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Of Hybrids and Hydras: Early Modern Political Zoology – and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

Andreas Höfele

I

1 Renaissance man is a hybrid. Half beast, half angel, he has the capacity to develop in either direction. Brought into the world when God ran out of shapes for his creatures, man was granted the unique privilege of shaping himself. He alone of all living beings has a choice: either to "degenerate into the lower things, which are brutes", or to raise himself "to the higher things, which are divine."[1]

2 The cradle of this fabulous being was Italy. It was here that, according to Jacob Burckhardt, "men and mankind were [...] first thoroughly and profoundly understood":

> This one single result of the Renaissance is enough to fill us with everlasting thankfulness. The loftiest conceptions on this subject were uttered by Pico della Mirandola in his speech on the dignity of man, [...] one of the noblest bequests of that great age.[2]

3 Pico's God grants Adam the gift of unlimited creative potential, designating man himself as the prime object of this creativity:

> The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down, you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will [...] trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature [...] [as] the free and proud shaper of your own being.[3]

This plasticity, "this nature capable of transforming itself" makes man, according to Pico, the "most fortunate of living things and [...] deserving of all admiration": "Who then will not look with awe upon this our chameleon, or who, at least, will look with greater admiration on any other being?"[4]

4 The exuberance of these passages has not prevented Giorgio Agamben from finding a massive fly in the ointment of Pico's vision. What Pico celebrates as the condition of

unlimited perfectibility – man's lack of "any endowment properly [his] own"[5] – registers with Agamben as a fundamental aporia. Instead of fortifying the notion of man, Agamben argues, it "verifies the absence of a nature proper to Homo, holding him suspended between a celestial and a terrestrial nature [...] – being always less and more than himself. [...] The humanist discovery of man is that he lacks himself" (29-30). Instead of a unified being, man emerges as "a field of dialectical tensions always already cut by internal caesurae that [...] separate [...] 'anthropophorous' animality and the humanity which takes bodily form in it" (12).

5 Renaissance man, I said, is a hybrid. He may also be said to be a figment of an outdated historical imagination.[6] However, the dynamism and instability of Pico's human chameleon may serve as a window on other, non-Burckhardtian fields of Renaissance knowledge: a multiverse of creatures that know not just Neo-Platonist upward and downward mobility between the divine and the brutish but also occupy a horizontal plane of embeddedness with room for all sorts of variations.

II

6 Hybrid creatures sprout from the encyclopaedic pages of the two foremost 16th-century authorities on natural history, Conrad Gesner and Ulisse Aldrovandi. The multitude of beings – human, non-human or somewhere in between – which Aldrovandi depicts in his *History of Monsters* (*Monstrorum Historia*) fall into two main categories: malformation and hybridity, with a considerable zone of overlap between the two. For the larger part, Aldrovandi offers a pathology of deformities, a well-nigh interminable list of birth defects: humans with more than one head, four eyes or only one, faces covered all over with hair. As 'errors of nature' (*errata naturae*)[7] these are either single instances or recurring congenital abnormalities. As such they do not constitute species or kinds. But Aldrovandi's *History* also includes monstrous species. Their monstrousness, without exception, consists in hybridity, the mingling of features that belong to at least two different species.

7 Edward Topsell's English adaptation of Gesner's *Natural History* follows Aldrovandi's usage. Topsell deals with species, not malformation. Accordingly, the monsters appearing in his pages – just over a handful – are all hybrids; mostly hybrids not of two different kinds of animals but of animals and humans: the satyr, the sphinx, the lamia, and the flamboyant mantichora whose "appetite is especially to the flesh of man,"[8] a predilection written all over his dentally over-equipped face (see figure 1).

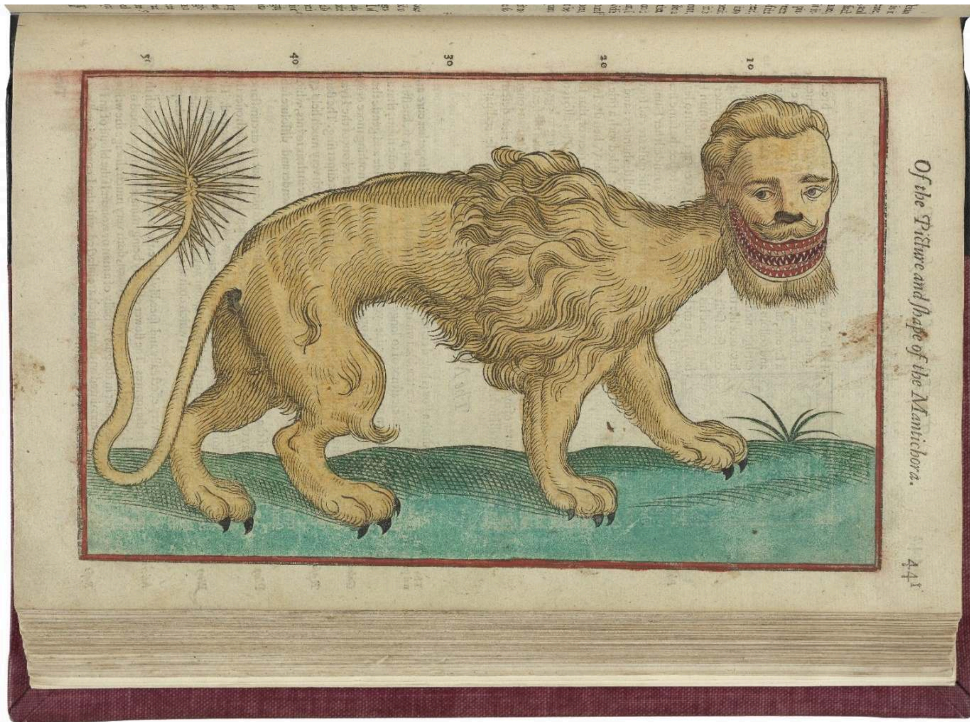

Figure 1. Manticore. Edward Topsell, *The historie of foure-footed beastes*, London, William Iaggard, 1607, p. 441: Mantichora.

