Concluding her Preface to an 1808 reprint of John Philip Kemble’s *Coriolanus*, Elizabeth Inchbald pointedly reminds her reader of the play’s political volatility:

This noble drama, in which Mr. Kemble reaches the utmost summit of the actor’s art, has been withdrawn from the theatre of late years, for some reasons of state. When the lower order of people are in good plight, they will bear contempt with cheerfulness, and even with mirth; but poverty puts them out of humour at the slightest disrespect. Certain sentences in this play are therefore of a dangerous tendency at certain times, though at other periods they are welcomed with loud applause. (5.5)

Attending not to the character of Coriolanus but to ‘certain sentences,’ Inchbald immediately locates there a ‘tendency’ which endangers the legitimate taste and political equilibrium of the state: ‘certain sentences in this play are therefore of a dangerous tendency at certain times … ’. But what exactly does Inchbald mean here by ‘sentences?’ On the one hand, there is the play’s judgement: as Hazlitt formulates it in an 1816 review of a later Kemble production, ‘the whole dramatic moral of *Coriolanus* is, that those who have little shall have less, and those that have much shall take all that others have left’ (WH 5.349). Beyond such a comprehensive pronouncement, however, there are also Coriolanus’ sentences, both those published against him by the tri-
bunes (his banishment), and those which he authors himself at the expense of the Roman multitude and the Volscian military (the choleric taunts that prove his undoing). Furthermore, in what consists the ‘certainty’ of such sentences? Are ‘certain sentences’ sentences which are absolute, which can somehow guarantee the claims they set forth? (Who, finally, banishes whom when Coriolanus turns his back upon the people of Rome?) Or are they merely a particular collection of sentences, remarkable not so much for their settled reliability as for their precipitous inclinations, their ‘dangerous tendencies’? The troubling uncertainty of Inchbald’s own sentence – its pronouncement upon the play amidst its own grammatical aberration – confronts us with yet another dilemma, one that not only resounds throughout _Coriolanus_, but that repeatedly haunts any examination of the shifting modalities of romantic apostasy: is it in fact possible to stand by one’s sentences?

In Regency England, this question is perhaps nowhere confronted so relentlessly as in and around the figure of Coriolanus. Indeed, for romantic writing (Hazlitt) as well as romantic acting (Kemble), the drama of Coriolanus’ shifting rhetorical postures regularly underlines the complications of what it means to stand. However considered – thematically, rhetorically, politically, or even dramaturgically – _Coriolanus_ (specifically, Kemble’s productions of _Shakespeare’s Coriolanus; or, The Roman Matron_) explicitly dramatizes the difficulties of distinguishing between variously unstable modalities of standing and falling (political as well as physical) on a scree slope that not only defines the parameters of the play but also impels the undoing of its hero. Whether encountered on the stage or in the closet, _Coriolanus_ inevitably confronts romantic readers with the unavoidable yet insoluble question, what is the relationship between poetry and politics? As will become evident, no reader is more preoccupied with this question than Hazlitt, whose writing during this period (at no time more so than the winter of 1816–17) is riddled with his attempts to formulate its implications for contemporary poetry, to sentence the ‘Jacobin poetics’ of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey following their conviction on charges of apostasy.

It is in the collision of Coriolanus’ own sentences with the sentence of exile against him that the play’s dangerous tendencies are most conspicuously yet unpredictably at work. The play’s ‘tendency’ (that is, its leaning or inclination) needs to be considered as, first and foremost, that of a standing which tends toward a falling, for it is Coriolanus’ failure to ‘stand’ properly for the consulship that catalyzes his momentous fall: unable to stand before the people and beg their voices,