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The Derivation of Identity: Gender, Masculinity, and Sexuality in Coriolanus

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Abstract

William Shakespeare wrote *Coriolanus* (1608) when two epistemological modes, empiricism and theater, asserted competing constructions of selfhood. As Renaissance anatomical texts imply, empiricism voiced an increasingly stable and innate subjectivity. In contrast, theater imagined identity as fluid and subject to external manipulation by exposure to the stage. Coriolanus faces a dilemma of selfhood reflecting those conflicting epistemological modes. Outside agents attempt to change his subjectivity, but he resists this coercion, maintaining a stable and innate subjectivity. In contrast, theater imagined identity as fluid and subject to external manipulation by exposure to the stage. Coriolanus faces a dilemma of selfhood reflecting those conflicting epistemological modes. Outside agents attempt to change his subjectivity, but he resists this coercion, maintaining a stable and innate subjectivity.

Methodology

- New Historicism
- Roots in specific historical context
- Focuses on subjectivity in relation to power hierarchies inflected by gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality
- Used *Early English Books Online* Digital Archive to access rare books as a historical context for understanding subjectivity
- Consulted fifteenth- and sixteenth-century anatomical treatises
- Gender Studies
- Highlights power relations inherent in constructions of gender
- Assumes gender as socially constructed
- Identifies and critiques representations of gender in literary texts
- Close Textual Analysis
- Scrutinizes play text passages dealing with masculinity and identifies nuanced meanings of words
- Collects data through identification of literary devices such as image, rhyme, rhythm, and metaphor
- Base interpretive conclusions on a preponderance of evidence

Analysis

- **Towards an Empirical Epistemology**
  - Galenic and Aristotelian theories of sex identity
  - One-sex anatomical system: major difference between males and females is location of reproductive organs
  - Females lacked heart and considered unpervaded differentiation of males
  - Distancing of Early Modern anatomists from Galenic notions of the body (Billing 14)
- **Empirical and Theatrical Epistemologies in Coriolanus**
  - Empirical subjectivity where Coriolanus asserts his absolute selfhood:
    - “That, like an eagle in a dovecote, I / Fluttered your valiantness, to be your gallant / To make men think of me- But the thing was done.” (5.6.15-18)
  - Theatrical subjectivity where Volumnia claims Coriolanus’s identity comes from herself, asserting his externally derived subjectivity:
    - “With as big heart as thou. Do as thou list. Thy valiancy was mine, thou seest it from me, But owe thy pride thyself.” (5.2.29-31)

Conclusion

Whether theatrical or empirical notions of subjectivity predominate by the play’s end remains dubious, but Coriolanus certainly does not die as the absolute, stable, individual he claims for himself. Indeed, Crooke’s *Microsomographia* and Vincenzo’s *De humani corporis fabrica* assert an increasingly static ontology through observation even as theater’s golden age proclaimed a fluid and utterly performative subjectivity. These two emergent epistemological modes of Early Modern England compete yet simultaneously build problematic constructions of English nationalism and colonialism to be worked out in the crucible of gender, class, and ethnic relations in the centuries to follow. Just as Aufidius’s unannouncing of Coriolanus descends into violence, so these clashing mechanisms of knowing spur troubling ideologies haunting developing European nationalism for the next three centuries.

Selected Bibliography