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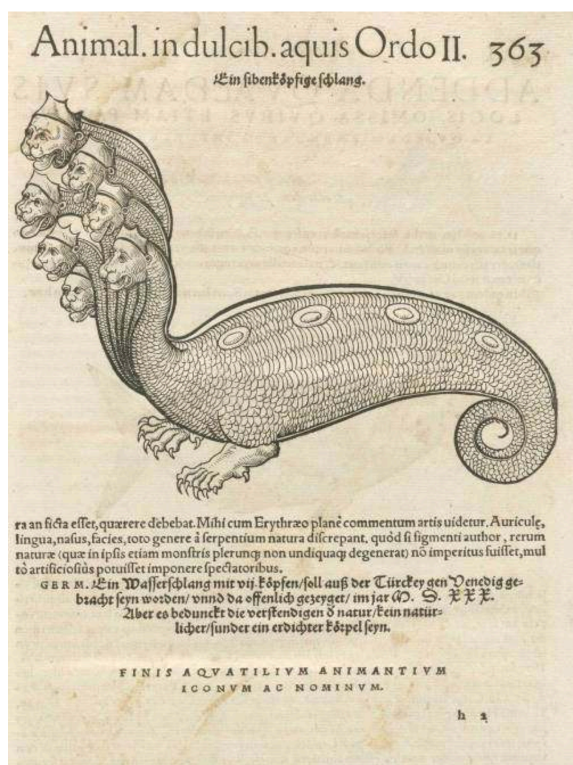
8 All of these 'humanimal'[9] hybrids are to be found in Topsell's first volume, *The History of Four-Footed Beasts*. Volume 2, *The History of Serpents*, features only one monster. Not the dragon – who, for all his having wings, is not regarded as a hybrid, hence no 'monster' – but the hydra (figure 2).



Animal. in dulcib. aquis Ordo II. 363

Ein sibenköpfige schlang.

ra an ficta esset, quærere debebat. Mihi cum Erythræo planè commentum artis uidetur. Auriculę, lingua, nasus, facies, toto genere à serpentium natura discrepant, quòd si figmenti author, rerum naturæ (quæ in ipsis etiam monstris plerunq; non undiquaq; degenerat) nõ imperitus fuisset, mul tò artificiosiùs potuisset imponere spectatoribus.

GERM. Ein Wasserschlang mit vij. köpfen/soll auß der Türckey gen Venedig gebracht seyn worden/ vnnd da offenlich gezeyget/ im jar M. D. XXX.
Aber es bedunckt die verstendigen d natur/kein natürlicher/sunder ein erdichter körpel seyn.

FINIS AQVATILIVM ANIMANTIVM ICONVM AC NOMINVM.

h 2

Figure 2. A Hydra. Konrad Gessner, *Conradi Gesneri medici Tigurini Historiae animalium*, vol. 4, Zurich, Christoph Froschauer (Froschoverus), 1551ff, p. 363.

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https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/historicalanatomies/gesner_home.html

9 Topsell’s image is taken identically from Gesner, who concludes his Latin description with a paragraph in German:

> Ein Wasserschlang mit vij. köpfen / soll auß der Türckey gen Venedig gebracht seyn worden / unnd da offentlich gezeyget / im jar M.D.XXX.
> Aber es bedunckt die verstendigen der natur / kein natürlicher / sunder ein erdichter körpel seyn.
> [A water-serpent with seven heads is supposed to have been brought from Turkey to Venice and put on display there in the year 1530. But those who are knowledgeable about nature deem that it was not a natural body but an invented one.]

10 Topsell, who is sometimes less sceptical than Gesner, concurs with him here:

> For that there should be such a Serpent with seven heads, I think it unpossible, and no more to be believed and credited then that Castor and Pollux were conceived in an Egge, […] or that armed men were created out of Dragons teeth […][10]

11 Topsell particularly objects to the way the Hydra has been represented and interpreted by “some ignorant men of late dayes at Venice”, who “set it forth to the people to be seen, as though it had been a true carcase” (*ibid.*). This fake image is the one Topsell (borrowing from Gesner) reproduces in his book. It is all wrong, he says,

> *for the head, ears, tongue, nose, and face of this Monster, do altogether degenerate from all kindes of Serpents, which is not usual in Monsters, but the fore-parts do at most times resemble the kinde to which it belongeth; and therefore if it had not been an unskilfull Painters device, he might have framed it in a better fashion, and more credible to the world. (736)*

12 Wrong, too, is the interpretation of the monster provided by the explanatory inscription of the Venetian picture, which Topsell also renders in full. "These Monsters", the inscription declares,

> signifie the mutation or change of worldly affairs but (I trust said the Author of the inscription, who seemed to be a German) the whole Christian World is so afflicted, that there is no more evil that can happen to the Christian World, except destruction […] [But] seeing that the Turkish Empire is grown to that height, in which estate all other former Kingdomes fell, I may divine and prophesie, that the danger threatened hereby , belongeth to the Turks, and not unto us […] (*ibid.*)

According to the inscription, this is further confirmed by the fact that "the hinder part of his head seemeth to resemble a Turks Cap" (*ibid.*).

13 "Thus far this inscribing Diviner", Topsell says and then launches into a stern rebuke: "[H]ow doth he know that this evil doth belong more to the Turks then to the Christians? For shall we be so blinde and flatter our selves so far, as not to acknowledge our sins, but to lay all the tokens of judgement upon our adversaries?" (*ibid.*)

14 Topsell's abrupt turn from naturalist to moralist may surprise the modern reader. But what seems incongruous to us is all part of Topsell's broader project. As announced on the title page, *The History of Serpents* offers not only their 'natural' but also "Their Divine, […] and Moral descriptions […] Collected out of divine Scriptures, Fathers, Philosophers, Physitians, and Poets […]" Thus it is perfectly possible for a creature to be spurious *and* to convey serious messages to real people in the real world.

15 Topsell sees his History as a chapter in the Book of Nature, and if all of nature by the will of God offers significances for humanity to decipher, monsters only scale up that signifying function. The Latin root word of 'monster', *monstrare*, after all, means 'to show'.[11]

16 Topsell has no quarrel with the Venetian inscription's claim that "Monsters signifie the mutation or change of worldly affairs". In fact, his ire is raised precisely because he takes this claim seriously. If he did not, he would hardly see cause to rebuke the author of the inscription for lulling "us", "the Christian World", into a false sense of moral security.

