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# *English Calvinism and the Crowd: Coriolanus and the History of Religious Reform*

PETER IVER KAUFMAN

Late Tudor London comes alive when Stephen Greenblatt's acclaimed biography of William Shakespeare, shadowing its subject, takes to the streets. "The unprecedented concentration of bodies jostling . . . crossing and recrossing the great bridge, pressing into taverns and theaters and churches," Greenblatt suggests, is a "key to the whole spectacle" of crowds in the playwright's histories and tragedies. To be sure, his little excursions in London left their mark on his scripts, yet he scrupulously sifted his literary sources from which he drew characters and crises onto the stage. He prowled around Plutarch and read Stow and Hollinshed on the wars of succession he chronicled. Nonetheless, "the sight of all those people—along with the noise, the smell of their breath, and their rowdiness and potential for violence—seems," Greenblatt says, "to have been Shakespeare's first and most enduring impression of the city" in the 1580s and to have been the inspiration for the "greasy aprons" and "gross diets" of "tag-rag people" or rabble in his plays. There, onstage, the glory that was Rome and the grit of fifteenth-century England were "suffused less with the otherness of the past than with the familiar coordinates of Shakespeare's own present." And familiarity bred contempt for "the sweaty multitude." "All those people" were terribly, dangerously unpredictable or, as with Jack Cade's crowd in the second part of *Henry VI*, just plain dangerous. Cade stirred his prole followers to kill the city's more cultured citizens. Sinisterly self-interested tribunes—or so they may have seemed to some playgoers—swayed the crowd in *Coriolanus* against the play's protagonist, Rome's most noble soldier. And commoners could be "lightly blown to and fro."<sup>1</sup>

1. Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), 169–70. For aprons and diets, *The Tragedy of Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. Michael Neill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 5.2.210–12; for tag-rag people, *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1.2.257; for "lightly blown,"

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Was Shakespeare warning the Elizabethan and early Stuart aristocracy about anarchy? He appears to have been counseling contemporaries against trusting ordinary citizens or trusting those who manipulate them. Brents Stirling influentially believed so fifty years ago. He explained that the playwright “damned” the rabble and rag-tag “with tragic thoroughness.” Stirling would likely have thought Greenblatt’s grim references to the stench and noise in London’s narrow streets—to “all those people”—germane, though he attributed Shakespeare’s tragic thoroughness to the “climate of public apprehension” created by late Tudor conformist religious literature. “It [was] clear,” to Stirling, “that Shakespeare’s attack on the common mass for excesses of leveling, bungling, and instability was typical of a conservative position which sought to discredit both moderate and extreme [religious] dissent.” Conformist critics of many puritans’ nonconformity, that is, supplied the recipes, the playwright let commoners’ grievances simmer and then brought them to a boil, and playgoers must “have sensed . . . unconsciously” or “habitually” that the crowd’s insolence and violent fantasies they saw on stage substantiated what they heard from the pulpit about the inferior “sorts” in their city’s streets.<sup>2</sup>

I shall argue here that religious attitudes towards commoners—those of the conformists and nonconformists alike—were rather more complicated than Stirling assumed. The public apprehension he identified signaled an ambivalence that was fundamental to early modern religious reform in England, and I believe that Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, composed and performed by 1609, illustrates precisely that. The “thoroughness” of its contempt for the crowd is often overstated, but the same ought to be said about its brief for democracy, which several historians of drama have filed. Ultimately, we shall try to repossess the way the play—according to Frank Kermode, “probably the most difficult . . . in the canon”—gestures to the religious literature of its time.<sup>3</sup>

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*Henry VI, Part Two*, ed. Roger Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.8.55–56 (killing the cultured at 4.2.96–101; Cade, also known as the captain of Kent, died as a prisoner in July, 1450, a few months after the stirr of that year started in the southeast). For the tribunes in republican Rome, see *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, ed. Louis Wright and Virginia La Mar (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), 2.3.164–290. References to acts, scenes, and lines from these editions of the plays are given parenthetically in the text. For contempt for the “sweaty multitudes” at the theater, see Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from his Life* (London: Arden, 2001), 60 and 116.

2. Brents Stirling, *The Populace in Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 99 (sensed unconsciously), 120 (climate of apprehension), 151 (excesses of leveling), and 175 (tragic thoroughness).

3. Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare’s Language* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000), 244 and, mentioning “daunting ambiguities,” 254. For reformers’ ambivalence into the 1580s,

### I. THE PLAY: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE TEXT?

Coriolanus's contempt for commoners drives the drama. He discovers that desperation during hard times turns them into "dissentious rogues" (1.1.175) and that wars turn them into cowards, "souls of geese that bear the shapes of men" (1.4.45–46). Coriolanus, their contrary and valorous general, is courageous. Valor and a disdain for Rome's ordinary citizens, which he shares with fellow patricians, make him the senate's choice for consul. He has only to get the commoners' consent. For they recently won the right to ratify such choices, and, before endorsing his appointment, they want to inspect his wounds.

Simple enough, save that Coriolanus put himself above pandering. His wounds "smart to hear themselves rememb' red" (1.9.32–33). His mother's calls for calm and the patricians' appeals seemed to win him over and to move him within striking distance of being acclaimed by the crowd, yet electioneering brought out his arrogance and contempt for "the mutable, rank-scented meinie," the many menials he was supposed to oblige and flatter (3.1.87).

Their elected representatives or tribunes recall that Coriolanus, at the play's start, urged rejection of the proles' petitions for surplus corn at low prices. They suspect that the candidate for consul remains resolutely opposed to the new republic's participatory regime, "where," as he claims, "gentry, title, [and] wisdom cannot conclude but by the yea and no of general ignorance." The tribunes egg him on. He, impolitic, complains that governments by the people "must omit real necessities and give way the while to unstable slightness" (3.1.182–86). "Your dishonor mangles true judgment," he tells the tribunes and their constituents alike, "and bereaves the state of that integrity which should become 't, not having the power to do the good it would, for the ill which doth control 't" (3.1.195–99). Controllers, though, are disinclined to tolerate such contempt. The "rank-scented" banish Coriolanus from the city he so nobly defended for refusing to show his wounds respectfully. He leaves them with a last slap: "you common cry of curs, whose breath I hate . . . I banish you" (3.3.150–53).

"Being now in no request of his country" (4.3.34–35), Coriolanus goes over to the enemy. He finds employment there, leading the Volscians, whom he recently humbled in the corpse-littered streets of their city, to the very walls of his own. But he spares Rome. Loath to let the "mechanics" there off, he nonetheless acquiesces when his

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consult Kaufman, *Thinking of the Laity in Late Tudor England* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 103–65.

mother and wife plead for mercy. They count on his nobility, which both sides acknowledge—his critics in Rome, even when they thwarted his candidacy for consul, and the Volscians when they slay him for betraying them (5.4.170, “most noble”). If all within the play agree about Coriolanus’s virtue, would playgoers have questioned his descriptions or indictments of the commoners’ self-indulgence and ignorance, of the “despised, fragmented carnality of the mass”? Would so honorable a soldier lie about those “curs,” “scabs,” “shreds,” “rats,” and “fragments”? Surely, *Coriolanus* is a warning against social leveling, as Brents Stirling suggests, against English citizens’ “unstable slightness,” and Stirling is not alone in thinking so.<sup>4</sup>

Had he been acquainted with religious controversies familiar to early Jacobean playgoers, Coriolanus might have echoed the complaints about prole overreaching that they often heard, the regrets that “it was never good world . . . since everie souldier and every serving-man could talk so much of the scripture.” But Calvinists in England attributed such sentiments to their Catholic critics. “It was never good world *with us priests*,” Anthony Gilby has an abrasive chaplain say, in effect, making contempt for the crowd contemptibly Catholic.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one contention of the more forward among reformers, who came to embrace their colleagues’ disparaging depictions of them as precisianists, purifiers, or puritans, was that “a worthy, grave man” need not be a priest to pronounce on Scripture. Puritans, in other words, seemed ready to risk a *de facto* priesthood of all believers. Agreed, few proles had much learning, and learning was unmistakably valued, yet zeal “was the most precious virtue in Christianity,” Richard Greenham said, “so long as it is free from extremities.”<sup>6</sup>

Hence, quite possibly, zealously reformed playgoers imagined that “most noble” Coriolanus’s contempt for the commoners denied him

4. Among others, Zvi Jagendorf, “*Coriolanus*: Body Politic and Private Parts,” reprinted from *Shakespearean Quarterly* 41 (1990), in *Coriolanus: Critical Essays*, ed. David Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1995), 239, for “despised carnality”; Ian Munro, “The City and Its Double: Plague Time in Early Modern England,” *English Literary Renaissance* 30 (2000): 254–56; and Stirling, *Populace*, 97–150.

