

Shakespeare's suppliant: the 'rotten custom' of ancient asylum seeking in *Coriolanus*

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Looking back to the early modern period from the current immigration crisis, this article reads Shakespeare's tragedy Coriolanus as a tragedy of displacement and asylum seeking. It argues that just like theatrical productions today, Shakespeare might have harked back to ancient Greek tragedy as a cultural resource for coming to terms with the challenges of immigration. It traces the possible migrations between the ritual of asylum seeking that was reflected in a number of Greek tragedies including Aeschylus's Hiketides, the earliest surviving play about refugees from the fifth century BCE, and Shakespeare's Coriolanus. In this respect, this article is part of the current critical re-evaluation of the relations between Shakespeare's work and ancient Greek tragedy. It places Coriolanus into the intertextual and intermedial hiketeia rhizome, in which one transmission line from Greek tragedy via Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Plutarch, Amyot, and North to Shakespeare can be corroborated by evidence, while other lines are more uncertain. Asking whether hiketeia, the ancient verbal and gestural repertoire of a stranger pleading for protection and integration into the polis, is only present as 'rotten custom' in Shakespeare's tragedy, as a trace of cultural history without any considerable force in the new context, the article explores the paradoxical negotiation of displacement in Coriolanus, where both the exiled and the exiler become suppliants. It proposes that Shakespeare's transformative reactivation of hiketeia as a theatrically, affectively, and

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politically potent form created an opportunity to negotiate the immigration crisis in Jacobean England.

This article reads Shakespeare's late, perhaps last, tragedy *Coriolanus* (1609) as a tragedy of displacement. It is part of a re-examination of Shakespeare's play from the perspective of the current situation in which the number of refugees who seek asylum in Europe and the US has led to intense debates. As Ruben Espinosa and David Ruitter put it in the introduction to their collection *Shakespeare and Immigration*, the 'clearly present issue of immigration affects current readings and readers of Shakespeare's work. It is the urgency of our time' which shapes our look back to his plays and their context (2014: 6). This article argues that Shakespeare might have done something similar when responding to the urgency of his time, which was characterized by high numbers of European refugees, migrants from other parts of the British Isles, as well as English people newly arrived in London: he might have turned to ancient Greek tragedy as a model for his own dramatic engagement with asylum seeking. The ancient ritual of *hiketeia*, the pleading of a stranger for protection and integration into the polis, was reflected in a number of Greek tragedies including Aeschylus's *Hiketides* (463 BCE),¹ usually translated as *Suppliants* or *Suppliant Women*, the earliest surviving play about refugees. Greek tragedy was part of an interdisciplinary, transversal negotiation of immigration in Athens that included laws, quasilegal practices, religious and political customs, and cultural assumptions about the proper engagement with strangers that were inherited from myth and Homer's portrayals of supplication (Naiden 2006: 18–25).²

At Shakespeare's time, a network of texts existed that together constituted the knowledge of ancient *hiketeia*.³ Addressing issues of migration and reintegration,

¹ For the open question regarding the most probable date of the first performance, see Sommerstein (2019: 40–44). Sommerstein concludes that 'the year 463 is thus slightly more likely as the date of *Supp.* than any other, but it is very far from certain' (ibid.: 42).

² As F.S. Naiden points out, supplication 'operated under an umbrella that included Athenian laws, Assembly decrees, and treatises but also included Homeric maxims about enemies and Greek commonplaces about oaths' (2006: 183).

³ This network of texts was part of a larger net of supplication literature, which linked scenes of asylum seeking to other forms of pleading. As Leah Whittington points out in her study *Renaissance Suppliants*, it was 'a web of loosely affiliated supplicatory episodes' in 'a network of inherited classical texts', on which Renaissance authors drew for various genres (Whittington 2016: 13). Whittington also discusses the contributions of medieval plays and performances to this web. Renaissance playwrights fused classical plays with the theatrical tradition inherited from the morality plays that had established a gestural repertoire of supplication in a Christian context, usually a pleading for absolution from sin (Whittington 2016: 122–27). In what follows, my reading of *Coriolanus* as a tragedy of displacement and asylum seeking builds on, but also departs from Whittington's reading of the play in the context of the Renaissance culture of pleading, where supplication was

Renaissance authors further contributed to this intertextual web of immigration literature that stretches from Antiquity to today. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Douglas Lanier has theorized such processes of cultural transmission and adaptation as a rhizomatic network that does not have a clear centre, origin, or root, and instead should be understood as ‘a horizontal, decentered multiplicity of subterranean roots that cross each other, bifurcating and recombining, breaking off and restarting’ (Lanier 2014: 28).⁴ Lanier’s argument that the rhizome ‘may be entered at any point, and there is no *a priori* path through its web of connections’ (ibid.: 29) is relevant for our academic task of identifying intertextual connections and of rereading particular texts through such links. For my interest in *Coriolanus* as a tragedy of displacement and asylum seeking, it is important to note that all extant tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, including Aeschylus’s *Hiketides*, were in circulation in England in Latin translation from the mid-sixteenth century onwards (Demetriou and Pollard 2017: 12; see also Mund-Dopchie 1984). We also know that Shakespeare and his contemporaries worked with sources such as Plutarch’s writings that circumspectly reflected the Greek immigration tragedies and the ancient code of *hiketeia*. While the relation between Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* and Plutarch has been corroborated by evidence in recent research, the path between *Coriolanus* and particular Greek tragedies, for instance Aeschylus’s *Suppliants*, is more indirect, winding through various nodes in the intertextual *hiketeia* rhizome, and little explored in academic criticism.

As the first extant asylum tragedy, *The Suppliants* itself was written in response to large-scale immigration to Athens after the Persian Wars and it used a story of the past, a Bronze Age myth, to negotiate topical concerns (Bakewell 2013: 3, 17). It chronicles the arrival of Danaos and his fifty daughters in Argos, pleading for protection as they flee from forced marriages to their Egyptian cousins. Juxtaposing the

‘a ubiquitous social ritual, designed to appease anger and conciliate parties at odds’ (2016: 121). Whittington examines the women’s supplication as a process of tragic reconciliation with a specific ‘affective logic’ (2016: 144) and does not discuss *Coriolanus*’s own supplication at Aufidius’s hearth.

⁴ Lanier (2014) develops this concept for the study of Shakespeare adaptations. In this journal, Marchella Ward recently made a similar suggestion that Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory should be employed to replace the linear, passive notion of ‘classical reception’. Assemblage also allows, like the rhizome, to account for individual and often achronological reading strategies used by particular readers that shape their perception of intertextual relations: ‘assemblage-thinking does not attempt to establish a fixed relationship between two texts; rather, by accepting that a text is essentially unattributable, it focusses on the process by which the assemblage of multiple potential relationships available within a text is focalized, from a particularly situated point of view, in order to inscribe it within a particular relationship’ (Ward 2019: 510). Ward emphasizes that the early modern engagement with Greek tragedy has to be understood ‘horizontally as well as vertically’, as Shakespeare drew not only on classical texts he read, saw performed or knew through other sources, but also on early modern translations, adaptations, and quotations of Greek tragedy or allusions to the plays (ibid.: 515).

needs of the asylum seekers with the potential dangers that the refugees pose for the polis, whose inhabitants have to decide democratically about the supplication, the play focuses on the political, psychological, and religious force that rituals of seeking asylum had in ancient Greece.⁵ Showing ‘a democratic city taking over and supervising an aristocratic custom’ that was traditionally an encounter between two individuals (Bakewell 2013: 32), Aeschylus developed ‘a sophisticated, “political” version of a primitive and ancient social institution’ (Gould 1973: 32) that spoke to the current situation. Aeschylus’s theatrical negotiation of *hiketeia* was taken up in many later Greek tragedies, chiefly Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, Euripides’s *Hiketides* and *The Children of Heracles*, and Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*. They explored and shaped the collective Athenian identity and legitimized Athens’ imperialism via depictions of the generous acceptance of asylum seekers (Grethlein 2003: 49–107 and passim; Tzanetou 2012: 1, 17 and passim). Among them, Aeschylus’s *Suppliants* is closest to the actual practices of supplication in Athens, as it shows how the Assembly debates and decides about a politically hazardous supplication (Tzanetou 2012: 13).

