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Parallel lives in contrast: Scars in the Roman Republic versus English hereditary monarchy

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Abstract Scars are a visible part of the political forum in the Roman Republic and in English hereditary monarchy. Coriolanus's scars are celebrated by Romans in William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*; in contrast, an absent record of King Richard II's skin ever breaking is part of the collective fiction of hereditary monarchy in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. For democracy in Rome, the symbology of scarring may be a practical element in ratifying the office of the consul: as a reminder of Rome's experience with the Tarquin kings they had expelled and to avoid the concentration of power in any one man. Consuls would serve only one year, and there were two consuls each year. Scars demonstrated that these politicians were not gods like kings wished to be. In parallel, scar-free, impenetrable skin preserves King Richard II's symbolism as an anointed monarch. Henry Bolingbroke and his son, Prince Hal and future Henry V, face the psychologic and political consequences of stripping the kingship of this aura, by demonstrating that a king's skin can be penetrated on the battlefield by any of his subjects.

Introduction

> Roman General Coriolanus:
>
> Show them the unaching scars which I should hide,
>
> As if I had received them for the hire
>
> Of their breath only!
>
> —Act II, scene ii, lines 176-179[1]

These are words spoken in a community where scars on exposed skin convey political authority, much like the prenominal "Dr." or postnominal "M.D." conveys scientific authority today; yet research today in dermatology and plastic surgery aims to reduce scarring. These fields have recently shown that fibrosis disrupting original tissue architecture can be attenuated in mice with a stromal-derived factor 1 (SDF1) genetic deletion.[2,3] In the preceding quote, the common people of Rome demand to see a politician's scars—a critical ceremonial act before one of republican Rome's generals, Coriolanus (circa late 6th through early 5th centuries B.C.), is entrusted with the highest executive office in Rome.

Celebrity in republican Rome

Regarded as a paradigm of political organization, the Roman Republic achieves this capacity by absorbing nearly every aspect of life into the political sphere. The Republic survives for about 500 years—twice the lifetime of the United States. Family, courtship, and recreation are channeled into an unending war drive responsible for the Republic's conquest of the Mediterranean world.[4,5] William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* assembles a social milieu of republican Rome for spectators to appreciate. The milieu is an inverted, alternate reality to ours: their celebrity is military glory; the crowds

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roar for Coriolanus to showcase his scars at the capitol's front steps.

Contrary to when families urged their children to enter the clergy at the height of the Catholic Church centuries later, Coriolanus's wife wishes for their son to become a military man. In parallel, Coriolanus's mother expresses her preference for Coriolanus to die honorably on the battlefield rather than for Coriolanus to retire from active duty:

> Volumina: … Hear me
> profess sincerely: had I a dozen sons, each in my
> love alike and none less dear than thine and my
> good Martius [Coriolanus], I had rather had eleven die nobly
> for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out
> of action (1.3.22-29).[1]

The typical path to the top executive position of Rome, the two consulships—each with a term limit of one year to avoid the one-man rule of Rome's past Tarquin kings—was through successful military command as a general. American presidents, in comparison, typically gain experience in Congress before being elected to their analogous executive position. Without the annual Superbowl of American football, the central organizing feature of Roman life, responsible for the Republic's unparalleled political participation, was the promise of political standing through war. They need not be born into the few hundred families of the patrician aristocracy to become consul.[17] This was the innovation of the Republic: incremental gains from continued pressure by the common people had resulted in the abolishment of many of the special privileges patrician aristocrats enjoyed. By the fourth century BCE, families from both patricians and plebians, the common people, had attained consulship.[6] While Roman men were perpetually deployed on long military campaigns, the women of the play, represented by Coriolanus's mother and wife, remain politically productive by grooming their sons with military ambition and temperament.

Roman celebrity is this concoction of military glory and political office. Successful generals were surrounded by this aura, had scars to showcase, and were closely followed for news of their military campaigns by the Roman people. When Coriolanus refuses to present his wounds to the Roman people, the plebians accuse him of not having scars at all. As much of a cultural anachronism as it may seem, empirical proof of scarring may be fiercely practical of Romans to demand: a smoking gun that the body has been cut open—to merit their votes—and for the officer to not have simply commanded their common people from the comfort of a plush tent; each political stakeholder in Rome, as well as Coriolanus himself, needs to recognize that Coriolanus is not a god, that his skin does break, and that he is accountable to the "low-born" of a republic; his pressed, patrician clothing does tear, dirt does etch into the creases of his face, and his teeth do go bad in war like the common people. In comparison, when SDF1 knock-out mice with enhanced tissue regeneration and wild-type mice that scar are placed in parabiosis: their surgically connected circulatory systems result in fibrotic scarring of both mice. The architecture of pilosebaceous units, glands, and adipose tissue does not return. Fundamentally, the Roman people ask that Coriolanus be in parabiosis with them so that he may scar over his joints, too, in a constant reminder that he is a descendant of plebian ancestors as well.[20] Coriolanus has only experienced upward mobility to these political heights through the incremental plebian victories in Roman politics.