III

17 None of Topsell's other monsters is associated with issues of such magnitude as the antagonism between the Christian World and its great adversary, the Ottoman Empire. This is no accident, since the Hydra is the *political* monster par excellence. In an age of religious schisms, of a unified body of epistemic certainties breaking up under the pressure of competing truth claims, in an age where the hitherto "sure and firm-set earth" (*Macbeth*, 2.1.56) became just one among many wandering planets in an unfathomably huge cosmos, the Hydra is the quintessential embodiment of the threat of pluralization. The Burckhardtian view of the Renaissance as a triumphant overcoming of the Old by the New[12] does not hold up to closer scrutiny. Historical change in the period typically takes the form of a multiplication of authorities rather than a clear-cut supersession of one authority by another. But the age that experienced radical pluralization was by no means 'pluralistic'. In other words, it had no liking for plurality; it invariably preferred the one to the many, unified sameness to diversity.[13]

18 Under these auspices, the Hydra provides a compelling image of noxious multiplicity. The title page of *Septiceps Lutherus* (1529 edition), a pamphlet by Johannes Cochlaeus, one of Luther's fiercest opponents, affords a graphic example of this deep-seated animosity against the plural (see figure 3 below). Sprouting heads from the deceptively respectable torso of an Augustine monk, the Lutheran Hydra recasts the seven deadly sins as a rogue's progress from doctor to murderous Barabas. "In the old, most Christian Evangel", Cochlaeus writes, "there was one heart among the multitude of believers and one soul; yet in this new Evangel one heart and flesh are cut apart into many heads."[14]

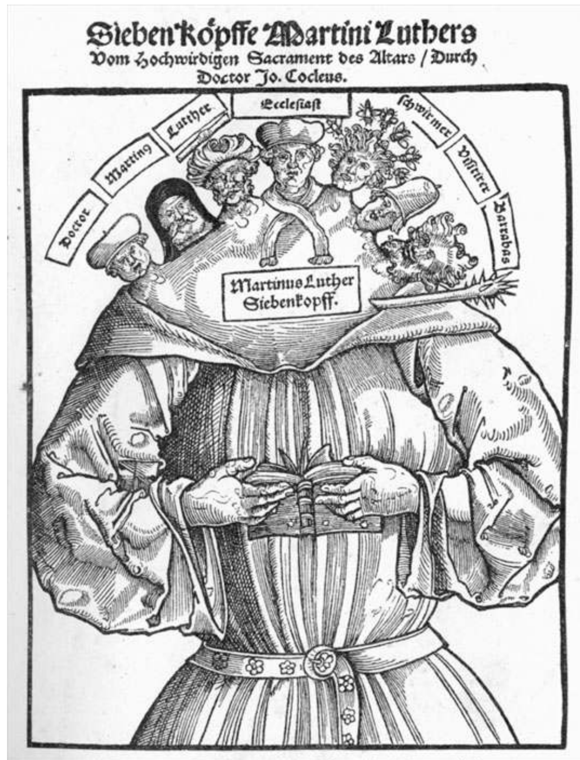

Figure 3. Johannes Cochlaeus, *Sieben Köpfe Martin Luthers*, Leipzig, Valentin Schumann, 1529, titlepage.

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19 Such cutting apart is, of course, not limited to religious dissension. The Hydra just as readily lends itself to representing the disruption of the body politic. That body is ideally – or, as writers of the period claimed, 'naturally' – conceived of as a collective unified under one head. This is famously visualised in the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan*: a multitude of individual bodies collectively form the body of the state, which is presided over by the single head of the sovereign. The monstrous anatomy of the Hydra reverses this order: one body but many heads.

20 Perhaps the Turkish headgear of Topsell's Venetian Hydra would have primarily reminded a contemporary audience of a familiar threat from without: those Ottoman armies that haunted the collective imagination of Christendom for centuries. The fact, however, that the inscriptor thinks the monster prophesies a danger not posed *by*, but *to* the Ottoman Empire is all the more telling. It confirms what many other sources

attest: that the Hydra signifies, first and foremost, the inner corrosion of a commonwealth, the threat of rebellion and civil war.

21 This is what the Hydra stands for in the writings of King James I. James's fear of crowds is a commonplace among Shakespeare scholars and routinely crops up in discussions of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*. It also finds mention in comments on Daniel Mytens's portrait showing the King glumly gazing forth from the cocoon of a bulging, tent-sized cloak meant to protect him from knife attacks. (See figure 4 below.) But James's alleged personal phobia only foregrounds a dilemma inherent in the very structure of early modern kingship. Visibility is a crucial working condition of royal eminence. "It is a trew old saying", James writes in *Basilikon Doron*, his political guide book to his son Henry, "That a King is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly doe behold."[15] Claiming absolute sovereignty, James sees himself answerable to God alone. And it is to God's uniquely privileged spectatorship that his performance on the stage of the world is ultimately directed; ultimately but by no means exclusively.

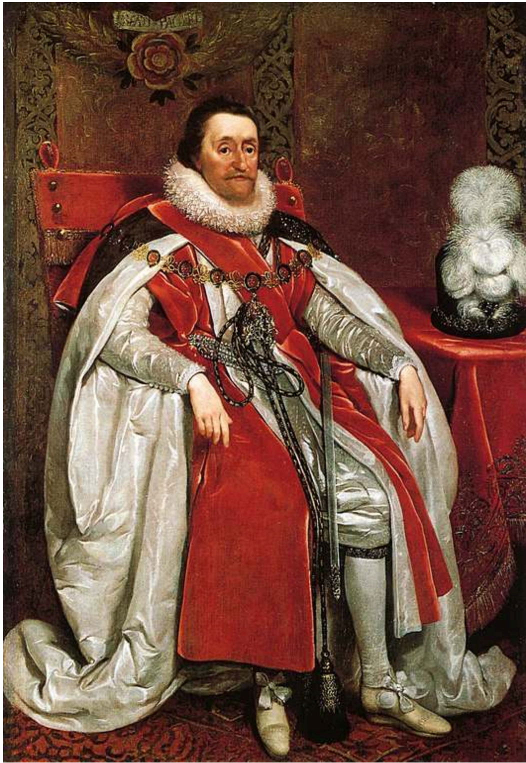

Figure 4. Daniel Mytens, *King James I*, 1621.

