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'The Citizens in Coriolanus: How They Make a Sword of Us'

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Shakespeare has been part of the Western literary canon since its inception and his position as one of its key members seems without doubt. He is renowned as England's greatest playwright to such an extent, it is easy to lose sight of exactly why he is considered great. A play such as *Coriolanus* manages to bring the genius of Shakespeare's craft back into sharp focus. One of his least produced plays, *Coriolanus* is a strange one.[1] As a hero that turns against his own and never lets the audience close by help of a soliloquy, Coriolanus is hard to empathise and identify with. At least Hamlet suffered a dramatic loss so one could feel sorry for him. Even Macbeth can be pitied for having a terrible stroke of fate. But *Coriolanus* isn't about its hero, despite its name. The true victim and villain here are the Citizens.[2]

Burke argued in 1966 that trying to present *Coriolanus* in 'the light of modern conditions can never quite succeed', yet much has changed since then, most of all us, the people.[3] In his 2011 film *Coriolanus*, Ralph Fiennes masterfully brings Shakespeare's play into the 21st century.[4] The first ever big screen adaptation of the play doesn't shirk from showing exactly how easily swayed the Citizens are. Fiennes shows them as being divided over what they want, from whom and when and how this makes them vulnerable to the interests of other parties, may they be religious or political. Just a rough overview of some of the events in the last three years shows how comparable his and Shakespeare's Citizens are to the people of today. The 25th of January marked the three year anniversary of the start of the revolution in Egypt, which marked the spread of the Arab Spring from Tunisia to the larger, Arab world. In 2011, the Egyptian people found themselves united and strong and ousted President Hosni Mubarak. July of 2013, the army, at the cry of 'the people', deposed President Mohammed Morsi, and now the country still finds itself in turmoil, the people clashing furiously over their divided loyalties. Some want Morsi back, others prefer the rule of the military and some are simply lost in a conflict that should be giving them a voice. At the same time, the Syrian government and opposition forces have their first tentative meeting in Geneva but a full peace deal is reportedly not even on the table. The Syrian people and their loyalty are torn between a dictator unwilling to let go and an opposition that is still trying to organise themselves into a political and military whole. As a consequence, bombs and bullets consistently slip through the cracks, killing children, women and men. Closer to home, Ukrainians are fighting their own government, burning cars and building barricades. Promised one thing before election, the citizens not only find themselves lied to but also supressed by anti-protest laws. All three of these conflicts are not between countries, between opposing religions or lifestyles, but between divided citizens and the government, and this is the kind of clash that Shakespeare portrays in *Coriolanus*.

1 William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. Lee Bliss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
2 Citizens with a capital C refers to the characters in *Coriolanus*. The lower case refers to real life citizens of any country.
3 Kenneth Burke, '*Coriolanus* – and the Delights of Faction', in *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer, 1966), p. 196
4 *Coriolanus*. Directed by Ralph Fiennes. UK: Hermetof Pictures, 2012

Shakespeare's plays are often populated by citizens who seem to be there for comic relief, yet in *Coriolanus* they fulfil a very different role. Although the Citizens are never independently named, there is a subtle distinction between their characters that makes them individuals rather than a mass. Each Citizen presents a different reason for the failure of the Citizens to stand up as a group. Citizen 1 opens the play and reveals his weakness from the get go. Starting *in media res*, the Citizens have already decided on a course of action and many words have already been spoken, yet he still asks for the right to 'speak' (I.i.1). What he exemplifies here is the desperation of the people to be heard by their government and by each other to such an extent that in their clamouring they miss the opportunity to actually make themselves heard. Citizen 1 suffers the consequences of this desperation only a few lines later when Menenius asks him to 'speak' (43). Finally being invited to voice his opinion, Citizen 1 falls silent and isn't heard for the rest of the scene. Here, the powerlessness of the Citizens seems to come from inside. Even before Menenius' entrance there seems to be evidence that Citizen 1 isn't a very assured speaker. He starts his sentence wanting to 'revenge' the crimes against the Citizens, yet finishes the sentence claiming he does not 'thirst for revenge' (18, 19). Citizen 1, although an individual, stands for the Citizens as a whole, which means that his internal confusion forms a danger to all of them. This is best represented in the Voting scene, where Coriolanus comes to beg for their voices. The words 'voice' or 'voices' are overwhelming in this scene, appearing thirty-two times, clogging up the dialogue. The First Citizen appears again, and where he previously wanted to kill Coriolanus, he now feels they 'ought not to deny him' (II.iii.1-2) their voices. As a personification of the masses, he presents their 'opinion' as unstable; when Citizens 2 and 3 enter into a political discussion, he once again disappears from the stage.[5] In our modern world, Citizen 1 personifies the disassociated citizen that is desperate to stand up and be heard but too unaware to truly change anything. They are uninformed and unsure and are therefore easily swayed by other parties. The Tribunes are able to rouse the Citizens into a mob because of their political ignorance.

