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All the World's Ashamed

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All The World's Ashamed

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The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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INTRODUCTION

The dual triumvirate

*The mind, body, and soul
of shame in Shakespeare*

Murdering two men on stage is a great deal more complicated than you might think. Even more so when you have to catch the blood from slitting their throats in a basin. However, this is a problem that concerns anyone who puts on a production of *Titus Andronicus*—or even the readers of the same. How does one understand the vengeful spirit of the titular general, and render him in a way that makes sense to the readers? The answer lies not in the execution, but rather in the fundamental reasons for his actions. What motivates someone to such great lengths, to such horrible travesties?

The most basic motivator for Titus' revenge is shame. Shame, that he could not perform his roles as a general, shame that his body will not do what he desires it to, and an even more fundamental shame that arises from the difference in what he does, and what he feels he could do. Shame is, at its core, a feeling of discrepancies. These discrepancies take different forms in different understandings—and *Titus Andronicus* can help clarify the different types found within the rest of the paper.

The first iteration of shame is one that comes from Erving Goffman's 1956 sociology text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman presents a understanding of not just shame, but social interactions as a whole—but we can see where shame exists in those social roles. Essentially, Goffman's conception of shame is centered around a metaphor for the stage: everybody can be separated into two groups, the *actors* and the *audience*. Actors are those who play *roles*, which is really anything that one is: husband, student, homemaker, towel expert, etc. Both one self and society have

an idea of how to perform those roles. Under Goffman's system, how well one performs those roles is the most basic part of how shame works. If one does not perform their roles well, then one is shamed. It is the discrepancy between how society (and the self) think someone should act, and how they actually do. The complication in this is that everyone is simultaneously an actor and an audience member. While our 'performances' are constantly being evaluated, we are also doing the same for everyone else. When we disapprove of a performance, it shows—we shame people for not doing what we would expect their roles to do. As an example, Titus, in the beginning of the play, returns from war, with two dead sons, who fell honorably in war. To clarify, Titus is an excellent general. But, when he returns home from war, he does not bask in the celebration of another victorious campaign; he rakes himself over the coals for not burying his sons immediately:

TITUS

... Titus, unkind and careless of thine own,
 Why suffer'st thou thy sons unburied yet
 To hover on the dreadful shore of the Styx?
 Make way to lay them on their brethren.

They open the tomb.

There greet in silence, as the dead are wont,
 And sleep in peace, slain in your country's wars.
 O sacred receptacle of my joys,
 Sweet cell of virtue and nobility ...
 (1:1:86-93)¹

This is not to say that Titus should not be mourning, or that his sons are undeserving of a proper burial; but does it not seem odd that in the middle of celebrations, he decides to mercilessly shame himself? This is the interaction of two of his roles that he takes very seriously: a general and a father. They pull at him in very different directions; the general, to celebrate another victory for himself and Rome, and the father, to mourn the death of his sons (for reference, these are sons twenty and twenty-one that have died in war). It is impossible to sate the demands of both of these roles at

¹ All references in this text to *Titus Andronicus* are to *The Arden Shakespeare* 3rd edition, edited by Jonathan Bate. More information can be found in the Bibliography.

once, because there are not two Tituses. There cannot be Titus the General while there is Titus the Father, and that impossibility of filling both roles brings shame on Titus. And that is the thing about a conception of shame that is held in the mind; it is not necessary for anyone to place that shame on an actor, to say, ‘they have not performed their role, and they should feel bad for it’. Shame is an interior thing with actors and audiences—correctness and ability to play roles is held within the mind.

You can take the mind out of it, however; this conception of shame focuses much less on the interactions of an actor and society’s conception of how they should act. What it does focus on is how the thing you can control—your own body—is sometimes not under your control. In *Titus*, the protagonist really doesn’t care what other people think of him—in fact, it’s a defining aspect of his personality. But that hardly stops him feeling shame; he feels shame for a much different thing. He is a man who places a great deal on the physical. It is when he cannot do something with his body, or his body does something that he does not wish it to do, that he feels shame. It is the discrepancy between what we want our bodies to do, and what they actually do:

TITUS

A better head her glorious body fits
 Than his that shakes for age and feebleness
 [*To Tribunes and Senators aloft.*] What, should I don this robe and
 trouble you?
 ... Rome, I have been thy soldier for forty years,
 And led my country’s strength successfully,
 And buried one and twenty valiant sons,
 Knighted in field, slain manfully in arms,
 In right and service of their noble country.
 Give me a staff of honor for mine age,
 But not a scepter to control the world.
 Upright he held it, lords, that held it last.
 (1.1.187-201)

Titus is clearly invested in a kind of physical idea of honor; there is no worse fault than to be unable to perform a physical duty. In addition, there is nothing so worthy as being a soldier for Rome, and being good at it. Titus believes that so far as to not lament the loss of his sons, but to celebrate the

fact that they died in war. He does not want to be in control, because that is not a physical job, that is a job for talking and thinking. The idea that mastery of the physical—especially mastery of one’s own body—is the best way to prevent shame. But in the first and last lines of this speech, we can see where Titus believes that not being able to perform a physical duty is shameful. Even the degradation of age is shameful; it’s losing control of one’s own body. Better indeed to die in war than to fall victim to “age and feebleness”.

Despite their differences, however, those two conceptions of shame do share an essential commonality: they require the people feeling them to care. That is what makes the shame matter; the people who it affects truly believe that the shame is something they would rather be rid of, and would do much to that end. Regardless of the abstract or concrete nature of the shame, it matters to the characters because they care about it.

So what happens when nobody cares about shame?

What happens when the standard rationales for shame are there—societal roles, expectations of one’s own body—and people simply don’t care about them? The idea that there is shame, but it doesn’t affect people. It is a strange and unsettling world where this is true: there is an abundance of shame, but it doesn’t change the actions or thoughts of any of the characters. For instance, an excellent example in *Titus*:

LUCIUS

Art thou not sorry for these heinous deeds?

AARON

Ay, that I had not done a thousand more.
 Even now I curse the day—and yet, I think,
 Few come within the compass of my curse—
 Wherein I did not some notorious ill ...
 But I have done a thousand dreadful things
 As willingly as one would kill a fly,
 And nothing grieves me heartily indeed
 But that I cannot do ten thousand more.
 (5:1:125-9 ... 143-6)

The idea that someone could feel this shame and not care about it is mind-boggling. That's what makes Aaron's character initially so impossible to believe; how could someone actually be so comically evil, so mustache-twirlingly unrepentant? It simply does not make sense! The idea of delighting in evil, in having the world shame you, and then simply ... shrugging it off. In our own experience, that's just not how it works. Through all these explorations of shame, there is no case where you can just ignore shame. It's part of the human experience. That is the core of why a shameless society feels 'weird'. Body and mind make you feel shame, but none of that shame matters if you don't care about it. When people don't care, they feel soulless. What does that do for the society in which we see this soullessness?

But before we get to that more abstract understanding of shame, however, each of the three chapters will use each of the previous understandings of shame to understand three plays in turn.

The first will be *Othello*, written in 1603. It follows the story of a Moorish Venetian General, and his fall from the heights of a respected general to his death as a shameful murderer. We will also look at his trusted ensign and betrayer, Iago, and how they are both manipulated by the roles they play into a sorrowful tale of distrust and destruction.

The second will follow another general, though Roman this time: the titular protagonist of the play *Coriolanus*, written in 1608. Throughout, we will see how his own fraught relationship with his body ultimately leads to him forgoing that by which he defined his life: his love for Rome. His own inability to control his body, and the shame that arises from it, renders him completely unable to act as one must. Suffice to say, it does not work out well.

The third will look at the society at large of *Measure for Measure*, written in 1604. It is the least understandable of the three; it is a society that seemingly does not care about shame. A society that pays lip service to, but ultimately forgoes any real attempt to better itself through shame. Even then,

there is a singular character that functions as the soul of the play, and how she acts defines the rest of them. That definition is at the core of how shame works in *Measure*.

How shame functions in Shakespeare, and how that translates to our own understanding of shame, is the goal of this project. Through multiple paradigms and views of shame, as well as critical investigations of Shakespeare, the early modern era, and other contextual notes, we will arrive at a more complex and nuanced understanding of shame. This is a project that is not only supposed to help us understand and appreciate Shakespeare more; it is a project that is fundamentally about understanding ourselves. To see how shame acts on us, and we impose shame upon each other, and how that makes our society function. Shame is a natural byproduct of human interaction—how can we use it to better mankind?

CHAPTER ONE

Role with the punches

*Performances, expectations,
and insecurities in Othello*

Othello, upon first viewing, is generally considered to be a play about jealousy, not shame. At first viewing, this makes a lot of sense: Othello is jealous of Cassio's supposed dalliances with his wife, Desdemona; and Iago is jealous of Othello's success within Venetian society. This causes Othello to act progressively worse and worse to Desdemona, ultimately resulting in her murder, and Othello's own suicide when he realizes he has killed his innocent wife. Jealousy truly seems to be the driving force of *Othello*.

It's not quite that simple, however. Jealousy is certainly a significant part of *Othello*, but it is not the only (or even main) force behind the action of the play. Societal and self shaming, and their consequences, are the true villain of *Othello*. Shame from failure to perform roles, shame from others' perception of you, shame from one's own perception of oneself—the list goes on. Jealousy, anger, hatred; these are all things derived from the writhing mass of shame found in these characters throughout *Othello*.

That writhing mass of shame found in *Othello* will primarily understood through the paradigm found within Erving Goffman's seminal 1956 sociology text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, specifically through its examination of 'performers', 'audiences' and 'discrepant roles'. These will clarify the way the characters in *Othello* act, and how each of their roles within the play creates the character we see on stage.

The performers of a given interaction are those who are ‘putting on a role’ for those they are interacting with. This performance can be for any number of things; it can be as good spouse, it can be as a decent woman, as a bad clerk, it can be as a mediocre student—literally any characteristic that someone has, it is a role and they are playing it. More to the point, “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (Goffman 17). Unlike theatrical roles, there may not necessarily be the willing suspension of disbelief that both the audience and performer accept. That being said, awareness of the fact one is playing a role is nonessential. Many roles are played unconsciously, as a function of them being ingrained in people by society from birth. Many of those ‘unconscious roles’ are those that are truly fundamental, like ‘man’, ‘woman’, or ‘straight’ and ‘gay’. These fundamental roles form the basis of our society, and nearly everyone performs some of these roles. Everyone has a conception of how a woman should act, and everyone has a conception of how a clerk should act. It’s those expectations, whether consciously realized or subconsciously internalized, that form our practices in life, and form how actors practice their roles. In turn, we watch other people performing their roles (and evaluate *how well* they are performing their roles) and become the audience.

That self-evaluation applies to acting as well; one’s own appreciation for how one is performing the roles one has ascribed themselves is the core of self reflection: ‘am *I* doing well in the role *I* have started playing?’ Of course, this does lead to a dual-life. One cannot be simply a performer, or simply an audience member. To participate in either, one must be the both; it is the experience of being an actor that informs your ability to be an audience, and vice-versa. As Goffman puts it, “When an actor takes on a social role, usually he finds that a particular front [relatively fixed things about the role] has already been established for it. Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both” (Goffman 27). Observing that front is

the role of an audience member; maintaining it is that of a performer. It is by judging the performance of others that one is able to pitch your own performance; and it is by the judgment of others that one is able to understand how one should change one's performance.

Broadly speaking, we are all the audience for everyone else's performances. An audience is literally the people who are watching a performance. Since we are all performing many roles at once, we are all simultaneously watching the complex performances of others around us. The purpose of the audience is unsurprisingly to be the judge of the performance. Much shame that can be understood through *Presentation* is focused around whether or not one has performed to another's expectation—the feedback from your audience is critical to your own judgment of your performance. This feedback can be explicit ('I think you're a softie [i.e., criticizing a man for not performing the role of a manly man] for liking how flowers smell') to more subtle and harder to detect (not being selected for important jobs at work because people don't think you're up to it [i.e., not performing your role as a good worker]). Regardless, our participation as audience members forms the basis for our performance-based society.

A further complication of this whole system comes from what are effectively 'sub-roles'. These are nuanced variations in the traditional performer-audience dichotomy that complicate and elucidate the picture. Most relevant to a discussion of *Othello* is the role of the confidant. In what I'm sure is a shock for the reader, a confidant is one who receives and is the beneficiary of other players' confidence in them. In a stricter sense, they are, "... persons to whom [a] performer confesses his sins, freely detailing the sense in which the impression given during a performance was merely an impression" (Goffman 159). That expression of sins can be in the sense of standard trust, in that they are believed to be ethically honest and reliable, to a more severe level, where they are trusted with destructive information, or information that can lead to the downfall of one or more performances and those who put them on. The relationship between a confidant and another

performer may be formal—as is the case between a therapist (or lawyer, or priest, etc.) and a client—or it may be informal, as is the case between two friends. However, an important aspect of the confidant is that “... [they are] located outside and participate only vicariously in back [i.e., ‘behind’ the performance with the performers] and front [i.e., as part of the audience] region activity” (Goffman 159). Confidants are—or should not be—a participant in the in the performance of their ‘client’. While they may not be impartial, they are at the very least not be directly involved. Moreover, any differences in the perception of the relationship, such as the degree of discretion, or the level of trust, inevitably lead to problems and difficulties between the confidant and performer.