Oil on canvas. NPG 109. https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw03419/King-James-I-of-England-and-VI-of-Scotland

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22 In his address to the reader James somewhat testily admits that *Basilikon Doron* has slipped into print quite against his royal will. Only because "false copies [...] are alreadie spread", James declares, "this Booke is now [...] set forth to the publike view of the world, and consequently subject to every mans censure [...]"[16] The reading public, like the audience at a public playhouse, has the power to transfer agency from the royal author to 'every man'. The prerogative of making public is attributed to the active force of the people's irresistible inquisitiveness, so that "their great concurrence in curiositie

[...] hath enforced the un-timous divulging of this Booke, farre contrarie to my intention."[17]

23 In print, the royal author comes under the judgement of an audience to whom his strict line of absolutism – hammered home in *Basilikon Doron* and *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* – expressly denies any such power. James's troubled sense of vulnerability in the sphere of public display is betrayed by the name he gives this audience. He calls it the "Hydra of diversly-enclined spectatours."[18]

24 Visibility is an indispensable constituent of early modern kingship which must be endorsed by the affirmation of an audience – the court, the people, the world at large. But audience response can never be safely predicted. How the spectacle of majesty is received remains beyond the control of executive authority, even when this authority brandishes its sharpest weapon: execution. It is pointless to decapitate the Hydra. The monster will always grow new heads, "diversly-enclined".

IV

25 The Jack Cade rebellion in *Henry VI* Part 2 and the "Friends, Romans, countrymen" who lend Mark Antony their ears before tearing Cinna the poet to pieces in *Julius Caesar* are prominent examples of crowd presence in Shakespearean drama. But the most sustained engagement with the many-headed multitude occurs in *Coriolanus*. Here the conflict between the hero and the crowd is the central issue. Their fight over the prerogative to define and, of course, rule the *polis*, the *civitas*, is pervasively conceived of as a fight between animals, the city fought over, as a body.

26 If *Coriolanus* has been called a debate rather than a tragedy,[19] it is a ferociously physical one, resembling, as I have argued elsewhere, the action in the baiting arenas located in the close vicinity of Shakespeare's theatre.[20] Three turbulent quarrel scenes mark the opening, the turning point and the finale of the play (1.1; 3.3; 5.6). All three have the same basic configuration; they pit a single imposing figure against a crowd of opponents, a powerful individual against a pack, or 'cry', of lesser creatures. All three resemble a bear-baiting.

27 Contemporary accounts of bear-baiting tend to anthropomorphize these cruel entertainments by cloaking the animal contestants in a kind of mock humanity.[21] The quarrel fought out in *Coriolanus*, on the other hand, turns men into beasts:

> 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? (3.1.34-38)[22]

28 The dispute is over 'voices', the votes of the people which Coriolanus needs in order to become consul. But in Coriolanus' diatribe the tribunes as the people's spokesmen turn into dog keepers, teeth replacing tongues as organs of oral communication. In Shakespeare's Roman class struggle, the mouth is the central organ of the body politic. In a fight over food and votes, the instrument of speech serves equally well for barking and biting.

29 Oral aggressiveness finds its ultimate epitome in the many-headed monster, which in *Othello* figures as the monster of "many mouths".[23] The Hydra bursts on the scene in

Coriolanus' angry response to Sicinius the tribune's declaration that he, Coriolanus, shall not rise to the position of consul. Coriolanus' mind, the tribune asserts, "shall remain a poison where it is, / Not poison any further" (3.1.88-89):

> CORIOLANUS. 'Shall remain'?
> Hear you this Triton of the minnows? Mark you
> His absolute 'shall'?
> [...]
> 'Shall'?
> O good but most unwise patricians! Why,
> You grave but reckless senators, have you thus
> Given Hydra here to choose an officer
> That with his peremptory 'shall', being but
> The horn and noise o' the monster's, wants not spirit
> To say he'll turn your current in a ditch,
> And make your channel his? (*Coriolanus*, 3.1.89-98)

The first epithet, "Triton of the minnows", 'mouthpiece of small fry', contemptuously belittles the tribune and his constituency. The second epithet, Hydra, emphasizes their dangerousness. By fighting the Hydra, Coriolanus assumes a familiar role.

30 Hercules the Hydra-slayer was a favourite mythological self-image of the early modern ruler (see figure 5 below),[24] although, as Shakespeare's use of the image shows, not an altogether untroubled one. Hercules kills the Hydra, but in the end she also kills him. He dips his arrows in her poison and uses such an arrow to shoot Nessus the centaur, the would-be rapist of his wife Deianira. The centaur dies, but not without having convinced the gullible Deianira that his blood is an unfailing love-potion. Wanting to pump up Hercules' flagging marital enthusiasm, Deianira soaks his garment in the centaur's Hydra-infected blood, and the otherwise invincible hero ends the victim of his own shirt. "The shirt of Nessus is upon me", exclaims Shakespeare's other Herculean hero, Antony (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 4.12.43).