Shakespeare offers an alternative in Citizen 2. When Menenius enters the play, Citizen 2 takes over from the First and enters into a discussion with him. Citizen 2 seems to be more independent, questioning Menenius rather than trusting in his good character. In the discussion between the two we find the famous belly metaphor. The state as a body is not a revolutionary concept; the government here takes the position of the head and the Citizens that of the belly. Important here are the possessive pronouns used by both. Initially, the belly is an 'it' (I.i.80), but Menenius asserts he can 'make' (92) the belly talk, therefore claiming it as his servant. Citizen 2 enforces this by referring to it as 'your belly' (97) in 'our fabric' (102). Citizen 2 here shows the connection that exists between citizens and the state. They consider themselves the fabric in which the state is settled, yet each part of them seems to belong to the state as well. This suggests that the Citizens are confused over their influence on the state and what they can expect, a situation that is mirrored in Ukraine. Citizen 2 doesn't understand how Menenius plans to 'apply' (I.ii.130) his metaphor because their interests in this debate diverge completely. The belly profits from everything that enters the body, but the Citizens don't see it as a part of them and don't see their advantage. Citizen 2, therefore, cannot be guided by others who have more influence and knowledge, not just within the government but even amongst the other Citizens, because he only considers his own position. Citizen 2 is an example of '"opinion" [encroaching] upon authority'.[6] This is what often causes modern revolutions to sink into civil wars. The conflict between the Syrian government forces and the opposition has added fuel to the age-old conflict between the Sunni and Shia, both Muslim. The Shia find themselves on the government's side, passionate in their fight against the Sunnis to such an extent that the

5 William Rosen, *Shakespeare's Craft of Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 167
6 James L. Calderwood, 'Coriolanus: Wordless Meanings and Meaningless Words', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 6, No. 2: *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (Spring, 1966), p. 213

Lebanese Hezbollah has become a major player in the conflict. This completely distracts from the original reason for the uprising, namely human rights and freedom, and means that a solution is still far away. In a similar way, Citizen 2 not only feels disassociated from Menenius but also from Citizen 1 and 3. This is especially tragic because he is the 'great toe' (I.i.137) of society. Although Menenius seems to consider this an insult, it shows Citizen 2 as trying to advance the progress of society and therefore 'goest foremost' (140). Without these citizens, a state cannot move forward and becomes stagnant. Although Citizen 2 seems to not see how he is part of the body, Caius Martius does. When he describes the Citizens as 'rubbing the poor itch of your opinion, [making] yourselves scabs' (147-48), he shows a possible consequence of the Citizens' actions. Rather than try to heal the rupture between the classes or between people of different opinions, they rub salt into wounds and increase pain. As natural parts of the body, the Citizens become wounds that hinder the progression of their state, thereby hindering themselves as well. Through presenting 'a plebeian protest…as a bodily disease', Shakespeare isn't trying to show the Citizens' fault, but rather their tragedy.[7]

Citizen 3's role is perhaps the most tragic of all. Entering the stage in the second Act, he seems to be acutely aware of his own position. Although Oliver Arnold judges him for seeing himself as 'a vessel of power', his statement that his power 'is a power that we have no power to do' (II.iii.4-5) is actually incredibly insightful.[8] He seems to be aware of the fact that having become part of the political body, the Citizens have exchanged their independence for influence. He is right to worry about how 'diversely coloured' (17) the minds of the Citizens are, realising that the confusion and divisiveness represented by Citizen 1 reduces how much they can change with their voices. Citizen 3 seems to agree with Calderwood that through their fickleness and changeability, the Citizens have 'a corrosive influence' upon the language of the play and its meaning and therefore calls for each of them to give '[their] own voices with [their] own tongues' (39).[9] He seems to believe that as long as they utter their own voice, in the sense of vote, there is a chance each of them will be heard. However, his trust in their own voices is shown as being misplaced when the two Tribunes remind the Citizens they had been 'lessoned' (163) and 'fore-advised' (178). Citizen 3, who believed most in the value of his own voice, has to realise he has been used, not only by Coriolanus but also by those who proclaimed to help him. The Tribunes and the way they manipulate the Citizens into changing their voices deserves an essay of its own, yet it is important to state that their influence is crucial because it shows how internal division allows for the drama to occur. Shakespeare shows that the true tragedy here lies in the fact that the Citizens themselves are largely to blame for these divisions and are the only ones who could change them. But because they retreat into the role of those who have to be 'lessoned' (163), they can't be proactive and change their fates.

Every time the Citizens raise their voices, Shakespeare reveals how they have copied their outcries from others and it is this he presents as the true danger to Rome. Although it would be unfair to blame Coriolanus' banishment completely on the Citizens, they carry a large part of the responsibility for the state in which Rome finds itself. In a modern world where people are becoming more and more vocal thanks to social media, it is interesting to see how many parallels can be drawn between them and Shakespeare's Citizens.

7 Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Penguin Books, 2000) p. 248
8 Oliver Arnold, *Third Citizen: Shakespeare's Theater and the Early Modern House of Commons* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 216
9 Calderwood, p. 213

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