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**Barbara
Bočkaj**

**Mercy at the Price of One Fair Word:
Language of Honour in *Timon of
Athens* and *Coriolanus***

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

BARBARA BOČKAJ

University of Zagreb

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This paper examines William Shakespeare's tragedies *Timon of Athens* (1606) and *Coriolanus* (1608), focusing particularly on the storylines of Alcibiades and Coriolanus, both distinguished soldiers who turn on their cities. The paper argues that the source of conflict lies in the characters ascribing greater importance to language than their communities do.

The first part of the paper looks more closely at the two soldiers in order to establish their position and character, while the second part focuses on the central conflicts in their storylines, with particular emphasis on the role played by language. Due to the prominent position given to oaths in warrior honour code, soldiers' use of language is inextricably linked to their bodies, which is another aspect of language use explored in the paper. As a consequence, the soldiers experience difficulties in communication with their communities, leading ultimately to their marginalisation.

KEYWORDS

***Timon of Athens*, *Coriolanus*, chivalry, language of honour**

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* follows the eponymous nobleman's decline in Athenian society following his bankruptcy and eventual self-imposed exile. A secondary storyline introduces Alcibiades, a veteran warrior fighting for Athens, who turns against the city after a failed attempt to save one of his soldiers from the death penalty. One of Shakespeare's final plays, the Roman tragedy *Coriolanus*, once again takes up the theme of the banished warrior who seeks to revenge himself on the city he protected.

This paper explores the similarities and differences in the storylines of the banished warriors in these two plays. The first step in the analysis is to establish Alcibiades' and Coriolanus' positions in society by taking a closer look at how society perceives them individually and their role. This is then contrasted with their own perceptions of their profession and their role as warriors. The discrepancy between these two perceptions of the role of the warrior is embodied most obviously in the central conflicts in Alcibiades' and Coriolanus' narratives. The second section of this paper looks more closely at those conflicts, with emphasis on language and its role in those episodes. By exploring how the two warriors use language and contrasting it to the civilians' use, attention is drawn to the fact that the warriors' use of language (in particular in relation to their bodies) ultimately results in their marginalisation and exclusion from their respective societies. Contrary to expectation, the veterans' role as warriors is not presented as a privileged position in society, but is rather shown to be a problematic one. Both plays deromanticize the chivalric role of the warrior and emphasize isolation as an inherent trait in the figure of a soldier.

Like to a Lonely Dragon: A Warrior's Position in Society

The very beginning of *Timon of Athens* distinguished Alcibiades from other characters in the play. Timon, due to his standing in society and the accompanying wealth, is besieged by sycophants hoping to be given rich presents. Alcibiades' first words in the play, however, are: 'Sir, you have saved my longing, and I feed / Most hungrily on your sight' (*Timon of Athens* 1.256-57). Although this might portray Alcibiades as just another leech, waiting to profit from Timon's bounty and using him as sustenance (187n256-7), the lines could also indicate the exact opposite – an intimate friendship. This is the first example of food imagery in the play. Until this point, those characters seeking to ingratiate themselves with Timon use the language of economy. Furthermore, it is not Timon that is Alcibiades' sustenance, but rather the *sight* of Timon. One particular early modern theory of sight, intramission, claims that 'each object of vision ha[s] its own spirits' (Sugg 35), which stream into the eye and make sight possible. Every person's spirits were thought to be responsible for the communication of body and soul, and were a kind of vapour or smoke, the rarest form of blood, responsible for

all physiological processes in the body (3). In this respect, Alcibiades could be understood as saying that the sight of Timon is nourishment for his soul.