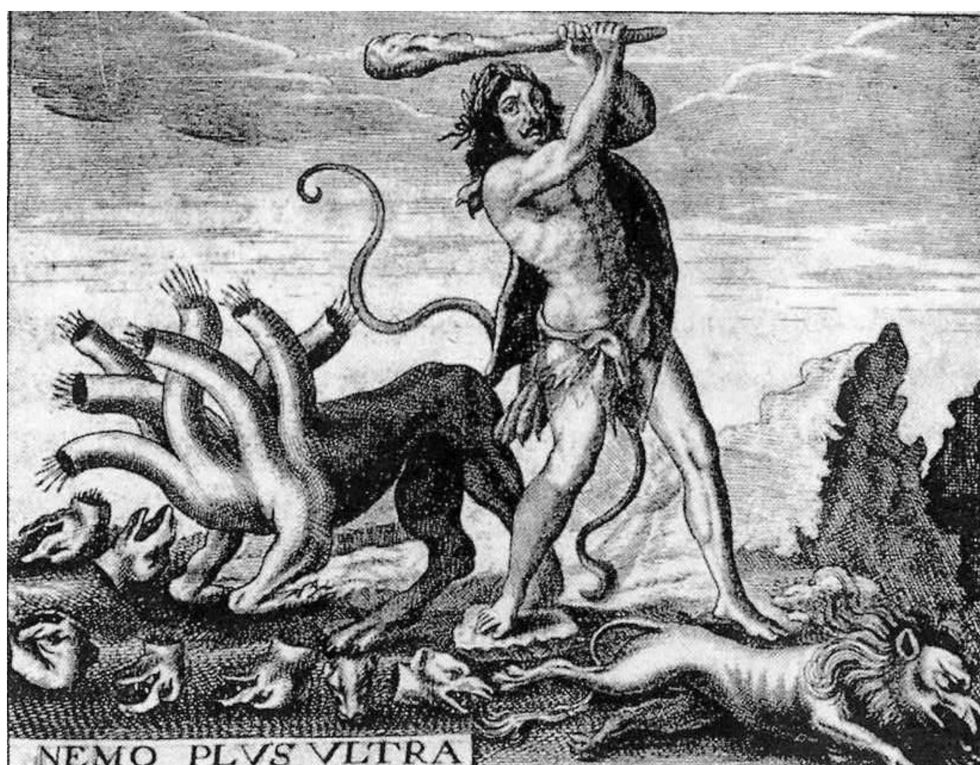

Figure 5. King Louis XIII of France as Hercules, from the title page of: Gabriel Barthélemy de Gramond, *Historiarum Galliae ab excessu Henrici IV. libri XVIII.: quibus rerum per Gallos totâ Europâ gestarum accurata narratio continetur*, Tolosae, Colomerius, 1643.

Augsburg, Staats- und Stadtbibliothek, Catalogue # 2 Gs 337. URL: http://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11196886-8

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31 *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* is the play in which Hercules' struggle with the Hydra features most consistently. The shirt of Nessus is upon Coriolanus, too, when he has to wear the gown of humility in order to win the people's votes in his candidacy for consul. Wearing the hated garment, which his friends assure him is a mere formality, throws him into fits of revulsion. To him, it is not a charade of humility but an experience of very real humiliation, a submission to the poisonous power of the many-headed monster. No sooner is the hateful ceremony over than he hastens to rid himself of "this wolvish toge" (2.3.101) in order to "know [...] [him]self again" (2.3.133). The Folio, our only source text for the play, has "Wooluish tongue". A compositor's error, no doubt, yet a curiously apt one. Tongues haunt the hero's phobic revulsion. They also turn up in the citizens' discussion of the forthcoming election: "THIRD CITIZEN. For if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put tongues into those wounds and speak for them [...]" (*Coriolanus*, 2.3.5-7). What makes the experience so unbearable for Coriolanus is captured in the vividly physical image of tongues being put into his wounds. The humiliation is in his passivity, the exposure of his body to the invasive "licking" by the "multitudinous tongue". It is in keeping with the aggressive orality of the play that the many-headed monster is conceived of as the many-tongued one.

32 In a remarkable stroke of irony, the Hydra image is playfully introduced by the "monster" itself, the citizens, in their discussion of the imminent election:

> THIRD CITIZEN. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ingrateful were to make a monster of the multitude, of which we, being members, should bring ourselves to be monstrous members.
> FIRST CITIZEN. And to make us no better thought of, a little help will serve; for once we stood up about the corn, he himself stuck not to call us the many-headed multitude.
> THIRD CITIZEN. We have been called so of many, not that our heads are some brown, some abram, some black, some bald, but that our wits are so diversely coloured. (*Coriolanus*, 2.3.8-17)

The "diversely coloured" wits of the plebeians are close to King James's "diversly-enclined spectatours". Caius Martius whose military performance against the Volscians earns him frenetic applause and his name of honour, but who is unable to bring himself to perform the civic ceremony expected of him, reflects the ambivalent position of the actor in Shakespeare's theatre, "the charmed circle in which an audience enshrines or entraps the player."[25] By extension, Coriolanus' deeply conflicted glory mirrors the privileged visibility of the monarch himself.

33 But the body politic of Shakespeare's republican Rome differs quite considerably from that envisioned by James I. The political anatomy of Stuart absolutism is crucially centred on the monarch as the single, sovereign head of the state. It is against this normative singularity that the Hydra stands out as a monstrous anomaly. Rome, however, is a republic. When Menenius translates the structure of this republic into bodily terms in Act 1, "[t]he kingly crownèd head" (1.1.98), though mentioned in passing, has no role to play in a fable that assigns executive power to the belly: "The

senators of Rome are this good belly/ And you [the plebeians] are the mutinous members" (1.1.131-132). In the gastrocentric logic of Menenius' republican fable, the head for all its being "kingly crowned" would have to be ranked among the 'members', and thus the mutineers – though this, of course, is never explicitly stated.[26]

V

34 Danger to the *res publica* arises not only from the pernicious plurality of the Hydra but also from a singularity whose self-assertion knows no bounds. "You are too absolute" (3.2.40), Volumnia cautions her son, but to no avail. The absoluteness of his *virtus* makes him the most Roman of all Romans but at the same time untenable as a citizen of Rome.

