

Coriolanus abbreviated

Act 1, Scene 1

Humor

Situation: Poor and hungry fifth-century BC Roman plebeians are publicly complaining about the lack of corn allocated to them by the Roman Senate. The Roman Senate is made up of patricians and they set Roman policy. The plebeians are taking their frustration out on Martius, a Roman military hero and the play's lead. Menenius, a gentle man and friend of Martius, enters telling the plebeians that "you might as well strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them against the Roman state." He proceeds to tell them a story.

FIRST CITIZEN: They ne'er cared for us yet: suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain; repeal any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily to restrain the poor.

MENENIUS: I shall tell you an apt tale.

FIRST CITIZEN: Well, I'll hear it, sir; yet you must not think to elude our disgrace with a tale.

Menenius to the First Citizen

There was a time when all the body's parts
Rebelled against the belly, where food starts,
Accusing it, in the body's center,
Idle and stubborn, of holding the bread
While the body's other organs cater
Through mutual participation, led
By the mind, unto the needs of the whole.
The belly said with a smile that its role
As the receiver of the food first and
As the storehouse for the body, does send
It through the streams of your blood to the hand,
The heart, the seat o' th' brain; doth attend
The strongest nerves and smallest veins to give
The parts the nourishment whereby they live.

FIRST CITIZEN: Ay, sir, well, well.

MENENIUS: I can tender up a full account 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. You shall find no public benefit which you receive but it comes from them to you.