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Though My Gross Blood Be Stain'd: Bleeding Bodies and Power Dynamics in Shakespeare's the Tragedy of Coriolanus and the Rape of Lucrece

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“THOUGH MY GROSS BLOOD BE STAIN’D”: BLEEDING BODIES AND POWER DYNAMICS IN SHAKESPEARE’S THE TRAGEDY OF CORIOLANUS AND THE RAPE OF LUCRECE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THESIS: “THOUGH MY GROSS BLOOD BE STAIN’D”: BLEEDING BODIES AND POWER DYNAMICS IN SHAKESPEARE’S <em>THE TRAGEDY OF CORIOLANUS</em> AND <em>THE RAPE OF LUCRECE</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCE LIST</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

Early modern literature is replete with references to blood. These references appear in the contexts of class and gender distinction, medical information, religious significance, and more. It is clear that blood, while one of the four humors of the body, held a place of special significance amongst the rest. This paper examines two of Shakespeare’s works in depth, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both chosen for their specifically bloody language. Blood is not only blood in each work, rather blood becomes both a source of liberation while simultaneously holding a potential for shame. Both Coriolanus and Lucrece embrace the ability of blood to carry the body’s exterior to the outside world, yet both are concerned about the possibility for blood to be misinterpreted. What we observe in each work is that exercising control over when, how, and if blood is exposed equates to holding power.
THESIS

“THOUGH MY GROSS BLOOD BE STAIN’D”: BLEEDING BODIES AND POWER DYNAMICS IN SHAKESPEARE’S THE TRAGEDY OF CORIOLANUS AND THE RAPE OF LUCRECE

Blood is heavily laden with metaphorical meaning. We associate blood with religious ritual, class and gender dynamics, and perhaps most importantly, power. A desire to explore the treatment of blood in early modern literature will necessarily lead one to a better understanding of social hierarchy and power dynamics. Burton Hatlen discusses some of the enduring interpretations of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* in his article “The ‘Noble Thing’ and the ‘Boy of Tears’” saying, “...the key issue is the struggle, whether in ancient Rome or in Jacobean England, between opposing social classes, noble and plebeian, of the relationship of “the great man” to the people, while other critics have argued that the play problematizes the very concept of the ‘political.’”¹ *Coriolanus* takes place in the midst of a social upheaval in which the members of the plebeian class feel that they are being mistreated by their social superiors. Stephen Greenblatt brings this kind of class struggle into the context of early modern England in his “General Introduction” to *The Norton Shakespeare*, “In every day practice, as modern social historians have observed, the English tended to divide the

population not into four distinct social classes but into two: a very small empowered group – the “richer” or “wiser” or “better” sort – and all the rest who were without much social standing or power, the “poorer” or “ruder” or “meaner” sort.” Not only is this reductive, but once examined critically it becomes clear that human beings simply do not fall naturally into social classes.

Such a rigid two-class system is of course oppressive for those considered to be lower class as it cuts them off from opportunities for education, economic prosperity, and full political participation. Yet such narrow class distinctions also limit members of the noble class in that they are not able to develop a dynamic sense of identity or self-understanding. For members of the noble class there are very particular rules about the virtues and standards they are expected to embody. If you have power, your life and identity become tied up in maintaining that power. The precarious position of members of the nobility is the subject matter of much of early modern tragedy. This is not to claim that no social mobility whatsoever existed in early modern society. There were certainly ways that one could improve one’s situation, but even so it was believed that those who were able to rise from the lower class to the noble class had some kind of inherent nobility in their nature and their blood which allowed them to do so. That is to say, if you were able to rise through the ranks, it was because you were made of something better. We likely recognize this argument as one still employed to explain why some prosper while others suffer in a capitalist economy.

A long tradition exists of utilizing the image of the cohesive human body to talk about our far more fractured human society. Even the existence of the term body politic
attests to our desire to grab onto a familiar reference point when talking about things as abstract and diverse as masses of human beings. Of course in referring to society in terms of a human body there is an ulterior motivation to portray social dynamics as natural. Perhaps then the reason that early modern theatre was so interested in the relationship between the human body and the body politic was that the very concept of natural social dynamics was beginning to break down in the early modern period. In an analysis of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, Arthur Riss comments on the ineffectuality of the body politic metaphor in the play: “The play, I argue, stages a rebellion not only by the plebs but also by literally itself; in the play neither the plebeians nor the rhetorical vehicle of the body politic analogy is willing to participate any longer in the larger structures for which they labor but in which they are given no voice.”

In *Coriolanus* the metaphor of the body politic serves the purpose of the noble class, but it certainly does not convey the message of equality that Menenius claims to promote.

Not only does the metaphor of the body politic fail to subdue the anger of the plebeians, but the noble characters who promote the metaphor in the first place also do not seem to believe in its validity. In fact Brutus and Sicinius, the two men chosen by the common people to serve as their tribunes, display a certain amount of contempt and mockery toward the very group whom they are supposed to represent. Thus the striking dysfunction of the body politic metaphor in *Coriolanus* mirrors the breakdown of natural social dynamics in early modern England. The people of Rome are not convinced by the body metaphor which suggests that their oppression is a natural phenomenon. The

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metaphor is however quite effective in buying time for Menenius, therefore allowing the plebeian’s rebellion to be subdued. Thus Menenius’s claim that the belly must be supplied first is designed only to serve the interest of the noble class. Menenius claims that in order for nutrition to make it to the rest of the body it must come to the belly first, but the plebeians are angry because in fact no nutrition is being supplied to them. Menenius’s metaphor buys him the time that he needs, but the people of Rome are aware that the body politic is a broken body rather than the harmonious body that Menenius describes.

Early modern English literature is especially poignant for a study of class dynamics because while the culture of court and nobility had always emphasized the naturalness of class distinction, a newly developing uncertainty about the boundary between the individual and the outside world left many questioning the relationship of individual bodies to the body politic. In Shakespeare’s Entrails David Hillman grounds his argument upon this growing sense of instability in early modern England. Hillman addresses Elaine Scarry’s argument that in times of identity crisis people look to the seeming naturalness and incorruptibility of the human body for comfort. We fail to recognize the multiple constructed systems of meaning that have been inscribed on our bodies, such as gender and race dynamics, and instead hold up the body as the ultimate symbol of what it is to be human. Hillman wants to extend Scarry’s argument to say that rather than just the incorruptible body, in times of identity crisis people insist on clear and natural distinctions between the somatic inside and outside:

Societies, like individuals, try to shore up their borders at such times, when a sense of unity and integration is threatened; thresholds become barriers, self-protective and closed. At the most volatile transitional periods (in one’s life, in
history), faced with the fear of the unknown, it is the fear of the unknown, it is the transitionality of the (individual, national, symbolic) body that becomes the focus of anxiety.³

Not only do we look to the body as something natural and unchanging, we look to it to provide us with an impenetrable protective barrier. Of course in extending this argument Hillman is necessarily insinuating that we think of our interior selves, or what we might recognizably refer to as the soul, as the most essential part of ourselves rather than our bodies. According to Hillman’s argument our exterior bodies become defensive barriers for our interior selves, the part of ourselves that we are truly concerned with protecting. For this study I will draw on Hillman’s argument about anxiety over the permeability of boundaries between one’s personal body and one’s society to interpret two tragic works by William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Coriolanus and The Rape of Lucrece. However my focus will be on how both Coriolanus and Lucrece, despite being caught in both social and personal upheaval, seem concerned not with keeping their bodies closed, but with finding a way to let their open, bleeding bodies to be the mechanisms through which they speak.

Prudence, temperance, courage, and justice were believed to be the four virtues that members of the nobility embodied. Noble people were thought to possess those qualities because they were of superior blood, and thus had superior spirits. Thus both Lucrece and Coriolanus have an extreme reaction when they feel that their ability to embody the noble virtues is challenged. Coriolanus finds that despite his courage he does not meet the expectations of the citizens of Rome. Coriolanus discovers that being

courageous is not always enough. Lucrece perceives herself as having been tarnished in such a way that she cannot return to her former life of renowned virtue. Both Lucrece and Coriolanus are faced with situations in which words fail them. Coriolanus is a man of action, and when he is removed from the action of the battlefield and expected to interact with the citizens of Rome he finds himself incapable of doing so. Lucrece comes to the realization that even if she protests her innocence and those around her agree that she is not to blame, she will always be seen as Tarquin’s victim. Thus Lucrece’s solution is to forego language in favor of drastic action. I believe that each character reaches the conclusion that blood speaks louder than words. The difficulty is in determining what that blood will say. Just as blood can be a sign of courageous action, so it can also serve as a reminder of mortality and weakness. Therefore both Coriolanus and Lucrece express anxiety over how their blood will be interpreted by those who see it once it is made visible. Each character wants their shed blood to signify courage, empowerment, and self-definition. Thus neither of Shakespeare’s characters seems afraid of letting their bodies be opened, rather the trouble comes when the potentially judgmental gaze of others is introduced. The emphasis is not on keeping one’s body closed, but on attributing a positive value to what comes out once one’s body is injured.

This leads to the ultimate reason for choosing these two specific works. In reading both *The Rape of Lucrece* and *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* one is struck by the particularly bloody language of each piece, which is rooted in a physicality that makes it difficult to escape the image of the body. I believe that there is a connection between the identity of the characters in both works and their understanding of blood. I will make the argument that both Lucrece and Coriolanus come to their tragic ends because they have a
very narrow understanding of themselves as noble, an understanding that is both formed and informed by their understanding of their blood.

This argument becomes complex when placed in conversation with Hillman’s ideas because I believe that blood disrupts the attempt to draw a clear boundary between the somatic inside and outside. Blood is representative of the identity crisis that was taking place in early modern England. For characters like Coriolanus and Lucrece, what kind of self-identity or social role is left for them if their nobility is compromised? Thus we can observe the attempts by both Coriolanus and Lucrece, though they are different characters with different gendered expectations, to establish a specific interpretation of the blood crossing the border between their individual bodies and the outside world, the border maintaining the distance between the two classes. For both characters this attempt becomes a very bloody affair. I am arguing that the social, medical, and political significance placed on blood grants it a status that is more than physical. Whoever has control over the interpretation of bleeding holds power.

Of course if one is injured one does not have any power to stop the natural process of bleeding. However, what we observe in both Coriolanus and Lucrece is that one can have some power over how one’s blood is interpreted. Coriolanus chooses very specific language to paint a particular image of his own bleeding body and to attribute a certain understanding to the bleeding bodies of his Vosician enemies. In the same regard, Lucrece carefully chooses the time and place of her suicide so that her bleeding will be understood in a specific way. Both plays allow us to see that there is significance to the way that one’s blood is interpreted and that the potential exists for one’s bleeding body to either further one’s noble virtue or to taint it. Because blood is viewed as a precious
substance, one that is tied to the forces of life and death, it is understood that the reasons for which one is willing to shed one’s blood are reflective of the causes for which one stands.