35 According to Aristotle, "someone who cannot live in the community or, because he is sufficient unto himself, has no need of it, is not a member of a state and therefore either a beast or a god."[27] Beast – subhuman, god – superhuman: this seems to be in accord with the vertical scale on which Pico della Mirandola places man between the angels and the brutes.[28] But the quotation accords at least as well with a scale that places man not between, but opposite, god and beast. (See figure 6 below.) Coriolanus is much closer to this scheme than to Pico's ladder. Where he exceeds human limitations, he does not move towards anything even remotely like the purified spirituality of Neo-Platonic idealism. The divinity ascribed to him points to something much more archaic envisioned not as a turning away from but as a turning into the animal:

> MENENIUS. This Martius is grown from man to dragon. He has wings; he's more than a creeping thing. [...]
> When he walks, he moves like an engine, and the ground shrinks before his treading.[...]
> He wants nothing of a god but eternity and a heaven to throne in. (*Coriolanus*, 5.4.10-11; 15-16; 19-20)

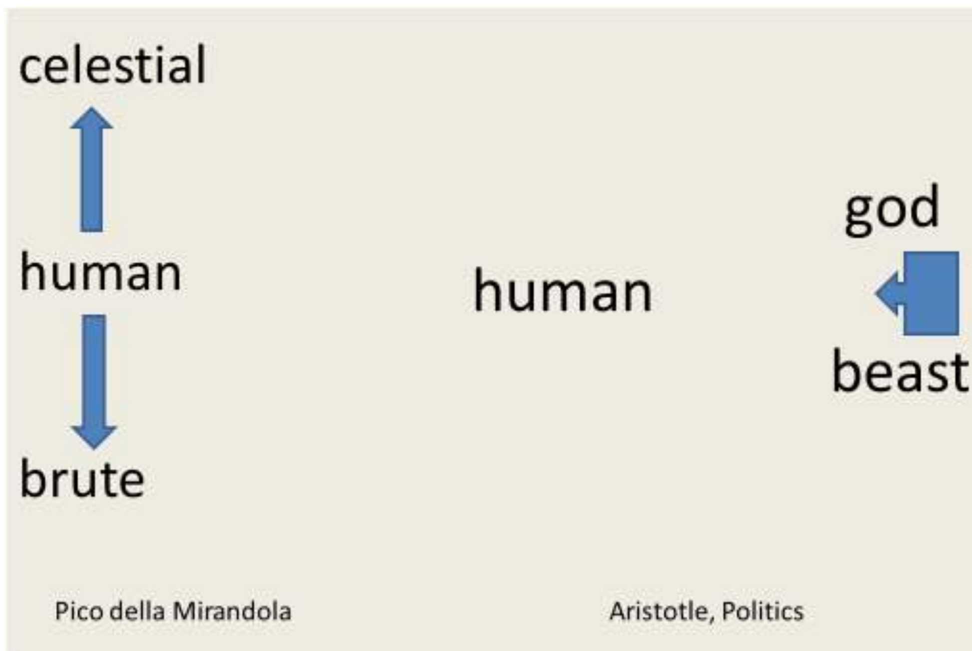

Figure 6.

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36 The hero of mythology is typically a slayer of dragons and other monstrous beasts. But by a logic of what we might call totemistic identification, the hero also partakes of the beast's nature. Coriolanus' heroism perpetuates some of this archaic tie. There is an inhuman quality to his superhuman exploits. They exalt but also exclude him, make him strange, a stranger to his own community.

37 Taking his farewell from family and friends on his way into exile, he once again invokes the familiar image of his monstrous adversary: "The beast / With many heads", he says, "butts me away" (4.1.1-2). He also mentions the Hydra-slayer: "If you", he addresses his mother, "had been the wife of Hercules, / Six of his labours you'd have done" (4.1.17-18).[29]

38 But rather than embracing his Herculean role he casts himself as another monster:

> CORIOLANUS. [...] I go alone,
> Like to a lonely dragon that his fen
> Makes feared and talked of more than seen [...][30] (*Coriolanus*, 4.1.29-31)

39 Likening himself to a dragon (and likened to one later on – admiringly – by both Menenius and Aufidius[31]) Coriolanus moves remarkably close to what he most hates and opposes: "the many-headed multitude". This has long been noted by editors of the play. Philip Brockbank (Arden[2]) observes that Spenser's Orgoglio keeps a dragon "'bred in filthy fen' that is compared to the Hydra of the Lernaean marsh", though Brockbank also submits that a "specific allusion to the Hydra", the signature monster of the plebeians, "would be inapposite here, where Shakespeare needs evocations of isolation, pathos, menace, rumour, and uncertainty."[32] The distinct note of isolation is unmistakable, but so is the menace that no less unmistakably links the disruptive force of the Hydra-like multitude with that of the dragon-like outcast-hero. Coriolanus turns into a kind of superhuman hybrid, a God-beast of archaic provenance, unaccommodated in the sense of being incapable of accommodation to the social world of Rome.

40 When confronted with that world again in the form of its most binding nucleus, his own family, he grows backwards, as it were, from dragon to man. "Wife, mother, child, I know not" (5.2.76), he declares as he rebuts Menenius's supplication. But when he actually faces them, he "melt[s], and [is] not / Of stronger earth than others" (5.3.28-29).

41 At this point, we briefly return to the idea, formulated by Pico della Mirandola, of man's unique privilege to shape himself. "[I] stand", Coriolanus declares, "As if a man were author of himself" (5.3.35-36). The "as if", however, poses an all too obviously impossible condition. Instead of "tearing / His country's bowels out" (as Volumnia predicts at 5.3.102-103), he ends up being torn to pieces himself in another country. "Tear him to pieces!" shouts the Volscian version of the many-headed beast and in the end, according to the Folio stage direction, it is Aufidius who "stands on him" (5.5.132 SD) like another Hercules on a monster he has slain.

42 The Hydra's life-span as a political monster did not expire with the anxieties of early modern rulership. It looms large, for example, in Edmund Burke's account of violent crowds unleashed by the French revolution.[33] It even raises its heads in our own day. On the occasion of his sixty-second birthday, a latter-day Hercules was presented with

a whole gallery of celebratory portraits by his grateful nation. Most widely publicized among these images was the one showing the hero, Vladimir Putin, fighting the Hydra of US sanctions.[34]

