

Coriolanus

Act I, sc. 1 (line 32 - intercut)

MENENIUS

I tell you, friends, most charitable care
Have the patricians of you. For your wants,
Your suffering in this dearth, you may as well
Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them
Against the Roman state, whose course will on
The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs
Of more strong link asunder than can ever
Appear in your impediment. For the dearth,
The gods, not the patricians, make it, and
Your knees to them, not arms, must help. Alack,
You are transported by calamity
Thither where more attends you, and you slander
The helms o' the state, who care for you like fathers,
When you curse them as enemies.

First Citizen

Care for us! True, indeed! They ne'er cared for us yet: suffer us to famish, and their store-houses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily, to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love they bear us.

MENENIUS

Either you must
Confess yourselves wondrous malicious,
Or be accused of folly. I shall tell you

A pretty tale: it may be you have heard it;
But, since it serves my purpose, I will venture
To stale 't a little more.

First Citizen

Well, I'll hear it, sir: yet you must not think to fob off our disgrace with a tale: but, an 't please you, deliver.

MENENIUS

There was a time when all the body's members
Rebell'd against the belly, thus accused it:
That only like a gulf it did remain
I' the midst o' the body, idle and unactive,
Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing
Like labour with the rest, where the other instruments
Did see and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel,
And, mutually participate, did minister
Unto the appetite and affection common
Of the whole body. The belly answer'd--

First Citizen

Well, sir, what answer made the belly?

MENENIUS

Sir, I shall tell you. With a kind of smile,
Which ne'er came from the lungs, but even thus--
For, look you, I may make the belly smile
As well as speak--it tauntingly replied
To the discontented members, the mutinous parts
That envied his receipt; even so most fitly

As you malign our senators for that

They are not such as you.

First Citizen

*Your belly's answer? What!
The kingly-crowned head, the vigilant eye,
The counsellor heart, the arm our soldier,
Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter.
With other muniments and petty helps
In this our fabric, if that they—*

MENENIUS

What then?

'Fore me, this fellow speaks! What then? what then?

First Citizen

*Should by the cormorant belly be restrain'd,
Who is the sink o' the body,--*

MENENIUS

Well, what then?

First Citizen

*The former agents, if they did complain,
What could the belly answer?*

MENENIUS

I will tell you

If you'll bestow a small--of what you have little--

Patience awhile, you'll hear the belly's answer.

First Citizen

Ye're long about it.

MENENIUS

Note me this, good friend;

Your most grave belly was deliberate,

Not rash like his accusers, and thus answer'd:

'True is it, my incorporate friends,' quoth he,

'That I receive the general food at first,
Which you do live upon; and fit it is,
Because I am the store-house and the shop
Of the whole body: but, if you do remember,
I send it through the rivers of your blood,
Even to the court, the heart, to the seat o' the brain;
And, through the cranks and offices of man,
The strongest nerves and small inferior veins
From me receive that natural competency
Whereby they live: and though that all at once,
You, my good friends,'--this says the belly, mark me,--

First Citizen
Ay, sir; well, well.

MENENIUS

'Though all at once cannot
See what I do deliver out to each,
Yet I can make my audit up, that all
From me do back receive the flour of all,
And leave me but the bran.' What say you to't?

First Citizen
It was an answer: how apply you this?

MENENIUS

The senators of Rome are this good belly,
And you the mutinous members; for examine
Their counsels and their cares, digest things rightly
Touching the weal o' the common, you shall find

No public benefit which you receive
But it proceeds or comes from them to you
And no way from yourselves. What do you think,
You, the great toe of this assembly?

First Citizen

I the great toe! why the great toe?

MENENIUS

For that, being one o' the lowest, basest, poorest,
Of this most wise rebellion, thou go'st foremost:
Thou rascal, that art worst in blood to run,
Lead'st first to win some vantage.
But make you ready your stiff bats and clubs:
Rome and her rats are at the point of battle;
The one side must have bale.