5. Gilby, *A Pleasaunt Dialogue conteining a large discourse betweene a souldier of Barwick and an English chaplain* (London: [R. Schilders], 1581), C3v.

6. Greenham, “A Sweet Comfort for an afflicted conscience,” in *The Workes of the reverend and faithful servant of Jesus Christ, M. Richard Greenham*, ed. Henry Holland (London: William Welby, 1612), 104. For Greenham’s long ministry in Cambridgeshire, see Kevin L. Parker and Eric J. Carlson, *Practical Divinity: The Works and Life of Reverend Richard Greenham* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 1998). For the prospects for worthy grave men in religious service, see instructions “for the better ordering and direction of ecclesiastical government” in Doctor Williams’s Library, Morrice MSS B.1.276 and C.338–39 (hereafter, DWL).

the company of angels.<sup>7</sup> Alas, as the tribunes noted, the protagonist intemperately spoke "o' the people as if [he] were a god to punish [them], not a man of their infirmity" (3.1.105–7). He was "a portrait of uncivility," Cathy Shrank says, observing that his patron and publicist, Menenius, along with other patricians had learned to accommodate "the rhetoric of participation" in their new Roman republic. Not Coriolanus! Did his obstinacy annoy playgoers from London and other towns in the realm where municipal jurisdiction was exercised by citizens? The lesson Shakespeare has him learn at great cost—that no noble was indispensable—could not have surprised them. History—as told in their chronicles, recited from their pulpits, and staged at their theaters—had revealed as much. Still, Coriolanus's snarling self-importance, atrocious arrogance, and disdain for commoners, grating as they may have been, no more delegitimized what he said about ordinary people than his perceived nobility ("his nature is too noble for the world": 3.1.324) made it all true. His flaws and fate, however, incline a number of recent critics to suggest that *Coriolanus* rehabilitates old Rome's "rats" and "scabs," and "encourages" playgoers' "support of the plebeians' wishes for a more democratic form of government" in early Jacobean England.<sup>8</sup>

Annabel Patterson's interpretation strides towards that suggestion but starts by taking stock of the playgoers. The theater crowd was a mixed lot, "a jumble of classes," she says; commoners rubbed elbows with the affluent and aristocratic. The theater "spoke to democratic ideals" before anyone appeared onstage.<sup>9</sup> The first to appear in

7. Reformed playgoers? True, the puritans' anti-theatrical prejudices were often articulated and have been usefully studied, as has the puritan laity's tendency to ignore sermons and pamphlet literature warning that patronizing plays was tantamount to idolatry. See, for example, Margot Heinemann, *Puritans and Theater: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Paul Whitfield White, "Calvinists and Puritan Attitudes under the Early Stuarts," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 14 (1988): 41–55; Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists, and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).

8. For such support, Bryan Reynolds, "'What is the City but the People?' Transversal Performance and Radical Politics in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Brecht's *Coriolan*," in *Shakespeare without Class: Misappropriations of Cultural Capital*, ed. Reynolds and Donald Hedrick (London: Palgrave, 2000), 112; and, for "uncivility," Cathy Shrank, "Civility and the city in *Coriolanus*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54 (2004): 414–15. Also see Thomas Sorge, "The Failure of Orthodoxy in *Coriolanus*," in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean F. Howard and Marion O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), 235–37; and Burton Hatlen, "The 'Noble Thing' and the 'Boy of Tears': *Coriolanus* and the Embarrassments of Identity," *English Literary Renaissance* 27 (1997): 413–19.

9. Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 16–18.

*Coriolanus* were “mutinous citizens,” protesting the inflated price of corn. Peter Hall’s production at London’s National Theater invited patrons to identify with protestors. Actors were not supplied costumes but told to bring casual clothes from their wardrobes at home. They leisurely circulated with placards, beckoning playgoers to join the “mutiny” before the first line was delivered. If Patterson is right, the crowd in *Coriolanus* appealed to seventeenth-century playgoers as well. Its resistance to protagonist and patricians alike made power-sharing appear attractive; the play made the broadly participatory alternative to Jacobean absolutism “visible and accessible.”<sup>10</sup>

The crowd in the fourth act of Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI* surges more menacingly and corresponds more perfectly with the images of prole protest in the socially conservative and religiously conformist propaganda of the time. The Calvinist conformists feared that radical puritans were waiting only for a resourceful leader to rally them and specify which of the realm’s cherished religious and political institutions ought to be flattened first. Shakespeare nominated the clothier from Kent, Jack Cade, who had proposed to flatten just about everything that got in his way in the fifteenth century. The commoners’ grievances in *2 Henry VI* are unspecified; they seem disturbed that they had been getting bad press, that their reputation as sturdy sorts was unraveling—“O Miserable age! Virtue is not regarded in handicraftsmen” (4.2.10–11). In any event, Cade could excite them to a murderous frenzy, by promising better beer. He and they seemed simply to relish opportunities to destroy. Cade made his “mouth the Parliament of England” (4.7.13–14), yet the crowd swiftly abandoned him when it hears a more compelling speech and a more enticing offer (4.8). Commoners in *2 Henry VI* were fickle as well as brutal.

They are more reflective and self-critical in *Coriolanus*. They want to be seen as neither ridiculous nor ruthless. They worry about “mak[ing] a monster of the multitude by showing ingratitude” towards the protagonist (2.3.9–11). If only he “incline[d] to the people, there was never a worthier man” (2.3.37–39). The playgoers might have recoiled immediately, offended by Coriolanus’s arrogance, but the proles on-stage were generally magnanimous and reservedly friendly at first

10. Patterson, *Voice*, 120–46; Anne Barton, “Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*,” reprinted from *Shakespeare Survey* (1985) in *Shakespeare and Politics*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67–90; and Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* (Stratford: Arden, 2004), 14–17, 209–10, 178–81. For Hall’s production—my favorite—see S. K. Bedford, “On Both Sides More Respect: A Very British *Coriolanus*,” in *Coriolanus: Critical Essays*, ed. David Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1995), 339–41.

(2.3.166)—until tribunes turned their reservations into rage and “put all in anger” (3.2.115).

The tribunes must work awfully hard to get that done. Coriolanus’s Rome and Shakespeare’s London were filled with sturdy middlers who “do not cease to negotiate,” as Theodore Leinwand observes; “this is not one of those Shakespearean moments,” he says of the crowd in *Coriolanus*, “when we stand apart from the lower orders, laughing at their malapropisms” or praying, as one might after exposure to Cade’s kind, that officials acquire some “comprehensive disciplinary control of popular energy.”<sup>11</sup> The playwright was not ashamed of the commoners onstage, and he seems not to have wanted playgoers to be afraid of “popular energy.” Plutarch, his source, staged the protest differently. The crowd’s “hate and malice grew” with only minimal prompting until the proles “were in wonderful fury.” Only then did the tribunes capitalize on their constituents’ reaction to Coriolanus’s “soaring insolence” to assure the rejection of his candidacy for consul. In the play, though, the commoners never forgot who the hero of the drama was. Not they, but the tribunes, could be considered its villains inasmuch as they goad both Coriolanus and the crowd to no good ends simply to preserve their own political standing. Tribunes remind “the people in what hatred he still hath held them” (2.1.275–76); then they cover their tracks and tell the patricians that they were responsible for getting citizens initially to acquiesce in Coriolanus’s political promotion (2.3.258–79). Playgoers know what the patricians doubtlessly suspect, that the tribunes, in fact, utterly undermined the citizens’ goodwill: “do you think [Coriolanus’s] contempt shall not be bruising to you when he hath power to crush” (2.3.219–20). So whose reputation did the script scuttle? That of Coriolanus, the hero-turned-victim? That of the crowd? Or that of the tribunes?<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the tribunes have greatest cause for complaint. After all, they had only pointed out the obvious in the play: “he [Coriolanus] did solicit you in free contempt” (2.3.217–18). True, onstage, they were luminously self-interested. Once Coriolanus assumed authority as

11. Theodore B. Leinwand, “Shakespeare and the Middling Sort,” *The Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993): 300–302; Michael D. Bristol, “Lenten Butchery: Legitimation Crisis in *Coriolanus*,” in *Shakespeare Reproduced*, 214.

