nd series editions, accessed on the Arden Shakespeare cd-rom.
uniquely with, of all people, Cordelia – and of course Lear is close in time to Coriolanus.

As Goldberg recognizes, in Menenius’ fable of the belly, what is left after the patricians’ supposedly generous distribution of everything that is good and nourishing and useful is ‘bran’, the waste that is the unusable excess in the economies of the production of corn: ‘the belly’, he writes, ‘assumes the position of the anus, receiving what is normally expelled; a closed economy is imagined in which waste is consumed’. In this vision of a hyper-efficient system there is no waste to be disposed of, no excess to the consumption, no outside to which the waste is turned for a different kind of recycling that has so fascinated Shakespeare in for example the progress of Alexander in Hamlet. There is no need here for the services of waste management, of sewerage, of the ways in which the modern state deals with its forms of socially wasteful excess, the moment at which goods become only and irrevocably garbage, land-fill rather than city-fill; indeed, the sense of the belly as ‘the sink o’th’body’ (121) might now, in a presentist methodology, lead us to ‘sink estates’, those urban sites of the disposal of socially useless individuals, a semi-expulsion.

But in the irruption into the play of another location, the immanence of the Volscians (immanent both to the play’s action but also to the place of Rome for Corioles is only about 25 km from Rome and Antium barely 50) provides the opportunity for expulsion, evacuation, venting. The OED, not quoting this passage under any of its senses of vent, offers only one example for its obscure usage of the verb to mean ‘to rid (a kingdom) of people’ and only one for the similarly unusual usage to ‘eject or expel (people) out of a country’, both usages appearing within a mere four years of the probable date of Coriolanus. Both surely hover here as well: the closed walls of Rome will be opened to release its superfluity and rid the state of their presence, turning them from people to corpses through the state’s use of this musty corn as cannon-fodder. Where murder as garbage disposal has for us parodically become a practice of mafia gangsterism (in the operations of New Jersey Waste Management), here it is a function of the state’s self-regulation through expulsion. We can, of course, see similar practices of waste and value operating throughout

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7 OED, vent v., 7.a and 7.b.
the play’s battle-scenes, the ones that will earn Caius Martius the play’s 
name, in the onstage opening and closing of the gates of Corioles, 
ingesting and expelling Volsces, Caius Martius and the Romans, as if 
we are watching the bodily processes of the city beyond the feeding 
cycles that Menenius had described.

Yet this first scene has also an especial visual and aural 
centration on its own excess, the first as the people who mark that 
superfluiy, not an abstraction but a literal presence of the crowd, that 
group of citizens who, to Caius excessive in their demands, can be 
redefined as the city’s excesses to be shot upon in the excesses of his 
language before being shot out. The King’s Men, like most modern 
companies, cannot have represented the excess of the crowd by sheer 
numbers. Recent experiments to achieve that have ranged from the 
embarrassing, like Peter Hall’s use of audience members in his 
National Theatre production of 1984, unconvincingly clutching their 
handbags, briefcases and shopping, to the spectacular, like Tim 
Supple’s use, in his Chichester Festival Theatre production in 1992 
starring Kenneth Branagh and Judi Dench, of local amateur actors, 
more than fifty of them, filling the stage excessively and defining 
exactly the quantity of which Rome had need to be vented.