Though not himself a physician, Shakespeare would have had had access to the oral and folk medicine that was handed down in early modern society. As an educated individual he would also have had access to the philosophical and theological texts that often dealt with medical issues. As F. David Hoeniger asserts in *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance*:

> The books in which Shakespeare found information were not confined to those on medical or paramedical subjects. Some of the poems, plays and other literature he read include passages of medical bearing. Widely read in his time were works by moral philosophers, ancient and modern, who regarded psychology as their domain, often related psychology to physiology, and sometimes commented on the causes and symptoms of certain diseases as well.⁴

Hoeniger goes on to suggest that through close association with two physicians, Dr. John Hall who was Shakespeare’s son-in-law and Dr. Thomas Lodge who was a friend and fellow author, Shakespeare likely gained a good understanding of medicine. It is of course difficult to know to what extent these associations could have informed Shakespeare’s knowledge of medicine, but I aim to demonstrate that Shakespeare’s writing displays an awareness of and rhetorical engagement with medical knowledge. This is not to say that Shakespeare was actively studying medicine, only that his interaction with medical knowledge likely informed the ideas that he expressed in his plays.

The most widely accepted and practiced form of medicine in early modern England was based on the tenets of the Greek physician, surgeon, and philosopher Galen (130 AD-200 AD). Therefore it will be necessary in order to better understand what Shakespeare might have learned about blood to examine some of the tenets of Galenic medicine. Despite being a philosopher who was very much interested in the role and origination of the soul, Galen gave more attention in his writings to the functioning of the physical body, as displayed by his strong emphasis on the humors of the body: blood, phlegm and black and yellow bile. Importantly, when Galen refers to the “soul” in his writing he is not talking about what we might understand as the Christian soul, or a kind of immortal spirit which endures even after death. Rather, Galen is likely speaking of the kind of “soul” referred to by Aristotle in *De Anima*. This soul, while possessing unique properties, is still considered to be a physical entity, and Aristotle is far from certain that it is an enduring entity.

For the ancient Greeks such as Aristotle and Galen, the soul was something both physical and metaphysical. Aristotle describes in *De Anima*:

A further problem presented by the affections of soul is this: are they all affections of the complex of body and soul, or is there any one among them peculiar to the soul by itself? To determine this is indispensable but difficult. If we consider the majority of them, there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving the body; e.g. anger, courage, appetite, and sensation generally. Thinking seems the most probable exception; but if this too proves to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination, it too requires a body as a condition of its existence.\(^5\)

As evidenced by Aristotle’s complex exploration in *De Anima* there was never a definitive agreement about what the soul was, or if and how it existed. However it is

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apparent from most of the texts written by Greek philosophers and physicians that the soul was not necessarily seen as something existing independently of the physical body. Thus when Christianity, with its belief in an immortal soul, exploded across Europe during the middle ages, the resulting views on what exactly the soul was were quite messy and inconclusive. As such, thoughts about the soul in the early modern period were often a strange hybrid of beliefs that the soul was an immortal spirit as well as a substance subject to the changes of the physical body. We can observe the near impossibility in medieval and early modern medical writing of separating medicine from other disciplines such as theology and philosophy. For the purposes of this paper, I will explore some of the views surrounding how blood served to animate the body, but it is important to note that there was no universally accepted understanding of what the soul was or how soul and body related to one another. In terms of medical treatment, blood was also understood as the humor through which balance could be restored to the body. Any humor could be out of balance, and this imbalance was believed to account for both physical and mental illness.\(^6\) In order to restore balance, the body had to be purged of excess humors or stagnant blood, employing the method used to purge bodies for centuries both before and after the early modern period: bloodletting.

Galen certainly believed that blood was the dominant humor and the one most in need of control. Therefore Galen also believed that letting blood flow out of the body would eliminate any imbalanced humors that were causing illness.\(^7\) Therefore the quality of blood was variable, having the potential to be both spoiled and purified. The other


humors of the body did not necessarily have a naked-eye structure that could be pointed to. In other words, it was difficult to say where exactly yellow and black bile were within the body. On the other hand, blood was the humor that could be easily seen. Because of its liquid properties, and its subsequent ability to move easily, blood was believed to be the humor which acted as a vehicle for nutrition as well as disease within the body. As such, even if there was a build-up of black bile, that bile would be carried in the blood. Thus if one wanted to eliminate the excess bile, it would need to be purged from the blood. Because blood was responsible for conveying disease, it was the humor that became the focus of medical treatment. If you could purge the infected blood then you would in effect be purging any other imbalanced humors with it.

The notion that blood could become stagnant or spoiled in some way relied on a concept of the body as permeable and capable of being influenced by exterior forces. We would all agree that ingesting a poison would have a negative effect on the body’s interior, but the Galenic concept of the body depicted it as porous and fungible in a variety of ways. As such, the interior condition of the body could be changed by the quality or temperature of the air or by the presence of an excessive amount of one humor relative to the others. If the humors of the body were out of balance, it was believed this condition could spoil the quality of a person’s blood. Specifically, bloodletting needed to take place because a humoral imbalance could cause a build-up of moisture in the body that could potentially suffocate the vital spirits and cause the blood to become thick and


While we no longer rely on humoral theory, what we can glean from the tenets of Galenic medical philosophy is that blood was given a place of primacy among the other humors of the body.

While in a strictly medical sense blood was still understood to be a physical element of the body, its connection to the vital spirits, as well as the recognition that it was responsible for the health and balance of the body led to blood becoming a substance heavily laden with metaphorical meaning. Just as blood was believed to be responsible for the balance of the body, it was alluded to in speaking about the balance of an individual’s character. For instance, having hot blood was associated with a tendency toward anger and rash action. In a Judeo-Christian context blood was also highly associated with salvation. Thus whether or not early modern people literally understood blood as a meeting ground between body and soul, they were familiar with its various metaphorical meanings. Shakespeare certainly recognizes the importance of blood as metaphor in his writing. In both Coriolanus and Lucrece, blood is regarded not only as the humor which carries life, but also the humor responsible for the value of a person’s life. In other words, blood is closely connected to an individual’s status as either noble or common. If a person is assumed to possess noble blood, an inheritance from their noble predecessors, then that person has expectations that they must live up to. The matter of how nobles see themselves, and the struggle inherent in trying to live up to what may be an impossible expectation, is one issue which Shakespeare masterfully explores in both Coriolanus and Lucrece. Another interesting notion raised by Shakespeare in both works is blood as a signifier of action and immediacy. Since blood only flows freely for a while

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after an injury occurs, blood carries a temporal value. In both *Lucrece* and *Coriolanus* blood is distinctly tied to the desire of each character for direct action over speech.

Thus much of the drama of each work arises from the social expectations placed on both Coriolanus and Lucrece as a result of their noble blood. While ideas about gender roles and nobility were very much a part of early modern English society, the extremity to which those social expectations were taken is also felt in the Roman context of both works. Thus *Coriolanus* gains its dramatic context from the turbulent political situation depicted in the play. Though it is clear that Shakespeare’s primary concern in writing the play was not the accurate recording of historical events, much of the play is taken from the life of the man Caius Martius, who would eventually become Coriolanus. The play opens on a scene of political discord, an internal division that threatens the peace and unity of Rome’s society. As war looms over Rome, a famine has set in, and the plebeian population of the city feels that the noble class is taking more than their share of the food supply. In anger, the plebeians are causing a scene and threatening to revolt against their social superiors. The familiar image of the body politic presents itself as a dismembered, divided mess. As Zvi Jagendorf suggests in his article “*Coriolanus*: Body Politic and Private Parts,” “The play’s rhetoric makes us see the body politic as chopped up into grotesquely independent limbs and organs that refuse to become a complete body even though political orthodoxy says that this is what they must do.”

Rome’s body politic is being torn apart by class strife. A great deal of hatred clearly exists between the members of the noble class and those of the plebeian class. It is his excessive pride which causes

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Coriolanus to act with disdain toward lower class citizens. Because Coriolanus’s pride is central to the main conflict of the play, it is fair to say that understanding the source of that pride is one important question that the play explores.

In the beginning of *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* a comparison between the city of Rome and the human body is drawn when Menenius, a patrician of the city like Coriolanus, gives a physiologically informed speech to the citizens of Rome. This speech, likely drawn from the account of Coriolanus in Plutarch’s *Lives*, uses imagery of a functioning body in an attempt to quell the anger of the plebs. The citizens of Rome accuse “the belly” of the city, which Menenius has set up as a symbol for the aristocracy, of doing nothing to help its citizens during a time of war and hunger. Menenius answers for the belly:

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“True it is my incorporate friends,” quoth he,
“That I receive the general food at first
Which you do live upon; and fit it is,
Because I am the store house 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.”
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Shakespeare has thus constructed the city in terms of the Galenic body, but a Galenic body that is marked with political significance. Menenius here gives an argument for the naturalness of class distinction by describing wealth distribution in terms of blood bringing vital spirit to the parts of the body. It is natural, Menenius claims, that food should come to the nobles first, because they are responsible for distributing it to the rest.

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of the citizens. The people feel that the body politic is malfunctioning, but Menenius utilizes language of the human body to try to prove that the body politic is working in perfect harmony. Of course Menenius’s speech is ultimately unsuccessful, as the conversation ends with the plebs still feeling that their government is conspiring against them. This initial introduction to the conflict of the city foreshadows the space of conflict that we will observe Coriolanus occupying throughout the play. In many ways Coriolanus’s struggle with his own individual body reflects the fractured body politic that we are presented with in the beginning of the play.

Coriolanus’s way of displaying his noble identity is by building a distance between his physical body and the body politic. While Coriolanus certainly thinks of himself as a Roman citizen, his idea of being Roman is restricted to the world of the nobility and specifically to his own valiance and courage. He does not understand that to be a citizen of Rome is to share a bond with every Roman citizen, even those whom he considers his social inferiors. Where this intersects with my topic of interest is in Coriolanus’s own acts of bleeding and shedding blood in which he expresses an anxiety about how his shed blood will be interpreted. Coriolanus is very specific about when and how he will allow others to see his blood or his injured body. This is what lies behind Coriolanus’s problematic refusal to display his battle scars to the people of Rome. As David Hillman writes in *Shakespeare’s Entrails*, “By the late sixteenth century, the inevitable permeability of the body had become a matter of high anxiety, an increased sense of vulnerability to the invasion of all manner of “foreign agents” which – from the point of view of subjective embodiment – might be taken to include the objectifying,
prying eyes of scientific knowledge.”

For Coriolanus, the “foreign agent” is the prying eyes of the plebs. Coriolanus is a noticeably isolated character, and much of his struggle comes from his inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to transcend the supposed boundary between the noble class and the plebian class. Thus when Plutarch offers a description of the man Caius Martius, he describes a man who could not connect with others:

But on the other side for lack of education, he was so cholerick and impatient, that he would yield to no living creature: which made him churlish, uncivil, and altogether unfit for any man's conversation. Yet men marvelling much at his constancy, that he was never overcome with pleasure, nor money, and how he would endure easily all manner of pains and travails: thereupon they well liked and commended his stoutness and temperancy. But for all that, they could not be acquainted with him, as one citizen useth to be with another in the city: his behaviour was so unpleasant to them by reason of a certain insolent and stern manner he had, which because it was too lordly, was disliked.