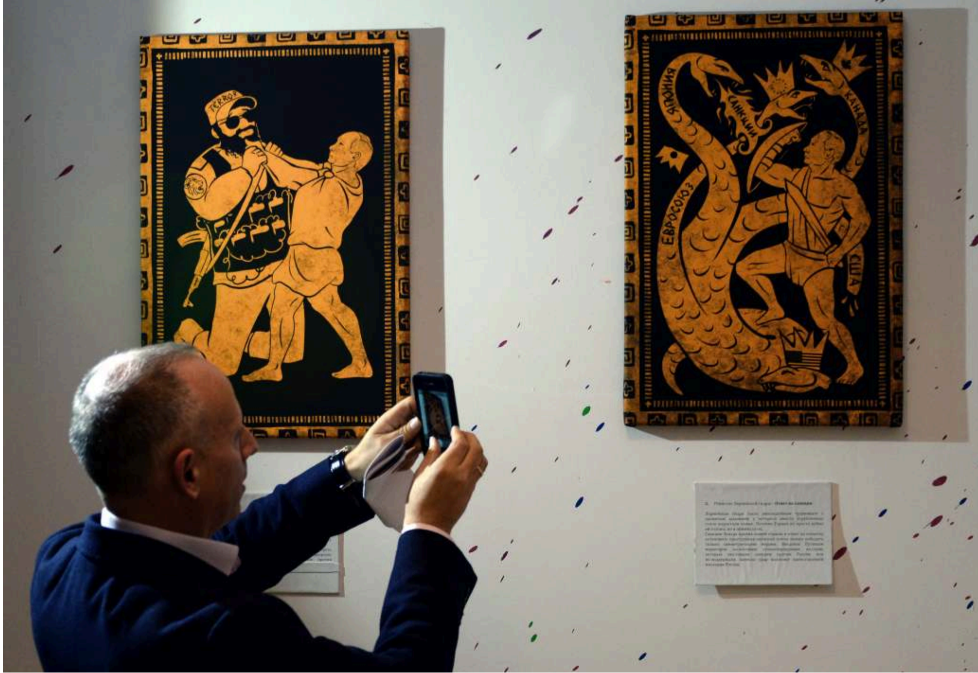

Figure 7. Vladimir Putin battling the Hydra of American sanctions.

Photograph: VASILY MAXIMOV / AFP

NOTES

1. "Poteris in inferiora quae sunt bruta degenerare; poteris in superiora quae sunt divina ex tui animi sententia regenerari." Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1483), quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 29-30.

2. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Period of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore, originally publ. London, C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1878, repr. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, vol. 2, p. 103-104.

3. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. A. Robert Caponigri, Washington, DC, Regnery Publishing, [1956] 1999, p. 7.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

5. Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 7. Further references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

6. This is the drift of Brian P. Copenhaver's acerbic critique of Burckhardt's idealising view of Pico in "Magic and the Dignity of Man: De-Kanting Pico's *Oration*", in *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. A. J. Grieco, M. Rocke and F. Gioffredi Superbi, Florence, Olschki, 2002, p. 295-320. See also Copenhaver, "Who wrote Pico's *Oration*?" (February 2004) https://de.scribd.com/document/119118485/i25-a-Pico-Cabala-Eng.pdf (last accessed 1 November 2018),

which opens with the statement that "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola did not write an Oration on the Dignity of Man, nor did he conceive its celebrated proclamation of human freedom. The words *de dignitate hominis* attached themselves to the speech that Pico wrote decades after he died, and the concept of human freedom and dignity commonly attributed to him came even later, emerging from the metaphysics and moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant" (p. 1). The paper concludes that Pico is "not Faustian, not heroic in the romantic way and ultimately not modern or liberal, not the author of that so well celebrated *Oration on the Dignity of Man* of ours, which is a speech that we have written for ourselves" (p. 28).

7. Cf. the chapter heading "De erratis naturae in formatura capitis" ("Errors of Nature in the Forming of the Head"), Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Vlissis Aldrovandi patricii Bononiensis Monstrorum historia, cum Paralipomenis historiae omnium animalium*, Bologna, typis Nicolai Tebaldini, 1642, p. 400.

8. Edward Topsell, *The History of the Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents and Insects*, vol. 1: *The History of Four-Footed Beasts*, (facsimile reprint of the 1658 edition:) New York, Da Capo Press, 1967, p. 343 and illustration p. 344.

9. For a discussion of the term 'humanimal' and its relation to historically older terms 'monster' and 'hybrid', see for example: Sara E. S. Orning, "Staging Humanimality: Patricia Piccinini and a Genealogy of Species Intermingling", *Animalities: Literary and Cultural Studies Beyond the Human*, ed. Michael Lundblad, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, p. 80-103.

10. Topsell, *History*, vol. 2, p. 735. Further references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

11. Florio's Italian-English *World of Words* underlines the continuing relevance of that root:

Móstro, *shewed, set to view, demonstrated, declared. Also a monster, or misshapen creature, anything against the course of nature, a monstrous signe, a strange sight.*

Mostruóso, *monstrous, portentous, against the course of nature*.

John Florio, *Queen Anna's New World of Words, or Dictionarie of the Italian and English tongues*, London, Edward Blount and William Barret, 1611, p. 324 (http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/florio/339small.html, last accessed 29 November 2018).

12. Cf. Burckhardt's ground-breaking *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860), see above n. 2.

13. The findings of the Munich Collaborative Research Centre *Pluralization and Authority in Early Modern Europe* (SFB 573), http://www.sfb-frueheneuzeit.uni-muenchen.de (2001-2011) amply support this generalization. See, for example Andreas Höfele, Stephan Laqué, "Introduction", *Humankinds: The Renaissance and Its Anthropologies*, ed. A. Höfele, S. Laqué (Pluralisierung & Autorität, vol. 25), Berlin, New York, De Gruyter, 2011, p. 1-18. Cf. also my "Portraits of Hydra: Theatre and the Many-Headed Multitude", *"If Then the World a Theatre Present…": Revisions of the Theatrum Mundi Metaphor in Early Modern England*, ed. Björn Quiring (Pluralisierung & Autorität, vol. 32), Berlin, New York, De Gruyter, p. 61-81.

14. Johannes Cochlaeus, "S[epticeps] L[utherus]", quoted in Gotthelf Wiedermann "Cochlaeus as a Polemicist", *The Seven-Headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary*, ed. Peter Newman Brooks, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 195-205, p. 196.