Parallel life in contrast: Richard II

Whereas Coriolanus is bred too rigid to accommodate the democratic rhetoric of a republic and display his scars, King Richard II's (1367-1400) infallible belief in his own divine nature and invincibility persuades his subjects in a monarchy that he is the legitimate ruler. Democracy rejects Coriolanus, who compares plebian representation in government to allowing "crows [plebians] to peck the eagles [patricians]":

> Coriolanus: … Thus we debase
> The nature of our seats and make the rabble
> Call our cares fears, which will in time
> Break ope the locks o' th' Senate and bring in
> The crows to peck the eagles (3.1.173-177).[1]

The people of England, under a monarchic regime, in contrast, have become accustomed to rulers "born higher" than they. Indeed, the expectation was that the ruler is from the line of prior anointed monarchs. Englishmen, including King Richard himself, believed that Richard can summon angels to the battlefield—before steel ever penetrates his skin:

> Richard II: … To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,
>
> God for His Richard hath in heavenly pay
> A glorious angel. Then, if angels fight,
> Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right (3.2.61-63).[7]

To wound Richard II was to strip the kingship of this sacred aura, suggesting that Richard was but a man and that regicide, the murder of a king, would not invoke biblical punishment. When Camillo in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* is ordered to kill the king, Camilo reflects that even "villains" and evildoers dared not touch a king (1.2.429-433).[18]

A King's aura in English feudal monarchy

To avoid regicide after defeating Richard's army, Henry Bolingbroke (1367-1413), Richard II's cousin, ensures Richard does not die resisting capture or commit suicide on the way back to London. Bolingbroke warily proceeds as if "I [were] rain / My waters—on the earth and not on him"

(3.3.61-62).[7] Bolingbroke painstakingly takes every parliamentary measure to have Richard abdicate the throne through parliamentary procedure and speaks like an attorney: "Henry Bolingbroke [he speaks in the third person] / On both his knees doth kiss King Richard's hand / And sends allegiance and true faith of heart / To his most royal person ..." (3.3.36-39).[78] Bolingbroke even publicly commits himself to a pilgrimage to the holy land for legitimacy. Bolingbroke, named after Bolingbroke Castle, had utterly "broke" the aura of an anointed king. He gives other nobles precedent, fueling the rebellions of Northumberland and Hotspur in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part* 1. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, asks if God is punishing him with his son's behavior; in *Henry IV, Part 2*, he asks God for forgiveness on his deathbed, reflecting that "all my reign hath been but as a scene / Acting that argument"—that "argument" in dismantling the fiction of the holy monarch (4.3.355-356).[19] Bolingbroke's son, Henry V (1386-1422), also known as Prince Hal, inherits rebellion and the psychological anguish of constantly having to prove he is legitimate to the English people. Severely outnumbered in the Battle of Agincourt against the French, Henry V prays, "imploring pardon" from God: "Not today, O Lord, O, not today, think not upon the fault / My father made in compassing the crown!" (4.1.303-305).[9] Here, Henry V expresses his private guilt that he is not a true prince, and that England "sing[s] still for Richard's soul" (4.1.313).

Richard II's deposition does not fade easily in collective memory. Richard's over-life-sized portrait in Westminster Abbey is the earliest painted portrait of an English monarch, dating to 1395 (Figure 1).[10] It currently hangs on a pillar near the west door in the nave of the abbey.[11] Painted on six oak panels with a linseed oil medium, the portrait depicts Richard, holding an orb and scepter, seated in the Coronation Chair. According to a friar writing at the time, Richard would sit quietly at the throne after festival dinners until evening prayer, expecting the bearer of his gaze to kneel.[12,13] The painting background is gilded with gold, much like Richard is gilded with divinity. Used in religious paintings of the period, gold is pounded into thin square leaves and flows from the background into Richard's crown. The underlying fabric of Richard and the painting, however, is a human body and wooden panels susceptible to warp, respectively. Richard's hair, before stucco (an ornamental plaster mix) restoration, was also painted in gold, flowing from the gilded crown.[14] Candlelight illuminating the portrait would reflect off the punched and textured gold, contributing to its glow. Richard spent significant amounts of time tending to his appearance, ironically, through hand mirrors also gilded with gold.[8]

Scarring: The optics

In *Richard II*, tasked to read an inventory of his crimes for parliamentary theater, Richard looks into a hand mirror before shattering it on the ground:

Fig. 1 Richard II's portrait, ca 1395, on six oak panels, in present frame, from the 19th century. Reproduced with permission from Westminster Abbey/Dean & Chapter.[16]

> Richard II: Give me the glass, and therein will I read.
>
> No deeper wrinkles yet? hath sorrow struck
>
> So many blows upon this face of mine,
>
> And made no deeper wounds? O flatt'ring glass (4.1.287-290).[7]

This scene captures Richard in a moment where his limitations as a man dawn on him. To England, King Richard II can summon angels and deflect steel upon his skin; his portrait depicts a worry-free face, reflecting a lifetime of flattery reinforcing this fiction. The psychological weight of this crisis breaks Richard. Richard's reflection has never revealed a blemish or wrinkle because his golden mirrors have always borne this larger-than-life, gilded portrait. It is Henry Bolingbroke in *Henry IV Part* 2 that utters the Shakespearean adage, "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," not Richard II (3.1.31).[19] Coriolanus's life in the Roman Republic serves as

a foil; his mother rejoices that a portrait of Coriolanus would render his scarring visible:

> Volumina: True? Pow waw! …
>
> … There will
> be large cicatrices to show the people when he
> shall stand for his place (2.1.147-154).[1]

Under their respective political regimes, the people of republican Rome and of feudal England request different portraits of their rulers. Coriolanus's refusal to present his scars to the republic triggers his rejection by the Roman people, who ask consuls to demonstrate they are not gods like kings wish to be, whereas Richard II's scar-free skin only strengthens his sacred iconography to England. Richard discovers only too late that his skin does give in to steel. In the aftermath, Henry Bolingbroke and Prince Hal must face the sequelae of regicide that continues to unfold generations after having deposed King Richard, after having exposed an anointed king to a trial of the "mortal coil" against steel, which is a trial from which "no [mortal] traveler returns."[15]

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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