Alcibiades' own perception of his profession is illustrated at several points in the play. At the banquet in scene two, Timon comments on Alcibiades' apparent reluctance to be there, by saying that he would probably rather be 'at a breakfast of enemies ... than a dinner of friends' (*Tim.* 2.75-76; ellipsis mine). Alcibiades responds as follows: if 'they were bleeding new, my lord, there's no meat like 'em. I could wish my best friend at such a feast.' (2.77-78). These lines are seemingly problematic, as they might be interpreted as Alcibiades' thirst for blood. However, the idea of death, or rather killing, as sustenance can also simply be a direct reference to the military profession. It not only references the adrenaline rush after a victory, but could also refer to the fact that killing is his occupation and source of income. This idea is reinforced by Timon commenting on the fact that Alcibiades, as a warrior, is 'seldom rich' (2.223). He gives him a present, saying it is a charity to Alcibiades as 'all thy living / Is 'mongst the dead, and all the lands thou hast / Lie in a pitched field' (2.223-226). The gift not only confirms that the two men are close (which is reaffirmed by using the pronoun 'thou'), but it also draws attention to the fact that the life of a warrior is a difficult one – death is both a way to make a living and a fact of life, either as a threat to one's own life or as consequence of a well-executed job. However, Alcibiades is quick to retort that the little land a soldier has is 'defiled land, my lord' (2.226), thus turning the image of a pitched battle into one of dung heaps (205n225). The land is defiled precisely because it is de-filed, i.e. because files of soldiers have either been scattered or exterminated, which shows that Alcibiades thinks of war as of a sordid affair. This, in conjunction with the fact that warfare is not a lucrative profession, works to paint the picture of a warrior not as a man seeking renown, but rather a much soberer figure, emphasizing the idea of service. This point is reiterated throughout the play, as when Alcibiades stands in defence of one of his men, saying the following: 'Why, I say, my lords, he's done fair service, / And slain in fight many of *your* enemies' (*Tim.* 10.61-62; emphasis added). Moreover, he calls Athens 'your city' in the final scene (17.61). Both of these instances could be interpreted as setting Alcibiades and soldiers in general apart from Athens and the rest of its population, and in their service (which could arguably also be interpreted as an inferior position).

By expanding on the image of war as a field in *Coriolanus*, a drastically different effect is achieved. While the eponymous character is away, fighting in a war, his mother and wife await his return to Rome. Virgilia, his wife, frets for him, while his mother Volumnia imagines him wreaking havoc in battle: 'His bloody brow / With his mailed hand then wiping, forth he goes, / Like to a harvest-man that's tasked to mow / Or all or lose his hire' (*Cor.* 1.3.35-38). The idea of death as the soldier's livelihood is retained, but this is where the similarities stop. It is important to stress that this is a civilian's idea of war, and the battlefield is imagined as fertile land. The warrior is in this instance magnified, portrayed as

the grim reaper, a personification of death itself. The added imperative of all-or-nothing might also be interpreted as pointing to quite a superficial idea of war, whereby only utter destruction and carnage secure the warrior's 'hire', i.e. fame (a word which is used three times in the play, twice by Coriolanus himself in contexts where it is associated with public opinion – cf. 2.2.146-49 and 2.3.109-10). This romanticised idea of a warrior's life is far removed from a veteran's point of view, who is forced to think of men as, in essence, glorified fertilizer.

There is, moreover, strong indication that Coriolanus himself does not idealize his profession. The excitement he feels before battle invariably becomes tempered after it. Instead of listening to praises from his general, Coriolanus says:

Pray now, no more. My mother,
Who has a charter to extol her blood,
When she does praise me, grieves me.
I have done as you have done, that's what I can;
Induced as you have been, that's for my country.
He that has but effected his good will
Hath overta'en mine act. (1.10.13-19)