15. King James VI and I, "Basilikon Doron", *Selected Writings*, ed. Neil Rhodes, Jennifer Richards and Joseph Marshall, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003, p. 246. Instead of 'stage', the first, 1599, edition had 'scaffold', a word that brings the heightened visibility of kingship uncomfortably close to the public spectacles of execution: "That a King is as one set on a skaffold, whose smallest actions & gestures al the people gazingly do behold". King James VI and I, *Basilikon Doron. Divided into three Bookes*, Edinburgh, Robert Waldegrave, 1599, p. 121 (STC 14348). The emendation has often been commented on; see e. g. Andreas Höfele, *Stage, Stake, and Scaffold: Humans and Animals in Shakespeare's Theatre*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 72-73.

16. King James VI and I, *op. cit.* p. 203.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

19. D. J. Enright, "Coriolanus: Tragedy or Debate?", *Essays in Criticism* 4 (1954), 1-19.
20. Höfele, *Stage, Stake, and Scaffold*, p. 98-101.
21. See, for example, Robert Laneham's account of the famous entertainment the Earl of Leicester arranged for the Queen at Kenilworth Castle in 1575, where a day of stag-hunting was followed by a day of bear-baiting. Robert Laneham, "A Letter: Whearin, part of the Entertainment, untoo the Queenz Majesty, at Killingworth Castl, in Warwik Sheer, in this Soomerz Progress, 1575, iz signified [...]", *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. John Nichols, 3 volumes, London, J. Nichols and Son, 1823, vol. 1, p. 420-484.
22. All quotations from William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* (The New Cambridge Shakespeare), ed. Lee Bliss, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
23. "CASSIO. Had I as many mouths as Hydra, such an answer would stop them all." William Shakespeare, *Othello*, *The Moor of Venice*, ed. Michael Neill, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, l 2.3.292-293.
24. The image refers to Louis XIII's role in restoring religious unity in France by quelling the Huguenot rebellion. For further examples of Herculean rulers slaying political Hydras see Sabine Heym and Willibald Sauerländer (ed.), *Herkules besiegt die lernäische Hydra: Der Herkules-Teppich im Vortragssaal der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Munich, Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006; Takashi Nishi, *The representations of Hercules and Hydra in Shakespeare's Coriolanus*. PhD thesis, Birkbeck, University of London, 2014 (http://bbktheses.da.ulcc.ac.uk/59/, last accessed 12 January 2019).
25. Meredith Anne Skura, *Shakespeare the Actor and the Purpose of Playing*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 8.
26. Coriolanus chimes in with Menenius's gastric image of the body politic. "Being pressed to th' war", he accuses the plebeians (3.1.123-125), "Even when *the navel of the state* was touched, / They would not thread the gates." (italics added) In other words, they refused to go to the wars; the image also suggests, as the Cambridge editor, Lee Bliss, points out, the plebeian soldiers' refusal to follow Martius through the gates of Corioles.
27. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.
28. In this and the following paragraph I am drawing on my *Stage, Stake, and Scaffold*, p. 105-107.
29. The Oedipal overtones are almost too obvious to mention. And it is almost equally obvious that if Coriolanus is Hercules, then casting his mother as Hercules's wife (i.e. Deianira) means that she will be the cause of his death. As indeed Volumnia will.
30. The sentence as a whole, from which this quotation is taken, is as ominous for Coriolanus's future as the reference to Hercules's wife: "My mother, you wot well / My hazards still have been your solace, and / Believe't not lightly – though I go alone, / Like to a lonely dragon that his fen / Makes feared and talked of more than seen – your son / Will or exceed the common or be caught / With cautelous baits and practice" (4.1. 27-33). He will in fact both exceed the common *and* be caught with baits and practice.
31. Aufidius (4.7.23-24) acknowledges that Coriolanus "[f]ights dragon-like, and does achieve as soon / As draw his sword [...]"
32. William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. Philip Brockbank (The Arden Shakespeare, 2nd Series), London, Methuen, 1976, p. 239.
33. Mark Neocleous, "The Monstrous Multitude: Edmund Burke's Political Teratology", *Contemporary Political Theory* 3 (2004), 70-88.
34. See, for example, Katie Zavadski, "Putin's Birthday Present Is a Hercules-Themed Art Show About How Manly and Amazing He Is", *The Intelligencer* (*New York Magazine*), 6 October 2014 (http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2014/10/putin-birthday-present-hercules-art-show.html, last accessed 29 November 2018).

ABSTRACTS

Taking its starting point from ideas of human-animal hybridity in Renaissance philosophy and natural history, this paper explores the role of one particular hybrid, the Hydra, in early modern political thought. The epitome of noxious pluralization, the many-headed monster embodies the threat of corrosive civil strife. As such it figures in the writings of King James I and in pictorial representations of kingship. The monarch in the Herculean role of Hydra-slayer is a standard motif of early modern royal iconography. Shakespeare's Herculean hero, Coriolanus, follows this pattern in his fight against the plebeian "beast / With many heads". But in doing so, he moves remarkably close to what he most hates and opposes: "going alone / Like to a lonely dragon", the outcast-hero becomes as politically disruptive as the Hydra-like crowd. Turning into a kind of superhuman hybrid, Coriolanus, the most Roman of all Romans, proves untenable for the social world of Rome.

À partir de conceptions sur l'hybridité humain-animal puisées dans la philosophie et l'histoire naturelle de la Renaissance, cet article étudie le rôle d'un hybride en particulier, l'Hydre, dans la pensée politique de la première modernité. Le monstre à plusieurs têtes, symbole parfait de pluralité nuisible, incarne la menace de dissensions politiques délétères. C'est à ce titre qu'il est mentionné dans les écrits de Jacques Ier et qu'il figure dans des représentations picturales de la royauté. Le monarque dans son rôle herculéen de tueur d'hydre est un motif récurrent de l'iconographie de la période. La version shakespearienne de ce héros herculéen, Coriolan, obéit au modèle dans sa lutte contre « la bête aux mille têtes » que constitue la Plèbe. Mais ce faisant, il se rapproche terriblement de ce qu'il déteste et combat : « je serai comme le dragon solitaire », déclare le héros banni devenu aussi dérageant sur le plan politique que la foule comparée à l'Hydre. Coriolan, le plus romain de tous les Romains, se transforme en une sorte d'hybride surhumain, et se révèle ainsi insupportable pour la société romaine.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Coriolan, Hercule, héros, hybridité, hydre, monstre, Plèbe, politique
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