It would appear that for his play Shakespeare stayed very close to this characterization of Coriolanus. The picture that Plutarch draws of Coriolanus is of a man who has, by way of his own excessive pride, completely isolated himself. Plutarch mentions that Coriolanus was lacking in education. It seems that he means both that Coriolanus preferred training for combat to formal education and that he possessed an undisciplined nature. Plutarch repeatedly notes that a truly virtuous individual must train their nature to cast off any excesses. Plutarch asserts that Coriolanus’s excessive pride was a result of an undisciplined nature. In relation to the body politic Coriolanus is in some ways like a severed limb. Plutarch notes that Coriolanus embraces certain virtues while completely disregarding others.

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In the larger context of the play Shakespeare seeks to make us think about difficult questions such as the meaning of honor and the moral status of war. In addition to the open contempt between Coriolanus and the plebeians displayed in the opening scene, I believe Shakespeare introduces us to two opposing views of war in Act I, scene iii during an exchange between Coriolanus mother Volumnia and his wife Valeria. Volumnia takes a great deal of pride in her son and views him as an honorable offering to Rome. Thus Volumnia gives detailed descriptions of the fantasies she has about her son’s valiant actions. Volumnia and Virgilia discuss the possibility of Coriolanus’s going to war.

**Volumnia** Methinks I see him stamp thus and, and call thus: ‘Come on, you cowards, you were got in fear Though you were born in Rome! His bloody brow With his mailed hand then wiping, forth he goes, Like to harvest-man that’s tasked to mow Or all or lose his hire.

**Virgilia** His bloody brow? O Jupiter, no blood!

**Volumnia** Away, you fool! It more becomes a man Than gilt his trophy. The breasts of Hecuba When she did suckle Hector looked not lovelier Than Hector’s forehead when it spit forth blood At Grecian sword, contemning.15

Volumnia then believes, as Coriolanus does, that bloodshed in battle is the path to honor. Volumnia’s speech conjures up images of Coriolanus’s hands soaked in the blood of his enemies and also of Hector’s body spitting forth blood in a noble sacrifice to Rome. Virgilia on the other hand, out of concern for her husband’s life, declares that she would rather there be no blood. For Virgilia blood is only a harbinger of death and pain, not of

honor or glory. Shakespeare thus presents us with the two opposing sides, and while we may understand that Volumnia embodies the idea of a Roman matron, it is difficult not to be repelled by her desire for her son’s injury in battle. With this scene Shakespeare calls us to ponder the glorification of war and bloodshed.

Coriolanus was admired for his courage and for his aversion to greed, but even those qualities could not redeem his haughtiness in the eyes of the plebs. While we certainly understand from the metaphor of the belly that the plebeians are in some ways being mistreated by their governing body, as Norman Rabkin notes, Shakespeare’s ambiguous characterization of the plebs causes us to question which side the playwright would have us take. The plebeians, while laudably calling for greater social justice, are also depicted in the world of this play as fickle, riotous, and easily mislead. As such, neither Coriolanus nor the plebeians come across as particularly likeable in the play. Plutarch describes Coriolanus as “unfit for any man’s conversation” and says that men “could not be acquainted with him.” Despite being an important figure in Roman society, Coriolanus is nonetheless not fully a part of that society. In observing his behavior throughout the play it seems that this is because Coriolanus only truly feels at home in the bloody heat of the battlefield. When he is introduced back into a social context in which words replace bloodshed in measuring a person’s virtue, Coriolanus is not nearly as highly regarded. Coriolanus’s isolation is a problem because it disrupts the social order of Rome. As a member of the nobility Coriolanus has a responsibility to help govern and guide the body politic, and instead he is causing further fracture. Just as a body needs to have balanced humors, the beginning of the play lets us know that Rome, an enormous body politic, must also be balanced in that it must attend to the needs of all of its people,
it must emphasize justice. The hunger of the plebeians is an injustice, as is Coriolanus’s
disdain for common men, and because there is no justice, Rome’s body is diseased.

Yet Shakespeare wants us to think about much more than Coriolanus’s excessive
pride. He places us in a difficult position by making clear that the root cause of
Coriolanus’s pride is his rigid adherence to an ideal of honor. Indeed, Coriolanus’s
dedication to military action is reflective of his understanding of combat as honorable.
Thus it is difficult for us to wholly condemn Coriolanus because honor is not necessarily
a negative ideal to strive for. Indeed, in Act I, scene vii we see Coriolanus where he truly
excels: on the battlefield. When Cominius, a general of the Roman military tells
Coriolanus to choose the men who should go with him to make a final attempt at
defeating Aufidius, Coriolanus responds,

Those are they
That are most willing. If any such be here-
As it were in sin to doubt-that love this painting
Wherein you see me smeared; if any fear
Lesser his person than an ill report
If any think brave death outweigh bad life,
And that his country’s dearer than himself,
Let him alone or so many so minded,
[He waves his sword]
Wave thus to express his disposition,
And follow Martius.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus we see Coriolanus in a truly inspired moment, and we also see the sincerity with
which he believes in the honor of battle. Norman Rabkin remarks on the difficulty o
deciding how we are to view Coriolanus.

The opposition Shakespeare has so carefully established between two aspects of
the warlike personality reveals the doubleness of our own attitudes towards war,
and more particularly the composite nature of that personality. The gallantry is

\textsuperscript{16} Shakespeare. \textit{The Tragedy of Coriolanus}. I,vii,68-75.
inseparable from the bloodiness; it is not the gentle Cominius but the savage Martius who has the force to lead his broken troops into victory. But Shakespeare is not, like a sociologist, simply reporting his observations, but rather challenging our moral sensibility. If the character of the soldier is as we see it hear, what is its moral status? As the play is set up so far, this is a disturbing and unanswerable question.17

Shakespeare has then left us in thorny territory. On the one hand Coriolanus’s courage can be seen as honorable and self-sacrificial. Yet at the same time we recognize that the extremity to which Coriolanus has dedicated himself to battle and bloodshed borders on obsessive and causes Coriolanus to believe that anyone who does not meet his expectation of valor is worthless. As Rabkin point to, we simultaneously admire Coriolanus’s courage and are repelled by his lust for bloodshed. In addition to his violent nature, we are also repelled by Coriolanus’s classism.

In Blood Will Tell in Shakespeare’s Plays, David S. Berkeley remarks on the way that early modern thought equated noble blood with courage.18 Berkeley notes that in Shakespeare’s writing, nobles are represented as having inherited the four classical virtues – “prudence, temperance, courage and justice” – through the noble and virtuous blood of their parents.19 The question that is raised by many of Shakespeare’s Roman plays, such as Titus Andronicus and Coriolanus, is whether the revenge enacted by the characters in the play is justified and in keeping with these classical virtues. As Myung-soo Hur notes in the essay “‘Vengeance Rot you All!’ Blood Oriented Revengers in Titus


Andronicus.” “Whereas the baseborns endure injustice in a humiliating and cowardly manner, the gentles demonstrate their courage to fight against evil, restore good, and avenge wrongdoing inflicted on them and their families.”\textsuperscript{20} Thus Shakespeare’s depiction of Coriolanus’s intense revenge at the end of the play maintains an image of Coriolanus as someone who strives to embody the classical virtues associated with nobility. The problem, as previously noted, is that Coriolanus thinks of himself solely in terms of courageous action, and neglects the other important qualities of a noble nature.

Embodying courage becomes somewhat of an obsession for Coriolanus to the point that he seems to be disgusted by people who are not of the noble class. Plutarch offers further comment on Coriolanus’s disdain for the plebs by describing the social upheaval taking place in Rome. This upheaval led to a protest enacted by the plebeians in which they marched together out of the city of Rome in a kind of nonviolent sit in and refused to serve in the present war with the Volscians unless they were given better treatment by their governors. The senate eventually conceded to the demands of the common people who in return agreed to serve in the war. Plutarch describes Coriolanus’s reaction:

Marcius also, though it liked him nothing to see the greatness of the people thus increased, considering, it was to the prejudice, and imbas
ing of the nobility, and also saw that other noble patricians were troubled as well as himself: he did persuade the patricians, to shew themselves no less forward and willing to fight for their country, than the common people were: and to let them know by their deeds and acts, that they did not so much pass the people in power and riches, as they did exceed them in true nobility and valiantness.\textsuperscript{21}


Coriolanus values courage and valor most, and he does not see those qualities in the common people of Rome. In Shakespeare’s play Coriolanus constantly insults the plebeians for their lack of courage, and says that without that quality they are essentially useless to Rome. He refers to the common people as scabs, boils, and infections on Rome, taking from the city and marring it, but never giving anything back. When Menenius explains to Coriolanus that the plebeians are demanding a fair share of Rome’s food supply Coriolanus exclaims:

Hang ‘em! They say?
They’ll sit by the fire and presume to know
What’s done i’th’ Capitol, who’s like to rise,
Who thrives and who declines; side factions and give out
Conjectural marriages, making parties strong
And feebling such as stand not in their liking
Below their cobbled shoes. They say there’s grain enough!
Would the nobility lay aside their ruth
And let me use my sword, I’d make a quarry
With thousands of these quartered slaves as high
As I could pitch my lance.22

Coriolanus thus believes that the common people, because they are of common blood, have no right to influence the goings on of Rome. Rather they ought to accept whatever rule is handed down by their social superiors and stay in their place. The fact that the common people manage to have a direct effect on Rome’s policies, and that this angers Coriolanus so much, points directly to the shifting body politic that we see throughout this play. In the beginning of the play Rome’s body is terribly imbalanced. Rome’s body is not functioning properly in that nutrition and prosperity is not being distributed throughout the entire body, it is only reaching certain parts. As the play progresses, we

22 Shakespeare, Coriolanus, I,1,179-89.
see the plebeians slowly begin to gain more power while Coriolanus loses power. Coriolanus also represents an imbalanced body in that he opposes justice for the common people and would prefer that power continue to be unevenly distributed. Coriolanus is less concerned with physical wealth or even with the distribution of food, rather he is concerned with the distribution of power.

What becomes truly apparent in Coriolanus’s interactions with the plebs is that he can see value in no other way of life but battle. Undoubtedly, the plebeians perform necessary and important work such as farming and other trades which allow Rome to survive, but Coriolanus only sees value in bloodshed. Despite their roles as common citizens, the plebeians are still an important military force, as evidenced by the willingness of the senate to give into the plebeians’ demands when they threaten to forego participation in the war against the Volscians. Yet even when they are engaged in battle, Coriolanus will not give his respect to the plebeians; rather he feels the need to point out how they fail to meet his expectation of courage. Therefore the audience realizes, as apparently does the senate, that the common citizens are an integral part of Rome’s military force, but Coriolanus will not give them credit for their service. For Coriolanus, fighting in battle represents a courageous disregard for one’s own body. This is perhaps part of the reason that the plebs anger him so much. Their insistence on being fed, particularly at the expense of refusing to fight in the war, is an assertion that the needs of one’s personal body are more important than valor. Thus for Coriolanus, blood is a sign of courage, a sign of noble work. It is in the scenes away from the battlefield in which blood is not visible and is not being shed that Coriolanus struggles to earn high regard. Thus despite the fact that these scenes take place away from the battlefield, they
still have a great deal to do with blood, mostly with its lack. The contrast between scenes of bloodshed and scenes of social interaction highlight the conflict that Coriolanus feels in his own being.

