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Book Reviews

DEADLY UNITY

Jan H. Blits: *Spirit, Soul, and City: Shakespeare's Coriolanus* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006. Pp. vii, 243. $80.00.)

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Writing in 1817, critic William Hazlitt observed of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* that the play "is a store-house of political commonplaces. Any one who studies it may save himself the trouble of reading Burke's Reflections, or Paine's Rights of Man, or the Debates in both Houses of Parliament since the French Revolution or our own." To Hazlitt's mind, *Coriolanus* centered on the conflict between "the privileges of the few and the claims of the many," which Shakespeare addressed with all "the acuteness of a philosopher." Something of the political complexity of the play is suggested by the fact that, according to Hazlitt's partially humorous suggestion, one could theoretically dispense with the reading of *Coriolanus* by taking up Burke *or* Paine instead. If the play adequately represents the arguments of both writers for and against the claims of the many and the privileges of the few (to the point that they would each suffice by way of substitution), then the replacement of the play by only one of them would represent a considerable sacrifice.

Regrettably, more recent criticism has frequently tended to simplify the political problems and questions raised by *Coriolanus* by arguing that the play's importance lies mainly in its relevance to the historical moment when it was written. Having narrowed the political scope of the play to the point that it encompasses only topical concerns, such criticism argues that the play subverts aristocratic virtue and privilege and promotes the values of populism (and pacificism), rather than offering a philosophically significant consideration of the tension between aristocracy and democracy. Thus, while almost every critical discussion of *Coriolanus* stresses the emphatically political nature of the play, it must be said that with the exception of several individual articles, chapters or sections of books (particularly those by John Alvis and Paul Cantor), a contemporary account of *Coriolanus* that is both politically informed and philosophically acute has been lacking.

With the publication of *Spirit, Soul, and City: Shakespeare's Coriolanus* by Jan H. Blits, that lack has been redressed. It will prove valuable to specialists in search of an excellent book-length discussion of the political philosophy of *Coriolanus* and anyone else who is interested in a patient, insightful, carefully

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written, clearly argued, and erudite reading of Shakespeare. The structure of Blits's book is determined by the structure of Shakespeare's play, with each of the five chapters containing a virtually line-by-line commentary upon all the scenes in a given act. Although his reading is striking in its detailed attention to Shakespeare's words, Blits does not sacrifice the scope and depth of his argument at the cost of his painstaking examination of the play's use of language. He draws out the political and philosophical implications of his point at almost every turn.

Blits's main argument centers upon the three terms adumbrated in his title: spirit, soul, and city. The city is like the soul in that both are divided—the city, between the many and the few; the soul, between its composite "animal and rational nature" (2). What the soul knows in its capacity as the source of rational thought is that the body will die. Spirit attempts to defy the fact of mortality by attempting to transcend the condition of human death, which is human birth. Seeking singleness in all things, it sets the aspirations of virtue against the claims of birth and death. In aiming to transcend all that is not one, spirit destroys the soul: "Owing to his dual nature, man must go beyond himself in order to be true to himself. But owing to man's dual nature, the soul cannot succeed in doing that without ultimately destroying itself. In spiritedly defying death, it ultimately denies life" (234). Left unfettered, spirit would reduce all complex and composite things (including the soul itself) to unity, but such unity would entail nonexistence.

Blits argues that what is true of spirit in relation to the soul is true of Coriolanus in relation to the city. He places the same demands on Rome that he places on himself; both "should be only one thing" (126). But the city of Rome, like the soul of Coriolanus, is divided by nature: "Just as Rome is frequently at war with foreign enemies and always divided at home between its two major classes, Coriolanus is constantly divided both against others and within himself" (1). In the midst of this division, Coriolanus seeks to impose unity through the spirited assertion of virtue, thereby repudiating "the very conditions of his virtue" (152), which include his Roman birth, his dual nature, and the internal and external conflicts of the city. Both of these types of conflict lead Rome to go to war. Since war offers Coriolanus his best chance for superlative feats of virtue, he requires war in order to be true to himself. During intervals of peace, he has politics available to him as a potential field of action, but his disdain for the nonvirtuous many makes any sort of political rapprochement between himself and the people of Rome impossible.

In the important chapter on act 3, Blits argues that "Coriolanus, at bottom, despises not only the people and Rome, but the 'city,' that is, political life, as such" (152). One wishes that Blits had discussed the relation between spirit and political life at greater length. Under what conditions does spirit (which is often understood as being a central impetus for political action) reject politics altogether? If anything, Coriolanus's spirit seems to be an impetus for *anti*-political action. Blits hints at a potentially important aspect

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of Coriolanus's distaste for politics in suggesting that he is "[i]n effect a moral idealist" who "has no concern for prudence or calculation" (131). Is Coriolanus's putative idealism "moral" primarily by virtue of its refusal of calculation or prudence (and politics) or in its positive concern for nobility? Blits mentions the possibility that Coriolanus's spirited interest in punitive justice may interfere with his love of nobility (131). Is there in spirit a more general tension between the pursuit of justice and that of nobility? An extended discussion of the ambiguous alliance between moral idealism and spirit (and the defeat of that alliance in the fifth act of the play) would have been welcome in this context. The range of topics Blits covers throughout the book, however, is so extensive that one can hardly complain.

Overall, this book offers a model of how to read Shakespeare that should serve as a subtle reproach to less careful readers of *Coriolanus* and an invitation to those who wish to consider in depth the philosophic and political questions that the play poses in all their stubborn complexity.

–Suzanne Smith

SILENCING XANTHIPPE

Lisa Pace Vetter: *"Women's Work" as Political Art: Weaving and Dialectical Politics in Homer, Aristophanes, and Plato* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005. Pp. x, 178. $60.00, cloth)

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In *"Women's Work" as Political Art*, Lisa Pace Vetter pursues a theory of a deliberative democratic practice that is attentive to feminist concerns. To this end, Vetter produces an original interpretation of Socratic dialectic. She finds Socratic dialectic to be more compatible with feminist accounts of deliberative democratic practice than previously thought.

Vetter arrives at an expansive conception of Socratic dialectic through a dramatic reading of Plato's *Phaedo.* She places her interpretation of Socratic dialectic as weaving alongside three equally novel interpretations of earlier conceptions of weaving found in ancient Greek literature. Vetter argues that Socratic dialectic builds upon and improves the characterizations of dialectic offered by Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey,* Lysistrata in Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, and the Stranger in Plato's *Statesman.* Vetter portrays Penelope and Lysistrata as thoughtful individuals who are catalysts for action and change, and actors themselves. Their forms of dialectic do not, however, avoid tyranny and homogeneity. Even worse, the Stranger's excessively abstract understanding of dialectic stifles human striving, according to Vetter. In contrast, Socratic dialectic, as a mode of philosophic inquiry practiced in the *Phaedo*, harmoniously weaves together human plurality, human limitation, subjectivity, and particularity.

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