In the current European and US American preoccupation with migration, a number of Greek tragedies have been revived. Most prominently, Aeschylus’s *Suppliants* was staged in several countries including the UK, USA, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, and Germany, also in David Greig’s free translation *The Suppliant Women* (2016) and Elfriede Jelinek’s postdramatic rewriting *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (*The Charges*, 2013), which was written in response to the deportation of refugees after they had claimed asylum in a Viennese church.⁶ Euripides’s *Trojan Women* has also frequently been staged and adapted in the wake of the ‘migration crisis’. For instance, in several performances that use applied theatre for political as well as therapeutic work, The Trojan Women Project has organized workshops with Syrian refugees since 2013 in Jordan and the UK. From these workshops, it has developed several stage and film versions of Euripides’s *Trojan Women* to explore the situation of the refugees, among them a UK tour of *Queens of Syria* (2016) and a documentary film with the same title (2014), as well as the Scottish production *The Trojans* (2019) and its film version (2020). These brief examples demonstrate that foundational European plays such as *The Suppliants* and *The Trojan Women* offer a historical perspective for current debates over immigration policies and the ‘symbolic system by which we recognise [...] migrants and migration’, as Emma Cox puts it (Cox 2014: 10): ‘a “mythopoetics” of migration’ that consists of the ‘accumulation of visions of foreignness that have collided in the globalised, bureaucratized present’ (Cox 2014: 10). This article is interested in how we can place Shakespeare’s work in the mythopoetics of the *hiketeia* rhizome. It argues that in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, when procedures of immigration became increasingly bureaucratized, Shakespeare might have harked back

⁵ Bakewell argues that the Danaids are accepted as metics and thus granted a status between foreigner and citizen (2013: 5).

⁶ See Menke and Vogel (2018) and Wilmer (2018: 29–40) for an account of the theatre of migration modelled on *The Suppliants*.

to the ancient portrayal of asylum seeking for reasons that are in some respects comparable to our current reinterpretation of ancient *hiketeia* plays.

In discussing the potential reactivation of ancient *hiketeia* in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, this article is part of a current critical re-evaluation regarding the relations between early modern drama and ancient Greek plays. For a long time, there did not seem to be any link between what may be the most famous epochs of tragedy. Scholars argued that Shakespeare read neither Greek tragedy nor Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE). For instance, A. D. Nuttall concluded in 2004 '[t]hat Shakespeare was cut off from Greek poetry and drama is probably a bleak truth we should accept' (Nuttall 2004: 10). When critics identified surprising similarities between Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, these parallels were explained with rather elusive concepts like 'action at a distance' and a 'strange relationship', or attributed to Shakespeare's knowledge of Seneca (Nuttall 2004; Silk 2004). Recently, however, this longstanding critical consensus has been challenged, as alternative lines of transmission have become increasingly plausible. For example, critics have shown that Greek tragedies were read in early modern England in the original Greek as well as Latin and English translations, which inspired theatrical productions and literary adaptations (Kenward 2016: 174; Demetriou and Pollard 2017: 7, 13; Pollard 2017: 2). As Tania Demetriou and Tanya Pollard have shown in a special issue of this journal on Homer and Greek Tragedy in Early Modern England's Theatres, 'Attic drama, which had been circulating in multiple forms within and beyond the scholar's study, officially entered the realm of the English book trade near the end of the [sixteenth] century, as part of its general turn towards Greek' (Demetriou and Pollard 2017: 15). What is more, Aristotle's *Poetics* was available in Latin and Greek versions as well as in Italian commentaries, thus countering the myth that the text was mostly forgotten in Renaissance Europe (Lazarus 2016).⁷ English early modern authors could also gather knowledge about Greek tragedy from intermediary sources such as Plutarch's writings (Demetriou and Pollard 2017; Whittington 2016; 2017). Michael Lazarus recently argued that Edward VI received a Latin translation of Sophocles's plays from Protestant scholars in Wittenberg, who 'found in Greek tragedy the lived experience of war and confessional schism, an ancient mirror of the political and theological turbulence of the 1540s' (Lazarus 2020: 35). This example is particularly interesting for my concern with refuge, since the translation was dedicated to Edward as the only Protestant monarch capable of providing shelter to Protestant refugees at the time. As Lazarus notes, the Sophocles translation 'traveled through networks of Continental refugees recently arrived in England' to the King (ibid.: 53).⁸

⁷ See also Sarah Dewar-Watson's (2018) study *Shakespeare's Poetics: Aristotle and Anglo-Italian Renaissance Genres*, which shows that Shakespeare was an active participant in early modern responses to Aristotelian poeology.

⁸ Lazarus (2020) also discusses how Melanchthon described Edward VI's death and Mary I's subsequent return to Catholicism in terms of Greek tragedy, which 'becomes a narrative heuristic for real historical events' (56). Despite the sudden reversal of fortune, 'in

Wittenberg's model of tragedy was received across Protestant Europe as a source of inspiration for translations, poetologies, and new plays (ibid.: 45).

Because of these new insights into the circulation of Greek plays and Aristotle's *Poetics* in early modern England, Richard Halpern states in the *Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy* that '[t]he whole question of Shakespeare and the Greeks is currently up for re-evaluation, while at the same time irrefutable proof of such influence remains difficult to pin down' (Halpern 2016: 23). In this journal, Demetriou and Pollard concluded more optimistically: 'Pursuing the influence of Homer and the Greek tragedians on early modern commercial dramatists is not, then, such a quixotic project after all' (Demetriou and Pollard 2017: 18). Quite on the contrary, 'ignoring their visibility perpetuates an incomplete understanding of the period's literary development' (ibid.: 18). By tracing one particular aspect of tragedy's transhistorical and transcultural travels, namely the migration of ancient forms of asylum seeking from Greek tragedy to the early modern stage, my article contributes to this ongoing project. Exploring the affordances of *hiketeia* on the early modern stage, it pursues a new formalist interest in the portability of a form that once had considerable theatrical, religious, and political force.⁹ The reactivation of *hiketeia* on the early modern stage thus exemplifies what Bruce Smith has called the 'confluence' of Greek and early modern drama (Smith 1988: 6), in which 'early modern English playwrights developed new forms of theatrical power [...] through imagined conversations and collaborations with newly visible Greek plays' (Pollard 2017: 20). This article asks what theatrical power Shakespeare's suppliants could draw from the ancient ritual of asylum seeking.