Coriolanus’s hatred of the plebeians can be interestingly contrasted to his admiration for his enemy, Tullus Aufidius. Though we might expect Coriolanus to hate Aufidius, he shows a strange reverence for the man. In fact, Aufidius is the only person other than himself whom Coriolanus says he would wish to be. When the other senators begin to speak with Coriolanus about the approaching army of the Volsces, Coriolanus tells them what he knows about the army’s leader, Aufidius:

They have a leader
Tullus Aufidius, that will put you to’t.
I sin in envying his nobility,
And were I anything but what I am,
I would wish me only he.  

Coriolanus admires and relates to a man who is his city’s enemy much better than he does his fellow Roman citizens. Coriolanus likely believes that he and Aufidius have more in common than he and the common citizens of Rome because he and Aufidius are both of noble blood. More than this, Aufidius is one who enthusiastically engages in the work of shedding blood. In fact, this is the only place in which Coriolanus expresses a desire to be, or even be like, another person. For Coriolanus, Aufidus embodies the kind of noble courage that he believes is the height of honor. Interestingly, Coriolanus is still careful to privilege himself saying that he would wish to be Aufidius only if he were not Coriolanus. In effect, being Coriolanus is the best possible option, but Aufidius is a close second. Coriolanus does not seem to believe that he could be courageous or virtuous if he

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were a plebeian. As such, Coriolanus’s focus throughout the play falls to distinguishing himself through courageous acts in battle.

Notably, Coriolanus’s embodiment of courage is highly gendered since if he were a woman he would be expected to fulfill different virtues. Because he is male, Coriolanus has been taught to believe that his proper place is on the battle field protecting Rome. Peggy McCracken offers an insightful account of the gendered understanding of blood in *The Curse of Eve, The Wound of the Hero*. McCracken discusses Lawrence Hoffman’s assessment of the gendered values assigned to blood in rabbinic society. McCracken writes:

> Hoffman’s reading of the symbolic opposition between the blood of circumcision and menstrual blood, that is, between men’s blood and women’s blood, shows how this opposition grounds conceptual frameworks that oppose men’s control to women’s unruliness, and that construct men’s blood as purifying and women’s as polluting. The gendered values of blood thus identify, justify, and even naturalize gendered social values.\(^{24}\)

McCracken writes specifically about medieval understandings of blood, but the ideas ring true for early modern thought as well. Coriolanus’s blood, symbolic of his acts of aggression against Rome’s enemies, is equated by characters in the play with salvation. More than this, the blood of soldiers is blood that is active, it is blood which serves a purpose as opposed to the perceived inactive bleeding of women. While men’s blood is a sign of work and productivity, women’s blood is a sign of waste. Coriolanus is willing to sacrifice his own blood to defend Rome. Of course in an early modern context any mention of blood as possessing salvific qualities immediately suggests the place of

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Christianity as well. Blood obviously has an important place in a predominantly Christian society, but it seems that an understanding of blood as sacrificial and potentially salvific is of particular importance for Shakespeare’s Roman tragedies. Louise Geddes suggests that there is an element of Eucharistic sacrifice to the deaths of Roman martyrs in the Roman tragedies.\(^{25}\) According to the Roman understanding of honor, dying in sacrifice for one’s country was more than just a noble death: the death effectively furthered the glory of the Roman Empire and protected what that empire stood for. Since the death served a higher purpose, it took on a transcendent quality.

When viewed by an audience that was quite familiar with the Christian worldview, there is something in the idea of a transcendent sacrifice which is comparable to martyrdom. Even if dying for a secular institution such as the state was not quite the same as dying for religious faith, there is still much to be said for a willingness to die for a greater purpose. The specific honor given to not just dying, but dying by shedding one’s blood, is indicative of what Caroline Walker Bynam discusses as the salvific quality attributed to blood: “Blood is a sign of desecration that makes holy; hence it sets apart, it consecrates.”\(^{26}\) By desecration, Bynum means the violent destruction of the body, a physical rather than a spiritual desecration. In order to serve that higher purpose, Coriolanus goes to war with his enemy Tullus Aufidius and his army of Volscians.

During a battle with the Volsces, Coriolanus runs inside of the closing gates of the sieged city of Coriolis while his fellow soldiers run away in fear of being overcome.


Coriolanus miraculously survives the battle, and afterward his courage is visually represented by the enemy blood caked all over his body. This enemy blood has now become inextricable from Coriolanus’s own blood, undoubtedly flowing from his many wounds. Coriolanus meets with Tullus Aufidius and challenges him to fight saying,

Within these three hours, Tullus,
Alone I fought in your Coriole’s walls
And made what work I pleased: ‘tis not my blood
Wherein thou seest me mask’d; for thy revenge
Wrench up thy power to the highest.27

Coriolanus’s courage becomes associated with his willingness to shed the blood of his enemies. It is also, however, characterized as his disregard for the shedding of his own blood, as when a fellow soldier, after Coriolanus has emerged from the heat of battle, observes that Coriolanus is bleeding and exclaims “Thy exercise hath been too violent for a second course of fight.” Yet Coriolanus protests that he is fine saying:

Sir, praise me not;
My work hath yet not warm’d me; fare you well;
The blood I drop is rather physical
Than dangerous to me: to Aufidius thus
I will appear, and fight.28

Coriolanus insists that his injuries are not dangerous to his health, and that he is still capable of fighting. It is interesting that in order to convey this message Coriolanus chooses to characterize the blood from his wounds as “rather physical than dangerous to me.” In one sense Coriolanus is simply saying that he does not care if he is injured because his duty as a soldier is far more important to him. Yet Coriolanus’s repeated and

27 Shakespeare. The Tragedy of Coriolanus, I.ix.7-11.

28 I.vi.17-21.
adamant refusal later in the play to show his scars to the people of Rome suggests that perhaps Coriolanus’s words have a more complex meaning.

As Hillman notes, the early modern period was one in which a new conception of humans as “sомatically and ontologically isolated” gave rise to serious fears about potential invasion of the body and loss of control over it.29 Thus Coriolanus is displaying anxiety about the potential for blood to be incorrectly interpreted once it is made visible. In the language and action of the play, this potential is represented by Coriolanus’s bleeding body. When the fellow soldier mentions to Coriolanus that his wound is too serious for him to continue fighting, the suggestion carries the potential for Coriolanus to be viewed as weak. Perhaps anyone with a typical expectation of courage would say that Coriolanus has already gone above and beyond the call of duty, but Coriolanus himself will not accept any suggestion that he cannot continue fighting. Coriolanus wants his bleeding body to be interpreted as a sign of courage rather than a sign of mortality. Importantly, Coriolanus’s method for denying that he is injured or in danger is to depict his body as perfectly healthy and functioning. In this sense the word “physical” means something more along the lines of medicinal. In other words, he is bleeding, but it is healthy bleeding, much the way that bloodletting allows blood to flow freely in order to restore balance to the body. Coriolanus therefore insists that his body is not bleeding in a way which may lead to death, but only to greater vitality.

In Coriolanus’s world, that is the battlefield, blood is always in some sense a reminder that the bleeding party is only human and can therefore die. I believe there is a part of Coriolanus that is anxious about how others will read his blood once it leaves his

body and is no longer under his control. Nonetheless he displays his superiority to his enemies by opening their bodies. Thus Coriolanus taunts Aufidus by informing him that he has made Volscian bodies bleed. It is fair to say that Coriolanus is at home on the battlefield and that while he is engaged in combat his courage and fierceness outweigh any fears. On the battlefield Coriolanus feels wholly autonomous and distinguished. It is only after battle has ceased and he is forced to return to a social context that he has trouble coming to terms with the idea of his body being on display.

In an article titled “The ‘Noble Thing’ and the ‘Boy of Tears,’” Burton Hatlen explores the role of shame in Coriolanus. Hatlen reads Coriolanus as failing on three key levels to build a stable identity. Coriolanus cannot separate himself as an individual from society at large, he cannot separate himself psychologically from his mother, and he cannot use language to definitively name himself. Hatlen writes, “On all three levels, furthermore, the concrete sign of Coriolanus’s failure to become the “author of himself” (5.3.36) is a flood of shame, which thus serves to define the limit of personal identity, the moment when identity dissolves into contradiction. Around the issues of identity and shame, then, all the great themes of Coriolanus – political, psychological, linguistic – converge.”30 I agree with Hatlen that Coriolanus’s main struggle throughout the play is to forge an autonomous identity that is always out of reach. In other words, Coriolanus cannot seem to find a healthy balance between existing as an individual and participating in society at large; he seems to be under the impression that he must choose entirely one or the other. If we look to the larger context of the play we see that Shakespeare is asking us to consider the difficult question of how one simultaneously adheres to one’s personal

convictions while living amicably within a social context. We see within the play that Coriolanus fails miserably to combine these two allegiances, and that his failure to do so leads directly to his downfall.

On one level the blood caked onto Coriolanus is a symbol of his courage on the battlefield. The battlefield is a place where that which normally makes up the interior of the body becomes exterior and is allowed to be seen and known by other people. In saying to Aufidius “’tis not my blood wherein thou see’st me mask’d”, Coriolanus is saying that he has witnessed the interior of Aufidius’s soldiers becoming exterior. The place of bleeding is complex and appears to be intricately tied to the conditions of that bleeding. Coriolanus taunts Aufidius with the bleeding of his soldiers as though that bleeding is a shameful act. The Romans have won the battle, so in one sense the Volscian soldiers, and their leader, have to feel some shame at their defeat. Yet to their own people, the Volscian’s sacrifice of their blood would be seen as a valiant act. How bleeding and shame will be interpreted really depends on who is seeing the blood. Thus blood is simultaneously a testament to one’s bravery in battle but also to one’s mortality. Aufidius, as the leader of the Volscian army, has to accept some responsibility for the bleeding of his soldiers’ bodies. Thus Aufidius is essentially being told by Coriolanus that he should feel some shame at his inability to keep the bleeding of his soldiers under control.

There also seems to be some suggestion that Aufidius should be ashamed because he has allowed the blood of his soldiers to reach the ultimate level of chaos: they have bled so much that they have died. Louise Geddes suggests that in the Roman tragedies the spectacle of violence “denies the victims the right to control the interpretation of their
death.”