12. Compare Thomas North’s translation (1603) of Plutarch’s *Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus*, reprinted in *Shakespeare’s Plutarch*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (London: MacMillan, 1875), 16–19. Also see R. W. Chambers, “The Expression of Ideas—Particularly Political Ideas—in the Three Pages and in Shakespeare,” in *Shakespeare’s Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*, ed. A. F. Pollard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 168–69: “Shakespeare hated and despised the tribunes in *Coriolanus* with a bitterness he rarely felt towards any of his creatures.”



consul, their "office" would "go sleep" (2.1.246). They would certainly have been derelict, however, to overlook the likelihood that the protagonist would similarly have abridged the people's prerogatives. What they called "soaring insolence" (2.1.288) made him "the ultimate conservative"—his "monumental narcissism," "the most serious threat to emergent republicanism."<sup>13</sup> The tribunes, therefore, connived at his dreadful fate ("i' the people's name": 3.3.130), to save the people and their recently acquired rights from a man who was demonstrably better at waging war than at working a friendly crowd. After Coriolanus was banished, in his absence, the commoners enjoyed "peace and quietness." Tradesmen rejoiced, "going about their functions, friendly." The patricians grew "most kind" (4.6.2–11). The tribunes were every bit as disingenuous as ever—"we wished Coriolanus had loved you as we did" (4.6.29–31)—yet, undeniably, according to the play, "Rome sits safe and still without him" (4.6.44–46). Shakespeare's tragedy, then, leaves playgoers with dilemmas rather than with defensibly categorical conclusions about the ingratitude of the "tag-rag people" of Rome, the wickedness of their tribunes, and the incorrigibility of the would-have-been consul. If being baffled did not bother the play's patrons—and William Empson suggests that it did not—*Coriolanus* was a fine way to pass the time.<sup>14</sup>

## II. TOPICAL REFERENCES: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE CONTEXT?

But early modern plays tended to be more than just pastimes. A smattering of propaganda punctuated the entertainment, and the point of propaganda was not to baffle. Literary historians appreciate as much and hunt for political purposes in the plays, for topical references in the scripts that help them locate the playwrights and performances among other "players" in political or religious controversies of the time. Assuming that *Coriolanus* pronounced on current events, historians of what happened onstage and off would be irresponsible not to pursue possible connections, perhaps to learn whether the crowd was meant to be—or was seen to be—more dangerous than the play's protagonist.

Even without Greenblatt's nudge, his richly imagined account of "Shakespeare's first and most enduring impression of the city" and its

13. See Leonard Tennenhouse, "*Coriolanus*: History and the Crisis of Semantic Order," *Comparative Drama* 10 (1977): 333, for "ultimate conservative" and threat; Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 206, for narcissism.

14. Empson, *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. David Pirie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 118.

"sweaty multitude[s]," we would have to presume the playwright overheard comments about crowd control. London's magistrates and in-the-know assize judges elsewhere were anxious about commoners who were displaced during the economic downturns of the 1590s and after. The crop failures and crime rates warned them of a coming crisis. Twentieth-century observers contend that rural "stirs" and urban riots were cottagers' and tradesmen's "negotiating strategies."<sup>15</sup> But magistrates were obliged to anticipate that some protests would turn into emergencies. England's new king in 1603, James I, worried as well. He was not happy to have dissidents speaking out or acting out. His impatience with those who did either and with members of Parliament (he called them "tribunes") who spoke on behalf of his "immiserated" subjects was, one could argue, packed into Coriolanus's swift kicks at the "curs," "scabs," and "rats" of Rome. The protagonist's staged dislike of public displays might have reminded playgoers of James who avoided making public appearances. The king was known to have cut short his coronation, apparently wishing, as Coriolanus did, to "o'erleap that custom" or ritual requiring him to go among the commoners (2.2.156). To him, their curiosity was an ordeal. One can see why Shannon Miller concluded that similarities between Shakespeare's sovereign and his would-be consul were "inscribed into the play," which, she continues, urged respect for citizens' rights and encouraged resistance to Jacobean absolutism.<sup>16</sup>

And there was resistance in London. The city's magistrates campaigned for a new charter that would disallow royal interference in certain circumstances. It was granted by 1608, shortly before *Coriolanus* was first performed and after local officials scuffled with the king's marshals who claimed superior jurisdiction over some crimes. To read the play in light of that conflict is to read "locally," Leah Marcus says, to look for "a language of civic liberties and franchises [that has] topical reverberations with the jurisdictional battles of Shakespeare's London." But Marcus sees no brief for the crowd, no endorsement of Rome's "turbulent republican system" or of England's levelers. The city is the winner, although not its commoners who "display little of the steadfastness and civility they need"

15. Jim Sharpe, "Social Strain and Social Dislocation, 1585-1603," in *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*, ed. John Guy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 200-202; Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2-9.
16. Shannon Miller, "Topicality and Subversion in William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*," *Studies in English Literature* 32 (1992): 287-310. For "popular immiseration," see William Hunt, *The Puritan Moment: The Coming of Religion in an English County* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 41-63.

to pick honorable, effective tribunes to guard cherished customs. "The city," Marcus insists, "dominates the stage," on which popular protest reflects contemporary "clamor for the preservation of local autonomy."<sup>17</sup>

Yet such sorting of "topical reverberations" leaves the play in a peculiar position, appearing to celebrate commoners' "clamor" for autonomy while doubting their ability to manage it. Or are we mistaken to think of that as peculiar? An undated Elizabethan "plot" for social reform argued that greater power ought to be given to local authorities, despite their incompetence. It allowed that there was something to be said for decentralization, without interrupting its withering account of political blundering. The problem seemed simple; the solution, less so. Late Tudor citizens too often presumed good butchers or popular bakers and vintners might make smart magistrates. How silly to be selective stabling one's horses with good grooms, while trusting one's laws to the untrained!<sup>18</sup>

Did playgoers sense that *Coriolanus* compassed the plot's reservations about those who ruled the realm's cities and perhaps others who ruled the realm itself? Playgoers may have noticed the protagonist's resemblance to James and agreed that his patriotism in the play ought to have made him patient instead of proud. Still, they were unlikely to be tipped against either Coriolanus or their king, Clifford Huffman now says, because they knew—as playwrights did—that drama either "spoke to James's interests" or was denied a stage. Sentiments limiting monarchy were unwise, to say the least, "in the tense atmosphere" of the early seventeenth century. Censors would have seen to it that *Coriolanus* was "conservative in tendency," that it illustrated the stupidity of citizens, the duplicity of tribunes, and the impracticality of any conceivable alternative to charismatic, divine-right rule. Huffman is certain that Shakespeare's play was—and was seen to be—a homily on obedience.<sup>19</sup>

Or was the drama indifferent, apolitical, and nonpartisan? Huffman could be right about "the tense atmosphere," yet he appears to have improvised the playwright's and playgoers' responses to it and to have overestimated the reach and effectiveness of early modern censorship. The topical references to James settle nothing conclusively.

17. Marcus, *Puzzling*, 203–11.

18. "A Plot for Reformation," in British Library (hereafter BL), Additional MS 48066, 5v–6r.

19. Clifford Chalmers Huffman, "*Coriolanus*" in *Context* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1972), 139–50, 181–82, 221–22. But, for the nearly inaudible contemporary revival of republicanism, see Markku Peltonen, *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 51–87.

They neither substantiate nor undermine Huffman's hunches. We cannot tell for sure whether the playgoers who recognized their king in *Coriolanus* cheered the crowd that opposed him, or jeered, or cared nothing at all about the indignation and popular protests onstage. Yet what if playgoers glimpsed something else of England? Shakespeare, after all, played a bit with Plutarch, whose mob, at first, objected to greedy creditors. But the crowd in *Coriolanus* is hungry. Its irreverent commoners agitate "for corn at their own rates. They claim the city is well stored" (1.1.202–3). The script mentions usury but attributes the swells of sedition to the Romans' sense that their senate is unfairly withholding the surplus to drive up prices. References to Elizabethan and early Stuart shortages, hoarding, enclosure of arable land, and widespread hunger and anger might have been achingly obvious to playgoers who knew history, knew, specifically, that discontented peasants had squared off against landlords for generations. They understood as well that the frequency and intensity of conflicts, notably in Midland counties, greatly increased from the 1580s. Complainants then often converged on specific sites to riot against neighbors whom they blamed for low yields, high unemployment, or inflated prices. The earthen embankments and thick shrubbery enclosing pastures were early casualties, although the frustrations, allegations, and accusations occasionally led to "cutting down gentlemen rather than their hedges."<sup>20</sup>

Riots did not discourage the enclosures, which outraged peasantry and the poor into the 1600s. The Midland revolt of 1607, two years before *Coriolanus* was first staged, was one result. Armed levelers were beaten back in Northamptonshire during late spring, yet unpromising prospects for agrarian reform did not deter fellow proles from protests in Oxfordshire and Worcestershire, close to Shakespeare's Stratford. The playwright spent much of his time in London, yet as one of the leading cornholders in his home county he almost certainly kept an anxious eye on developments there. If the crowd in *Coriolanus* reflects or refers to the stirs in the Midlands, the few moments in which the commoners onstage seem to disarm playgoers with their self-deprecation and goodwill ("he has our voices": 2.3.166) are all the more remarkable. For Shakespeare's cargo of corn should have kept him on the senate's side of the controversies he scripted. "Topical reverberations"—Shakespeare's corn and context—suggest to literary historians that the play cast citizens' "herd-irrationality" "emphatically and continuously in an unfavorable light." *Coriolanus's*