This indicates not only that praise makes him feel uncomfortable, but also hints at the cause of unease – he feels he is simply doing his job. Additionally, he thinks much more of those soldiers who excel on the battlefield due to the strength of their convictions (those that only 'effect their] good will'). There are further examples of his embarrassment, both on the battlefield and in Rome. He tells Cominius that his wounds 'smart / To hear themselves remembered' (1.10.28-29), and that he did not go to battle to be shouted 'forth / In acclamations hyperbolic; / As if I loved my little should be dieted / In praises sauced with lies' (1.10.50-53), simply for doing that '[w]hich without note here's many else have done' (1.10.49). Cominius then compares him to a suicide, interpreting Coriolanus' dislike of praise as lethal damage to his reputation. In order to prevent this, Cominius gives his most distinguished warrior a new title – from now on he will be known not simply as Caius Martius, but will bear the addition of 'Coriolanus', a lasting reminder of his deeds at Corioli, when he stormed the enemy city alone and emerged from it covered head to foot in blood. Although this seems like a great honour, from Martius' perspective it might well be a punishment. His reaction is tellingly ambivalent, with him saying he will first wash and then they 'shall perceive / Whether I blush or no.' (1.10.69-70).

Before his return to Rome, however, the play focuses on civilians. Volumnia and Menenius, a patrician close to the family, discuss his wounds, meticulously numbering them and concluding that every 'gash was an enemy's grave' (2.1.151). Volumnia yet again paints a picture of Martius as an elemental force, saying: 'Before him / He carries noise, and behind him he leaves tears. / Death, that dark spirit, in's nery arm doth lie, / Which being advanced, declines; and then

men die' (2.1.154-157). The warrior is here no longer the personification of death, but rather its master, able to command it with the swing of his sword. After many exclamations and flourishes, Martius asks Romans to stop as 'it does offend [his] heart' (2.1.164). His 'Pray now, no more' (2.1.165) almost seems like pleading, and the fact that praise offends his heart and grieves him even when it comes from his mother implies that Martius' leaving the senate before Cominius' speech in his honour is not simply a performance. He does not want to 'idly sit / To hear [his] nothings monstered' (2.2.74-75), i.e. shown (226n75) and distorted (and to his mind also possibly perverted in the process).

But perhaps the most accurate description of a soldier's position in society is given by Martius himself, as he tries to reassure his family before he leaves his country forever: 'I go alone, / Like to a lonely dragon that his fen / Makes feared and talked of more than seen' (4.1.30-32). It is important to note here that water imagery in *Coriolanus* is used either by veterans or by other characters to refer to veterans.¹ The image of a formidable beast living in an inaccessible waterlogged area, terrifying anybody that comes near, is not only one of isolation. It also testifies to the fact that Martius is acutely aware of the root of the problem – his circumstances in life are the ones making him an outcast. This image again raises the question of the soldier's marginalisation, and underscores perceived threat as being at the heart of the matter. The threat, however, does not come from the dragon itself, but rather from his surroundings.

My Would Ache at You: Language as Weapon

That a soldier's role is that of an instrument has already been established with Alcibiades' continual emphasis on 'your enemies' and 'your city', placing him and other soldiers in a position almost of an outsider. The idea is given more complexity from the very beginning of *Coriolanus*. Within the first couple of lines the plebeians refer to Caius Martius as a 'very dog to the commonality' (1.1.26). With hunting being an alternative arena where masculine power could be measured (Lewis 44), it is interesting that the plebeians portray Martius as nothing more than a dog used to bait the commoners, as opposed to casting him as the hunter. In other words, the plebeians themselves seem to think of Martius as nothing more than an instrument, but at the same time treat him like the ultimate threat. A similar position, almost smacking of cognitive dissonance, is present in the perception of the soldier as part of society and its protector, while at the same time treating him as a threat to it. An example of this double standard is the veterans' use of language.

Menenius insults the tribunes much as Coriolanus does the plebeians, but his words are not taken seriously. More importantly, he recognizes that he is quick-tempered and easy to provoke, and in the same breath says the following: 'What I think, I utter, and spend my malice in my breath' (2.1.51-52).