Shakespeare's tragedy of displacement depicts the early days of imperialist Rome, when, historically speaking, rituals of supplication were still closely modelled on the Greek antecedent, before Rome developed distinctive innovations (Naiden 2006: 220–21). The play shows how the extraordinary warrior Caius Martius excels in war and is given the honorary name 'Coriolanus' after having conquered Corioles. Back in Rome, he is not elected as consul, and he is eventually banished by his people. He joins the enemy's army and returns to destroy Rome. After several attempts to establish peace with Coriolanus fail, it is a delegation of Roman women which finally succeeds and averts the imminent military threat. The scenes of Coriolanus's arrival in the sphere of his enemies after he was banished and the later supplications by the Romans bear striking resemblances to the scenes of ancient Greek supplication as staged in *The Suppliants* and the subsequent asylum tragedies. While there is as yet no proof of Shakespeare's knowledge of Greek plays, the connection between ancient suppliants and Shakespeare's tragedy has been traced to his Greek and Roman sources for *Coriolanus*, chiefly to Plutarch's *Bioi paralleloi* (96 CE). Following Christopher Pelling's groundbreaking work, North's Plutarch is now used as a

the brief six years of Edward's reign, Wittenberg's tragedy left a permanent mark on the literary history of England and the Continent alike', according to Lazarus (57).

⁹ See Levine's (2017) study on the foundational questions regarding the portability and affordances of both aesthetic and social forms.

‘largely unexplored source for Shakespeare’s mediated contact with Homer and Greek tragedy’ (Miola 2016: 12). Leah Whittington draws attention to the fact that Plutarch not only read Greek tragedies, but saw them performed, and that he therefore included body movements and gestures derived from tragedy in his *Parallel Lives*. This makes Plutarch particularly important for the transmission lines between Greek *hiketeia* plays and their early modern responses, ‘as a mediator of the performative aspects of drama, especially the awareness of theatre as a bodily medium in which the complexity of tragic action is often best rendered in stage gesture’ (Whittington 2017: 139). Following the transmission line of the ancient Greek ritual to Shakespeare’s drama via Plutarch highlights how transcultural, transgeneric, and transmedial the rhizome of *hiketeia* literature is. Plutarch himself described early Rome from the point of view of a Greek ethnographer and drew on the historiography of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (Burrow 2013: 203–05). The most famous and influential Renaissance translation of Plutarch’s biographies was Jacques Amyot’s scholarly French version, *Vies parallèles des hommes illustres* (1559/1567), which in turn was translated and adapted for the English early modern context in Thomas North’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579), which Shakespeare used to write *Coriolanus*.¹⁰ Through this complex transmission process, Shakespeare’s tragedy harks back to the verbal and gestural rituals of *hiketeia*, which prominently influenced, and were shaped by, ancient Greek tragedy including Aeschylus’s *Suppliants*.

In ancient Greece, the ritual of seeking asylum was performed through the use of codified gestures, rhetoric, and specific objects (Gödde 2000: 24–30). From the various practices that can be inferred from texts and visual presentations, four typical steps can be identified that are particularly prevalent in tragedy and epic (Naiden 2006: 21). In the first step, the asylum seeker raised their hands, and, carrying an olive branch wrapped in wool that was called *hiketēria* and functioned as a ‘distress signal’ (Naiden 2006: 43), kneeled next to an altar, hearth, or the statue of a god. However, once the suppliants ‘enter upon the ritual of supplication, they have entered into the world of politics, for the god and his altar are only the intermediary in the transaction between suppliant and polis’ (Zeitlin 1992: 210). Therefore, in the next step, suppliants had to address the political leader of the respective community. Here, it was important to establish physical contact. Most often, the asylum seeker would embrace the knees of the supplicandus while kneeling before him, thus highlighting the appeal’s urgency (Naiden 2006: 44), or touch his chin or hand. Rhetorically, the *hiketētai* related their life story and emphasized their need to elicit compassion, asked for protection with codified expressions, and, as a last resort that comes close to blackmail, might have threatened suicide, thus putting considerable pressure on the

¹⁰ To an unusual degree, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* relies on one single source, North’s Plutarch (most probably on the 1595 edition), but might have used other versions of the Coriolanus legend, too, chiefly Titus Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*, Lucius Annaeus Florus’s *Epitome Bellorum Omnium Annorum DCC*, and Virgil’s *Aeneis* (Holland 2013: 25–49), which are, however, less interested in the ritual of *hiketeia*.

political leader to avoid such a pollution of the sacred space (Gödde 2000: 33, 181; see also Naiden 2006: 7). In particular, the threat of suicide demonstrated the power of the (ostensibly) inferior, whose supplication in this moment is closer to an aggressive demand than a modest plea. In this respect, the olive branches that demonstrate purity and the need for protection also symbolize the destructiveness of a weapon (Gödde 2000: 182). Importantly, however, only this first part of the encounter between the asylum seeker and the community that they addressed was regulated by ritual: the reaction—and hence, the outcome—was unregulated and had to be negotiated by the parties involved in each case (*ibid.*: 24). In this respect, despite the customs of *hiketeia* and its regulation as a quasilegal practice, ‘every act of supplication is new, every suppliant starts afresh’ (Naiden 2006: 295) because ‘there is an element of indeterminacy written into the paradigmatic suppliant script’ (Whittington 2016: 17). Given the mutual reinforcement of verbal and physical expression, the performative interplay of scriptedness and improvisation and the underlying conflict that is often a matter of life and death, supplication is powerful drama waiting to happen.

In Shakespeare’s tragedy, the issue of exile and asylum seeking becomes prominent when the Roman people banish Coriolanus. The banishment scene is famous for the protagonist’s highly unusual megalomaniac reaction. In a dramatically excessive escalation, which critics have described as ‘peripety-atop-peripety’ (Burke 1966: 191), the banished Coriolanus himself banishes the Romans, thus establishing a paradoxical notion of displacement:¹¹

Brutus: There’s no more to be said, but he is banished
 As enemy to the people and his country.
 It shall be so.

All Citizens: It shall be so, it shall be so!

Coriolanus: You common cry of curs whose breath I hate
 As reek o’th’ rotten fens, whose loves I prize
 As the dead carcasses of unburied men,
 That do corrupt my air, I banish you.
 And here remain with your uncertainty!
 Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts;
 Your enemies with nodding of their plumes
 Fan you into despair! Have the power still
 To banish your defenders till at length
 Your ignorance – which finds not till it feels,
 Making but reservation of yourselves,
 Still your own foes – deliver you as most
 Abated captives to some nation
 That won you without blows! Despising

¹¹ The following reading of the play as *hiketeia* tragedy draws on, reformulates and extends the arguments made in Wald (2018). I have added references in the subsequent paragraphs to indicate where I take up my earlier observations.