20. See John Walter, "A 'Rising of the People'? The Oxfordshire Rising of 1596," *Past and Present* 107 (1985): 101.

counsel is, on this reading, Shakespeare's: capitulating to commoners "nourish'd disobedience [and] fed the ruin of the state" (3.1.151–52).<sup>21</sup>

And "this reading" has pretty much displaced the old view that Shakespeare's "artist nerves" alone accounted for his "aversion to the mob." Richard Wilson's canny reconstruction of the playwright's business interests, however, while making it harder still to swallow the idea that contempt for the crowd in *Coriolanus* was predominantly aristocratic and aesthetic, also drops the topical conceit that the Midland stirs of 1607 "reverberate" onstage in 1608. Wilson, that is, contemplates instead the turmoil that came before. For Shakespeare was not just one of Stratford's cornholders; he had been asked in the 1590s to represent the interests of local, Warwickshire commodity traders when he was in London. His *Coriolanus*, on cue, opposes the citizens who agitate for quick consumption, yet, as Wilson sees, the play is considerably kinder to commoners than the playwright's Stratford friends and fellow profiteers would have wanted, had they all not feared some "unregulated counter-market." The crowd in *Coriolanus* is "presented so equivocally," Wilson contends, because local traders—notably maltsters and brewers—were more or less in league with commoner consumers to keep middlemen elsewhere from putting their local corn exchange out of business by siphoning off supply.<sup>22</sup>

Does the play contain a coded market-analysis? Maybe. Wilson is surely right, though, to have Shakespeare hover over—rather than settle as a partisan among—any of the grasping and grappling antagonists—in republican Rome or in Jacobean England.<sup>23</sup> *Coriolanus* seems to commend neither the citizens nor the consul-designate they had banished, neither mayhem in the Midlands nor absolutism at court. Nonetheless, this apparent "neutrality" does not preclude the playwright's support for the government efforts to suppress "stirs" and for the puritans' petitions to give "anie man" a right to redress

21. E. C. Pettet, "Coriolanus and the Midlands Insurrection of 1607," *Shakespeare Survey* 3 (1950): 34–42; and, for "intolerable strains," consult John Martin, "The Midlands Revolt of 1607," in *An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain, 1548–1900*, ed. Andrew Charlesworth (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 33–36.

22. See Wilson's "Against the Grain: Representing the Market in *Coriolanus*," *The Seventeenth Century* 6 (1991): 111–17. For "artist nerves," see remarks culled from Georg Brandes's *William Shakespeare* (1895–96) and reprinted in *Coriolanus*, ed. David George (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 272–73.

23. Also, in this connection, see Paul Cefalu's "End of Absolutism and the Consensual Nature of the Early Modern State," *Renaissance Forum* 4:2 (2000): 1–34, where the case for the play's commitment to "a state platform of both negative libertarianism and paternalist centralization" seems to me far less clear and less compelling than arguments against the playwright's involvement with "rigidified class antagonisms" and "embattled, transitional ideologies."

injury and inequity by appealing from the local courts and clergy to higher authorities and councils.<sup>24</sup>

But "anie man" was not a mob, and Shakespeare seems to have been vexed by "the sight of all those people" in London, as Greenblatt guessed at our start. The crowd in *Coriolanus* may well signal the playwright's admiration for the commoners' common sense, as Annabel Patterson tells us, his respect for their ability, in Plutarch's Rome and in James's England, to read the economic symptoms of social injustice. But neither the vexation nor the admiration developed into a consistent and coherent position on crowd cunning or crowd control. Arguably, topical references aimed less at social relevance—less at proposing what Patterson calls a "daring social analysis"—than at dramatic effect, at "creating immediacy" for playgoers who could appreciate in an eye-blink "an artistic method" that added a dash of familiar English rebelliousness and royalty to republican Rome.<sup>25</sup>

### III. THE PIETY BEHIND "FACTIOUS PRACTICE"

Playgoers likely left the theater with some sense that *Coriolanus* and the crowd referred respectively to their king and to recent popular protest. But that is not to suggest that they left with a clear picture of the playwright's political preferences—that they were invited to draw specific conclusions about current events. Letting patrons sift and sum up for themselves, of course, amounted to a political preference similar to Edward Dering's, expressed years earlier when he asked that his sermons "be judged by the hearers."<sup>26</sup> At the time, it was enough to prove what his superiors suspected, that Dering disrespected their authority. But he enjoyed considerable support among reformed Christians in the early 1570s, in part, because he was confident that commoners could readily ascertain critical consolations and applications of doctrine on offer in the preaching that they encountered. With reformation came regeneration; with both, came understanding.<sup>27</sup>

Dering was only echoing Martin Luther's early optimism. Reformation, for both men, was an incredible opportunity to return fundamental choices to parishioners. Once the papacy had been discredited

24. Oxford, Queens College MS 280, 167v.

25. For "immediacy," David George, "Plutarch, Insurrection, and Death in *Coriolanus*," reprinted from *Shakespeare Survey* 53 (2000) in *Shakespeare and Politics*, ed. Catherine M. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 124; for "daring analysis," Patterson, *Voice*, 143.

26. BL, Lansdowne MS 17, 197r.

27. Patrick Collinson, *A Mirror of Elizabethan Puritanism: The Life and Letters of Godly Master Dering* (London: Friends of Dr. Williams's Library, 1964).

and the Roman Catholic hierarchy dismantled, they assumed, ordinary people ought to be able to deliberate about doctrine and pick their pastors. Luther thought so until the Swiss and German peasants took up arms against authorities in the mid 1520s.<sup>28</sup> The rebellions convinced him that one old saw still cut: *ubi enim tyranni desunt, tyrannizant populi*, people tend to tyrannize in the absence of tyrants. John Calvin, under no illusion about the commoners' courtesy, was pointedly dismissive of colleagues who imagined that Christians would participate usefully in a reformed regime without much prodding, but he fondly recalled apostolic times when bishops were created "by voyces of the people" and "put in execution [whatever was] decreed by common counsell."<sup>29</sup>

To many Calvinists on the Continent, election and "execution" of that sort seemed ideal and scriptural. A "counsell" or consistory in every congregation would appoint and closely monitor clerical leadership. The English were exposed to such broadly participatory parish regimes when refugees crossed the Channel in the late 1540s, after setbacks for reformed religion in France, Flanders, and Germany. The strangers' churches were closely watched and cursed, in some circles, for improvising arrangements without an episcopal say-so. Nonetheless, Thomas Cranmer, then archbishop of Canterbury, was favorably impressed by their provisions for parishioners' review of candidates for the ministry. He was cautious, however, about implementing changes in the English church that might baffle the laity and endanger the prerogatives of his episcopal colleagues and of influential lay proprietors.<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, and for several generations, his similarly cautious successors encountered more "forward" or radical reformers who advocated a series of experiments with lay and local control over the ministry. Thomas Wilcox, for one, did not flinch in the early 1580s, translating a treatise on church government that recommended important personnel and disciplinary decisions be taken with "the plaine and expresse consent of the people."<sup>31</sup> At roughly the same time a homegrown *Declaration* against "the untrue principle that uniformitie

28. See Luther's letter to the laity of Leisnig, *D. Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1900), 11:412.

29. That was what reformers read in Thomas Norton's translation, *The Institution of the Christian Religion written in Latine by John Calvin* (London: Vautrollier, 1578), 356r–357r (4.3.15–4.4.2). For Petrarch's formulation of the "old saw," cited here, see his *Invectiva contra quendam magni status hominem sed nullius scientie aut virtutis*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1949), 15.