Finally, there is another level above all this: the *naïve* versus *conscious* performers:

... one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality

At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine. This possibility is understandable, since no one is in quite as good an observational position to see through the act as the person who puts it on (Goffman 17).

It’s a very simple duality; those who are aware of the system of performers and audiences, and those who aren’t. The naïve performers, in a very real sense, believe in the roles they’re playing. They do not see their self as a conglomeration of roles, but rather as a unified whole, with admittedly different aspects, but they are not trying to ‘be anything’ for anyone. They are just being themselves. The conscious performer is one who is aware that who they are is a combination of the roles they play. They also are aware of how they can manipulate that binary into making others believe that they are something they’re not. In doing so, they can use the system *in which we all participate* to get results they want. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing—“A cynical individual may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community, etc.” (Goffman 18)—but to the point of *Othello*, it certainly can be a bad thing. With that knowledge in hand, a clever manipulator can do everything from having someone believe a lie, to tearing someone’s life apart.

Social roles are of particular concern to the titular general of *Othello*. As the ostensible focus of this play, particular detail is paid to what roles he occupies, and how well he performs them. Just a few of his roles include husband, Other in Venetian society, commander, and friend—he must balance these and others to succeed in his chosen life. Much of the play, and all of the tragedy, is concerned with how he eventually buckles underneath the pressure of all of those roles, and his own perception of his ability to play them. Because it is also clear that not just outside forces work on him; he himself is constantly taking stock of his performance in all of the roles he plays. As his view of his own performance dims, so does his ability to perform. This vicious cycle ultimately ends up in both Othello and Desdemona’s death.

Of course, that vicious cycle is not entirely without help. Iago, Othello’s trusted lieutenant, is the secondary antagonist of the play (the primary being shame itself), and is obsessed with bringing about Othello’s downfall. He is aided in this by his natural cunning, but also his awareness of and ability to manipulate the system of the society. By understanding how Othello sees himself, Iago is able to expertly push Othello to further depths of shame and self-hatred. That self-hatred is hardly reserved for Othello, however. Iago drinks deeply of the same cup, even if he manifests it differently. Whereas Othello has worked strenuously for—and striven to maintain—his status, Iago is frustrated because he sees his natural characteristics (largely his skin tone) as more deserving of reward than Othello’s hard work. Being passed over for those rewards brings Iago shame: how could he, as he delicately puts it, be passed over by the “thicklips” (1.1.65)² Othello for a promotion? That very moment—and that realization—forms the start of the play. Why must Iago be lose out on a promotion to Michael Cassio, and why must Othello continue to live?

Shame is the driving force and central villain of *Othello*. Its manifestation can be satisfyingly examined through a social lens, one that is centered around Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self*

² All references in this text to *Othello* are to *The Arden Shakespeare* 3rd Edition, edited by E.A.J. Honingmann. More information can be found in the Bibliography.

in Everyday Life. This apparatus will help us gain a deeper understanding of the play, and help focus the actions and rationale of each character. Ultimately, we will see how every person, and every action within the covers of this tragedy are fueled by and encouraged by societal shame. In doing so, we will understand one of the ways that Shakespeare leverages shame within his plays.

At the start of the play, Othello is undeniably secure and confident in his own role and abilities as a person within the Venetian society. Through a combination of hard work and constant affirmation, Othello is able to ignore most of the shame placed on him, by both society and himself. This confidence and immunity to shame becomes so profound that he is able to secretly marry the daughter of a Senator and convince the alarmed Venetian nobles that this is not only permissible, but also healthy for them both. His faith in his own ability to play all of the roles he assumes reassure those around him and further strengthens his own conviction. Some of those roles (but hardly all of them) include his place as a husband, as a general (more specifically put, as a leader of men), as a good Christian, and as a Moor in this society. The action of the play is the persistent undermining of that confidence and belief. As evidence of his self confidence at the start, this is his response when he learns that the nobles of Venice have learned of his marriage to Desdemona: "... I must be found./ My parts, my title, and my *perfect soul*/ Shall manifest me rightly" (1.2.2, emphasis mine). He makes no attempt to hide, no attempt to run or otherwise deny his responsibility to defend his marriage. Moreover, he goes so far as to assert that his soul is *perfect*—without flaw or blemish. He is so secure in himself that he knows his defense will go well. He does not worry about it in the slightest. This is not a trend that will be predictive of the rest of the play.

In the defense itself, Othello speaks well for himself, but also reveals several assumptions that he and society have decided are things he must keep track of and regularly work against:

OTHELLO

Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,
 My very noble and approved good masters:
 That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter
 It is most true; true, I have married her,
 The very head and front of my offending
 Hath this extent, and no more. Rude am I in my speech
 And little blest with the soft phrase of peace ...
 And little of this great world can I speak
 More than pertains to feats of broil and battle
 And therefore little shall I grace my cause
 In speaking for myself ...
 (1.3.77-83...87-90)

These all speak to Othello's primary sources of shame: his position as an Other in Venetian society, his potential illegitimacy as a husband and what that means for his marriage, and his position as a soldier in the midst of a group of people who spend their lives doing nothing but thinking. In, "... my very noble and approved good masters ...", we see both an explicit acknowledgement of the power dynamic between Othello and the upper echelons of Venetian society, and an implicit acknowledgement that Othello is aware they think of him as automatically less than them. The latter is for several reasons, but most important because of his place as a Moor (and therefore his implied connection to magic and illicit techniques of seducing women), and also as his position as a 'mere' soldier—even if he is a general, he must necessarily have less of an understanding of proper society than they do. This is not an example of anyone shaming him, per se, but rather an example of where the potential to shame exists. This line functions as a reminder to himself: do not overextend, or place yourself higher than you deserve. In a way, it's a pre-shaming, jumping the gun on himself and other people attempting to shame him. The following lines present an inversion of that paradigm, wherein Othello consciously acknowledges that he should feel shame for something, and then accepts and moves on from it: "The very head and front of my offending/ Hath this extent, and no more ..." This is Othello at his most self-confident and mature! This is a healthy person, capable of acknowledging mistakes that he has made by the standards of the group he is in, and then

articulating his reasons for making those mistakes, and remaining steadfastly assured despite disapproval of those he considers his betters. His belief in his own worthiness—and a considerable dose of love for Desdemona—has made him into a person who can see external shame, understand its rationale, and be able to not internalize it. In fact, this self-respect runs so deep that he is able to be self-deprecating in an effort to show humility in front of those he views as his betters: “Rude am I in my speech/ And little blest with the soft phrase of peace” Suffice to say, Othello is plenty skilled with his tongue, but these lines play a dual role: they further widen the gap between Othello the humble soldier and the nobles, and they further lessen Othello’s ‘threat’ to both the Duke and Brabantio (Desdemona’s father). Othello’s language here is not designed to be one-hundred-percent truthful, but rather it is designed to confirm some of the preconceptions of the Venetian nobles, so they feel more at ease and so that Othello has an easier time convincing them of his righteousness. Othello preempts some of the shame that the Senators and Duke were ready to place on him; he knows that he has violated societal norms by secretly marrying Desdemona, so he deftly acknowledges that and moves the conversation past it. In doing so, he successfully navigates the social mores that threaten to sink him. This is Othello at his most adept and impervious to shame—and it is nothing but downhill from here.

Othello successfully defends his choices in front of the Duke of Venice, but the first cracks in his façade appear. Throughout the rest of the play, his “honest” ensign Iago slowly erodes Othello’s self-confidence and trust in Desdemona, until the climax where he murders Desdemona for imagined infidelity. He is then told the truth—that Desdemona was entirely innocent, and he was ruthlessly manipulated by Iago—and laments the horrible realizations he has come to:

OTHELLO

Soft you, a word or two before you go.
 I have done the state some service, and they know’t.
 No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
 nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinable gum. Set you down this,
 And say besides in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and turbaned Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
 And smote him – thus! *He stabs himself.*
 (5.2.336-53)

In the first pair of lines, we already can see to what extent Othello is defeated: “some service”. Some service? This is an outsider in every sense of the word—not a ‘proper’ part of Venetian society, different skin color, not royalty—who has worked hard enough to be in an eminently respectable position. He is deeply successful, and what he has done for the Venetian state is more than a casual favor. What follows is of note: “... as I am. Nothing extenuate” It seems an odd tense for Othello to be using; in using the present tense, he suggests that the state he is in at the end of the play is his most realized. He carefully points out that he was not consumed or defined by malice, though leaving what he was consumed unspoken. He speaks of a fiery love, un-tempered by too much consideration. Othello speaks of how he is not easily made jealous—disproved by the action of the play, though this line in particular speaks to a common Elizabethan stereotype of Moors being extremely prone to jealousy—but rather completely overcome by emotion and in no place to make decisions, good or bad. Then, there comes a poignant comparison of Othello to an Indian; said comparison is telling, because it reinforces the idea that while Othello is aware that he is an other, he still considers himself ‘less’ other than even more noticeably different groups. This same spectrum of ‘otherness’ can be seen in different Shakespeare plays, like the Goths and Aaron in *Titus*

Andronicus. In the line that follows, he beats himself down further, saying that he had no comprehension of the treasure he possessed. He throws in a pitiable description of how he cries, despite being unused to the action. In the last quintet of lines, he relates a rare bit of his personal history before the play, drawing a comparison between himself and a damnable Turk, driving home the point with his knife. With a final kiss of his beloved wife, Othello dies.

This speech is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is how it reveals the motives of Othello's actions. He is an Other in a rarefied company. He is constantly apologizing for who he is, even as he proves to all of them—the various senators, fellow soldiers, and the person in charge of Venice—that he is just as competent, if not more so than his non-othered compatriots. He has broken social conventions, namely, marrying Desdemona, and commanding those who would usually command him simply due to social convention. Despite being an Other, however, Othello is still restricted by the same expectations that shape how men in the Venetian society; how they comport themselves in front of superiors, how they command their men, and how they deal with their women. All of this creates an incredibly dense, multilayered view of the plethora of roles that Othello must play.

To this point, Othello's roles place him on veritable tenterhooks. In the Venetian society, he is first and foremost a Moor. Inescapably othered, and subject to a bevy of racist assumptions and stereotypes. Almost on the same level, he is a man. That carries with it a cartful of expectations to do with masculinity, sexual prowess, conduct befitting a man ... the list goes on. He is a soldier, and a general at that, which subjects him to expectations concerning his ability to lead, but also to follow; to succeed in battle, but to be graceful in defeat; to know when to push and when to give. He is a husband as well, and one that has to defend his marriage to the highest-ranking member of the society he has spent years insinuating. That role is associated with martial duties and one of the building blocks of society, but also with more complicated things such as satisfying his wife, and

producing an heir. He is also a friend, which takes trust and complete confidence in another to perform well. Already, without listing ever-more-detailed compendiums of Othello's role, he becomes a character pulled in endless directions—perhaps more so than any other character in the play.

In this light, Othello's final monologue is not just the defeated final speech of one whom hope has utterly deserted, but also a thorough breakdown of Othello's own shaming of himself for failing to perform his roles. "I have done the state some service ..." was already self-deprecating, but it hides a depth of implied failure to be a good commander. At this point, Cassio has been stripped of rank, dishonored greatly, Iago triumphant in ruining Othello; by any measure, Othello has not performed the role of general. He struggles to hold on to a shred of dignity, suggesting that he "... is not extenuate,/ Nor aught set down in malice ...", but even that is not a resounding endorsement of his success. He goes on: "Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;/ Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,/ Perplexed in the extreme ..." Othello criticizes and shames himself for failing to perform as one who loves. That is the core of this speech, and the most affecting part of it. Humans are defined by their ability to love, and Othello feels nothing but shame for't. The following speaks to stereotypes that he is clearly aware of, and perhaps has been accused of in the past, thus his sensitivity and defensiveness around the subject. He compares himself to one even lower and more distant from the Venetian society, suggesting that his performance as a member of that society is comparable to someone who is outside it completely. He is crying for what has happened and what he has done, but he still is concerned for the fact that crying makes him less of a man: "Albeit unused to the melting mood ..." A man's life lies shattered at his feet, and he is concerned that those anonymous persons who would read the reports of events that transpired would think the worse of his manliness because he cried at the sight of his innocent wife dead at his hands. In the final lines, he effectively removes himself from society, illustrating his belief

that he had failed so wholly as a Venetian that him in his present condition should be compared to an enemy of the state who his former self killed, succeeding in his role.

Othello's final speech stands as an unforgiving bookend to Othello's participation in Venetian society. Throughout the play, we are forced to watch as the numerous roles that stretch Othello to a breaking point slowly tear him apart. In trying to succeed perfectly in all of his roles, he merely ends up entirely destroying his ability to succeed with any of them. Thus stripped of his life, he ends it. Othello's suicide is not one of the choices he could make, it was the only choice he could make. He was entirely devoid of purpose and joy. In a very real sense, this is the happiest ending he could choose.

Let's talk about Iago.

Getting all the summary out of the way: he is initially jealous/angry with Othello because Othello promoted Cassio to a position above him, which Iago views as fundamentally wrong, for various reasons, but most having to do with capability and experience. He then manipulates several people—including Cassio—into getting Cassio stripped of his rank. Unsatisfied at that, he proceeds to slowly convince Othello that his (unquestionably faithful) wife Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. Then he tries to get Cassio killed, but ends up killing the guy he sent to do that. Othello kills Desdemona, and Iago remains silent in a move that has created undoubtedly thousands of academic discussions and probably dozens of books. Fortunately, that's not what we're here to discuss.