For you the city, thus I turn my back.
There is a world elsewhere. (3.3.116–34)

This mutual banishment opens up a split perspective, making either Coriolanus an exile in need of shelter and protection or turning the Romans themselves into exiles, because Coriolanus now seems to embody Rome. The play's action and its political stance thus become ambivalent through two contradictory actions of displacement, both exerted in attempts at political restitution. Shakespeare here continues a generic experiment which he had started in his earlier historical tragedies (Mahler 2005: 182), which likewise explore the epistemic inconsistencies of the doubled, contradictory action of political restitution (Wald 2018: 143).¹²

This split perspective leads to a paradoxical theatrical setting of epistemic ambiguity. Rome as a setting becomes unstable, uncertain, precarious, because it is now understood as both Rome/home and as a place of exile: is 'the despised city' still Rome without its hero? Or do audiences witness the semantic and dramaturgic 'transformation of Rome into a place of exile,' as Jane Kingsley-Smith argues (2003: 142)? Does Coriolanus now embody Rome, and does he export it to 'a world elsewhere'? What does such an export mean not only for Rome itself, but also for the space outside Rome, the sphere of the Volsces? Initially, the action conforms to the perspective of the peoples' tribunes and traces Coriolanus's migration into the uncertain space of his exile. The first scene which shows Coriolanus outside Rome is the liminal moment when he is about to enter the house of his enemy Aufidius. In his only soliloquy of the entire play, Coriolanus reflects on the imminent transgression, which will either lead to his death or to his integration into the enemy's community: 'I'll enter. If he [Aufidius] slay me/He does fair justice; if he give me way,/I'll do his country service' (4.4.24–26) (Wald 2018: 143–144).

The precise dramaturgical structure of this arrival of a stranger can be better understood if we take into account the ancient Greek conventions of *hiketeia*, which Shakespeare adopted from North's Plutarch (Whittington 2017). *Hiketeia* (supplication), *hikesia* (suppliant prayer), and *hiketēs* (suppliant) are derivatives of the ancient Greek verbs *hiketeuein*, 'to implore', and *hikō/hikneomai*, which means 'to approach' or 'to come to' (Gödde 2018: 30). As Whittington points out, '[i]n this radical sense a suppliant is someone who arrives, a newcomer whose entrance inaugurates a meeting

¹² Shakespeare's tragedies are generally characterized by multiple perspectives, as Paul Kottmann points out: 'The action of a Shakespearean drama is invariably motivated by the non-coincidence of these multiple points of view—the sheer lack of an objective view of subjective stances' (2016: 12). In his study of *Coriolanus*'s performance history, John Ripley comments on the play's 'endemic' technique of creating paradoxes (1998: 13). He argues that due to Jacobean theatre architecture, performances furthered the multi-perceptivity of Shakespeare's writing because viewers observed the action from multiple points of view (ibid.: 1). Given how well Shakespeare knew the performance context as actor and author, we can also assume that theatrical architecture shaped his writing.

or confrontation' (2016: 14).¹³ *Hiketeia* hence is a moment of encounter and conflict, an 'invitation into the unknown' (ibid.: 14) with considerable theatrical potential. As John Gould observes, in ancient Greek culture and drama,

the ξένος, the outsider who does not belong, is a man without a role [...] – one who, in a fundamental sense, does not know how to behave and to whom the members of the group do not know how to behave either: from his point of view, everything is at risk and nothing can be taken for granted; from the point of view of the members of the group he constitutes an unsettling threat who cannot be 'placed' and whose behaviour, therefore, cannot be predicted (1973: 90).

Gould goes on to emphasize how religious rituals and social conventions such as the right to hospitality and *hiketeia* order and regulate the politically risky moment of the stranger's arrival, for instance by clarifying the stranger's ancestry and by ultimately giving the dislocated a new home (Wald 2018: 145).

Gould's description indicates how theatrically productive such an encounter is, and Greek tragedy recurrently explores this transitional moment. For Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, the specific theatrical and social convention is captured in Coriolanus's first sentence after entering Aufidius's house: 'A goodly house. The feast smells well, but I/Appear not like a guest' (4.5.5–6). 'I appear not like a guest' refers to the fact that Coriolanus was not invited to the banquet and that his dishevelled and impoverished appearance falls short of any expectations for a guest at this party. Accordingly, the servants take him for a beggar and refuse to let him speak to Aufidius. Further, and more importantly for the question of immigration, the statement self-reflectively clarifies what kind of entry Coriolanus has chosen: he does not appeal to the right to hospitality, but to the ritual of *hiketeia*.¹⁴ While a stranger has to wait at the threshold if they appeal to the right to hospitality, as suppliant they enter the house and place themselves next to the hearth, which functions as the altar of *Zeus hikesios*.¹⁵ The dialogue makes clear that Coriolanus claims just this position:

3 *Servingman*: What have you to do here, fellow? Pray
you avoid the house.

Coriolanus: Let me but stand. I will not hurt your hearth. (4.5.23–25)

¹³ See also Gödde (2000: 26).

¹⁴ Thomas P. Anderson explores the scene in the light of hospitality, notions of friendship, and nationally sanctioned communities. As Anderson notes, the poetic features emphasize the precariousness of arrival: 'The use of enjambment in these lines draws attention to the contrast ("but I") between hospitality's unconditional welcome and Coriolanus's inability to participate unconditionally in the plenitude' (2016: 76).

¹⁵ 'The question of demarcation of roles between stranger and suppliant is one which must arise for the "arrival" when he presents himself for acceptance by a "foreign" community: the choice lies between waiting at the porch to be acknowledged and conducted within or crossing the threshold and adopting the ritual of *hiketeia*' (Gould 1973: 92). See also Gödde (2000: 24).

Shakespeare adopts this procedure from North's Plutarch, where Coriolanus, following the model of Odysseus, 'went directly to Tullus Aufidius house, and when he came thither, he got him up straight to the chimney harthe, and sat him downe, and spake not a worde to any man, his face all muffled over' (Bullough 1964: 527; see *Plutarch's Lives* 1959: 173). However, Shakespeare's version radically questions the conventions of both hospitality and *hiketeia* and thus intensifies the suspense of the precarious arrival scene. In the first act, Aufidius emphasized that his hatred of Coriolanus transgresses all sacred and social rules (Wald 2018: 145–46):

Aufidius: Nor sleep nor sanctuary,
Being naked, sick, nor fane nor Capitol,
The prayers of priests, nor times of sacrifice –
Embargements all of fury – shall lift up
Their rotten privilege and custom 'gainst
My hate to Martius. Where I find him, were it
At home upon my brother's guard, even there,
Against the hospitable canon, would I
Wash my fierce hand in's heart. (1.10.19–27)

This confession highlights that Shakespeare was aware of Graeco-Roman customs and canons including hospitality and sanctuary, and that he used them as a foil for this encounter between Coriolanus and his enemy as well as for the subsequent supplication scenes in which Coriolanus will be supplicandus rather than asylum seeker. In this first activation, Shakespeare's antagonist invokes and explicitly rejects the ancient rituals. Therefore, audiences expect that Aufidius will obey neither the usual procedures of religious and political asylum nor those of hospitality when Coriolanus arrives in Antium. This means Aufidius is no longer bound to all codes which regulate the risky state of exception when a stranger arrives. According to Aufidius, they are 'rotten privilege and custom'. Shakespeare here increases the tension that characterizes any process of *hiketeia*, because 'even as it holds out the promise of bridging gaps and facilitating transitions, supplication always threatens to dissolve and decompose into new forms of conflict or disparity' (Whittington 2016: 18). Here, the ritual force is questioned even before Coriolanus can appeal to his enemies.