30. Kaufman, *Laity*, 43–47.

31. Bertrand de Loque, *A Treatise of the Church* (London: Richard Langton, 1581), 39. The translator is perhaps best known as the author, with John Field, of the puritans' first *Admonition* to Parliament ten years before.

must be in all places enforced by [the] magistrate," in effect, put worship to a vote. Arrangements "most meete for diverse places"—local variations—were permissible as long as congregations carefully sifted proposed changes. "Overseers" and "elders" might be deputized to assure that any innovation reflected parishioners' preferences and was "profitable for all."<sup>32</sup>

The overseers and elders were to present would-be pastors to parishioners who interrogated their delegates' choices and returned a decision to appoint or dismiss. The protocol resembled that in *Coriolanus*, although, predictably, the precedent cited by the *Declaration* was scriptural, that of the apostle Paul and not the reports filed by Plutarch. Commoners could object to candidates. "Reasonable" resistance might stall an election, even send a candidate packing. But the unwelcome alternative was to have "a multitude of unfitte pastours" "pro[w]ll[ing] where they can for their benefices," flattering superiors or, worse, bribing them for choice appointments. The *Declaration* insists that parishioners will recognize virtues "meete" for ministry—learning, modesty, and gravity—more readily than had ecclesiastical and lay proprietors.<sup>33</sup>

Improvements would not come easily; hypocrisy was hard to detect; temptations to lie for power, hard to overcome. Clever candidates for clerical leadership might play on parishioners' self-interest, and the parishioners, looking for quick fixes—for a way to assuage their guilt and assure themselves of election—were ready to believe any and all good news on offer. Reformed religion had done away with the confessional where, as Walter Travers said, Catholic priests provided a false sense of security. But what kept nominees, eager for parishioners' approval, from hawking similarly specious consolations? To Calvin, it was critical that commoners believe the good news that the God who must justly punish them would also mercifully forgive them. They would need no priest to listen to their confessions, test their contrition, assign them penances, and present the sacrament at Communion as if regular reenactments of Christ's singular sacrifice on the cross were necessary to revive his coup against the devil. That coup ought to convince the laity of God's mercy, although adversity tempted the faithful to doubt its effectiveness. Yet Calvin was sure that truly reformed Christians should be able to "call [themselves]

32. *A Briefe and plaine declaration concerning the desires of all those faithfull ministers that have and do seeke for the discipline and reformation of the Church of Englande* (London: Robert Walde-gaue, 1584), 120–21.

33. *Briefe and plaine declaration*, 125–29.



back to patience."<sup>34</sup> The recall was tough and never total or complete. Doubts alternated with patience and assurance. English Calvinists did not underestimate the difficulties parishioners faced applying Christ's victory on the cross to their guilt and shame. Richard Greenham accepted that a Christian life would always be spiked with anxiety. "The conflict which we finde and feele in ourselves," he counseled, was not a sign of sinfulness and irredeemable estrangement from God but of sanctification. And Greenham's job for twenty years near Cambridge and then in London was to incite the "conflict" from the pulpit and explain how it built spiritual strength.<sup>35</sup>

Edmund Grindal could hardly have been more concise: "public and continual preaching of God's word is the ordinary mean and instrument of the salvation of mankind." Presiding consecutively over three sees—London, York, and Canterbury—he put procuring "able and sufficient" preachers at the top of his diocesan agendas. He screened candidates carefully, he told the queen, "admit[ting] no man . . . that professeth papistry or puritanism."<sup>36</sup> Yet he obviously shared puritans' sense that pulpits were of paramount importance to the improvement of lay piety. Sermons trained commoners. Grindal, to be sure, objected to what Patrick Collinson now calls the puritans' "highly selective" use of the Book of Common Prayer. He objected, that is, to the liberties they took with liturgy. And he could not have been happy that they defied their bishops, his colleagues, who preferred scripted homilies to sermons. Yet he made common cause with the puritans who criticized government efforts to suppress public exercises, in which multiple sermons were delivered on market days. Grindal was as indignant as the leading puritan preachers when officials, demonstrating their terribly imperfect understanding of religious reformation, suggested England could do with fewer sermons. "Nothing," he said, "beateth down popery more than ministers grow[ing] to such good knowledge by means of the controversial exercises" or prophesying, as they were known. That "good knowledge," packed into subsequent sermons, would edge commoners close to the "certaintie and full persuasion" that their "synnes are forgiven," the certainty that reformers set as a goal at the very start of the queen's reign. Had Elizabeth forgotten? It certainly seemed so to Grindal when her government targeted those valuable exercises. He dared to

34. Calvin, *Institution*, 228v–229r (3.7.10); Walter Travers, *An Answer to a supplicatorie epistle of G.T. for the pretended Catholiques* (London: Tobie Smith, 1583), 283–85.

35. *Workes of Greenham*, 268.

36. Grindal's 1576 letter to Elizabeth is printed in John Strype's *History of the Life and Acts of the Most Reverend Father in God, Edmund Grindal* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1821), 561–63.

scold her—"remember, madam, that you are a mortal creature . . . dust and ashes" beneath "a purple and princely array"—and lost all influence at court.<sup>37</sup>

Grindal's daring cost him dearly, although, despite the government's misgivings, he was not advocating broad popular participation in the prophecies. He was determined to have the public exercises, because they allowed preachers to improve their skills. The corresponding improvement in lay learning was a factor but not an issue. Grindal would have agreed that great advances were not to be expected. As puritan preacher Eusebius Paget put it, the vast sea of doctrine could never be poured into commoners' "little dish of wit." He often preached at the exercises, setting other standards for his sermons' success. They must urge the faithful to that "certaintie and full persuasion," to have the faithful "feele in their hartes [a] portion of God's grace" and think of themselves as the "heirs of eternal salvation."<sup>38</sup> Arguably, for Paget, that success might lead to greater lay and local control over parish life, but not for Grindal. He saw "no reason why the people shulde bee excludett" from edifying exercises, yet he took no initiative to have them any more meaningfully included in parish government than some, as wardens, already were.<sup>39</sup> Skepticism about lay readiness to assume significant responsibilities abounded. Even Coriolanus chimed in, alleging anachronistically that commoners retained and applied little of what they heard from the pulpit (2.3.59–60). He almost certainly would have agreed with Paget that commoners' "dish of wit" was more like a sieve than a vessel. Paget and other puritans, however, typically blamed their bishops—"fitt" leaders, the Welsh reformer John Penry explained to Parliament in the late 1580s, "whensoever opportunitie shall serve to bringe the people againe into Egypt."<sup>40</sup>

Penry pulled no punches. He deplored what he saw as the bishops' conspiracy to keep commoners ignorant—as "ignorant" and "slight" as Coriolanus found them—and to plump up the English church with Catholic ceremonies for an eventual return to Rome, "into Egypt." The bishops, Penry said, "butchered" the church. They thrust earnest, yet

37. Strype, *Grindal*, 568 and 572. For "full persuasion," consult Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 121, 149, for the early Elizabethan reformers' goals and compare Calvin, *Institution* 404v (4.11.1): "the power of the keyes is nothing but the preaching of the Gospell." For puritans and the prayerbook, Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 366–67.

38. Paget, *A Verie fruitful sermon necessary to be read of all Christians concerning God's everlasting predestination, election, and reprobation* (London: n.p., 1583), A8r–B6v.

39. BL, Lansdowne MS 23, 20r.

40. Lambeth Palace Library MS 2006, 248r.

nonconformist preachers from their pulpits, only to appoint pluralists and nonresidents. Penry probably would have endorsed Grindal's early efforts, much as he approved those of Tudor evangelists-turned-bishops-turned-martyrs—Hugh Latimer, John Hooper, among others—who “laboured by all meanes possible to put life into [their churches] by preaching the word.” Nonetheless, if it had been possible to rerun the English Reformation, Penry would have done without bishops altogether. He decided, finally, to separate from the Elizabethan church that retained them, but not before reminding prince and prelates alike of the leadership's duty to feed the flock: “if they will needs be rulers over God's household, they are bound to give the Lord's familie their meat.”<sup>41</sup>

Anthony Gilby declined to become a “ruler over God's household.” Returning from exile to England at the start of Elizabeth's reign, he settled in Leicestershire as a parish priest and criticized friends who agreed to be the queen's bishops. He feigned amazement: more than forty years had passed, he remarked, since “poperie hath been written and spoken against,” yet “men be not yet confirmed in the knowledge of Christ.” The possibilities were still unlimited—a learned ministry and regenerate laity—if only the bishops ceased depriving dissident, worthy preachers whose only crime was to press for the decontamination of reformed religion. Gilby and other puritans wanted to be free of vestments, “garishe geare” that reminded them of Rome. “Where the weedes of poperie are utterlie abolished,” “all thinges procede more livelie both in fayth and in manners.”<sup>42</sup>

But “livelie” laymen in late Elizabethan and early Stuart England appear to have been widely resented. They were unwelcome, “over precise,” “over holy,” too “busie in checking every man.” The nonliterary evidence does not permit us to say with certainty whether there were “so manie [such] scripture men” or meddlers as their critics claimed. But the answers to such criticism applauded commoners willing to “speak godliness,” and the authors had protagonists rally support for a lay ministry of sorts that would reprove the realm's “filthie ribaldrie” and blasphemy.<sup>43</sup>

41. Penry, *A Treatise wherein is manifestlie proved that reformation and those that sincerely favor the same are unjustly charged to be enemies unto her Majestie and the state* (Edinburgh?: Robert Waldegrave, 1590), E3v–E4r and H4r.

