Metaphoric Resonance in Shakespearean Tragedy

Metaphoric Resonance in Shakespearean Tragedy

By

Myron Stagman

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Metaphoric Resonance in Shakespearean Tragedy, by Myron Stagman

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-1444-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1444-7

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

An occasional prefigurement and echo was hardly unknown before Shakespeare. But the vast echoism—forward and backward references—which characterize some of Shakespeare's plays were rare if not unknown before him.

Who—even now—plays with language in this echoing way, setting up networks of metaphoric, symbolic vibrations underneath the surface story? and thereby **stressing themes, characterizations, and messages poetically, economically, subliminally.**

Shakespeare magnifies ordinary echoes in certain ways: He
(1) *suffuses* some of his plays with prefigurements and echoes,
(2) establishes **metaphoric trails**, echoing and re-echoing a particular metaphor, perhaps throughout the text (if not an actual metaphor, a repeated word or phrase or action assumes symbolic import due to its recurrence and emphasis),
(3) interweaves metaphoric trails,
(4) caps a trail or series of interwoven trails with an ironic, echoing punchline (e.g. *Coriolanus*: "boy of tears" and "stands on the body"; *Macbeth*: the decapitation of the protagonist),
(5) often plays on words and concepts with extreme subtlety to form various metaphoric trails.

Nomenclature: The term "echo" is fine for denoting a portion of Shakespeare's repetitions. But the phenomenon of

re-echoing steps somewhat beyond the term, especially when recurrence extends to a half dozen or a dozen instances. Besides this, some Shakespearean echoes and re-echoes are so clever that they warrant a better name to dignify them. Therefore, we coin Shakespeare's metaphoric trails "Metaphoric Resonance". Even a single echo, if it be sufficiently impressive, I feel impelled to call **Metaphoric Resonance.**

Of Shakespeare's plays, a minority contain any significant amount of extended Echoism. A small minority contains numerous echoing sequences and metaphoric trails: among them are a Roman trilogy of *Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*; a Lancaster duo of *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part I; Macbeth*, and *The Winter's Tale*. ***Coriolanus***, as we shall see, has such pervasive metaphoric resonance patterning that we deem the phenomenon a "Nether World" of Metaphoric Resonance.

I.

AN ABBREVIATED NETHER WORLD EXAMPLE: *CORIOLANUS*

This tragedy, a model for political scientists and politicians as well as an excellent play, offers an extensive and highly sophisticated instance of the Nether World of Metaphoric Resonance. *Coriolanus* has been endowed by the author with the most brilliant matrix of metaphoric patterns in his entire canon.

Shakespeare resonates over 30 metaphors. They trail their ways through the text and interact with one another.

Hunger:
First Citizen.
You are all resolved to die than to **famish**?
I.1.5

Marcius [the hero's given name before he was honored as the conqueror of Corioli, hence "Coriolanus"].

What's the matter
That in these several places of the city
You cry against the noble senate, who,
Under the gods, keep you in awe, which else
Would **feed on one another**?
I.1.189

The resonance in Shakespeare is **always thematic**, here stressing the diametrically opposing attitudes of the hero and the plebeians.

A subdivision of Hunger is **Surplus**:

First Citizen. [speaking of surplus corn].
What authority
Surfeits on would relieve us.
If they would yield us but the **superfluity** …
I.1.17

Marcius [speaking of the rabble as cannon fodder].
I am glad on't [that there will be war]; then we shall ha'
means to vent
Our musty **superfluity**.
(227)

Brutus [the tribunes discuss the hero].
He's poor in no one fault,
But **stored** with all.

Sicinius.
Especially in pride.

Brutus.
And **topping** all others in boasting.
II.1.20

Body: This includes the famous Parable of the Belly (I.1) which by itself permeates the play. E.g.

Menenius.
The senators of Rome are this good belly,

And you the **mutinous members**.
I.1.150

Volumnia [to Coriolanus].
You are too absolute;
Though therein you can never be too noble,
But when **extremities** speak.
III.2.41

"Extremities" is a double entendre that represents an acute use of language and quick, bright conception.
[crises; limbs, *members*]

Disease:

Marcius.
What's the matter, you dissentious rogues,
That **rubbing** the poor **itch** of your opinion,
Make yourselves **scabs**?
I.1.167

Sicinius.
He's a **disease** that must be **cut away**.
III.1.293

Breaking (walls, city):