Iago is a perplexing character. He is not 'othered' in the sense of Othello—being a Moor, and having to prove himself thrice over to everyone he meets—and he is not 'othered' in the sense of being a woman. He is in fact the picture of privilege in the society: male, rich (or at least comfortable), of a decent position, respected by those around him ... he doesn't have much reason to gripe, besides being in a position beneath Othello. That's the thing, though: the impetus for this entire play—which ends up with four people dead—is Iago getting passed over for a promotion.

Seems a bit much for a workplace complaint. So what's the deal? Why is Iago so angry, and why is he so willing to go to such great lengths to revenge himself upon Othello?

A good place to start is with a review of *discrepant roles*, namely the *confidant* (Goffman 152). Discrepant roles, within the context of Goffman's social structure, are those roles that do not fall within the usual trifecta of performers, audience, or non-participants. While almost every discrepant role overlaps with one of those three traditional roles, they have distinguishing factors that enable them to be defined separately. The confidant is a particular role, one that is unsurprisingly related to its common definition: a person in which a performer can confide their secrets.

Secrets, of course, are an example of *destructive information*, or information that can interfere with (or completely derail!) the carefully constructed façade those performers spend so much time putting on for the audience. Destructive information can take many forms, but its most common is information that shows the intent of the performers is at odds with their performance. Related to 'naïve' and 'conscious' performers, conscious performers may have a ulterior motive for putting on the performance they do. The audience that presumably believes that performance would not be reassured by that knowledge, however – this is a case where ignorance really is bliss. An audience becoming conscious of not only the constructed nature of the performance, but also the fact that all performances have motives beyond the interests of the audience. When a confidant is trusted with destructive information of any type, they are automatically placed in a position of power over both the audience and performers. This is usually within the context of a trusted relationship, as Goffman points out:

A person in whom another confides, unlike the service specialist [another discrepant role] does not make a business of receiving such confidences; he accepts the information without accepting a fee, as an expression of the friendship, trust and regard the informant feels for him (Goffman 159).

This is the crux of Iago's relationship to Othello: a confidant to a man who cannot let down his performance for a single moment. Othello's entire existence is so carefully constructed and maintained that a single crack could bring the entire thing crashing down. And he places an extraordinary amount of trust in Iago, a man who proves to be singularly untrustworthy. This hardly explains Iago's disproportionate taste for revenge, but nevertheless leads us neatly to a discussion of his arc throughout the play.

Othello actually starts out with Iago. He and Roderigo are found on a Venice street, discussing the latest command from the Moor – namely, that Michael Cassio has been chosen for promotion to Othello's lieutenant over Iago. The most significant part of this scene is that it tells the audience of the play exactly what's going to happen: Iago will revenge himself upon Othello for passing him over, though he will never show that he's angry with Othello.

IAGO

... I follow him to serve my turn upon him:
 We cannot all be masters, nor all masters
 Cannot be truly follow'd ...
 Others there are
 Who, trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
 And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
 Do well thrive by them and when they have lined their coats
 Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul;
 And such a one do I profess myself ...
 In following him, I follow but myself;
 Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
 But seeming so, for my peculiar end ...
 (1.1.39-59)

In this, Iago establishes himself very firmly as part of Othello's group, a member of and party to its secrets. He is not doing this because of any great love for Othello, however – this is a method of acquiring that *destructive information* that is so necessary for revenging himself upon Othello. He very much draws a dichotomy between those who follow blindly, without thought for themselves, and those who follow to serve themselves. In doing so, he also reverses the traditional ideals: those who

follow only to serve are mocked, whereas those who serve with ulterior motives are praised. This inversion is notable, especially coming from a career soldier like Iago. He even goes so far as to suggest that those who do not serve themselves in service are weak and letting themselves be taken advantage of; those like him who forward themselves under the guise of supporting another "... have some soul ... " and are to be admired. This is direct conflict with the fact that soldiers, especially the 'men on the ground', are gauged on their ability to follow orders not necessarily without thinking, but certainly without question or hesitation. In fact, the entirety of military structure is based around this concept, to the extent that not following orders is a prosecutable offence. Having a soldier that is constantly thinking about how to manipulate his own service for his own benefit is not just a betrayal, but it threatens the entire construction of military organization.

To some extent, every person is acting in their own self-interest, that's a given. But groups—like the group that Othello has surrounded himself with—agree to act towards the general goal in furthering the interests of all. One way to promote both group cohesiveness and trust is simply to have the members of the group share secrets with each other. This can be either the chicken or the egg—sometimes groups are formed by those already inclined to share secrets, or sometimes 'groups of opportunity' become more solid by trust fostered by proximity and vulnerability. Time is a factor as well, as knowing how a member of your group interacts with members of other groups better enables you to understand their role in your group. Thus, any actor who wants to foster trust and confidence either must have the benefit of an extraordinary set of circumstances (like shared trauma) or a significant amount of time. Iago has both—he is both someone that Othello has known for a great deal of time, and with who he has shared intense, brutal experiences. These two factors combine to form a natural bond of trust between these two men. That bond is exploited to great effect by Iago.

The next step in Iago's meticulous destruction of Othello is to plant the seed of doubt about his marriage. This is a very conscious manipulation of Othello's perceived insecurities (whether shared with Iago or not) about his inability to perform his roles—specifically as a husband, in this case. As was discussed earlier, Othello has spent a great deal of effort and time proving to himself and the world around him that he is a good husband—indeed, a significant part of the first act is Othello arguing that he did not magically coerce Desdemona into loving him! But this scene comes along in the third act, after Othello has stripped Cassio of his rank for participating in a fight that Rodrigo instigated at Iago's behest (see? Simple!):

IAGO

I am glad of this for now I shall have reason
 To show the love and duty that I bear you
 With franker spirit; therefore, as I am bound,
 Receive it from me. I speak not yet of proof:
 Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio.
 Wear your eyes thus, not jealous nor secure;
 I would not have your free and noble nature
 Out of self-bounty be abused: look to't.
 I know our country disposition well –
 In Venice they do let God see the pranks
 They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
 Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.
 (3.3.195-207)

O beware, my lord, of jealousy, indeed. The most subversive thing about Iago's advice here from all outside perspectives—i.e., from Othello's perspective—is that it posits itself as friendly, 'looking-out-for-you' advice. It seems nothing more like a concerned, good friend, worried that someone is taking advantage of you. When in fact, it is the exact opposite, laden with incredible irony that Iago (someone who was established at the beginning of the play as attempting to destroy Othello) is pretending to look out for Othello. What's more is that Iago is also undermining two truly good relationships that Othello had. Both Cassio and Desdemona are people who honestly want the best for Othello. Iago destroys his relationships with both. And he posits it so *nobly*. He couches it in the

language, of ‘I don’t want to do this, but it is what’s best for you’. By the time we get to this speech, Othello has variously encouraged, threatened and begged Iago to tell him what’s on his mind. Iago has worked Othello in such a way that he wants his own destruction. Iago is building up the information to seem so dire, so important to Othello’s well-being, but simultaneously so harmful, that Othello cannot help but put an outsized importance on the information when he hears it. In doing so, he also leans on the fact that there is an enormous gulf between every character’s—but especially Othello and Iago’s—consciousness of their performances and their need to have those views validated. Othello’s insecurity about all his roles (as a husband, as a man, as a general, etc.) mirrors Iago’s same insecurities, and he uses them in the same way on Othello that they work on him.

This manipulation and ultimate victory over Othello comes in the moment when he finally convinces him to destroy Desdemona. This is not because that was Iago’s ultimate goal, but rather that it is the thing that puts the final nail in Othello’s coffin. By convincing Othello to kill Desdemona (for something that he does not have any *true* proof for), he has reversed all the work that Othello has done to become a member of Venetian society. This is not simply a trespass of his values, it is a trespass of the man Othello has attempted to be; Othello has become everything he has always hated, every stereotype that he’s tried so desperately to avoid. It’s a destroying realization that all the things he has worked against—the othering by the true Venetians, accusations that he used magic to seduce Desdemona, that he does not deserve his position in society—they all might as well be true after he kills Desdemona and discovers her innocence. In doing that, Iago is successful beyond what he imagined; Othello shames himself far more than anyone else could (“Whip me, ye devils/ ... Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,/ Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!” (5.2.275-8)). That being said, Iago fans the fire, an act earlier, when Othello is discussing how he should kill Desdemona:

OTHELLO O, a thousand, a thousand times: and then of so gentle a condition.

IAGO Ay, too gentle.

OTHELLO Nay, that's certain. But yet the pity of it, Iago—O, Iago, the pity of it, Iago!

IAGO If you are so fond over her iniquity, give her patent to offend, for if it touch not you it comes near nobody.

OTHELLO I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!

IAGO O, 'tis foul in her.

OTHELLO With mine officer!

IAGO That's fouler.

OTHELLO Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago.

IAGO Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed – even the bed she hath contaminated.

OTHELLO Good, good, the justice of it pleases; very good!
(4.1.189-208)

Iago, here, is purposefully making the crime more heinous to further the shame that Othello will feel if and when he discover that he has murdered an innocent. Othello, despite objecting to the thought that feels that he has to kill Desdemona to remove some shame from himself, nevertheless follows through. Why shouldn't he? Iago takes those things that are best about Desdemona and uses them against her, arguing that her beauty, her wit, and her complete loyalty to Othello make this betrayal all the worse. And Othello is in such a rage, so convinced of her moral bankruptcy that he is willing to totally forgo discussion that was apparently their norm. He suggests that by trying to talk with her and have a discussion about her perceived infidelity that she will seduce him again and he will be powerless! In discussing things with her, and trying to see her point of view, he will lose power over her—and in doing so, fail in his role as a man. Iago layers on the shame, pointing out that if Desdemona is cuckolding Othello with Cassio, that is even worse than normal cuckolding; she is not just a slut, she is a slut who does not respect him or his relationships with his men—to say nothing of Cassio. He even puts the idea for Othello to murder her with his bare hands, in a horrifying inversion of the kind, gentle hands of the lover. There's no separation from the act and the device

used to do it; strangling is the most intimate way to kill someone. For as long as it lasts, both parties will be conscious of each other, and there is no way to clean out that damn spot, as it were. Iago has constructed the perfect, most ultimately shaming way for Othello to seal his fate—and he revels in it.

Suffice to say, one of the greater challenges facing the characters in *Othello* is their communication skills. This play would be a great deal shorter if a few characters had sat down, and had an honest discussion about their feelings. But that's not what happened—and why that is makes for an excellent example of how shame works in *Othello*.

The clearest example of poor communication is how within every character there is a discrepancy between how they wish to be perceived, and how they think they're being perceived (or in the case of Desdemona especially, how they think they're perceived and how they are perceived). This discrepancy, and how it makes the characters feel and act, generates the main of the action in the play.

Iago's particular case of this tension is of course the driving reason for him to act as he does. This goes directly back to his main cause for frustration at the beginning of the play: "... I know my price, I am worth no worse a place ..." (I.i.10). It's that fundamental difference between Iago's perception of his worth and society's declaration of it. Iago thinks that he is worth something more than society thinks, and he cannot explain how he's failing to meet the standards that are arbitrarily set. It feels bad to not know why you're being punished for doing what you think you should be rewarded for. This ends up shaming Iago, because if he isn't being promoted in accordance with his stature, then he must be doing something wrong—but what is it that he's doing wrong? He can't figure it out, and can't fix it. So he funnels that frustration into those he believes have caused him this shame—namely, Othello. That concentration of energy ends up in aggressively shaming Othello and bringing him low on all accounts that the general tries his best to maintain. If Iago is going to wallow in shame, so must Othello.

What this implies is that Iago is deeply aware—either unconsciously or otherwise—of how effective a tool shame is. Iago is cogent of how shame makes him feel, resentful and angry and hurt, and knows that it will make others feel that way, too. He feels shame at not being able to perform well enough for society to believe in him, so he brings shame onto Othello in a more personal way. Othello has spent the better part of his life working against the prejudices of society, so the shame that he will be forced to feel should be a more intimate one, one focused around the personal aspects of his life that he has less control over. He can carefully forge the image of a spectacular general, a good commander, a just officer, but he has less control over the actions of his wife. Iago realizes and exploits this, and knows that Othello's inability to explain his perceived deficiencies in those areas will lead him down into a self-destructive spiral.

A notable parallel between Iago and Othello is that of Iago's military rank and Othello's 'rank' in society. These two roles and their respective owner's awareness of them mirror each other closely throughout the play, and explain much of how each character acts.

Of course, what this view of Iago ignores is how Othello is working against notably similar societal pressures. Where Iago has class, Othello has race. And the terrible hypocrisy in Iago condemning both Othello's choice and Cassio's 'luck' is that he denies all of the incredibly hard work that Othello has put in to fight the idea that a *Moor* would be suitable for leadership. Indeed, Iago even uses Othello's race as a reason for why he should not be his superior. Iago has such tunnel vision that he is unable to see one who would be a perfect complement for his struggle. Iago's destruction of Othello is not tragic for only Othello's sake, it is tragic for Iago as well. In destroying Othello, Iago destroys the one man who may have been best able to understand Iago's frustrations and difficulties in Venetian life.

The shame of *Othello*—the shame of not meeting others' expectations (and your own)—forms a picture of shame highly dependent on the social. It is one highly dependent on a system of shame kept in the mind. The construction of roles, and the belief that they must be followed; how that causes people to act in an effort to fulfill those roles. Goffman lays out the conception of the actors and their audience; the *dramatis personæ* act it out.

