

Words Fail: Menenius Agrippa in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

Menenius Agrippa plays a significant supporting role in Shakespeare's final tragedy, *Coriolanus* (c. 1608). While much scholarly attention has focused on the influence of Livy and, even more so, Plutarch (specifically through the iconic Sir Thomas North translation of 1579) as sources and on the fable of the Belly and the Limbs that Menenius tells the angry plebeians of Rome, this character's other utterances in the play have often gone unnoticed. In this paper, I shall examine not only Shakespeare's treatment of Menenius Agrippa's retelling of the famous fable in Act 1, but also his counsel for Coriolanus in Act 3 and his attempt to dissuade the disaffected warrior from attacking Rome in Act 5. Far from the being the eloquent but rather remote presence from Livy and Plutarch, Shakespeare's Menenius Agrippa emerges as an important secondary figure with a wit and personality of his own. Possessing a much greater presence in the play than in either Livy or Plutarch, he is an even more articulate and politically astute speaker than he is in the ancient sources. Even so, he is less able to achieve desired change with his speeches. He becomes both a meditation on the power and the limits of words and a testament to the playwright's gift for character creation and amplification from sources.

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