Coriolanus has bled, but he has managed to survive in order to bear live witness to his valor. If the consolation for dying in battle is the honor that it brings to you, then the threat of not having that honor recognized is terrifying indeed. Coriolanus, in this scene, is attempting to cast the bleeding, and subsequently dead, bodies of the Volscians as signs of shame rather than of honor. In Violence and the Sacred Rene Girard offers some insight into the difference between dried blood and blood that is still flowing during ritual sacrifice: “Blood that dries on the victim soon loses its viscous quality and becomes first a dark sore, then a roughened scab. Blood that is allowed to congeal on its victim is the impure product of violence, illness, or death. In contrast to this contaminated substance is the fresh blood of newly slaughtered victims, crimson and free flowing.”

Therefore when Coriolanus wears the dried blood of his enemies he is displaying their shame on his body. Their blood is no longer vital, no longer giving life, and it is now being coopted as a trophy for Coriolanus. In contrast, the blood emanating from Coriolanus’s wounds is still free flowing, indicating his still present vitality. Yet there is an interesting side effect in that the dried, impure blood of Coriolanus’s enemies is mixed in a sense with the blood coming from his own wounds.

When Coriolanus protests that “the blood I drop is rather physical than dangerous to me” he is acknowledging that his own blood has now become exterior. It is only in this exterior space that Coriolanus’s blood is mixed with that of the Volscian soldiers. Once the blood leaves the body, its liquid form allows it to move on its own. Since the Volscians are his enemies, Coriolanus would never have considered that his blood could

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be mixed with theirs, a metaphor that normally only alludes to familial relationships or sexual intercourse. Yet once their blood crosses the barrier of the skin and enters the exterior world it is able to commingle. Bleeding is a function of the body that happens when we are injured and vulnerable, and can be a dangerous function if allowed to run out of control. Thus blood, though the road to honor, is also a part of Coriolanus that he cannot exercise control over. Perhaps what Coriolanus truly fears is that his bleeding will run out of control and bring him down to the same level as the Volscians whose bleeding bodies he regarded with scorn. Again, it is not a fear of dying that bothers Coriolanus, rather it is a fear of experiencing shame. Later in the play we observe Coriolanus’s disgust at the idea of having to perform actions that he considers an affront to his dignity in order to garner votes from the citizens of Rome.

It is after he is elected to be consul and informed that he must take to the streets of Rome to ask for the votes of the common people that Coriolanus’s rigid understanding of his nobility becomes problematic. While speaking with his mother Volumnia, Coriolanus struggles with the idea of asking the people for their votes saying:

Well, I must do't:
Away, my disposition, and possess me
Some harlot's spirit! my throat of war be turn'd,
Which quired with my drum, into a pipe
Small as an eunuch, or the virgin voice
That babies lulls asleep! the smiles of knaves
Tent in my cheeks, and schoolboys' tears take up
The glasses of my sight! a beggar's tongue
Make motion through my lips, and my arm'd knees,
Who bow'd but in my stirrup, bend like his
That hath received an alms! I will not do',
Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth
And by my body's action teach my mind
A most inherent baseness.33

These lines, while offering an excellent view of Coriolanus’ inability to accept that he may have to become subservient to the common people of Rome, also allow us a detailed view of Coriolanus’s troubled understanding of his body. Throughout the lines he gives descriptions of what he sees as the vile actions that his body will have to take in order to gain the votes of the common people. His tongue will be like that of a beggar, his knees, which are usually only bent in his stirrups while going into battle, will now bend like those of a poor man receiving charity. Lastly, he states that by taking these actions his body will teach his mind to adopt the same subservient attitude. What is truly at stake here for Coriolanus is enduring shame, something that he does not associate with his noble identity. In Shame in Shakespeare Ewan Fernie notes the enormous role that shame plays in motivating Shakespeare’s characters. In describing scenes of public shaming in Shakespeare Fernie remarks that “Like Ralegh and Essex, Eleanor is shamed by her public exposure. Like Coriolanus in the market place, she is degraded further by the gaze of a specifically lower-class audience…”34 Coriolanus’s body would be on visual display, and this is problematic for him because he believes that he possesses a noble spirit, and thus a noble body, that should not have to endure the gaze of the common people.

Thus in this scene the body politic of Rome possesses the power. If Coriolanus wants to be consul, he must first obtain the approval of the people. Rome itself is in a better place than when the play began. The successful battle against the Volscians seems

33 Shakespeare. Coriolanus, III.ii.110-123.

to have, at least for the time, quelled the social upheaval. Nobles and common people alike fought in the battle, and that collective defense of Rome has bonded the body politic together in this scene. Coriolanus then is the one opposing the will of the Roman body. Coriolanus has not figured out how to maintain his identity as a courageous soldier while also participating in society. Most importantly, Coriolanus is concerned in this scene that his wounds, which he wants to be interpreted as symbols of noble sacrifice and valor, will be corrupted by the gaze of the common people. Wounds are representative of the blood that Coriolanus shed on the battlefield, but that blood is no longer present to attest to his courage. Rather than empowering him, his wounds will be used as a way to serve the will of the people. Yet the absence of actual blood in this scene is a problem for Coriolanus, who is comfortable in violent battle, but not in social settings. Coriolanus has wounds, which represent spilled blood, but no actual blood to testify to his courage. For Coriolanus, actual bloodshed and action are far more important than words or scars. Both words and scars represent reflection, while bloodshed, at least in Coriolanus’s mind, is the essence of courage itself. Cominius and the plebeians cannot understand why Coriolanus objects to having titles and accolades poured upon him since to their minds those rewards represent honor. Yet as Norman Rabkin explains, “For Caius Martius, however, the deed is its own reward, honorable or dishonorable regardless of what people think of it; honor is a quality of action, not of action’s effects; honest praise is flattery and lies because all words that describe what is ultimately personal and subjective must miss the point.”

Thus for Coriolanus, the moment when battle is occurs and blood flows freely is the moment that constitutes honor, not the subsequent ceremonies and conferring

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of titles. Shakespeare uses this complexity to paint for us the problem at the heart of the play. We see that Coriolanus holds strong personal convictions about what constitutes honor. Nonetheless, Coriolanus refuses to yield anything to public will; he will not participate in the ceremony even if it means placating the common people and aiding peace in Rome.

As Burton Hatlen notes, it is not simply a disdain for subjecting himself to the eyes of the people that upsets Coriolanus so much. Standing before the people to display his hard-won battle scars would still allow Coriolanus to occupy an elevated space of honor. It seems to be the idea that he should have to participate in a civil ceremony, an action that in itself acknowledges that he is a member of the social body, that makes Coriolanus feel too common, perhaps even too human. Indeed as a citizen of Rome Coriolanus would have recognized the importance of society and the body politic, but in his vision the common people are complacent and follow the instruction of their social superiors. There is something repugnant to Coriolanus about having to ask for approval from the lower ranks of society. Coriolanus sees himself as part of noble society, not society as a whole. So it is that at various points in his interactions with the plebs Coriolanus tries to degrade them as something less than human, thus allowing himself to still remain elevated. In Act I, scene 4, Coriolanus refers to the common people as “You

Hatlen. “The ‘Noble Thing’ and the ‘Boy of Tears.’”
herd of – Boils and Plagues” and also “You souls of geese, that bear the shapes of men.” Later, in Act II, scene 2, he tells them,

    You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
    As reek o’ the rotten fens, whose love I prize
    As the dead carcasses of unburied men
    That do corrupt my air, I banish you.

Coriolanus cannot stand even to be a member of the same species as the common people. He wants to assert that they are something less than human, while he stands over them with his rationality and self-reliance. The only option left for someone who refuses so adamantly to be a part of the Roman body politic is to be cut off from that body.

Over and over again throughout the play Coriolanus refuses to show his battle wounds to the people of the city despite the other patricians telling him that these wounds will help him gain the love of the common people. It seems odd at first that Coriolanus should refuse to display his wounds as they are a testament to his valor in battle and to the blood that he shed to defend Rome. Yet scabbed wounds do not possess the same sacrificial importance as still-flowing blood. Even more than this, Coriolanus does not love the common people, and thus does not want them to think that he sacrificed his blood for them. A sacrifice is supposed to serve a higher cause, but it seems that Coriolanus’s courageous actions are to his mind more a testament to his own valor than a sign of love for Rome. Coriolanus thinks of Rome as existing for the nobles, he does not even want to consider the plebeians as part of Rome. Thus Coriolanus once again fails to

37 I.v.2
38 I.v.5-6
39 III.iii 124-127
understand the balance of the body politic. As such, the anxiety about how his bleeding body, even his previously bleeding body, will be interpreted is enough to keep Coriolanus from displaying his wounds. Clearly Coriolanus does not wish to participate in a civil ceremony that makes him feel as though he is part of the body politic, but an interesting note from Plutarch’s *Lives* reveals just how much the ritual might have offended Coriolanus’s noble sensibility. In discussing the political disputes happening in Rome during Coriolanus’s lifetime, Plutarch mentions the extreme mistreatment of the common citizens by money-lenders. Plutarch writes,

> For those that had little, were yet spoiled of that little they had by their creditors, for lack of ability to pay the usury: who offered their goods to be sold to them that would give most. And such as had nothing left, their bodies were laid hold on, and they were made their bondmen, notwithstanding all the wounds and cuts they shewed, which they had received in many barrels, fighting for defence of their country and commonwealth: of the which, the last war they made was against the Sabines, wherein they fought upon the promise the rich men had made them, that from thenceforth they would entreat them more gently...

Battle scars could then be used as a method of clearing one’s self of debt, or pleading better treatment from one’s social superiors. Whether Shakespeare had this particular idea in mind when writing *Coriolanus* is impossible to know, but the play certainly does capture the disdain that Coriolanus feels for taking part in civic ceremonies. What we can glean from Plutarch’s words is that earning scars in battle was not just a form of glory for the noble class, but that battle scars served as proof that you had performed a civic duty and were thus firmly a part of the community. Being part of the community seems to be precisely what Coriolanus is trying to avoid. Coriolanus prizes the glory of shedding

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40 Plutarch. *Lives*, p. 6
blood in battle, but he does not care to display his wounds now that the blood has dried and taken with it the glory.

What we learn then from the insults that Coriolanus hurls at the plebs is that Coriolanus’s understanding of himself as noble runs so deep as to stop him from allowing himself to be a member of the body politic. He must keep his noble body hidden from the prying eyes of the common people. It is this self-induced isolation that leads to the physical isolation of his banishment. Yet even after experiencing the shame of banishment, Coriolanus only has one way to understand himself. He is, no matter what, courageous. As such, the only possible course of action that he sees is revenge for the wrongs against him. Coriolanus thus enters into an agreement with his former enemy Aufidius to destroy the city of Rome. We have noted that taking revenge against his enemies is in keeping with the noble courage that Coriolanus is expected to embody. Thus, just as he did in killing his Volscian enemies, Coriolanus will spill the blood of the citizens of Rome who have betrayed him; he will open their bodies and cause their blood to cross into the outside world. The fact that Coriolanus is willing to destroy Rome to preserve his own pride tells us that he loves himself far more than Rome. It is not until he realizes that his plan to destroy Rome will have personal consequences for him that he feels conflicted.