42. Gilby, *A Pleasaunt Dialogue betweene a souldier of Barwicke and an English chaplaine* (London: n.p., 1581), E8v–F8r.

43. See, for example, George Gifford, *A Briefe Discourse of certaine points of the religion which is amonge the common sort of Christians which may be termed the countrie divinitie* (London: Richard Field and Felix Kingston, 1598), 27–29, 43–44.

Ordinary people in these extraordinary dialogues had the nerve to pronounce on matters of public interest, much as Plutarch's proles in Shakespeare's play. The Essex preacher George Gifford, for one, had not shied from featuring lay contributions to lay reeducation. He anticipated commoners' resistance and resentments; his dialogues matched formidably thick-headed laymen against nimble lay colleagues who aimed to convert them. The latter stayed well "within the limits of their calling." Gifford did not want to be confused with religious separatists whose "intollerable pride and presumption" led them to think and say terrible things about the established church. The protagonist in his treatise on *Countrie Divinitie* was a patient, persistent lay zealot who agitated against "the remnant of sin that did abide" in all reformed Christians, not against shortcomings of the reformed church or clergy. If Gifford's vanguard of lay "meddlers" had ever been put into play, it would have made only one demand on commoners, that they learn to "delight and desire . . . upon the good."<sup>44</sup>

Legions of competent pastors might have helped, but deposing the Catholics depleted the ministry at the start of Elizabeth's reign, and culling nonconformists had similar consequences during the next decades. Grindal, as noted, appeared to appreciate the problem, but many of his suffragans and their successors, if we may trust their critics, did not. To Gifford, church authorities seemed content with complacent commoners, who "are like naked men," he memorably explained; they had been stripped by statute of their Catholicism and were "ready for any coate almost that may be put upon them." That left reformed religion vulnerable, unstable, and left reformers rather ambivalent about those commoners they wanted to clothe. There were those among the laity who, with training, could clothe themselves and others in the crowd rightly and redemptively. They were to be celebrated, literate lay consultants, whom Gifford would have armed with arguments and exegesis, because so many other "naked men" had come to enjoy the world too much, hate the "over holy," and "arme themselves against true repentance."<sup>45</sup>

44. Gifford, *Briefe Discourse*, 130–31. Also, for the separatists, see Gifford's *Short Treatise against the Donatists of England whome we call Brownists* (London: Cooke, 1590), quoted at 3–4 and 101; and his criticisms of their "anabaptistical freedom," in *A Short Reply unto the last printed books of Henry Barrow and John Greenwood* (London: Tobie Cooke, 1591), 18. For a splendid inventory and analysis of Gifford's views on lay reclamation, see Timothy Scott McGinnis, *George Gifford and the Reformation of the Common Sort* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2004), 135–62.

45. Gifford, *Briefe Discourse*, A3v.

Arthur Dent, too, found reformed Christians unrepentant. "True godliness [was] despised," he said; "uprightnesse loathed." "We are become impudent in sinne. . . . We are almost past shame and past grace." Parts of Dent's *Plaine-Man's Pathe-way to Heaven* echoed the Old Testament's prophets of doom—"this house shall be waste"—insisting that England had "great cause to mourne and lament, to quake and tremble."<sup>46</sup> He was loath, though, to call off the reclamation. Coriolanus was ready to have the rabble consigned to oblivion (1.1.215); Dent, to pave a "pathe-way" for commoners who "despised" piety. He trusted that ordinary people could possess the "full persuasion" of God's infinite mercy. To criticize their neglect of "true repentance" and to utter prophecies of retribution was just the beginning. Such criticisms and prophecies edged readers onto his path. Once en route, they were sure to proceed to a "cheerfull obedience" to God and to their eternal reward for same. The differences between their course—Dent's pathway—and the thoroughfare traveled by Catholics seemed worth mentioning often. Dent said that Rome's power and prestige depended on keeping the laity in doubt about the amplitude of God's mercy. Hence, Catholic commoners, en route, feared for the fate of their immortal souls, and that fear, Dent went on, served the interest of the Catholic clergy and made the laity "servile," easily swayed, cheerlessly obedient. But reformed Christians were instructed to discover their "exaltation" in Christ's humiliation. To call that discovery an empowerment of great social or political significance may be overreaching, but not to acknowledge it as empowering or to think it insignificant would be a mistake.<sup>47</sup>

Contemporaries did not make that mistake. They were especially wary of the rhetoric of regeneration. True, Dent wrote about obedience as well as exaltation, yet the puritan nonconformists' emphasis on the latter appeared, at the very least, to complicate efforts to enforce the former. Matthew Sutcliffe, dean of Exeter Cathedral, feared that "more livelie thinges," particularly a lively laity, would almost certainly prefer "innovations," the "dangerous effects" of which could only be detrimental to diocesan authority. Congregational or consistorial "courts" might monitor the mischief in local parishes and assure a modicum of intraparish piety, but who might umpire when persons from different parishes turned on each other? Sutcliffe was unimpressed by the innovators' plans for regional synods and by their faith in reformed conferees' predilections for con-

46. Dent, *Plaine-Man's Pathe-way to Heaven* (London: G. Lathum, 1637; first published in 1601), 145–46 and 224–27.

47. Dent, *Pathe-way*, 266–69, 413–15.

sensus. He could not hide his scorn for presbyterians' naiveté. Lay and local control, he argued, ran the risk of destroying church discipline.<sup>48</sup> His conformist colleague, Archbishop Whitgift, remembered that crowds invariably caused a "marvellous stir and sedition" whenever the common sort participated in the government of the church. The streets of fourth-century Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome were streaked with blood, he said, when ordinary people got involved in parish elections; only England's bishops could save the realm's religious settlement from the populist presbyterians and the "multitude of [their] lewd complices." To Christopher Hatton, Whitgift's friend and patron at court, the puritans' rhetoric and the presbyterians' "platforme" sounded suspiciously like "factious practice." Nonconformists seemed to be out to "snare and entrap honest, religious subjects, to capture or captivate them and to have the realm turn on conformists and on all authorities for the nonconformists' "own glorie and wealth."<sup>49</sup>

Dudley Fenner explained that complaints about "factious practice" wholly missed the presbyterians' point. Parish elders were put in place, he said, to control crowds, not to incite them. Fenner had returned to England from his self-imposed exile on the Continent during Grindal's pontificate, only to flee England again soon after Whitgift succeeded to Canterbury. He probably would have conceded to the new archbishop that "stirs and sedition" discredited popular participation in church elections in late antiquity, but he believed that, in early modern England, there was no reason to rule them out. Besides, Scripture trumped tradition: Paul's letters and the record of Peter's "acts" proved that both apostles had taken the pulse of ordinary people's reactions to their ministries—that both "did accept in some maner the people to speake and authorise their determinations." Their leadership was effective, Fenner alleged, because they "yeilded to the challenge of some not so well instructed," and they unflinchingly gave commoners the satisfaction of an answer when questions or objections were raised.<sup>50</sup> Searches for crowd consent may not have been central during the first century, but they were critically supple-

48. Matthew Sutcliffe, *A Treatise of Ecclesiastical Discipline* (London: George Bishop, 1591), 186–91.

49. Oxford, Bodleian, Tanner MS 79, 137r; *The Works of John Whitgift*, ed John Ayre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1851), 1:446–47; and Oxford, Queens College MS 280, 172v. Catholic polemicists also took note of reformed religion's "factious practice[s]," suggesting "evangelicall libertie" meant near constant quarreling; Thomas Wright, *Certaine Articles or forcible reasons discovering the palpable absurdities and most notorious and intricate errors of the Protestants' religion* (Antwerp: n.p., 1600), B4r.