Martius, however, is held to a different standard. What he utters is understood as open threat to the plebeians, without there being any possibility that he is simply venting his contempt. It should also be pointed out that his reproaches are based on his personal experience of the plebeians' unreliable behaviour on the battlefield, whereas the insults that Menenius offers the tribunes stem from their lower social status and the novelty of their political position. In other words, while civilians are allowed malicious utterances in the heat of the moment, warriors are expected to be mindful of what they are saying at all times. Warriors' utterances being treated differently not only places them in a different (and more precarious) position in society, but also testifies to the recognition that warriors use language differently.

This importance of language and its use harks back to medieval chivalric culture. The rules of medieval chivalry were customary (Meron 5), with oaths and promises playing a central role. They were the foundation of the system of honour (141-2), meaning that a knight who broke an oath was labelled a perjurer and traitor (142). The fact that a 'knight's oath was his word of honour' (143) certainly indicates that language (especially that of bonds) played an important role in the life of the warrior class. Understanding this sheds further light on the central conflict(s) in *Timon* – both the titular character and Alcibiades realise that language has lost its currency in Athens.

The tenth scene of *Timon* focuses solely on Alcibiades (the only scene to do so). The senators which have brushed Timon off after his ruin enter the scene, adamant in their decision to condemn an Athenian soldier to death for murdering another citizen. 'The fault's bloody', so "[t]is necessary he should die' (*Tim.* 10.1-2). Alcibiades attempts to shed more light on the event by saying that his friend 'in hot blood / Hath stepped into the law', as opposed to those 'that without heed do plunge into't' (10.11-13). He does his best to justify the soldier's reaction by characterizing him as a man 'lof comely virtues', which he didn't soil by running away like a coward. He is a man who

with a noble fury and fair spirit,
Seeing his reputation touched to death,
He did oppose his foe;
And with such sober and unnoted passion
He did behave his anger, ere 'twas spent,
As if he had but proved an argument. (10.18-22)

The phrase 'touched to death' is particularly interesting. The soldier's reputation was not only mortally wounded, but also infected (246n19) by whatever implication or affront was offered him. The imagery of wounds and illness implies that reputation is for a soldier almost as another body part, integral to his person. Thinking also of Cassio's lamenting his lost reputation in *Othello*, it could be claimed that it is precisely reputation which the soldier perceives to be the single redeeming

quality about himself. In this respect, words can be construed as weapons, and defending one's reputation is equally as important as defending one's physical integrity. Moreover, Alcibiades insists that the soldier did not overreact in any way. Quite the contrary, he lucidly managed his anger, as though he were debating.

Honour, as Schwerhoff remarks, is an elusive concept (31), and could be somewhat loosely defined as sitting half-way between self-respect or self-esteem and reputation, functioning as 'a 'second skin', which had to be defended against violent attacks just like one's physical skin' (36). These violent attacks could be both physical and verbal in nature and were even legally recognised as equally pernicious (36). Much like the unnamed soldier in *Timon*, men in Renaissance Europe frequently engaged in duels to protect their honour from threats. Such duels were a laic variant of the judicial duel of honour, which arose in the fourteenth century and was legally regulated (Cavina 572). Having initially been sanctioned by authority (Mondschein 286), once the duel became a more common occurrence unrelated to the judiciary it began posing a threat to authority of the monarch as it suggested that any man can take it on himself to punish transgressions. In the early seventeenth century, public duels became such a wide-spread occurrence in London that King James did his best to condemn them (Waggoner 303). This might also have created an additional pressure on those in the military profession, as their position was already declining during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, whose 'foreign policy typically consisted of flirtation [...] and inconstancy' (Rapple 48). Using a combination of legal action and public pressure, the King and the government eventually succeeded in their campaign, leading to a change in rhetoric surrounding duels (Waggoner 303-4). Prominent members of society were openly against it, considering it to have an inflammatory effect on society, putting the person into an impossible position of either reacting to (perceived) affronts or being shamed for not reacting (303). The Athenian senators in *Timon* echo this idea when they say that this kind of valour 'lils valour misbegot, and came into the world / When sects and factions were newly born' (*Tim.* 10.29-30). In other words, this sectarian monopoly on valour is perceived as an aberration, and the senators proceed to claim that true valour is being able to suffer wrongs and bear them with dignity.