Coriolanus’s ultimate conflict comes when he is confronted by his mother, wife, and son, all of whom he will have to kill if he besieges the city. Coriolanus’s mother succinctly sums up his predicament:

For either thou
Must as a foreign recreant be led
With manacles through our streets, or else
Triumphantly tread on thy country’s ruin,
And bear the palm for having bravely shed
Thy wife and children’s blood.\textsuperscript{41}

Of course, by shedding the blood of his family, Coriolanus would in a sense be shedding his own blood. He and his wife, according to early modern views of sex and marriage, are of one blood and one flesh. His mother and son can also be understood as having the same blood as Coriolanus. The boundary between Coriolanus’s body and the body politic comes to its problematic climax when Coriolanus is faced with the predicament of preserving his noble courage by spilling the blood of his own family, in a sense his own blood, or keeping that blood enclosed and forfeiting his unfailing military prowess. Ultimately, Coriolanus is murdered by Aufidius’s men. Of course in keeping with the course of history Coriolanus has to die at the end of the play, but nonetheless we are left with the knowledge that his death was brought on by his constant insistence on being separate from the body politic.

Rome and Coriolanus stood as opposing forces throughout the entirety of the play, and whether or not we can say that Rome won, we can certainly say that Coriolanus was purged from Rome. As usual, Shakespeare does not offer us a simple way to read Coriolanus. We leave the play unsure of whether we are on the side of the plebs or of Coriolanus, each of whom made valid points throughout the play. It seems nonetheless that Shakespeare wants us to consider the consequences of making bloody battle and intense violence requirements for honor. What is a good soldier to do when they are taught to act with courage and self-assertion and then asked to come back into society and behave in an orderly fashion? The real tragedy of the play is that we sense if

\textsuperscript{41} Shakespeare. Coriolanus, V.iii. 114-119.
Coriolanus were not so caught up in an unrealistic ideal of absolute honor and absolute independence, a middle way could likely have been found. Roman society forged a perfect soldier and then cast him out for embodying the values that they so often praised him for. As discussed, the significance of blood in Coriolanus must be understood in terms of politics and military obligation, both of which are related to Coriolanus’s male gender. However, this is not the only perspective from which Shakespeare’s Roman tragedies deal with blood. A look at Shakespeare’s minor epic poem The Rape of Lucrece will reveal that there is an entirely different set of expectations and pressures placed on female blood.

Lucrece is another character who is a member of the noble class. The expectations placed on women, and the wives of noblemen such as Lucrece, were no doubt very different from those placed upon Coriolanus. Lucrece is nonetheless still expected to embody the classical virtues. Rather than displaying courage on the battlefield, however, a noblewoman would be expected to fully embrace temperance, especially by remaining chaste. Since Lucrece is a married woman, she embodies chastity by remaining faithful to her husband, Collatine. This faithfulness is Lucrece’s identity, and like Coriolanus she understands that identity as inherent in her noble blood. Thus Lucrece is described from the beginning of the poem as a vision of noble virtue. When Lucius Tarquinius, Lucrece’s eventual rapist, comes to her home, Shakespeare offers a description of the welcome he receives from noble Lucrece:

When at Collatium this false lord arrived,  
Well was he welcomed by the Roman dame,  
Within whose face beauty and virtue strived  
Which of them both should underprop her fame:  
When virtue bragg’d, beauty would blush for shame;
When beauty boasted blushes, in despite
Virtue would stain that o'er with silver white.\(^{42}\)

From the very beginning Lucrece is characterized as occupying a space of competition
between mind and body for sovereignty. The blood inside of her body reacts according to
its noble virtue. Thus Lucrece blushes, which involves blood rising to her cheeks, when
she feels she has been immodest. When her blushing blood threatens too much pride, it
retreats and leaves her cheek pale. While in some sense Shakespeare is using these lines
to highlight the nobility of Lucrece, he has actively chosen to characterize that nobility as
in a state of instability, an instability that dwells in Lucrece’s blood. A.D. Cousins
explores in depth this problematizing of Lucrece in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Narrative
Poems*. Cousins sees Shakespeare as having rewritten the story of Lucrece as a kind of
tragic parody of Petrarchan poetry in which lovers often utilize emotive descriptions as
well as superlative imagery to describe their beloved. In describing some of the typically
Petrarchan images, such as the roses and lilies used to characterize Lucrece, Cousins
writes:

> However, insofar as those conceits are suggestive of conflict and linked to
> Petrarchan imagery, they serve also to remind the reader that it is especially the
> Petrarchan images used to describe Lucrece throughout the poem that tend to
> identify her as a site of conflict. The first instance of Petrarchan imagery, for
> example, identifies her as the embodiment of perfect beauty through whom
> Collatine can vaunt his superiority over Tarquin, but through whom, likewise,
> Tarquin will assert his tyrannic will and role over Collatine.\(^{43}\)

Lucrece’s noble identity is then problematized in a way that Coriolanus’s is not. Lucrece,
because of her gender, is always understood in terms of the male gaze of Lucius

\(^{42}\) Shakespeare. *The Rape of Lucrece*, lines 50-56.

Tarquinius, of her husband Collatine, and even of Shakespeare. Lucrece’s entire social value is bound up in her identity as a faithful and chaste wife. Thus from Lucrece’s perspective, rape is the worst possible fate because not only has her body been violated, but she has also lost her understanding of herself as a chaste woman. Yet I do not read *The Rape of Lucrece* as solely about a woman’s loss of power over her existence. Rather, I believe that Lucrece’s shedding of her own blood, though certainly tragic, is a shocking assertion of power over her own body. I therefore agree with Cousins’ assessment that the language describing Lucrece is always filtered through a male gaze. Yet upon closer inspection the movement of Lucrece’s blood, and the very actions of blushing and paling indicate the independent existence of her body. Lucrece’s blushing may be understood as an indication of chastity, but it also subtly indicates that her blood acts of its own will. The ability of her blood to act independently will be a source of anxiety as well as empowerment throughout the rest of the poem.

In *The Rape of Lucrece* we quickly become aware that we have entered a world in which the protagonist’s body is the center of attention. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, virginity is held up as the ideal condition for women to exist in. Yet some women have to be married in order for procreation to happen, so faithfulness in marriage was the acceptable avenue for women to express sexuality. Despite the fact that as a married woman Lucrece is presumably not a virgin, it is difficult to miss the strong rhetorical emphasis placed on ascribing virginal, or at least incredibly modest, attributes to her. Thus Lucrece is described repeatedly as virtuous, and Shakespeare equates that virtue
with white lilies and “Venus’ doves.”\(^{44}\) Certainly faithful wives were often rhetorically cast in the same virtuous mold as virginal women, but there was also a sense in which the blood of virginal women was believed to be of higher quality than that of nonvirgins. Peggy McCracken, drawing further on the argument that the blood of women was often seen as polluting in opposition to the salvific blood of men, goes further to discuss some instances in which women’s blood could be seen to possess positive qualities. McCracken observes, “From the perspective of hagiographical narratives, the difference is not in the blood itself, but in the state of the body that sheds the blood – the intact virgin’s body incarnates a unique purity and the virtue of the body guarantees the virtue of the blood. At the same time, though, a virgin’s blood could be seen as literally different from that of a nonvirgin.”\(^{45}\) Lucrece’s blood is understood to be superior in that she is of the noble class, but this is not emphasized as much as it is for Coriolanus. Of most importance for our female protagonist is that her blood is chaste. She is not a virgin, but great pains are taken to ensure that her blood is as close to virginal as is possible for a married woman. Hers is clean, virtuous blood. These descriptions of Lucrece as a chaste noblewoman work to increase the drama and intensify the tragedy of her eventual fate.

The Lucrece that we meet in the beginning of the poem is set up to serve as a point of comparison for the state that Lucrece finds herself in after her rape by Lucius Tarquinius. The question then is whether we are to understand Lucrece’s blood as physical blood, subject to change. Alternately, are we to understand Lucrece’s blood as having a kind of transcendence lent to it by her status as a noble and virtuous woman. It would be

\(^{44}\)Shakespeare. *Lucrece*, line 58.

easy to read *The Rape of Lucrece* and decide that Lucrece’s blood is only meant to be a symbol for her noble nature. Yet the incredible emphasis placed on her blood leads me to believe that Shakespeare may be playing with the question of whether a person’s body or soul plays a greater role in determining who they are and how they exist. Thus I believe that blood in this poem is something more than just a symbol. Blood seems to be a physical presence that has to be acknowledged and dealt with. This is why Lucrece struggles so much to come to terms with what has happened to her. For her, her blood is a solid, physical presence that complicates her desire to protest her innocence.

Of course early modern society did conceive of human beings as whole creatures made of a unity of body and soul. Yet following her rape, Lucrece struggles with the question of whether her body or her soul is more important to her state of being. Lucrece’s conflict is mirrored in Tarquin’s struggle to decide whether to follow the sexual desire of his body, or to follow the better judgment of his soul. Tarquin’s body wins out and he comes to Lucrece’s bedroom during the night. As Lucrece protests against Tarquin, trying to dissuade him from performing this crime against her, she tells him,

> “Thou art”, quoth she, “a sea, a sovereign king,  
And lo there falls unto thy boundless flood,  
Black lust, dishonor, shame, misgoverning  
Who seek to stain the ocean of thy blood.”


Lucrece characterizes Tarquin in terms of blood. The ocean of his blood is noble, but in transgressing the noble virtues that he should aspire to, his blood, and thus his entire person, will be tarnished. Lucrece casts Tarquin’s blood as something changeable, and more importantly, something over which he has control. The actions that Tarquin chooses to take will have a direct result on the quality of his blood.

Tarquin makes an attempt to justify his own actions, saying essentially that Lucrece’s beauty has bewitched him and removed his ability to make a choice. He replies,

The coulour in thy face,
That even for anger makes the lily pale
And the red rose blush at her own disgrace,
Shall plead for me and tell my loving tale.
Under that colour am I come to scale
Thy never-conquered fort. The fault is thine,
For those thine eyes betray thee unto mine.\footnote{lines 477-483.}

Shakespeare’s version of the story of Lucrece is generally regarded as the most psychologically complex version ever written due to the close look at the inner struggles of both main characters. This is in no way to suggest that Tarquin’s actions are excusable. What is interesting to note, however, is the way that both characters’ internal struggles are rhetorically represented. Shakespeare allows the reader to see the lengthy debate that Tarquin has with himself over whether or not he should go through with the crime against Lucrece. The language used to depict Tarquin’s thought process is in large part heavy with military allusions. In the above lines Tarquin claims that he has come to conquer Lucrece’s body, or “never-conquered fort.” In Tarquin’s language Lucrece is a fort, a stationary and inanimate object. He, on the other hand, is an active agent who will
conquer the fort. What are we to make then of Tarquin placing the blame for his crime on Lucrece if he has already said that he is the one taking action?