Othello himself has perhaps the most serious collection of roles placed on him within the context of Venetian society. As an outsider, he is constantly under the pressure to perform exactly as well as, if not better than someone who was born in Venice. That, and his own insistence on being the absolute top of everything he does—that as a husband, as a leader, as a friend. He can occasionally escape the pressure of society; he can never escape the pressure of himself. And when it is revealed that he has failed utterly in every way, he collapses entirely.

Of course, it is not just Othello who causes his own fall. Iago, under his own pressure to perform as he sees fit, twists and corrupts Othello's very being. He expertly uses his knowledge as a cynical actor and as a confidant of the general to tear him down and keep him down. But it is not without a price; Iago's own world, as flawed as he may see it, is burned in the unmaking of Othello's. The two both lose all they had.

This is the true cause of shame: it all comes down to discrepancies. In *Othello*, this discrepancy is that between how one is expected to act and how you do. That imposition of shame from any discrepancies that might arise from that system can come from anyone: one's enemies, one's friends, one's self. It is a system that does not allow for error—and especially in the case of Othello, who has spent his life achieving a tenuous position. Iago is driven to nonsensical destruction by those expectations, and how he feels that he cannot meet them. Shame is the true villain of *Othello*.

Shame is the true villain of *Othello* because it is ultimately the motivating force for every act of evil in the play. From Iago's jealousy and manipulation, to Othello's heated temper and assumption making. There are no 'winning' characters in this play. The evil is shame, and shame is the winner. These characters were fated by the society in which they lived to destroy themselves. What's worse is those who survive—the few of them that do—will be shamed for not preventing it, forever repeating a unrelenting cycle of shame.

CHAPTER TWO

The body impolitic

*The inability to control the body
and failing physically in Coriolanus*

Goffman's construction of a society consisting entirely of actors and their roles is a focused explanation for how people exist in a society. He uses the perception other people have of one another—and themselves—to contextualize and explain their actions. Several years before that, in the Renaissance, there was advanced a set of ideas that gained a great deal of attention: humoral theory. Humoral theory was largely concerned with the balance of *humors*, or combating forces within one's body. The most prevalent version included four humors: *phlegmatic*, *melancholy*, *choleric*, and *sanguine*. This was largely based on the work of a Middle-Age scholar and physiologist, Galen, who largely based *his* works off of Hippocrates (Cruttwell 75). Humoral theory attempted to describe the relationship between the mind and body; how the humors interacted explained how the body acted, and what results came from that action. An imbalance in those humors—too much phlegm, or a dearth of the sanguinary, etc.—could result in a loss of control over the body, such as a sickness, or an inclination to act in a way that differed from one's norm. This inherent relation between a body 'out of balance' and acting strangely, thus bringing shame on the person that controls it, is the core of another of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Coriolanus*.

An excellent example of this paradigm immediately appears in the first scene of the play, as certain senators and consuls are attempting to placate a company of citizens who are discontented about grain rationing in a famine:

MENENIUS

There was a time, when all the body's members

Rebelle against the belly, thus accused it:
 That only like a gulf did it remain
 I'th' midst o'th'body, idle and unactive,
 Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing
 Like labour with the rest, where th' ther instruments
 Did see and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel
 And mutually participate, did minister
 Unto the appetite and affection common
 Of the whole body. The belly answered –
 2 CITIZEN Well, sir, what answer made the belly?
 (1.1.91-101)³

This focused theme of a body rebelling against itself—in this case, the rest of the body against the stomach—is mirrored, point by point, in the narrative itself. That is to say, the common citizens are ‘the rest of the body’, the *body politic* of Rome. Those that are the beneficiaries of that work, such as the consuls and senators, are that belly, seemingly inactive and useless. This point is driven even further home by the perhaps overeager citizen who interrupts Menenius before he is able to manage a word out about the stomach’s reply, further evidence of the body’s discontent ...

MENENIUS

Sir, I shall tell you. With a kind of smile,
 Which ne'er came from the lungs, but even thus—
 For, look you, I may make the belly smile
 As well as speak—it tauntingly replied
 To th' discontented members, the mutinous parts
 That envied his receipt; even so most fitly,
 As you malign our senators, for that
 They are not such as you.

2 CITIZEN Your belly's answer—what?
 The kingly crowed head, the vigilant eye,
 The counselor heart, the arm our soldier
 Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter,
 With other muniments and petty helps
 In this our fabric, if that they—
 (1.1.102-13)

The function of all of this discussion is to emphasize and clarify the great divide that is present between the ruling class and the ruled. Menenius, despite being “... one that hath always loved the

³ All references in this text to *Coriolanus* are to *The Arden Shakespeare 3rd edition*, edited by Peter Holland. More information can be found in the Bibliography.

people” (1.1.46-7), is nevertheless being consistently shouted down by the citizens. Moreover, the citizens grow increasingly tired of his lengthy method of declaration, and pre-emptively finishes his metaphor, unwittingly legitimatizing it. Menenius objects to the interruption, and the answer finally comes after another dozen lines of arguing:

MENENIUS Note me this, good friend;
 Your most grave belly was deliberate,
 Not rash like his accusers, and thus answered:
 ‘True is it, 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. And though that all at once’—
 You, my good friends, this says the belly, mark me—
 (1.1.123-36)

Menenius is not exactly of the ‘short and sweet’ philosophy of discourse. But that pontification does reveal valuable things about how the senators and consuls view themselves: the first thing he lists about the stomach’s value is its benefit to the rest of the body. He posits that the stomach is important, perhaps even totally necessary to the functioning of the virtuous body parts mentioned beforehand. Thus, that rebellion of those other bodies parts is not simply in disagreement with the stomach’s interests, but also in disagreement with the interests of the rest of the body. He continues to complicate the metaphor:

MENENIUS ‘Though all at once cannot
 See what I do deliver out to each,
 Yet I can make my audit up that all
 From me do back receive the flour of all
 And leave me but the bran.’ What say you to’t?
 (1.1.38-41)

An argument to the inscrutability of governing, and the noble sacrifices the senators and consuls must make in their continued service of the city. This complication and explanation is what Menenius does; explains and elucidates the actions of the few to the reactions of the many. He tries to show how that disagreement between body and mind—or in this case, body and belly—can cause critical dysfunction, and bring ruin and shame upon a great city. To this point, Menenius lays it out bare:

MENENIUS

The senators of Rome are this good belly,
 And you the mutinous members. For examine
 Their consels and their cares, digest things rightly,
 Touching the weal o'th' common, you shall find
 No public benefit which you receive
 But it proceeds or comes from them to you,
 And no way from yourselves.
 (1.1.143-49)

He pushes that narrative of the great and all-generous belly, that knows the city needs and desires, and has the ability to justly hand out those resources that each part may have want of. However, you can see through the emphasis of his words that even he is losing control of that belly which may smile and even speak. Even as he describes a ruling order losing control, he himself is losing control. This is the critical disjunction; the mind's loss of control over the body, and the shame that comes from that discrepancy.

This discrepancy will be the lens through which a deeper understanding of *Coriolanus* will be created. By using close reading similar to that found throughout this introduction, as well as leveraging other critical readings and thought, how bodily shame works and winds its way through the play will be explored; we will follow Martius from the very beginning until the bitter end.

But Martius does not remain simply Martius for long. After sacking Corioli, he is awarded the official surname of Coriolanus for his exceeding bravery and endurance. But he hardly powers through those conflicts unscathed. Much to the alarm and lasting impression of his subordinates,

Martius ignores injury and insult in his pursuit of glory. To that point, he becomes further blood-soaked as the act progresses, before finally stepping off to the baths as the final scene closes out.

This enthusiasm for blood seems to be inherited—Volumnia, his mother, visualizes him gleefully as conquering hero:

VOLUMNIA

... Methinks I see him stamp thus, 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 a harvestman that's tasked to mow ...

VIRGILIA

His bloody brow? O Jupiter, no blood!

VOLUMNIA

... 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.
 (1.3.34-8...40...42-44)

In Volumnia's vision, Coriolanus coated in blood is not an indicator of Coriolanus failing in his work, but rather it is an essential mark of soldier. To be a soldier is to be bloodied, to be in competition to survive, and pulling through despite the constant threat of death. Volumnia takes a certain pleasure in seeing Coriolanus as the true epitome of a soldier: one who brings in not hay with sweeps of the scythe, but rather men's lives with the blows of a sword. This ties back to Volumnia's dismissal of those who would die a *petite mort*—"I rather had eleven [sons] die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action" (1.3.23-5)—over those who would die on their feet, facing their enemies. Her bloodthirstiness contrasts sharply with Virgilia, who seems at best squeamish about what her husband does. As her name might suggest, Virgilia possesses an innocence and idealism that sets her apart from Volumnia. Volumnia continues with her screed, referencing ancient Roman legend, suggesting that inherently feminine objects are further improved

upon with the addition of the viscera of those they love—and further making Virgilia’s objection to bloodied Coriolanus stand out.

Blood occupies a special place within bodily fluids. Not looked down upon as urine or feces, blood carries with it a symbolic weight that other interior liquids lack. For many religions, including that of ancient Rome, it was a thing used in ceremonies—a tradition that found its way into the most dominant strains of Christianity. To this point, Paster has this to say: “... blood’s symbolic weight and power would seem to derive from the obviousness of its importance to life itself ...” (Paster 65). Within *Coriolanus*, being covered in that blood—something that happens alarmingly often—is an important marker layered with meaning. More importantly, the shame associated with blood carries with it not just a social weight, but a religious and political one as well. Covered in your own blood implies loss, death and failure in achievement, which is especially painful for those who make their work of killing, like Coriolanus. Covered in another’s blood, however, is a mark of pride. In exactly the opposite way that your own blood on the outside carries a shameful connotation, your enemies’ blood on you—their inside on your outside—carries with it a pride in a job well done. Further to this point, Paster says:

Blood was and is a ... powerful signifier ... but despite medical panegyric and the serious weight of Christian and other symbolisms, it is no less ambivalent or shame producing blood is suffused with ideological import. It is the bearer of a robustly hierarchized, elaborate semiology chiefly, though not solely, because in preindustrial English society where all the key structures of exchange and distribution of resources—whether material, symbolic, or libidinal—were still based on hereditary transmission, the key social attributes of blood could never be simply symbolic or metaphoric (66).

Those hierarchized, meaning-laden tiers produce important ramifications for any blood that is seen within *Coriolanus*, and how it is displayed on the body. Exactly to this point, Coriolanus during the sacking of Corioli suffers an injury, and begins bleeding. Upon noticing this, a subordinate suggests

Wherein thou seest me masked. For thy revenge,
 Wrench up thy power to th' highest.
 (1.8.10-2)

Suddenly, the blood that Lartius pointed out as being notable—and implicitly shameful—is no longer Coriolanus' blood! Coriolanus is lying to Aufidius about the origin of the blood for a twofold purpose. First and foremost, he is attempting to hide his shame over being injured and bloody. That injury is a sign of weakness, both to Coriolanus' men, and to Aufidius. Showing any weakness to either would be disastrous for him, as he stakes a great deal of his reputation on his prowess as a fighter and a general. Clearly within the society that they occupy, it is best for the leaders to appear immortal. The second reason is to use that same blood to anger Aufidius. By suggesting that the blood is not his own, Coriolanus leaves only one option for its origin: Aufidius' men. He twists that metaphorical knife in Aufidius, goading him into irrational anger. Aufidius' men, who drag him away as the battle for Corioli concludes, are the only thing that saves him from fighting to the death. Even in this nasty, brutish and short exchange, we see the power that blood has to manipulate and effect people within the society of Coriolanus.

That weight is also what allows blood to move the plot within Coriolanus. At the end of the battle, Martius is officially awarded the name 'Coriolanus', and he has this to say after it is announced:

CORIOLANUS I will go wash.
 And when my face is fair you shall perceive
 Whether I blush or no
 (1.9.67-9)

Further to that point, he spends a few stanzas talking to the assembled figures of note, before his aide insists that he leave:

COMINIUS Go we to our tent.
 The blood upon your visage dries; 'tis time
 It should be looked to. Come. *Exeunt. A flourish [of] trumpets.*

(2.2.67-9)

For whatever reason, Coriolanus is abashed at the idea of having to tell the story of his wounds, like they are sources of shame for him. It could be construed as humbleness, not wanting to sound your own horn, but that is refuted by the fact that those wounds were honorably won,

VOLUMINA He had, before this last expedition, twenty-five wounds upon him.

MENENIUS Now it's twenty-seven; every gash was an enemy's grave.

(2.1.149-152)

And that Coriolanus is not a particularly humble man:

1 OFFICER That's a brave fellow, but he's vengeance proud, and loves not the common people.

2 OFFICER 'Faith, there hath been many great men that have flattered the people who ne'er loved them ...

Therefore, for Coriolanus neither to care whether they love or hate him manifests the true knowledge he has in their disposition and, out of his noble carelessness, lets them plainly see't.
(2.2.5-14)

Coriolanus' confidence in himself seems to be to the point of scorn for the common man. It makes it very strange that someone with an ego like that would be shamed at the idea of scars being shown in public. It speaks to something deeper than perhaps lowering oneself to hear the voice of the common man: it is a fear in that if some might see himself weak, he would begin to, as well. He has held himself to a very high standard—as evidenced by his unwillingness to give up on something that he knows he can win if he just tries hard enough.