If, though, as seems likely, Coriolanus were written for the 
Blackfriars Theatre rather than the Globe, then the sheer experimental 
and radical daring of Coriolanus is all the more apparent, of writing a 
play which depends so much on a sizeable crowd, in the First Folio’s 
apparently authorial entry in the ‘voices’ scene, no fewer than ‘seven or 
eight’ citizens, not as many as Jack Cade’s entry ‘with infinite numbers’ 
in 2 Henry vi (iv.ii.30.1), but more than any other play specifies. On 
the smaller Blackfriars stage, the crowd must have loomed larger, more 
threateningly, more significantly than at the Globe. This group of 
players – citizens or plebeians, a company, troop or rabble, a sequence 
of possible opposites of value and political attitudes established by the 
variants in stage directions – define rhythmic movements in the action 
simply through their presence, from their tumultuous entry as starving 
mutinous Romans, who may or may not be considered by the 
patricians to be ‘citizens’ as equally as they are, to their extraordinary 
final entrance, no longer Romans but Volscians and no longer the 
object of Martius’ contempt but the group of ‘commoners’ who 
willingly and celebrately accompany him on his last entry. Strikingly
lacking any names (except for the servant Cotus who works in Aufidius’ house), randomly numbered, unspecified by gender, this amorphous group figure out one aspect of the dramatic rhythms of excess in the play through the mechanics of their entrances and exits.

If aural excess is conceived of in terms of volume, then Supple’s Chichester crowd were magnificent in their excess, not a superfluity but an aural abundance as, for instance, in their thundering of their response to Sicinius, ‘True, / The people are the city’ (III.i.197-8) – and, incidentally, the word ‘people’ is spoken a simply astonishing 78 times in the play, a hammering away at the word, both revealing and breaking its meanings through excessive repetition. And, for a sense of the degree of excess that this repeated usage constitutes, compare the mere 11 occurrences in Julius Caesar or 15 in Titus, with the frequency in Coriolanus amounting to more than one-third of the occurrences across the entire corpus of Shakespeare’s plays.

If aural excess is quantitative and temporal, then it is effectively Caius’s own. Of the sixty-four lines from the moment of Caius’s first entrance to the lines that are so obsessing me, Caius speaks a remarkable 56 of them, an apparently limitless vomiting of language as invective that was, of course, a spur to Cavell’s concerns. I would want to see this excess of speech as the inverse of the excess of scars, those signs of his wife’s fear and of parental pride, each of the 27 lovingly counted and located as a bodily history of heroic fighting for Rome. In their operation, also, as political symbols of state service, of the longevity and commitment of his work for the city they are inscriptions of worthy candidature. These multivalent writings on the body are a location of voyeuristic desire, the aftermaths of wounds and death (‘every gash was an enemy’s grave’, II.i.154-5) that are signs of shame that neither the citizens nor the spectators may see: ‘I have wounds to show you, which shall be yours in private’ (II.iii.76-7). As we quickly desire the sight of the excess of bodily writing so we quickly turn from the site of the excess of the same body’s speaking. As the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan once advised an over-energetic actor, ‘Don’t just do something; stand there’.

But alongside the kinds of conceptualizing of the forms of representation of excess that I have been suggesting, forms, of course, not solely the concerns of this play but which underpin all of Shakespeare’s dramatic practice, comes another concern, a concern
with what constitutes the play’s remains. The structural peculiarity of the play’s fourth act, a point where the order and balance of the five-act form is most vulnerable, deserves exploring, for, as a play for the Blackfriars with inter-act music, then Coriolanus would be Shakespeare’s first experiment with five-act structure since Henry V and his first negotiation with discontinuous performance in his career. The play invokes an explicit two-part structure which is itself premised on being within or without, contained or expelled and evacuated, about being an excessive presence within or that excess that the state can dispose of in redefining the parameters of the state, whether the excess is a multiple number of members of its citizenry or the single individual, Martius himself, who constitutes the site across which the conceptualisation of excess will be traversing. It is structured in five acts, involving three cities, and is plainly a kind of mathematical conundrum, a paradox as incapable of solution as the problem in the play’s name, a word which means both a citizen of Corioles and the conqueror of that city – and hence containing both belonging and the denial of belonging, an inverting mirroring of identity which Volumnia will play with at the play’s familial climax. The name itself argues for imprecision, the impossibility of Coriolanus being either a Roman or a Volscian and/or both at once, the equal impossibility of the inversion of the city in Caius’ being able to say ‘I banish you’, and of the spatial movement across the play’s fictive spaces. The problem of pre-fractional mathematics, when, you will recall, what cannot be neatly divided becomes remainder – as a two-part structure in five acts creates the maths problem that two goes into five with the answer two, remainder one – is then exactly the point. This is the play of remainders, of the excess that has to be trimmed, of what is left over when divisions are made, of the social difficulties of superfluous and inequitable division, of the class and wealth basis structured into Roman society that leaves most people as the remainder, that ‘musty chaff’ that Coriolanus sees the population of Rome being.