Katherine Eiseman Maus explores the problem of Tarquin’s faulty thinking in an article about the role of literary tropes in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Discussing the scene in question, Eiseman Maus writes:

Tarquin’s characteristic mode of self-justification does not involve arguing directly for the rightness of his action. Rather, he elaborates metaphors that allow him to establish a clear, if perverse, hierarchy of priorities, and then strenuously resist any attempts either to expand the interpretive possibilities of the tropes or to suggest ways in which the analogies might be faulty.49

Tarquin’s rhetoric indicates that while he wishes to acknowledge his act of aggression, and in his mind victory, he is not willing to accept responsibility for the crime. The trope of military prowess allows him to construct the kind of disarrayed rhetoric that expresses his lack of responsibility. He is a soldier merely carrying out orders. The harm and violence that his actions cause are necessary to achieve the goal of his military campaign. Therefore when Lucrece tries to remind Tarquin with images of his stained blood that he has moral responsibilities, he will not hear her.

Nancy Vickers has also pointed to the problem of literary tropes in establishing violence in *The Rape of Lucrece*. It is notable that the very features of Lucrece that Tarquin remarks upon before raping her are those that Lucrece is praised for in the beginning of the poem. Tarquin specifically mentions the Petrarchan images of the lilies and roses of Lucrece’s face, claiming that the qualities for which her husband Collatine

boasted of her are now the reason for the crime he will commit against her.\footnote{Nancy Vickers. “‘The Blazon of Sweet Beauty’s Best’: Shakespeare’s \textit{Lucrece}. ” in \textit{Shakespeare and the Question of Theory}. Ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (NY: Methuen, 1985), pp.111-112.} Amy Greenstadt draws on Vickers’ article to argue that Shakespeare’s poem is an attempt to move past being embedded in literary tropes such as the blazon. Thus Greenstadt reads Lucrece as seeking to find a way to assume authorial control over her own body in defining what she is and what will become of her.

Imagery of stained and tarnished blood is applied to Lucrece after her rape. Lucrece tries several times to tell someone about her rape by Tarquin, but her shame is so great that she cannot do so. While physical descriptions of paling and blushing are certainly tied to purity and virtue, they also indicate the physical movement of blood within the body. Thus the actions of Lucrece’s blood are at the center of attention both in praising her virtue and in drawing the unwanted attention of Tarquin. Just as the meaning of Lucrece’s blushing and paling skin is interpreted through the gaze of other characters, so Lucrece’s gaze falls on the subjects of the paintings hung about her home. Throughout the poem Lucrece looks at and ponders paintings. While the stanzas concerning the paintings can seem like a strange detour from the narrative, it quickly becomes clear that Lucrece is using the paintings as a way to interpret her own situation. She often sees reflections of herself and those about her in the painted images. It is within these paintings that the deceptive capabilities of physical appearance, and of art, are discussed.

For instance, Shakespeare comments on a painting of Sinon, the treacherous Greek:

\begin{quote}
In him the painter laboured with his skill  
To hide deceit and give the harmless show  
An humble gait, calm looks, eyes wailing still,
\end{quote}
A brow unbent that seemed to welcome woe;
Cheeks neither red nor pale, but mingled so
That blushing red no guilty instance gave
Nor ashy pale the fear that false hearts have.  

On one level Shakespeare is describing the ability of the painter to mix the colors red and white so that Sinon looks neither guilty nor fearful in the painting. Just as the movement of Lucrece’s blood in the beginning of the poem is described as holding her in a perfect balance of beauty and modesty, so the painting of Sinon is described as holding him in perfect balance. Thus Lucrece’s mind begins to apply the painting to her own situation after being raped by Tarquin. Lucrece rationalizes that a form as innocent looking as Sinon’s surely could not be guilty of so horrible a crime as destroying Troy, “Such signs of truth in his plain face she spied/That she concludes the picture was belied.” The picture then mirrors Lucrece’s desire to prove herself innocent of any wrong doing despite what has happened to her physical body. Nonetheless, Lucrece has still to deal with the fact that she trusted Tarquin because of his noble look despite the fact that he was actually always treacherous.

At last, Lucrece is overcome with rage at the impossibility of finding a perfect unity between physical appearance and inward intention. She comments on Sinon’s deception of Priam:

‘Such devils steal effects from lightless hell,
For Sinon in his fire doth quake with cold,
And in that cold hot-burning fire doth dwell.
These contraries such unity do hold
Only to flatter fools and make them bold;
So Priam’s trust false Sinon’s tears doth flatter

51 Shakespeare. Lucrece, lines 1506-12.

52 Shakespeare. Lucrece, lines 1532-33.
That he finds means to burn his Troy with water.\textsuperscript{53}

Lucrece is finally forced to accept that there is not a perfect alignment between a person’s physical appearance and their character. In anger she shreds the painting of Sinon with her nails, “Comparing him to that unhappy guest/Whose deed hath made herself herself detest.”\textsuperscript{54} Rather than finding any comfort in the idea that there was nothing to outwardly indicate Tarquin’s villainy, and thus no way that she could have known, she is discouraged by the fact that she can do nothing to punish either Sinon or Tarquin. Tarquin’s and Sinon’s evil souls dwell inside of innocent looking forms, and this is difficult for Lucrece to accept. Even more difficult is the inconsistency that she feels between her own violated body and her noble character.

Just as she protested against Tarquin, Lucrece also tries to assert agency by protesting the idea that she, meaning her interior self or mind, is in any way accountable for her rape. Also like her protest against Tarquin, this argument is placed in terms of her blood. Lucrece, though innocent of any wrong-doing in her rape, still feels that she has been made unchaste, and thus insists that at least her mind is not guilty of any crime. She says,

\begin{quote}
    Though my gross blood be stain’d with this abuse,
    Immaculate and spotless is my mind;
    That was not forced; that never was inclined
    To accessory yieldings, but still pure
    Doth in her poison’d closet yet endure.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} lines 1555-61

\textsuperscript{54} lines 1565-66.

\textsuperscript{55} Shakespeare. \textit{Lucrece}, lines 1655-59.
Lucrece feels that her body has been tarnished, but the language she chooses to communicate this focuses specifically on her blood. She feels that her blood has been stained. Yet she believes that her blood, and thus her body as a whole, does not possess the ability to affect her mind. Her body is only the “poisoned closet” of her mind. Thus for Lucrece in this instance, it would appear that her mind is more central to her personhood than her body.

At this point Lucrece is utilizing a viewpoint put forth by St. Augustine in his *City of God Against the Pagans*. Augustine posits that because of the Fall, God has punished human beings by placing a divide between their consciousness and their carnal desires. Augustine deals specifically with the issue of raped women and whether or not we should regard them as in any way culpable for their rape. Augustine says of chastity that it, “has its seat in the strength of the will” and “if that will continues unshaken and steadfast, whatever anyone does with the body or to the body…involves no blame to the sufferer.”

Lucrece pleads her case saying that her will was not involved in her rape. Her body was acted on by Tarquin without any consent from her mind. According to an Augustinian viewpoint, then, Lucrece’s chastity is not affected and she is not responsible for her rape.

Yet Lucrece cannot be so simply understood because she ultimately defies the views that she expresses here and commits suicide. Amy Greenstadt notes that the Augustinian viewpoint Lucrece at first promotes was a direct contradiction to that of Jerome, who had said that Lucrece, “would not survive her violated chastity, but blotted

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out the stain upon her person with her own blood.” According to Jerome then, Lucrece’s blood performs the salvific work of cleansing her violated person. The question remains whether Lucrece’s person is her physical body, which she herself feels has been tarnished, or her soul, which Lucrece argues is innocent. Lucrece does express the opinion that her blood has the potential to purify her. After she decides that she will wait for Collatine to come home and afterward commit suicide she says:

‘Thou, Collatine, shalt oversee this will.
How was I overseen that thou shalt see it!
My blood shall wash the slander of mine ill;
My life’s foul deed my life’s fair end shall free it.
Faint not, faint heart, but stoutly say “So be it.”
Yield not to my hand, my hand shall conquer thee;
Thou dead, both die, and both shall victors be.’

Thus Lucrece believes that by committing suicide, and specifically by spilling her blood, she will be able to purify her name of the stain that she believes has been brought upon it. While she may never be able to cleanse her body to her satisfaction, she can exercise some power over her life. Yet Lucrece very specifically stipulates that Collatine must be present to witness the suicide. Later in the poem Lucrece writes a letter to Collatine telling him about her rape at the hands of Tarquin, but she carefully leaves out any mention of the depth of grief that she feels and specifically decides to wait until he comes home in order to commit suicide. Shakespeare describes Lucrece’s decision not to write to Collatine of her desire to commit suicide: “She dares not thereof make discovery, /Lest he should hold it her own gross abuse/Ere she with blood had stained her stain’s


in other words, Lucrece has to be very careful about how her desire for death, and her eventual suicide are interpreted. Coriolanus attempted to define the Volscian soldiers as something shameful to Aufidius, thereby stripping them of their honorable sacrifice. Lucrece knows that there is a danger in dying of no longer having the ability to define one’s own death, and she is determined to use her death as a way of asserting her own power. As the lines in which she contemplates the painting of Sinon suggest, Lucrece has had to let go of the idea that a person’s physical appearance can be trusted to accurately represent their character. This is why she is so careful about how she is being interpreted. She feels that there is no way for her to ever have a physical form that will be compatible with the purity of her character, and as such it will take a drastic action to purify her.

The question then ceases to be whether Lucrece’s body or soul is more fundamental to her understanding of herself. When she asks, “My body or my soul, which was the dearer?”, she seems almost to be acknowledging the ridiculousness of such a question. Katharine Eisman Maus notes, “What she yearns for is her condition before the rape when there was no need to make a choice between the body and the soul.”

Lucrece herself is shocked out of a comfortable space in which she never gave thought to the relationship between body and soul. The picture of her at the beginning of the poem is specifically designed to let the reader know that Lucrece’s virtuous nature is working in perfect harmony with her body. By the end of the poem Lucrece has determined that her soul is the most important part of her, but she is aware that continuing to live will require

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her to inhabit her physical body. Rather than being subjected to a body that she feels has been tarnished, she chooses to die on her own terms. The end of the poem offers a graphic description of Lucrece’s suicide. Shakespeare describes the blood pouring from Lucrece after she stabs herself in the chest.

And bubbling from her breast, it doth divide
In two slow rivers that the crimson blood
Circles her body in on every side,
Who like a late-sack’d island vastly stood
Bare and unpeopled in this fearful flood.
  Some of her blood still pure and red remain’d
  And some look’s black, and that false Tarquin stain’d.⁶¹

Lucrece’s blood is spoken of as carrying her essence, both her virtue, which the poem continually tells us is her true nature, and the stain that Tarquin has brought on her. Yet the language of the poem still does not resolve the issue of whether Lucrece had an enduringly virtuous nature within her. The poem acknowledges that Tarquin is responsible for bringing the stain on Lucrece, but the stain is still a part of her blood. Yet some of her blood still remained untarnished. Lucrece cannot conceive of a way that her raped body, a body symbolized by her blood, can go on living the life that it did before. Thus we see that Lucrece’s narrow understanding of herself as the embodiment of faithfulness and chastity causes her life to end in even greater tragedy. This is the reading long attributed to *The Rape of Lucrece*. Margaret Vasileiou argues that “By penetrating and unsheathing her soul, then, she hopes to expose the self that is obfuscated, imprisoned, and polluted by that body that mediates her self to the world.”⁶² Vasileiou

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believes that the narrator uses the language of red and black blood to point back to the Petrarchan imagery that has run throughout the poem. The narrator uses that Petrarchan imagery to point to the futility of Lucrece’s attempt to reveal her true self. Yet I believe that the agency in this scene is in the hands of Lucrece rather than the narrator.