Even in his defense of his dismissal of the common man, Coriolanus downplays the significance of his wounds, irrespective of the praise Menenius gives them:

MENENIUS

... Think

CORIOLANUS Well then, I pray, your price o'th' consulship?

1 CITIZEN The price is to ask it kindly.

CORIOLANUS Kindly, sir, I pray let me ha't. I have wounds to show you which shall be yours in private.
(2.3.72-5)

This ties back to the grotesque ownership and 'use' of the wounds that the citizens already advocated with the "speaking for the wounds". The reason that Coriolanus would be willing to show his wounds in private is an allegory for currying favor with the citizens in private. He is not willing to show true humility in public—as evidenced by the fact that he has no idea what the "price o'th' consulship" is—but he is used to doing so in private. That experience is related to his experience as a general, who is most used to a private audience; private in this case as a audience who shares a defining commonality with him, the military. Coriolanus is not used to have to prostrate himself before the common man, and it shows. He has a great deal of respect for his fellow soldiers, and less so for random persons who happen to inhabit Rome. His measure of worthiness is directly tied to a person's valor—to not be a warrior, or one who works in the service of Rome is shameful, and that person is not worthy of his respect. That is not a standard that he holds only others to; it is also one that he holds himself to. This means that he expects a great of respect and reverence from Romans, and especially from those who have not served themselves. Coriolanus remains stubborn and steadfast about his refusal to show his wounds, as if he is above proving himself to the common man. He considers it shameful that one so honored as he would have to prove anything to those who have done nothing for the glory of Rome.

That repudiation of the common man continues in Act Three. Coriolanus has a streak of anti-showmanship, wherein he refuses to 'play the game' of politics, and give to the people's need for proof. He even extend that disregard to those who speak for the people, like Sicinius and Brutus:

CORIOLANUS

Enter SICINIUS and BRUTUS

Behold, these are the tongues of the people,
The tongues o'th' common mouth. I do despise them,
For they do prank them in authority
Against all noble sufferance.
(3.1.21-4)

Far from being normal citizens, these are the dutifully elected representatives of those citizens. Here, Coriolanus is not just disrespecting Sicinius and Brutus; he is disrespecting the process by which they came to their positions. More importantly in this context, though, is that he likens them to the “tongues o'th' common mouth”—the very same that he just pretended to bow to. The fact they are heard at all is insulting to him, and he believes that he is the worse off for hearing it. In his eyes, he and people like him (those who have served Rome in an explicitly military fashion, the only type of service that means anything) shouldn't have to ever listen to the common people, because the common people have no appreciation for what really defending Rome is like.

For all his posturing about propriety and his belief in the upper classes, those who are allowed to speak to Coriolanus may not think the best of him. After he has departed, Menenius mentions the paradoxical nature of thinking well of the general:

MENENIUS

... His heart's his mouth.
What his breast forgoes his tongue must vent,
And, being angry, does forget that ever
He heard the name of death. *A noise within.*
(3.1.259-62)

Menenius, while also praising Coriolanus in the same dialogue (“His nature is too noble for this world ...” (3.1.257)), still seems to hold some disapproval for how Coriolanus acts. Even if he does agree with Coriolanus' conclusions, it seems as if Menenius is somewhat ashamed of how he expresses them. This bit also makes a winking reference to ‘what the heart thinks the tongue

speaks'—furthering the idea that one's body and its actions are not totally under one's control. This, combined with the possible embarrassment of not controlling his other bodily functions (like blushing) paints a picture of Coriolanus that is not completely in control as he would have his commanders believe. The last couplet is a hat tip to the well known "Pride goes before destruction, and the haughty spirit before the fall", from Proverbs, 16:18 (NRVS ed.). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is prophetic for Coriolanus.

The fixation on tongues continues—as Coriolanus shows more and more his disdain the common people, his descriptions of the other consuls and the body politic become harsher, and more like to beasts than men. The body becomes, as it did in the first act, a body indeed:

CORIOLANUS Are these your herd?
 Must these have voices, that can yield them now
 And straight disclaim their tongues? What are your offices?
 You being their mouths, why rule you not their teeth?
 Have you not set them on?
 (3.1.35-37)

He converts the citizens to sheep, and chides the consul for not bringing them back in line. Moreover, he even goes as far as to suggest that the citizens should not have voices, and have the ability to say what's on their mind. The idea that the consuls are the 'voice of the people' Coriolanus literalizes, and uses it to shame the body politic. It is the idea of the body itself being uncontrolled by the mind that inhabits it, and that being shameful. The idea that disparate people that make up the body of Rome being allowed to speak as if they were Rome is abhorrent to Coriolanus. In fact, he is shaming the 'mouths of Rome' for not controlling those that they are tasked to speak for. This ties back to his disregard for the *vox populi*—Coriolanus wishes only to hear the voices of the elite. Though he only wishes to hear the voices of the elite, he does have disrespect for those who he perceives as not doing their jobs—those mouths that do not control their teeth. His distrust of the

body politic goes so far as to suggest that that aspect of society should have no access to the actual power of ruling:

CORIOLANUS

... at once pluck out
The multitudinous tongue; let them not lick
The sweet which is their poison.
(3.1.156-8)

Coriolanus is following the pattern of ‘power corrupts’; he is so used to having absolute control over his men (the military is not a democracy) that he cannot fathom the idea of bending his knee to those he views as common enlisted men. While the people may elect him, he views that as assurance that he knows better than them. He is simultaneously aware that power corrupts but also unable to see it in himself. He firmly believes that the body politic is not to be trusted with power. The citizens themselves, who are speaking to Menenius later in the scene, continue this metaphor even further:

1 CITIZEN

He shall well know
The noble tribunes are the people’s mouths
And we their hands.
(3.1.273-5)

The citizen here clarifies that while the tribunes may be the mouth of the people, the people are far from just an accessory of that mouth. The citizens are the things that build Rome, that build the city proper, and without them, nothing can be done—all that will be left is words. This not viewed as a shameful thing; on the contrary, the citizen seems to take a distinct pride in it, and knows that the citizens are the right by which the tribunes speak. There is pride in the very physical labor of the ‘hands of the city’—one that parallels the very physical labor of Coriolanus’ soldiering. Despite that, Coriolanus still holds that labor in disregard. He himself is also assigned a body part, variously debated upon by both the citizens and several tribunes:

SICINIUS

He’s a disease that must be cut away.

MENENIUS

O, he's a limb that has but a disease:
 Mortal to cut it off, to cure it easy.
 What has he done to Rome that's worthy death?
 Killing our enemies the blood he hath lost –
 Which I dare vouch is more than that he hath
 By many an ounce – he dropped it for his country;
 And what is left to lose it by his country
 Were to us all that do't and suffer it
 A brand to th'end o'th' world.

SICINIUS

This is clean cam.

BRUTUS

Merely⁴ awry. When he did love his country
 It honoured him.

SICINIUS

The service of the foot,
 Being once gangrened, is not then respected
 For what before it was.
 (3.1.296-308)

The idea that Coriolanus is a part of Rome that must be “cut away”—evocative of a sword hacking away the limbs of those it strikes. He is no longer something that the city may take pride in—his dictatorial tendencies, antithetical to the rule of the people that is placed as a pillar of what Rome *is*, rapidly moves him from the highest heights of admiration to sentenced to death by a mob of agitated democrats. Menenius argues that his disease (in this case, clearly taken to mean his disregard for the common man) is something curable. That, despite nominal attempts from Coriolanus, seems unlikely. Menenius is arguing that Coriolanus can in fact change, and that he would have respect for both the rule of the people and the tribunes that speak for him. To bolster his point, he gestures to Martius' service, and in particular the blood he spilled. This is incontrovertible evidence for Menenius; if Coriolanus did not have a true love for Rome, then he would not have spilled that blood in its defense. His blood coming out from the inside of his body is viewed as proof that the thoughts inside him can change, because for the blood to be spilled in the defense of what Rome stands for, so must the thoughts that are spilled in defense of it. Both Coriolanus' blood and

⁴ “merely” here means ‘completely’.

thoughts must correspond to one another—the truth of Coriolanus’ belief lies in his blood. His repeated sacrifice, which Menenius points out has gone far beyond what would kill most men, is the true representation of Coriolanus’ devotion to Rome. Moreover, to kill Coriolanus for his pride would bring shame on everyone in Rome. While Coriolanus’ behavior is certainly shameful, to answer it with his death would be disrespectful to the service he has rendered to Rome. Brutus and Sicinius remain unconvinced. They both denounce it as twisted and perverse, and Sicinius especially has a disagreement with the idea that Coriolanus can be ‘cured’. He makes the disease much more serious, and suggests that that shameful infection overrides any service he has done for Rome, as the present danger could bring ruin upon the whole of the body.

Coriolanus readily transforms himself through words, though, as he is being needled before his mother to incline himself to the people:

CORIOLANUS Well, I must do’t.
 Away my disposition and possess me
 Some harlot’s spirit! My throat of war be turned,
 Which choired with my drum, into a pipe
 Small as an eunuch or the virgin voice
 That babies lull 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 armed knees
 Who bowed but in my stirrup bend like his
 That hath received an alms! – I will not do’t
 Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth
 And by my body’s action teach my mind
 A most inherent baseness.
 (3.2.112-23)

All of this language is run through with shame. Coriolanus views himself as the epitome of what a warring man should be, and the idea that he would be anything less is repugnant to him. In the comparisons he draws, he reveals his inherent dislike and disrespect for all those he would liken himself to. For him, these people are not simply those in a different situation than him; they are those who have made an objectively worse, shameful choice. There is nothing but shame to be

found in the life of a eunuch, or a knave, or a schoolboy who may cry—which also implies that Coriolanus chooses not to remember when he may have been one of those himself. Indeed, Volumnia suggests as such mere lines later: “Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck’st it from me ...” (3.2.130). There are actions that can be both shameful and not—and Coriolanus argues that distinction is all in the context of that action! There is no other explanation for a beggar’s need for alms than he is too shameful to seek out those wages himself. Coriolanus places a very strong emphasis on the action itself, as opposed to the intent behind it. To him, there is no difference between kneeling like a beggar and being one; to be both above the people in title and still subservient to them are mutually exclusive to him. Finally, it ties back to the betrayal of his own body—in doing something with his body that is shameful, he will teach his mind, his thoughts to normalize that shameful thing, and be shamed through it. He is holding his indefinite future self to the standards that have stood him in good stead throughout his life, but to be inflexible to the demands of a new role is to break, as Coriolanus will find out.

The general’s breaking point comes when he is finally banished from Rome. Seeing his attitude towards democracy and the people in general, the citizens seek death, but are convinced to allow him to leave in disgrace and exile. To that action, Coriolanus retorts:

CORIOLANUS

You common cry of curs whose breath I hate
 As reek o’th’ rotten fens, whose loves I prize
 As the dead carcasses of unburied men ...
 Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts ...
 (3.3.119-21...124)

Again, he seeks to disembody those he holds in little regard, and to shame them through equivalency with beasts. He considers himself above them all, and not tied to his baser natures as he sees them. They are dogs in his eyes, and their words nothing but a stench from the earth. This mirrors how some citizens view Coriolanus himself: “Against him first. He’s a very dog to the commonalty”

(1.1.29). Even as he curses them for beasts, he compares their love to that of unburied men—something wholly abhorrent to a soldier, especially that of Rome. He cares not for those who would be terrified by every slight rumor and whisper against the city. He sees himself not as one who is above the city, but rather as one of the last true defenders of its honor, a stalwart for its bettering. He views himself as the best of Rome—and the city only the worse off for missing him.

So Coriolanus is banished from Rome, reviled by the common man. He heads off to fairer pastures, with naught but his name left in remembrance. He leaves his distraught mother behind:

VOLUMNIA

Bastards, and all.

Good man, the wounds that he does bear for Rome!

...

VOLUMNIA

Anger's my meat: I sup upon myself

And so shall starve with feeding.

(4.2.27-8...50-51)

Coriolanus is not the only one fixated on his wounds and why he has them. Volumnia, too, is outraged at the lack of respect given to Coriolanus and to his service. The idea that her son could be so dishonored by those he serve so strongly is damnable in her eyes. In Coriolanus' exiling, Volumnia herself is shamed by the association she bears to him. For him to be banned is for her to be ashamed of the how she raised him—which she resents, as she views her influence on Coriolanus as nothing but a good thing. She is livid, and promises to “sup upon myself”—a changing of the body we haven't seen before. While there has been much transformation, the idea of the body as sustenance, or forgoing sustenance in favor of willpower has not appeared. This is inherently a self-destructive thing, and lays out an example of ‘death before shame’ that we will see paralleled by Coriolanus in Act Five. This is a state of mind that is concerned only with the reparation of honor, and with nothing else. That extremity is Volumnia's only choice in her view, in such depths of shame.