The suspense is further heightened because Shakespeare extends the process of Coriolanus's arrival as suppliant in the house of the enemy to an unusual degree when compared to Plutarch's text and to Shakespeare's other banishment plays (Kingsley-Smith 2003: 153). Coriolanus, who has disguised himself, does not reveal his identity despite the twenty-five urgent questions of the Volscians, who aim to identify the 'questionable shape' of the intruder.¹⁶ Even when Coriolanus begins to

¹⁶ Juliane Vogel's observations on the critical quality of all theatrical entrances, where each entrance requires epistemological and formal competences of those who aim to identify the newcomer and to integrate them in a regulated manner, are particularly pertinent to situations of refuge and exile (Vogel 2014: 27–28).

give clues and takes off his disguise, Aufidius does not recognize him (Wald 2018: 146). As Emma Smith remarks, the ‘forty lines of fruitless interrogation seem to identify an unreadability that is in excess of the immediate dramatic situation’ (2016: 98). This ‘excessive unreadability’, I argue, is due to the very risky moment when a stranger arrives. It is only when Coriolanus announces his name that he is identified by his enemy. Yet this identification does not, as would be usual, ease the situation by meeting the hosts’ desire to identify the stranger. Instead, it heightens the conflict, as the stranger’s honorary name marks him as the destroyer of the Volscian city Corioles. Coriolanus in fact emphasizes his past attacks on the Volsces so explicitly that his identification speech has been read as a plea to be murdered in revenge (Wald 2018: 147).¹⁷ This escalation of the dramatic conflict centres on the ambivalent meanings of the Latin term *hostis* and the English *host*, since the potential host is addressed as a former enemy.

Coriolanus reveals his name at the beginning of his longest speech in the play, which Shakespeare modelled closely on North’s Plutarch. The speech adheres to the ancient Greek theatrical semantics of the refugee’s entry: Coriolanus indicates his name, relates his history of banishment from Rome, and asks to be integrated into the Volscian community, offering them military support against Rome in return:

Now this extremity [of Coriolanus’s banishment]
 Hath brought me to thy hearth, not out of hope –
 Mistake me not – to save my life, for, if
 I had feared death, of all the men i’th’ world
 I would have ’voided thee. But in mere spite
 To be full quit of those my banishers
 Stand I before thee here. [...]
 And make my misery serve thy turn. (4.5.80–90)

Coriolanus’s position next to the hearth, the altar of *Zeus hikesios*, evokes the ancient tradition of *hiketeia*. This reference is even more noteworthy as *Coriolanus* is Shakespeare’s only play which uses the word ‘hearth.’¹⁸ Shakespeare’s phrase ‘hath brought me to thy hearth’ does not use the more specific line from Plutarch, where Coriolanus explicitly calls himself *hiketes*, asylum seeker (*Plutarch’s Lives* 1959: 172; see also Ahlrichs 2005: 312; Naiden 2006: 330), because Shakespeare was working with North’s translated expression ‘poore suter’ (Wald 2018: 147–48). ‘This extremitie hath now driven me to come as a poore suter, to take thy chimney harthe’ (Bullough 1964: 528) instead of ‘I have been driven into exile, too, and am become a suppliant (ἰκέτης) at thy hearth [...] I put myself in thy power’ (*Plutarch’s Lives* 1959: 172–75). In Plutarch’s source, Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s *Roman Antiquities*, the supplication is presented in even more clearly ritualistic terms. Here, Coriolanus

¹⁷ Wald (2018: 147). See Calbi (2010: 91) and Kuzner (2007: 174–99).

¹⁸ See Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, 338–81.

became his suppliant (ἰκέτης) by sitting down at his hearth. Then, having related to him the dire straits which had forced him to *take refuge* with his enemies, he begged of him to entertain sentiments of *moderation and humanity toward a suppliant* and no longer to regard as an enemy one who was in his power, nor to exhibit his strength against the unfortunate and the humbled, bearing in mind that the fortunes of men are subject to change. [...] ‘[...] [I]f you have any other purpose concerning me, let loose your resentment at once and grant me the speediest death by *sacrificing the suppliant with your own hand and at your own hearth.*’ (Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1986: 4–7, emphasis mine).

In the process of linguistic and cultural translation from Dionysius of Halicarnassus, where Coriolanus as *hiketes* repeatedly implores the Volscian leader to grant asylum and immunity to him, via Plutarch’s shorter *hiketeia* speech, to Amyot’s and North’s translations, the ancient Greek protocol of seeking asylum has become looser and more oblique (Wald 2018: 148).¹⁹

This raises the question of whether ancient Greek *hiketeia* is indeed only present as ‘rotten privilege and custom’ in Shakespeare’s tragedy, as a trace of cultural history without any considerable theatrical, religious, legal, or political force in the new context. Given the vagueness of this ritual, it is noteworthy how Shakespeare frames the scene. Coriolanus’s speech continues:

I [...]
[...] present
My throat to thee and to thy ancient malice,
Which not to cut would show thee but a fool,
Since I have ever followed thee with hate,
Drawn tuns of blood out of thy country’s breast
And cannot live but to thy shame, unless
It be to do thee service. (4.5.96–103)

Shakespeare’s Coriolanus here connects two forms of *hiketeia*: the political supplication in the domestic sphere next to the hearth and an appeal for clemency from the military opponent (Wald 2018: 149). John Gould has termed these forms ‘domestic supplication’ and ‘supplication of the battlefield’ (Gould 1973: 93–94n100a), with the latter a familiar trope in Homer that could have been an additional source for Shakespeare’s knowledge of *hiketeia* (Naiden 2006: 34).²⁰ This innovative combination of supplication forms comes much closer to the rituality of Plutarch’s arrival scene than North’s translation does. Christopher Pelling has discussed an analogous case in Shakespeare’s earlier Roman tragedy

¹⁹ Peter Riemer argues that Plutarch might have simplified the formalized *hiketeia* of Dionysius of Halicarnassus because only Greek readers would fully have understood the ritual (2004: 222). Ahlrichs (2005: 316) briefly compares the uses of *hiketeia* in Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Plutarch. Regarding the debate over procedures of asylum in early and Republican Rome, see Dreher (2003: 5).

²⁰ Also see Gödde (2000: 37).

Julius Caesar (1599), in which Shakespeare likewise distilled Plutarch's ritual essence from his translated source. Pelling argues: 'It is as if Shakespeare can sense the real Plutarch, [...] even when his translators stray' (Pelling 2009: 268).²¹ As argued above, this sensibility might have to do with the transmedial adaptation from prose to the stage, where Plutarch's theatrical interest in specific gestures and positions could be re-enacted. Shakespeare's remediation for the theatre recovers and heightens the tragic sensibility of Plutarch.

The mutual reinforcement of verbal and body language is crucial for the success of the supplication at the moment of crisis. In this vein, Shakespeare's rhetorical topos 'I present my throat to thee' was probably translated into body language on the early modern stage, just as it has been enacted in recent *Coriolanus* productions, including the Donmar production starring Tom Hiddleston, which was shown in cinemas worldwide, and the film version by Ralph Fiennes, which uses immersive aesthetics to render the dramatic moment when Coriolanus presents his throat, and Aufidius is about to cut it (Wald 2018: 149). Coriolanus's bravery in confronting his enemy is part of the supplication of the battlefield, which does not require—and indeed should avoid—the submissive kneeling that was regarded as unheroic and effeminate (Naiden 2006: 286; Whittington 2016: 1–2). Accordingly, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* emphasizes, 'in mere spite/To be full quit of those my banishers/*Stand I* before thee here' (4.5.84–86). Aufidius as supplicandus in both North and Shakespeare accepts Coriolanus's supplication with the codified gesture of raising him, touching his hand, and sharing his food with him: 'Tullus hearing what he sayed, was a marvelous glad man, and taking him by the hande, he sayed unto him: Stande up, Martius, and bee of good chere, for in profering thy selfe unto us, thou dost us great honour: [...] So he feasted him for that time, and entertained him in the honorablest manner he could' (Bullough 1964: 528). Once more, Plutarch is closer to the ritual structure of the scene than North because Plutarch specifies that Tullus gave Coriolanus his *right* hand, which was an important feature of the ancient ritual (*Plutarch's Lives* 1959: 175; see Naiden 2006: 109–11).