Lucrece has revealed her awareness that her mind is of greater importance than her soul, but she also knows that something has been taken from her. Yes, her mind remains spotless of any crime, but her mind still has to exist simultaneously with her body, and this is the obstacle that Lucrece cannot get around. Lucrece’s suicide is her way of taking action, of taking her fate into her own hands. The divergent streams of blood reveal to the reader what Lucrece had already accepted. A person’s self is not a unified whole, but a fragmented thing.

Yet what exactly is the blood in the ending of The Rape of Lucrece? Since Lucrece is a woman it is not considered part of her duty to shed blood or to bleed publicly. For a better understanding of Lucrece’s mindset we can look again to her contemplation of the paintings around her. Lucrece begins by looking at a painting of soldiers of Troy dying in the Trojan War: “And from the strand of Dardan where they fought/ To Simois’ reedy banks the red blood ran,/ Whose waves to imitate the battle sought.”63 The men of Troy are allowed to have glorious deaths, as the flow of their blood on the banks of the river is regarded with pride. Surely those men suffered pain in battle, but they are allowed the comfort of knowing that their deaths are regarded as honorable sacrifices. In contrast to the public display of the soldier’s bleeding bodies,

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63 Shakespeare. Lucrece, lines 1436-38.
Lucrece regards the painting of Hecuba, queen of Troy, as the most distressing image.

Shakespeare describes Hecuba:

In her the painter had anatomized
Time’s ruin, beauty’s wreck, and grim care’s reign.
Her cheeks with chaps and wrinkles were disguised,
Of what she was no semblance did remain
Her blue blood changed to black in every vein,
   Wanting the spring that those shrunk pipes had fed,
   Showed life imprisoned in a body dead.\(^{64}\)

Lucrece sees nothing to be feared in the images of the bleeding soldiers. Their suffering is allowed to be known and is validated as a noble action. Lucrece sees what she truly fears in the image of Hecuba. Just as Lucrece saw a mirror image of Tarquin in the painting of Sinon, she may view Hecuba as a reflection of herself. Hecuba offers a visual representation of fallen nobility. Hecuba is described as a woman who has lost all of her beauty, the very quality that Lucrece has always been praised for. Interestingly, Hecuba’s ruin is described in terms of the color of her blood. Rather than healthy blue blood, Hecuba’s blood has turned black in her veins, the color believed to represent dishonor. In the same regard, Lucrece believes that her blood has been stained, and the poem depicts some of her blood as flowing black. When Shakespeare writes that Hecuba “Showed life imprisoned in a body dead,” he is revealing to us what Lucrece fears most. Lucrece does not want to go on living in a body that has been stripped of its nobility and power the way that Hecuba did. In short, Lucrece feels imprisoned in her body, and she will do anything to escape her prison.

Thus the hiddenness of her blood, of what lies within her, is the source of Lucrece’s anxiety. She feels that she has been stained with an impurity, but it is not an

\(^{64}\) Shakespeare. *Lucrece*, lines 1450-56.
impurity that is readily seen by the eye. Of course Lucrece’s understanding of her rape is informed by her understanding of her role in the body politic. Her role in the body politic is closely tied to the condition of her physical body; she must remain pure of body in order to fulfill her role as a noble wife. Therefore Lucrece’s anxiety throughout the poem is not about her body being opened. Rather opening her body and allowing her blood to transcend the boundary of the skin is Lucrece’s solution to the problem. Though we can assume that Lucrece may have sustained some injury as a result of her rape, her body has no bleeding wounds to testify to it, which is why no one is aware of her rape until she tells Collatine. Lucrece believes that the blood still living and moving behind the boundary of her skin has been tarnished by being mingled with that of Tarquinius when it was only meant to be mingled with that of her husband. It is only in opening her body to the eyes of others, in willingly allowing herself to bleed to death, that Lucrece believes she will preserve her nobility. Lucrece specifically chooses a very dramatically and publically bloody death. She wants people to see her blood and to know that she has taken control over it. She is transgressing the idea that the bleeding of women is a private and unclean affair.

In fact, if we take into account the previous comment by Rene Girard on the difference between the impurity of dried blood and the salvific nature of free flowing blood, then Lucrece’s blood is a purifying agent in this scene. The description of the blood’s movement as it bubbles forth, divides into two rivers, and encircles Lucrece’s body becomes even more striking when we think of fresh blood as pure. Yet there is still the issue of the discoloration of Lucrece’s blood. According to the tenets of Galenic medicine blood could be corrupted by exterior sources, and in Lucrece’s case that
exterior source was Tarquin. Yet the body could also be restored by purging the stagnant and corrupted blood. Of course Lucrece’s rape is no fault of hers and she should not be held responsible for it, but she is nonetheless seeking a way to assert agency over her own body. Thus despite the fact that Tarquin apparently left a mark on Lucrece’s blood, this scene is still one in which Lucrece restores and purifies herself to her own satisfaction. In a violent bloodletting, Lucrece purges herself of her “gross blood” and purifies herself in an almost ritualistic way by allowing her body to be covered and circled by her free flowing blood. Though we can interpret this scene as one of agency and empowerment for Lucrece, we are nonetheless left with the end of the poem in which Lucrece is subjected to the gaze and interpretation of the people of Rome.

In letting her blood come forth Lucrece is not necessarily trying to reveal her true self. Rather, she is seizing an opportunity to put her fragmented self on display. If no verdict can be reached as to whether mind or body is more important for the making of a person then at least whatever she is made of can be seen by others. St. Augustine may believe that a person cannot be held responsible for a sexual crime against them, but that is not necessarily helpful for a woman whose only model for thinking about her identity has been as a unified whole. Though Collatine and Lucrece’s father try to convince her that she is not to blame for her rape, she nonetheless refuses to go on living as a victim. Lucrece fears that she will be interpreted in terms that she has no control over.

Lucrece is talked of at the end of the poem as a woman who had a vicious crime committed against her, but who was so true to her pure and chaste nature that she could not stand to live in a tarnished body. At least, this is the view put forth by the men, such as her father and her husband, who witness her death. To ensure that everyone in Rome
knows of Lucrece’s tragically noble death they resolve, after deciding to have revenge
against Tarquin, to put Lucrece’s body on display.

When they had sworn to this advised doom
They did conclude to bear dead Lucrece thence,
To show her bleeding body thorough Rome,
And so to publish Tarquin’s foul offence;
Which being done with speedy diligence,
    The Romans plausibly did give consent
To Tarquin’s everlasting banishment.65

Thus the people of Rome are seeing Lucrece as she wanted. She is a tragic heroine, who
in her essential nature, was chaste and powerful. Lucrece recognized that the unleashing
of her blood from its container would be the only moment she had to seize power over
her own body. She would allow the bleeding of a female body to be a symbol of agency
in a way that was transgressively public and open. Seizing control over how a bleeding
body is perceived still equates to power.

In both Coriolanus and Lucrece there appears to be an intricate connection
between how bleeding bodies are perceived and power dynamics. For both of these
characters shedding blood is a necessity, either as a display of courage or of personal
autonomy. Their great struggle is to see that their bleeding bodies will convey the
message that they want others to receive. For Coriolanus this is largely tied to
establishing himself as a military hero. As such, Coriolanus is careful to assert that his
shed blood is a courageous sacrifice rather than a symbol of weakness or mortality. The
problem for Coriolanus is that in his quest to dominate the battlefield, a place where
blood freely flows, he has neglected to forge a healthy relationship with the Roman body

65Shakespeare. Lucrece, lines 1849-55.
politic, a body that he is expected to be a part of. Because Coriolanus consistently defies the will of Rome, he is eventually cut off from the body and left for dead.

Lucrece’s understanding of herself is at first very much informed by the social order. Yet her struggle has less to do with a direct political conflict than with the very private issue of defining oneself after suffering trauma. Lucrece does not necessarily wish to escape the social order; in fact she was very happily a part of it before her rape at the hands of Tarquin. It is after she has been forced to face the division of her mind and body, reaching the conclusion that her mind is of greater importance, that she decides she cannot continue to live. Though she knows, and her husband and father also acknowledge, that she is not to blame, Lucrece is unwilling to go through the rest of her life being viewed as a victim. In the end the act of publicly spilling her own blood gives her the moment of power that she is looking for. It is not about presenting herself as a unified whole set against the social order. Rather, Lucrece just wants to make the reality that she is changeable, fragmented, but ultimately still powerful known to those around her. Thus seizing power over her blood is also the medium through which Lucrece finds agency.

In order to create such a psychologically complex telling of the tale of Lucrece Shakespeare pushes his readers to think hard not only about the act of violence committed by Tarquin in the poem, but about the underlying system that leads to such as act. From the outset Shakespeare plays on the idea of Lucrece’s idealized femininity, specifically her noble femininity. Thus Shakespeare sets up the poem so that we see how contentedly Lucrece exists in her state at the beginning of the poem. Once the rape occurs, Shakespeare allows us to see Lucrece’s desperate search for understanding within
the paintings, but she ultimately comes to the conclusion that she remains alive the only option for her is utter ruin. Thus the central question that Shakespeare so adeptly explores is that of women’s, and especially noble women’s opportunities for self-definition, which, he seems to suggest are virtually nonexistent. Lucrece has been defined within very narrow parameters for her entire life, and now that she has been violently forced out of those parameters she has nowhere to go that will offer her any real fulfillment. Thus Shakespeare does not deny the horror of what Tarquin has done, but suggests that another crime has been committed against Lucrece by society at large. Lucrece has been brought up in a system that has taught her that unless she is virtuous she is worthless and has defined her virtue in terms of her sexuality. Thus while the rape itself is undoubtedly a tragedy, the play also suggests that forcing women to live in system in which they are offered no means of recovering from a crime such as rape is equally, and perhaps more enduringly, tragic.

Blood is an incredibly striking visual image. More than that, it has undergone centuries of changing medical understanding and carries immense metaphorical meaning. Blood has been believed to be a source of ritualistic power, a source of purification, the seat of human emotion, the river which carries nutrients or disease throughout the body. As such, blood is not just blood; it means something more. Both *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* and *The Rape of Lucrece* treat blood as a substance that signifies both power and mortality. Because blood is such a powerful substance, the sacred liquid which animates us with life, it is important for those who shed their blood that it be understood as empowering. If the blood you shed is a symbol of courage, then that blood will be perceived as more than a sign of death. It will signify a life powerfully lived.
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