Marcius.
They say there's grain enough!
Would the nobility lay aside their ruth,
And let me use my sword, I'd make a **quarry**
With thousands of these **quarter'd** slaves.
I.1.200

The tribunes have called to the Citizens to take action against Coriolanus whose "quarrying" attitude has incited the conflict. Cominius, supporting the hero, says to the tribunes,

That is the way to **lay the city flat**;
To **bring the roof to the foundation**
And bury all, which yet distinctly ranges,
In **heaps** and **piles** of **ruin**.
III.1.206

Altitude:
Marcius finished his "quarter'd slaves" statement in this way:

I'd make a quarry
With thousands of these quarter'd slaves, **as high as**
I could pick my **lance**.
I.1.201

This resonated First Citizen's analysis of Marcius' motivation:

He did it [service for his country] to
please his mother, and to be **partly proud**;
which he is, **even to** the **altitude** of his **virtue**.
I.1.40

Resonated and *confirmed* that analysis.

One more, **Weight**. The protagonist says scornfully to the Citizens:

He that depends
Upon your favours swims with **fins of lead.**
I.1.181

In the subsequent Act (II.2.74), Coriolanus more cautiously, deceptively, remarks to the tribune Brutus,

Your people, I love them as they **weigh**.

The full import of this statement would be lost without knowledge of the metaphoric resonance. Coriolanus' apparent impartiality is false.

Shakespeare tops off the entire assemblage of metaphoric patterning with "boy of tears": "tears" as a double entendre meaning both crying and tearing, dividing the **body**-politic.

And, commenting upon Volumnia's claim that her son would tread upon Aufidius' neck, the irony of Aufidius standing upon Coriolanus' dead body.

[See the long, predominant chapter which concentrates on *Coriolanus*, "A Nether World of Metaphoric Resonance: *Coriolanus*".]

II.

MISCELLANEOUS EXAMPLES OF METAPHORIC RESONANCE

Macbeth. Two little items.

(1) Within the **Garments** pattern: Macbeth, acting as loyal partisan of King Duncan, "unseam'd" the rebel leader (I.2.22).

After Macbeth has treacherously murdered his King, he seeks to escape his conscience:

Macbeth.
Come, **seeling** *[stitching]* Night.
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day.
III.2.47

Later we have the summary image: "Now does he feel his title **hang loose about him, like a giant's robe** upon a dwarfish thief." (V.2.22)

(2) **Jewelry**: (II.1.15) Duncan presents Lady Macbeth with a **diamond. (**III.1.69) Macbeth murders the giver and loses his "eternal **jewel**" (soul). Macduff kills Macbeth and places Malcolm on the throne:

Macduff.
Behold, where stands
Th 'usurper's cursed head: the time is free.
I see thee compass'd with thy kingdom's **pearl**.
V.9.22

Jewels thus tell a story. The playwright chose his words carefully to accent themes.

Julius Caesar. Shakespeare has one scene resonate another, and thereby provides a strong indication of where his sympathies lie. **Cinna the poet** (III.3) is torn to pieces by a mob instigated by Antony. In Act IV, sc. 3, **a poet** has the audacity to burst in on Brutus and Cassius during the Quarrel. The scene is comical, with Brutus angrily ordering him out while Cassius laughs at his bad poetry.

Via his treatments of the two poets, Shakespeare signifies his preference for the Brutus-Cassius side in the civil war, especially as the scene immediately following the mob violence shows Antony and Octavian plotting mass death. Moreover, Shakespeare flashes a clear sign that, between Brutus and Cassius, he prefers the man who responds to a poet with humor.

Note: In the Plutarch source, a poet actually does intrude on the two generals. Cinna, however, is a friend of Caesar, not a poet. Shakespeare made him into a poet to create a resonating scene which would emphasize motifs and messages.

Hamlet. A dandy Shakespeare metaphoric pattern is the resonating death-image of composite mythological creatures. Lamord ("death"), the **centaur** ("as had he been incorps'd and demi-natur'd with the brave beast"), foreshadows another half-animal, half-human creature signifying death. This is the **mermaid**, a figure which Queen Gertrude applies to the drowning Ophelia:

> When down her weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide
> And, **mermaid**-like, awhile they bore her up;

Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like **a creature native and indued**
Unto that element.
[echoing "incorps'd … natur'd … beast"]
IV.7.179

The two death-images forge foreshadowing links in the chain leading to Hamlet's death.

Antony and Cleopatra. Antony's losses are related with **weight** metaphorism. After the first military loss at sea to Octavian:

Antony.
Love, I am full of **lead.**
III.11.72

After the second military defeat and the revelation of Cleopatra's "death", Antony stabs himself.