Alcibiades then tries to speak from the position of a soldier. If suffering is valiant, why do soldiers 'expose themselves to battle, / And not endure all threats, sleep upon't, / And let the foes quietly cut their throats / Without repugnancy' (10.42-45). Alcibiades does not claim monopoly on valour for soldiers, but rather tries to make a case for the right of a soldier to remain consistent, i.e. to retain the right to live according to his code both in times of war and peace. Alcibiades does agree that murder in cold blood is a condemnable sin, but also emphasizes that 'in defence, by mercy, 'tis most just' (10.55), and in saying this, once more stresses the fact that verbal threat is understood to be equally as dangerous as physical threat. In order to further strengthen the soldier's case, Alcibiades again draws attention to the soldier's service to Athens, claiming that what he did at

Lacedaemon and Byzantium is a 'sufficient briber for his life' (10.60), as he had 'slain in fight many of your enemies. / How full of valour did he bear himself / In the last conflict, and made plenteous wounds' (10.62-64).

As the senators remain implacable, Alcibiades resorts to language of bonds and transactions, but even that fails, showing that language is a weak currency in Athens. The warrior is left 'Irlich only in large hurts' (10.107), and even his desperate cry of 'Imly wounds ache at you' (10.94) leaves the senators implacable and earns him banishment. In other words, Alcibiades' attempt to defend his soldier shows not only that for soldiers and warriors language can very easily become physical, but also that physicality and the body in itself is a language which soldiers read differently to civilians.

These ideas in scene ten in *Timon*, attributed to Thomas Middleton (244nSc.10), are further expanded on and nuanced by Shakespeare over the course of several scenes in *Coriolanus*. The crux of the matter, however, is contained in Martius' unwillingness to retroactively redact his language. He refuses to go back on his word and pander to the plebeians by telling them what they want to hear. He is forced, however, by Menenius and Volumnia to humble himself before the plebeians and be milder in his approach. When a citizen approaches him with '[y]ou have / not, indeed, loved the common people' (*Cor.* 2.3.88-89), Martius replies with: 'You should account me the more virtuous that I have not been common in my love' (2.3.90-91). This could be understood as more than just an attempt at manipulation, as the remainder of the speech gives an impression of bitterness. Martius openly shows how little he thinks of flattery when he says: "'Tis a condition they account gentle. And since the wisdom of their choice is rather to *have my hat than my heart*, I will practice the insinuating nod and be off to them most counterfeitly; that is, sir, I will counterfeit the bewitchment of some popular man, and give it bountiful to the desirers' (2.3.93-98; emphasis added). The phrase 'popular man' might be a jab at the tribunes, who manipulate the plebeians very effectively, very often and in crucial moments by lying to them (as when they claim that Martius plans to rule as a tyrant after they elect him consul).

In the same scene, Martius also says the following:

For your voices I have fought,
Watched for your voices, for your voices bear
Of wounds two dozen odd; battles thrice six
I have seen and heard of; for your voices
Have done many things, some less, some more. (2.3.122-126)

Given Martius' opinion of the plebeians, 'your voices' could be expanded to mean 'Rome'. The above speech could then be taken to mean not that he fought to get their voices, but that he fought for them all to be able to have their voices in Rome, i.e., to be free and speak freely.

However, the plebeians cannot see past his curtness, and violent protests break out with the tribunes' blessing. Martius refuses to change his rhetoric, preferring to be blunt still, keeping in fashion with the stereotypical image of the laconic soldier (Jorgensen 227). The tribunes use this to their advantage, and call him a traitor to Rome, knowing that he will not be able to control himself after such an affront. Martius' reliance on to-the-point and truthful language is best illustrated in the following speech:

The fires i'th' lowest hell fold in the people!
Call me their traitor, thou injurious tribune!
Within thine eyes sat twenty thousand deaths,
In thy hands clutched as many millions, in
Thy lying tongue both numbers, I would say
'Thou liest' unto thee with a voice as free
As I do pray the gods. (*Cor.* 3.3.68-74)

Forgetting his promise to be milder, Martius no longer cares about the people's judgement and resolves 'not to buy / Their mercy at the price of one fair word' (3.3.91-92), preferring whatever punishment is in store, including death.