Apart from the theatrical appeal of a ritualized supplication, the 'rotten privilege and custom' of ancient Greek *hiketeia* might also have been attractive to Shakespeare and early moderns because it offered a much more palpable and specific procedure than the ways by which people immigrated to England in the early seventeenth

²¹ Plutarch and Shakespeare might have shared this 'tragic sensibility' because they were both interested in dramatic conflict: 'perhaps we can see how first Plutarch may be adopting a tragic filter for his own presentation of biography and history, then Shakespeare—with a sensibility which is itself informed by the 'tragic tradition' which goes back ultimately to the Greeks—may pick up various of these elements himself and recast them in more directly dramatic form' (Pelling 2009: 266).

century. Shakespeare's lifetime saw an unprecedented influx of Europeans into England, mainly due to the religious persecution of the Reformation, which turned London into 'a multicultural and multi-ethnic metropolis' (Selwood 2010: 2).²² Shakespeare's theatre was located in a neighbourhood with more than 300 immigrants, so '[o]n the way to the theatre audience members would hear and see strangers, and Shakespeare was no doubt aware of their presence, if not well acquainted with some as well' (Oldenburg 2014: 143). Critics have proposed *Coriolanus*'s Rome as an equivalent to London rather than England, for instance because the play is 'imbued with the vocabulary of the livery companies' and because its geography maps London just as well as Rome (Archer 2005: 145, 151). The focus on a city rather than the country brings Shakespeare's supplication scenes closer to *hiketelia*, which was concerned with the integration of outsiders into the polis.

Even though Elizabethan and Jacobean authorities tried to control and monitor immigration,²³ it was much more pluralized and chaotic than the rituals required in the Greek polis for the arrivals of individual strangers. As Laura Hunt Yungblut has argued, '[e]ven the Queen and her Privy Council seem to have been of two minds about alien policy' (1996: 2): officially supporting immigrants, they also feared political treason and destabilization. Strangers from overseas arriving in England could ask for sanctuary from the Church, a practice that was severely cut back in the first half of the sixteenth century under Henry VII and Henry VIII, when a number of parliamentary acts 'decisively damaged the institution' (Rabben 2011: 67), and was officially ended by Parliament in 1624 under James I. While strangers who came from countries that England counted as hostile were labelled 'alien enemies', those from other countries were regarded as 'alien friends' (Luu 2005: 59). 'Alien friends' had similar rights to English subjects and had to take the same oaths to swear allegiance to the English king or queen. In contrast to English subjects, however, they could not own, inherit, nor bestow property, nor could they vote or hold office (ibid 2005: 59).

If strangers wanted to change their status from 'aliens,' they could ask for denization, a limited form of citizenship that could be granted by the King or Queen, or they could aim for naturalization as English citizens, a rare achievement that required an act of Parliament (Rabben 2011: 67). As Lien Luu has shown, the process of denization was fairly 'cumbersome', because 'a stranger had to present a petition, which meant hiring a scrivener to write it, and if favourably received a patent would be granted. The length of time taken between the initial entry of the grant and the final registration of the patent varied between a few days and several months' (Luu 2005: 60–61). Further, purchasing a letter of denization became more and more expensive, and the opportunities for denizens shrunk (they could for example no longer become

²² According to Selwood, a 1593 survey counted 7,113 strangers from overseas in London (2010: 2), with the majority of newcomers to the city being English migrants, so-called 'foreigners' (2010: 23, 3). See also Yungblut (1996: 2, 21).

²³ See e.g. Dummett and Nicol (1990: 40–43).

apprentices after 1574), which contributed to the number of denizations dropping during Elizabeth's reign. While in 1568, 13% of aliens were denizens, in 1593, only 7% had successfully obtained a letter of denization (ibid.: 60–62). Naturalization was even rarer, and it was also much more expensive. In Elizabethan England only twelve strangers were naturalized, and between 1603 and 1640, seventy-one requests for naturalization were granted, which might indicate that strangers, despite the difficulties and costs, were under greater pressure to accomplish naturalization under James I and Charles I (ibid.: 63). As the King or Queen was also the head of the Anglican Church, religious and political allegiance were closely connected. Under James I, naturalization law required a religious test. An Act of 1609 specified that the candidate had to take Anglican communion as well as the oath of supremacy (Dummett and Nicol 1990: 58).

The law thus promoted Protestant immigration, and—even though church sanctuary was restricted and ultimately abolished—this connection between religious and political belonging offers a parallel to the ancient ritual of *hiketeia*, which proceeded from an invocation of the gods to an appeal to the political ruler. The practice of integrating English people born outside of London — ‘foreigners’ in early modern usage — into the city bore similarities to *hiketeia* because it was a question of a face-to-face encounter and an individual decision. As Jacob Selwood has shown, English migrants to London negotiated ‘their way through an elaborate web of organizations, from guilds and churches to the courts and councils of civic and national government’ (2010: 19). In a description similar to how Gould describes the arrival in the ancient Greek polis, Selwood continues:

Finding a place meant finding a role, and roles – of occupation, civic citizenship and subjecthood – were guarded by a host of institutions. The officers of these institutions conferred belonging according to ancient rules, often granting exceptions only on an individual basis, in the face of financial influence or pressure from a patron. Such gatekeepers bestowed belonging and enacted exclusion by virtue of the sum total of their many decisions, with the traditions of institutional practice guiding and shaping their choices (2010: 19).

As this account indicates, there were structural parallels between the immigration practices for English ‘foreigners’ to early modern London and the ancient Greek polis.

In addition to these partial similarities, the theatrical reactivation of *hiketeia* might have been attractive for two more reasons. Immigration was a politically sensitive topic on the early modern stage, where too-concrete political references were censored. Using a historically distant situation thus allowed safe reflection on current concerns (see Hoenselaars 1992: 53). Besides, the wealth of migration procedures for immigrants from outside England, some of a rather bureaucratic and prolonged manner, did not lend themselves to dramatization. In comparison, the legally anachronistic ancient ritual of supplication offered a concrete, theatrically and emotionally engaging form to stage current concerns about the trustworthiness of strangers, who

were at the time frequently suspected of being undercover agents of the enemy whose ‘true loyalties remained with their homelands’ (Yungblut 1996: 46), just as Coriolanus is suspect when he arrives in Antium.