CORIOLANUS

... The painful service,
 The extreme dangers and the drops of blood
 Shed for my thankless country are requited ...
 our dastard nobles, who
 Have all forsook me, hath devoured the rest
 And suffered me by th' voice of slaves to be
 Whooped out of Rome.
 ... But in mere spite
 To be full quit of those my banishers
 Stand I before thee here. Then if thou hast
 A heart of wreak in thee that wilt revenge
 Thine own particular wrongs and stop those maims
 Of shame seen through thy country, speed thee straight
 And make my misery serve thy turn ...
 Since I have ever followed thee with hate,
 Drawn tuns of blood out of thy country's breast
 And cannot live but to thy shame, unless
 It be to do thee service.
 (4.5.70-3...77-80...84-90...100-3)

This is a continuation of the emphasis on physical work that Coriolanus has espoused throughout the play, but this time to someone who understands it on the same level as he does. In the context of talking to Aufidius, citing the physical work and risks that Coriolanus has done and taken for Rome, the injustice of it is practically manipulative. He is appealing to the shared values they have as soldiers and rivals—to place in the mind the Aufidius the acute shame he feels at being run out of town by non-soldiers. He furthers this manipulation by aligning himself with what Aufidius' opinions of the Roman nobles and peoples already are: slaves and bastards, hiding behind their walls. He tosses in how the voices of slaves were those that followed him out of Rome; implicit in that is the shame in being bested by those who you should not have to think about. This mirrors the last time they fought, at the Siege of Coriole, when during their single combat, and certain Volsces come to Aufidius' aid: "Officious and not valiant, you have shamed me/ In your condemned seconds" (1.9.15-6). Aufidius' behavior during that duel is enough to establish that the both of them function by a code of honor that is deeply tied to your personal physical actions. Knowing this,

Coriolanus expertly manipulates Aufidius' sympathies to his own personal benefit. That being said, he is completely clear about what he is doing: "in mere spite" he is before Aufidius, to serve in the destruction of Rome. Coriolanus is so done with Rome that he is willing to entirely forsake it. But he also makes mention of Aufidius' heart, and its relative state of sympathy to Coriolanus. The idea that the body itself could be possessed by a state of mind, that the body responds to the overriding emotions in its mind—this as contrasted with the body in rebellion against its owner, and its refusal to do as it should. He then falls back on the city-as-body metaphor so prevalent in Rome. The idea that the death of its soldiers and the loss of territory that it suffered from Coriolanus are indeed like a body losing a limb, and thus bring shame in Coriolanus' eyes. But he is using that shame to convince Aufidius to help him by helping himself. Coriolanus is nothing but an asset on the battlefield—Aufidius knows that better than anyone—and so to assault Rome with Coriolanus would certainly be a victory. On the other hand, he could simply kill Coriolanus for the damage he has done, and to be revenged upon him. While that might be satisfying, it would do less for the overall goal of the Volsces. Therefore, Aufidius is left really with only one choice if he is not to kill Coriolanus outright: use him to sack Rome. Unfortunately, this also corresponds to Coriolanus' wishes, but where the harm if Aufidius can take the credit?

The personification of objects and ideas continues after Coriolanus and Aufidius beat a retreat to the dinner table; the servingmen have a discussion about war versus peace.

1 SERVINGMAN Let me have war, say I. It exceeds peace
 as far as day does night. It's sprightly walking, audible
 and full of vent. Peace is a very apoplexy, lethargy,
 mulled, deaf, sleepy, insensible, a getter of more bastard
 children than war's a destroyer of men.

2 SERVINGMAN 'Tis so, and as wars in some sort may be
 said to be a ravisher, so it cannot be denied but peace is
 a great maker of cuckolds.

(4.6.132-6)

Menenius, as he has done for the entire play, falls squarely on Coriolanus' side of the court. This simile—that of the soldier's hair as whips—is different than previous ones for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a specific body part that is being transmuted, and into an object that carries with a symbolic weight. Certainly, the primary consideration is as whipping slaves, as Coriolanus likens the citizens to in his appeal to Aufidius, but also as the whips of hell. In that same appeal, Coriolanus mentions how, "... I will fight/ Against my cankered country with the spleen/ Of all the underfiends" (4.5.92-4). That brings a righteous cast to the whips, as if they are not simply a revenge, but the wrath of a vindictive god. Just as Coriolanus was shamed by those citizens for being anti-rule-of-the-people, so is he shaming them for being, well, anti-*him*. This is the whips of Coriolanus' fury wailing on the body politic of Rome, for revenge and shame both.

That whipping is to bring Rome into the shape that Coriolanus most likes. He views Rome, or at least the ruling of it, as his own, through his natural tendencies for leadership and obvious qualifications. That being said, the idea of ownership—and especially ownership of the body politic is not an unfamiliar one to Coriolanus. Nor is it unfamiliar to Aufidius, who justifies his decision to let Coriolanus sack Rome to one of his subordinates in the closing lines of Act Four:

AUFIDIUS

... One fire drives out one fire, one nail one nail,
Rights by rights falter, strengths by strengths do fail.
Come, let's away. When, Caius, Rome is thine,
Thou art poor'st of all; then shortly art thou mine.
(4.7.54-7).

Coriolanus' rage at Rome's betrayal has blinded him to the reality of the situation: Aufidius is letting him sack Rome to further his own ends. While at the end of the siege, Coriolanus may own the body politic of Rome like he always imagined he would, Aufidius will own Coriolanus' body in a much more concrete way. As he explained to Aufidius, Coriolanus' only purpose at this point is to revenge

himself upon Rome—"If I had feared death, of all the men i'th' world/ I would have 'voided thee. But in mere spite/ To be full quit of my banishers/ Stand I before thee here" (4.5.83-6). Coriolanus thinks he has nothing to lose, but Aufidius sees past that—and looks forward to when the price must be paid.

And to think that if a character could ignore shame if they could ignore the society that imposed it on them. It is hard to hold society in lower esteem than Coriolanus. Even to those he would respect the most—his mother, his fellow soldiers, his wife—Coriolanus remains steadfastly his own man, who will do as he wishes. But he cannot escape the shame, even if he can break free of a Goffmanian conception of shame.

Coriolanus' shame comes not from him caring what others think about him, rather, it comes from the fact that he cannot control his own body. As a man who very much establishes himself in the physical, he places a great deal of emphasis on his body and how it is under his control. Any slip in that control, and Coriolanus is laid low by an unrelenting shame. That pride—and that deep need to avoid any act that may make it seem like he is losing control of his body—is what causes him his downfall. He cannot imagine a world in which he must be told what to do, and the world is more than happy to remove him from one that does.

That arc reveals the fundamental issue of shame in *Coriolanus*: even without the shame placed on us by others and ourselves, we still feel shame for those things that we cannot control. In this case, it is the discrepancy between what we want our bodies to do, and what they actually do. As Coriolanus shows, one can remove oneself from the opinions of others with a great deal of willpower and strength, but to remove yourself as subject of your own body is a much more difficult thing. Coriolanus thinks that once he is in a place to ignore the word of the common man, he can be

finally free of shame, content in his own belief in his physical prowess. But his inability to make his body do something it does not want to do on fundamental level completely incapacitates him. This is a signal for the why the discrepancies that we discussed in the first chapter occur; it is that basic inability of humans to control even their bodies. There are simply things that we are forced to do, or cannot prevent ourselves from doing. Even with shame of social removed, we cannot escape the shame of our own bodies, because they have roles that our mind has no power over. Not only can we not control the abstract, as we saw in *Othello*, *Coriolanus* makes it very clear that we have no control over the concrete, either.

These two conceptions of shame, that of the lack of control over the abstract and lack of control over the physical, are what form the basis for the shame found in *Othello* and *Coriolanus*. However, in the next chapter we will see what happens when neither of those apply. By what *Measure* can shame then be defined?

CHAPTER THREE

The soul's responsibility

*Shame in the shameless
society of Measure for Measure*

Through *Othello*, we saw a society that was so focused on how everyone should act, and how shame arose from the differences in expectations and reality. In *Coriolanus*, we watched as Martius increasingly lost control over his body, and how he falls into shame through that. These conceptions of shame rely on the people within that society to believe they can be shamed for something; because they care, shame is easily locatable and definable.

In *Measure for Measure*, it is a much different situation. For fourteen years, people have been acting wholly shamelessly in Vienna. This is the motivation for the action of the play: the Duke, who has overseen this slide into a society that hardly pays lip service to shame, but hardly done anything about it, desires—for whatever reason—for the city to be brought back up into the light. And ‘shameless’ here means that the people of the city seem not to care about shame, but not of anything, really. Take this instance of Lucio, a *Fantastic* speaking with two gentlemen about peace versus war:

LUCIO If the Duke, with the other dukes, come not to composition with the King of Hungary, why then all the dukes fall upon the king.

I GENTLEMAN Heaven grant us its peace, but not the King of Hungary's!

2 GENTLEMAN Amen.

LUCIO Thou conclud'st like the sanctimonious pirate, that went to sea with the Ten Commandments, but scrap'd one out of the table.

2 GENTLEMAN ‘Thou shalt not steal?’

LUCIO Ay, that he raz'd.

1 GENTLEMAN Why, 'twas a commandment to command the
 captain and all the rest from their functions: they put
 forth to steal. There's not a soldier of us all that, in
 the thanksgiving before meat, do relish the petition
 well that prays for peace.
 (1.2.1-16)⁵

They cite the most authoritative and basic source of moral behavior, and laugh off justification for selectively paying attention to it. There is a sense that they should be doing something different, something better and less shameful, but they don't. It is as if they are aware of the idea that their behavior is shameful, they acknowledge it, and then move on. Even Lucio's use of *sanctimonious*—it fits perfectly here, “Of pretended or assumed sanctity or piety, making a show of sanctity, affecting the appearance of sanctity” (“sanctimonious, n.”, *OED*). There is this implicit suggestion that the realities of life take precedence over trying to live the best life that one can. The 1st Gentleman goes so far as to say the nature of a pirate is to steal; as if that nature was fixed and incapable of change. This is shameful behavior—suggesting that a commandment that outlaws clearly wrong behavior is going against the inherent nature of thinking beings. But they do not feel any shame for it, even if their status suggests they should. Gone are the carefully constructed relations of *Othello*, or even the fraught relation with bodily functions in *Coriolanus*; that sense of shame is replaced with a cynical, ‘realist’ view of the fundamentally corrupt morals of man.

This cynicism is shared by nearly everyone in the play—from the hypocritical Angelo, to the wildly inconsistent Duke, and the falsely pious Claudio. However, there is one exception: Isabella, sister of Claudio and soon-to-be nun. Her rock-solid belief in both the importance of acting well, and her complete willingness to express that belief make her stand out as a beacon of frankness in a sea of pessimism. Even Lucio, who is good friends with Claudio, must convince her of his sincerity, such is her nature:

⁵ All references in this text to *Measure for Measure* are to *The Arden Shakespeare* 3rd edition, edited by J.W. Lever. More information can be found in the bibliography.

us act in a way that enables us to exist in the context of other people. Thus, the shamelessness of Angelo, the Duke, and so many of the other characters in *Measure* is so unsettling because it simply should not be how it works. How does one find shame in a shameless society? By having a soul—something that must be non-negotiable.

It is a Catholic background of the playwright and the universal Christian background of English society that sets the scene of *Measure for Measure*. We find ourselves in a fictionalized Vienna, and the play sets out from there. Inside the Duke's palace, the Duke is calling upon Lord Angelo to take his place while the Duke leaves the city for a while:

DUKE

... Thyself and thy belongings
 Are not thine own so proper as to waste
 Thyself upon thy virtues, they on thee.
 Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
 Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
 Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
 As if we had them not. ...
 In our remove, be thou at full yourself.
 Mortality and mercy in Vienna
 Live in thy tongue, and heart.
 (1.1.29-35 ... 43-5)

While this is not a shameful moment in itself, it prefaces a great deal of shame to come, and couches in it unreachable moral terms. The Duke, in complimenting Angelo, also saddles him with a moral responsibility. So now Angelo has not only his own sense of moral duty, but also a duty to the Duke and to his city. He is now held to be a paragon of virtue by both the Duke's trust in him, but also as the leader of the city. In failing to be a perfect, shining example of morality, he would not only be shamed by his own sense of religious responsibility to God, but also by his leader, and the people he speaks for. Given the focus on duty to God, this is a heavy sentence indeed; if Angelo fails, he will

not only be shamed by himself and his people, but also by the Almighty. And that sentence is inescapable; the Duke very clearly lays out that he views Angelo as one who should be held as a shining example of virtuous behavior. To add to that, he then places the entire moral responsibility of a city on Angelo's shoulders. Even for a saint, this is no easy task. The Duke places the final nail in the coffin as he steps out:

DUKE

... Your scope is as mine own,
So to enforce or qualify the laws
As to your soul seems good.
(1.1.64-6)

'You have the first and final say in every matter, but every decision you make will be on your own soul'. This is not merciful—this almost seems a punishment, and Angelo the reluctant recipient.

Speaking of reluctant recipients, somewhere else in the city, a group of men, including Lucio, erstwhile friend of Claudio, gather and discuss the latest developments. We'll take a closer look at this scene:

LUCIO If the Duke, with the other dukes, come not to
composition with the King of Hungary, why then all
the dukes fall upon the king.

1 GENTLEMAN Heaven grant us its peace, but not the King of
Hungary's!

2 GENTLEMAN Amen.

LUCIO Thou conclud'st like the sanctimonious pirate,
that went to sea with the Ten Commandments, but
scrap'd one out of the table.

2 GENTLEMAN 'Thou shalt not steal'?

LUCIO Ay, that he raz'd.