50. Fenner, *Defense of the godly ministers against the slanders of Dr. Bridges* (London: Richard Schilders, 1587), 70–71.

mental. In the sixteenth, appealing for consent while building consensus ought to be just as important and, partisans of participatory parish regimes imagined, consensus itself would be more easily accomplished than at any time in the intervening centuries. For only lately had the reformed Christian commoners come to learn their limits and to appreciate their need for guidance. They accepted that the truths of their faith were "contrarie" to common sense; for instance, they flocked to sermons to be persuaded "that the more a man should give away from himselfe, the more he should enrich himselfe," that corruptible reason could never reach certainty about so strange a statement without assistance from pastors and presbyters.<sup>51</sup>

But reformed conformists fretted about the kind of help the laity was getting from pastors who complained about their bishops and agitated for "senate[s] of elders" in their parishes. Was their purpose, as Hatton said, to rule through those senates and to increase their "own glorie and wealth"? Richard Hooker suspected so and figured that agitators would get a robust response from the crowd. He might just as well have been speaking about Shakespeare's tribunes when he speculated that "he that goeth about to perswade the multitude that they are not so well governed as they ought to be shall never want attentive and favourable hearers."<sup>52</sup>

Late Tudor and early Jacobean nonconformists, however, tended to attribute whatever attention and favor they experienced less to discontent with the way the multitude had been governed than to their brilliantly conceived ways to govern parishes from then on, which they found in Scripture and in Geneva. Calvin's consistory seemed to them a compelling model for the "senates" that ought to resolve "ordinary matters." Congregational assemblies were excellent ways to collect (or shape) parishioners' opinions about what mattered more. The critics of such bicameral arrangements were critical as well of "the absurde assertion of the puritanes" they found behind them, namely, that regenerate commoners ought to contribute meaningfully to decisions better left to the clergy. Congregational conferences and senates alike simply encouraged "private men to impugne orders established in the church." Why, those critics asked, would anyone look to give pockets of resistance to authority in parishes a chance to increase

51. This example is drawn from the many offered by Suffolk puritan preacher Nicholas Bownde, *The Unbeleefe of St. Thomas the Apostle* (Cambridge: Cantrell Legge, 1608), 60–67.

52. Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, vol. 1–4 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977–82), 1.1.1; BL, Harleian MS 6539, 76v, for parish senates.

their influence in the dioceses or in the realm?<sup>53</sup> Fenner protested that crowd participation in parish government would be carefully monitored and that the “fore-leading” of pastors and presbyters would channel popular sentiment and avoid all the attendant vices of mob rule. Nonetheless, his provisions still seemed to give too much scope to the voices and votes of parishioners not long after Henry Howard concluded that the mark of true wisdom was scorn for “playne democratia.”<sup>54</sup>

Disdain for democracy, though, did not always signal contempt for consent, a point lost on literary historians eager to connect contempt for the crowd in *Coriolanus* with conformist religious rhetoric. Tudor theorist Richard Hooker, for one, ostensibly dismissed arguments for broadly participatory parish regimes, principally because the partisans who formulated them bungled biblical exegesis, put too little trust in tradition, recoiled from the truths of reason, and got ecclesiology all wrong. Incompetence! The democracy they preferred was dangerous, but, Hooker allowed, tyranny was equally so. Hence, “no ecclesiastical law [should] be made in a Christian commonwealth,” he said, “without consent as well of the laity as of the clergy.”<sup>55</sup>

But Hooker’s brief for participation was limited. He did not think consent need be preceded by anything resembling an unrehearsed airing of contrary views, which would only “breed disturbance.” Puritans “labour[ing] mightily to uphold” the regulations that “they frame to themselves” might do very well “in some wilderness by themselves,” he commented, but their participatory regimes would undermine “the possibilitie of sociable life.” Advocates of those regimes unjustly “overruled” what Hooker described as a “lawe of publique determinations,” a law or, to be precise, a set of laws, to which generations of reformed Christians in England had given consent.<sup>56</sup> Puritans ought to have possessed the same power of discernment that led their reformed predecessors to subscribe to “publique reason.” They had, presumably, received sanctifying grace and had become, Nigel Voak says, elaborating Hooker’s soteriology, “divinely

53. BL, Additional MS 28571, 193r. For bicameral arrangements, see DWL, Morrice MSS B.1.468 and C.413, but also note Dudley Fenner, *Sacra Theologia sive veritas quae est secundum pietatem* (London: n.p., 1586), 105v–106r.

54. BL, Cotton Titus MS C VI, 19v–20v, for Howard’s letter to William Cecil, discussed at some length in Kaufman, *Laity*, 107–13. For Fenner, see BL, Lansdowne MS 30B, 211r.

55. Hooker, *Laws*, 8.6.8. Also consult H. E. C. Perrott, “Richard Hooker and the Problem of Authority in the Elizabethan Church,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 49 (1998): 56–60; and Patrick Collinson, “Hooker and the Elizabethan Establishment,” in *Richard Hooker and the Construction of Christian Community*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade (Tempe, Ariz.: Medieval and Renaissance Studies and Texts, 1997), 177–78.

56. Hooker, *Laws*, 1.16.5–7.



enhanced persons." But their faith and good fortune—their "enhancement," as it were—did not signal that they were empowered (or entitled to empower others) to measure policy or personnel options and settling on or consenting to one. Indeed, the puritans who subjected "publique determinations" to such devastating scrutiny and who insisted on manicuring parish morality and on approving candidates for local and diocesan leadership proved to Thomas Bilson, in the 1590s, that dissenters of all stripes were "lede rather with affection than with discretion."<sup>57</sup> Ranked now with Richard Hooker as one of the most learned critics of "presbyterian democracy," Bilson was a canon of the cathedral in Winchester when he questioned the commoners' competence. How imprudent to experiment and give ordinary people a voice in parish deliberations, just when Catholics were streaming to England from their seminaries on the Continent "for the pervertting" of the laity!<sup>58</sup>

Truth be told, though, for Bilson and other Calvinist conformists, experiments with parish or diocesan democracy would have been untimely at any time. From what they said or left unsaid, on other fronts, one might have guessed they could have been more accepting. They talked about spiritual growth in glowing terms. They seemed to have no quarrels with the lay consultants defended by Dent and Gifford. Even Richard Bancroft, who distinguished himself by writing barbed comments on puritan populists' "dangerous positions," confided that he "trusted people generally [were] not so madde" as the theorists who proposed to give them a greater share in church government.<sup>59</sup> To Bilson, too, those puritan and presbyterian theorists—and not ordinary people—were to blame for melding piety and politics. The inferences they "pressed out" of the biblical stories about the formation and regulation of the earliest Christian congregations were preposterous. The scriptural accounts were just stories, Bilson explained; the Bible was not about how to govern but about what to

57. Bilson, *The Perpetual Government of Christ's Church* (London: Christopher Barker, 1593), 356–59; For divine enhancements, see Nigel Voak, *Richard Hooker and Reformed Theology: A Study of Reason, Will, and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 97–98, 167–70, 196–216.

58. Bilson, *The True Difference betweene Christian subjection and unchristian rebellion* (London: Jackson and Bolliant, 1585), A2v–A3r. For Bilson on consent, review Peter Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans? Presbyterianism and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 129–31; and, for Bilson's "ranking," see William Richardson's article in the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5:739.

59. Bancroft, *Dangerous Positions and proceedings published and practiced within the island of Brytain under pretence of reformation* (London: John Wolfe, 1595), 139.

believe, and "no proof can be made that the people have by the word of God an essential interest in the choice of their pastors."<sup>60</sup>

Conformists nodded to the incidental or occasional interest that the coarser sorts might have in the choice of their pastors, and congregational consent was not ruled out altogether. What seemed clear to conformists, however, was that no "essential interest" could be biblically maintained and justifiably claimed. Nonconformists who intimated otherwise and who, by sleight of mind, coupled commoners' spiritual regeneration with the proles' power in the parishes derogated from the authority of both bishops and civil magistrates. Bilson bundled together some of "the infinite places in the Old Testament" where Moses, Joshua, David, and others "meddled with ecclesiasticall men and matters"; "planting, preserving, and purging . . . true religion," he said, was a province of princes, not of local presbyters and ordinary people.<sup>61</sup>

The nonconformists, for their part, insisted that subjects need not express contempt for crowds to show respect for authorities. They themselves posed no threat to their sovereigns' sovereignty over the realm's churches, they said, petitioning Queen Elizabeth and then King James to "plant" and "purge" (or prune) differently from the ways that Bilson, Bancroft, and their kind had suggested. The puritans, for example, encouraged the government to plant a preaching ministry in every church and to subsidize the training of local preachers with revenues realized after purging the cathedrals, that is, pruning episcopal excesses. The sermons that resulted, more effectively than a scripted homily on obedience regularly repeated, would instruct the commoners to set aside ambition, envy, and impatience, three dreaded enemies of parish consensus and public safety.<sup>62</sup>

William Perkins called them the "three lets of constancy." At Cambridge, from the late 1580s to his death in 1602, Perkins prepared puritan preachers to warn the laity against excessive ambition. Reformed Christians, he said, should be satisfied with their "particular callings;" they should not look to rise above their stations "upon every light conceit and every sudden occasion" or, as Cade and his crew, to dismantle the stays of society. They must seek "sufficiency," not abundance.<sup>63</sup> Fenner and his friends would have welcomed the advice. They claimed that commoners could be moderate, content with

60. Bilson, *Perpetual Government*, 182 and 368.

61. Bilson, *True Difference*, 191–92; Bilson, *Perpetual Government*, 248.

62. "The Lamentable Complaint of the Commonaltie," in *A Parte of a Register* (Middleburg: Richard Schilders, 1593), 206–23 and 242–43.

63. Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations and Callings of Men," in *The Workes of the Famous and Worthey minister of Christ . . . William Perkins*, (London: John Legatt, 1616), 1:768–76.

sufficient say in parish deliberations without longing for sway—abundant or final authority. Commoners in the first congregations were satisfied with just that, puritans pointed out, imagining that ordinary people interrogated the apostles less as strangers than as collaborators. And there were examples closer to home; in select parishes, at certain times, select vestrymen talked business with wardens and with “most of the parishioners.”<sup>64</sup>

Evidence for such congregational conversations is relatively scarce, yet we must not underestimate what Peter Lake has identified as “the considerable potential for social leveling within puritan religion.”<sup>65</sup> And we must not simply assume that this “potential” or prospect caused widespread consternation, that playwright and playgoers were just as alarmed as the patricians in *Coriolanus*, who believed that political liberalism and social leveling in their new Roman republic was about to “lay the city flat” (3.1.255). But such caution leaves historians of literature and religion uncertain. Did the Jacobean playgoers cheer upon hearing the protagonist’s indictments of the crowd or chafe upon hearing the tribunes’ version of the people’s predicament: “you are at the point to lose your liberties” (3.1.242) and to be left with “no more voice than dogs that are as often beat for barking” (2.3.235–36)? Or did the play give commoners cause to imagine that legitimate leadership must be “established” by their consent (3.1.252–53)?

We can do little more than formulate questions, if we stick to the script. And although determined efforts to locate topical references or “reverberations” suggest various answers, they nail nothing down conclusively. Our discussion of early modern piety, specifically our assessment of conformists’ and nonconformists’ pronouncements on commoners’ competence and on the possible political repercussions of the rhetoric of regeneration gets us closer to the crowd in *Coriolanus* and at the Globe, but we still trade in uncertainties. If we only knew more about the first performances! If we knew whether *Coriolanus* were played as something of a robot in 1609, as transparently tactless and as monumentally insensitive as he seemed in the late 1970s at Stratford-upon-Avon, denying ordinary citizens a nobility that their

64. London, Guildhall, MS 1002A, 184v, quoting the accounts for St. Mary, Woolnoth. Thomas Cranmer had stipulated forty years earlier that churchwardens themselves “be chosen by a majority of parishioners,” *Synodalia: A Collection of Articles of Religion, Canons, and Proceedings of Convocations in the Province of Canterbury*, ed. Edward Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1842), 1:122–23.

65. Lake and Questier, *Lewd Hat*, 584, and Judith Kronenfeld, *King Lear and the Naked Truth: Rethinking the Language of Religion and Resistance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 151.

acceptance of his noble deeds might lend them by association—if we knew that, we might write more confidently about the play, the playwright, Calvinism, and the crowd.<sup>66</sup>

But the first performances are beyond our reach. Historians now can hardly poll playgoers then at the exits. To say that such crowds shared conformist Calvinists' anxieties about crowds is to assume what curiosity can never convert to fact, the effectiveness of what nonconformists called the "dogge rethorick" of their critics.<sup>67</sup> But what we have learned here is that those same nonconformists clamored as loudly as their critics against commoners' "practical godlessness."<sup>68</sup> English Calvinists in both camps, however, were far from throwing in the towel. They had ceased thinking that belief formation amounted to a simple and sudden exchange of Catholic folly for Protestant fideism. They pelted the "drowsy" laity with accusations to speed up what they regarded as an unacceptably slow growth in godliness. The puritans or nonconformists especially sensed that the trajectory was right even if the pace seemed halting or too leisurely. Ordinary Christians seemed to them to want only practice in self-incrimination and repentance. The puritans, in other words, trusted that God (with their sermons, complaints, pamphlets, and consolations) would lead reformed yet still muddled commoners "to finde an heavenly sweetnesse in their owne lives" and be "fit to season others therewith," to become the impresarios of others' regeneration.<sup>69</sup>

But to Coriolanus, Menenius, and their fellow patricians, commoners were "rats," and their leading spokesman, before the tribunes appear, was base and offensively intrusive, "the great toe of the body politic" (1.1.162–72). Menenius patronizingly tells him how the body and body politic depend, respectively, on the belly and the propertied "classes" of old Rome. Perhaps, acts later, playgoers left the theater, endorsing that explanation. Maybe Menenius's bearing and belly

66. For Alan Howard's run as Coriolanus in 1977–78, see Mary Steible, "*Coriolanus*": A Guide to the Play (London: Greenwood, 2004), 132–34.

67. Penry, *Briefe Discovery*, 47.

68. The term is Patrick Collinson's, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559–1625* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 199–201.

69. Richard Rogers, *Seven Treatises* (London: Thomas Man, 1610), 413. Elsewhere I discuss nonconformists' complaints, agreeing, as I have here, with Eamon Duffy's conclusion that "puritan attitudes to the 'prophane multitude' were both more complex and more positive than is often allowed": Kaufman, "How Socially Conservative were the Elizabethan Religious Radicals," *Albion* 30 (1998): 29–48; Duffy, "The Godly and the Multitude in Stuart England," *The Seventeenth Century* 1 (1986): 31–55, quoted at 37. For "belief formation" and the supposedly "irreligious multitude," see Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 322–30; for Rogers, Kaufman, *Prayer, Despair, and Drama: Elizabethan Introspection* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 140–42.

made them forget that the "great toe" had offered an alternative interpretation of the metaphor. Menenius saw the belly as the body's great benefactor and his patrician friends as fair-minded keepers and distributors of society's resources. The toe, though, emphasized "the cormorant belly[s]" insatiable appetite, alluding to the possessioners' self-interest that undermined the interdependence that would otherwise have enabled every part of the body politic, the many "petty helps" that constitute "this our fabric," to work harmoniously with every other part (1.1.121–25). In Shakespeare's early plays, the toe's tale would have seemed out of place, inconsistent, certainly, with the cruelties of Cade's crowd. But, emerging from *Coriolanus*, playgoers could well have been struck by the vitality, dignity, and common sense of "petty helps."

There is no way to verify that sort of response, and no verifiable generalization about the playwright's possible interest in eliciting it. But I suspect that Greenblatt gets Shakespeare's general interest in the common or inferior sorts right when he contrasts it with Machiavelli's. The Florentine fled local taverns for his library, letting Livy or Tacitus tell him about *homo rapiens*. "Nothing could be farther from Shakespeare's sensibility," Greenblatt says, assuming that the playwright was fascinated with "small talk, trivial pursuits, and foolish games of ordinary people."<sup>70</sup> "Hang em," Coriolanus cries when he first confronts the crowd's demands. He promised the patricians that, on their say, he would put an end to the republic and gladly "make a quarry with thousands of these quartered slaves" (1.1.204–16). Plutarch seems to have been closer than Shakespeare to commending such sentiment. His Rome, after all, had not made prole empowerment work especially well. Early modern England, however, was still experimenting with ways to accommodate the polity implications of a priesthood of all believers in the realm's reformed churches when Shakespeare escorted Plutarch's proles and the people of his acquaintance into *Coriolanus's* tragedy.

Months before it was first performed and not far from the theater in Southwark, "the common people and handicraftmen" from St. Saviour's parish, as it happens, were suing to have their "voices" restored. The lawsuit went on, for all we know, for several years. "Small talk" in the taverns must have compassed the charges and countercharges, and playgoers from that (south) side of the Thames, as well as Shakespeare, would have known more than we do about the crisis. The vestrymen claimed their congregation had long before

70. Greenblatt, *Will*, 389.

“transferred” to the vestry its right to elect parish officers. But parishioners spoke of “usurped power” and insisted, against the vestry’s apparent surmise, that they could conduct parish elections without undue squabbling. They argued that no one had ever proven “by experience” that direct elections were “unprofitable and inconvenient.” Partisans of both positions—turned playgoers—could conceivably have returned home from a performance of *Coriolanus* with grist for their mills. They could have snatched supportive material from the last fifty years of their religious history, from the sermons and treatises of conformists and nonconformists alike, who tried connecting piety with polity. Neither *Coriolanus* nor English Calvinism tilted indisputably towards either side of the Southwark controversy. The play and the piety illustrate the ambivalence towards the sturdy but sometimes stubborn and always suggestible common stock around Shakespeare’s theater, the ambivalence of the religion around Shakespeare.<sup>71</sup>

71. The dispute at St. Saviours (1607) is chronicled in John Stow’s *Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster* (London: A. Churchill, 1720), 2:9–10.



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