All.
Most **heavy** day
IV.14.134

Other weight metaphors allude to Cleopatra's sexual regard for Antony, then later to her recognition of his genuine nobility and worth. In the Monument scene, the poetry seeks to express the meaning of death in general, as well as Antony's particular death, by centering on the weight of his corpse.

Richard II. Gaunt begins his renowned deathbed speech:

King Richard.
How is't with aged Gaunt?

Gaunt.
O, how that name befits my composition!
Old Gaunt, indeed; and gaunt in being old . . .
And therein fasting, hast thou made me gaunt.
Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave . . .
II.1.82

In this unusual speech, Gaunt both prophesies and puns. Shakespeare utilized Gaunt's prophecy to set up other prophecies in the play. For example,

Captain.
'Tis thought the King is dead; we will not stay.
The bay trees in our country are all wither'd,
And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven;
The pale-fac'd moon looks bloody on the earth,
[I interrupt to inform that Hotspur will resonate "pale-fac'd moon" in I Henry IV: "to pluck bright honour from the pale-fac'd moon", referring to King Henry. Thus it is Bolingbroke who "looks bloody on the earth" here in Richard II.]
And **lean**-look'd **prophets** whisper fearful change.
II.4.11

Gaunt was a **lean**-look'd prophet and he assuredly did *whisper* fearful change, **prophesying** from his ***deathbed.***

Shakespeare has been criticized in some quarters for Gaunt's punning at such a time. That does not trouble this writer, especially after learning that Oscar Wilde on his deathbed said, "I am dying beyond my means." Moreover, we wish to point out that (and Shakespeare has done this in

other places) one reason for Gaunt's punning repetition ("Gaunt … gaunt … gaunt … Gaunt … gaunt") was to tip off the audience to a cleverly resonant "**lean**-look'd prophets" two scenes away.

Without the repetition, what chance does a theatergoer have—or the ordinary reader—to catch the play-on-words echo?

Shakespeare does something similar when Aumerle's mother begs King Henry for her son's life (V.3). The Duchess' "pardon … pardon … chopping French" and York's *seconding* "Speak it in French, King, say 'pardonne moy' " makes one squirm. I do not like it, but Shakespeare did have a reason.

He tries to hint, hint, hint to the reader something about the very next scene (as the Antony-Octavian blacklisting follows and reinforces the Cinna murder) which bears considerable importance. In V.4 Exton speaks with his servant:

Exton.
Didst thou not mark the King, what words he spake?
'Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?'
Was it not so?

Servant.
These were his very words.

Exton.
'Have I no friend?' quoth he. **He spake it twice**,
And **urg'd it twice** together, did he not?

In other words, the author insists that you draw the conclusion, aided by the prefiguring scene, that King Henry ordered the

murder of King Richard. The King stating something twice signifies genuine intent.

Another example of hinting can be found in *Coriolanus.* The hints are unpoetically repetitious, Shakespeare thereby practically shouting to us the existence of a **pun**:

Sicinius.
It is a mind
That **shall** remain a poison where it is,
Not poison any further.

Coriolanus.
Shall remain!
Hear you this Triton of the minnows? mark you
His absolute "**shall**"?

Cominius.
'Twas from the canon.

Coriolanus.
"**Shall**!"
O good but most unwise patricians! why,
You grave but reckless senators, have you thus
Given Hydra here to choose an officer,
That with his peremptory "**shall**" being but
The **horn and noise** o' the monster's, wants not spirit
To say he'll turn your current in a ditch,
And make your channel his?
. . . . .
They choose their magistrate,
And such a one as he, who puts his "**shall**",
His popular "**shall**", against a graver bench
Than ever frown'd in Greece.
III.1.107

Can one imagine what the Bard's "*horn* and noise"/"shall"-business was all about? It was aimed at our comprehending the pun implicit in "Triton". For Triton was a mythological sea-deity, the trumpeter of Neptune. Do you remember what Triton used for a trumpet (i.e. a *horn*)? That's right, a **shell**.

That man Shakespeare must have had one playful and wonder-ful personality.

King Lear. We see in another, rather special instance of Metaphoric Resonance the playful and wry sense of humor of William Shakespeare. King Lear, in the first scene of the tragedy, asks his vain, fateful question.

> My daughters, which of you … doth love me most?