1 GENTLEMAN Why, 'twas a commandment to command the
captain and all the rest from their functions: they put
forth to steal. There's not a soldier of us all that, in
the thanksgiving before meat, do relish the petition
well that prays for peace.
(1.2.1-16)

In sharp and quick contrast to the lofty words of the Duke and Angelo, we are brought back to ‘street-level’ morality, where there is not nearly the level of shame associated with defying—or at the very least, justifying breaking—the most basic of religious tenets. Because the stakes seem so much lower—the moral status of one man, versus that of an entire city—the rules of how much one should be shamed for that breaking of God’s law are much more loose. Despite that, there is a paradoxical appeal to God to grant the peace of Heaven. But this is the space that these largely unnamed characters occupy; closer to the ground, the more the waters of morality and religious piety become muddied. Lucio even points this out, specifically choosing the word *sanctimonious*, a word with overtly religious overtones—and one that in Shakespeare’s time actually meant sacred, in a reversal of the meaning we see today.⁶ However, this may be an early example of its ironic use, as Lucio points out that it does not mean much to be holy if one ignores the parts of scripture one does not like. But, in the first refutation of shame through religious order, the 1st gentleman puts forth a practical argument. If you order someone to do something that is against their nature, can one reasonably expect them to follow that order? The 1st gentleman is arguing that there is no shame in following one’s nature—be it inherent or cultivated. No soldier truly wishes for peace, that would put them out of a job! And, in contrast to the Duke’s earlier suggestion that virtues should “go forth”, the gentleman rather suggests that it is the role that men have found in life that makes them “put forth” and act according to those roles. The dichotomy of the play has been neatly set up—the high aspirations of an all-inclusive morality that dictates every word, action, and ruling; or that of a pragmatic morality that realizes that humans are not perfect. These two oppositions strongly effect how the religious and moral shame affects the characters throughout the play. Fear of the Almighty and his wrath affects those who do not have fear of where the next meal comes from; in that sense, those who are free from the shame of poverty merely swap it out for shame in religion.

⁶ OED.

Perhaps the best example of a ‘shameless’ character within *Measure for Measure* is Mistress Overdone, the owner of a large number of brothels throughout Vienna. She arrives with the news that Claudio has been arrested and sentenced to death, for sleeping with and impregnating his soon-to-be wife Juliet. She is entirely unfazed by Juliet’s condition, and when another character responds to her inquiry about what Claudio has done with, “A woman”, she responds, “But what’s his offence?” (1.2.81-2). Where the Duke epitomizes a morality above all, Mistress Overdone must sacrifice that morality (and eschew the shame that accompanies it) because of her own practical concerns. These concerns are most prevalent in her moment alone on stage:

MISTRESS OVERDONE Thus, what with the war, what with the sweat,
 what with the gallows, and what with poverty, I am
 custom-shrunk.
 (1.2.75)

She doesn’t object to any of those for the traditional reasons; all of these things kill men in one way or another. To Mistress Overdone, the tragedy there is not the deaths, rather it is her loss of business because of those deaths. This rather ruthless approach to the reality of her work is an incredible twist on the motherly associations of women that the play trades in (note the pregnant Juliet). Every aspect of those associations—and the heavy dose of shame for not performing to those expectations—is completely dropped by Mistress Overdone. She simply does not have the time to be concerned about the state of her soul; she’s got a business to run. Unfortunately for her, that business does not have good weather on the horizon; Angelo’s first decrees outlaw them entirely. She serves as the polar opposite of him throughout the play—and a strident advocate for the right to that “most mutual entertainment” (1.2.142).

The speaker of that entertaining euphemism is none other than the piteous Claudio, who is led onstage by the arresting officers as Lucio and the gentlemen find him. Juliet is there as well, though she does not speak. Claudio’s case, as it starts in the beginning of the play, is a complicated

one. He is someone concerned with the morality of his actions, and has the ability to do so, but is willing to give in to his more earthly desires if it bends the rules instead of breaking them. To that point, Juliet is, by Claudio's word, "fast my wife,/ Save that we do the denunciation lack/ Of outward order" (1.2.136-8). So, in every view but that of the law and church, Claudio and Juliet are married. However, their eagerness to partake in that mutual enjoyment, they forgot that all premarital sex, even on a technicality, is outlawed. So Juliet becomes visibly pregnant, the authorities put two and two together, and Claudio is arrested. At that point, he becomes remarkably more pious:

CLAUDIO Thus can the demi-god, Authority,
 Make us pay down for our offence by weight.
 The words of heaven; on whom it will, it will;
 On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just.
 LUCIO Why, how now Claudio? Whence comes this
 restraint?
 CLAUDIO From too much liberty, my Lucio. Liberty,
 As surfeit, is the father of much fast;
 So every scope by the immoderate use
 Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue,
 Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,
 A thirsty evil; and when we drink, we die.
 (1.2.112-22)

Claudio reaffirms Angelo's position as the moral executor of the city in the Duke's absence. There is something intensely human about the enforcement of God's laws. It is not that God will step in and enforce his laws—it is up to his representatives on earth (in this particular case, Angelo) to interpret and execute his will. Therefore Claudio lifting that authority to a status just below that of God himself—and assigning proper heft to the position. He then speaks of how he feels the weight of his crimes upon him. In the context of this religious speech, it is clear that it is his religiousness that causes that shame, for failing to meet the standards set by those religious dictations. He even strays into Apologetics, suggesting that the infallible nature of God's decree is such that even when it is unjust it is right. The shame that is felt is agnostic to the justness of the situation; if God, or one of

his stand-ins, declares that one has done wrong, *one has done wrong*, and one is shamed for't. Claudio then goes on to suggest that it was too much freedom that led him astray, his own failure to do his duty (i.e., to get married fully to Juliet) that lead him down this shameful path. He extrapolates from his experience to the entire human experience—too much freedom will ultimately result in humans partaking in so much pleasure that they lead themselves to their deaths.

It is evident that the Duke agrees with Claudio. In the next scene, he is found meeting with Friar Thomas, to make clear his true reasons for leaving the city:

DUKE We have strict statutes and most biting laws,
 The needful bits and curbs to headstrong jades,
 Which for this fourteen years we have let slip;
 ... Now, as fond fathers,
 Having bound up the threatening twigs of birch,
 Only to stick it in their children's sight
 For terror, not to use, in time the rod
 Becomes more mock'd than fear'd ...

DUKE 'Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them
 For what I bid them do: for we bid this be done,
 When evil deeds have their permissive pass,
 and not the punishment.
 (1.3.19-21...23-6, 36-9)

The Duke has been looking for a way to 'fix' the city. The laws on the books are plenty strict, and would suffice to sufficiently regulate the actions of the citizens. But without enforcement, it's as if there were no laws at all. This is part of the Duke's conception of his moral responsibilities; as the leader of the city, he feels a need to be the moral guide of the city. If he fails in that responsibility, he has let an entire city of people fall prey to their baser nature. Their shame reflects on him, and is coupled with the shame that he personally feels. Additionally, this gives reason to why he leaves Angelo as the moral as well as civil leader of Vienna—that is something that the Duke thinks leaders should simply be. Despite those beliefs and that shame, he has let the city languish in shame—consciously or not—for a decade and half. That gives rise to another of his reasons to give Angelo the helm: he feels as if his suddenly reversing stance on his policies would make him seem too much

the dreadful dictator. Implicitly, there is another apology for the wrong behavior of the city—because the Duke views that man is naturally inclined towards regressive behavior, the leader of the city should be shamed for not enforcing laws that punish that regressive behavior. The Duke is taking that moral shame on himself. Almost as penance, he is donning the robes of a simple Friar to see how Angelo ‘cures’ the city. The fact that he chooses a monk as a disguise, and the fact that he is talking to a monk about his plans reveals another layer of religious worry on the part of the duke. By donning a habit and trusting a clergyman with his plan, he attempts to layer a Godly approval over his plan. Actively or not, the Duke is seeking approval from a moral authority to assuage his own shame over having both someone else to fix his city, and for having to use deception to achieve that end.

This usage of holy folk continues: in the previous scene with Lucio and Claudio, Claudio implores Lucio to go to his sister, Isabella, who is training to become a nun, and ask her to appeal to Angelo. Naturally, the discourse on shame becomes much more prevalent, and more complex. One of Isabella’s fellow sisters is with her when Lucio makes his way to the priory, and explains the rules of how the nuns must act around men:

NUN When you have vow’d, you must not speak with men
 But in the presence of the prioress;
 Then, if you speak, you must not show your face;
 Or if you show your face, you must not speak.
 (1.4.10-4)

Already, we see the much more strictly defined rules of how one must act in a explicitly holy place—and how the shame is amplified in turn. For these women who have entirely devoted themselves to God, to even talk to men is shameful without a higher authority present. Religion is dictating how much shame is in any given situation. Lucio seemingly knows this, and uses it to talk to Isabella a sight more easily:

Let but your honour know—
Whom I believe to be most strait in virtue ...
(2.1.6-8)

He's the paragon of virtue—and Angelo himself has clearly attempted to cultivate this image:

ANGELO 'tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,
Another thing to fall.
(2.1.17-8)

This will not serve Angelo well in the latter half of the play; by setting himself higher and higher as a moral authority, he only has farther to fall. Later in the scene, he is judging a layman by the name of Elbow, who 'mixes up' his words that conveniently foreshadow Angelo's hypocrisy:

ELBOW
... But precise villains they are, that I am sure
of, and void of all profanation in the world, that good
Christians ought to have.
(2.1.54-6)

Angelo, the ideal 'good Christian'—full of all the profanation that he ought to have. In fact, in the next scene, Isabella echoes Elbow, saying: "... Great men may jest with saints: 'tis wit in them,/ But in the less, foul profanation" (2.2.128-9). The *OED* defines it as "the action or the act of profaning", so within the context of Isabella scolding Angelo, it's heavily laden and critical of his supposed status as a virtuous example.

Speaking of Isabella scolding Angelo, the next scene is exactly that: it starts out as Isabella pleading for Claudio's life, Angelo is unmoved, and then Isabella goes into a brilliant screed about the nature of power and its just use. This is to contrast the *actual* moral center of the play—Isabella—against the *supposed* moral center of the play. This is the first time we see a true example of someone who really believes in the system, and believes that their actions have consequences. Isabella is not like many of the others, in paying lip service to shame and then not changing their behavior. Isabella actually does feel shame from things, and believes that acting virtuously is the best way to avoid

moral shame. She believes in the judgments of God, which causes her to view her actions in the context of what would save her from the most shame. That is directly in contrast with Angelo, who, while ostensibly being concerned with the judgment of God, does not have any nuance in his interpretation of the word, and does not act according to the tenets of God. There is a very basic example of this early on in the conversation between the two:

ISABELLA I have a brother is condemn'd to die;
 I do beseech you, let it be his fault,
 And not my brother.
 PROVOST [*aside*] Heaven give thee moving graces!
 ANGELO Condemn the fault, and not the actor of it?
 Why, every fault's condemn'd ere it be done:
 Mine were the very cipher of a function
 To fine the faults, whose fine stands in record,
 And let go by the actor.
 (2.2.34-41)

Isabella is pulling straight from the St. Augustine: hate the sin, love the sinner. It's a forgiving view of sin, but also one that still leaves room for shame to be placed. Not that Isabella is necessarily arguing for Claudio to be forgiven entirely—and not that she is arguing the law is unclear in its prescription—but she is arguing to hold to the law without thinking about it is merciless. Angelo clearly does not think that. He is also acting in terms of fixing his status as the person who will 'make the laws respected', so in some sense this is also Angelo merely enforcing that which he was appointed to enforce. However, he is valuing the letter of the law above the life of his citizens. Certainly, if Claudio had committed murder, or some other crime befitting the death penalty, Isabella would have a harder time arguing that mercy is the right choice here, but as it stands, Claudio and Juliet have committed an essentially victimless crime. The idea that death is the necessary reaction, or that the death penalty cannot be appealed to, is ridiculous, even within the context of *Measure for Measure*. As Claudio points out in the first act, they are all but married. And, as Mistress Overdone points out, it's not like Claudio and Juliet are the only ones having sex out of

wedlock. Angelo here is not making a wise and just decision here; he is arbitrarily making an example out of Claudio with no respect to the idea of Christian mercy. He is letting the power get to his head.

Before pointing out Angelo's power-drunkenness, Isabella stays on the track of mercy as the transcendent Christian virtue. The way she talks about it is to show how it is the thing that defines truly great leaders:

ISABELLA

... Well, believe this:
 No ceremony that to great ones longs,
 Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,
 The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,
 Become them with one half so good a grace
 As mercy does.
 (2.2.58-63)

She speaks of mercy as the thing that redeems both the recipient and the donor. It is not a sign of weakness. It is ultimately the thing that makes a great leader—something that Angelo aspires to be. It is the thing that tempers power; it is one thing to have power, it is another to use it justly. Not to mention that within Isabella's language is an implicit judgment that those who wield power without mercy are shameful in the worst way. Power without mercy is not worthy to be that power—it is the gentle influence of mercy that allows for power to exist without being inherently manipulative and corrupting.