But this is also and crucially a play that is fascinated by what remains, by the consequence of excess as waste, of what cannot be expelled, evacuated, vomited from the body politic and removed as superfluous. Quite unexpectedly, I find that Coriolanus turns out to share with Cymbeline by far the highest frequency of occurrence of the
word ‘remain’ and its cognates, fourteen in Coriolanus and fifteen in Cymbeline, with no other play reaching double figures. The word suggests two senses in Coriolanus, a stasis and a sequence, senses that parallel the tension in the concept of excess with which I began. On the one hand, Menenius images the complaint of the other members of the body against the belly in terms of remaining static: ‘That only like a gulf it did remain / I’th’ midst o’th’ body, idle and unactive’ (i.i.74-5). Lartius calls on the troops to act to save Caius at Coriolo: ‘Let’s fetch him off, or make remain alike’ (i.iv.67). On the other, it indicates what still has to be done, what the necessary next stage in a sequence of activity is to be. Here is Menenius working through the Senate’s agenda:

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Having determined of the Volsces, and
To send for Titus Lartius, it remains,
As the main point of this our after-meeting,
To gratify his noble service that
Hath thus stood for his country. (ii.ii.24-8)
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Later he twice tells Coriolanus the next steps towards becoming consul: ‘It then remains that you do speak to the people’ (122) and, after gaining the voices, ‘Remains / That, in th’ official marks invested, you / Anon do meet the Senate’ (i.iii.112-14). The name Coriolanus itself becomes something that remains, a static sign of all that will survive, both in his own description of what Rome has done to recognise his service (‘The painful service, /... Shed for my thankless country / But with that surname... /... Only that name remains’, iv.v.62-7) and in Volumnia’s of what the chronicles will say of Coriolanus as traitor: ‘The man was noble, / But with his last attempt he wiped it out, / Destroyed his country and his name remains / To th’en ensuing age abhorred’ (v.iii.144-7).

But I am particularly interested in two of the three occurrences of remain in the play that are beyond the 14 others, the two that do not read the same in the F1 text, where F’s ‘manet’, the action of remaining on stage, is usually now translated by editors as ‘remain’, for example towards the end of the first scene when the stage empties of its extraordinary fullness, the patricians walking off while ‘the citizens steal away’ and then ‘Manet Sicinius and Brutus’, the tribunes remain (i.i.250.1), and again at the end of the senate’s deliberations when the senators exit to the sound of a flourish of cornets and ‘Manet Sicinius
and Brutus’ again (II.i.154-1). For there is a striking aspect to the play’s rhythm, especially through its first half. In every scene bar one in which the two tribunes of the people appear, they are on stage at the end of the scene, remaining behind. In the first four scenes in which they appear, the opening scene and all three scenes of act II, and once again late in the play when the news comes of Coriolanus’ invasion, they alone are left, two politicians reflecting on what has happened and determining what remains to be done. Their coda-like duologues vary immensely in length: 65 lines at the end of II.i including their being summoned to the Capitol by a messenger, just six lines at the end of II.ii and only four at the end of IV.vi. Other scenes in which they are on stage at scene’s end do not define their dual dominance of stage-space, especially in the greater chaos of the opposition to the election in act III, though they may well dominate the crowd in the celebrations of Coriolanus’ banishment. In only one scene do they leave the stage finally before the scene’s end, chased from the stage by Volumnia’s apocalyptic anger after her son’s departure, a scene in which they repeatedly try to leave: ‘Let’s not meet her... Keep on your way... Pray, let’s go...Well, well, we’ll leave you... Why stay we to be baited / With one that wants her wits’ (IV.ii.8-43). The disruption here of the drama’s usual formal practice defines something of Volumnia’s power and their entirely justifiable terror of her.