Turning to the second perspective established by the mutual banishment, the later scenes in *Coriolanus* again revise features of the ancient ritual. The focus here shifts from Coriolanus in his uncertain, liminal space of exile to the Romans, who find themselves in a helpless position after Coriolanus joins the Volscian forces in their attack on Rome. The play now enacts Coriolanus’s megalomaniac claim to embody Rome, as he does become the space of refuge and protection for the Romans. The final acts present a series of supplications, which become increasingly powerful: at first, the failed supplication by the consul Cominius is only reported; second, the supplication by Menenius, Coriolanus’s father figure, is staged, but is interrupted and fails. Third, a group of Roman women along with Coriolanus’s young son, led by Coriolanus’s charismatic mother Volumnia, are allowed to perform their *hiketeia* in its full length and strength, which also shows the immense pressure and potential violence inherent in any act of supplication. The suppliants encounter Coriolanus in the Volscian camp as a godlike, emotionally petrified statue sitting on a golden throne (5.2.63–64). He thus physically adopts the position of Rome, which, three scenes earlier, was envisioned as follows: ‘Rome/Sits safe and still’ (4.6.36–37). Metatheatrically, the drama next has the characters enact the supplications which aim to transform Coriolanus from this petrified embodiment of Rome into a feeling human being who can be affected by their performance and will refrain from destroying what he perceives as ‘the corrupt simulacrum of Rome so as to claim authenticity for himself’ (Kingsley-Smith 2003: 152). In the same vein, Coriolanus’s body is recurrently envisioned as fortress Rome (Wald 2018: 151). For example, when the Romans ask Menenius to implore Coriolanus, they rhetorically present Coriolanus as a place that can be travelled to via roads: ‘You know the very road into his kindness/ And cannot lose your way’ (5.1.58–59).

For these supplications, Shakespeare could elaborate on the theatrically scripted encounters in North’s Plutarch, which emphasize the importance of body language and facial expression in the moment of supplication. For example, the first supplication is described like this:

For at their comming, they were brought through the campe, to the place where he was set in his chayer of state, with a marvelous and an unspeakable majestie, having the chiefest men of the Volsces about him: so he commaunded them to declare openly the cause of their comming. Which they delivered in the most humble and lowly wordes they possible could devise, and with all modest countenance and behaviour agreeable for the same (Bullough 1964: 534; *Plutarch’s Lives* 1959: 191).

However, the first two supplications fail. Even though Cominius observes the protocol of supplication, Coriolanus dismisses him with a ‘speechless hand’ (5.1.67), thus denying communication on both the verbal and the gestural level. In Shakespeare’s framing of the second supplication, the Volscian soldiers discourage Menenius even

before he meets Coriolanus. In their view, the ritual is no longer binding for Coriolanus after his banishment and he will not give in to ‘the easy groans of old women, the virginal palms of your daughters, or [...] the palsied intercession of such a decayed dotant as you seem to be’ (5.2.43–46). And indeed, though Menenius presents himself as ‘old father’ to his ‘son’ Coriolanus (5.2.70) to add weight to his supplication, his mission fails spectacularly: Coriolanus sends him away without making any physical contact or conceding to his plea, claiming to no longer be emotionally attached to any of his friends and family in Rome. When he declares, ‘Mine ears against your suits are stronger than/Your gates against my force’ (5.2.87–88), Coriolanus envisions himself as a gated city that embodies the essence of *Romanitas*, invincibility, while the city that is still called Rome can no longer defend itself (Wald 2018: 153). Untouchability not only characterizes his body language, but also the syntax of his speeches, which ‘eschew connectives, both within and between sentences, and such withholding creates a disjunctivity that sets every utterance apart from every other’ (McDonald 2006: 56). Russ McDonald has shown in his study of Shakespeare’s late style ‘how Shakespeare’s most emotionally isolated hero’ speaks ‘a language in which the interdependence of sentences is suppressed, clauses do not touch, and the prevailing tone is firm and unyielding. His speech constitutes the grammatical equivalent of his famous desire for freedom from familial or other kinds of relation’ (ibid.: 57). Facing the supplications by Cominius and Menenius, Coriolanus remains ‘the rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken’, as the Volscian senators acknowledge (5.2.107–108). However, the third and final scene of supplication undercuts his obstinacy, forcefully reminding Coriolanus of his familial ties.

The third supplication is performed in its entire length and unfolds the dramaturgic, political, and psychological complexity of *hiketeia*. Coriolanus’s reaction to the arrival of the Roman women and his son anticipates the most relevant aspects of their plea. He calls Volumnia ‘the honoured mould/Wherein this trunk [Coriolanus’s body] was framed’ (5.3.22–23), thus emphasizing the physical connection between mother and son. This bond is extended to Coriolanus’s son through a blood metaphor (‘The grandchild to her blood’ 5.3.24) and further extended to his wife, whom he addresses as ‘[b]est of my flesh’ (5.3.42) in the romantic metaphor of mutual incorporation. Even before the women begin to voice their supplication, these metaphors of linked bodies collapse the earlier notion of Coriolanus as invincible city: as the new suppliants are already an integral part of his body, he cannot deny them entry and incorporation, even though he tries with various strategies. When the women do enact their supplication, it follows the ancient protocol as described in North’s Plutarch and enacted in Greek tragedy since Aeschylus’s *Suppliants*. Body language reinforces the verbal pleas, most of all the kneeling and raised hands that signal the need for protection (Wald 2018: 154–56). Shakespeare took over this reinforcement of the supplication by body language from Plutarch; none of his other sources contain similar descriptions (Whittington 2017: 135–36).

When Volumnia realizes that their verbal supplication does not weaken Coriolanus, she proceeds according to her earlier insight that ‘Action is eloquence’

(3.2.77) to ‘shame him with our knees’ (5.3.169). Shakespeare here follows North, where the group ‘fell downe upon their knees before him’ (Bullough 1964: 540), and Coriolanus raises his mother and takes her by the right hand while declaring that he accepts their supplication (see *Plutarch’s Lives* 1959: 208–09, where the women throw themselves at Marcius’s feet, are raised by him, and where he takes his mother’s right hand). As Miranda Fay Thomas observes in her recent study *Shakespeare’s Body Language*, this gesture of submissiveness is also ‘a show of strength’ and a ‘calculated move of emotional blackmail’ (2020: 164). The shameful of a mother who kneels in front of her son is enhanced by the Roman and Elizabethan custom that children habitually knelt before their parents (Whittington 2016: 153–54). Besides the kneeling, the women’s supplication uses further ancient Greek characteristics of supplication, such the threat of suicide. Volumnia puts her threat of suicide in drastic words:

[...] thou shalt no sooner
 March to assault thy country than to tread –
 [...] on thy mother’s womb
 That brought thee to this world. (5.3.122–24)

Volumnia here equates the motherly matrix of Rome with her womb, the origin of Coriolanus’s own body. Just like Coriolanus, she claims to embody Rome and at the same time emphasizes the close physical bond between mother and son, that is, between the competing embodiments of Rome. How paradoxical this competing embodiment is becomes obvious when she implies that her suicide after Coriolanus’s invasion of Rome will include Coriolanus, because he will eliminate his own origin. Just as in Greek tragedies including *The Suppliants*, the murder of relatives here means self-murder and vice versa. In ancient Greek, it is expressed by the same word, *autophonōs* (Gödde 2000: 155).