Goneril flatteringly answers,

> I love you more than word can wield the matter:
> Dearer than **eyesight, space**, and **liberty**.

The resonance of "eyesight" occurs in the theme of Lear's mental blindness and Gloucester's literal blindness.

"Space": Lear wandering on the great heath ("for many a mile about there's scarce a bush" — II.4.301).

"Liberty: He and Cordelia end up in prison, from which she (and the Fool) do not emerge alive, and Lear soon dies as a consequence of grief.

Goneril and Regan have set these terrible events in motion. Regan, like her morally twin sister, also produces a flattering, resonant answer to her father's leading question:

I find she names my very deed of love
Only she comes too short, that I profess
Myself an enemy to all other joys
Which **the most precious square of sense** possesses.

Goneril forgot to mention **Sanity**, "the most precious square of sense". Regan's response initiates the thematic resonance of Lear's madness.

Henry IV, Part II.

Doll.
Sirrah, what humour's the Prince of?

Falstaff.
A good **shallow** young fellow.
II.4.241

The resonating line to the above stresses the Falstaff *hubris* theme. That "good shallow young fellow", grown to be King Henry V, has a few words to impart to a certain "**vain** man" (V.4.45), and therefore said "**vanity** in years" (Part I, II.4.454) must say to a companion,

Master **Shallow**, I owe you a thousand pound.
V.4.74

III.

A NETHER WORLD OF METAPHORIC RESONANCE: *CORIOLANUS*

More than thirty interlacing metaphoric resonances permeate the tragedy *Coriolanus*, illuminating the nature of character, emphasizing and dramatizing themes, creating memorable symbolism and imagery. Amidst the vast, ringing symbolism, the Body-metaphor and Tears-metaphor tend to dominate. And one expression, combining both symbols, summarizes crucial conceptions of the play—"boy of tears".

Hunger-metaphor

The first scene prefigures the important Belly Parable by speaking of "famish" and "hunger". **These, and associated references, resonate and emphasize throughout the play the fundamental themes of plebeian hunger/deprivations, and Coriolanus' contempt for their condition.**

> *First Citizen.*
> You are all resolved to die than to **famish**?
> I.1.5

> The **leanness** that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is an inventory to particularize their [the patricians] **abundance**; our suffering is a gain to them. Let us revenge this with our pikes, ere we become rakes: for the gods know I speak this **in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge**.

> They ne'er cared for us yet: suffer us to **famish**, and their storehouses 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.
> (87)

Thus the opening lines present forcefully the position of the commonalty, against which Coriolanus' words and demeanor will collide to shape the plot. Sincerity and urgency mark the First Citizen's speech. The rhythmic balance of "in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge" adds to the impression.

Quickly, the hunger-famish concepts clash with Coriolanus' scornful metaphoric use of similar language:

> What's the matter
> That in these several places of the city
> You cry against the noble senate, who,
> Under the gods, keep you in awe, which else
> Would **feed on one another**?
> I.1.189

Note the specific resonance of "eat us not up" earlier in the scene. Then, literally, regarding a troop of militia:

> They are dissolv'd: hang 'em!
> They said they were an-**hungry**; sigh'd forth proverbs:
> That **hunger** broke stone walls; that dogs must **eat**;
> That **meat** was made for mouths; that the gods sent not
> **Corn** for the rich men only.
> (209)

In the second scene of the fourth Act, Volumnia assails the tribunes on the street after the banishment of Coriolanus. Brutus and Sicinius depart, and Menenius asks Volumnia,

Men.
You'll **sup** with me?

Vol.
Anger's my **meat**; I **sup** upon myself,
And so shall **starve** with **feeding**.
(50)

Her angry intonation of "sup", "meat", "feeding", and "starve" recall the angry and sardonic references of her son toward the plebeians, especially

Keep you in awe, which else
Would **feed on one another**.

First Citizen speaks of **surplus** corn:

What authority **surfeits** on would relieve us.
If they would yield us but the **superfluity.**
I.1.17

Coriolanus soon speaks of surplus "rabble":

Messenger.
The news is, sir, the Volsces are in arms.

Cor.
I am glad on't; then we shall ha' means to vent
Our musty **superfluity**.
(227)

Coriolanus' store of faults is the subject:

First Citizen.
I need not be barren of accusations:
he hath faults with **surplus**, to tire in repetition.
I.1.45

Menenius.
In what enormity is Marcius poor in,
That you two have not in **abundance**?

Brutus.
He's poor in no one fault, but **stored** with all.