But the five scenes that end just with the two onstage establish a repetitive rhythm of their presence, a marking of their significance in changing the play’s course, a statement about their odd status in Rome. It is not only in computers and the early work of structuralist criticism that binary oppositions are dominant. We recognise how strongly in a drama like Coriolanus, the forms of the agon are defined in pairs: externally Romans and Volscians, Caius and Aufidius, Rome and Antium, internally it is shaped as Forum versus Capitol, that spatial definition of the division in Roman society, the Capitol the place of senators, nobility, patricians, political authority, the Forum the space of the plebeians, citizens, the rabble (as Caius, his mother and the stage directions alone refer to them). Where then do the tribunes of the people fit in this structure? For Caius Martius the institution of the tribunes is itself a superfluous action, a sign of patrician cowardice, and incidentally something that is marked by an excess of information beyond the processes of the play: they are granted ‘five tribunes’ but
only two are named and present in the action, the other three conjured momentarily into existence and then ignored as excess and waste:

Menenius. What is granted them?
Martius. Five tribunes to defend their vulgar wisdons,
    Of their own choice. One's Junius Brutus,
    Sicinius Velutus, and I know not. (213-6)

Though the tribunes are the plebeians' representatives it does not mean that they are themselves plebeian. They share with Menenius the same word to the people as a greeting: 'neighbours'. Like him, their use of the word may define patronising superiority masquerading as connection and integration; like him, they may not count within that class and therefore be superfluous to it. Often now played as the middling sort, representatives of a Roman bourgeoisie separated both from their working-class neighbours and the unattainable heights of patrician power, Sicinius and Brutus, whatever their analogies to modern class structures, may signal their own extraneousness, their ambiguous status as what remains after the two dominant forces of Roman social structure are removed. They are unidentified in and unassimilated into the self-defined structure that Rome uses as its slogan: Senatus Populusque Romanus, the senate and the people of Rome. The tribunes may, more than any other division of characters in the play, be the site of excess, waste, remains.

Shakespeare is remarkably restrained in his fascination with excess. The word itself appears a mere fourteen times across the plays, from the excess of grief in All's Well (i.1.51, 53) to the excess of wine in Henry V (ii.ii.42), from the excess of pomp in King John (iv.ii.16) to the excess of laughter in Othello (iv.i.99), from the fascinating double use in The Merchant of Venice as both excessive interest and an excess of joy (i.ii.57, iii.ii.112) to the familiar double excess of music and love in Twelfth Night (i.2), from the banal excess of woe in The Two Gentlemen of Verona (iii.i.220) to the complex political definition of the redistribution of the economies of excessive wealth in King Lear (iv.i.69). It is not in Coriolanus at all.

My concern, using Coriolanus as a test-case, has been to find the dramatic and performative location of excess in formal terms, the outward manifestations of excess, less excess of emotion than excess of language, less excess of feeling than excess in the number of characters, the form of a name, the density of semantic meaning. If the evidence
has its own copiousness, its copia, then it also risks its own wastefulness, the excess of our analytic process. Coriolanus has come, for me, to be the great play of the closure of the city and the body, of the limits of containment and the meaning of the body/city’s procedures with waste, its paralleling evacuations and expulsions. No wonder it was a play that so fascinated Brecht. No wonder its taut politics have been so potent here in France, perhaps even more often than in England. In the exiguous processes of its action, the dramatics of excess are perfectly revealed. It reminds me, yet again, why this play seems to me in some ways Shakespeare’s most perfect achievement – and there is nothing excessive in that judgement!

Peter Holland
University of Notre Dame