The encounter between mother and son also transforms the crucial moment of physical touch between suppliant and potential saviour, the contact magic:²⁴ here, it emphasizes not only the ritual bond between the parties, but also the symbiotic physical relation of mother and son that the earlier metaphors set up. This touch is one of the most famous stage directions in Shakespeare’s oeuvre, which has been described as ‘the most massive silence of all drama’ (Parker 1994: 56): ‘[He] holds her by the hand, silent’ (5.3.182). This moment of soundless body language, which is Shakespeare’s innovation, expresses the inner state of being touched and silently enacts Coriolanus’s tragic moment of decision, when he has to choose between the

²⁴ See Gödde (2000: 30–31). Gödde argues that Plutarch’s Life of Solon is crucial for the debated question of whether the physical touch in supplication rituals has to do with a belief in magic. See also Naiden’s survey, which sums up the history of ‘contact magic’ and discusses the critique of an automatic efficacy of the physical touch (Naiden 2006: 9–18), which reduces the relevance of the actual decision (as well as its theatrical potential).

destruction of Rome, including the murder of his family, or his own death as a traitor at the hands of the Volsces.²⁵ He must decide between the murder of his relatives and self-murder, or, given the double meaning of *autophonōs*, between suicide and suicide: the genuinely tragic moment of irresolvable conflict (Wald 2018: 156–57). The contact magic under a microscopic lens focuses on what Pollard identifies as essential feature in the Renaissance reception of Greek tragedy, namely ‘the sympathetic transmission of emotion between bodies’ (Pollard 2017: 1). In this regard, virginal and motherly bodies as represented by Danaos’s virginal daughters in *The Suppliants* and the maternal figures Volumnia and Virgilia as well as the Vestal Velaria in *Coriolanus* can be regarded as particularly potent. Because of their ‘receptive permeability’ and their ‘privileged capacity to absorb and transmit’, they functioned as ‘conductors for a kind of affective electricity’, which made these Greek tragic heroines particularly interesting for early modern authors (ibid.: 7).

When Coriolanus decides to grant the women’s supplication, the tragic crisis affects his precarious position. His ultimate radical displacement is enacted in two scenes of failed triumphal homecoming. When Volumnia returns to Rome, she is praised as ‘patroness, the life of Rome’ (5.5.1) with all protocols of triumph. The senator presents her homecoming as a clearing of Coriolanus’s banishment: ‘Unshout the noise that banished Martius,/Repeal him with the welcome of his mother’ (5.5.4–5). ‘Unshouting’ describes the impossible action of taking back something that was uttered. Because the loud cries that accompanied the banishment cannot be undone, Coriolanus’s return to Rome is only possible by acts of revocation, by calling him again or by calling him back (Wald 2018: 158–59). There is a semantic ambivalence in the senator’s elliptical request ‘Repeal him’ rather than to ‘repeal his banishment’ or, as in North’s Plutarch, ‘to repeale the condemnation and exile of Martius’ (Bullough 1964: 533, see *Plutarch’s Lives* 1959: 189): is the banishment to be repealed or Coriolanus himself to be cancelled? Is he welcomed with Volumnia because she now again metaphorically incorporates her son? Do the words envision an inversion of his birth by Volumnia? By welcoming Volumnia, the Romans welcome Coriolanus who has returned in and into his mother. The relocation in the motherland as an eliminating regression to the womb completes the displacement of Coriolanus staged in the earlier acts.

This rhetorical elimination is enacted physically in the second scene of failed triumphal homecoming. Celebrated by the Volscian soldiers, Coriolanus returns to Antium, but Aufidius and the other Volscian lords decide to accuse him of being a ‘traitor in the highest degree’ (5.6.85). Aufidius addresses him as ‘Martius’ (5.6.89) and thus degrades him similarly to the senator’s earlier speech (‘Unshout the noise that banished Martius’). That both parties deny Coriolanus’s honorary name is de-

²⁵ As Whittington notes, ‘This moment is exceptional in the Shakespeare corpus as an instant in which speech and movement come to a halt, the actors frozen in a static, statue-like pose’ (2017: 137–38).

cisive, as he himself in an earlier scene declared this name as the only remaining part of his dislocated identity: ‘Only that name remains’ (4.5.75), a line taken directly from North’s Plutarch (Bullough 1964: 528). This dissolution of a spatial location is further enhanced by the contradictory setting of this final scene. The scene starts in Antium, the ‘native town’ (5.6.49) of Aufidius, but then seems to be transferred to Corioles, because Aufidius confronts Coriolanus: ‘Dost thou think/I’ll grace thee with that robbery, thy stolen name/“Coriolanus”, in Corioles?’ (5.6.90–92). The scene again ends in Antium. The flexible spatial location of the early modern stage and its word scenery makes it possible that the scene is torn between the two Volscian cities. When the Volscian people ultimately demand ‘Tear him to pieces’ (5.6.121), they request the physical equivalent of the spatial division and dislocation of both protagonist and dramaturgy, they plan to complete the displacement in an act of dismemberment. After his murder, the protagonist’s name is never again mentioned. This demonstrates that his ultimate honorary funeral in the Volscian sphere means that he can only be relocated when eliminated, just as in his earlier homecoming to Rome. Named but disembodied, returned to Rome in Volumnia, buried as nameless ‘noble corpse’ (5.6.145) in an unspecified space in the Volscian sphere, the epitaph of the fundamentally displaced protagonist may read ‘And here remain with your uncertainty’ (Wald 2018: 159–60).

What is the significance of Shakespeare’s recuperation of the ancient code of asylum seeking in his Roman tragedy? Whittington has argued that Shakespeare presented early modern audiences with ‘a live re-writing of ritual’ by innovatively making the process of *hiketeia* culminate in mother and son holding hands, a re-writing that is ‘constrained to a certain extent by the literary past, but also capable of opening new possibilities’ (2016: 159). I propose that among these new possibilities of the reactivation of *hiketeia*, Shakespeare’s play offers an emotionally engaging case of asylum seeking, which contains a message comparable to More’s speech on ‘the strangers’ case’ in the section of *Sir Thomas More* that was probably written by Shakespeare: those who considered themselves safe and powerful are now in need of refuge and compassion. This strategy is still used for plays today, where ‘putting yourself in the shoes of the refugee’ is a dramaturgical device to bring the refugee experience closer to audiences who have never lived through this situation. As Alison Jeffers points out in her study *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis*, ‘[t]his approach asks for imagination and empathy and [...] it is in theatre that its full potential can be explored’ (2012: 60). Shakespeare’s invitation to empathy might have stemmed from his familiarity with the immigrant experience in London (Honigmann 2004: 233–34), and first audiences of *Coriolanus* would also have been aware that the changes between Catholic and Protestant governments had forced a number of Englishmen and women into exile in the sixteenth century.²⁶ Through Roman history and the ancient Greek ritual, Shakespeare thus contributed to concerns that shaped England’s recent

²⁶ See also Tudeau-Clayton (2012) and Espinosa and Ruiters (2014). Stephen O’Neill recently offered an account of how transmedial adaptations and citations of More’s speech

history and its present, using the affective force of an anachronistic form for his early modern stage. The portability of *hiketeia* and its redeployment in a new context thus offers an example of what Caroline Levine calls ‘the strange encounters among forms’ that allow for ‘unexpected, politically significant possibilities’ (Levine 2006: 633). Rather than being a trace of a half-forgotten, ‘rotten’ ancient ritual that Shakespeare undeliberately adopted from his sources, the transformative reactivation of *hiketeia* in the crucial moments of *Coriolanus* as a theatrically, affectively, and politically potent form hence offered an opportunity to negotiate pressing concerns about immigration in Jacobean England.

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