His prioritisation of (his idea of) truth is made obvious in 3.2, when Menenius asks him to apologise to the plebeians and publicly repent for verbally abusing them. Martius' reply is: 'For them? *I cannot do it to the gods, / Must I then do't to them?*' (40-41; emphasis added), clearly letting everybody know that he is not in the habit of mincing words. He is also recognized by others as honest: 'He would not flatter Neptune for his trident / ... His heart's his mouth. / What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent' (3.1.258-60). Prioritising honesty likewise does not allow him to hyperbolise his achievements, which is what other characters seem intent on doing. This reluctance to make a show of his 'achievements' is stressed most forcefully in Martius' attempts to avoid showing the plebeians his scars (which he needs to do in order to become consul). He begs to 'o'erleap that custom' because he cannot ask them for their voices only for the sake of his wounds (2.2.135-138). He does not want to 'brag unto them 'Thus I did, and thus', / Show them th'unaching scars, which I should hide, / as if I had received them for the hire / Of their breath only!' (2.2.146-149). Being a soldier is how he serves his country, which he does not want to taint by either overemphasizing his merits or by trivialising them for the sake of fame.

The frequent imagery of body parts and dismemberment is present in the play in order to underscore both the military theme and the fact that Rome is in a state of disorder (Jagendorf 458). However, it also serves to contextualise the veteran's body, imparting it with more meaning. Martius' refusal to comply with demands to display his scars, therefore, is closely connected and harks back to his use of language. While his 'I banish you!' (*Cor.* 3.3.124) could be interpreted as the rage of a proud man, and his sense of honour, primarily characterised by

violence, perceived as a perversion of the classical idea of *virtus* (Rackin 69, 70), it can also be understood as a conclusive inability to communicate, a confirmation of the society's distance from any kind of honour paradigm. The soldier, touched almost to death by Rome's ingratitude, decides to revenge himself on the city in a final and definitive act of isolation.

Conclusion

The two warrior characters in *Timon of Athens* and *Coriolanus* are far from being vainglorious. Both perceive their profession as work which has to be done and, unlike civilians, do not romanticise it. Moreover, they show that soldiers use language differently, relying on the imperative of honesty and truthfulness as one of the central notions of their profession, which rests, among other things, on giving and honouring oaths and promises.

The fact that displaying his body makes Martius feel uncomfortable has been expressed in many ways throughout the play, so much so that his repeated attempts to avoid it could well be a conclusive indication of a deep split in understanding between veterans and civilians. Both Alcibiades and Martius expect civilians to understand the narrative that their wounded bodies communicate. That narrative, however, is either completely disregarded by Athenian senators (either because unintelligible or deemed unimportant) or utterly misunderstood by Romans welcoming home their victorious warrior. The soldier's body becomes the ultimate symbol of an utterance which has two deep structures – the meaning of one construed by civilians, and the other available only to veterans – thereby marking the soldier as a problematic member of society, and consequently excluded due to the nature of their profession.

End Notes

- 1 Cf., among many other examples, Cominius' 'His pupil age / Man-entered thus, he waxed like a sea' and 'As weeds before / A vessel under sail, so men obeyed / And fell below his stem' when he describes Coriolanus' first experience of battle in 2.2. Another example is Coriolanus' calling the plebeians a Hydra, as well as his vitriolic speech before his banishment in 3.3 opening with 'You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate / As reek o'th' rotten fens' (note that he describes the plebeians using the imagery of water beasts and stagnant bodies of water as when he refers to his own position).

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