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Matthew Chacko
Andrews University

L. Monique Pittman Ph.D.
Andrews University

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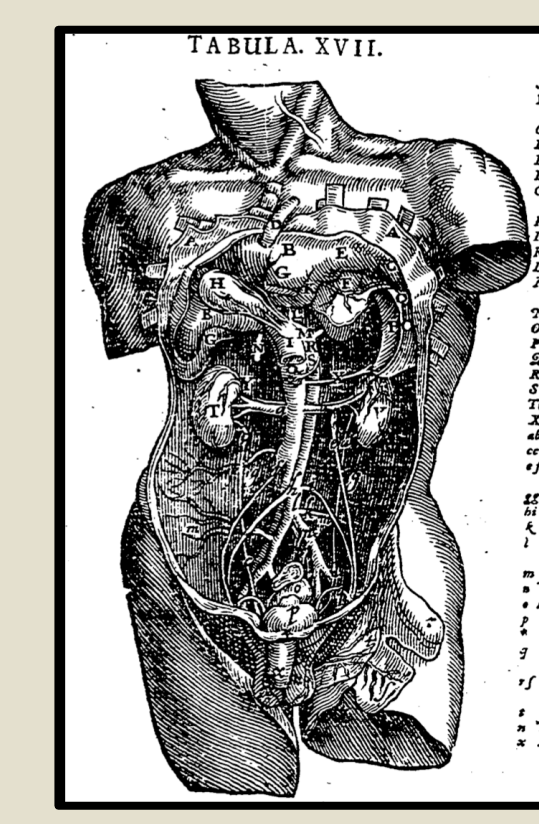
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The Derivation of Identity: Gender, Masculinity, and Sexuality in *Coriolanus*

Matthew W. Chacko, Dr. L. Monique Pittman, Department of English, Andrews University



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, mirroring the theater, while Coriolanus asserts his immutable identity, paralleling empirical understandings. Coriolanus's concerns of selfhood echo Renaissance subjective anxieties during a changing period as different epistemologies, empiricism and theater, launched rival notions of identity. While much *Coriolanus* scholarship examines the eponymous hero's subjective crisis, this project breaks new ground by placing that crisis in the context of emergent somatic epistemologies.



Methodology

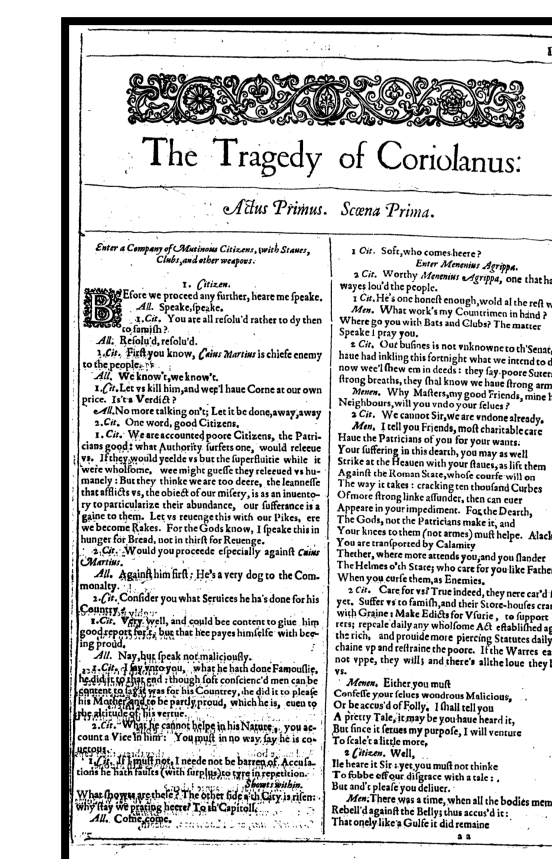
- New Historicism
 - Roots analysis in specific historical context
 - Focuses on subjectivity in relation to power hierarchies inflected by gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality
 - Used *Early English Books Online* Digital Archive to access rare books as a historical context for understanding subjectivity
 - 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
 - Bases 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 heat and considered unperfected version of males
 - Distancing of Early Modern anatomists from Galenic notions of the body (Billing 14)
 - Gradual transition to a two-sex model where men and woman possess essential differences
 - Anatomical treatises begin positing stable and fixed subjectivity
 - Thomas Vicary's *A profitable Treatise of the Anatomie of mans body* (1577)
 - “And in man it is hotte, white, a thicke, wherefore it may not spread nor runne abroade of it selfe, but runneth and taketh temperaunce of the womans sparme, which hath contrarie qualities, for the womans sparme is thinner, colder, and feebler” (111)
 - Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia* (1615)
 - “But what shall we say to those so many stories of women changed into men? Truly, I thinke saith he, all of them monstrous and some not credible. But if such a thing shall happen, it may well be answered that such parties were Hermaphradites, that is, had the parts of both sexes, which because of the weakenesse of their heate in their nonage lay hid, but brake out afterward as their heate grew unto strength” (250)
- Theatrical Epistemology
 - Identity subject to change by exposure to stage
 - Person's subjectivity contingent on external surroundings
 - Social paranoia concerning theater's ability to alter the subject (Orgel 37)
- Empirical and Theatrical Epistemologies in *Coriolanus*
 - Empirical subjectivity where Coriolanus asserts his absolute selfhood:
 - “That, like an eagle in a dovecote, I / Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles. / Alone I did it. ‘Boy?’” (5.6.115-18)
 - 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 valiantness was mine, thou suck'st it from me, But owe thy pride thyself” (3.2.129-31)
 - Aufidius caustically scorns Coriolanus's actions, deconstructing the protagonist's masculine identity:
 - CORIOLANUS. Hear'st thou, Mars?
 - AUFIDIUS. Name not the god, thou boy of tears. (5.6.102-03)

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 *Microcosmographia* and Vicary's *Anatomie* 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 unnamings of Coriolanus descends into violence, so these clashing mechanisms of knowing spur troubling ideologies haunting developing English nationalism for the next three hundred years.



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