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MUSTY AND UNBOLTED GRAIN IN *CORIOLANUS*

There are some masterly analyses of how *Coriolanus* draws on early modern discourses about the market: how, in a market economy, values fluctuate for all commodities (including, here, for corn, the citizens, and Coriolanus himself), and how the play reflects political unrest caused by two decades of dearths from the mid-1590s, especially those of 1596 and 1607, which drew attempts by the state to control both regrating and the use of grain for malting, not food.¹ Editors draw on these to comment on the striking opening passage of the play, where citizens threaten rebellion if the granaries are not opened to them at prices they can afford, and are met by mollifying myths from Menenius and furious hostility by Coriolanus.²

However, these analyses focus on defects in the market relating to price and supply. The opening scene also uses ideas and a vocabulary based on defects relating quality: grain which is musty and unbolted. This is highlighted by looking at some editions of the regularly updated publication, *The Assise of Bread*. These give tables showing the weight of the loaf and the type of grain to be used in different qualities of bread, depending on the price of wheat. The price and quality are always stable (for instance, a halfpenny loaf made with fine meal), so the weight of the loaf varies according to the price of grain. But they then add a list, more or less expansive, of the punishments to be meted out should a product not be up to standard: an unspecified punishment for the first offence, losing one's stock of meal for the second, the pillory for the third, and ending by banishment from the town on the fourth. For instance, John Powel's repeatedly published *The Assise of Bread. Newly Corrected and*

¹ Particularly R. Wilson, 'Against the Grain: Representing the Market in *Coriolanus*', *The Seventeenth Century*, 6 (1991), 111-48; S. Hindle, 'Imagining Insurrection in Seventeenth-century England', *History Workshop Journal*, 66 (2008), 21-61.

² W. Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. L. Bliss (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 17-27; W. Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. P. Holland (London, 2013), 56-68.

Enlarged gives an ‘order for mustie Meale’ which covers ‘mixing of it deceitfully’ (altering the proportion of flour and chaff) or using meal which is ‘mustie & corrupted’, ‘to the hurt or infection of mans body’.³

This second set of faults provides a second, and more minor, strain of imagery in the play.

The citizens start by demanding ‘the superfluity while it is wholesome’ (I.i.16), but end by being labelled themselves as a ‘musty superfluity’ (I.i.225), by Coriolanus.⁴ Comenius later reports on how Coriolanus lumps Romans together as a ‘pile/ Of noisome musty chaff’, and finds it ‘folly, / For one poor grain or two, to leave unburnt’ the rest. Menenius bitterly applies the image: ‘For one poor grain or two! / I am one of those; his mother, wife, his child,/ And this brave fellow too, we are the grains: / You are the musty chaff’ (V.i.25-31).

On sound but coarse meal, Menenius praises how the patrician belly distributes ‘the flour of all’, retaining ‘but the bran’ (I.i.143-4), though he later admits that Coriolanus cannot use ‘bolted language. Meal and bran together/ He throws without distinction’ (III.ii.324-5).

Noticing these faults of quality, not quantity, can add something to readings of the play which dwell on its calculations about exchange value. Coriolanus is unwilling to take the time to distinguish in detail between the sound and the musty, or the meal and the bran. Tragic heroes often get testy or vague when asked to attend to dull but necessary procedures. All very well for these arm-waving men, but not for those overlooked, such as the poor man of Corioli, left imprisoned because Coriolanus has simply forgotten his name.

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³ John Powel, *The Assise of Bread. Newly Corrected and Enlarged* (London, 1600), F3r.

⁴ Sir Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch uses the word ‘superfluous’ of the ‘ill humours’ of the citizens, not grain, Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. Bliss, I.i.225 fn.