An important part of that sense of mercy is how it so much develops from a sense of empathy. Angelo, seemingly unconvinced by her pleas, is snapped at by Isabella:

ISABELLA I would to heaven I had your potency,
 And you were Isabel! Should it then be thus?
 No; I would tell what 'twere to be a judge,
 And what a prisoner.
 (2.2.66-9)

While she almost never comes right out and says, ‘this is a shameful way for someone in power to behave’, her language screams it. She is saying someone better—her—would act in a different way, a less shameful way than Angelo may, because they are guided by the proper influence of Christian mercy. That mercy derives from not just scripture, but the ability to feel empathy for those condemned. Angelo has no respect for each individual situation that he comes across as this ‘ultimate power’, so to speak. He is in a position to justly enforce the laws, and not to blindly follow what the laws dictate to him. That is the shameful part of Angelo’s ruling; it is not the ruling itself, but rather that he is making it without rationally inspecting the situation. First off, Claudio is not the only person to be having sex out of wedlock; moreover, he is ‘out of wedlock’ in only the absolutely strictest sense. He does not need to ask Juliet, there is no question that they were to be married, but Angelo persists. Additionally, it seems harsh to remove one of the child’s parents before the child is even born—even that is not enough to convince Angelo about the harshness of his sentence. It seems that Angelo is more controlled by the law than the other way around; this is not a kind monarch justly presiding over his loyal subjects, this is a harsh dictator imposing his will on those who don’t want or need it. That is the shameful thing about Angelo’s ruling. Not that he is allowed to rule, but rather that he is ruling poorly. It very much seems as if the preference here is clearly no ruler over a bad one.

As Isabella warms up, she truly brings the religious weight of her position as an almost-nun to bear. This is extraordinarily telling of Isabella—she clearly cares about what she is saying, and how it brings shame on Angelo:

ISABELLA

Alas, alas!

Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once,
 And He that might the vantage best have took
 Found out the remedy. How would you be
 If He, which is as the top of judgment, should
 But judge you as you are? O, think on that,
 And mercy then will breathe within your lips,

Like man new made.
(2.2.73-9)

She is truly convinced of the truth of the Gospel, and of the never-ending mercy of God. To her, this religion is not just a façade one puts up to save face and blame one's feelings of shame on; religion is the only guiding force in a world that is unapologetically full of shameful acts. God is the redeeming force—yes, humans may be shameful and petty and often simply follow their base desires, but in accepting God and living a pious life, one can be saved. Isabella is trying to live that life to the greatest extent. She then uses that background to base her arguments in something that is essentially infallible: the Word of God. Claudio may be condemned by the law, but were not all souls condemned for eternity by the Lord, and yet he still found a way for those souls to be saved from that most horrible punishment? Of course, this is complicated by the fact that she claims to know the will of God and what his actions in this particular situation would be. That matters less, though, because she puts the impetus of imagining that on Angelo (note his name, *Angel-o*. Perhaps he should have a better idea than most), in an effort to make him feel the shame more viscerally. The end point of all of this is to get him into a more merciful state of mind, to shame him into believing in mercy more so than he already might. Angelo attempts to defend himself claiming that the 'law is the law', as it were, but this pales in comparison to the Word of God.

Angelo realizes that he is being outclassed, however; he attempts to liken the word of the law to that of the Word of God. He suggests that mercy is no more shown than when it is the law justly acting:

ANGELO The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept:
 Those many had not dar'd to do that evil
 If the first that did th'edict infringe
 Had answered for his deed. Now 'tis awake,
 Takes note of what is done, and like a prophet
 Looks in a glass that shows what future evils ...
(2.2.91-6)

Isabella's parting shot here clearly means that she is suggesting to him to save what little honor he has left, but that is not how it is taken. He remains ignorant of his own lack of honor—and he does not care. As we have seen, he has spent a great deal of time and energy showing how he is the most virtuous, the most uncorrupted, the purest authority. But suddenly, in the presence of a truly moral person, he becomes as corruptible and base as the rest of the city, which cheerfully bumbles along in its apparent shamelessness. What's striking about the next few lines is that he is not ashamed for how he feels—even if he pays lip service to it later on—his first concern is who really is at fault here: her, for existing, or him for having these feelings. Put simply, there's one correct answer to this question. The fact that he is turned on by Isabella is his problem alone. Nowhere in the past interaction did Isabella ever give any indication that she was remotely attracted to Angelo; so why is he concerned with that at all? He is lusting after someone who he knows to be taking a vow of chastity, someone who takes very seriously the precepts she lives by. Strictly speaking, while there is nothing wrong with lusting after someone (though mark "Thou shalt not commit adultery" and "Thou shalt not covet"), the idea of expressing it and acting on it is—and especially in someone like Angelo, who claims to be the very model of earthly virtue! He claims that he should be inspired by Isabella's belief and morality ("the violet in the sun"), but rather he is wholly corrupted by her earthly beauty ("Do as the carrion does ... corrupt by the virtuous season"), something that he later suggests he was above—"When men were fond, I smil'd, *and wondered how*" [writer's emphasis]. He almost feels bad for this transgression against Isabella's modesty, in asking why he vulgarly desires to "raze the sanctuary", but moves right past it into ruminations on his self. There's no contrition there, no regret that lasts more than a dozen syllables. Angelo is taking pleasure in the transgression, in the taboo. It is the very betrayal of the values he claims to espouse that makes lusting after Isabella's body so pleasurable. He loves that she is pure, in this society where people act as if none of that matters. The fact that Isabella believes that all matters makes her more desirable in Angelo's

eyes. The fact that he would be the one to corrupt Isabella is what turns him on so much. Despite that lecherous sentiment, he still claims to be a saint! There was no saint wholly without sexual desire, however, it is a far claim to suggest that Angelo is a saint with his desire to feast upon Isabella's 'eyes' again. He almost seems to claim that in wanting to have sex with Isabella, he should be excused for those temptations, because she is so pure, and therefore begging to be corrupted. He claims to be immune to the pleasures of prostitutes; to not feel anything for their beauty or their ready availability for sex. But because Isabella truly cares about the things she believes, she would require the corrupting of Angelo, which only turns him on more.

Speaking to that care of Isabella, though, it is one of the most perplexing things in the play. Why does she care? Where is her motivation? Throughout the barely act-and-a-half we've examined, every indication—from Lucio's sanctimonious pirates, to Mistress Overdone's customs (albeit shrunk), to Claudio and Juliet's most mutual entertainment—all those things that we have seen people be shamed by before are not in play. While social expectations remain, and every person has roles they play, no one takes shame from those transgressions; no one cares, truly, that someone may not be performing their roles. General lewdness, rudeness, and crudeness are all above-board, if everyone does them, it's not an issue. Lying is commonplace, and viewed hardly as a problem; the Duke himself justifies lying to an entire city with a wave of the hand. Bodily functions are hardly a source of shame, either. Everybody wants sex, everyone seems to have it, except for strange people like Angelo who pretend not to want it, but actually do. Mistress Overdone is not subtle, in any sense of the word. She and her workers provide a service. There is no shame to be found in that service—the desires of the body simply *are*, there is no reason to feel betrayed or ashamed of your body because it wants something. Your prerogative is to satisfy that desire. Thus, the society of this Vienna is one that feels no shame for failing to meet socially defined roles, no shame for the natural inclinations of the body; yet for some reason, Isabella insists on the sanctity and purity of her

devotion to something higher. Why does she care? Everything around her—including authority figures that are supposed to be examples—tells her that there is no shame to be found in this society. Wherefore the belief, the reluctance to sacrifice something as apparently meaningless as her purity to save her brother’s life? Why does Isabella care when no one else does? This is the critical realization, and the one that rules *Measure for Measure*. While the mind and body can make you *feel* shame, your soul is the thing that makes you *care*. Shame, in *Measure for Measure*, is the discrepancy between how one acts, and one feels one *could* act. It is independent of both societal expectations and one’s relation with one’s body. It is one’s conscience speaking to oneself, speaking to one’s actions and how they could have been different—how they could have been better. This realization clarifies something more about the nature of everyone else in the play aside from Isabella; they have spent so much time in this society where nothing really matters, *per se*. There’s nothing that can bring you shame, and that means that there’s no reason to not do anything. They believe so wholly in nothing that the tempering influence of the soul has disappeared. What makes Isabella remarkable is that she still believes. The fact that she listens to her soul, that she still feels shame in ‘things that are bad’ is what makes her so different.

That difference is most clear in the rest of the characters. They truly do embody the “sound and fury, signifying nothing”—they feel soulless. The rest of the characters in the play don’t ‘click’ with the reader because they are not imbued with a sense of right and wrong. When we read Angelo’s speech, or see how Lucio and his friends casually defend thieves, it strikes the reader as wrong, in a sort of unsettling way; it *should* be wrong, and the characters seem to know that, but nobody seems to care. One feels as if there should be more problems—like we saw in *Othello*, or *Coriolanus*. People objecting to things that are wrong, that are shameful. But that doesn’t happen—and that is what is so problematic about this play. If you have so many characters so concerned with what is right, and what is holy—why do none of them care about it?

Nothing about *Measure for Measure* is simple or straightforward. The good people in it are not especially good, and the bad seem to not do anything particularly worse than the good. The society found in Vienna, in fact, just seems to ... not care. They do not care for the moral, or the just, they care for what they want, and not much beyond that.

Isabella is the one voice of reason in that sea of degradation. She speaks with a self-assured passion, and ideas that reflect her belief in doing the right thing. Those beliefs ironically subject her to the most shame of anyone in the play—though it largely comes from herself. No one else seems to care in this play. The social roles intermingle and blur, and the physical is just viewed a fact of life, for better or for worse. The idea that someone may not be performing their roles, or that they are giving in to the body's needs—it's simply a non-factor. The characters besides Isabella may feel shame from the mind and the body, but they don't care about it. That is what makes Isabella so unique in the play: she has a soul.

Isabella's conception of shame in *Measure for Measure*, besides needing a great deal of belief for it to work, requires that soul. Because it is the discrepancy between how one acts, and one feels one could act. Just as the play itself is complex, so is its understanding of shame. Because the play does not trade in shame of the mind or body—recalling that 'carelessness' that we saw throughout the play—it must find that shame *somewhere*. Shame is an important part of any human society, so it must find the place where it can exist. Caring about 'doing the right thing' or 'acting shamefully' is not something inherently wrong, it is something that lets humans guide their behavior. Without it, we see what happens to the vast majority of the people of Vienna—degradation and stagnation. Even those who profess feeling are liable to corruption if they don't care. It is not enough to just feel shame; one must actually care about it. This is why the characters in *Measure for Measure* feel unsettling, even soulless—they don't care about shame, and that makes them feel 'off'. Because

shame forms such an important part of any society, the idea that there could exist a group of people that ignore its teachings makes for deeply uncomfortable reading.

Measure for Measure stands not as a comedy, and hardly as a tragedy, but as a immensely complicated picture of shame in a society that has forgotten to care. That lack of caring results in decisions that should never be made, and characters that seem less believable than others. Isabella, with her rock-solid belief and deep caring, stands out as the most soulful person in the play, but—is her shame enough to save the rest?

AFTERWORD

‘For shame ...’

*Final thoughts on a Senior Project
about shame in Shakespeare*

Well, suffice to say, this was not a fast, easy, or even particularly smooth process to arrive where we have about shame. Shame is not a simple thing to understand, even with authorities and a great deal of brilliance bearing down on it.

We saw how it seems to function in ‘normal’ society—people performing roles, and people evaluating those performances. That’s what we know. We all have conceptions of what each other should be doing, and how we should be performing ourselves. *Othello* is a particularly strong example of shame twisting and roiling, destroying a society as it wreaks havoc on its members. We know what this feels like, even if it hasn’t killed our loved ones. To fail an assignment, to not get that job, to disappoint someone you respect—it is a understanding of shame that we all can grasp and truly *feel*.

But, of course, we could hardly stop there. If you could stop caring about what other people thought, what happens then? Certainly, you cannot control what other people think, so being able to ignore it helps immensely. But even if you don’t care about that, there still things beyond your control that will bring you shame. Coriolanus finds this out as his body rebels against him, and that he cannot control everything he thought he could. The shame of the uncontrolled brings him low even when societal shame couldn’t.

And then there’s *Measure for Measure*, which sort of ... cuts to the quick of shame. It removes all those constructions of shame, and asks that fundamental question: we may feel shame, but what makes us care about it? Why do we feel shame, and why does it make us act in a certain way?

Isabella's crucial presence helps us answer those questions, but it also complicates our entire view of shame.

That, I think, is the final word. How shame works in Shakespeare—and how these three understandings of shame interact with each other—is incredibly complicated. This project has given me a much deeper understanding of these three plays, and an ability to understand characters in a new and profound way. But to say that this analysis is final or the last word is, to borrow Shakespeare's phrasing, *clean cam*. These characters, like the characters of any other writer, can be understood in a multitude of ways; this is the one that I found most immediately compelling.

This project, on a personal level, was fundamentally a learning experience. Not just about shame in Shakespeare, but also as a personal and academic one. It is the first real monumental task I have undertaken; it is a culmination of four years of education, and it reflects both the skills I've learned, and my own personal working idiosyncrasies. Part of me wishes that this was perfect, flawless, that all the problems and issues that I talked through with my advisor were fixed and invisible. But, as this paper stands, it is intensely *mine*, and it reflects that. It is not perfect, and I could not be happier about it.

And at the end of the day, the answer for what shame looks like in the 'real world', not one constructed by Shakespeare is ... 'it's complicated'. It is neither just that of *Othello*, with roles enforced to the death, nor that of *Coriolanus*, where we are free to ignore society and focus on our body image issues. It is not even that of *Measure for Measure*, because people do in fact care about why they feel shame, and seek to feel less of it. Real-life shame is a conglomeration of those, of our mind, and our body, and ultimately of the soul. None of them exist in a vacuum, and this paper is hardly exhaustive. But through this we can begin to grasp the many ways in which shame affects the people of Shakespeare, and how shame affects the world of people.

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There are undoubtedly dozens more that I may have missed, forgotten, or overlooked simply due to the nature of working on a project for this long. To those authors, my apologies.