Sicinius.
Especially in pride.

Brutus.
And **topping** all others in boasting.
II.1.20

Metaphorically, Coriolanus states his fundamental position:

I **say** again,
In soothing them we **nourish** 'gainst our senate
The cockle of rebellion, insolence, sedition,
Which we ourselves have **plough'd** for, **sow'd** and
scatter'd.
III.1.71

Though there the people had more absolute power,
I **say**, they **nourish'd** disobedience, **fed**
The ruins of the state.
(118)

First Citizen in the first scene, first Act, in criticism of Coriolanus:

I say unto you …
(36)

(1) Coriolanus' parallel repetition of "I say" and "nourish", to stress his position, and to counter that of the people with their own "I say", "hunger"-"feed" language.

(2) "Plough'd", "sow'd", "scatter'd" resounds in the final Act when a determined Coriolanus, just prior to Volumnia's pleading, says:

Let the Volsces plough Rome, and harrow Italy.
V.3.34

So he himself will now do what he feared earlier would be done by the plebeians.

The ironic, metaphoric echo continues in the fourth scene of that Act when Coriolanus decries,

My surname, Coriolanus: the painful service,
The extreme dangers, and the drops of blood
Shed for my thankless country, are requited
But with that surname….
The cruelty and envy of the people,
Permitted by our dastard nobles, who
Have all forsook me, hath **devour'd** the rest.
IV.5.80

He invades Roman territory with unstoppable success, and threatens Rome itself. Menenius is asked by the tribunes to plead with his old friend:

> I'll undertake it:
> I think he'll hear me. Yet, to bite his lip,
> And hum at good Cominius, much unhearts me.
> He was not taken well; he had not **din'd**:
>
> The veins unfill'd, our blood is cold, and then
> We pout upon the morning, are unapt
> To give or to forgive; but when we have **stuff'd**
> These pipes and these conveyances of our blood
> With **wine** and **feeding**, we have suppler souls
> Than in our priest-like **fasts**.
> V.1.56

This speech, part of the general Hunger-resonance, specifically resonates Menenius' first encounter with the tribunes, where "wining" is mentioned. The tone is different, however, in that second Act, critical and unfriendly. Then, Menenius was Coriolanus' partisan against the common file and their representatives. In the fifth Act, they are on the same side, hoping to dissuade the all-conquering general from further conquest.

> Act II, scene 1
>
> I am known to be a humorous patrician, and one that loves **a cup of hot wine** with not a drop of allaying Tiber in't…. What I think, I utter, and spend my malice in my breath. Meeting two such wealsmen as you are, —I cannot call you Lycurguses,—if the **drink** you give me touch my **palate** adversely, I make a crooked face at it. (57)

Menenius' mission to Coriolanus fails, and it is left to Volumnia to save Rome, which she does. He says to her,

> What is this? Your knees to me?
> To your corrected son.
> Then let the pebbles on the **hungry** beach filip the stars.
> (V.3.59)

Body-metaphor

The Parable of the Belly (I.1) establishes the physical body as representing "the body of the weal" (II.3.180), the commonwealth. References to the body which recall and symbolize "the body of the weal" abound in the play. Only major examples can be recounted here.

[Does our expression "body politic" stem in some measure from this play?]

Menenius recites the Parable:

> There was a time when all the **body's members**
> **rebell'd** against the **belly**. . . .
> (98)

First Citizen helps him along,

> The kingly crowned **head,** the vigilant **eye**,
> the counsellor **heart**, the **arm** our soldier, our
> steed the **leg**, the **tongue** our trumpeter . . .
> (118)

The Parable claims the indispensable value of the senatorial class to the commonalty:

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.
(155)

"Members rebell'd" and "mutinous members" introduce the plebeians as "members" and conjure up the spectre of civil strife and division (of a "tearing" of the body politic). "Members" resounds when Volumnia says to Coriolanus,

You are too absolute;
Though therein you can never be too noble,
But when **extremities** speak.
III.2.41

"Extremities", on one level, imports crisis. But the underlying allusion is to the "members" *[limbs!]*, the plebeians whom Coriolanus holds in contempt and loses his temper whenever confronted by them—a salient theme.
[an extremely clever thematic echo!]

In Act II, sc. 3, a group of Citizens discuss the coming vote for or against Coriolanus as consul:

Third Citizen.
If he show us his **wounds**, and tell us his
deeds, we are to put our **tongues** into those
wounds and speak for them; so, if he tells
us his noble deeds, we must also tell him